Study day on Access to books and reading

On the 7 December, BrailleNet, Arald and Enssib organised a study day on access to books and reading for people with print disabilities. Over 80 publishing professionals attended the event held at the Ecole Nationale Superieure des Sciences de l’information et des Bibliotheques in Villeurbanne.

The event provided an opportunity for professionals to get up to speed on recent changes to the legal and technical landscape designed to increase the availability of accessible books. Much of the day was devoted to participatory workshops where delegates were invited to focus on specific issues and processes in the publishing lifecycle. Publishers, accessible book producers, software providers, libraries, online retailers, e-reader manufacturers, teachers and end-users all share responsibility and have an active role to play in the production of accessible books.

The event was opened by the Director of the Enssib, Yves Alix, the Director of Arald, Laurent Bonzon and the Director of BrailleNet, Bruno Marmol.

Changes to the legal and technical framework

Claire Leymonerie of the French Ministry of Culture provided an overview of recent changes to national and international legislation.

In France, a copyright exception for people with print disabilities makes it possible for non-profit organisations to produce accessible books from source files that publishers are required to make available for this purpose. The 2016 reforms to French intellectual property law will, it is hoped, further increase access to books and to reading for people with print disabilities thanks to a more balanced workflow in which responsibility is shared between publishers and accessible books producers. Improvements include a less restrictive definition of what constitutes a print disability, the requirement that publishers provide source files in more structured formats, and that source files for text books are made available by default at the moment of publication. To avoid duplication, all adapted versions will then be shared on the Platon platform which is managed by the French National Library.
The European Accessibility Act, which is in the process of being finalised, will be effective from 2018 and transposed into national law by member states by 2020. Intended to support a fully inclusive digital society within the European single market, it sets down the functional requirements for all online services, including those related to books.

Following this, Alizé Buisse of Arald presented the Lectura+ portal, a website for written heritage and in particular historic press articles. The project demonstrated how the EPUB 3 format had been used to render the archive fully accessible to users with print disabilities.

**Stakeholders join forces to find ways to improve access to digital books**

The morning closed with the first series of participatory workshops which were subsequently summarised in the auditorium.

The **Publishing** workshop was run by Luc Audrain of the Hachette Group who also coordinates the Standardisation group at the French Publishers Association, and Alex Bernier of BrailleNet. Discussions centred on the need to produce structured documents from the outset, and to ensure that transcription centres are not only equipped to interpret and build on these semantic-rich formats, but are also able to indicate accessibility features using the appropriate metadata and mark-up.

In the second workshop, **Procurement**, led by Philippe Lenepveu of Tosca Consultants, participants recognised that accessibility requirements need to be written into all project briefs and tender documents, whether it be for new websites or software packages. Supported by existing standards, clients must then ensure that accessibility requirements are taken into account at all stages of the project lifecycle.

In the third workshop, **Signposting**, Françoise Fontaine Martinelli of Lyon University led discussions looking at how professionals can point to accessibility features across titles and platforms. Participants shared frustrations on the lack of political buy-in and insufficient training of public servants who are ill-equipped to check whether accessibility requirements are being met. The need for certification to highlight best practice was expressed.
The afternoon kicked off with a series of demonstrations on reading software for users with different types of print-disability, from learning disabilities to visual impairments.

There followed three more workshops on the book production cycle.

The Reading workshop was coordinated by Fernando Pinto da Silva (EDRLab) and Marion Berthaut (Mobidys). Discussions highlighted the disparities between user needs – which vary greatly according to disability – and the tools available on the market. The notion that one format and tool could fit all was brought into question. The issue of government funding for particular reading tools was also discussed as participants conceded that mainstream tools are at times the most adapted to user needs, but rarely qualify for government support.

In the Sharing workshop, led by Chloé Cottour of the French National Library and Nicolas Eglin of the CTRDV transcription centre, participants thought about ways in which to improve the productivity of accessible book services through the Platon platform and services such as the BNFA or Eole. The need to share working practices became apparent – although it was noted that these can vary considerably from service to service and according to the type of books being adapted. The need to indicate the level of accessibility of files available on Platon was again highlighted.

The final workshop, Encouraging, was coordinated by Sophie Martel and looked at ways in which stakeholders from all stages of the publishing lifecycle could be encouraged and supported in their efforts to produce accessible books. Various solutions were evoked: more training at all levels, greater use of public grants (CNL, DRAC, FIPHIP, etc.), more concerted effort to include accessibility requirements in all public procurement processes; financial penalties for those services who fail to meet legal requirements and certification processes for those who follow best practice.

**Immediate measures to improve accessibility**

Alex Bernier of BrailleNet concluded by listing the immediate measures that must be taken to improve access to books and reading for the print-disabled. Among the measures listed were the need for:
Accessibility training for all stakeholders (publishers, digital professionals, accessible book producers, etc.);

A more industrial approach to accessible publishing with increasingly streamlined approaches and shared workflows;

A concerted effort to move from individual-led initiatives to organisation-wide accessibility policies;

A means to highlight and celebrate best practice through certification programmes.

If inclusive publishing is to become a reality, all stakeholders need to work together in a more organised and streamlined manner.