

NNELS: A New Model for Accessible Library Service in Canada

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Abstract

Public libraries face a unique challenge when building a collection that includes accessible format material for people with print disabilities, as a very small percentage of published material is available in accessible formats. In Canada, the National Network for Equitable Library Service (NNELS) offers a forward-thinking solution to this predicament. NNELS is a digital library of accessible-format material; this paper argues that NNELS' model of user-driven, participatory, and publicly-owned accessible format collection-building, provides an innovative way for public libraries to meet the needs of their print-disabled communities.

Keywords: accessibility; accessible formats; format-shifting; libraries

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Introduction

Not everyone has equal access to published material. In the context of what is referred to as the “book famine,” people with print disabilities are regularly unable to access books because most published material is not produced in an accessible format (World Intellectual Property Organization, 2016, p. 2). Alternate or accessible formats are formats designed for people with print or perceptual disabilities, defined in the Canadian *Copyright Act* (1985, s. 2) as mobility, cognitive, and vision impairments that prevent individuals from being able to read traditional print. Accessible formats for people with print disabilities may be tactile (e.g., Braille), audio (e.g., DAISY¹), or visual (e.g., specialized fonts). Significantly, it is estimated that there “are around 3 million Canadians living with a print disability. However, only 5 to 7 percent of books are made in accessible formats...” (Innovation, Science and Economic Development, 2016, para. 1). This small selection of available material presents a significant challenge for people with print disabilities, as reading offers the opportunity for lifelong learning, community building, recreation, and political engagement and civil discourse: “Without books, journals and magazines, people are cut off from life. They cannot gain an education or participate fully in society” (World Intellectual Property Organization, 2016, p. 2). Some people with print disabilities use assistive technologies with traditional formats; however, that does not change the fact that most published material is not created accessibly, and if the material is only available in printed format, it is very difficult to use assistive technologies. For public libraries, the lack of accessibly created material poses a distinct dilemma: how can a public library provide a rich and diverse collection that meets the needs of its entire local community, including those with print disabilities, when so little of the published material is accessible?

This paper explores a unique model for accessible public library collections. The National Network for Equitable Library Service (NNELS) is a digital library of accessible-format

material working under Section 32 of the *Copyright Act*² to change the formats of traditional print material to accessible formats. There are two main non-profit organizations in Canada that create accessible-format collections for the public library audience: the Centre for Equitable Library Access and NNELS. This paper will focus solely on NNELS and its innovative service model, but it is worth noting that there is another organization. While it will format-shift any material, NNELS focuses primarily on fiction and non-fiction books; however, the NNELS model may be applied to different kinds of published material. Ultimately, the goal for NNELS is to ensure that material is available in all formats at the site of production, and that, rather than retrofitting formats, published material is born accessible. While this is not the current reality for publishers, NNELS provides a model that helps libraries to best serve their print-disabled patrons. This paper uses the historical trajectory of services for people with disabilities in Canada—from a traditional, medical paradigm to a critical, inclusive paradigm—as a theoretical framework to position NNELS as an innovative service that is changing the public library landscape. As a user-driven, participatory, library-owned, and accessible-format collection and service, NNELS represents a professional practice that not only responds to the users' needs but also builds on inclusivity and empowerment.

Background: Public Libraries and Accessible Collections

Public libraries in Canada have experienced the book famine when trying to serve patrons with print disabilities. Mary Ellen Gabias, President of the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB), describes her challenges as a print-disabled person finding material that she can read:

If I had the choice of living for thirty years but could never read another book, or living for ten years with access to all the books I want, I'd have a hard time making that decision. My attitude toward books and reading is somewhat like the attitude toward money of someone who grew up during the depression. I remember taking home volumes of the Braille dictionary from school because I had nothing else to read. (M.E. Gabias, personal interview, February 3, 2016)³

Although libraries have always been the first place she checks for reading material, she says, "it's unfortunately true that sometimes (far too often) the book I want isn't in [the library's] collection" (personal interview, February 3, 2016). Due to the lack of available material, people with print-disabilities have sometimes experienced strained relationships with public libraries, as the public library has not always been equipped or empowered to engage with print-disabled users and treat them as any other patron (as noted by Gabias).

Until recently, in Canada, the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) Library has been the primary source of accessible material for people with print disabilities, and libraries relied heavily on the CNIB to provide this service. In 2010, CNIB began its Partners Program and started working directly with libraries to deliver what became a more integrated library service (Canadian National Institute for the Blind, 2011, p.8). However, in 2013, CNIB discontinued the Partners Program, and two national library services for people with print disabilities emerged: the Centre for Equitable Library Access, which is built out of the CNIB legacy and continues to leverage the CNIB library collection (CNIB, 2015, p. 2), and NNELS, which uses open-source technology to build a repository of public library material in accessible formats that belongs to the community.

This history of services for people with print disabilities in Canada can be traced alongside the history of disability services in Canada generally. In their article "Looking Back,

Rethinking Historical Perspectives and Reflecting upon Emerging Trends,” Peter Dunn and Terri-Lynn Langdon (2016) chart disability history from the European settlement through to the present day in Canada. They outline the historical trajectory of disability service organizations through three major paradigm shifts: “the medical and rehabilitation paradigm, the traditional community service paradigm, and the critical disability paradigm based upon the social model of disability” (p. 37). The medical and rehabilitation paradigm considers disability as a sickness that needs to be cured. The model of care that follows from this paradigm is one where patients need to be taken care of by institutions that are separated from the rest of society. The traditional community service paradigm deinstitutionalizes people with disabilities but maintains special services for them. Finally, the critical disability paradigm locates the problem within the environment itself, and places emphasis on social inclusion and human rights. They argue that, although there are many disability activists fighting for the critical disability paradigm, Canada has not yet quite embraced it.

The framework and trajectory of these shifting paradigms is useful in assessing the current state of library service for people with print disabilities in Canada. These services have been traditionally seen as separate, special, or charity services (as in the traditional community service paradigm). However, in recent years there has been a shift to new models of service, toward a paradigm that looks more like the critical disability paradigm.

As a young and a relatively new service, NNELS is not entrenched in traditional modes of service. It represents a shift from the traditional community service paradigm to a critical disability paradigm, as it has altered the landscape of library service for people with print disabilities in Canada in the following ways. NNELS is

- user-driven, which empowers those using the service to make decisions about the service;
- participatory, which empowers the library to participate, create content, and provide direct library service; and
- library-owned, which means it is a library collection that belongs to the community.

User-Driven: From Client to Customer

In his keynote address at the 2016 Satellite Meeting of the IFLA World Library and Information Congress Conference, Kevin Carey (2016) argued that for meaningful change to occur within the alternate-format production sector, the consumer (the person with a print disability) must be transitioned from client to customer. In some contexts (such as the business framework), client and customer are interchangeable terms. However, for the purposes of this paper, they are defined separately, as per Carey’s definition, reflecting social practice (for example, in social work). For Carey, a customer has power over the product, whereas a client is served with a product and has very little say. The customer has the “power to exercise dominance over producers,” to make their demands heard, known, and addressed (p. 5). A print-disabled customer requires “niche goods and services on exactly the same basis as her sighted peers,” or non-print-disabled peers, and the customer is “always right!” (Carey, 2016, p. 10). Carey speaks from the perspective of a blind individual, but the power shift applies to all print-disabled readers requiring traditional print in specialized formats, that is, the “niche goods” (Carey, 2016, p. 5). For Carey, power in the hands of users is essential for moving away from a paternalistic

model of service delivery to one of empowerment, or from traditional community service to a critical disability service.

The movement from client to customer for the alternate format sector in Canada can be seen in the user-driven piece of the NNELS model. NNELS puts the user, or customer, at the centre of the service. The NNELS team records and format-shifts material that has been requested by the community, making the NNELS collection uniquely representative of its users. Because of its responsive model, NNELS is also able to make available material that is often overlooked, such as medical information, instructional booklets, provincial library legislation, etc. It offers unique ways of consulting and engaging people with print disabilities to build a service that works for them.

A user-driven collection also puts a new spin on library resources; they become a collection of potential material. Anything can be converted; therefore, everything becomes available (copyright permitting). Because NNELS works responsively (i.e., it will format-shift on demand), it is able to boast that its potential collection is limitless. Dunn and Langdon describe the activists' demand for a shift away from the client-based model: "Instead of 'well-meaning care' in the community, requiring individuals with disabilities to behave as 'clients' and recipients of social services, activists are demanding to provide their own programs based upon self-direction, choice and options" (p. 39). NNELS offers its users options and choice by opening collection development and ensuring self-direction for the community that will be accessing the service.

For Carey (2016), the sheer lack of available material also represents the inability to shift production demand from that of a client to that of a customer. Carey notes the paradigm shift occurring in the information sector—that of analogue to digital—has not effectively transformed the landscape for those producing and consuming alternate formats. Throughout his address, Carey returns to the idea that alternate-format producers are overly concerned with the quality rather than the quantity of the material. He points out that in this digital age, we have missed the opportunity to really move from scarcity to plenty in terms of alternate format material, even if it means sacrificing some of the "high-cost, low volume, super quality products" that have been the focus (p. 3). This approach sacrifices large-scale production, which could expand "customer choice" from a limited number of high-quality items to a much larger array of products. Carey says: "The option of synthetic speech to bulk out a catalogue and to speed up delivery...has largely been ignored, a notable shortcoming particularly in nonfiction" (p. 5). NNELS, however, uses a combination of both synthetic voice and recorded live narration for its audiobooks to provide a balanced and robust collection. If a title needs to be created quickly, synthetic voice is often used to meet the demand. Synthetic audio has allowed NNELS to expand its collection rapidly in a few short years, and it supports the responsive on-demand format-shifting priority.

Participatory: From Outsourcing to Insourcing

NNELS empowers libraries to be part of both production and direct service delivery. Taking the network principle seriously, anyone is welcome to record a book or edit e-text; materials are added to the NNELS repository to build a unique collection of voices and effort.

In the summer of 2015, the Pemberton Public Library in British Columbia, Canada recorded a copy of the *Captain Underpants and the Revolting Robo-Boxers* by Dav Pilkey (National Network for Equitable Library Service, 2015). The staff at the library recorded the book together as a group. The project was not only fun and morale-boosting—as the town was experiencing

destructive wildfires at the time—but it was also a contribution to a collective national repository, a way to serve patrons both locally and nationally. In 2017, children at the Gibsons District Public Library recorded two children’s books: *Supposing* by Alistair Reid and *The Way I Feel* by Janan Cain (National Network for Equitable Library Service, 2017). These recording projects contributed to the participatory vision and, at the same time, taught the children who participated in the project that different people read in different ways. In Alberta, the Lac La Biche Public Library received a grant to create a recording studio that they will use to record material for NNELS, among other projects. Students from the University of Alberta School of Library and Information Studies have been hired on one-year contracts over a two-year period to edit e-text and produce synthetic-voice DAISY files for NNELS. The Crane Library at the University of British Columbia has deposited many titles into the NNELS repository (National Network for Equitable Library Service, 2016). Many of the volunteer recorders for the Crane Library are also recording items for NNELS. These are just a few examples of the distributed nature of a national network, which highlight the diversity of the individuals and organizations that contribute to the NNELS repository.

Additionally, NNELS encourages public libraries to provide direct service to patrons with print disabilities. For example, NNELS trains library staff to burn discs on-demand or transfer files from the NNELS repository for their patrons. Libraries have not always been empowered to provide this kind of direct service. Gabias describes a key frustration from her experience in libraries:

[A frustration] is to always and every time be told to go to CNIB for what I need. Do people who keep saying that to me really believe that I haven’t heard of CNIB? Do they not understand that I’m a member of the public trying to participate in a public program? I’m there because I believe the library may be of service to me. Before sending me back to the “experts,” at least have a conversation about what might be possible. I’m not so ‘other’ that I must always content myself with “separate but equal” service. (M.E. Gabias, personal interview, February 3, 2016)

The nature of the NNELS collection enables libraries to think about insourcing these services, rather than relying on external agencies, like the CNIB. Rather than sending patrons away to be served by an external organization, which was the reality until 2010, librarians can have conversations about reading preferences with their print-disabled patrons to provide proper readers’ advisory services. Though the gap between accessible material and traditional published material remains, librarians who can burn discs on demand and who are aware of on-demand production are well-equipped to engage with print-disabled users as they would other patrons.

Library-Owned: From Licenced Content to a Core Collection

Although NNELS is an organization and a repository, the collection itself belongs to public libraries. The library branches of the provincial and territorial partners (British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut) have created and continue to fund NNELS. They own perpetual and unlimited distribution rights for any files produced by NNELS. This means that the NNELS files are owned in perpetuity by the public libraries in the participating jurisdictions. In contrast, other organizations generally offer subscription or licensing models in which the content is perpetually owned by the organization acting as a vendor. NNELS is a true example of interprovincial partnership and a shared accessible-format library collection. Ownership rights are more than a symbolic gesture: owning the collection integrates services for print-disabled customers as a fundamental part of the library mission rather than an additional, specialized service.

Working Ourselves Out of Business: The Future of Accessible Formats in Canadian Public Libraries

NNELS allows for a new way of thinking about services for people with print disabilities in public libraries. The trajectory from a traditional community service paradigm to a critical disability paradigm has provided a useful framework in situating this new model. However, the critical disability paradigm advocating the ideals of social inclusion and full participation cannot actually be realized until NNELS ceases to exist. The common refrain for people who work with NNELS is that “we are in the business of working ourselves out of business.” Full inclusion means

- that libraries no longer need a special service (even if it is integrated as much as possible) for people with print disabilities,
- that all reading material is available in all formats, and
- that material is born accessible.

There are many dedicated people working towards this vision—readers, libraries, advocates, and publishers—but we are not there yet. NNELS offers libraries and supporters a new model for our current environment and, more importantly, a way to envision a future without NNELS.

Endnotes

¹ “DAISY (the Digital Accessible Information System) is the emerging world standard for digital talking books for people who are blind or have a print disability. This format has been under development for over ten years, with most of the world’s talking book libraries now employing some form of the standard” (Kearney, 2011, para. 4).

² There is provision in the *Copyright Act* (1985, s. 32) that permits individuals with perceptual disabilities or non-profit organizations acting on behalf of persons with perceptual disabilities to produce copies of published works in order to make them accessible.

³ Cited by permission.

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