



## Thriving company rides the popularity of digital audio books

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Thank you, Edgar Rice Burroughs.

For Kevin and Laura Colebank, that American author's classic book, "Tarzan of the Apes," was the entrée to the audiobook publishing world, the impetus for their company's name, Tantor Media, and the vital launch pad to a successful business that today employs 75 and produces 50 new titles a month from its Old Saybrook headquarters.

Not bad for a husband-and-wife team that had no prior experience in the industry.

In one decade, Tantor Audiobooks has transformed itself from a small startup with three people (including the husband-and-wife team and his brother) into a major independent audiobook publisher on the East Coast, with a roster of more than 70 narrators across the country and a wall full of industry awards and honors.

And about that name? Tantor, explains Laura Colebank, was Tarzan's elephant friend in "Tarzan of the Apes."

Inside the company's two office complexes in Old Saybrook, employees handle a variety of tasks, from gaining licenses to publish an audiobook from the original book publisher to technicians who oversee rows of computers and complex machinery that produces thousands of copies of CD audiobooks. The technology can print up to 15,000 CDs daily. It's literally a one-stop shop, where everything from the artwork for the audiobook cover to the marketing is done in house. "We do it all," says Kevin Colebank.

Adds Laura Colebank, "If someone needs one copy, we can do it. If they need ten thousand copies, we can do it." A typical audiobook, with multiple CDs, costs about \$30 to \$35, while an MP3 audio file costs about \$25. (The MP3 CD costs less because one CD can hold up to almost 13 hours worth of a recording.)

The couple estimates that by the end of this year, their firm will be producing up to 1,800 titles of audiobooks.

And the firm continues to grow, say its owners. Today's book listeners are changing their habits, with many preferring to listen to books in an MP3 format. So, instead of a book covering 12 CDs, one single MP3 CD file can play the entire book. There's still a strong market for audiobooks on CDs, say the couple, but in today's downloadable world, habits are changing and so are the preferences of audiobook listeners.

In addition, the firm offers "Playaway"-style books. The book comes in a small compact player, sort of like a small iPod, with headphones. The book can be listened to more

than once, of course, but the convenience is that the listener doesn't have to fiddle with CDs. Just pop the tiny headphone pods into your ears, and hit play.

Eventually, say the audiobook publishers, more listeners will want to simply download their choice of audiobook directly from Tantor's website ([www.tantor.com](http://www.tantor.com)) onto their computer's hard drive. They can, however, already download those books from iTunes and from [www.Audible.com](http://www.Audible.com). For now, though, the industry is churning out millions of CDs or MP3 files to meet the needs of a growing listening audience.

According to the **Audio Publishers Association**, which represents the audiobook industry, CD sales represent a hefty 72 percent of the audio market, which ranges from audiobook sellers like the small, but growing, Tantor to industry behemoths like Amazon.com. Download sales, however, grew to 21 percent of the market (based on 2008 figures) and the industry expects that number to continue to increase. And the sale of so-called "preloaded" devices, such as the "playalong" books sold by Tantor, inched up to 3 percent of the total market. Cassette sales of audiobooks, once this industry's mainstay, have stayed stagnant since 2007, says the Audio Publishers Association, at around 3 percent.

Unabridged books, which represent the narrator reading the full work, not an edited version, make up nearly 85 percent of the audiobook market. That's good news for Tantor, which only publishes unabridged, original works.

The publishers' association also says that audiobooks have a long, and interesting, history among the reading (and increasingly common listening) public. In 1933, J.P. Harrington, an anthropologist, drove the length of this country to actually record the oral histories of Native American tribes. Of course, back then there was no digital technology, so the anthropologist was said to have recorded these histories on aluminum discs, using his car battery to power a turntable spinning those discs.

That's a long way away from today's technology at Tantor. Inside its separate production building in Old Saybrook, technicians oversee machinery that prints the book name and other information onto the CD disc. Then large computer towers take the master CD and burn copies in large volumes.

The company currently produces a host of popular, and best-selling, titles, including the top New York Times bestseller, "Three Cups of Tea," the non-fiction work by Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin about building schools in impoverished areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Among other current titles are "Third World America," by political commentator Arianna Huffington and "Savages," a thriller by Don Winslow.

Tantor's modest beginnings began in San Clemente, California, in 2000 (literally above a garage). In 2004, the company moved to Old Saybrook (Laura Colebank has family locally) in a smaller location, and then relocated into its two buildings within an industrial park setting in Old Saybrook near Interstate 95.

While both Kevin and Laura Colebank today are steeped in the publishing and audiobook world, easily noting the popular authors and nimbly explaining the shifting technology, they both have diverse backgrounds that didn't include publishing. Kevin Colebank was trained in mechanical engineering and management, while Laura Colebank's background is in consumer marketing, which did prove helpful in the

company's early days and still gives her a marketer's vantage point today in the competitive audiobook world.

Tantor's customer base is as varied as its publishing works. It serves the library world with specially bound copies of its works (they're more rugged for the many times the audiobooks are loaned out), to online distribution, telephone and retail sales. Its website offers all its works for sale in the various formats and there's even a "bargain bin" link for the less-popular titles. The website also offers reviews and chronicles some of the company's new releases and "coming soon" titles.

Tantor offers a strong line of classics, including "Pride and Prejudice," "Robinson Crusoe," and "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn." And, says Laura Colebank, some of its CD audiobooks also come with an "e-book" version, allowing the listener to also read along on a device such as a Kindle, which is helpful for students studying a particular book or classic.

The couple admits that they didn't see such profound growth in their enterprise when they first dabbled in the industry in 2000. But today, they say, they're glad they relocated to Connecticut, and Old Saybrook. The town's proximity to the shoreline is a plus, as is its proximity to a nearby busy Amtrak station and to New York City. "All publishing is on the East Coast," says Kevin Colebank. "And while we're not in the city, we're close enough to the city," he says of the frequent trips into Manhattan's book-publishing world.

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