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EXTENT OF SERVICE: MINNESOTA LIBRARIES DISABILITY SERVICES AND QUALITY OF WEBSITES: ASSESSING PUBLIC & ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

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This article addresses the availability of software/hardware and other sources for all persons with disabilities in Minnesota libraries, and also the navigability of websites of these libraries for those who are visually impaired. Many electronic resources are prohibitively difficult or impossible for the Blind to access. On a practical level, the article surveys and evaluates what is available and what works for people with disabilities at present.

I surveyed all Academic Libraries and Public Library Systems in Minnesota as to their disability services, and evaluated the accessibility of library websites through the help of people with visual disabilities. The websites chosen were those of public Academic Libraries/Learning Resource Centers, and those of Public Libraries or Library Systems. To evaluate Minnesota library web sites, I was able to recruit 5 volunteers, and using their personal screen readers (JAWS 4.0 or later), evaluated 20 Public Library and 40 public Academic Library web sites.

Existing legislation concerning persons with disabilities is overviewed as well as issues and concerns that arose during the course of my writing and surveying. The work provides timely information and raises questions for further research.

The 1997 National Survey of U.S. Public Libraries and the Internet," commissioned by the American Library Association (ALA), Office for Information Technology, found few libraries actually provide special software or hardware for

persons with disabilities. While urban areas offered the most adapted access to hardware and software, only 15.4 percent of those responding indicated that they have made access accommodations to their automated information systems (This figure is unacceptable for entities that profess to be citadels of knowledge, dedicated to "equal access" to information. In an age where quality information available via the Internet is growing, libraries should be seeking to ensure that their systems are accessible by everyone. (Mates, 1998)

Five years later, how do the Public and Academic Libraries in Minnesota fare? This article will address the availability of software/hardware and other sources for all persons with disabilities in Minnesota libraries, and also the navigability of websites of these libraries for those who are visually impaired. Many electronic resources are prohibitively difficult or impossible for the Blind to access. On a practical level, what is available and what works for people with disabilities at present.

THE LAW

We are all aware of the American Disabilities Act of 1990 which states that "No qualified individual with a disability shall, by reason of such disability, be excluded from participation in or be denied the benefits of the services, programs, or activities of a public entity, or be subjected to discrimination by any such entity". (Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990) More recent accessibility

standards for electronic and information technology covered by section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended in 1998 (29 U.S.C. 794d), requires that when Federal agencies develop, procure, maintain, or use electronic and information technology, they shall ensure that the electronic and information technology allows Federal employees with disabilities to have access to and use of information and data that is comparable to the access to and use of information and data by Federal employees who are not individuals with disabilities, unless an undue burden would be imposed on the agency. Also, Effective February 20, 2001, The Architectural and Transportation Barriers

Compliance Board (Access Board) issued accessibility standards for electronic and

information technology covered by section 508. They defined electronic and information technology and the technical and functional performance criteria necessary for such technology to comply with section 508. (Electronic and Information Technology Accessibility Standards, 2000)

In addition, Minnesota Statute 16C.145, Nonvisual Technology Access Standards states that non-visual access must include: (b)(1) effective, interactive control and use of technology, (b)(2) it must be compatible with technology used by the sighted, (b)(3) it must be integrated into networks used to share communications, and (b)(4) equivalent access by non-visual means must be provided. This applies to all contracts for the procurement of information technology by, or for the use of, agencies, political subdivisions, and state colleges and universities. (Nonvisual Technology Access Standards, 2002). More specifically, another Statute requires that all videos released on or after June 1, 1997, produced for sale to educational institutions or state or local agencies, and where more than

500 copies are produced or is produced in any number by a governmental entity for educational purposes, must be open or closed-captioned (Minn. Stat. 3251.05 Subd.3). These regulations can seem overwhelming, but the purpose behind them is to serve a large segment of the population fairly and effectively. This purpose is in keeping with the spirit of libraries, both academic and public.

SURVEY

I decided to: (1) survey all Academic Libraries and Public Library Systems in Minnesota as to their disability services, and (2) to evaluate

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the accessibility of library websites through the help of people with visual disabilities. The websites chosen were those of public Academic Libraries/ Learning Resource Centers, and those of Public Libraries or Library Systems.

AVAILABLE SERVICES

To inquire as to what services were available at different libraries, I sent an email message that read:

"Do you have any disability services available at the library?"

Special books, software or hardware, or other sources for the deaf, visually or physically impaired?"

"If so, could you briefly tell what it entails or send an attachment with more information?"

Where I could not easily find an email address or website, I used the telephone. Some libraries were very difficult to contact, not very accessible in many ways, let alone being accessible electronically. This problem would be true for all persons, those with disabilities and those without.

Responses from the libraries varied greatly in what they had available as far as helpful technology, resources, or services for people with disabilities. Some of this variance is understandable do to the nature of the library (technical, public, academic), the locale, and the clientele. Services varied from "None" or "one handicapped bathroom" to a full array of adaptive devices and software. Private institutions, in general, had less than public universities. In the case of some colleges and universities, the library itself had no special equipment, but their Office of Student Disabilities did have resources. In two cases the OSD was located in the library. In Public

Library Systems, in many cases, only a few branches or just the "main"

branch had been equipped for disability services.

Of the Libraries that I was able to contact, the response rate for:

Public Academic Libraries was 23 of 40 (~60%);

Private Academic Libraries was 16 of 25 (~60%);

and Public Library Systems was 14 of 20 (70%).

Of the total number of 85 libraries contacted, 53 responded.

Of the libraries having no disability hardware, software, or materials, 4 were public Academic Libraries and 10 were private Academic Libraries. (Several of these institutions had Offices of Student Disabilities that did have disability hardware, software, or materials). All Public Library Systems had some disability hardware, software, or materials—not all individual branches.

The following table is a compilation of the information received in response to the survey.

RESPONDING MINNESOTA LIBRARIES REPORTING DISABILITY RESOURCES AVAILABLE

Resource	Academic Libraries (Public)	Academic Libraries (Private)	Public Libraries (Systems)	TOTAL
None	4	10	0	14
Large Print Books	3	1	11	15
Magnification Units (print)	5	4	6	15 (a)
Zoomtext	3	0	1	4 (b)
Reader/Scanner (OpenBook,etc.)	8	1	7	16 (c)
Page Reader (JAWS, etc.)	10	3	2	15
Braille Books	2	0	1	3
Text to Braille printer	2	0	1	3 (d)
AudioBooks	4	0	9	13
Voice Recognition software	5	1	0	6
Described Videos	0	1	6	7
Closed Captioned Videos	3	3	7	13
Sign Language Videos	0	0	2	2
Telecaption Decoder	0	0	1	1 (e)
TDD/TTY Phone	0	0	5	5 (f)
Pocket Talker	0	0	2	2 (g)
PA system (FM) (Hard of Hearing)	1	0	2	3
Adaptive Keyboards (Intellikeys, etc.)	2	0	2	4
Touch Screen Monitor (Mouseless)	1	0	1	2
Daily living aids (for checkout)	0	0	1	1

PUBLIC LIBRARY SYSTEMS (BRANCH LIBRARY ACCESSIBILITY)

- (a) 4 Systems had 1, 1 system had 2, 1 system had 5
- (b) 1 System had 1
- (c) 4 Systems had 1, 1 had 2, 1 had 3, 1 had 4
- (d) 1 System had 1
- (e) 1 System had 5
- (f) 4 Systems had 1, 1 had 3
- (g) 1 System had 1, 1 had 25

WEBSITE EVALUATION

To evaluate Minnesota library web sites, I was able to recruit 5 volunteers who were persons with visual disabilities. 2 persons were employed by the State of Minnesota, in institutions of higher learning, and 3 were recruited through contacting the Minnesota State Services for the Blind. Of those 3, one worked in Technical Computer Network Support, another worked as an instructor, Braille transcriber, and website evaluator for another State's (other than Minnesota) Department for the Blind.

The criteria and instructions for evaluation of websites sent to the volunteers read:

- 1) *Spend about 5 minutes on each site.*
- 2) *Judge the page on its "Accessibility" NOT its content, style, etc.*
- 3) *Scale for grading: Well Done (Accessible); Navigable; With some effort (OK); Difficult or Impossible*
- 4) *Overall Grade: Grade (A (+)-F)*
- 5) *Add Comments*

Using their personal screen readers (JAWS 4.0 or later), the 5 volunteers individually evaluated a number of the 20 Public Library and 40 Academic Library web sites.

EVALUATIONS OF MINNESOTA LIBRARIES' WEBSITES BY PERSONS WITH VISUAL DISABILITIES

<u>Evaluation</u>	<u>Academic Libraries (Public)</u>	<u>Public Libraries (Systems)</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
Grade	A 11	A 8	A 19
	B 15	B 5	B 20
	C 9	C 4	C 13
	D 3	D 0	D 3
	F 2	F 1*	F 3
Accessibility <i>See key below.</i>	W 12	W 9	W 21
	N 12	N 5	N 17
	E 12	E 3	E 15
	I 4	I 1*	I 5

*Accessibility Key: W=Well Done (Accessible); N=Navigable;
E=With some effort (OK); I=Difficult or Impossible.*

**Online access problem with two libraries at time of evaluation.*

COMMENTS ON LIBRARY WEBSITES

In brief, some sites were very accommodating and others were not. Either they worked or they didn't. Also, in addition to employing the many criteria for making a site accessible⁵, it also seemed that "simplicity" in a web page was key to easy navigation.

STATISTICS

Just how large is this segment of the population that we are striving to serve fairly and effectively? An estimated 9% (14.2 million) of working-age people in the United States have some work disability-defined as a limitation in work due to chronic illness or impairment. About 4% (6.3 million) are limited in the amount or kind of work they can perform. Some 5% (7.9 million) have severe work limitation, defined by the U.S. Bureau of the Census as not working at all or receiving Medicare or Supplemental Security Income (SSI). These estimates are for civilians aged 16 to 64 and are based on data from the U.S. Current Population Survey (CPS) of people living in households. Estimates are for 1990. "Some 43,000,000 Americans have one or more physical or mental disabilities,

and this number is increasing as the population as a whole is growing older"(Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990)

In Minnesota, according to the Disability Information Network: Minnesota State Council on Disability [MSCOD] <http://www.disability.state.mn.us/faqfacts/stats.html>, there is a void of current, reliable information on the prevalence of disability in Minnesota. Nationwide figures are not necessarily reliable when applied specifically to Minnesota. The disability question in the Federal census implies that the only factor affecting the ability to work is the condition of the person. Environmental factors and social barriers also play a role. No comprehensive state specific study has been done since 1976 (Disability Information Network, 2001), but of the 4,919,479 people in Minnesota, (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000), there are 679,236 persons with disabilities (82,719 between 5-20 years old, 392,313 between 21 and 64, and 204,204 over 65. (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000)

There are 79,000 receiving federally administered SSI payments in December 2000, 64,084 persons—53,932 disabled and blind, and 10,152 aged. A

total of 15,356 recipients were aged 65 or older, 40,273 between 18 and 64, and 8,455 under 18. (Social Security Administration, 2000)

CONCLUSION

No library would willfully seek to exclude this segment of the population from available resources, but by not providing adequate services or making the services prohibitive by way of travel to other locations, patrons with disabilities may be encouraged to seek other places for access. Also, once the "word is out" that a certain library does not provide adequate service to community patrons with disabilities (even if equipment is available), those patrons will not be inclined to use the library. They may get their own software and equipment, or they are deprived of information resources by way of frustration, time, and energy level.

This article is in no way meant to discredit various library disability services, but to act as a barometer for libraries of readily available services, to increase awareness, and to raise further questions.

Questions such as: What is to be the scope of the librarian's personal service to patrons with disabilities realistically to be, if disability hardware and software is available?; In academic institutions, is a full array of disability hardware and software to be available in their libraries or in their Disability Services offices?—Maybe before the "electronic information age" this was a different story. *

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HELPFUL SITES

Checklist for Readily Achievable
Barrier Removal
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checkweb.htm](http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/checkweb.htm)

MnSCU Web Accessibility Guidelines
[http://www.its.mnscu.edu/
webmaster/access/guidelines/
index.php](http://www.its.mnscu.edu/webmaster/access/guidelines/index.php)

WebABLE
<http://www.webable.com/>