



Digitalization Policy Brief

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Historically, publishing has been a gatekept industry that is costly to enter, slow to change, and dominated by a narrow set of voices. Digitalization has transformed this reality, offering unprecedented opportunities to reduce production costs, increase market access, and democratize storytelling.

According to the Journal of Economic Perspectives, digitization has dramatically reduced the cost of bringing books, music, movies, and television to market while increasing both the number and quality of creative products available to consumers (Waldfoegel, 2017). Yet this democratization has not been evenly distributed.

Public schools and libraries, especially those serving low-income communities, often lack the budget to offer comprehensive digital library access. This gap not only affects all students who increasingly access literacy through digital formats, but disproportionately harms students with disabilities, for whom e-books and audiobooks are often the only accessible format.

Additionally, while online resources exist explaining how to publish content inexpensively, there is no accessible, systematic way to disseminate this knowledge at scale to best benefit current and future authors. As a result, students, particularly those in under-resourced districts, lack a clear and straightforward pathway to

author, publish, and distribute digital content.

This gap creates both cultural and economic divides between those who can publish, profit, and shape the literary landscape and those who cannot.

This capstone proposes that federal and state education agencies invest in both equipment and digital publishing literacy initiatives, prioritizing Title I schools, to empower youth to be not only consumers of culture but also its creators and stewards.

II. OVERVIEW

Digital publishing is reshaping how young people encounter stories. Between 2010 and 2014, the percentage of children ages 6–8 who read e-books more than doubled from 28% to 64% (Larson, 2015). At the same time, audiobooks have become the fastest-growing segment of the publishing industry. When Amazon released the Kindle e-reader, U.S. e-book sales grew at “triple-digit rates,” fundamentally changing the economics of reading (Gilbert, 2016, p.166).

E-book also enhance the frequency readers consume literature. E-book readers consume an average of 24 books per year compared to 15 among those who stick to print. Forty-one percent of tablet owners and 35% of e-reader

owners say they read more since adopting digital formats. In other words, access drives engagement: the more ways readers can access stories, the more they actually read.

And yet, despite these trends, public education remains stubbornly anchored in print literacy. Many teachers never receive formal training on how to integrate digital reading tools into instruction. In fact, existing curricular structures and testing frameworks can actively discourage technology adoption, leaving educators feeling unequipped to experiment or adapt (Larson, 2015, p.170). This isn't just a missed opportunity for innovation; it's a widening gap between how students read at home and how they read in school.

Libraries tell a similar story. On paper, they're a natural bridge between technology and literacy. But in practice, they face serious economic barriers.

"Libraries often pay much more for digital copies than individuals do. Spokane Public Library simply cannot afford to buy as many digital books as we need to meet the demand. The average cost the library pays for a print book can range from \$8–\$30 and we get to keep that book in our collection forever (hypothetically), whereas the average cost for an eBook is around \$40, and for an audiobook, it's about \$73, and we have to renew these licenses regularly. To maintain a varied collection, we aim to spend approximately \$8,000 each week on digital books alone."

While digital publishing has made it easier for individuals to consume and create content, the institutions most responsible for equitable access,

public schools and libraries, are priced out of participation. They face rising licensing costs, renewal fees, and infrastructure challenges, all of which make it harder to build robust digital collections.

The result is a layered inequity: students in well-funded districts gain easy access to digital books and learn how to use new publishing tools, while students in low-income districts fall further behind. Without exposure to e-books and audiobooks, they miss out on literacy growth opportunities that their peers are already experiencing. And without digital publishing literacy, they're shut out of participating in a growing creative economy where individuals can share stories, build audiences, and even generate income through platforms like Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP) or ACX.

This is more than an educational issue. It's an equity gap in who gets to participate in 21st-century storytelling. If schools and libraries can't keep up with digital reading trends, we risk creating a future where only those with private access to digital platforms are able to both read and be read.

Integrating digital publishing literacy into classrooms and libraries wouldn't just update curricula, it would level the playing field. By teaching students how to create, distribute, and engage with digital literature, we can ensure that the benefits of this cultural shift aren't concentrated in the hands of the few but shared across communities.

III. HISTORY

A. Economic Shifts in the Publishing Landscape

The digitization of media has significantly reshaped the economics of publishing. In earlier decades, bringing a book, album, or film to audiences involved high production costs, multiple layers of gatekeeping, and limited entry points for new creators. Digital technology changed that equation. Once information is digitized, “it can be copied and distributed at near-zero marginal cost” (Waldfoegel, 2017, p. 195).

This shift has not only reduced expenses but also made it easier for more people to participate in creative industries. Digitization “has greatly reduced the cost of bringing new products to market in music, books, movies, and television” (Waldfoegel, 2017, p. 196). What once required large capital investments, such as the estimated \$1 million to launch a new music album, can now be accomplished for under \$20 through digital publishing and audio storytelling platforms.

Importantly, these changes have not resulted in widespread economic decline for the publishing sector, as some initially feared. The U.S. publishing industry has remained stable throughout the digital transition (Waldfoegel, 2017; Ward et al., 2012). E-books have contributed to expanding overall book sales (Gilbert, 2015, p. 169), and market share grew from less than 0.6% in 2008 to 22% in 2012 (Nature, 2015, p. 124).

These historical trends show that digitization is not merely a technological shift but an economic one, lowering barriers to entry while broadening participation. This context is essential for understanding why integrating digital publishing into public education and library systems is both a practical and forward-looking strategy.

Digitization has disrupted many of the traditional structures that historically determined which voices

reached audiences. As researchers have noted, “the disruptions and reduction of revenue streams have challenged the role of the traditional gatekeepers of quality... Because traditional gatekeepers were imperfect judges of quality, the growth in new products has presented consumers with many products that would not have met the approval of pre-digital gatekeepers” (Waldfoegel, 2017, p. 196).

By reducing reliance on centralized publishing institutions, digital platforms have made it easier for a wider range of creators to participate, including those from communities that have historically faced barriers to entry. This shift has expanded opportunities for creative expression and broadened the cultural landscape.

However, access to these opportunities remains uneven. Amazon’s growing “monopsony” power in the digital publishing space raises concerns that control may once again concentrate in the hands of a few dominant actors, effectively recreating new forms of gatekeeping (Gilbert, 2015, p. 172).

This tension highlights the importance of public infrastructure and policy in ensuring equitable participation. Federal initiatives such as the Digital Equity Act and the Library Services and Technology Act already prioritize access to technology and digital resources (Digital Equity Act, n.d.). Expanding digital publishing literacy in schools and libraries would build on these existing frameworks, helping ensure that democratization through technology reaches every community, not just those with existing access and privilege.

B. Equity and Inclusion Developments

Digitization has also disrupted many of the traditional structures that historically determined which voices reached audiences. “The disruptions and reduction of revenue streams have challenged the role of the traditional gatekeepers of quality... Because traditional gatekeepers were imperfect

judges of quality, the growth in new products has presented consumers with many products that would not have met the approval of pre-digital gatekeepers” (Waldfoegel, 2017, p. 196).

By reducing reliance on centralized publishing institutions, digital platforms have made it easier for a wider range of creators to participate, including those from communities that have historically faced barriers to entry. This shift has expanded opportunities for creative expression and broadened the cultural landscape.

At the same time, the distribution of these opportunities is not fully equitable. Amazon’s growing “monopsony” power in the digital publishing space raises concerns that control may once again concentrate in the hands of a few dominant actors, effectively recreating new forms of gatekeeping (Gilbert, 2015, p. 172). This tension highlights the importance of ensuring that the benefits of digitization are accessible to all creators, not just those with pre-existing access to powerful platforms.

C. Libraries and Education Stance

Public libraries and universities have increasingly turned to digital publishing as a way to expand access and engagement (Green, 2017; Vassallo, 2016). However, despite this growth in higher education and community settings, these same tools are rarely embedded into K–12 classrooms, where they could have the most transformative impact.

Research demonstrates that digital reading formats, including audiobooks, can support literacy development. “Many literacy skills and strategies used by audiobook readers are comparable to those used by text readers” (Larson, 2015, p. 170), and audio support can improve both pronunciation and comprehension (Larson, 2015, p. 169).

This evidence suggests that integrating digital publishing and audio literacy into classroom

instruction can complement traditional reading practices rather than replace them. In doing so, schools and libraries could better align literacy instruction with the ways many students already consume and interact with stories outside of school.

D. Cultural Impact

Digital publishing and multimodal storytelling can play a significant role in improving literacy outcomes and access for a wide range of learners. Audiobooks and other digital formats have been shown to increase access and comprehension for auditory learners, bilingual students, and students with disabilities (Baskin & Harris, 1995; Mediatore, 2003; Larson, 2015).

These tools offer more flexible pathways for engagement, which can be particularly valuable in communities where access to traditional print resources may be limited. By making it easier to consume and create content, digital publishing can help support more inclusive literacy development and cultural participation.

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders and Interests

The issue of digital publishing access touches many groups.

Central are students, particularly those in Title I schools. These students often face limited access to high-quality digital resources both in and outside the classroom. For them, access to digital publishing platforms and e-books would enhance equal opportunity to participate in a rapidly evolving literacy landscape.

Educators are essential partners in this effort. Without proper training and support, even the most well-intentioned digital equity initiatives

cannot be implemented. Many teachers are eager to integrate digital publishing tools into their literacy instruction, but they need professional development, reliable infrastructure, and time to adapt their curricula.

Libraries and library systems are another critical link. They serve as public gateways to knowledge, particularly for communities that lack private access to digital resources. Yet libraries often face steep licensing fees and renewal costs for e-books and audiobooks, which can make it difficult to maintain a robust collection. Their position at the intersection of education and community access makes their involvement essential to any sustainable solution.

The publishing industry also plays an important role. As business models shift in response to digitization, publishers must balance adapting to new forms of distribution with preserving jobs and maintaining quality. Their decisions about pricing, licensing, and distribution will directly influence how accessible digital content is to schools and libraries.

Finally, federal and state education agencies shape the policy landscape. They provide funding, set standards, and have the authority to expand or restrict access through regulation and investment. Their engagement can determine whether digital publishing literacy remains a privilege concentrated in wealthier districts or becomes a shared resource across communities.

B. Risks of Indifference

The risk of indifference to the scarcity of audiobook availability stands under the topic of exclusion of those who have impaired reading, or reading disabilities from the same literacy education as others. If a publishing firm and other stakeholders are incapable of addressing this matter, advances in technology will continue without diversity, creating an environment that can't accommodate individuals who require different learning structures. By failing to include all of society, not only would those with reading disabilities be limited to their personal growth in literature, but issues from the past where people were prevented from education would resurface. Eventually, these issues that seem inconsequential could escalate education exclusion, creating a community where literacy, literature, and basic education is not accessible to numerous individuals. Thus, it is vital that new technology advances with the inclusion of everyone, creating an environment where each and every person is granted equal access to literature and education.

C. Non-partisan Reasoning

Expanding digital publishing literacy is not a partisan issue. It focuses on equity, access, and opportunity for all communities. Digital equity strengthens literacy, prepares students for the workforce, and supports community

engagement.

This approach aligns with existing federal initiatives such as the Digital Equity Act and the Library Services and Technology Act, which emphasize technology and digital resources as shared public goods.

A wide range of groups can benefit from this work, including libraries, educators, students, and cultural industries. Because the goals are shared, this issue has strong potential to bring together a broad coalition of partners and supporters.

V. TRIED POLICY

COMPASS:

A successful structure of equal online access has already been established in the state of California through COMPASS, COMPASS stands for the California Online Media Program for Access and Student Success. This effort is controlled by the California State Library and allows every individual in K-12 public schools to have accessibility to categorized online learning assets. COMPASS also displays that organized state investment can patch academic gaps in online writing, and reading accessibility. However, while COMPASS provides students analysis and research successfully, it hasn't been able to encourage students to enhance into digital developers. These programs are teaching students how to use technology, but what is necessary is to teach these students not to just be passive consumers of technology, but to use these skills

and put them to use in an increasingly digital world to thrive in a publishing industry that is now more democratic. Expanding on COMPASS, it provides California's youth with opportunities to take initiative on producing literacy, as well as online authorship. These initiatives especially take place within Title 1 schools, helping students to create and design culture, instead of just participating.

Digital Equity Act:

A well built example displaying digital inclusion policy has been established since the year 2021. The Digital Equity Act of 2021 initiated by Senator Patty Murray and Senator Rob Portman. The Act allows over 2 billion dollars of federal grant financing to assist online inclusion programs. This is done through the Information Administration and National Telecommunications, supporting states in their expansion of broadband accessibility and online learning. Although this Act also assists in allowing individuals larger amounts of digital literacy access, the youth needs to grasp and master how to put their knowledge and understanding from this online inclusion act to use in the publishing world.

VI: POLICY OPTIONS

Option 1: Integrate Digital Literacy into Curriculum

Federal and state education agencies could support the integration of digital literacy into K-12 curricula, with a special focus on Title I schools. This would involve:

Embedding digital skills into existing literacy and

language arts standards.

Training educators to use e-book and audiobook tools effectively in their classrooms.

Teaching students how to author, publish, and distribute their own digital work through accessible platforms like Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP) and ACX.

Creating a digital publishing module that gives students a pathway to share their work in a more open and accessible marketplace.

Students in well-resourced districts already access digital tools informally, which gives them an advantage. Making digital literacy part of the formal curriculum would help level the playing field and align with broader national goals. It would also prepare students to participate not just as readers, but as creators in a growing cultural and economic landscape.

Option 2: Expand Infrastructure and Access in Public Schools and Libraries

Federal and state funding could be used to expand digital infrastructure, licensing capacity, and broadband access for schools and libraries. This would include:

Funding for e-book and audiobook licenses.

Discounts or state-negotiated pricing for digital access codes.

Investment in classroom technology such as

tablets, e-readers, and audio equipment.

Many schools and libraries face steep digital licensing and equipment costs, which limits their ability to provide equitable access. Expanding infrastructure would help ensure that opportunities to read and publish digitally are not determined by district wealth or location.

Option 3: Public–Private Partnerships to Support Digital Publishing Equity

Partnerships could be formed between school districts, libraries, nonprofits, and private publishing and technology companies to expand access and reduce costs. This could include:

Encouraging publishers to develop affordable educational licensing models.

Working with nonprofits to provide educator training and student programming.

Incentivizing technology companies to supply devices, hosting services, and technical support.

By leveraging both public and private resources creates a more sustainable approach to access and innovation. These partnerships can help lower costs, speed up implementation, and build stronger community support. They would also give students the chance to engage with digital publishing as active participants rather than passive consumers, contributing to a more inclusive and dynamic digital marketplace.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Education should be accessible everywhere. The resources available to students through public education are dependent on the school's assigned district. Lower income districts have fewer options, which widens gaps in literacy, opportunity, and cultural participation.

One powerful way to make access more equitable is to strengthen the role of public libraries as shared digital resource hubs. If libraries can secure discounted educational licensing models through state or federal agreements, these digital collections can be shared with all schools within their city or district. This approach would reduce costs for schools, expand access to students, and make digital resources a shared public good.

This strategy aligns with existing programs like the Digital Equity Act and COMPASS. By combining curriculum integration, infrastructure investment, and public library partnerships, we can create a system where every student has access to digital reading and publishing tools, regardless of their background.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

Digitalization is not the end of publishing. It is its democratization. By lowering costs, expanding access, and challenging traditional gatekeepers, it has created new opportunities for creators and readers. These opportunities only matter if they are shared widely and equitably.

Embedding digital literacy into public education and expanding access in libraries and schools can make sure students, especially those in under-resourced communities, are part of this shift. Giving young people the tools to read,

create, and publish in digital spaces allows them to shape the stories that reflect their lives and communities.

The next step is to make sure that every classroom, every library, and every young voice can take part in this cultural transformation and be strategically prepared to thrive with greater academic and economic opportunity.

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