

Equitable access for the visually impaired

Barbara Fewtrell, Royal Blind Society of New South Wales

More than 100 000 people in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory (300 000 in Australia) have at least some difficulty reading ordinary print. The Royal Blind Society has as its vision that people who are blind or vision impaired have access to the same range of books and information, at the same time, as their sighted counterparts.

Public libraries have changed considerably in the last few years. As well as the traditional books and magazines, music, cassettes, videos and compact disks are all now available for borrowing. Libraries also offer CD-ROMs, computer-based catalogue access and, more recently, access to information sources such as the internet. Libraries have become the information centres of their communities, but much of the information available from them is inaccessible to people who are blind or vision impaired.

Participation in the broader community depends on the capacity of the individual to receive and use visually-based information. Limited access to visually-based information affects all aspects of the lives of people who are blind or vision impaired. The Royal Blind Society recently conducted a major survey of people who are blind or vision impaired in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. The survey took the form of a structured telephone interview, with more than 700 participants. The survey demonstrated that only one in five respondents of working age are in paid employment, even when short-term, part-time

and casual positions are included, the capacity of respondents to travel locally is very restricted, eight in ten respondents cannot use an automatic teller machine and, although enrolment in study is higher than in the general community, students report enormous difficulties with textbooks and other course materials.

The Royal Blind Society Library in Sydney provides audio books to vision-impaired and print-handicapped borrowers in New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory and Queensland; it also provides and braille books to vision-impaired people all over Australia through the Australian Braille Library Service in co-operation with the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind and the Braille and Talking Book Library.

Producing braille and audio books is expensive and time consuming. The Royal Blind Society produces between forty and fifty braille titles per year, as well as purchasing about the same number. It also produces between 100 and 120 talking books per year and purchases between fifty and seventy. Compared with printed works, this is an extremely small sample. The dilemma for the Society: is what books and publications to produce as talking or braille books? Books to be produced are selected by library and production staff based on a general collection development policy, input from Royal Blind Society Library borrowers, collection and borrower profile information and their suitability for production into the format. For instance, books with a high proportion of information in the

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form of pictures or graphics would be difficult to produce in audio.

A title is not produced in either audio or braille if it already exists in that format and is available for loan or purchase. A book is only produced with the permission of the copyright holder and cannot be produced if this permission is not obtained. Most copyright holders give permission readily and free of charge. The Royal Blind Society tends to produce a high proportion of Australian titles as these are very popular with library borrowers and tend to be less available in alternative formats than popular overseas titles.

The nature of demand for access to information is changing. Many people losing their sight in the 90s have already participated in the 'information explosion' of recent years and expect to sustain access to a very wide range of timely information. They are familiar with the high standards of production that can be achieved and have a greater knowledge of their rights than did previous generations, resulting from consumerism and the awareness of disability rights. ■



OptimusPRIME

Telephone: (03) 9620 5333

Facsimile: (03) 9620 5355

Email: optimus@optimus-prime.com

Level 15, 575 Bourke Street

Melbourne Victoria 3000

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We'll be happy to discuss your particular information requirements.