



Impact of Evidence Based Acquisitions (EBA) on Resource Sharing Activities of Canadian Research Libraries: How EBAs Impact the Ability to Share

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Abstract:

In Canada, university libraries play a key role in supplying research and scholarly items to college, public and special libraries' patrons via resource sharing. At the same time Canadian university libraries have invested heavily in Evidence Based Acquisitions products, and ebooks in general. This paper presents the results of a survey of resource sharing specialists and licensing specialists at member libraries of the Canadian Association of Research Libraries. Recipients were surveyed for their work-informed impressions regarding resource sharing and licensing of ebooks; for evidence of declining resource sharing activity due to the rise in EBAs; and for evidence of communication, or non-communication, within libraries about the impact of e-books on resource sharing. The findings suggest that there is a causal link between the rise in EBAs and the decline in the ability of libraries to fulfill resource sharing requests. The findings also point to a probable lack of serious reflection by Canadian university libraries on the equity impacts of reducing resource sharing capacity through the acceptance of licensing terms that limit the ability to share ebooks within resource sharing networks.

Keywords: E-books; Resource sharing declines; Canada; Academic libraries; Lack of access to information.

Background

Ebooks have been in libraries since the beginning of the 21st century, but have only become an issue in resource sharing in the past decade or so, as libraries have increased the size and breadth of their ebook collections compared to their print collections. As noted back in 2013, ‘there is no comprehensive way to borrow or lend ebooks via the traditional interlibrary loan frame work’ (Litsey & Ketner, 2013). The obstacles to lending ebooks via resource sharing services stem from restrictive licenses, digital rights management and other technological barriers (Lippincott et al., 2012). The same is true today, but what has changed since 2013 is that the number of ebooks in libraries is increasing substantially (Murphy, 2019). In particular, Canadian academic libraries have significantly increased expenditures on ebooks while significantly decreasing their collection of paper books (Canadian Association of Research Libraries, 2018), a situation that has only accelerated since 2020.

Therefore, despite the inability to share ebooks between libraries in the same streamlined fashion that print books are shared, libraries are rapidly increasing their ebook collections. Canadian academic libraries are dramatically increasing their holdings of ebooks and turning to ebooks as a way to more efficiently serve their patrons and to reduce, or eliminate, the need to build more space for physical books. As of 2022, Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) members had nearly double the number of e-monograph holdings (56944754 titles) as they did print monograph holdings (26833737 titles). As a way of better serving their patrons, Canadian academic libraries are increasingly turning to Evidence Based Acquisitions products offered by the large academic publishers such as Elsevier, Taylor and Francis, Wiley, Oxford University Press, Springer-Nature and others. Evidence Based Acquisitions (EBA) ebook programs/products allow libraries to gain ongoing access to a publisher’s entire annual monograph publication output for their patrons. At the end of each year the library can purchase permanent access to specific titles based on usage, while retaining access to all titles while they continue to subscribe to the EBA product (Murphy, 2019). At the same time, complete ebooks in an EBA are usually not available for resource sharing purposes due to licensing constraints. It is important to note that EBA’s offer “permanent access”, and not “ownership” of the ebook – thus the library must abide by the license governing that access.

In order to investigate the impact of EBA products on resource sharing at Canadian academic libraries, and to see if the increase in EBA, and ebooks generally, can be correlated with the ongoing decline in the ability to fill resource sharing requests at Canadian academic libraries and the general decline in resource sharing generally (*Annual CARL Statistics*, n.d.), a survey of Canadian Association of Research Libraries’ member libraries was undertaken.

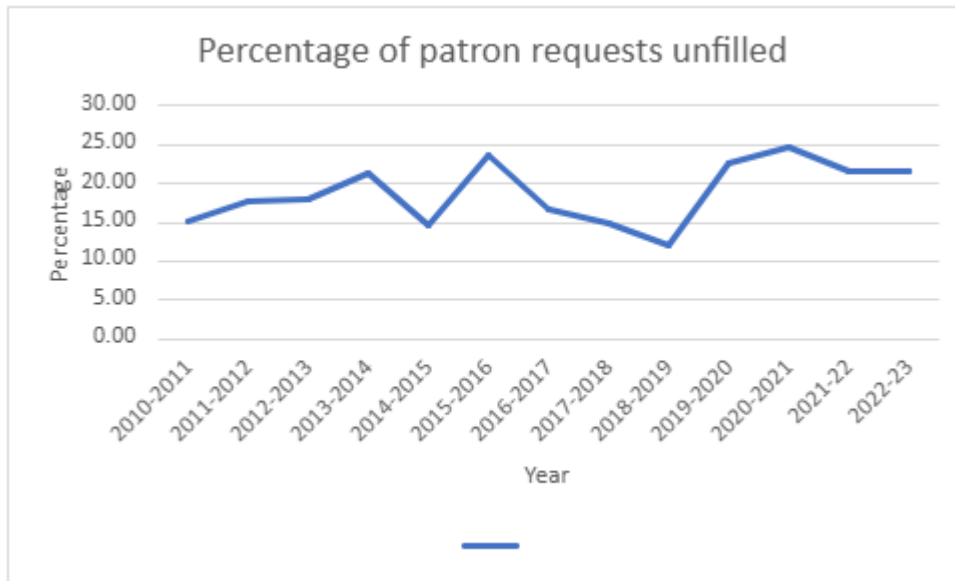


Fig. 1. Percentage of resource sharing requests from their patrons that CARL Libraries are unable to fill.

Methodology

The Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) is the association of the largest research libraries in Canada. It consists of 29 of the larger Canadian university libraries as well as Library and Archives Canada and the Federal Science Libraries Network. For the purposes of the survey the federal government libraries were not included as neither engage in significant resource sharing with external libraries. Also, due to an inability to obtain a timely translation of the survey tool into French, the four French language universities have not yet been surveyed. This left 25 university libraries to be surveyed.

Two different surveys were designed – one for those involved in resource sharing and one for those involved in licensing. The purpose in surveying both groups was to see obtain comprehensive information on licensing terms; to easily obtain correct information on EBA programs at the libraries; and to see if there exists a knowledge gap between the two areas regarding licensing terms. The surveys were hosted on Simon Fraser University’s licensed instance of Survey Monkey and recipients accessed the survey by using the link provided in the survey invitation.

One survey was sent to the individual listed on the library’s website as being responsible for overseeing the resource sharing operations of the library. The other survey was sent to the individual listed on the library’s website as being responsible for the licensing of e-resources at the library. The surveys were completely anonymous with no way to identify which institution completed the survey. Permission to conduct the survey was obtained from Simon Fraser University’s Ethics Review Board.

The survey was open from July 3, 2024 to September 13, 2024. The first survey invitation was sent July 3, and two subsequent survey reminders were sent; one in late July and another in mid-to-late August.

The results of these surveys, and CARL's resource sharing statistics for member libraries, were used to investigate whether or not a connection can be made between the rise of ebook acquisitions and the general overall decline of resource sharing activity.

Results

The survey sent to resource sharing specialists at libraries received 13 completed responses for a response rate of 52% and the survey sent to licensing specialists at libraries received 15 completed responses for a response rate of 60%.

Knowledge and understanding of EBA products:

Resource sharing specialists had a much lower understanding and knowledge of EBAs than did licensing specialists. Only 40% of resource sharing specialists surveyed stated their library had EBA products, whereas 100% of the libraries included in the survey have EBA products. This finding is hardly surprising, since there is nothing obvious to indicate to resource sharing staff that an ebook is part of an EBA package. However, it does possibly point to a gap in knowledge sharing between collections and resource sharing departments. EBAs are a significant ebook product, and for resource sharing specialists to be unaware of this type of product signifies a lack of understanding by resource sharing specialists of their library's collection development directions.

Backing up the general feeling that ebooks and EBA products account for a growing percentage of CARL library collections, 80% of libraries surveyed stated that ebooks account for anywhere from 60 to 100% of new monographs that they purchase each year, and 60% stated that the number of ebooks they licensed each year was greater than the previous year. Obviously the fact that licensed ebooks make up a significant majority of new monograph purchases at CARL libraries has a significant implication for resource sharing, and also illustrates the popularity of EBA products.

Impact of EBAs on resource sharing requests:

As stated earlier, Canadian academic libraries are turning to EBAs as a way to better serve their patrons and as a way to use patron driven need for a book as a significant driver of their collection development. By way of demonstrating the value of EBAs, an e-resource licensing specialist commented in the survey that their library showed zero circulation for 50% of their print books for the years 2011-2019. The low use of print resources at academic libraries makes the patron driven basis of EBAs very attractive to collection development departments.

Resource sharing specialists agreed with their licensing counterparts about the benefits of EBA programs to their library's patrons. 67% saw them as positive for library patrons, and no respondent saw EBA products as negative for their patrons. Interestingly, one might be able to infer that resource sharing specialists see EBAs as a way of reducing the demand for resource sharing services on the part of their patrons, since EBA and other ebook products are more likely to meet the needs of their library patrons more effectively than print monograph collections.

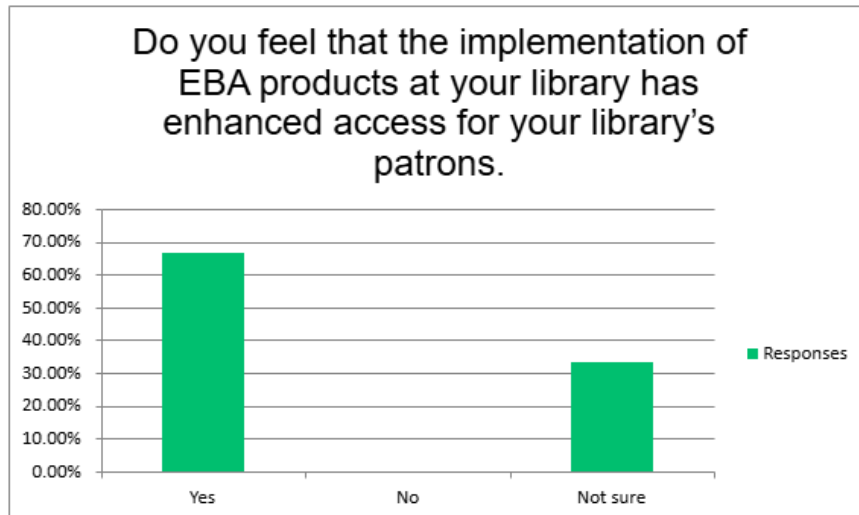


Fig. 2. Resource sharing specialists' response about whether EBAs enhance access for patrons.

Resource sharing specialist were of the opinion that over the past few years there has been an increase in the number of patron requests that were only available in other libraries as an ebook.

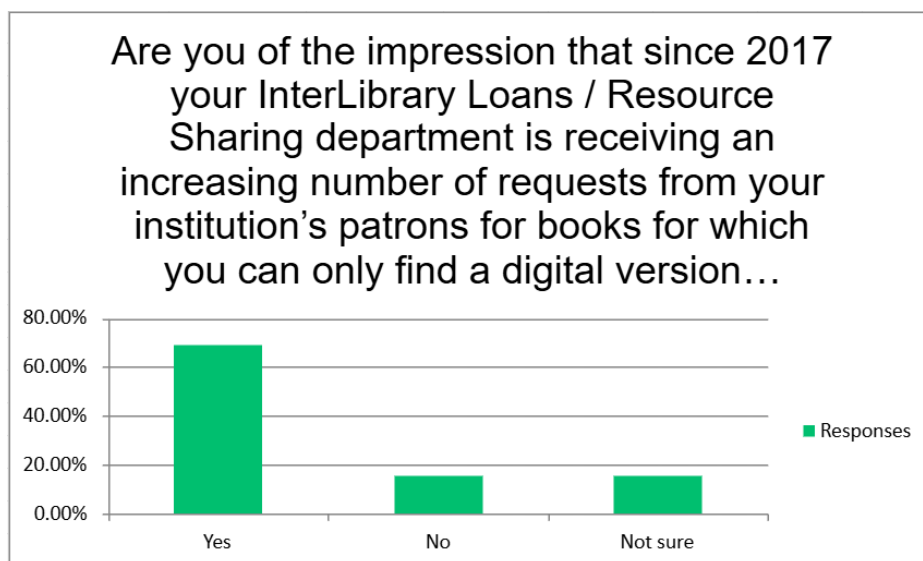


Fig. 3. Resource sharing specialists' response regarding whether or not they feel they are receiving increasing numbers of requests from their patrons for books which they can only find as ebooks at other libraries.

The majority of resource sharing specialists were also of the opinion that there has been a commensurate increase in the last few years in the number of monograph resource sharing requests they receive from other libraries for which their only holdings are digital.

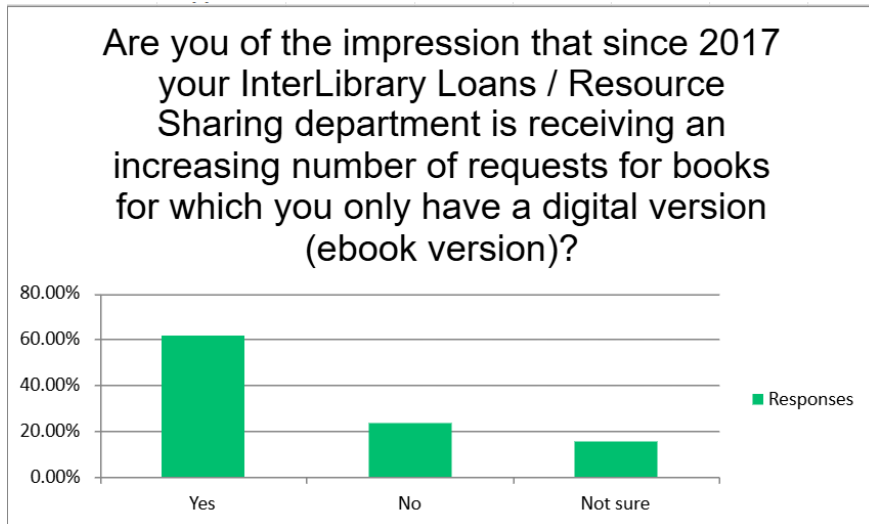


Fig. 4. Resource sharing specialists' response regarding whether or not they feel they are receiving increasing numbers of requests from external libraries for books which they only have in ebook format.

In line with this finding was the survey result that over 80% of resource sharing specialists are of the opinion that they have had to cancel an increasing number of resource sharing requests from other libraries because they only had a digital version of the monograph and were unable to lend it due to licensing restrictions.

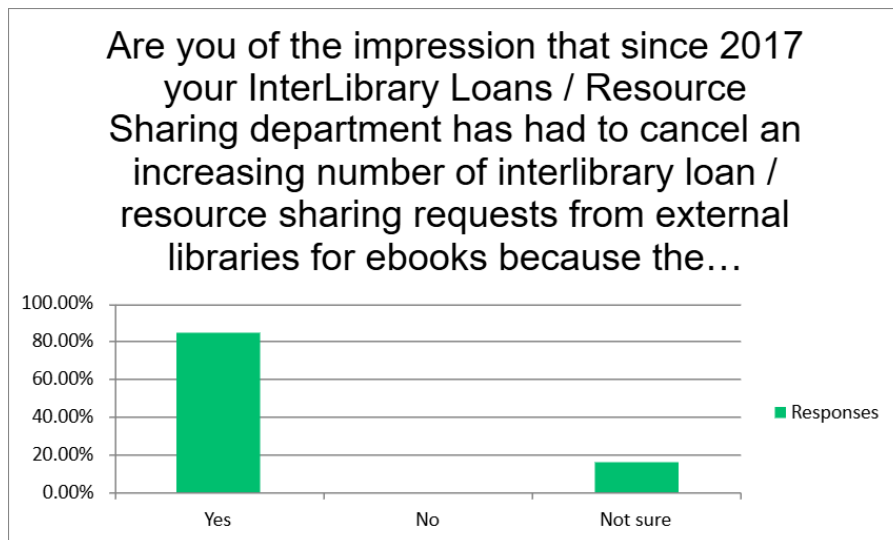


Fig. 5. Resource sharing specialists' responses regarding whether or not they feel they are having to cancel an increasing number of requests from external libraries because they only own the requested title as an ebook and are unable to lend it due to licensing restrictions.

When it came to responding to questions about whether or not they were under the impression that the number of resource sharing requests they had to cancel since the licenses they had for ebooks forbade whole ebook lending, no respondent answered in the affirmative. So it is quite clear that the general impression of resource sharing specialists at CARL libraries is that ebook licenses coupled with the growing size of their ebook collections, is leading to them canceling an increasing number of requests from external libraries.

Interestingly, these numbers correlate with the general upward trend of the inability of CARL academic libraries to fill resource sharing supplying requests received from external libraries.



Fig. 6. Percentage of requests received from external libraries that CARL libraries cannot fill.

Perception of institutional concern around ebook licensing:

The next set of questions looked at resource sharing specialists perception of how their licensing colleagues treat resource sharing in ebook licenses.

Over 54% of resource sharing specialists respondents felt that those responsible for licensing resources do not attempt to ensure that ebook licenses contain some provision to allow for resource sharing. And only 23% of respondents stated that licensing specialists at their library have ever consulted with resource sharing staff about suitability of the resource sharing terms in an ebook license.

Conversely, 75% of e-resource licensing specialists stated that they attempt to ensure that ebook licenses come with some sort of resource sharing provision.

Related to this was the response of licensing specialists to a question regarding whole ebook lending. 33% of respondents thought that they had at least one license that allowed their library to send copies of ebooks to another library via resource sharing.

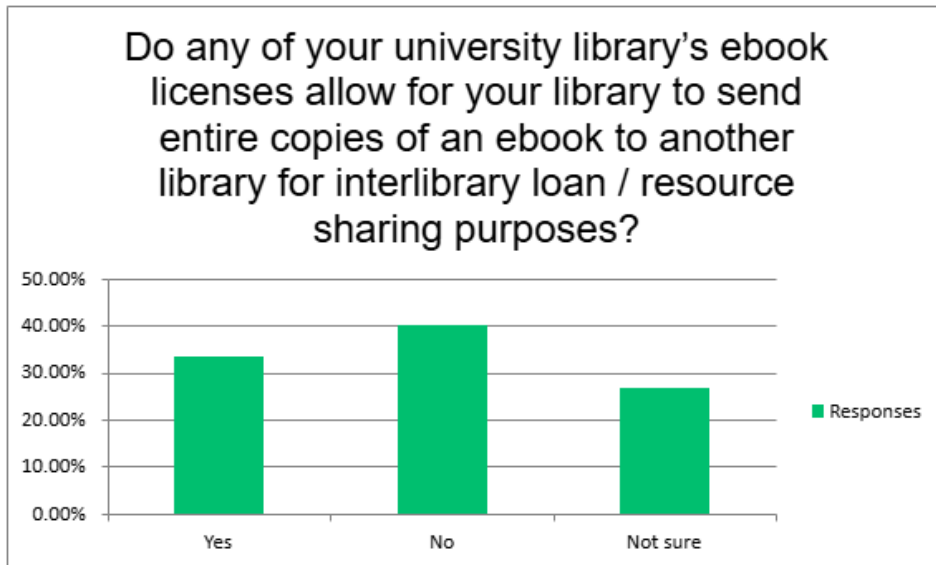


Fig. 7. Licensing specialists' responses regarding whether their library has at least a single ebook license that allows for an entire copy of the ebook to sent to another library for resource sharing purposes.

Finally, licensing specialists were also asked if their library had plans to reduce the number of physical items in their library system.

Yes - through direct removal of items only	27%
Yes - through transferring items to storage only.	27%
Yes - through a combination of both direct removal and transferring items to storage.	33%
No	7%
Not sure	7%

Fig. 8. Licensing specialists' responses regarding plans to reduce the physical collection.

Over 80% of respondents stated that their library had plans to reduce the number of physical items in their collections. The responses also indicate that a significant percentage of the libraries plan on removing items entirely from the collection, with no plans of putting them into a storage facility. With libraries already collecting more digital monographs than paper monographs, the need for libraries to de-accession print works will further impact their abilities to lend their materials via resource sharing.

Results Discussion

The survey responses show that large Canadian academic libraries see EBA products, and ebooks in general, as a cost-effective way to collect monographs. One respondent stated EBAs are a way to “expand available titles for our students and faculty to access without expending the huge costs for ownership.” With significant space pressures on Canadian university campuses and libraries, and little money for building new library spaces, the future of monograph collections is increasingly digital (Canadian Collective Print Strategy Working Group, 2020).

However, as is also clear from responses, not a lot of consideration is given to the impact on resource sharing activities of the shift away from print monographs to acquiring monographs primarily as licensed ebooks.

Resource sharing specialists are under the impression that the rise in digital only titles for monographs is leading to resource sharing departments having to deny an increasing number of requests from other libraries due to licensing terms.

While libraries are trying to ensure that their ebook licenses come with some sort of resource sharing provision, only 33% of e-resource licensing specialist respondents were certain that at least one of their library's ebook licenses came with the rights to send entire copies of an ebook to another library on interlibrary loan. Of those respondents who submitted comments, not one of them spoke positively of the chances of getting whole ebook resource sharing provisions. Some comments from the survey regarding resource sharing for ebooks were:

- “noted “unsure” for ILL license conditions because they vary wildly -- I'd flag this as one of the problems of ebook licensing. No consistency from publisher to publisher, and not enough staff resourcing to check every license for terms and conditions when requests are made.”
- “We have discussed whole book ILL but technically it isn't clear how we would do this. ILL staff routinely provide single chapters to requesters under Fair Dealing.”
- “At this point chapter ILL has been the norm for our ebook collections. We haven't been able to set up “whole” book lending.”

EBA products may be an excellent collection development method to help a library ensure they are spending money on what their patrons need, but they also make it more difficult for a library to fully participate in resource sharing.

The discrepancy between resource sharing specialist and e-resource licensing specialists regarding their library's commitment to ensuring there are resource sharing provisions in ebook licenses, along with the findings about knowledge of EBA products amongst resource sharing specialists, demonstrates that there is a lack of communication between collections management and resource sharing departments at CARL libraries. This lack of communication is leading to an erosion of the importance of resource sharing in Canadian academic libraries when making e-book acquisition decisions. Canadian libraries are working hard to foster equity and to make equity based decisions. But in the case of EBA collections, and ebooks in general, the consequence of implementing systems that reduce equity in access to information has not been considered. making, The library ethos of information accessibility and resource sharing is being diminished by the wholesale adoption of EBA products without considering how these products impact our ability to share. These survey results demonstrate that Canadian academic libraries are – knowingly or unknowingly – turning their libraries into information silos whereby the utilization of huge amounts of digital information is controlled by technology and licenses which ties the library's collection to the institution in a way that was unheard of with print books.

Further Research

This survey uncovered many further areas for research – both in Canada and in other countries. Three areas that could be of interest to researchers to pursue are the attitudes of collections librarians towards resource sharing, opportunities for library consortia to be more active in proposing solutions to the problem of overly restrictive license impairing resource sharing, and investigating the impact on smaller and less well-off libraries of larger libraries shifting to ebooks over print books.

The attitudes of collections management librarians towards resource sharing need to be investigated. Do they even think of resource sharing when making collections decisions? Do they view resource sharing as being fundamental to the mission of libraries? Do they ensure that resource sharing staff are aware of the impact of collections decisions, and do they take resource sharing staff concerns seriously?

Many EBA deals are negotiated by consortia, It would be helpful to investigate the attitudes of library consortia regarding the importance of resource sharing to ebook acquisition decisions. One could also investigate whether large consortia are interested in working with publishers to develop a technical solution to make ebook lending via resource sharing mimic traditional resource sharing. Large consortia, particularly national consortia, could be well suited to partner with publishers on a technical solution.

Finally, it would be helpful to the resource sharing community to investigate the attitudes of smaller libraries that rely on resource sharing to supplement their collections. How are they being impacted by the massive shift to EBAs by larger libraries? Is there ability to serve their patrons being jeopardized by the actions of the large research libraries?

Advancing these research areas will heighten awareness of the impact of EBA programs on resource sharing and hopefully help lead to a place where the library patrons are able to access ebooks at another library with the same ease as they access print books through their library's resource sharing network.

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