

Why Accessibility?

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Abstract

Accessibility, simply defined, means that the fullest use of any resource should be given to the greatest number of people. Libraries, as providers of public space and digital content, have a responsibility to promote equitable access to all users, whether or not they use assistive technology.

Introduction

Libraries are all about access: to content, to connectivity, and to information education and support. However, there is access, and then there is accessibility. Accessibility is an ethic and set of design approaches that attempt to ensure that the fullest use of any resource is open to the greatest number of people. Physical accessibility facilitates equitable movement in and throughout built spaces. Web accessibility and “assistive technology” apply this ethic to the innumerable sites, formats, e-readers, and other tools people use to interact with information. Libraries, as purveyors of a vast amount of physical space and digital content, can and should help promote equitable access to all users, whether or not they are disabled.

Awareness of this need is on the rise in libraryland. Our conferences increasingly feature accessibility-themed sessions, our professional groups such as ASCLA offer high-quality Web and in-person programming on a growing range of topics, and the 2010 EQUACC presidential task force featured a prominent e-content accessibility subcommittee. In 2009, the American Library Association formally released a “Services to Persons with Disabilities” interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights:

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution mandates the right of all persons to free expression and the corollary right to receive the constitutionally protected expression of others. A person’s right to use the library should not be denied or abridged because of disabilities. The library has the responsibility to provide materials “for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves.” (See also the Library Bill of Rights.) When information in libraries is not presented in formats that are accessible to all users, discriminatory barriers are created.¹

Removing Roadblocks to Accessibility

I would wager that most librarians consider ourselves committed to accessibility and make individual and organizational efforts to comply with or exceed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) guidelines in our physical spaces and Rehabilitation Act Section 508 standards in our digital spaces. We may not, however, have had the sobering experience of trying to access an e-book or e-journal using screen reading software or other assistive technology—an often frustrating and confusing process. (Video examples of screen reader use are provided in chapter 4.)

Despite our best intentions, this can lead us unwittingly to create barriers that make access more difficult for the disabled. These barriers usually fall into the following categories:

1. **Standards.** Librarians may lack actionable knowledge of accessibility best practices and standards

and may not have meaningful awareness of the disabled user experience.

2. **Spaces and services.** Libraries may not offer an appropriate range of assistive and adaptive technology tools to serve the needs of their community of disabled patrons, or patrons may lack awareness of the library options that are available to them.
3. **Devices.** Disabled readers often struggle with mobile devices and e-books due to digital rights management (DRM) measures and poor design and information architecture.
4. **Websites.** Inaccessible library websites present issues for patrons who use assistive or adaptive technologies, such as screen reading software.
5. **Collections.** Users encounter inaccessible online content (e-books, e-journals) and subscription search and discovery tools (databases, OPACs) via library interfaces.

Self-Educate for Accessibility

You don't have to become an accessibility expert to dismantle these barriers: the first step is making a commitment to awareness. Even if you don't have the staffing or resources to achieve a standard of total perfection, you can follow the simple approaches outlined in this issue to considerably improve the experience of disabled users in your library through core accessibility practices such as *consistency*, *flexibility*, and *simplicity*.

There is a direct correlation between good design, open information, and accessibility, and in the midst of the digital transition it is more important than ever to bring these universally usable approaches into our libraries. This issue of *Library Technology Reports* provides straightforward tools to help you encourage accessible library practice, regardless of your focus area or the type of organization you work for. Each

expert-authored chapter provides a practical primer on breaking down one of the common barriers described above in order to build better services, collections, sites, and technology tools for all users:

- **Chapter 1—Standards.** Barbara Mates provides a primer on disability awareness and outlines accessibility standards and guidelines pertinent to libraries and librarians.
- **Chapter 2—Spaces and services.** Chris Guder covers assistive and adaptive technology software and hardware options and services for library spaces, as well as training, marketing, and services.
- **Chapter 3—Devices.** Ranti Junus explores the e-book and e-reader landscape for patrons with print disabilities.
- **Chapter 4—Websites.** Debra Riley-Huff details the practicalities of building and optimizing accessible library websites and services.
- **Chapter 5—Collections.** Jennifer and Joanna Tatomir outline accessible collection development strategies.

You might think that learning about accessibility will be too time-consuming to fit into an already busy schedule, or too esoteric to benefit many patrons. Not so. Considered from any angle—from public service and instructional excellence to sound information design to legal compliance—encouraging accessibility in libraries is always good practice.

Note

1. American Library Association, "Services to Persons with Disabilities: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights," January 28, 2009, www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/servicespeople disabilities, accessed June 2, 2012.