



eBooks for the Visually Impaired

Kindle and other readers come up short; Justice Dept. pushes textbooks

In recent columns, I have discussed Amazon and the Authors Guild's disabling of text-to-speech in Amazon's Kindle. It was unclear the exact reason that the guild demanded that Amazon disable TTS, although the move probably stemmed from a concern over diminishing audiobook royalties.

But not everyone in publishing perceives TTS as a threat to audiobooks. "If audiobook producers can be replaced by text-to-speech functions, then I don't think they're doing anything all that interesting," says Hugh McGuire, founder of LibriVox, an open-source project to create public domain audiobooks. "[So] bring on the TTS," he says, welcoming the competition. "Make it better, make it wonderful, find new and easier ways for people to read more books. If that puts audiobook makers out of business, then too bad for the audiobook makers."

Recent Progress

In the two years since the Kindle 2 debacle began, some progress has been made. But, for the most part, the issue has whimpered away without an acceptable solution. In a meeting that included the National Federation of the Blind, the Authors Guild, the Association of American Publishers, and six major publishing companies, the parties agreed in principle that books need to be accessible to the blind. However, it is unclear exactly what the ramifications would be. The meeting also did not address how people who have print disabilities for reasons other than vision loss will access the technology.

Amazon has since released Kindle for PC App, an accessible version of Kindle that users can download to their computers. The app allows anything to be read aloud using TTS software (such as Jaws and NVDA) that is already on the PC. This is fine for people with vision loss because they most likely have third-party TTS already on their computers. But it doesn't do much for people with other print disabilities. Additionally, it requires a reader to use his PC, not his Kindle device. While it may be a step in the right direction, it is not a complete solution.

The Kindle 3, released in 2010, included additional accessibility features, mostly for the visually impaired, though a lot of content remains inaccessible. For example, the blind can't navigate within the text or in the table of contents, shop in the Kindle store, or use the annotation and notation features.

In the meantime, advocates such as the National Federation of the Blind have turned their focus toward accessibility in

education because they believe that textbooks will be the first genre to go entirely eBook. While barring eBook access to people with disabilities may violate anti-discrimination laws, "it's not critical that a person have access to the latest John Grisham novel," says Chris Danielsen, director of public relations at the NFB. "But with textbooks, it's a different story."

Amazon has not moved to block TTS in textbooks that are in eBook format, however, because the device is not accessible for people with print disabilities. When some U.S. universities and colleges brought Kindle into the classroom, the Department of Justice (DOJ) intervened, ultimately entering into settlement agreements under which the "universities agreed not to purchase, require, or

recommend use of the Kindle DX, or any other dedicated electronic book reader, unless or until the device is fully accessible to individuals who are blind or have low vision."

In a letter to college and university presidents, the DOJ made clear that requiring inaccessible technology to be

used in the classroom is prohibited. This prohibition extends to elementary and secondary schools.

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Competition from Apple

During the struggle to compel Amazon to make Kindle accessible, Apple came out with iBooks, and the story changed. There are still limitations, but features inaccessible on Kindle are accessible for readers who use the iBook app on an Apple device. For example, clicking on an item in the table of contents takes the reader to the requested section—a feature not yet accessible on Kindle devices.

Readers using iBooks on an Apple device don't have to worry about whether TTS is disabled by the publisher either. Instead, books can be read using VoiceOver, Apple's TTS app. (Neither the Authors Guild nor publishers have tried to block VoiceOver from reading books on Apple devices.)

The DOJ believes that procuring accessible electronic book readers should be "neither costly nor difficult." And with the clear mandate that eBook readers must be accessible before they can be required in a classroom environment, manufacturers have a bottom-line incentive to ensure accessibility. Fast. ☑

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