Shifting Tides: How the Re-emergence of DRM Impacts Libraries

DRM is back.

In a January 2012 post on the technology blog The Verge, Nilay Patel describes a shift in the way content is consumed that has resulted in the re-emergence and reinvigoration of Digital Rights Management (DRM), defined by the Electronic Frontier Foundation as a system that attempts “to control what you can and can’t do with the media and hardware you’ve purchased.”

Patel’s article, “DRM Comes Back with a Vengeance as Digital Media Moves to the Cloud,” is telling because it reflects a trend that is not commonly acknowledged by either consumers or people working in libraries.

Patel paints a picture of a drastically different landscape than that of the late 1990s. In the 90s, it seemed as if DRM were declining, punctuated by the fact that, in 1997, music sold through Apple’s iTunes became completely DRM-free. As Patel writes, “the success of DRM-free music sales would seemingly prove that a thriving digital economy does not require technological limitations on consumer behavior.” But this was not to be, partially due to the fact that there has been a significant shift in the way people consume digital content.

The days when users purchase individual digital files and download them the way they buy physical items in a store are quickly disappearing. Digital formats like e-books, music, and video are now frequently stored in the “cloud” and purchased on a monthly basis. In addition, services like Netflix, Rdio, and Spotify are replacing the traditional video and audio libraries that we once owned. According to Patel, DRM has also changed, becoming more flexible, easy to use, and invisible to consumers.

Cloud-based distribution models are nothing new for libraries. The difference in the library world is that many of our cloud-based services, like our research databases, are not protected by DRM, making us living proof that these services can exist without widespread
making and in creating the priorities for CLA, and that CLA represent its members. At a time of significant challenges and great opportunities for libraries, the need for an association which advocates on behalf of libraries and the difference they make in our communities is essential. CLA is this association and I am committed to making CLA our association and one that is a strong advocate for libraries across Canada.

And my efforts in 2013, working with amazing council colleagues, Jennifer Evans, Karen Hildebrandt, Marie DeYoung, Mary-Jo Romaniuk and Jane Schmidt along with our very capable CLA staff, will be to increase opportunities for member engagement and continue strengthening our advocacy efforts. I am eager to hear from CLA members about what you think is important, so please contact me at pmartinez@epl.ca.

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technological limitations. However, as libraries move into acquiring and circulating more materials like e-books and streaming video, we will be—and are—faced with a situation where we can provide access only to content that is protected by these types of controls.

The danger for libraries is that DRM represents a significant loss of control over our materials. If publishers control how our users access materials, they may wind up leaving out large sections of our demographic, standing in the way of the central library mission of providing broad and unrestricted access to information. Another danger is that libraries can be cut out of the picture altogether. One example of this is Apple’s iBookstore, which only allows for the “personal, non-commercial use” of books purchased through their store. If big technology companies like Apple and Amazon come to dominate the publishing industry, it is hard to imagine a world in which they allow libraries unrestricted access to their collections.

This does not mean that all is lost, as reflected in the articles chosen for this issue. These five articles examine many of the questions that DRM poses for libraries and suggest a number of strategies and initiatives that libraries may be able to use to either manage or eliminate these problems. DRM may present obstacles, but libraries are staffed by some of the most resourceful and intelligent individuals in the world. It is up to us to find solutions to work with these types of materials and to advocate for content free of DRM restrictions.

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