

# Exploring audiobook piracy as an act of commercial resistance

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Twenty-first century bookselling is overshadowed by the market dominance of platform behemoths, and this is nowhere clearer than in the case of digital audiobooks, where Amazon's Audible alone is estimated to hold nearly two-thirds of the US market share (Allen, 2023). As a result, such platforms exert significant commercial and intellectual control over audiobooks' circulation, often to the significant detriment of both the commercial benefits of producers and the broader accessibility of content (Giblin & Doctorow, 2022: 154-9).

In this paper we report on a collaborative research project investigating audiobook piracy within the context of digital audiobooks' circulation structures. Book piracy more generally has been understood as an act of resistance, contravening inequitable economic and geographic restrictions to access and playing a 'clear political role as a counterweight to the centralized control of information—whether by states or private interests' (Balázs, 2011: 400). Contemporary audiobooks are both books and digital media, and their circulation has a number of distinctive features in comparison to print and even ebooks. At the same time as major platforms exert extreme control over the market, digital audiobooks are also often available for free through legitimate avenues such as libraries. As digital media, there is no secondhand market to either counterbalance or undercut the commercial interests of new sales. Geopolitics also plays a significant role in audiobooks' circulation, with territorial licensing restricting availability.

Against this backdrop, we use online ethnography and observation to investigate how the specific characteristics of the audiobook market affect attitudes towards and participation in audiobook piracy. Violations of copyright and other moral rights in relation to audiobook circulation are diverse, ranging from shadow libraries and dedicated audiobook pirate sites, to the digitisation of out-of-print material and the activities of sites such as the internet archive, to the repackaging for sale of public domain content, or the encroachments against author rights by platforms such as Findaway Voices and Taylor & Francis. A number of publishers also oppose the distribution of audiobooks and ebooks through public libraries, portraying this as akin to privacy.

Our provisional hypothesis is that audiobooks' differing industry structures result in differing attitudes and perceptions with regards to ownership and the morality of different modes of access and consumption, and ultimately that an understanding of audiobook piracy hinges on the core concepts of power, control and resistance.

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