

# Developing a new resource for visually impaired people

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## ABSTRACT

Since June 1999, UKOLN has worked with the Royal National Institute for the Blind, the National Library for the Blind and an independent library consultant on a major project, **Reveal**, that is part of an initiative to improve library and information services to visually impaired people in the UK. **Reveal** will be a web-based resource that will provide quick and easy access to information on the range of material available to visually impaired people. Progress on the project to date is described.

## Keywords

Web-based union databases, collection description, web accessibility, services to visually impaired people.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Visually impaired people need a range of materials to carry on reading. They might need their daily newspaper on tape; the latest blockbuster novel in Braille or Moon; online reference material; or a children's book using pictures, print and Braille to allow them to share their reading experience with a sighted person; or any combination of these. In the UK, more than 230 separate specialist organizations transcribe material from standard print into other media. With so many organizations and media formats, it is necessary to have a single, easy to use source of information on which titles are available in which formats.

## 2. BACKGROUND

The Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) developed the National Union Catalogue of Alternative Formats (NUCAF) as a first response to this need. Initially the service was only available via RNIB but access was then extended through regional library systems' union catalogues.

Then in 1999, a programme of work funded by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport through the Library and Information Commission working with Share the Vision was set up. Project One was concerned with developing NUCAF; this included a review of its role, a specification of metadata requirements and an audit of its coverage.

## 3. INVESTIGATION

UKOLN carried out a comprehensive review of the aims, objectives and role of NUCAF. The review concluded that a union database was the key element in improving access, but that NUCAF in its current form could not deliver at the required level. Despite efforts to widen access, NUCAF remained available to end users only through intermediaries such as RNIB, library inter-lending sections and a few schools and colleges and its visibility as a resource was low.

In addition, it was known that a number of organizations either had none, or only some, of their holdings on NUCAF. Indeed, the audit carried out by RNIB, the National Library for the Blind (NLB) and Juliet Leeves, demonstrated that nearly as many available titles were unrecorded as were actually recorded on NUCAF. Additionally, records needed to be enhanced with additional information to assist users choosing items remotely.

The strategic review [1] was submitted in December 1999 and recommended that NUCAF should be made completely accessible and comprehensive. In order to achieve this, the union database would be moved to a new, web-accessible system and would be re-launched as Reveal. There were also recommendations for some additional resources such as a web-based collections register. The programme Steering Group accepted the recommendations and the project was given a high priority rating in the next phase of the programme of work.

## 4. THE FEASIBILITY STUDY

A grant from the British Library Cooperation and Partnership Programme enabled work to proceed on the next stage, a feasibility study. Work began in May 2000 with a team from NLB, RNIB, UKOLN and Juliet Leeves. The study covered three areas: a service specification and management structure, an operational feasibility review, and an outline business plan. Further development was divided into a number of work packages, in order to facilitate further work as and when further funding became available. A report [2] was submitted in September 2000. Some work detailed in the report is now being funded – the development of the collections register and the appointment of a Reveal project manager – and it is hoped that funding will become available shortly for further work.

## 5. WHAT IS REVEAL?

The Reveal union database will be designed from the outset with the needs of visually impaired users in mind, in terms of choice of routes to the information, records with enhanced data that enable users to make choices based on relevant information, and web content accessibility.

### 5.1 A Web resource

The union database will be held on a system with a web front-end. This will allow users to access the database from home, place of study, or any publicly accessible Internet access, such as public libraries or cyber cafes. Although Internet access is widening, it is not universal, excluding some users. To support them, a CD product is planned; this could be used in mobile libraries, schools where Internet connections may be limited in number, in hospital wards, or for individuals who have a PC but not an Internet connection.

### 5.2 Supporting users

Reveal is committed to using relevant national and international standards so will be using MARC21 bibliographic record format, Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) and Guidelines for Subject Access to Works of Fiction and Drama (GSAFD) for fiction indexing and genre headings.

Records will contain short summaries on the content of a title. Users will be able to search on the names of major characters that appear in a series of novels, or for the series itself. They will be able to search for fiction titles that focus on specific issues, such as bullying, or family relationships, environmental issues or depicting life in another country.

Details will be given of the range of formats each work has been transcribed into, whether tactile, audio, enlarged print or electronic. Records will also indicate which organization holds copies of each format of a title.

Initially the database will cover fiction and non-fiction texts and music scores that have been transcribed into an accessible format. There are also plans for the inclusion of tactile maps and diagrams at a later stage.

### 5.3 Supporting producers

Reveal is also looking at a range of ways in which it can support the specialist organizations that produce the accessible format materials to improve services to users. As only 3% of titles published each year in the UK are transcribed into another format, a union database will enable producers to check whether a title has already been transcribed in the format they were considering. This will give them the chance to select another title instead, widening the range available to visually impaired people and reducing duplication of effort. Organizations will be offered a range of routes by which they can supply details of new titles, depending on their access to technology, ranging from submission of paper forms, to email and direct entry via a web interface.

### 5.4 Supporting inter-lending

Visually impaired users currently rely heavily on individual membership of the specialist organizations for their reading needs and few have used inter-lending services. With recent moves in the UK to improve inter-lending services for this material, and agreements by some lenders to accept requests by

members of other designated organizations, this is set to change over time. Reveal will therefore provide an important resource to library inter-lending sections to locate copies of requested titles.

## 6. THE COLLECTIONS REGISTER

Although there are more than 230 organizations that produce and make available accessible format materials, users often get to know of only a handful through individual recommendations. Developing a collections register is the first step in assisting users in their search for materials.

Again this will be a web-based resource in order to make it widely accessible. End users will be able to search the register for named collections and for collections with strengths in particular areas. Although the initial data collection and input will be carried out centrally, subsequently the specialist organizations will be able to update their own entries online. UKOLN has already been carrying out research into collection level descriptions [3] and will be working on this development.

## 7. ACCESSIBILITY

In developing Reveal, the issue of accessibility is paramount. For too long visually impaired people have had to rely on intermediaries or a variety of lists to discover and locate this information. Web-based resources such as the union database and the collections register provide an opportunity for visually impaired people to make their own searches and discover information at first hand.

It is equally important then to design these new resources with accessibility issues in mind, so that no further obstacles are placed in the way of these users. So design of the user front-ends of the Reveal union database and the collections register will use the advice and guidance found in the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines [4]. It will also build on the development of accessible OPACs, such as the work going on at NLB and the Canadian National Institute for the Blind.

## 8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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