

Photos provided

The North Suburban Digital Consortium is used by several library districts including those in Algonquin, Crystal Lake and McHenry. It provides thousands of e-books, audiobooks and videos for library patrons to download for free.

Readers win with online access

More people visiting libraries than ever – just not always in person

By JAMI KUNZER
jkunzer@shawmedia.com

More patrons are using area libraries, though they're not always walking through the library doors.

Visits to library websites through computers and mobile apps, as well as the use of e-books, are on the rise based on studies and firsthand accounts from area librarians. A recent Pew study reports about 13 percent of Americans 16 and older used a mobile device to visit a library website during the past year, up from 6 percent in 2009.

Still, library officials stress, don't count out the draw of an actual book in hand.

"We do have a virtual library where you can get content 24/7, but we have a lot of people that still like the print books," said Kathy Lambert, public relations manager for the McHenry Public Library District.

"I don't think e-books are at the point where they're going to take over."

Many still don't realize they can get e-books for free through links available on library websites. In McHenry, for instance, patrons have access to 5,728 downloadable e-books, as well as 4,107 downloadable audiobooks and 364 downloadable videos through the North Suburban Digital Consortium, a service used by several library districts including

Algonquin Area Public Library and Crystal Lake Public Library.

Many times those with tablets and such end up buying e-books through stores.

"We have all the same titles a book store might have," Lambert said.

The library even loans out pre-loaded Nooks with more than 300 titles on each, she said, and more titles are added monthly.

Patrons often will bring in their tablets and smart phones to get assistance on how to access the library catalog, she said.

"It's not just young people," she said. "We have senior citizens that come in and say, 'My grandson bought this Nook for me for Christmas,' and we walk them through it."

And yes, e-books definitely are catching on with younger generations, based on a report commissioned by children's publisher Scholastic Inc. The report found 46 percent of respondents ages 9 to 17 had read an e-book as of 2012, compared with just 25 percent in 2010.

Still, about 80 percent of those respondents continue to read print books.

Overall, library officials say, circulation of basically all materials has been growing annually.



The Huntley Area Public Library recently added a mobile app that allows patrons to check out items or download e-books using their smartphones or tablets. Create a user account at huntley.bibliocommons.com.

More people do tend to use the library during a down economy, but it's difficult to pinpoint exact reasons for the growth without speculating, said Linda Price, public relations director for the Crystal Lake Public Library.

"I like to think it's a good library, and we know what we're doing," she said.

In Crystal Lake, library use has grown disproportionately to the population since 1991. In 2001-02, the city's population was about 38,000 and circulation was 655,559. Ten years later, the population had gone up only a couple thousand, while circulation had reached nearly 1,015,274.

Area libraries continue to meet the demands of technology, expanding websites and improving access.

The Huntley Area Public Library recently added a mobile app that gives patrons the means to check out items using their smartphones or tablets.

"You can come in and do all the great things you've been able to do for the past 20 years, but at the same token, we're seeing more of an increase for people being able to use their mobile devices to do anything," said Doug Cataldo, marketing and technology specialist for the library.

Along with that, the circulation of e-books in Huntley has increased 90 percent in the past year, he said.

Those using the online books range from 7- or 8-year-olds to their parents to senior citizens, including many from Sun City, said Pamela Cardenas, e-book librarian.

"I think it will continue to grow for several more years," she said. "Just the amount of devices that come out probably contributes to it. I think now there's a device probably for everybody."

• The Associated Press contributed to this report.