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With great power comes great responsibility: Libraries & publishers providing accessible content

Libraries have a responsibility to ensure that patrons with disabilities can access library materials with as few barriers as possible. At the 2021 Charleston Conference, Michael Johnson (director of content partnerships, Benetech) moderated a panel discussion that included Trisha Prevett (elearning librarian, Southern New Hampshire University), Jonathan McGlone (digital product design engineer and accessibility specialist, University of Michigan Press), and John Unsworth (dean of libraries, University of Virginia). The panelists revealed how their organizations implemented accessibility initiatives that provide print disabled users with greater access to online content.

Johnson began by asking the panelists what prompted their institutions to focus on accessibility. Prevett described a situation involving a visually impaired student who was struggling to access...
and navigate the library’s databases to do research for courses. This problem led Prevett to question the barriers that students with disabilities faced when they attempted to access electronic resources. Equal access to library resources is an integral part of the American Library Association Code of Ethics. It was clear to Prevett though that students were not getting equal access to the library’s electronic resources at Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU).

For the University of Michigan Press (UMP), the impetus for their accessibility initiative began when a Disability Studies scholar, who was also print disabled, described the issues he was having with ebooks that did not offer adequate accessibility features. The scholar’s experience motivated the staff at UMP to concentrate on ways to make ebooks more accessible. They encouraged authors to put image descriptions in the body of text which better incorporates the image into the text. McGlone also explained that UMP publishes their ebooks in or electronic publication format (ePUB) because the format contains coding that enhances its ability to work with machines.

The University of Virginia (UVA) Libraries began their accessibility work in 2014 because of a visually impaired student who was taking many film courses and needed audio descriptions for films. The audiovisual staff were spending countless hours narrating films for the student. Unsworth was not aware of any other libraries were providing this kind of remediation to students with disabilities. Additionally, Unsworth discovered that inaccurate legal information from vendors was preventing disability services at other institutions from sharing remediation
strategies. This situation inspired people from UVA and the Association of Research Libraries to author a whitepaper on the intersection of civil rights and copyright (Butler, Adler, & Cox, 2019).

Next Johnson described the mission of the nonprofit company, Benetech, which creates software for the “social good”. Benetech offers Bookshare, a repository of books for print disabled users. According to their website, “readers can listen to books, see and hear words as they are highlighted, read in braille or large font” (Benetech, 2022). Benetech also offers the Global Certified Accessible (GCA) certification program which helps publishers create “born accessible” ebooks for their readers.

Johnson then asked the participants about the most important accessibility projects on campus at their institutions. Prevett described the electronic and information technology (EIT) addendum, a document that lists the expectations for vendors to create accessible content, that was created at SNHU. The EIT addendum contains specific language regarding timetables for content and platform remediations. Prevett and her SNHU colleagues noticed different groups of people all over campus working on accessibility so they created the Accessibility Council to consolidate some of their efforts. The Council found a culture on campus that resisted accessibility measures. Prevett emphasized that disability is a social construct and a culture change is required in order to serve all users equally.

The staff at UMP spent a couple years working on the publishing workflow to get it GCA certified by Benetech. McGlone also talked about their efforts to find accessibility gaps in their
epubs. An accessibility workgroup was created for the purpose of discussing ePUB accessibility and providing readers with guidance for finding content with adapted features for print disabilities. Additionally, they included accessibility requirements in their author guide. Currently, UMP is working on creating accessibility metadata to help users find ebooks with the accessibility features they need.

Unsworth discussed the Federated Repositories of Accessible Materials for Higher Education, or FRAME, project which UVA has led, in partnership with many other universities, to create an online repository for remediated texts. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation provided grants that helped them create the repository which they call EMMA (Educational Materials Made Accessible). The project group also established workflows to help librarians and disability services offices collaborate in remediating texts and uploading them to the repository.

References
