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Revealing All

[Ann Chapman](#) describes Revealweb, a Web site that brings together information about accessible resources for visually impaired people.

Introduction

The launch of [Revealweb](#) [1] on 16 September 2003 was a big step forward for anyone with visual impairment in the UK. For the first time, they had access to a Web-based union catalogue of resources in accessible formats and information about the producers and suppliers of these materials. Until that point there had been no single place which provided information accessible by everyone; in effect, these people were second-class citizens in the information world.

Revealweb has not solved all the problems. If you are unable to read standard print, even with the help of corrective lenses, you still face a series of obstacles in trying to access anything you want to 'read' – whether this is fiction, poetry, music scores, study materials or newspapers. In the first place, very little of the annual publishing output of the UK (less than 5%) will be transcribed into a format other than standard print. Secondly, of the titles that are transcribed, some will be available in perhaps only one or two formats – which you may or may not be able to use. These formats are produced, lent and sold by a wide variety of organisations – voluntary organisations of varying sizes, transcription services (including prison workshops), education support services and schools, and public libraries. None of that has changed.

What has changed is the ability to find the items that are available. In 1999, there were no resources equivalent to 'Books in Print' or the British National Bibliography, the British Library had no remit for these materials under its founding Act of Parliament, and there was no co-ordination of the resources that did exist. But now Revealweb provides an easy way to find out who has the title you want in the format you need.

Background

In 1999 the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) made a grant, to be administered by the Library and Information Commission and Share the Vision, to improve library and information services for visually impaired people, and a programme of key projects was drawn up. As part of the programme, UKOLN was commissioned to review the role of a national union database of accessible formats and to make a technical specification of the data elements required. The study concluded that the existing National Union Catalogue of Alternative Formats (NUCAF) had the potential to provide a valuable service, but that a number of factors prevented this: NUCAF was not directly accessible by end-users, the data it held was incomplete and sometimes incorrect; and its creator, the Royal National Institute of the Blind ([RNIB](#)) [2], did not have the resources to improve and maintain it. The study report [3] recommended that a new Web-accessible database should replace

NUCAF; this was accepted by the programme steering committee in January 2000 and designated a priority project.

A feasibility study was carried out to develop a management structure, business plan and technical system specification for the Revealweb database; partners working on the study were UKOLN, the National Library for the Blind ([NLB](#)) [4], RNIB and Juliet Leeves, a library automation consultant. The study was funded through a grant from the British Library Co-operation and Partnership Programme and a report submitted in September 2000.

Funding was finally secured from the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council ([MLA](#)) [5] to create Revealweb, and NLB and RNIB signed a partnership agreement to jointly develop the resource. UKOLN was responsible for the creation of the bibliographic standard (MARC 21 with some extension), with the assistance of cataloguing staff from both NLB and RNIB, while Juliet Leeves produced the technical specification. [Geac Library Solutions](#) [6] were contracted to supply the Geac Advance system in late 2002. The test database was in place by spring 2003 and test downloads of data from NUCAF were made from spring to early summer. The final loading of data from NUCAF and from the NLB catalogue took place in summer 2003, followed by a phase of merging, de-duplication, cleanup and enhancement ready for the launch in September 2003. In addition to the union database of items, a Register of Suppliers (holders, producers and sellers) was also created using the [RSLP Collection Description Schema](#) [7].

Scope

Revealweb enables users to find books available in accessible formats, find titles currently in production to avoid duplication, and find who produces, loans or sells accessible material. It also acts as the copyright notification register.

Revealweb's union database contains the details of accessible resources available to visually impaired people in the UK. When it was launched in 2003, it held around 100,000 records, for items primarily held by RNIB, NLB and Calibre Cassette Library. Since then the holdings of many other agencies have been added, so that there are now more than 112,000 records. Revealweb now includes titles from Ulverscroft Large Print, Talking Newspapers, Torch Trust, Living Paintings Trust, Listening Books, Inside Out Trust and a number of local education authority specialist support services, among others. Work is ongoing to add titles from other producers, including commercial producers.

Resources listed on Revealweb are available in one or more accessible formats: Braille, Moon, Braille music, Braille and print, Moon and print, tactile maps and diagrams, audio cassettes (2 track and 4 track), Talking Books 8 track cassettes, CD-ROMs (spoken word), DAISY format, electronic text files, electronic Braille music files, electronic Braille files, large print (all font sizes) and audio-described videos. Additional accessible formats will be considered as they develop. Items in standard print are not included, but the Register of Suppliers will include links to useful collections in standard print where possible (for example materials on visual impairment in general and on specific conditions).

All subject matter is included, unless it contains information of a potentially harmful or illegal nature – such items will be excluded. Content warnings are included as required on records; this means that users can avoid certain material if they wish, or

can choose how to use it in certain settings. For example, a user may wish to avoid listening to an audio recording of a text which includes strong language altogether, or to avoid listening in situations when other people, especially children, can also hear the text. Similarly, subject matter covers all levels of difficulty enabling as many people as possible to find material at their required level, from pre-school to degree level and beyond. Materials may be in languages other than English; in addition to those studying a foreign language, there are people in ethnic minority groups with visual impairment who want items in their home language. Some materials with a limited lifespan may not be included at the discretion of the producer: for example, Clear Vision children's picture books with interleaved Braille pages get very heavy use and individual titles may not be produced again.

The Register of Suppliers complements the union database of items. It holds details about a range of organisations and individuals (107 are currently listed) who produce, lend or sell accessible materials. Information is provided on the scope of the service on offer, any fees or charges made, and contact details.

Revealweb is also the place to notify details of accessible copies that have been produced; this satisfies the notification requirement of the Copyright Licensing Authority (CLA). However, neither the CLA VIP License nor the Section 31B exception apply if there is a suitable commercial edition available; Revealweb is working to include details of more of the commercial accessible editions making it easier to check.

Accessibility of the Database

Revealweb was designed to be as accessible as possible, which meant detailed planning in the design stages. In addition to the usual bibliographic requirements, the display interface needed to work with

- speech synthesis software which 'reads' text to the user,
- user personalisation of screen magnification and colour of text and/or background, and
- the use of keyboard shortcuts as an alternative to using the mouse.

It proved very useful that the vendor of the library management system, Geac, had already had experience of working in this field as it had previously supplied a system to the Canadian Institute of the Blind. Following the launch, the accessibility has been further improved by following up comments and suggestions from focus groups, user testing and email feedback via the site. However, some improvements will need the involvement of the library system supplier and also some funding, so may take longer to implement.

Cataloguing

It was also important to keep accessibility in mind when making decisions on the bibliographic format and the content of records. It was therefore decided to use the MARC 21 Bibliographic Format and Holdings Formats. A bibliographic record is created for each standard print item that has been used to create accessible versions. Attached to this record are the details of all the accessible versions that have been

created from that work. The top level display enables users to find the title they want and see quickly the formats in which it is available. This is in contrast to the alternative approach of a bibliographic record for every transcription which means that users can be confronted with long lists of the same title, which they have to read through one by one.

It was necessary to do a small amount of extension to accommodate additional data about the accessible formats. Visually impaired people need as much information as is known about a format in order to assess whether they can use an item. For example, Braille exists in three grades; in grade 1 each letter, number and punctuation mark has a Braille code. Grades 2 and 3 use contractions (where, for example, one Braille code represents a common word such as 'and', another code for a common word ending such as 'ed' or 'ing'). Someone who can read grade 3 can also read grades 1 and 2; but someone who can only read grade 1 will have some difficulty with grades 2 and 3. With other formats, the required information is about the physical carrier (e.g. a specific playback machine is needed for RNIB Talking Books) or the digital file (e.g. ASCII files contain little formatting and so can be used easily with speech synthesis software). The 007 field coding was not specific enough and additional codes were added. A few local fields were also added.

Cataloguing guidelines had to be prepared to ensure that cataloguing of certain materials was done in a consistent way. For example, the books of the Bible, and collections of short stories are often transcribed separately and the catalogue records needed to give information about other related works. Some items, often produced for specific needs, are transcriptions of only part of a work; for example, a student may be told that they only need certain chapters of a work and therefore only request those sections from the transcription agency.

Indexing records was also important. Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) are used in both non-fiction and many non-fiction records, and fiction records are additionally indexed for genre using the Guidelines for Subject Access to Individual Works of Fiction and Drama (GSAFD). This means that a user can, for example, use a character's name to locate all works in which they appear (although Hercule Poirot appears in many works by Agatha Christie, his name is in the title of only a few), search for science fiction or spy novels, works in Spanish, or find novels for children on the theme of adoption or bullying. As the Revealweb database is Z39.50-compatible, users can also cross-search the database with other Web-based services that use the Z39.50 standard.

In addition to material that has been produced, records are also created for transcriptions that are in process. This means that users can see, for example, that although a Braille version is not currently available, one is in production and expected to be available in a couple of months.

Although most materials have direct location information attached (Braille copy held by NLB, audio copy held by Calibre), some materials do not – for example, the Ulverscroft titles are held in public libraries; in these cases there is a location statement telling the user how to locate the item.

Another important feature is that the database should always be up-to-date. For the NLB and RNIB cataloguers to do all additions and deletions on top of their own workload was not practical or possible with current project funding. Therefore, contributor interfaces have been designed so that producers and holders of materials

can easily add details of new titles and notify withdrawn titles themselves. However this data is checked by a cataloguer at either NLB or RNIB before release to public view. Producers have found this a simple process, using a template and there is always support from the Revealweb cataloguers.

Impact

Revealweb now has details of 112,528 titles, with 107 organisations on the register of suppliers, and the site receives around 30,000 hits a month; with over 500,000 hits since its launch. But the best judge of the real impact is the target audience – those who need these materials, and their intermediaries (teachers, support workers and carers).

It has been welcomed by users like John Godber of RNIB. Using a laptop PC, wirelessly connected to a BBC Web site 'listen again' page, he was enjoying a play based on a book. Through the wireless connection he then connected to Revealweb and located a Braille copy at NLB. Pasting the details into the email link for NLB he requested the item, which arrived three days later. He says:

'No more wondering if you've got the strength to wade through catalogues from various organisations, no more having to make several phone calls. It's now easier for me as a blind person to borrow a book than it is for a sighted person. I don't have to wait for the library to open. Revealweb is 24/7.'

Another user is Chris Tattersall, who lost his sight 10 years ago and has since learnt both Braille and Moon. Always an avid reader, his wife had to read out lists of book titles from RNIB catalogues to him, or helpful staff at his local public library would read out the details on the back covers of audio books. Revealweb has enabled Chris to be more independent; he says "Nothing can beat the thrill of being able to access information without needing someone else's help." He further notes "Revealweb opens up a world of choice for me. If one organisation doesn't have the book I want to read, Revealweb allows me to easily find out if someone else has it."

A response to the on-line survey included the following comment:

'I have been using speech output computers for the last 15 years. I see so much potential in this form of communication but until now we have just had to put up with adapted systems that always fall very short of being ideal. You have simply produced a very 'visually impaired people-friendly' system that I feel should be a model for future developments in communications systems for people with sight loss.'

Revealweb has been demonstrated at a number of exhibitions since its launch, and a great deal of interest has been shown – from the computer literate who are quite happy to play around with Revealweb, to the elderly lady who had just lost the sight in her remaining good eye and was going to go to her local public library and ask them to search for her. And many teachers and parents thought that Revealweb would make life easier for them in tracking down leisure reading and study material.

The database is also proving useful to the producers of accessible materials. They can check the database for titles they are considering transcribing to avoid duplication;

their effort can then be redirected to producing another title in the same subject area, or fiction genre, or producing a different format for a title that already has some transcriptions. This means that the resources available for transcription are used in the most effective way.

Revealweb was singled out for praise in the recent House of Commons Select Committee report on public libraries. It notes:

'Revealweb is an important resource which serves as a national database of materials in accessible formats. This is a multi-functional, state of the art, web-based, freely accessible service which is the cornerstone of an integrated network of services for visually disabled people and is part funded by MLA.'

However, the Select Committee report noted concern that funding was only guaranteed up to March 2006, and recommended that:

'...secure funding is made available for the maintenance and development of Revealweb over the longer term.'

And at the Jodi Mattes Award ceremony held on Tuesday 12th April 2005, Revealweb received a Commendation of Widening Access to Information. The Awards are for a museum, gallery, library, archive or heritage Web site in England which demonstrates active commitment to meeting Web accessibility standards, involves users and develops practical and imaginative ways of making cultural and learning resources accessible to disabled people. The judges said:

"This library catalogue, for which there was a compelling need, is an initiative of the voluntary sector. A number of organisations working for visually impaired people, such as RNIB and NLB, have joined forces to bring together for the first time in an accessible library catalogue more than 100,000 materials in accessible formats, such as Braille, large-print and audio. The catalogue lists specialist library collections from the voluntary sector as well as commercial producers. Extensive partnership work forms the basis of its success. It can be used by visually impaired users as well as librarians. It makes finding out about reading materials and obtaining them considerably easier for visually impaired people."

The Future

Revealweb continues to be a joint project between NLB and RNIB, led by the Revealweb Manager, Deborah Ryan [9], who reports to the Joint Management Group. Its usefulness is such that the MLA has initiated a feasibility study about the possibility of Revealweb extending its coverage of materials to those for people with a variety of disabilities. If you would like to be involved in that discussion contact the Revealweb Manager. However, despite its evident value to the visually impaired community, and the praise from government and community alike, the future of Revealweb remains uncertain unless secure funding can be found to continue the service past March 2006. One of the major tasks of the Revealweb Policy Advisory Group is to put such secure funding in place.

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- 6.
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- 8.

Side Page