

An Open Letter to America's Publishers from ALA President Maureen Sullivan

It's a rare thing in a free market when a customer is refused the ability to buy a company's product and is told its money is "no good here." Surprisingly, after centuries of enthusiastically supporting publishers' products, libraries find themselves in just that position with purchasing ebooks from three of the largest publishers in the world. Simon & Schuster, Macmillan, and Penguin have been denying access to their ebooks for our nation's 112,000 libraries and roughly 169 million public library users.

Let's be clear on what this means: If our libraries' digital bookshelves mirrored the New York Times fiction bestseller list, we would be missing half of our collection any given week due to these publishers' policies. The popular *Bared to You* and *The Glass Castle* are not available in libraries because libraries cannot purchase them at any price. Today's teens also will not find the digital copy of Judy Blume's seminal *Forever*, nor today's blockbuster "Hunger Games" series.

Not all publishers are following the path of these three publishers. In fact, hundreds of publishers of ebooks have embraced the opportunity to create new sales and reach readers through our nation's libraries. One recent innovation allows library patrons to immediately purchase an ebook if the library doesn't have a copy or if there is a wait list they would like to avoid. This offers a win-win relationship for both publishers and library users since recent research from the Pew Internet Project tells us that library users are more than twice as likely to have bought their most recent book as to have borrowed it from a library.

Libraries around the country are developing mobile applications and online discovery systems that make it easier to explore books and authors on the go. Seventy-six percent of public libraries now offer ebooks – double the number from only five years ago – and 39 percent of libraries have purchased and circulate e-readers. Public libraries alone spend more than \$1.3 billion annually on their collections of print, audio, video, and electronic materials. They are investing not only in access to content and devices, but also in teaching the skills needed to navigate and utilize digital content successfully.

Librarians understand that publishing is not just another industry. It has special and important significance to society. Libraries complement and, in fact, actively support this industry by supporting literacy and seeking to spread an infectious and lifelong love of reading and learning. Library lending encourages patrons to experiment by sampling new authors, topics, and genres. This experimentation stimulates the market for books, with the library serving as a de facto discovery, promotion, and awareness service for authors and publishers.

Publishers, libraries, and other entities have worked together for centuries to sustain a healthy reading ecosystem – celebrating our society's access to the complete marketplace of ideas. Given the obvious value of libraries to publishers, it simply does not add up that any publisher would continue to lock out libraries. It doesn't add up for me, it doesn't add up for ALA's 60,000 members, and it definitely doesn't add up for the millions of people who use our libraries every month.

America's libraries have always served as the "people's university" by providing access to reading materials and educational opportunity for the millions who want to read and learn but cannot afford to buy the books they need. Librarians have a particular concern for vulnerable populations that may not have any other access to books and electronic content, including individuals and families who are homebound or low-income. To deny these library users access to ebooks that are available to others – and which libraries are eager to purchase on their behalf – is discriminatory.

We have met and talked sincerely with many of these publishers. We have sought common ground by exploring new business models and library lending practices. But these conversations only matter if they are followed by action: Simon & Schuster must sell to libraries. Macmillan must implement its proposed pilot. Penguin must accelerate and expand its pilots beyond two urban New York libraries.

We librarians cannot stand by and do nothing while some publishers deepen the digital divide. We cannot wait passively while some publishers deny access to our cultural record. We must speak out on behalf of today's – and tomorrow's – readers. The library community demands meaningful change and creative solutions that serve libraries and our readers who rightfully expect the same access to ebooks as they have to printed books.

So, which side will you be on? Will you join us in a future of liberating literature for all? Libraries stand with readers, thinkers, writers, dreamers, and inventors. Books and knowledge – in all their forms – are essential. Access to them must not be denied.