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Invitation to the feast: developing accessible eBook services in UK public libraries

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Abstract:

This paper examines the status of eBooks in the UK and explains how they can play a dramatic part in increasing the quantity of reading material accessible to blind and partially sighted people - from famine to feast. Public libraries can play a vital role in making eBooks available to blind and partially sighted people. The paper goes on to describe RNIB's strategies to influence library practice, including investigation of the issues, some collaborative solutions and reader case studies.

eBooks in the UK

In the UK, the popularity of eBook readers and eBooks has soared over the past year. Indicators of this phenomenon include the use of e-reading devices and eBook sales.

Reading devices

People are reading eBooks on dedicated eBook readers, tablets, computers and mobile phones.

In April 2012 it was reported that one in three people owns an eBook reader[1]. 1.3m eBook readers were given as Xmas gifts in 2011[2]- although 22% people who received one hadn't switched it on in January[3].

The most popular brands of e-readers in UK are the Amazon Kindle, Apple devices, Sony Reader and Kobo. Prices of eBook readers and tablets are falling. For example, the Kindle cost £180 when it was released in 2007 and is now only £89.

eBooks

In this paper, I am discussing eBooks, in other words downloadable texts, with or without images and text to speech functionality, as defined by Wikipedia[4]. On this occasion, I am not discussing downloadable audio using human narration, but many of the same issues apply.

In 2011, consumer eBook sales in the UK increased by 366%[5].

The most popular commercial eBook shops selling directly to consumers are Amazon, Apple iBook store, Waterstones, and W.H.Smith. Amazon offers over 1 million books, newspapers and magazines plus 1 million free eBooks; the Apple iBook store has over 700,000 eBooks.

There are numerous eBook file formats: the two most common are ePub and PDF; others include Amazon's proprietary format. Most new eBooks are protected by Digital Rights Management (DRM), which restricts what can be done with them.[6]

This is still an evolving market and not without challenges – such as interoperability and tax – but it's clear from this evidence that eBooks represent a feast of reading.

Situation for blind and partially sighted people

In the UK, one in eight people can't read standard print due to sight loss, dyslexia or another print impairment[7]. In other words there is a very large market for accessible reading.

RNIB is a membership organisation of blind and partially sighted people who, of course, want to be part of the eBook reading revolution.

This is a particular challenge because, historically, only 5% of books have ever been transformed into audio, large print or Braille. We estimate that this figure has now risen to 7% (including eBooks that can be read in these accessible formats)[8]. We describe this as a book famine. For the purpose of this paper, a more useful benchmark is that, in 2009, only 13% of the top selling 1000 titles were available in Braille, large print, audio and accessible eBooks[9].

For blind and partially sighted people, eBooks offer far greater access to books than ever before. eBooks could help meet the objectives of the international Right to Read campaign, for the first time, by providing access to the same book, at the same time as everyone else.

Books in electronic form are potentially more accessible than print because the user can adapt the content to suit his or her own needs, providing of course that all the components of the e-reading experience - eBooks, eBook readers and eBook services - are designed to be accessible and useable.

RNIB strategies

It's one of RNIB's priorities to influence society[10] and so we have a programme of work concerned with access to reading.

- We work with technology companies and eBook retailers to improve the accessibility of their offerings
- Through membership of the DAISY Consortium, we have helped develop e-pub3 as an inclusive way for publishers to create eBooks

- We also inform and empower blind and partially sighted people to be able to take advantage of new technologies, for example through advocacy, signposting and training. An example is our advisory leaflet: Ebooks what can they offer me?[11]

Outcomes

This approach has seen considerable progress.

Earlier in 2012 we produced a joint statement with publishing industry on accessibility and eBooks[12].

And we now see that 76% of the UK's 1000 top selling books are available in all accessible formats including e-books, a great improvement on the previous figure of 13%[13].

However, RNIB research earlier this year shows that most blind and partially sighted people are still missing out on the benefits of digital services and technology. The main reasons are low awareness; lack of confidence and skills; and accessibility barriers[14].

UK public library provision

We believe that public libraries have an important role in addressing these issues by providing accessible eBooks, for numerous reasons

- Social inclusion is part of the public library ethos
- Libraries want to extend reach
- Libraries provide services for people who don't want or can't afford to buy
- eBooks offer the opportunity to provide services to people who are remote from the library
- eBooks have the potential to reduce costs
- There are legal requirements to offer equitable services

The Equality Act has not yet been tested in UK but we are beginning to see challenges in the USA[15].

Many public library authorities are entering this market: see the list of public libraries providing download services[16]. Some libraries are reticent because the market is still developing and they say the cost benefits are not yet clear, however the latest data suggests the following take up

- Overdrive (e-text & audio) (135 authorities)
- Bloomsbury Public Library Online (70 authorities)
- Askews (e-text & audio) (44 authorities)
- W F Howes (audio) (40 authorities)
- Bolinda (audio) (12 authorities)
- Bilbary (due to launch August 2012)

Some publishers are not making titles available to public libraries while the ecosystem is developing; they fear that library use will damage sales. However, Amazon says its Prime eBook lending library correlates to an increase in book purchasing[17] and Overdrive says its "buy it now" option has driven significant sales.

If public libraries don't provide the service, there is a risk that commercial suppliers, such as Amazon, will fill the gap, with the risk that the digital divide will become worse.

The Society of Chief Librarians is bringing its influence to bear and on 13 July posted its position on eBook lending in libraries[18]:

"Public libraries have a key role in widening access to eBooks, reaching out to all sections of local communities including those that cannot access printed material easily or can only access services remotely".

"We also wish to seek support for the aim to enable access for all including those with visual and other disabilities".

In July, the Department of Culture Media & Sport signalled a review but there has not yet been a formal announcement. In Europe, EBLIDA has also launched a campaign for eBooks in libraries[19].

RNIB strategy with public libraries

RNIB is a member of the Society of Chief Librarians community of practice on eBooks and contributes to the national debate.

More precisely, in 2010 we developed a factsheet to help public libraries deliver accessible eBook services[20]. In 2011 we decided to follow up the factsheet by asking blind and partially sighted volunteers to carry out a survey, as part of our annual campaign, Make a Noise in Libraries[21].

Survey aims

We wanted to discover how easy it was for blind and partially sighted people to find out about the availability of eBook services in public libraries; and what issues they would experience when registering and using the services.

We asked the volunteers to enquire about eBook services in their local public library and if available to test them out. This proved to be quite a challenge.

Survey findings

130 people volunteered to help. Some of them discovered that their public library was not offering eBooks. Nevertheless, 55 blind and partially sighted people found that eBooks were available and succeeded in testing the service. Even though many were proficient users of IT, they found the experience daunting and frustrating. The problems encountered were largely to do with accessibility and usability (similar to those discovered in a study of commercial downloadable audio carried out for RNIB by i2Media[22]). Examples included

- Web accessibility was poor: volunteers had difficulty using council and library websites with access technology such as screen readers and magnification software because web pages were often cumbersome and poorly designed

- Logging on procedure was difficult

- Search and navigation: navigating to the eBook service was challenging for many people; searching for books was difficult at first but became easier with practice and familiarity with layout

- There was some disappointment with the quantity and range of titles on offer

- Technology issues: some libraries lacked a PC equipped with access technology so several people had to join at home rather than try in the library where support would have been available from a member of staff; the download process was tricky for some

- Playback functionality was reported to be reasonably satisfactory, probably because the volunteers were familiar with their own players. They used a variety of specialist and mainstream reading devices.

- Staff assistance was essential for most people at the start, even for experienced computer users: the general feedback was that it would have been impossible or extremely difficult for people to manage on their own and most library staff were helpful and supportive

- Awareness and understanding of eBooks: from the quantity of responses we inferred that this was relatively low

- Value of eBooks: most participants thought that eBooks would be a potentially useful addition to public library services

At that time, many libraries didn't provide eBooks and others were keeping a watching brief, which provided them with an opportunity to address accessibility from the start.

Users said

"I tried hard for more than an hour. I couldn't do it. I'm a reasonably experienced computer user, and I could not reach the Library online service or the eBook catalogue of titles to borrow."

"I tried to browse the available eBooks, only to discover that the website is not very accessible as each book is shown as a picture of the front cover."

"Downloading I still find a bit difficult and am nervous about it, but I can do it given time."

"Very difficult for people who use braille or audio. The synthetic speech is poor."

What happened next

As a result of this survey, we arranged a meeting with Overdrive in the London Borough of Greenwich and invited a user to walk us through the e-book experience to demonstrate typical accessibility issues. This led to Greenwich and Overdrive committing to take actions, mainly around improving website design and the user journey.

We are continuing a programme of hands on demonstrations of e-book readers throughout UK, including libraries. These are highly practical, confidence building sessions and have proved very popular.

We have started a project with Manchester Libraries to improve accessibility of their eBook service and promote it to blind and partially sighted customers. The aim is to motivate users and develop their skills. The programme will include demonstrations of eBook readers & services, staff awareness training and provision of eBook readers for users to try out. We intend that it will result in a wider range of case studies and recommendations for libraries.

RNIB's web accessibility team has launched a challenge to organisations to improve website accessibility in 180 days and we are promoting it to libraries[23].

Conclusions

eBooks have tremendous potential to improve access to books and reading for people who can't read standard print.

Public libraries play an important role in providing accessible eBooks and in reaching and supporting print disabled readers, turning the famine into a feast.

We recommend that libraries use of web accessibility standards and RNIB guidelines to influence the design and implementation of eBook services. Additional leverage can be applied during the procurement process.

The eBook reading experience is as much about people as it is about technology. We found it useful and powerful to engage readers in our survey and recommend that libraries who wish to develop services not only train staff but also consult readers.

Readers speak for themselves

eBooks for blind and partially sighted people. YouTube.[24]

Changing chapters: a blind book lover's personal experience by Ian Macrae[25]

Blind book lover and editor Ian Macrae reveals his personal journey accessing books through the decades, delighting in the speed and ease of access to books now, while stressing that all producers of e-reading solutions need to recognise blind and partially sighted readers as a genuine part of the market.

A real valuable tool

"We bought our daughter Sarah a Kindle as a present a year ago and this has proved a real valuable tool for her, to such an extent that she no longer uses your Giant Print service. Her reading has accelerated markedly and the variety of books she reads widened. I think this is due to the fact that the size of the Kindle is more manageable especially when reading in bed and importantly for a teenage girl, makes it less conspicuous." Lyndsay Chapman, Maidenhead.

Digitally delivered joy

"Like Lady Antonia Fraser (The week in books, 7 January), I welcome the Kindle with enthusiasm. And with relief: in my mid-

80s, after five eye operations, reading had become more of a pain than a pleasure. The sheer joy of finding a lightweight device that I could hold easily in my crablike hands, and that would obligingly enlarge the typeface to a level rendering superfluous any magnifying glass in my collection, was overwhelming.- Colin Cooper, St Leonards on Sea, East Sussex."

Letter reproduced from The Guardian, 21 January 2012.

For more information

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