
A User's Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article is a personal account of the challenges faced by a library school lecturer who loses sight later in life. It illustrates the difficulties faced by visually impaired people in the United Kingdom in obtaining access to reading materials for work, educational, and leisure purposes. It also considers their future prospects.

Whenever I think about library services for visually impaired people in the United Kingdom (UK), I am always struck by how confusing they are. As a user I find the variety of sources can be problematic and sometimes frustrating. I am also conscious that despite the number of organizations providing books for visually impaired people, less than 5 percent of UK publications actually appear in Braille, audio, or large print. Of course I am immensely grateful for the material that comes my way even though there is a considerably smaller range of nonfiction than I would like, and I seldom have a recently published book at the time other people are talking about it. I know from talking to other visually impaired people, especially those who have had sight and lost it, that my feelings are not unique and that many of those who can no longer read standard print often feel as I do, angry that unlike sighted people we have to rely to a very great extent on charities to meet our information and recreation reading needs despite our contributions to national and local taxes. Nevertheless, I am optimistic about the future.

Some personal information may help to set my views about library and information services for visually impaired people in context. I have been registered blind since 1987; I am a chartered librarian with an academic background in sociology, and I taught library and information studies for more than two decades. My views about library services for visually im-

paired people in the UK have clearly been shaped by my experience of sight loss. I am very aware that had I lost my sight only a few years later it would not have been necessary for me to take early retirement from teaching, but at that time synthetic speech and dictation software were yet to be developed. Additionally, while the Polytechnic where I worked had an excellent equal opportunities policy with respect to students, that policy did not at that time extend to meeting the needs of staff with disabilities. The concept of "reasonable adjustments" as elaborated in the Disability Discrimination Act of 1995 (DDA) was in 1989 alien to most employers, and the cost of any adjustments would not then have been deemed affordable. Also, while colleagues were individually sympathetic toward my difficulties, the idea of funds that could be spent on services to students being diverted to one member of staff would not, I am sure, have had much support.

The only help I was offered was someone to read to me for six hours a week. This might have been enough to keep me abreast with the reading I needed for preparing lectures, but the person the local authority would provide would know nothing about librarianship or sociology. What I really needed was someone who could quickly summarize the material so that I could then decide what I needed them to read aloud in detail. A research student would have been ideal, but the authority would not pay for this. Even if they had I would still have had the problem of needing to read handwritten essays and examination scripts. A CCTV magnifier, which was then very new technology, would have helped, but it was refused on the grounds that it was too expensive.

I therefore retired before the time came when all staff in the department had a desktop computer and students submitted their essays on disk. Had my sight loss been just that little bit later, I would have been able to read everything on the screen in large print until I needed the access technologies that now make using computers easier for visually impaired people.

There must be many other people who experience sight loss during their working lives and who want to continue having access to professional or academic literature and to information generated within their employing organization. The DDA and access technologies will undoubtedly have helped many, but I am still conscious that with the exception of the Royal National Institute of the Blind (RNIB) Student Library, which has been demand led rather than based on the concept of a balanced stock, relatively little academic and practically no professional literature is available in alternative formats in any of the libraries for the blind in the UK. I therefore look forward to a time when this situation can be addressed in a systematic way.

Following my early retirement I established a management training consultancy. Until I acquired my own scanner and Optical Character Rec-

ognition software I relied heavily on the aid of a good many helpful librarians plus a CCTV magnifier to read enough of the literature to produce a wide range of course materials. This experience also reinforces the view that I have always held: given good staff and equipment public libraries can provide the comprehensive service that the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 requires them to do rather than restricting, as so many do, visually impaired services to recreational materials. It is of course important that equipment is available, that staff are familiar with using this equipment, and that they have time available to help readers who have sight problems by finding the appropriate material, discussing the contents, and finding pages that the reader might wish to magnify or scan.

It has been my experience that professional associations can be enormously helpful to their visually impaired members and that they can equally create barriers to their having access to changes and developments in professional thinking and knowledge. I was heavily involved with the Library Association (now the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals [CILIP]) from 1987 to 1998 and was its president in 1994. The Library Association was committed to equal opportunities, and all my papers were automatically sent to me in large print or on disk. Some years later I asked to receive the journal of our new institution in an accessible format. To my surprise I was told that this would not be possible. I made several suggestions as to how it could be done but these were all rejected by staff at the operational level. Only when I took the issue to the chief executive was it made plain that CILIP's policy, the culture of the organization, and the spirit of the DDA meant that my needs had to be met. This clearly demonstrates that any equal opportunities policy is useless unless everyone in the organization is made aware of it. Equally important, people need to know what it is possible to do as well as knowing the organization's legal responsibilities. I believe this applies as much to libraries as to any other professional association.

My current use of libraries combines a variety of resources to acquire my leisure and educational reading. Unfortunately, Braille is not among these resources because in common with many people who lose their sight later in life, lack of sensitivity in my fingers has meant I found learning this particular tactile format too difficult. I can read Moon adequately if rather slowly, but with only 300 titles available in the National Library for the Blind there is not a great deal of choice. I use a computer with synthetic speech output (Jaws) and dictation software (Dragon Naturally Speaking). I download out-of-copyright nonfiction and some material from the Internet as text documents and use Jaws to listen; I have Eze Reader software for listening to books in DAISY format. For recreational reading I get cassettes from my local public library and from the Calibre Cassette Library. I usually get information I need either directly from the Internet or indirectly by using the National Library for the Blind Web site.

When I first registered as blind I was only told what my local public library could offer and about the RNIB Talking Book Service. I found the range of material that the RNIB made available was very good. However, the dedicated, nonstandard (transportable rather than portable) cassette player that had to be used was so seldom where I wanted to listen to the tapes that I read relatively few books each year. My local Social Services Department transferred the player to someone who would make greater use of the subscription.

Like many visually impaired people I like to visit my local public library where I can choose books for leisure reading that are available there and then rather than selecting from a catalog and using a postal delivery service. My local public library has a good selection of commercially produced standard audio cassettes and some CDs, and these satisfy a substantial portion of my recreational reading. However, I had been for several years bemoaning the fact that there were other books I would like to read before another blind person told me about the Calibre Cassette Library.

Like the cassettes in my local public library, Calibre uses open formats for its cassettes and CDs, which play on standard equipment. Calibre provides a much wider range of titles than can be provided by a public library because its books are recorded by volunteer actors. Their cassettes also have an advantage over the commercial ones in having additional information and a synopsis at the beginning of each book. There is also an excellent Web-based catalog that allows users to search by subject, author, title, and reader, so although I make relatively little use of the service at the moment I very much appreciate that it gives me wider choice and the ability to make my own selections.

Since I have no longer been able to read large print I have learned about other collections of audio books, but my learning has been haphazard and largely as a result of my formal role with the National Library for the Blind (NLB). But even if I were to register as a reader of every audio library, there would still be the problem of finding which of them has a particular title.

Since the establishment of the Revealweb catalog in 2003 this has been less confusing than when I first needed alternative formats. Nevertheless, it is a bit daunting to discover that a particular item is only available in a small library that I have never heard of and that the material must therefore be acquired through interlibrary loan. And while the Revealweb catalog is available to all public libraries, not all library staff seem to be aware of its existence. Thus a visually impaired person who does not know about it may not find items they would otherwise find useful or interesting. Also, at the time of writing, the future funding of Revealweb is not as secure as I would like it to be. As a national database of accessible formats I believe it should be part of our official national bibliographic service and have sustained government funding.

The difficulty of manipulating alternative formats is a constant if mild irritation. For example, I would read more books in Moon but I travel a lot and many of the books I would like to read come in eighteen volumes when reformatted into Moon. This bulk and weight means I can only read these books at home. Finding the next cassette or CD in an audio book can also be problematic. In the past my local public library use raised plastic stick-on numbers to identify each cassette and finding the next one was never a problem. Now, with three or four tapes in each bag I never find the first cassette on the first or even second attempt. The CDs, especially those that do not announce their number at the beginning of each disc, are even more challenging when they have been placed in their containers in random order.

Another testing problem with cassettes is their vulnerability. They get twisted, break, and generally wear out, especially if their initial physical quality was poor. Unfortunately, the fact that a tape is damaged beyond use only becomes apparent during play. Like other visually impaired people using public libraries, I have lost track of how many books I have had to abandon, sometimes on the last tape, because of this particular problem. Of course, it is embarrassing if one has damaged the tapes, but as the problem appears to be a common one might it be reduced if libraries were to ask their readers to inform them about any physical problems with the cassettes when returning them to the library? The CDs I have borrowed seem to be generally in better shape than many of the cassettes, although this may be because they are newer and have had less use. But CDs are not without their own problems, the most frequent of which seems to be that one of them, usually the last, is missing.

I am very aware that the above problems only relate to the cassettes and CDs I get from my local public library. Of course, some of these issues could be minimized if staff were to spend more time checking audio materials when they are returned, but resources are not unlimited. Money spent on staff is not available to be spent on materials, and I would like to see more books in alternative formats rather than fewer.

For most recreational listening I find high-quality cassettes perfectly adequate. I like them because they can be stopped and started again at the same point whereas most CD players do not appear to have a "remember last track" facility and users must rely on a visual display to identify an individual track. Additionally, some audio books on CD have only three tracks on each disc. Fall asleep when listening to one of these at your peril! Like cassette players, DAISY players resume play at the point where the machine was last stopped, although this may sometimes be rather different from the time at which the reader stopped listening.

I have a natural inclination to prefer audio books in an open format, which can be played on equipment that is inexpensive and readily available for as little as £15. This preference is based primarily on their wider

availability everywhere. Anyone visiting their friends or family and taking a couple of books on CD or cassette can be reasonably sure that they do not also need to take the equipment on which to play them. Additionally, DAISY players may be excessively expensive for some visually impaired people whose local authority will not support their annual subscription to the RNIB Talking Book Service (currently £70).

The range of equipment needed for playing alternative formats is another source of grumbles. While there are many MP3 audio books that can be (legally) downloaded from the Web, there are relatively few CD players easily available that, as DAISY players do, also play MP3 files. I know of few visually impaired people who use an iPod because most seem to find them too small and difficult to use. If only the control buttons of CD and MP3 players could be standardized in the same way that it seems cassette players are, life would be very much easier.

As a librarian and occasional user I am extremely enthusiastic about the DAISY audio format. Its only real limitation is the need for a dedicated player or special computer software (available from £30). The DAISY format, with its search and bookmark facilities, makes using an audio book much more like using a printed book, and because there is only one CD for each book there is no problem in identifying the next disc. I hope the day will come when a wide range of DAISY titles can be obtained through local public libraries. The success of the RNIB DAISY Talking Book Service and the NLB synthetic voice DAISY pilot project indicates that visually impaired people like this format. DAISY is one of the reasons why I am optimistic that my own information and recreational reading needs will be more easily satisfied in the future.

In common with much of the rest of the population, many visually impaired people like to satisfy their information needs through the Internet. For those of us who use screen readers this is not always easy as so many Web sites are not fully accessible to us. My own solution is often to visit the NLB electronic reference library service Web site. If that fails to deliver what I want, I use my local public library, which has a wide range of electronic resources. Unfortunately, none of its terminals are equipped with voice synthesis or headphones, and I therefore have to prevail on the ever-helpful staff. Needless to say, I would prefer to be able to find the information for myself. I am hopeful that at some time in the future it will be easier for me to do so.

When I look back to the time I first needed alternative formats, I am astonished at how much more choice there is now than there was then. I am also confident that the extension of choice in both form and content will continue. This is because the improvement in synthetic voice audio means it will be more likely that a wider range of nonfiction will become available on audio.

Two other reasons for my optimism are the Digital File Repository and

DAISY. The proposal to establish a UK Digital File Repository of publishers' original files should make it much easier for authorized alternative format producers to be more timely with their publications. The DAISY format already makes it possible to use a single file to generate all alternative formats, including large print. These two elements combined mean that it should be possible in the future for anyone who needs a book in a particular alternative format to have their needs satisfied.

The final reason for my optimism is that rationalization within the voluntary sector providers of library services for visually impaired people is already a very real possibility. This should lead to an improvement in those services and potentially more books being made more easily available to visually impaired people, whatever their format preferences. Although I would prefer this to be a government-funded initiative, it is good to think that we might be able to develop something approaching a National Accessible Library Service that will be readily and freely available to all visually impaired people.

Gillian Burrington has been chairman of the National Library for the Blind since 2002. She chaired the Adapt Trust (Access for Disabled People to Arts Premises Today) from 1996 to 2002; she was president of the Library Association (now CILIP) for 1994 and chaired its Equal Opportunities Panel between 1990 and 1996. As a member of her local Family Health Services Authority, she chaired the Ophthalmic Services committee from 1988 until 1996. Gill has worked in public and academic libraries and established Burrington Partnership management training in 1990. She has written widely on library management, equal opportunities, and since 1993 on disability and access to library services.