Introduction

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The original intention of the editor of *Library Trends* was to publish an issue devoted to a worldwide review of library services for all disabled people. We realized that this would be a formidable challenge that we did not feel competent to address. In discussing the challenge, however, we came to the conclusion that there was sufficient breadth within our own field of knowledge—library services for visually impaired people—to offer to edit this issue. We are grateful to have been given this opportunity to address a wider international audience than is normally the case, and we hope it will inspire somebody to take up the challenge of proposing an issue dedicated to services for people with other disabilities.

Our intention in devising this issue was to demonstrate the variety of national models for the governance and organization of services for visually impaired people. We wished to provide a broad as possible international perspective ranging from the highly structured and coordinated United States model to the situation in underdeveloped countries in Africa and elsewhere in the world. We wanted to explore the challenges and opportunities that these libraries face in the digital age. We were keen to demonstrate how these library services have to face the same issues as mainstream libraries throughout the world, such as copyright restrictions and metadata standards, but need to address the special needs of their users as well. We believe it is important to demonstrate the extent of effective international cooperation in this field of library and information services. It was crucial that this not be a British dominated issue but rather provide a range of expertise and experience from contributors around the world. Lastly, we were determined that we should provide an opportunity for readers to learn of the insights and experiences of the most important people of all—the users of these library services.

Accordingly, we commence this issue with three articles from the per-
spective of users. Dr. Gillian Burrington provides a very personal and informative account of her experience as a senior lecturer in library and information studies who progressively lost her sight from middle age. In contrast, Kevin Carey, who was born blind and is not a librarian, challenges us to develop a new vision of the role of libraries and librarians even though he has never seen a library but is a regular user. We do not apologize that both authors are British because we knew they provide valuable personal insights of worldwide relevance. We are keen to provide an international perspective on users’ needs, however, and we believe Eric Davies’s article should stimulate further research into this most important research activity.

Our next theme is the range of national models in this field of librarianship. It is appropriate to begin with Kurt Cylke and colleagues’ account of the history and development of the federally funded National Library for Blind and Physically Handicapped People as a constituent part of the Library of Congress because we envy such enlightened support from national government. In contrast, David Owen’s paper demonstrates how services in the United Kingdom are an uncoordinated mix of public and charitable services that are not directly funded or led by national government. This typical British compromise reflects the different library histories and written and unwritten constitutions of these countries. By way of further contrast, Morayo Atinmo recounts her personal attempt to provide much needed leadership in this field of librarianship in her native Nigeria, whereas Dick Tucker has valiantly attempted to provide a worldwide perspective on library services for visually impaired people in underdeveloped countries. It is sobering to compare the opportunities afforded to blind children in the United States with those in the poorest African nations.

Those involved in service delivery to visually impaired people across the world are constantly reminded of such crucial matters by their participation in the activities of the International Federation of Library Association’s (IFLA) Libraries for the Blind Section, and its secretary, Helen Brazier, provides an overview of the section’s activities to improve these services around the world. Another major concern for all these libraries is copyright, and Johan Roos, the chair of the section, provides a comprehensive and highly readable account of the particular relevance of copyright regulations in enhancing or deterring improved provision for visually impaired people in individual countries and internationally. In contrast, the library profession itself can determine how best to improve resource discovery for visually impaired people, and Ann Chapman explores the special factors that need to be considered when attempting to organize content to make it accessible to them.

Our final theme is to demonstrate how modern information technology and the digital revolution impact as much, if not more, on these li-
libraries as mainstream libraries. Elsebeth Tank and Carsten Frederiksen provide an account of how this sector has worked tirelessly on an international cooperative project to develop the DAISY standard so that visually impaired people can have previously undreamt of access to content in an easily usable form. Peter Brophy and Jenny Craven outline international attempts to ensure that the Internet becomes fully accessible to visually impaired people and how we can ensure that the visually impaired benefit from Web-based library services both within and remotely, providing we all address some fundamental requirements. Finally, Margaret McGrory and her colleagues at the Canadian National Institute for the Blind Library demonstrate how they have completely reengineered their library to revolutionize their service to blind Canadians by making full use of the digital revolution.

It is inevitable that in attempting to provide an issue with contributors from different countries and continents we have encountered differences in terminology. We are conscious that Library Trends has an international readership and that disabled people in different countries have different conventions. For example, in the UK we always write “Braille,” whereas elsewhere it is written “braille.” In the UK we refer to “visually impaired people,” whereas “visually handicapped people” is often used in the United States. We decided that we would not edit the articles to conform with UK terminology but would respect national usage and rely on our readers to recognize variations from their own normal terms.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge the excellent support we have received from Maureen Bates and Diane Farline in preparing this issue.