

Ditching the Guillotine: An Education in Accessibility

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The other day I was reading through the page proofs of a forthcoming title when I spotted a drawing of a book-holding device for a gout-suffering scholar.

In the drawing — from a rare book published in 1588 — the man sits before an enormous contraption that looks like a waterwheel. Multiple books are arranged on panels at intervals and it appears that the scholar turns the wheel when he needs to go from one book to the next. We don't know who collected the books or positioned them on the machine. But it is abundantly clear from this illustration that issues surrounding accessibility and reading have been with us for a very long time.

There are more than 54 million Americans with disabilities. One in eight struggles to read conventional print. In addition to people who are blind and vision-impaired, this population includes readers with “invisible” disabilities such as ADHD and autism.¹

Fewer than 5% of books published in the United States are available to individuals with print disabilities.² Without accessible books, the chances of living independently diminish significantly.³ In fact, of the 285 million people with visual impairments worldwide, only 10-25% are employed.⁴

Last March I joined the **Library of Congress** as director of publishing. As home to the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped — which provides free braille and talking books for people with visual impairments or physical disabilities — the Library stands alongside several other major institutions in championing literacy through accessibility. When I was asked to develop a comprehensive eBook publishing strategy for the Library shortly after arriving, I recognized that it was time to get serious about learning how to create accessible digital content.

My education began last June with a day-long seminar hosted by the **Association of American University Presses**. Entitled *Accessibility is Accessible* and organized by **Bill Kasdorf of Apex CoVantage**, the seminar focused on the convergence of “a new publishing paradigm” built on two fundamental principles:

1. People who need to use assistive technology should be able to buy and use the same digital books everybody else does, without enduring the delays and expenses that are currently required to provide them the books they need.
2. By incorporating good accessibility practices into their editorial and production workflows, publishers will make their books better for all users. ... making books accessible makes them better, period.

One of the first presentations brought home the difficulties faced by institutions of higher learning in meeting state and federal mandates to provide accessible textbooks and learning



Photo Caption: Drawing from *Le diverse et artiose machine del capitano Agostino Ramelli (The Varied and Ingenious Machines)*, published in Paris, 1588. The machine shown here is a wheel-operated book-holding device for a scholar who suffers from gout. Rare Books and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress.

materials to students with qualifying disabilities. **Jamie Axelrod**, Director of Disability Resources at **Northern Arizona University** and president-elect of the **Association on Higher Education and Disability**, discussed the realities he and his colleagues face when attempting to meet the needs of their disabled students.

Most of the publishers I know happily comply with requests from campus libraries for digital files of assigned books to accommodate disabled students. I had always thought the library's role was simply to facilitate the exchange of files between publisher and student, but the reality is far more complicated.

Consider this: 82% of the files received by **Northern Arizona University** can't be used without text conversion or remediation.⁵ The book might come as a single PDF without chapter-level bookmarks or as an image file without text. Some files aren't structured properly, others lack necessary tags. Page numbers, footnotes, and side notes might not match those of the printed text — or they might not exist at all. Often there is no descriptive text for the charts, illustrations, graphs, and mathematical symbols. Without this text, visually impaired students who rely on machine readers can't access the information.

At **Northern Arizona University**, staff in the office of Disability Resources must step in to fix these shortcomings. They open files, add missing elements, and repair flaws as students wait.

The process is even more labyrinthine when digital files are neither provided, nor available. In those cases, the staff purchases a print copy of the book, removes the spine with a guillotine, scans the text, and fixes the file. To offset some of their costs they rebind the guillotined book and sell it back to the campus bookstore.

It's bad enough that this process is inefficient and expensive. What's worse are the delays often endured by waiting students. All too often, students with disabilities don't have usable copies of required texts before the first day of class.

Most publishing professionals I know are caring, socially conscious people. So why are we doing such a poor job of serving readers with disabilities? One issue may be that the push for greater accessibility comes in the midst of a sluggish economy that has dampened retail sales and eviscerated the academic library market. The resulting diminished operating margins cause even the most good-hearted publishers — many already struggling to streamline processes and cut costs — to pause before committing to another new workflow.

Kasdorf points to another factor hindering our progress: many publishers haven't mastered the steps necessary to ensure that new content is born accessible, in addition to being born digital.⁶

I had always believed that EPUB solved the problem. As it turns out, however, the file preparation sufficient to create most eBooks isn't enough to make books fully accessible, even if those files are wrapped and packaged according to the latest EPUB standards. Without appropriate tagging, descriptions, and file structure, readers with print disabilities and mobility impairments will not be able to distinguish text elements like headings; they won't be able to navigate through the book properly; they won't be able to know what's in the illustrations or charts; and the files won't interact properly with assistance technology (AT) like text to speech.⁷

But there is good news too. The processes we use to create born digital eBooks provide an excellent foundation for creating accessible content, especially if we are using EPUB3. And publishers seeking easy-to-understand guidance now have an excellent resource in **BISG's Quick Start Guide to Accessible Publishing**.⁸ The section entitled “Top Tips for Creating Accessible EPUB 3 Files” can calm the nerves of the even the most technophobic among us.

We can also consult with pioneering publishers who have incorporated accessibility into their editorial and production processes. The **University of Michigan** has made significant progress in this regard, and interested peers can glean a lot of great information from **Jonathan McGlone's** excellent slide presentation from last June's seminar.⁹

Michigan is an institution with a robust disability studies initiative and the Press has

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a strong list in the field. But it was the 2015 protest of a blind professor of disability studies and literature that pushed **Michigan Press** to up its game.

Stephen Kuusisto expressed his frustrations at the difficulty of reading content published by the Press on his blog, *Planet of the Blind*. The post, entitled “My Everest: The University of Michigan Press,” vividly described the obstacles encountered by the author in trying to read content labeled as accessible. “They make the experience of attempting to read one of their books nearly impossible.”¹⁰

It would have been tempting to respond to this criticism with any one of the whiny retorts to which we publishers resort when on the defensive. “We’re understaffed!” “We’re underfunded!” “We’ve been told to cut costs!”

But press director **Charles Watkinson** chose to respond in a fashion from which we all might tear a page: humility. He wrote:

“We are very aware that we have more to do in making our works more widely accessible... Please know that we are actively working on the issue and hope to provide a better service to both our authors and readers soon.”

Charles Watkinson and his colleagues launched a process to produce born accessible eBooks. They reviewed and updated their production and image description guidelines and revised their instructions to authors to incorporate necessary requirements. They also developed a process by which they could audit EPUB3 files using the International Digital



Publishing Forum’s a11y¹¹ QA checklist. The details of this process — along with helpful tips — are described in **McGlone’s** slides.

In reviewing Michigan’s efforts, two pieces of advice stand out: “collaborate with campus experts” and “start small, iterate often.” This eminently sensible approach gives all publishers permission to blunder forward as best we can. We won’t get it right immediately. As with other new processes we’ve had to master — like ONIX compliance, metadata exports, digital catalogs, and eBook production — we’re going to meet with staff resistance and make some mistakes along the way.

But the potential benefits are significant. According to **BISG**, publishers that invest in accessible content can enjoy a variety of ancillary benefits, including new markets, better discoverability, and streamlined production workflow.¹²

And think of the money that could be saved by shedding the cumbersome, expensive, and inefficient processes of retrofitting that keep campus colleges shackled to scanners and disabled students lagging behind their able-bodied peers.

I still have a lot to learn, but I’m ready to ditch the guillotine and make the short leap from born digital to born accessible. Care to join me? 🐘

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Press, the New Republic, Counterpoint Press, and Moon Travel Handbooks. She serves on the Board of the American Association of University Presses (AAUP), and has served as an adjunct faculty member in George Washington University’s Master of Professional Studies in Publishing program.

Endnotes

1. **BISG** Content Structure Committee’s Accessible Publishing Working Group, *Quick Start Guide to Accessible Publishing* (New York: Book Industry Study Group, Inc., 2016), 8.
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4. **World Blind Union**, <http://www.worldblindunion.org/English/resources/Pages/Global-Blindness-Facts.aspx>.
5. <http://www.slideshare.net/aaupny/aaup-2016-accessibility-presentation-j-axel-rod>
6. **Bill Kasdorf**, “Accessibility has Never Been More Accessible to Publishers,” *IBPA independent*, May 2016, 34, no. 5, <https://www.ibpa-online.org/article/accessibility-has-never-been-more-accessible-to-publishers/>.
7. **BISG**, 8-9.
8. <https://bisg.site-ym.com/store/ViewProduct.aspx?id=6972996>
9. <http://www.slideshare.net/aaupny/aaup-2016-getting-to-accessible-publishing-at-the-university-of-michigan-press-j-mcglone>
10. <https://stephenkuusisto.com/2015/07/21/my-everest-the-university-of-michigan-press/>
11. a11y is a community-based effort to facilitate web accessibility, by providing, among other things, automated content audit tools. <http://a11yproject.com/>
12. **BISG**, p. 13.