

## **Getting an Earful of Printed Words Downloads, Small Devices Draw a Wider Audience Of Audiobook Listeners**

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Steve Somerville says he plows through a lot more books these days than he did 10 years ago -- but he rarely reads one. Instead, he listens to audiobooks while he watches football games on TV with the sound off, mows the lawn and even while chatting with the vet about his dog.

"I leave one earbud in to keep listening," says Dr. Somerville, a 61-year-old neurologist in Green Bay, Wis.

Downloading to portable devices has opened up more options for listening to information normally found in print.

Audiobooks first caught his attention via CD, he says, but his listening habit grew exponentially after he discovered digital downloads and tiny MP3 players. "I can put it in the breast pocket of my shirt!" he exclaims in tribute to his iPod nano. He listened to about 100 books in the past year and estimates he would have read only 20 in the same time period. Now he even gets an audio version of a newspaper via email every morning.

Audiobooks aren't just for long-distance commuters anymore, nor is it only the most tech-savvy who download onto MP3 players. Internet downloading and ever-smaller audio technology such as portable devices made for playing music are allowing people to listen while doing almost any droning activity from riding public transportation to mowing the lawn.

Simultaneously, downloading fluency is increasing and more and more people are comfortable with incessant multitasking -- like watching TV while listening to a book. The shift means more people, from all walks of life, are downloading and listening to spoken versions of information normally found in print, including books, language courses, magazines and newspapers.

Maddy Romey, a 13-year-old resident of Minneapolis, says she too discovered audiobooks on CD but became an avid user after discovering downloads. She often downloads books from iTunes or the Minneapolis Public Library Web site to the iPod she received as a birthday gift in April, she says, then listens while traveling, doing craft projects or cleaning her room.

The downloading boom is pushing the publishing industry, libraries and online shopping Web sites to adjust their business to increasingly tech-savvy consumers. Public libraries across the country are adding digital-download book-lending options to their Web sites. Library patrons can download a book that will automatically erase from an MP3 player after a set period of time or can be "renewed" online.

A sample of the offerings available for downloading on Audible.com

Web sites like Audible.com and soundsgood.com now offer morning newspaper delivery via email as well as audio back copies of several newspapers around the world, from the Hindustan Times Audio Digest to The Times of London. Earlier this month, Audible Inc. announced all Seton Hall University freshmen will receive an audio download of former U.S. Poet Laureate Billy Collins reading his work, as part of the South Orange, New Jersey, school's freshman reading program. Audio can be played on a growing number of listening devices such as MP3 players, computers,

PDAs, and mobile phones. And companies that sell audio downloads are expanding, both in the U.S. and in Europe and Asia.

Companies that run digital download Web sites such as MediaBay Inc., Spoken Network Ltd., Audible Inc. and Apple Computer Inc.'s iTunes have sprung up in large numbers, some seeing rapid growth. Audible says it has maintained 70% to 80% annual sales increases since launching in 1997. The company recorded \$19.1 million in sales during 2006's second quarter, compared with \$15.2 million for the same period last year. A barrage of free audio-download sites are also available, such as: [www.audiobooksforfree.com](http://www.audiobooksforfree.com), [literalsystems.org](http://literalsystems.org) and the French language [Archivox.com](http://Archivox.com).

When writer Max Brooks came out with his first novel, "The Zombie Survival Guide," in 2003, he didn't discuss doing an audio version with his publisher, Random House. At the time audiobooks were "the bastard step child" of the publishing industry, he says, because "three years ago you didn't have podcasting." He believes increased adoption of new technology like portable music players has pushed the audiobook world forward. His second book, "World War Z" came out simultaneously with the audio version this month.

Indeed, Doug Joubert, 42, says he started downloading audiobooks to his MP3 player after becoming a fan of downloadable podcasts—first writers' reading of their work on personal Web sites, then later radio shows like NPR's "Speaking of Faith" via Audible.com. Now he buys audiobook downloads online, as well as audio foreign-language courses for his MP3 player.

Jeannie Kim, a vice president and publisher at Reagent Press, says the company decided to produce all its books in audio as of 2006 (previously it produced about 50% in audio).

Compatibility problems can prevent some people from using the new services, depending on the type of MP3 player they own. As a librarian by training, Mr. Joubert was disappointed to discover his local library in Rockville, Md., encodes its books in Windows Media format. He owns an iPod.

The publishing industry's push to do more audiobooks -- both on CD and for downloads -- means different books get published. Now, "we have to ask ourselves, 'Is this a book that will work well both in print and in audio?'," says Ms. Kim. A thousand-page thriller may work well in print, but the costs associated with producing a long audiobook "are off the charts in terms of voice talent, production time and required engineering," she says. In addition, longer books are sometimes difficult to market to listeners, while readers will stick with a 1,000-page paper book.

Many people listen to audiobooks to fend off failing eyesight, a trend pushed along by the increasing population of aging baby boomers, though industry experts say the majority of growth in audiobook sales is due to adoption of technology advances.

Baby boomers, however, are having an effect on another part of the publishing industry: big-print books and newspapers. Jamie Knobloch, publisher of Thorndike Press, said large-print editions became common for public libraries and assisted-living communities throughout the 1990s but have since become a need for aging baby boomers now in their 60s.

"The demand of readership has risen," Ms. Knobloch said. "Readers want more of the best-sellers and what their peers are reading."

Dr. Somerville says he doesn't have eye problems when reading books, but he does see one MP3-player design flaw for some baby boomers: "I have to take out my hearing aid to listen."

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Corrections & Amplifications:

The radio program "Speaking of Faith" is produced and distributed by American Public Media. This article incorrectly referred to the program as National Public Radio's "Speaking of Faith."