The Right to Listen

A Not So Simple Matter of Audiobooks

Keren Dali and Leah K. Brochu

This paper, situated at the intersection of public and technical services, proposes a conceptual and theoretical foundation of advocacy for integrating audiobooks into library collections and programs. Suggestions are made primarily with librarians in public libraries in mind, although it is hoped that academic and special librarians will also benefit from them; these suggestions build on the analysis of the rising popularity of audiobooks as an accessible medium and a medium of choice for leisure readers with and without disabilities. The authors consider equal status for audiobooks and the wider acceptance of audiobooks through the combined lens of diversity and privilege. In their study, they survey extant literature (research-based, media, and social media publications); examine and synthesize it in a critical and innovative manner; propose new ways to consider the issues of advocacy and practice; and offer specific ideas for librarians to implement. The authors argue that some anxieties and concerns about audiobooks and audio-reading, among others, can derive from different types of privileges held by professionals and social groups, which becomes particularly important when they are endowed with decision-making power. These privileges include the privilege of body ability, the privilege of lifestyle, the Western privilege, the privilege of literacy, privileging format over story, and the privilege of citizenship and language.

The idea for this paper was born out of the request for an interview that came to one of the authors from a journalist; the interview never materialized, but the question sparked the authors' interest in the issue of audiobooks and audio-reading. In this day and age, when our engagement with stories and information is increasingly mediated by something other than traditional reading, how can librarians advocate for hosting and promoting a variety of formats in libraries, without ranking them and privileging one type of engagement with stories and information over another?

The authors' decision to submit their paper to a journal dedicated to library resources and technical services was determined by the fact that the boundaries between public and technical services have blurred. Librarians working in technical services are "backroom staff" no more. They are public figures in the workplace and library community activists who participate in advocacy, policy making, lobbying, and community engagement. Not to mention that in most staffing models in libraries, many librarians carry out both public and technical services responsibilities, for example, collection management and reference or collection management and liaison/outreach. This trend has certainly solidified in the last twenty years, and the authors observed it both through their research and first-hand experience as a former academic librarian/current

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faculty member, teaching in the areas of collections and public services, and as a special librarian actively engaged in producing accessible materials for visually disabled readers and in advocating for this user community.

This paper focuses primarily on public libraries, although the authors acknowledge that academic libraries and special libraries also work with readers in the context of leisure/recreational activities and/or bibliotherapy.[1] They recognize that in the last twenty years, leisure reading has made a comeback in academic libraries, as supported by numerous published sources.[2] Special libraries, primarily those in health care, correctional institutions, and social service agencies, have taken a vested interest in the practice of bibliotherapy.[3] Hence, supporting leisure reading is no longer limited to the domain of public libraries but is integral to professional practice in libraries of various types. As a result, the authors hope that librarians outside of public libraries will also consider this paper to be useful.

This paper is not intended to be a comprehensive overview of audiobooks and audio-reading; it is not an analysis of collection development policies related to audiobooks in different types of libraries; nor is it dedicated to the discussion of accessibility of information or leisure materials through audiobooks, although the authors address accessibility as applicable to the topic. Their intent is not to prove that reading textual material and audio-reading (or listening to audiobooks) have equal value and create comparable reading experiences, although they briefly engage this argument to support their discussion. Their purpose is very specific: to offer librarians language, ideas, and theoretically grounded argumentation to advocate for collecting and marketing audiobooks in libraries, using the notion of privilege and the frame of Diversity by Design.[4] No other conceptual or research paper, to the best of the authors' knowledge, has addressed the issue of diverse formats in library collection through the lens of privilege and the chosen theoretical frame, and this constitutes a unique contribution of their paper.

Although the audience is primarily practicing librarians, the authors believe that the insight, advice, and suggestions presented here will benefit other professionals, including educators, leisure and recreation workers, community workers, social workers, etc.

Literature Review
A Brief Overview of Audiobooks (and Related Materials) in North American Libraries

In North America, community members have borrowed audiobooks from libraries for almost a hundred years. From records, audiocassettes, and CDs to downloadable and streaming audio, libraries have hosted materials in audio-format in their collections for nearly as long as these resources have existed. It started with the idea of providing inclusive services for people with visual disabilities. In the US, the 1931 Pratt-Smoot Act mandated that the Library of Congress (LC) work with other libraries "to serve as local or regional centers for the circulation of such books"; as a result, US libraries began to develop collections of "talking books":

> A Joint Resolution was passed appropriating $100,000 for fiscal 1932 to carry out the provisions of the act to provide books for blind adults. The "Project, Adult Books for the Blind" was established. This program would become the National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled (NLS).[5]

The Pratt-Smoot Act triggered funding that enabled libraries to enhance their offerings for people with visual disabilities, first with braille books and shortly after, in 1933, with talking books.[6] The American Federation for the Blind had begun to record talking books in 1931, and in 1934 sent its first shipment to LC.[7] In 1952, the "adult" restriction was removed from the Act, so that talking books could also be created for and used by children. In 1966, under Public Law 89-522, it was mandated that talking books be made available to all readers with print disabilities (i.e., other visual disabilities or mobility issues).[8] In 1969, the NLS/BPH began to distribute audiocassettes.

In the same year, the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) began to record audiobooks; the service continues to this day, and the books are made available through the CNIB library service, the Centre for Equitable Library Access (CELA).[9] As the 1970s folded into the 1980s, audiocassettes became increasingly popular because of their portability, not to mention the inclusion of cassette players in vehicles, and the release of the Walkman in 1979.[10] Publishers began to produce audio versions of their own books, which they issued together with the print versions of books. Because publishers were now selling their own audiobooks, they became far more ubiquitous in libraries across North America, and readers with print disabilities were no longer the only or primary audience.[11]

In the 1990s, CDs began to replace cassettes, and the number of users continued to grow. Soon, such devices as the Playaway and Audible players were released, making listening to audiobooks even more convenient.[12] Finally, people were able to play audiobooks on personal devices such as iPods and Zunes, downloaded through their libraries using the OverDrive platform.[13]

Now, in 2020, users can stream audio directly to smartphones and other devices, regardless of whether they were

purchased or borrowed from the library. Individuals who do not own smartphones can download books to their computers and read them using a platform offered by the library. At the same time, CDs are still available for borrowing. A variety of programs are used by different libraries, including Recorded Books (which makes reading apps and programs accessible under the name RBdigital) and OverDrive (which has two platforms: Libby and OverDrive). These programs have greatly increased the ease with which many library users can download and read audiobooks. However, they also have many accessibility issues that present barriers for readers with print disabilities.

In July 2019, the National Network of Equitable Library Service (NNELS) in Canada, a digital public library of books for Canadians with print disabilities, and an advocate for an accessible and equitable reading ecosystem, released a set of detailed reports on the accessibility of different library reading apps on multiple platforms, including iOS and Android devices, and Windows and Mac operating systems.[14] The reports, written by NNELS's accessibility testers, a group of employees with a variety of print disabilities, found that many of the apps and programs ranged from confusing to frustrating, and in some cases, rendered the program or app completely inaccessible.[15] The companies have received copies of the reports, and most are actively working to resolve the issues.[16]

Today, the most popular audiobook production companies include Amazon's Audible (https://www.audible.com/), Recorded Books (https://www.recordedbooks.com/), Brilliance Publishing (https://www.brilliancepublishing.com/), and Blackstone Audio (https://www.blackstonewholesale.com/). Additionally, many large publishers have audio divisions and produce their own audiobooks. These include Penguin Random House Audio (https://www.penguinrandomhouseaudio.com/), Hachette Audio (https://www.hachetteaudio.com/), and HarperAudio (http://harperaudio.hc.com/homepage). As noted,

> Using the Netflix model, some audio book producers have even started experimenting with original works written exclusively as audio productions, ranging from full-cast dramatizations in the style of old school radio plays, complete with music and sound effects, to young adult novels, thrillers and multipart science fiction epics. . . . Audio books can be bundled with an e-book for just a few dollars, downloaded as part of a monthly subscription plan or bought individually for as low as $1.99 (for a short story) or as high as $69.99 (for the Bible).[17]

Individual users have choices: they can access many titles for free through their library services, purchase desired titles, or subscribe to a continuous service. Additionally, organizations such as NNELS and CELA (Canada), LC's National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled (US), and other services for print-disabled people worldwide work with volunteers and contractors who record books, which are then made available to users of the services. Across readerships, audiobooks are popular for many reasons—they are portable and thus convenient for commuters and readers can take them in while running an errand or exercising.

Audiobooks in Libraries as a Diversity and Privilege Issue: Setting the Stage

The concept of Diversity by Design (DbD), proposed by Dali and Caidi, put the spotlight on "the multiplicity of contexts that give diversity meaning and life in our complex field"; it highlighted that "diversity, broadly conceived, is foundational to LIS" and that "discounting or underappreciating its pivotal function may have a disintegrating effect on our practice, scholarship, and education."[18] The authors also described the diversity mindset that should be part of the professional and pedagogical thinking of everyone engaged with LIS in any capacity. An important part of this mindset is the recognition that diversity is "integral to social structure, daily interactions, learning environments, professional settings, and human relationships," and that we have to master the "ability to see the multiple contexts and expressions of diversity in our professional and academic settings."[19] Specifically, the sufficient and ready availability of formats in libraries (e.g., audiobooks) should be seen as an issue of diversity and inclusion, irrespective of whether we focus on community members with disabilities or those who prefer non-textual formats for a variety of reasons and personal choices.

The concept of privilege is always part of diversity discussions, as various characteristics differing from the mainstream may either disadvantage or give advantage to certain individuals, situations, activities, etc. McIntosh's seminal paper on the meaning and essence of privilege compares it to the "invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks."[20] McIntosh defined and discussed white privilege specifically and, to some extent, male privilege. However, the simile that McIntosh presents is so vivid and elastic that, respectfully acknowledging original usage, we can apply it for an understanding of other types of privilege: status, body ability, religion, national origin, social stratum, lifestyle. Privileges naturally extend to the leisure and recreation domain and to the domain of information access allowed in various formats. Specifically, preferring words recorded as texts to words recorded otherwise and seeing the audiovisual medium as inferior to the textual one could be viewed and analyzed through the lens of privilege

or, more specifically, several types of privilege, as shown below.

The preceding theoretical foundation, derived from an overview of historical developments and conceptual foundations of diversity, inclusion, and privilege, sets the stage for answering the research questions that follow.

Method: Research Questions, Terminology, Definitions, and Limitations

While there may be different lines of advocacy and different types of argument—through the benefits of education, personal development, or stress reduction—the authors chose the lens of diversity, inclusion, and privilege to make their case. They hope that this specific vision will add to the arsenal of librarians advocating for diverse collections in their libraries to library boards, library administrations, granting agencies, user communities, and other stakeholders.

The authors used a rigorous method to determine the types of privilege that affect the acceptance or rejection of audiobooks, which is detailed in the section that discusses research questions (RQs), specifically, RQ4, whereby McIntosh's theoretical concept was used as a starting point; they found its practical manifestation in the selected privilege checklist and provided careful operational definitions to each type of privilege discussed.

Research Questions (RQs)

In pursuit of this goal, the authors formulated the following RQs.

- RQ1: How have the popularity, use, and reception of audiobooks transformed in the last several decades?
- RQ2: Why may audiobooks and audio-reading need advocacy in the context of libraries?
- RQ3: How can contemporary approaches to diversity, equity, and inclusion help us interpret and understand resistance to audiobooks and audio-reading?
- RQ4: What specific theoretically based arguments can librarians use as a foundation for building advocacy for the inclusion of audiobooks and audio-reading in library collections and professional practices?

To respond to the aforementioned RQs, the authors adopted the following line of research. After briefly reviewing the history of audiobooks and related materials, and surveying opinions that privilege the reading of texts over listening to audiobooks, they provided several specific arguments to support the latter. To do so, they framed their discussion through the concept of Diversity by Design, developed by Dali and Caidi, and McIntosh's seminal analysis of privilege as an "invisible knapsack."[21]

Definitions

The authors surveyed extant literature (research-based, media, and social media publications); examined and synthesized it in a critical and innovative manner (e.g., by combining the social analysis of proliferating and diversified audiobooks with the notions of diversity and privilege); proposed new ways of considering the issues of advocacy and practice; and offered specific ideas for librarians to implement them in practice.

In this paper, the authors use "audiobooks" as

> a general term for a book that you listen to, usually narrated by a real person. Audio books are sometimes also called talking books or spoken word books. Downloadable audiobooks [e-audiobooks] are electronic versions of audio books that can be read on a phone, computer, tablet or MP3 player.[22]

Also included in this category are books in accessible formats such as DAISY. The authors distinguish between audiobooks and text-to-speech technologies. They only address audiobooks that "are professionally narrated by authors, actors, or famous public figures, [which] makes for a more immersive and dynamic listening experience."[23] It should be noted, though, following Rubery, that historically, "no single term has been available to describe all of the different types of spoken word recordings," and what is referred to in this paper as audiobooks can be easily described as talking books in other sources, as it is done, for example, in Rubery's own monograph.[24]

For the purposes of this paper, the authors operationalized reading as leisure reading, that is, free-choice, voluntary reading for pleasure, personal development, growth, spirituality, entertainment, escape, relaxation, and all the other purposes fulfilled by leisure reading. They refer to reading as a process of engagement with the story, not as a process of information consumption or acquisition. While leisure reading can certainly be informational in nature, as in the case of avid readers of information nonfiction or serendipitous information encounters, the primary driver here is not education or support of scholarly and learning activities, but the pleasurable pastime. The authors focus exclusively on the reading practices of adults as they recognize that reading in childhood and adolescence requires a different, specialized, and more nuanced treatment.[25] Given the developmental nature of reading habits, preferences, and practices at these formative stages of life, the authors feel that they could not do justice to this topic by combining it with the discussion of the reading practices of

adults. It is in light of these delimiters and limitations that their conclusions and suggestions should be interpreted.

Delimiters, Limitations, and the Authorial Voice

This paper was written in the context of North America and the discussion is limited to North American libraries. The situation with audiovisual materials, including audiobooks, and their history in libraries may be different in other parts of the world. However, the authors' hope is that some of their insights and suggestions will also benefit readers in other countries.

The authors identify as members of the LIS community. They also recognize that while they both belong to underprivileged groups in some ways, they are also privileged in many other ways; as such, they acknowledge that as private individuals and as professionals, they are not always aware of their own privileges and their effect on their professional decision making and choices.

Analysis and Discussion

RQ1 How have the popularity, use, and reception of audiobooks transformed in the last several decades?

Historical developments related to audiobooks in libraries and society at large indicate that readers with print disabilities are no longer the primary or the largest audience for audiobooks, and that the popularity of audiobooks has grown tremendously. Libraries have also taken note. As Susan Caron, the Director of Collection and Membership Services at the Toronto Public Library, Ontario, Canada attests, audiobooks are in high demand. In a recent interview, she commented that "audiobooks have been popular for years and years at the library; now with digital they're our highest area of growth—they grew 40 per cent last year, so over 650,000 downloads . . . and we're projecting a million this year."[26]

This observation brings us closer to the conversation about the meaning of diversity in libraries that goes beyond demographic characteristics of library community members and addresses the diversity of collections and access. This diversity serves as a basis for the inclusion and exclusion of specific groups of individuals or de-prioritization of other groups. This, by extension, invokes the notion of privilege.

The popularity of audiobooks, as noted, has also grown exponentially in the US. There "has been an uptick in the share of Americans who report listening to audiobooks, from 14% to 20%" between 2016 and 2019.[27] The reading landscape has been completely restructured by technological advances, and while the "digital revolution may have dealt a heavy blow to print, . . . it is boosting literacy in other unexpected ways by fueling the explosive growth of audio books."[28] In the words of Brooks, author of *World War Z*, we are now experiencing "one of the few times in history that technology has reinvigorated an art form rather than crushing it."[29] If in the past, literary omnivorism was defined in terms of combining various genres; low-, high-, and middle-brow literatures; and fiction versus non-fiction; the consideration of format has been added to the mix, "creating a new breed of literary omnivores who see narrated books and text as interchangeable."[30] In all fairness, "digital innovation isn't just changing the way audio books are created, packaged, and sold. It's starting to reshape the way readers consume literature," because it "allows book lovers to switch seamlessly between an e-book and a digital audio book, picking up the story at precisely the same sentence."[31] Don Katz, Audible's founder and CEO, notes a new type of reader has emerged: "a media-agnostic consumer who doesn't think of the difference between textual and visual and auditory experience."[32]

RQ2: Why may audiobooks and audio-reading need advocacy in the context of libraries?

The experience of being read to is not considered inferior to reading independently, especially if it occurs during a time of illness or on special occasions, when the reader tries to create a memorable storytelling atmosphere. Reading aloud in groups, book clubs, and at other gatherings is also a very powerful emotional communal engagement and serves as a foundation of bibliotherapy. Then why do we feel that audiobooks and audio-reading may require advocacy?

> Audiobooks are a complicated medium because
>
> Turning a book into something other than print risks forfeiting the very qualities that make it a book. Audiobooks are unique in preserving a book's contents, while at the same time discarding much of its tangible material, from binding to paper and ink. . . . And yet the audiobook is not strictly an adaptation either—at least, not in the sense of a TV show, film, or game—because it reproduces the book's words verbatim. In sum, an audiobook both is and isn't a book. This ambiguity has drawn hostility and defensiveness in equal measures from book lovers. The audiobook presents a compelling test case for literary criticism in particular since it forces us to make explicit and even to rethink our understanding of what it means to read a book.[33]

As a result, "despite the audiobook's prominence, . . . we still lack a vocabulary for discussing its relationship to conventional books, not to mention its uncertain standing in the world of letters."[34] Paradoxically,

"listening to books is one of the few forms of reading for which people apologize," which is different "from the usual way of discussing books as a personal achievement and sign of distinction."[35]

The authors could not locate research studies that would prove and gauge the extent and prevalence of the public opinion that audio-reading cannot be equated to textual reading. While there are no hard and conclusive data on how prevalent the second-rating of audiobooks is in relation to textual media, these views are evident in numerous media publications and private online posts. Some individuals holding these views are prominent public figures and have the power to influence cultural choices and the public opinion; by extension, they may affect decisions of library stakeholders (e.g., board members and librarians) with regard to audiobooks. For this very reason, to argue their case, the authors cite both expressions of public opinion (through forums, blog posts, and media) and research papers.

The phenomenon of ubiquitous audiobooks is still relatively new, and nothing is conclusive at this point, but it is clear that the "rapid rise of audio books has prompted some hand-wringing about how we consume literature."[36] There are "print purists [who] doubt that listening to a book while multitasking delivers the same experience as sitting down and silently reading," while "scientific studies have repeatedly shown that for competent readers, there is virtually no difference between listening to a story and reading it" and that the "format has little bearing on a reader's ability to understand and remember a text."[37] There is support to the fact that "listening to a text might even improve understanding, especially for difficult works like Shakespeare, where a narrator's interpretation of the text can help convey the meaning."[38] Yet, not much is known about "how well people absorb stories when they are also driving or lifting weights or chopping vegetables."[39] In the absence of conclusive empirical data, opinions may drive decision making.

For example, Frank McCourt, the Pulitzer Prize winner, is quoted as saying, "I think every writer would rather have people read books, committed as we are to the word. . . . But I'd rather have them listen to it than not at all."[40] Harold Bloom, a prominent literary critic, agrees, "Deep reading really demands the inner ear as well as the outer ear. . . . You need the whole cognitive process, that part of you which is open to wisdom. You need the text in front of you."[41] More radical opinions reflect a concern that

> the practice of silent reading could be threatened, as impatient and busy readers no longer take time to concentrate on a text. 'If we come to think reading is this secondary activity we do while doing other stuff, then we lose that deepest and most important kind of reading,' said Nicholas Carr, author of *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*. 'The broader danger is that technology will give us the illusion that everything can be done while multitasking, including reading.'[42]

Similarly, librarians worry about aliteracy, noting that many students get through school by "skimming texts, drawing information and themes from dust jackets, watching television, and listening to audio books."[43] These undesirable learning habits are juxtaposed against real reading, and libraries are called upon to become "creative in encouraging students to cultivate a lifelong reading habit."[44] A clear binary is driven here: a lifelong reading habit is related to textual reading while listening to audiobooks is slotted in the same category as scanning and skimming book jackets. Although this argument is made about reading with a purpose that supports education and learning, it has some relevance to leisure reading, as concerns arise of whether deep meaningful reading associated with text is being replaced with shallow entertainment consumption in any medium, including textual.

While this view is not without merit and multitasking can indeed have negative effects on our intellectual and physical functioning, this criticism is conveyed from the standpoint of privilege: the able-bodied society, which presupposes an equal choice of the medium and an equal ability to utilize textual and audio formats; the highly print-literate and text-oriented Western milieu; and the lifestyle that allows for a comfortable amount of leisure, among others. These points will be addressed in detail below.

The research community has also chimed in. In 2014, the study "The Way We Encounter Reading Material Influences How Frequently We Mind Wander" reported that "listening to the passage led to the most mind wandering" and "was also associated with the poorest memory performance and the least interest in the material," compared to reading texts.[45] However, as some critics noted, "a closer look at the study reveals some troubling methodologies, such as having participants self-report mind wandering."[46] Also, listening to audiobooks requires just as much of a habit and proficiency as reading printed or online texts, and it is not clear if the chosen participants were sufficiently and equally proficient in both modes of reading.[47] It is not clear if their reading habits and preferences were considered when a non-fiction book was offered to them as the only choice. It can be safely assumed that avid fiction readers would let their mind wander irrespective of the reading format, simply on account of the chosen (uninteresting) genre. Also, the study was focused on able-bodied individuals, excluding several groups of the most proficient audio-readers—people with print disabilities.

There is a not-uncommon opinion that listening to audiobooks rather than reading in print or electronically is

"cheating." To quote the University of Virginia psychology professor Daniel Willingham, though

> "Listening to an audiobook might be considered cheating if the act of decoding were the point; audiobooks allow you to seem to have decoded without doing so," he writes in his science and education blog. He argues that decoding is not the point for people who want to appreciate the language and the story. "Comparing audiobooks to cheating is like meeting a friend at Disneyland and saying, 'You took a bus here? I drove myself, you big cheater.' The point is getting to and enjoying the destination. The point is not how you traveled."[48]

Referencing other research, Willingham also states that "experiments show very high correlations of scores on listening and reading comprehension tests in adults."[49] He proceeds to argue that "For most books, for most purposes, listening and reading are more or less the same thing," adding that "'Cheating' implies an unfair advantage, as though you are receiving a benefit while skirting some work. Why talk about reading as though it were work?"[50]

Concurring with Willingham are two scholars from the University of Texas, Austin, Markman and Duke.

> I would not say that reading is necessarily better than hearing or worse than hearing. They are different, and what you extract is different." "It appears that because you can't go back and re-read something, you actually do a better job of trying to extract the gist of what someone meant when you're hearing them than when you're reading. And why Shakespeare is so much easier to understand when it's being performed than when you're trying to struggle through reading it."
>
> "And when we are reading and when we are listening, our brains are making predictions all the time"[51]

Another recent study by Rogowski, Calhoun, and Tallal, which investigated a random sample of ninety-five participants working in three groups and reading the same material in different formats (digital audiobook, e-text, dual modality), found

> no statistically significant differences . . . for any analyses pertaining to effects of the three different instructional conditions on comprehension . . . both males and females in each condition recalled an equal amount of information, regardless of whether they listened to an audiobook, read from an electronic tablet, or both listened and read simultaneously (dual modality).[52]

These facts notwithstanding, as Harmon notes "Audio book aficionados face disdain from some book lovers, who tend to rhapsodize about the smell and feel of a book in their hands and the pleasure of being immersed in a story without having to worry about the car in the next lane. [And] a certain stigma lingers."[53]

RQ3: How can contemporary approaches to diversity, equity, and inclusion help us interpret and understand resistance to audiobooks and audio-reading?

Given available empirical evidence and experiential observations about the positive role of audiobooks, it is surprising how much opposition they face. Moreover, this opposition seems to come primarily from within the community of avid readers themselves, be they professionals (librarians, writers, book sellers, literary critics) or simply reading lovers. It causes negative perceptions that may affect considerations of funding agencies, library administrations, and library boards and, by extension, the status and expansion of audiobooks in libraries. As a result, the benefits of audiobooks and their undeniable ability to build a more inclusive and equitable library environment in terms of collections, services, and programs may be underutilized or neglected. Under the circumstances, librarians should be prepared to advocate for the integration and promotion of audiobooks in their daily work and community engagement. While multiple lines of advocacy can be found, one that we offer here relies on the notion of privilege and its multiple manifestations. With libraries of all types trying to foster more equitable, just, inclusive, and fairer services and resource provision, the argument of privilege can be particularly powerful.

Reading is not only an enlightening, educational, transformative, or relaxing activity. It is also a social institution, and this institution can be just as progressive as it can be oppressive and exclusionary. One of the best books that sheds light on the dark side of reading is Pierre Bayard's *How to Talk about Books You Haven't Read*.[54] Extending Bayard's views, it could be argued that, in some ways, reading—and the space whereby we communicate about reading—is an oppressive institution with restrictive, never written but clearly understood rules and exclusive, elitist conventions. These rules and conventions, among others, are related to titles we have read and not read, especially if these titles serve as markers of a cultured person; to types of genres we choose to pursue; and—as relevant to our discussion—types of formats that we choose to engage with a story. In this space, privilege plays a crucial role even if we look within the bounds of a single society or region or within the bounds of a single part of the world (e.g., Western

countries), let alone if we take a broader, global view of the reading space. The critical view of the institution of reading and the multiple faces of privilege help us sort out the situation with audiobooks.

RQ4: What specific theoretically based arguments can librarians use as a foundation for building advocacy for the inclusion of audiobooks and audio-reading in library collections and professional practices?

The authors built upon McIntosh's definition of privilege, as described earlier. In determining the types of privilege that may affect the public opinion and professional decisions regarding audiobooks, the authors were guided by the "Privilege Checklist" developed by Boise State University for social justice training.[55] This list divides identifiable privileges by class privilege; white race, ethnicity, and culture privilege; citizenship privilege; cisgender privilege; sexuality privilege; male/masculine privilege; ability privilege; and linguistic privilege. Each category is broken down into discrete questions that help identify the presence or absence of the privilege. Based on these guiding questions and using the foundational definition of privilege as "a right, immunity, or benefit enjoyed only by a person beyond the advantages of most," the authors operationalized the privileges relevant to this discussion, focusing on the following:

- the privilege of body ability;
- the privilege of lifestyle;
- the Western privilege;
- the privilege of literacy;
- privileging format over story; and
- the citizenship and language privilege.[56]

Some of these privileges come directly from the checklist (e.g., body ability, Western, citizenship and language), while others are derivative (e.g., literacy, format, and lifestyle privileges as derivative of social status and Western privileges).

The Privilege of Body Ability

First is the privilege of having good eyesight, being able-bodied, and having no print disability. This amounts to the benefit of choosing any or many mediums for leisure, recreation, and entertainment without limitation. As was highlighted earlier, audiobooks are very popular with readers who cannot easily cope with text, which includes readers with disabilities ranging from blindness and partial sight to learning disabilities and motor skills disabilities. With the current focus on the creation of inclusive practices and the accessibility of reading materials, the number of audio-texts has grown exponentially. Hyder uses the term "audio-reading," which the authors adopted in this paper, and one of the most important questions raised in the context of disability and audio-reading is whether it, in fact, qualifies as "reading." If we concede that the "use of audio is not accepted culturally as a form of reading and if psycho-emotional disablism is about limitations to what a person can do or be, then the answer to this question impacts on whether blind and partially sighted readers are defined by themselves or others as 'readers.'"[57]

Many objections to the use of audiobooks and arguments in favor of text-based reading are done from the position of ableism, which often goes unnoticed by those who voice these objections. The very core of their arguments implies that the reader has an equal opportunity choice—read or listen, whereas many readers do not. Following is a typical statement made from the ableist perspective.

> If your goal is to be exposed to the most information possible, then listening is better. It allows you to consume books at a much faster rate because you can do it much more often, all while being productive in other matters! On the other hand, if your goal is to slow down and have an experience with the information (e.g., tactile experience with the pages, writing notes in the margin, putting a voice to the words we read, or advancing at our own pace) then reading is better.[58]

Privileging sight/text over hearing/audio automatically second-rates readers who rely on other senses for information consumption, learning, entertainment, or socialization. We do not "blame a person with a disability for using a wheelchair instead of 'doing it the hard, good-for-you way' and walking."[59] Then why do we not apply the same logic to audio-reading? In truth, we are so used to disregarding, dismissing, and excluding individuals with disabilities from the design and development of our physical and social environments, and from social awareness, that considerations of privilege in the context of reading and body ability do not even cross our mind.

Rarely do we stop to consider what denying audio-reading the status of legitimate and valuable reading does to readers for whom it is a primary means of engaging with the story. Self-efficacy is one of the most important concepts applied to reading. It is the "belief in one's own ability; this belief affects people's choices and actions because individuals tend to engage in tasks when they feel competent and confident, and avoid those in which they do not."[60] By second-rating audio-reading, we also second-rate audio-readers. Hence construing engagement with audiobooks "as a reading act" is not just semantics; this "is one way, perhaps, of blind and partially sighted adults"—and adults with other print disabilities—to take "control and impos[e] a definition that is enabling for those who engage

with text in a format other than print."[61] Positioning audio-reading as reading is empowering to audio-readers. This is important in the situation whereby "the cultural value of listening as a form of reading can make it hard for some audio users . . . to define themselves as readers. Losing this aspect of their identity can be dramatic."[62]

The Privilege of Lifestyle

Second is the privilege of a comfortable lifestyle, or the benefit and advantage of having sufficient leisure time, having greater control over work and leisure activities, and having a generally better work-life balance without risking detrimental consequences to one's well-being, the well-being of one's family and/or livelihood. Reading texts implies the so-called condition of leisure, a quiet time in which one can steal away from busy work, studies, and the hustle and bustle of daily routine.[63] Readers who are less restricted by family chores and responsibilities; who have higher levels of education and more flexible jobs; who do not have to juggle school, work, and/or family; reside in a higher income bracket and have the ability to afford downtime and less necessity to multitask are likely to find more time to read texts in print or electronically. However, many readers are multitaskers, and their dedication to reading often comes at the expense of hours of sleep. They are the ones stirring soup with one hand and holding a book in another, getting hair done and reading, driving kids to school and… reading? The latter would be impossible unless they had audiobooks. For long-haul truck drivers with late working hours, audiobooks are as much an entertainment as they are a safety net, keeping drivers company on the road and keeping them awake and alert. When work "and life in general along with college classes often deprives [people] of the time to read for enjoyment," audiobooks offer a "way to enjoy new books" as they listen to them on the "way to work or while doing yard work and other chores around the house."[64] Hence, there is more than one privilege under the umbrella of "lifestyle." It is the privilege that ties into socio-economic status, family history, income level, level of education, citizenship, and many other types of privilege. Those who reject "audio as a way of engaging with fiction believing it shows a lack of respect for authors to read 'when you're doing 30 minutes on your elliptical trainer'" speak from the standpoint of lifestyle privilege—one that grants them a sufficient condition of leisure.[65]

The Western Privilege

Third is the privilege of Westerners, or the benefit of access to and enjoying the comforts and conveniences associated with Western, literate, technologically advanced, and comparatively democratic life. As Tien notes, "Our cultural anxiety about audiobooks may have deeper roots in media and educational history, dating as far back as the beginning of the Enlightenment period, when the West made a general shift towards the privileging of sight over the other senses."[66]

Although "oral storytelling predates print and writing by thousands of years" in the West, we have lived in a reading culture for a long time, acquiring the habit of privileging the documented written word over oral traditions and ignoring the oral traditions of local Indigenous communities and the developing world.[67] We have reduced the diverse and vast phenomenon of reading to a very functional, specific, and narrow definition, which no longer reflects the richness of the reading experience.

Apropos, in April 2019, *The International Journal of Information, Diversity, and Inclusion* published a pecial issue on diversity and reading guest edited by Vanessa Irvin.[68] In this issue's editorial, the definition of reading was expanded. One of the most representative pieces in this regard is a column about reading in the Philippines, whereby reading refers to the practice of reading tattoo art.[69] This is a good example of how overcoming the often myopic Western gaze and becoming receptive to alternative points of view can also expand our definition and understanding of reading and help us see various types of reading as equally valuable.

The Privilege of Literacy

Fourth, intimately tied to the Western privilege, is the privilege of literacy, or the benefit of and the right to a guaranteed level of public education, which ensures basic literacy, and the advantage of access to an auxiliary system of education (e.g., through public libraries and community centers), which promotes personal growth and provides additional opportunities for self-development and education. The authors note, however, that even in Western societies, this privilege is not equally distributed or may be curtailed for many individuals by disadvantageous socio-economic, personal, and familial circumstances. Globally, many people "across the world . . . are illiterate or not sufficiently literate to read at a high level" one reader wrote in her blog comment. Invoking the precarious notion of audio-reading as "cheating," she continued

> Do you think it helps any of them [low-literate readers] in the slightest to get the message that listening to a book 'isn't as good' because it 'isn't as hard'? If you're a proficient reader, reading won't be "hard," it will be enjoyable. If you're not, there are probably very serious and sad reason[s] why not, ranging from disability to poverty, and you're the last person who needs to be looked down upon for finding another way in.[70]

In 2016, drawing on the data from the US Department of Education and the National Institute of Literacy, *The Washington Post* reported that approximately 32 million adult Americans cannot read, and according to the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) data, 50 percent of adults in America cannot read books written at an eighth-grade level.[71] That same year, *The Huffington Post Canada*, citing Canadian Literacy and Learning Network reports, stated that "42 per cent of Canadian adults have low literacy skills," despite the optimistic number of close to 97 to 99 percent of general literacy in Canada shown in OECD reports.[72] Whatever the case, it is clear that higher levels of literacy, required for not only decoding the text but also enjoying the story, are not found in a substantial cross-section of the population in both countries.

In a text- and writing-immersed society, it is practically impossible for literate adults to imagine what it feels like to go through the day while being denied most of the crucial information in your surroundings, getting partial, confusing, or unclear information, coping with perpetual shame, and investing much of your energy in hiding illiteracy. Audiobooks serve as opportunity equalizers, in the context of formal and informal learning, entertainment and recreation, and, highly possible, as a means of igniting audio-readers' motivation for acquiring or improving literacy. They bring the joy of story, discovery, and knowledge to a large portion of adults who would have been shut off from these experiences otherwise.

Privileging Format over Story

Fifth, inseparable from both the privilege of literacy and the Western privilege, is the habit of privileging format over story, which derives from the historical connections drawn in Western societies between enlightenment, the level of education, and printed media. The ongoing debate about audiobooks and their role in the process of reading in general "reflects arguments about what it means to be literate in the twenty-first century. It revolves around the privileged status of the printed text and whether it is almost considered to be 'synonymous with literacy.'"[73] Literacy is a serious matter, and uncertainties about whether audio books belong "to the respectable world of books or the more dubious world of entertainment" become paramount.[74]

In our document- and information-saturated environment, we often devalue the story or recognize its value only when it is written and published in print or electronically. We forget that stories can be given shape and life by media other than a book, an article, or an online document; that it can be transmitted by a person, a voice, or a recorded voice in this case. We forget that "Homer, after all, was an oral storyteller, as were all 'literary artists' who came before him, back to when storytelling . . . would have been invented—grounds for the argument that our brains were first (and thus best?) adapted to absorb long, complex fictions by ear, rather than by eye."[75] When we stop to consider that reading a book for "the pleasure of its characters, setting, dialogue, drama, and the Scheherazadean impulse to know what happens next," we realize that the whole audio versus text debate may be somewhat misguided.[76] As Tien astutely put it, "Romanticizing the printed word ignores all of the other benefits storytelling can offer."[77]

Citizenship and Language Privilege

Less frequently discussed is the privilege of citizenship and language, or the benefit of and right to access copious amounts of information in one's native language and one's ability to choose information in this language in different formats, packages, and modes of availability (e.g., print, electronic, audio; same information by different publishers; same information interpreted by different outlets; comparable information from different sources, etc.). Another aspect of this privilege is the benefit of living in one's home country, having learned and being familiar with many things by osmosis and/or by virtue of growing up in the same environment in which said information and knowledge originated. This accounts for greater awareness of and easier access to various sources and options for leisure and entertainment. This privilege is one of the most significant factors in the lives of migrant readers, be they immigrants, refugees, temporary or seasonal workers, international students, internal migrants (from state to state or from province to province) or any other group of individuals who reside in geographic and socio-cultural environments, different from one in which they were born and grew up. One of the recent issues of *The National Geographic* reminds us that "we are all migrants," that "humans are a migratory species," injecting a disquieting reminder later: "Yet, some would divide us into two kinds: the migrant" and the local.[78]

> We move when it is intolerable to stay where we are: . . . we move because of environmental stresses and physical dangers and the small-mindedness of our neighbors—and to be who we wish to be, to seek what we wish to seek.[79]

The new environment may be physically safer and offer shelter, food, schooling for children, and some job prospects. Yet, despite improvement, people lose the privilege to speak their language in most social interactions outside of their immediate family or community, if

they happen to be surrounded by one. Entertainment, education, and information in their native language may not be available easily or at all. Some may struggle with illiteracy or low literacy either in both English and their native language or in English specifically. That is to say, even for those who may be fluent readers in their mother tongue, reading comprehension and/or reading enjoyment in English may present a challenge or cause distress.[80] However, listening to a story in the learned language may be easier, more accessible, and more pleasant, and may open a relaxing, entertaining, educational, or informative venue. Audiobooks thus become bridges to the new culture and social milieu, a means of adaptation to the new environment, and an instrument of getting to know people whose mentality, culture, language, and ways of life may seem bewildering at times.

Conclusion

This paper examined the phenomenon of the growing popularity of audiobooks and challenges they face in being accepted as an equal reading medium in comparison to textual reading (print and electronic). The arguments advanced against the recognition of audiobooks were analyzed through the lens of privilege, in an attempt to help librarians (and possibly other professionals, including educators, community workers, leisure and recreation specialists, social workers, and other professionals who utilize audiobooks in their work) build a convincing line of advocacy in support of integrating audiobooks in their professional practices, collections, resource centers, programs, curricula, and outreach activities. This paper does not make universal claims. It is written in the context of North America, based on the situation in North American social milieu and libraries. However, it is hoped that some insights and suggestions will prove valuable and useful for international readers, as some social trends and development can be relevant to different countries around the world.

The argument presented herein is based on the fact that libraries in Canada and the US are increasingly concerned with making their services, programs, and resources more inclusive and equitable for the diverse communities they serve. The discussion is framed theoretically through the combination of two approaches: first, the DbD concept, which encourages us to see diversity as integral and indispensable to every professional activity, including collection development and community engagement; and second, the concept of privilege defined as an "invisible knapsack" of social and professional advantages that work in our favor whether or not we are aware of them.[81] Six different types of privilege, supporting the attitudes that second-rate audio-reading vis-à-vis reading texts, particularly print reading, are reviewed. Specifically, the privilege of body ability, the privilege of lifestyle, the Western privilege, the privilege of literacy, privileging format over story, and the citizenship and language privilege are cited. By so doing, this paper takes the first step to overcoming the perception of audiobook listening (or audio-reading) as an inferior form of reading through introspection, the recognition of privileges, their effects on professional decisions and choices, and the ensuing assumptions, perceptions, and social conventions.

Librarians may need to justify their collection development and service-related choices, budgetary decisions, and programming plans to library boards, library administration, and external stakeholders, be it granting agencies or community members seeking accountability and proof of value. Using the lens of diversity and inclusion in the current climate in North America could provide an effective and successful line of argument. The authors promote a vision whereby ascribing equal weight, importance, respect, and consideration to various formats in libraries becomes a matter of fostering an inclusive environment and whereby considering audiobooks a less preferable reading medium emerges as a detriment of privilege. It is hoped that librarians are able to take these ideas and suggested argumentation and use it in their advocacy efforts and accountability reports.

At the moment, and in the chosen context of leisure reading, audiobooks seem to have made the greatest advances in public libraries rather than academic or special. The authors hope that their analysis and insights will help librarians from other types of libraries engaged in leisure reading promotion to realize not only the recreational value of audiobooks but also their inclusive and equalizing effect on services, programs, and resources offered by libraries to diverse readers who have now become a reality in any library. Referring to diverse readers, the paper implies people with different body abilities, different levels of literacy, cultural and familial backgrounds, native languages, and second-language proficiency. Shifting attention from format to story, to "the sheer pleasure of storytelling," and to one's ability to enjoy the story irrespective of medium can also provide library staff and library administration with a different way of seeing their commitment to non-print resources in libraries.[82]

The argument of this paper is grounded in the concepts of diversity and privilege. Just as diversity should not be a bonus or an option but should comprise the essence and the core of our professional activities and decisions, non-print formats should not be a bonus or an afterthought either. In the context of libraries, accessing information and entertainment through listening—or audio-reading—should be guaranteed as a right. It is hoped that this paper will help librarians to advance a step further toward securing this right.

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