

## The Future of Audio Formats

The science and technology of sound recording is evolving at a frantic pace. Schools and libraries are faced with a dazzling array of possibilities when selecting how to spend diminishing audiobook funds. Here's a look at what's currently being produced, a peek at upcoming trends, and predictions from industry leaders.

### An Array of Formats

More than 300 audio publishers are currently producing titles in the United States. The preferred format continues to be CD, according to the 2008 Audio Publishers Association Sales Survey, with 78 percent of audiobook sales. Cassette sales represented only 3 percent of total sales in 2007, a steep drop from the 45 percent share of the revenue in 2003. Nearly two-thirds of all audiobook listeners own an MP3 player, and 40 percent of listeners have downloaded a digital file of an audiobook. The Playaway pre-loaded audiobook format is now available in more than 15,000 libraries and schools, with more than one million units sold.

Young digital natives demand audiobook content for a multitude of players: MP3, iPod, laptops, cell phones. Schools require formats that can be played on existing cassette tape and CD hardware. Librarians see the benefit of Playaways, with no parts to lose or scratch. Creating the perfect audiobook collection is a delicate dance that balances the diverse needs of patrons with the realities of allocating dollars to both new media and established formats.



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### Good-bye Cassette, Hello Cell Phone?

Linda Lee, vice president and general manager of Weston Woods, shared her reflections on trends for the audiobook company that has transformed picture books into audiovisual media for more than 50 years. “Cassettes are dropping rapidly as a format for purchase—they currently only make up 10 to 15 percent of our audio sales. Up to a year ago, the format was holding its own, but now it seems that only schools are still buying cassettes. We are not releasing new titles into cassette format at this time.”

Lee offers her suggestion for maintaining current collections. “Based on long-term experience, I think the wise audio supplier will continue to support multiple formats for audio. Because of the different places used—car, home, classroom, etc.—there are so many configurations of devices that people use to access their media, and I don't see one format becoming so dominant that there will be only one medium like the old days when it was strictly records, then tapes, and so on.”

What does Lee see on the horizon? “We are watching with extreme interest the rise of mobile phones as another delivery device, with people doing everything with their mobile phone, all in one device.”

### Supporting Multiple Formats

Troy Juliar, vice president of content and acquisitions at Recorded Books, reported on his company's continued support for multiple formats. “We still release titles on cassette—frontlist (newly released) and backlist (continually popular) titles. We will likely be the ‘last man standing’ with regard to the format because of our manufacturing capabilities. Nearly 35 percent of our school customers still order cassettes, believe it or not, because of the installed base of listening equipment. That said, we know it is going away eventually. We are seeing a lot of success with the Playaway format. . . . I expect it to compete successfully with CDs over the coming years.”

When asked about the multitude of audiobook formats, Debra Cardillo, co-owner of Live Oak Media, replied, “Since most of our productions are targeted at younger students, we still have a fairly high demand for cassettes,

especially in the classroom. Many teachers and media specialists who work with younger students have expressed how much they prefer cassettes because of their durability and ease of use. . . . We're trying to keep up with new technology while continuing to provide our long-standing customers with standard formats."

## Conference and Summit Tidbits

At the Young Adult Library Services Association's Young Adult Literature Symposium last fall, Tim Ditlow, vice president and young adult and children's acquisition editor for Brilliance Audio, stated, "I believe we are in a physical world for audiobooks for a time to come," and described the Brilliance release of John Green's novel *Paper Towns* in eight different audio versions, from CD to Playaway to download. Ditlow warned that there is a current lack of bandwidth in the United States that is holding back the widespread ease of audiobook download and predicted that cell phones may become the ultimate audiobook playback device in the future.

I recently moderated a panel on the future of digital audiobooks that featured Steve Potash, president and CEO of OverDrive, a global download distributor of digital audiobooks, e-books, and video. Potash is currently developing a school-focused service that will provide simultaneous unlimited access to audiobooks, allowing students to log on to any computer and pick up the story at the same spot, or download a book onto any iPod or MP3 player with no copy-protection barriers. Another OverDrive initiative is to convince textbook publishers to provide their core-curriculum titles as audiobooks for student use.

## Playaway's Role

I recently toured the headquarters of Findaway World, Playaway's parent company, in suburban Cleveland, Ohio, where I spoke with Blake Squires, chief strategy officer and company cofounder. He believes that it will be 10 or 15 years before digital downloads in schools become the norm, and that Playaways will meet the needs of audiobook listeners for years to come. He described the pick-up-and-go ease of Playaway units, which are half the size of a deck of cards and hold an audiobook in a durable housing that contains a single AAA battery and comes with a lanyard and earbuds. School teachers and librarians appreciate that no separate MP3 or CD player is needed, and that the kid-friendly design is easy to play at slow, normal, or fast speed, with bookmarking features and content that cannot be accidentally erased. Caroline Barni, Playaway's director of marketing, explained that school libraries have two vendors

# WEB CONNECTIONS


For information to support the development of an audiobook collection, visit the *Book Links* Web site at [www.ala.org/booklinks](http://www.ala.org/booklinks) and click on "Web Connections."

for ordering Playaways: audiobook publisher Recorded Books holds the exclusive rights for selling their titles in the Playaway format, while Follett Library Resources is the distributor for Playaway audiobooks from more than 80 other publishers.

## Transformative Literary Encounters

The integration of audiobook technology into literacy learning is a proven factor in student achievement. Librarians encounter audiobook success stories every day. Barbara T. Mates, head of the Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped of the Cleveland Public Library, told me about a teen patron who requested the audiobook of S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*. When told that he could check out the MP3-styled Playaway, he replied, "You mean for the first time in my life I get to be the cool kid at school instead of the geek?"

Barry M. Bishop, director for library information services for the Spring Branch Independent School District in Houston, shared another success story. A district librarian reported to him, "The student with very poor reading skills spent the whole morning here in the library engrossed with the Playaway of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* that you pulled for him yesterday. When he walked in here yesterday with his teacher, he was kind of quiet, beaten down, and discouraged by the daunting reading tasks ahead of him. He was obviously not a strong reader. Today, he was happy and chatty and having a hard time putting the audiobook down and getting unplugged."

Every young person deserves transformative literary encounters such as these. If you need support for funds to acquire a collection of audiobooks in a variety of formats to address the needs of all learners, explore the resources in this issue's "Web Connections" list (see sidebar for more information). Create a mix of audiobook formats to serve your students' needs, with the predictions here to guide you, and open access to great books through sound literature! 

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