This study describes a questionnaire survey of librarians responsible for audiobook selection in the public libraries of North Carolina. The survey was conducted to determine the selection criteria employed by those librarians for audiobook selection, how they differed from print, and how technological change affected the process. The criteria used by public libraries to select audiobooks vary, but are largely similar to that of print materials. Responses show that patron demand is the most influential factor in audiobook selection, and that budgetary restrictions heavily shape the collection. The trend towards digital media has had a significant effect on the way that libraries build their collections, but a consensus on providing digital audiobooks in public libraries has not been reached. Currently, audiobook selection is based primarily around popularity.
AUDIOBOOK COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT
IN NORTH CAROLINA PUBLIC LIBRARIES

by
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Approved by

_____________________________________
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Introduction

A library’s collection development decisions are made using a variety of criteria, depending on the character of the library and the intended audience which it serves. One decision that libraries must face in deciding how best to meet the goals of their institution is to determine which format of material best suits the library’s needs. Issues of formatting are not always touched on in institutional collection development plans. Collection development decisions in the public library setting may be made by different individuals, depending on many factors such as the size, administration, and priorities of the institution. However, the individual who makes these decisions must take certain factors into account. These factors include what audience the item is aimed at, as well as which of its objectives the library is trying to achieve. Selection decisions in libraries are typically made pursuant to certain guidelines, usually formalized in a collection development policy. These policies emphasize a library’s organizational goals and are shaped by the community it serves. Other significant factors in the selection process include professional reviews and patron recommendations. All of these factors are affected by the format of an item, which can have a significant impact on the way it is used by patrons. One format that has become increasingly prominent in library collections over the past several decades is the audiobook.

The history of the audiobook, or the sound recording of text, as a popularly used format for adult media dates back less than forty years. Yet, in that time, there have been
a number of upheavals in technology, listening trends, and library practice concerning the format. These changes have both influenced and been informed by other changes in the library field. Increased storage capacities have led to longer titles being made available. Online vendors have enabled different forms of distribution. All of these changes affect the roles that audiobooks perform within an institution’s collection.

The purpose of this study is to determine, through a survey of collection development specialists in public libraries in North Carolina, how selection decisions for audiobooks are made. By gaining a greater understanding of current practice, we can evaluate current practices more clearly and predict future trends more accurately. The questions examined in this study are:

How do public librarians make collection development decisions with respect to audiobooks?

How do these policies differ from those for print resources?

How does patron feedback affect audiobook collection development?

The research in the following literature review explores some of the past and current trends in library audiobook service and how they affect collection development.

**Literature Review**

The literature on collection development policy in the library has typically focused more on the genre and subject matter of material collected, rather than the format. However, format has a profound effect on the institution’s ability to address the demands of its patron base. Some formats may work to meet needs that other formats may not fulfill. All collections and services the public library offers are required to be
consistent with the goals and missions of the library in order to be useful and effective (Michnik 2014).

In this review, I have sought to examine the adoption of audiobooks in a library setting, as well as the ways that patrons have interacted with the format. As scholarly research in this area is lacking, much of the background is drawn from professional literature. I primarily focus on the public library practice and the factors that affect it, although data from other libraries and from publishers are included. In this section I focus on unique factors of the audiobook format and how they affect library collection development, the methods libraries use to distribute them and the services they aid in, how programs concerning audiobooks can be implemented, and how patrons interact with these materials.

**Background**

The first audiobooks were produced by the British Royal National Institute for the Blind in 1935, meant to cater to the needs of soldiers who were blinded during World War I. Audiobooks began to gain prominence in the 1970s and 1980s as cassette tapes proliferated, their ubiquity and inexpensiveness turning what had been a specialized tool into a leisure commodity. They became ensconced in public libraries during the same period (Philips 2007). Audiobooks became especially popular for use by three populations: the vision-impaired, developing readers, and, most recently, adult leisure readers, especially commuters (Stern 2011).

A large body of research exists on the effects of audiobook use on student learning outcomes in an educational setting. Audiobooks have been used to allow students who read below grade level to interface with course material (Grover
2012). Listening to audio recordings has been found to have similar effect to reading aloud, which has been considered “the single most important activity for building knowledge required for eventual success in reading” (Wolfson 2008, 106). Also, audiobooks develop listening skills, part of the Common Core State Standards (Lesesne 2013). Audiobooks are most effective when working with those who learn better through audio formats (Goldsmith 2015). According to a study by the National Endowment for the Arts, audiobook listening is one of the few types of media consumption that increases general literacy (Pope, Peters, Bell, & Bastian 2009).

Audiobooks have also been proven effective when working with ESL students of any age. Non-native English speakers find auditory listening to be more conducive to learning than navigating text. Audiobooks can also be a channel for Spanish-language materials. The OverDrive service offers such a selection of Spanish audiobooks (Yelton 2012).

Downloadable audio files such as podcasts have become an informational resource, with users rating the trustworthiness of podcasts highly. Some academic libraries have begun adding podcasts, along with traditional audio material, to their collections (Peoples & Tilley 2011, Fox 2004). These resources present unique challenges in that they “do not enter normal channels or systems of publication, distribution [or] bibliographic control” (Tillett & Newbold 2006, 70).

Some researchers have experimented with different navigational components for audiobooks. They note that listeners tend to prefer to have material divided into larger sections, rather than having a very large degree of control (Carriço, Guimaraes, Duarte, Chambel, & Simoes 2003).
Audio recordings of books for recreational purposes have been common components of public library collections since the 1980s, and there has been debate over the usefulness of developing audiobook collections in other types of libraries. Some academic and special libraries have experimented with using audio formats to provide information and instruction. In June 2007, the Research Library at the National Institute of Standards and Technology instituted a program in which they distributed audiobooks on leadership and management, with the result that those books were circulated more than six times as much as print copies (Allmang 2009). Business libraries have also used downloadable audiobooks to supplement their collections (Lannon 2013).

**Public Library Practice**

Beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, libraries acted to keep up with the growing demand for audiobooks as well as other audiovisual material. According to a *Library Journal* survey, public libraries, on average, increased their audiovisual budgets 53% between 1993 and 1998, much more than the budgets for other areas of the collection (Oder 1998).

According to North Carolina public library data from 2014 to 2015, audiobooks and audiobooks comprise an average of 4.25% of public library circulation. Mecklenburg County has the highest percentage with audio titles making up 9.76% of their total circulation, while Halifax County has the lowest audio circulation, with 0.38% (North Carolina State Library 2015). This wide disparity in the range of audiobook use by patrons indicates that many factors influence the popularity of audiobooks in a given area.
Audiobooks on physical formats like CDs carry distinct challenges for library collections, as they can easily become scratched or damaged and require culling or replacement (Lesesne 2011). They also run the risk of becoming rapidly outdated. Formats like MP3 CDs were initially praised for their higher storage capacity as compared to traditional compact discs (Crawford 2001). However, as they have been supplanted by digital files, their prevalence on library shelves has decreased.

A growing trend in public library practice of the 21st century has been the rise of interest in electronic resources, which include digital audiobook files as well as e-books. According to a 2010 Library Journal survey, the market for digital audiobooks was increasing by 71% a year, faster than any other media sector (Moyer 2012). A 2011 study of library users in Queensland, Australia found that e-books and electronic audiobooks were rapidly gaining ground on circulation of traditional materials. The most frequently-stated reason for this, at 81%, was the portability of downloadable digital materials. Other significant rationales include the convenience of not having to visit a physical location, and the ease of use (Duncan 2011). Digital audiobooks also have the advantage of not requiring cumbersome swapping of cassette tapes or CDs to listen to a complete book (Rubery 2008). This shift is also partially attributable to the increase in number and strength of broadband networks and partially to the decreasing price of portable media players (Furini 2008). A surprising new user base for this technology is older adults, who often have trouble physically accessing the library (Meyer 2014).

Libraries have struggled to meet the new digital demand, with public libraries lagging behind in making digital media available to all patrons (Kelley 2012). As demand has increased, the need for training and promotion to close the “digital gap”
between more and less affluent and digitally proficient patrons has also increased (Bonacci 2011). Another way in which libraries seek to promote accessibility is by making their resources, including audiobooks, accessible via mobile devices (Yelton 2012). A drawback to the digital format is that, even with the decrease in price of portable media players, many patrons do not have such devices, which are necessary to support the format. This means that either a large portion of patrons are underserved, or the library must act to provide devices as well as digital resources (Kim 2006). Another drawback is the many restrictions that are placed on digital materials by distributors, including Digital Rights Management software (DRM) that limits how files can be used, and access that lasts only as long as libraries continue to have an agreement in place with the distributor (Buczynski 2006). Susan Hoy addresses the decisions libraries have to make when considering new formats, concluding that librarians must make decisions on what formats to adopt on the basis of their user populations as well as changing markets (Hoy 2009).

**Patron Behavior**

An early study of public library audiobook use, in Salem Public Library in 1998, showed that users preferred unabridged audiobooks and chose their selections primarily by subject. In addition, many audiobook listeners accessed audiobooks exclusively from among the library’s holdings (Yingling 1998). A study by the Audio Publishers Association showed that younger, well-educated consumers were more likely to be audiobook listeners (Burkey 2013).

Genre fiction, like mystery and crime, enjoys much popularity among audiobook-listening patrons (Williams 2008). Foreign language materials have also been collected
to capitalize on the advantages that the audio format offers to language learners (Coon 2003). Self-help books also enjoy popularity (Ownes 2006). Unlike with traditional print books, some patrons tend to put as much emphasis on the narrator of the audiobook as they do the author and subject matter (Kunzel, Saricks, Stover, & Wyatt 2011).

A key aspect to increasing patron usage of the audiobook collection is to put them in the appropriate location. This includes placing audiobook materials in the appropriate area of the library, including placing materials for teens and young adults in their respective sections. This has been found to be more effective than having all library audio holdings in a central location. (King 2010). Promotional efforts such as posters and reading lists have also been found to increase user interest in the collections (Kucalaba 2000).

One traditional patron population which continues to utilize audiobook recordings consists of the vision-impaired. Many of these individuals are older adults who can no longer read print materials (Mayo 2001). While talking books for the blind have long been provided by the Library of Congress, commercial recordings are also popular (Stringer 2008). Many of these services can be performed in concert with libraries associated with institutions for the blind. A study conducted by the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind in Australia found that 30% of the population receiving audiobooks from the Institute also used the public library to retrieve materials (Murray, Huynh, & Williamson, 1995). Sweden’s Library of Talking Books and Braille worked in tandem with public libraries to provide audiobooks to the nation’s vision-impaired population (Hirschfeldt 2005). Providing materials for this population are a way for librarians to expand their service population while also complying with federal guidelines.
Young adults may greatly benefit from the audiobook format. Research shows that reading aloud can help introduce new language and concepts to inexperienced readers (Whittingham, Huffman, Christensen, & McAllister 2013). Providing audio copies of texts assigned in the school system is one way that public libraries can increase service to local teens (Lesesne 2013).

**Selection Methods**

The literature on public library selection methods specific to audiobooks is still limited. However, in general, most library collection development procedures during the last few decades have shifted towards a philosophy of patron-driven acquisition. Instead of basing collection decisions primarily on librarians’ expertise, selection decisions are frequently based off of the desires of patrons, as indicated by patron recommendations and loan requests (Fulton 2014).

One tool that libraries use in making selection decisions is review literature. Review journals, both standard and specific to the audio industry, highlight selected titles. Additionally, several awards for audio recordings for books are released annually. The Audie Awards, presented by the Audio Publishers Association, recognize several different categories of recording each year. Also, the American Library Association releases annual lists recognizing audiobooks for different segments of the population. They include the Notable Recordings for Children list, from the Association of Library Services to Children, and Selected Audiobooks for Young Adults, from the Young Adult Library Services Association. The Odyssey Awards also present an annual award for children’s audiobooks (Grover 2008). Another method for selection, recommended by Kaye and Baxter (1994), is keeping up with catalogs and advanced
notices of distributors, and familiarizing oneself with producers and narrators as a method for prepublication selection.

An early debate for libraries investing in audiobooks was whether to invest in abridged or unabridged recordings of literature. Clunky early formats like cassette tapes took up a great deal of shelf space, often requiring several dozen cassettes to accommodate one unabridged work of literature. Patrons also disliked having to switch tapes many times. Many professionals, however, felt like the prevalence of abridged recordings was a discouraging trend (Fakih 1989). Kaye and Baxter (1994) framed this debate as convenience versus traditional library practice. Newer technologies, such as digital recordings, have eliminated the physical space issue, and unabridged recordings have largely become the medium of choice for public libraries.

Libraries have used various programs to tailor their audio collections to the needs of their user population. One part of the library’s programming can be making audio recordings of local publications or lectures. The California State Library has partnered with the National Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped to employ volunteers to record books on local history for the benefit of the vision-impaired (Swafford 2008).

The Winnebago public library has expanded their audiobook selection in order to provide a bridge between the oral tradition of the Winnebago tribe and English literacy (Library Services 2008). The project is intended to help foster the continuance of an oral culture in populations ranging from early childhood to the college-aged (Yelton 2012). Similarly, the Tennessee State Library implemented a program that will allow for access to downloadable audiobooks for public libraries statewide (Bryant 2006).
The rising prominence of digital media distributors like OverDrive and hoopla in providing digital audiobooks as well as e-books has interesting implications for collection development. Public libraries subscribe to these services, in exchange for providing a catalog of titles for download. This alleviates much of the technical burden of libraries, as the responsibility for updating and maintaining access is shifted to the distributor (Peters 2007). However, the library has limited input into the titles that these distributors make available. Thus, if this model persists, public libraries’ ability to shape their audiobook collections will most likely decrease.

**Audiobooks Now**

The research shows that patron interest in audiobooks persists. Digital audio formats, in particular, are a rising trend in public library offerings. However, there is still as yet little research into the distinct characteristics of audiobooks and how public libraries can best use audiobook collections to supplement their objectives.

At present, there has been relatively little research done on audiobook use in public libraries, and almost none about how collection development decisions are made. While public libraries have proven responsive to patrons regarding the genres of audiobooks that they enjoy and the formats that they are interested in, they still have not gained much data concerning how patrons use audiobook titles. Although academic and community college libraries have begun to examine the information implications of audiobook technology, most of the trade literature relating to public libraries tend to treat audiobooks primarily as recreational sources. This study examines the ways in which public libraries select audiobook collections, and to examine what influence the public library’s objectives and patrons’ responses have on them.
Research Design

This study was designed to examine how public librarians make decisions concerning audiobook collection development. In order to do this, a survey was distributed to public librarians who identified themselves as being responsible for audiobook collection development. Here, audiobook collection specialists are defined as employees of a public library whose professional responsibilities include making the determination of which prose works to acquire in an audio format, whether on physical or digital media.

To maximize the accuracy of the data and the transferability of the findings, these surveys were distributed to every public library system in North Carolina. Given the size of the region, distributing to the total population was deemed more feasible than employing a sampling scheme. Contact information was identified using the North Carolina Library Directory available from the State Library of North Carolina. An e-mail containing an invitation to the survey was sent to the director of each public library system in North Carolina, or to the individual responsible for collections if one was specified by the library’s staff directory. The e-mail included a request to forward the survey to the appropriate staff member, if applicable. The survey was distributed through the e-mail feature of the Qualtrics software. This allowed for a greater geographic area to be sampled, while lowering expenses for the researcher and the participants. One week after the survey was sent, a follow-up e-mail was distributed to non-respondents triggering a second round of responses.

A sixteen-item survey was developed using the Qualtrics software. The survey was original but contains elements of earlier library-practice surveys. It had a mix of
demographic, open-ended, and Likert-style questions. This survey included three
demographic items in order to establish characteristics of the population. Several more
questions were designed to be free-text to allow the respondents to offer their own
thoughts on the subject of collection development. Open-ended, free-text questions were
judged to be appropriate because of the exploratory nature of the study, and the
likelihood that the recipients’ professional experience would allow them to illuminate
new areas of study. The free-text responses were coded by the researcher to determine
the librarians’ behaviors and attitudes towards audiobook collection development. The
remaining questions were multiple-choice, or were positioned on the Likert scale for ease
of analysis. Some of the Likert-scale data was analyzed by means of a paired t-test.

The questions were arranged with the free-text responses interspersed with
multiple-choice and Likert-style questions throughout the survey. This was done in order
to encourage participants to answer the free-text questions and minimize question
skipping.

The target population of the survey consists of public librarians of North Carolina
who work with audiobook media. As the population was deemed too large for direct
observation, survey methodology was chosen as the most effective method of
measurement. The survey instrument drew from existing research on collection
development. However, the study included questions based off of recent trends in
practice and technological shifts, such as the prevalence of outsourcing the provision of
digital media to online distributors.

The study was judged by the author to be low-risk to the participants. Steps were
taken so that all information submitted remained confidential. Subjects were assured that
their responses would remain private and anonymous. Any Qualtrics-collected information that could be used to identify the respondents was discarded at the conclusion of the study. The study was in conformance with accepted ethical standards.

One concern, as with many surveys, was that the response rate to the survey would be low. The author believed that this could be mitigated by focusing on members of a professional community and emphasizing the personal and professional significance of the study. A politely worded follow-up email was sent by the author of the study to the recipients of the initial e-mail who had not returned responses after seven days.

Results

Out of the 81 library systems surveyed, 31 surveys were returned, for a response rate of 38.27%. The job titles listed by survey respondents varied widely. Ten of the thirty respondents who chose to give their title identified themselves as library directors. Three respondents had a title pertaining to collections or collection development. Librarians from the Reference, Circulation, Adult Services, and Youth departments also participated in the study. In some cases, laypersons or paraprofessionals such as library assistants apparently had the responsibility of selecting audiobooks for their libraries. The survey also found the scope of collection responsibility of the respondents to vary from institution to institution. 52% of respondents claimed responsibility for audio titles in the adult collection only, while 39% had selection duties for the entire collection. The remaining 9% consisted of librarians for the children’s department or with another scope of responsibility.
Most of the respondents came from larger library systems, with 48% (nearly half) serving populations of more than 100,000. This may partially result from the fact that larger library systems generally have larger staffs with more specialization, making a survey such as the one in this study more pertinent to their duties. 6% of respondents served a library or library system with a population of between 75,000 and 100,000, while 19% came from systems serving 50,000 to 75,000 patrons. 16% served populations of between 30,000 and 50,000 patrons. Only 10% served populations of between 10,000 and 30,000, the smallest unit.

84% of librarians surveyed responded that their library had a collection development plan. Of those, fully 93% indicated that the collection development plan was either “highly significant” or “somewhat significant” in their collection decisions.

Figure 1 shows the frequency of the patron selection tools that selection specialists employed. Patron recommendation was the most common selection tool cited, with 93% of respondents citing that as a major factor in their selection decisions. Professional review journals were also commonly employed, as 87% of the respondents used them. Websites were only slightly behind, at 83%. 47% of librarians used recommendations from their professional peers in the selection process.
When asked to name the resources employed, journals topped the list, with 9 respondents citing Library Journal reviews as a source, 6 mentioning Publishers Weekly, 4 using Booklist, and 4 using Audiofile. A few of the responses also mentioned lists from booksellers like Barnes & Noble and Amazon. Lists compiled directly from the vendor were also a very common resource, with five libraries employing these. Five responses also mentioned patron requests or suggestions in this category. Relatedly, one librarian mentioned ordering audiobook titles when the print version of the title had multiple holds placed upon, proving community interest in that title.

As implied by the literature, respondents currently overwhelmingly favor unabridged recordings. 90% of the respondents, representing 27 out of 30 institutions, preferred this format to abridged recordings in their purchasing decisions.

The survey results demonstrate that library collection specialists have a variety of viewpoints on the changing technological landscape and how it affects their collections. The most commonly mentioned challenge was the difficulty of balancing...
physical and digital formats, with 13 out of 27 respondents mentioning this as a concern. Four respondents stated that there had been essentially no change in their institutions due to technological shifts, with one saying that demographic shifts have a greater effect on selection decisions.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of formats among the new audiobook acquisitions of libraries. Although audio recording technology has changed rapidly and significantly, the standard CD, a format that has been around for two decades, is still the most popular choice for public libraries, with 27 out of 31 respondents saying they “often” provided this format. 16 respondents provide online digital files at their institutions, more than half of the total, with another 6 often providing those files. However, 7 respondents, nearly a quarter of the total, “never” provide this format, and while another 2 only make such materials available “rarely”. Only 2 provided MP3 CDs more frequently than “rarely”.

**Figure 2. How often are new audiobooks added to the collection in each of the following formats?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Total Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Standard CDs</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP3 CDs</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online digital files</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preloaded digital audio players</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most common way that patron feedback is incorporated into the selection process is by encouraging a focus on bestselling titles. Almost all of the institutions
surveyed take requests directly from patrons. One respondent claimed that their institution only makes new audiobook purchases on request from patrons. Two librarians said they attempted to fulfill all requests of which the materials were available. One librarian noted that budgetary limitations made retrospective acquisitions, when patrons asked for copies of older materials, impossible. In several institutions, patron feedback is solicited through both online and paper forms.

When asked about the differences in the selection processes for print and audiobook resources, 26 out of 31 respondents chose to answer. For six respondents, there was no difference in selection between the sources. Many of the other responses reiterated the emphasis on bestsellers and patron demand, stating that these factors drove their selection to a greater degree for audio materials than for print. Several also said that their audiobook selections were much rarer than for other materials and made up a very small portion of the overall collection. Three respondents mentioned that the reputation of the narrator, as well as the author, was also taken into account during the selection process. One respondent replied that their audiovisual collection was a single floating collection throughout the system, so they were moving towards having one single person in charge of it. One respondent said that their institution’s policy had shifted over the life of the audiobook format, from a more involved process of evaluating reviews to focusing on demand only.

When asked about the digital audiobook services they made available, 20 out of the 29 librarians who responded indicated their institution provided access to the North Carolina Digital Library, an OverDrive-based consortium. 16 library systems provided access to OneClick Digital through NC Live. Hoopla was also utilized by five library
systems. Only two respondents indicated that their institution did not employ any online service.

When asked to name their greatest challenge, the one reported by the most respondents was the cost of materials. Fourteen out of 26 librarians, more than half of those who responded, maintained that the expense of items was a concern. Several mentioned that maintaining balance between formats, especially physical and digital, was a concern. Eleven respondents mentioned the concerns of balancing acquisitions in varying physical and digital formats. One noted that certain segments of the population prefer physical media, while others prefer downloadable titles. Two respondents claimed that having limited space for new physical titles was their biggest concern. Two others reported that patrons frequently expected them to have or be able to obtain all of the print titles they currently held in audiobook format, even the books for which no audio version had been released.

When asked what they would change if they had no limitations on resources, almost all respondents said that they would expand the number of titles their library makes available. Over half of the respondents specifically mentioned digital titles as being something that they would like to see expanded. Seven responses mentioned that they would like to increase the amount of physical audiobook titles carried by the library. In particular, four librarians said that they were interested in expanding or reintroducing their collection of playaways, preloaded devices carrying specific audio titles. One librarian said that they would like to expand their collection beyond popular material and purchase more material for self-directed education such as the Great Courses audio series.
On a scale of 1-10, patron influence was rated the most important factor in audiobook selection, with an average score of 8.83. Collection balance received a score of 7, and formal collection policy received a score of 6.75. Trade publications were rated the lowest, with a score of 6.28.

A paired t-test was conducted to compare the respondents’ rating of selection factors with the size of their institutions to observe the correlation between library size and selection factors. The correlation between the size of the library and reliance on a formal collection development policy was found to be significant, with a two-tailed P value of 0.0012. The correlation between size and patron demand and between size and collection balance were also statistically significant, with a two-tailed P value of less than 0.0001, as was the P value for trade publications, at 0.0036.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which public librarians implement collection development strategies for audiobooks, how these strategies differ from those implemented for other media formats, and how they could be affected by shifts in the technological landscape. Overall, the results of this study show that the audiobook selection decisions of public librarians incorporate many factors, especially patron demand and budgetary limitations. They also show that members of this field have different interpretations of technological changes, especially the move towards increased digital content, and what it means for the future of audiobooks in public libraries.
The selection process for audiobooks does not appear to differ substantially from that of traditional media, except that the process is more strongly focused on patron preferences. Results suggest that audiobook collection development practices follow the general trend within public libraries of focusing selection efforts on the most popular materials. This trend is more pronounced with audiobooks collections because of the smaller size of the collection and of the budget allotted to it relative to the print collection in most library systems. Many librarians mentioned bestsellers as comprising a large portion of their audiobook purchases. Comments suggest that audiobooks are viewed primarily as “recreational” materials and that this drives the emphasis on more popular titles. It is unclear whether this viewpoint is shared with the majority of patrons. Use of audiobooks for educational purposes, while having some success in the realm of education, has not become common practice in the public library setting. This, along with the rise in the use of audiobooks during travel and exercise, may have some impact on the perception of audiobooks as being primarily intended for leisure.

Technological changes have influenced all selection personnel. This can be indicated by the fact that all of the surveyed personnel use state-provided online services to distribute titles, and some use others as well. Focusing on digital titles may also alleviate the necessity of providing the space to store bulky collections of CD sets, mentioned as a concern by several respondents. However, the results show a variety of approaches by librarians to audiobook collections in light of these changes. Some librarians are moving from physical formats to digital ones, while others are moving away from audiobooks altogether. The so-called “digital gap” may factor into this, as some demographic and economic populations have much more access to and facility with
digital materials than others do. Based on these survey answers, it may take some time before the overall library response to the advent of digital audiobooks stabilizes and a paradigm is set throughout the public library sector.

Judging from the responses received, budget limitations are a significant factor in shaping audiobook collection development, as they are in library collection development in general. Public libraries must justify their expenditures to the institutions that support them and the taxpayers that fund them. This is commonly done by reporting performance measures, particularly circulation, leading to a focus on popular items that are more likely to increase these measures.

The results indicate that larger library systems have more diversified selection criteria than those of smaller systems. Larger libraries typically have the staff size that allows them to dedicate more labor to audiobook selection and to incorporate more factors into the process. Additionally, the size of a library’s budget and its holdings typically increases with the size of the population it serves, allowing librarians the ability to develop a larger and more diversified audiobook collection.

Lack of patron awareness of and knowledge about the audiobook collection may also impact its success. Several respondents reported that their patrons were unfamiliar with the extent of the library’s audiobook collection and which titles were held within. Some might anticipate the library having an audio collection just as extensive as its print collection, while others might not be aware of the collection at all. With more files being located online without a physical equivalent, many patrons may be unaware of a significant portion of the material to which they have access.
One potential limitation of this survey is the somewhat low response rate. The surveys that were returned originated disproportionately from the larger library systems. This may be because these systems were more likely to have larger staff that include individuals who have direct responsibility over audiovisual collections and who would be directly interested in the results of this survey. Smaller libraries and library systems, with fewer staff and a smaller service population, may employ very different selection strategies.

Conclusion

The results of this survey underlie the ways in which public library selection strategies, particularly those concerning audiobooks, are affected by shifts in technology, as well as the library’s own objectives. Although audiobooks have had a relatively short lifespan as a popular medium, the format, and the way libraries approach it, has changed significantly during that period. These changes have left librarians questioning the future of the format, or if it even has a future at all as a part of the library’s holdings.

Over the past several decades, the trend in library service has been to focus service on meeting patron demands, rather than attempting to shape them. This trend is exacerbated for non-print items such as video and audio materials, which are generally considered to be “extras” and not part of an item’s core collection. Statistics show that the circulation levels of these items as a proportion of the library’s total collection vary widely between library systems, which suggests that the demand for them is not uniform but is affected by the service population and the collection itself.
The results of this survey suggest some potential avenues for future research. The views that public library patrons hold of audiobook services in libraries is largely unreported, except in figures such as circulation statistics. Subsequent studies could examine how the shift away from physical media formats has affected the audiobook sector of public libraries, and the level of investment that public library patrons have in this format.

One potential avenue of research that could expand on the results of this study is to compare the patron demographics, such as age, ethnicity, and financial status, of various library systems with how they approach audio collection development in varying formats. It has been established that different populations, such as early childhood learners and the hearing-impaired, are served in different ways by audio materials, but the needs of individual population groups often go unstated in formal selection processes. Certain populations that lack familiarity with multimedia resources may not consider audiobooks as a resource when formulating their information needs. Understanding how patron demographics and special populations relate to the selection decisions of libraries could be useful in addressing the inequalities of service implicit in the concept of a “digital gap”.

The current research study has established that public library selection specialists employ a variety of factors in their audiobook collection development. These factors include both traditional sources for collection development, such as professional journals, as well as newer sources like blogs and audiobook awards. However, the results also show that patron demand is currently the largest factor shaping the development of audiobook collections in public libraries, even more so than with print materials. Patron
demand is also most likely behind the lack of consensus on the effects of technological change on the library’s audiobook section, as differences among the populations the library serves and their enthusiasm for and aptitude with varying technologies affects their demand for audiobooks in digital and other formats. Currently, audiobooks are chiefly viewed by both librarians and library patrons as leisure items whose primary role in the collection is to provide additional formats for popular materials. As public libraries continue to withstand budget crunches and the level of online services provided by the institution continues to expand, it remains to be seen whether audiobooks maintain their standing within public library collections and continue to comprise a substantial part of the public library’s holdings.
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Public Library Practice


Patron Behaviors


Selection Methods


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# Appendix A

## Questions

1. What is your current job title?

2. What is the scope of your collection responsibility?
   - Entire collection
   - Children
   - Young Adult
   - Adult
   - Other

3. What is the approximate size of the population that your library serves?
   - Less than 10,000
   - 10,000 – 30,000
   - 30,000 – 50,000
   - 50,000 – 75,000
   - 75,000 – 100,000
   - More than 100,000

4. Does your institution possess a formal collection development plan?
   - Yes
   - No

5. If so, how significant is the collection development plan in your audiobook selections?
   - Highly significant
   - Somewhat significant
   - Not very significant
   - No significance

6. Please check any categories of selection tools that you use to develop audiobook collections.
   - Websites
Professional review journals
Professional books
Recommendations from patrons
Recommendations from library professionals
Other

7. What are some of the specific selection tools that you use for audiobooks?

8. Do you give preference to abridged or unabridged audiobooks?

Abridged
Unabridged

9. How does the changing state of technology affect your audiobook selection decisions?

10. How often are new audiobooks added to the collection in each of the following formats?

Standard CDs
MP3 CDs
Online digital files

11. In what ways, if any, do you incorporate feedback from patrons into your audiobook selection decisions?

12. In what ways does your selection process for audiobooks differ from those for print materials?

13. Does your institution make use of an online audiobook distributor (e.g., OverDrive, North Carolina Digital Library) to offer digital titles? If so, through which service?

14. What do you feel is the greatest challenge that you currently face in audiobook selection?

15. Given unlimited resources, what changes would you make to your institution’s audiobook collection?
16. Please rate, from 1-10, the extent to which the following factors play a part in your audiobook selection decisions.

Formal collection policy
Patron demand
Trade publications
Collection balance
Appendix B

Invitation E-Mail

To the Directors and Collection Specialists of North Carolina Public Libraries:

I am a graduate student in the School of Information and Library Science at UNC - Chapel Hill and am currently working on my Master’s Paper. I am conducting a study to examine the factors utilized in audiobook collection development decisions and how they compare to those for traditional print materials. To do this, I am gathering information on the audiobook selection process from personnel in North Carolina public libraries. If you are willing to participate in the study, please complete this survey or forward it to the individual involved in audiobook selection for your library or library system. I hope you will be willing to spare a few minutes to assist me by completing this survey.

To participate in this study, simply complete the survey found at the URL indicated by the following link: https://unc.az1.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_bfJ2VNURXwAjQI5. Your completion of the survey signifies your consent to participate in the study. No personal information will be collected by this survey. All results will be confidential.

Your participation in this study will help me to complete my degree, as well as advance understanding of collection development practices for audiobook materials. If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at sanderjd@live.unc.edu. Thank you for your assistance with this project.

Sincerely,
Joseph Sanders
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Ericka Patillo
Faculty Adviser
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Appendix C

Follow-up E-mail

To the Directors and Collection Specialists of North Carolina Public Libraries:

I am a graduate student in the School of Information and Library Science at UNC - Chapel Hill and am currently working on my Master’s Paper. I am conducting a study to examine the factors utilized in audiobook collection development decisions and how they compare to those for traditional print materials. To do this, I am gathering information on the audiobook selection process from personnel in North Carolina public libraries.

One week ago, you received an e-mail with a link to this survey, and I would like to remind you of the benefits of this survey. Your participation in this study will help me to complete my degree, as well as advance understanding of collection development practices for audiobook materials. If you are willing to participate in the study, please complete this survey or forward it to the individual involved in audiobook selection for your library or library system. I hope you will be willing to spare a few minutes to assist me by completing this survey.

To participate in this study, simply complete the survey found at the URL indicated by the following link: https://unc.az1.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_bfJ2VNURXwAjQI5. Your completion of the survey signifies your consent to participate in the study. No personal information will be collected by this survey. All results will be confidential.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at sanderjd@live.unc.edu. Thank you for your assistance with this project.

Sincerely,
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