

## **Episode 12 Summary — Straight Download Podcast**

### **Live from the PLA Conference Floor**

Episode 12 of *Straight Download* marks a major milestone for the podcast with its first-ever live, on-location recording on the PLA Conference floor in Minneapolis. Recording in front of a live audience, the hosts dive into one of the most consequential conversations facing public libraries today: the sustainability of digital content and the evolving relationship between libraries, publishers, authors, and vendors.

The episode features Andrew Albanese, editor-in-chief of *Publishing Perspectives*, founder and editor of *Words & Money*, and a longtime publishing journalist. Albanese brings decades of experience analyzing the intersection of publishing economics, public policy, and libraries, making him an ideal voice for a candid, data-driven discussion about where the digital ecosystem is headed and where it is breaking down.

#### **A Market That Has Matured but Has Not Adjusted**

Albanese explains that the digital library marketplace has entered its mature phase, yet publisher policies around pricing, access, and licensing models remain rooted in early defensive thinking. Fifteen years after the introduction of the 26-loan model, prices have increased while restrictions have expanded, even as reader behavior and consumption patterns have fundamentally changed.

Libraries are now facing flat or shrinking budgets while digital demand continues to grow. As a result, traditional collection development has largely been replaced by demand management, with holds driving purchasing decisions and metered licenses rapidly consuming acquisition budgets that might otherwise support broader and more diverse collections.

#### **The Hold Problem and the Bestseller Tax**

A recurring theme throughout the episode is the unintended damage caused by holds-driven acquisition strategies. What was once celebrated as a sign of success has become a structural vulnerability, one that publishers increasingly reinforce by pricing bestsellers at a premium. The result is what the hosts describe as a “bestseller tax,” where a small percentage of high-demand titles consume a disproportionate share of library budgets.

This dynamic leaves little room for backlist, midlist, and independent titles, despite the reality that most publisher catalogs consist largely of works that will never perform at bestseller levels. Albanese underscores that libraries have historically been the strongest supporters of the midlist and that current pricing structures actively undermine that role.

## **Data, Transparency, and the Limits of Assumption-Based Economics**

Another central tension explored in the episode is the lack of shared, trusted data across libraries, publishers, and vendors. Libraries often do not have clear cost-per-circulation visibility, publishers rely heavily on incomplete or commercially biased data sources, and vendors do not consistently surface inefficiencies in purchasing behavior.

Albanese characterizes this resistance to new models as almost faith-based, with entrenched beliefs about cannibalization and sales protection persisting even when usage data suggests otherwise. Without shared facts and a willingness to acknowledge them, productive negotiation remains difficult.

## **Legislation as a Catalyst for Negotiation**

The conversation also addresses the growing momentum behind state-level eBook legislation. Rather than framing legislation as a cure-all, Albanese positions it as a catalyst designed to force meaningful negotiation in a market where major publishers have historically resisted coming to the table.

In a mature digital marketplace operating at scale, he argues that negotiated terms are both inevitable and necessary. Whether through legislation, reputational pressure, or libraries shifting spending toward alternative content ecosystems, the current model cannot remain static.

## **Authors, Advocacy, and the Long Tail**

A particularly powerful thread in the episode is the role of libraries as a massive, underrecognized advocacy engine for authors. Libraries create discovery, promote reading, and sustain long-tail titles that struggle to survive in a hits-driven retail economy. Yet many authors remain unaware of how restrictive pricing and licensing directly affect their visibility because library sales data is rarely isolated or shared clearly.

The discussion highlights the promise of instantly available and paper-use models for supporting diverse content, independent publishers, and self-published authors, particularly as younger readers increasingly discover books outside traditional publishing pathways.

## **A Call to Rethink Digital Infrastructure**

The episode closes with a clear message: the current digital content ecosystem is not sustainable. Libraries, publishers, authors, and vendors must re-evaluate systems designed for a transitional era and acknowledge that digital access is now core

infrastructure for public libraries. Without transparency, flexibility, and collaboration, the ecosystem risks becoming increasingly brittle.

### **What Everyone Is Reading, Watching, or Listening To**

The episode ends with the podcast's signature closing question, offering a more personal glimpse into each participant's current media interests.

#### **Andrew Albanese**

- **Reading:** *Digital Ink* by Richard Curtis, a memoir and industry history exploring the early days of digital publishing and the author's role as a literary agent navigating that transition.
- **Watching:** A full rewatch of *Game of Thrones*, which Albanese notes has challenged his mood but remains deeply compelling.

#### **Jeff**

**Watching:** *One Battle After Another*, a Leonardo DiCaprio and Sean Penn film that earned major awards and critical acclaim. He describes it as gripping, intense, and uncomfortably timely.

#### **Ann**

**Listening:** The audiobook *Tell No One* by Harlan Coben, narrated by Ed Sala. Anne shares that listening to mystery audiobooks motivates her workouts because she only allows herself to listen while walking. The suspense has successfully kept her active.