Integrating people with disabilities into mainstream library services

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Meeting:	**128 Division III** (4)
Simultaneous Interpretation:	Yes

Abstract

A new Library Act was announced officially on 4th October 2006 in Korea. One of the notable points of the Act was the establishment of the National Library Support Center for the Disabled (NLSCD) under the National Library of Korea. The NLSCD will actively support general libraries to integrate people with disabilities into mainstream library services. The purpose of the establishment of the NLSCD is to minimize the information gap between Information Alienated Class and non- Information Alienated Class and to include people with disabilities into mainstream society. This paper will focus on the background of the NLSCD and the major activities.

Introduction

Following the government's direction over the years, the National Library of Korea (NLK) has especially focused on improving services to the most disadvantageous group in the library, the visually impaired, as they introduced web based services for them. However, most libraries in public, schools and universities are still unaware of needs of the disabled. This leaves only disability institutions and special libraries to offer services to the disabled. Consequently a newly enacted Library Act was announced on October 4th 2006, to order all mainstream libraries to have provision for the disabled. Additionally, the NLK is responsible to establish a National Library Support Center for the Disabled (NLSCD) by the new law to help mainstream libraries to offer effective services to people with disabilities.

In this paper the Korean government's effort to solve the issue of information gap is described and the NLK initiative to help the visually impaired are also discussed. Finally, the establishment and major activities of the NLSCD are highlighted later. The NLSCD as a national body will play the central role in integrating people with disabilities into mainstream library services.

Korean Government's Commitment

The issue of Information Alienated Class (IAC) including the disabled in information era was taken seriously for the first time when the President presided over the 4th Information Strategy Meeting in April 2000 in Korea. Thanks to the government's strong drive toward the development of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Korea has become one of the fast growing countries in entering the *information society*. In the contrary, IAC also emerged as a negative effect of the growing *information society* and the gap between IAC and non-IAC is widening.

Therefore an Information Strategy Meeting was held in April 2000 in which *Act on Closing the Digital Divide* was enacted and the *1st Master Plan for Closing the Digital Divide* was also formulated in the following year. This *Master Plan* was managed by the Ministry of Information and Communication to build a competent environment in which information is easily accessible across all people. The plan was designed to support the entire governmental departments to implement the measures to solve the *digital divide* from 2001 to 2005. In the following year the *2nd Digital Divide Closed Master Plan* was also formulated and is now being carried out until 2010.

The *1st Master Plan for Closing the Digital Divide* primarily focused on building a competent environment in which information is easily accessible by constructing broadband information networks, distribution of IT devices and training IT literacy to the IAC. The subsequent *2nd Master Plan for Closing the Digital Divide* then focused on entering into a ubiquitous society, also known as a "computers everywhere society", where everyone and everything can be connected, and new innovations that will completely change the current dimension of ICT are anticipated. In the ideal ubiquitous network society, smooth interaction, reflection of users' needs and points of view are set to be realized. The government invested over US$ 4.5 billions to minimise the *digital divide* from 2001 to 2010. Furthermore, the Korea Agency for Digital Opportunity & Promotion (KADO) was established in January 2003 to commit into finding solutions to the *digital divide.*

Following the *1st Master Plan for Closing the Digital Divide* it is evident that the number of Internet users has risen from 11.5% in 2001 to 28.9% in 2005. The distribution of PC to the IAC has also risen from 40.6% in 2002 to 63.6% in 2005. The *2nd Master Plan for Closing the Digital Divide* aims to raise the number of Internet users up to 72 % by 2010 (*Table 1.*) and the number of people training for IT literacy is expected to be 5 million.

Type	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	Total
People with disabilities	77,000	82,000	82,000	82,000	77,000	400,000
Low income class	150,000	150,000	150,000	150,000	150,000	750,000
The Elderly	500,000	610,000	630,000	630,000	630,000	3,000,000
Residents in remote areas	165,000	175,000	170,000	170,000	170,000	850,000
Total	892,000	1.017,000	1,032,000	1,032,000	1.027,000	5,000,000

Table 1. The expected number of internet users in various groups.

Initiative of the National Library of Korea

Following the government's direction in the issue of the *digital divide* over the years, the National Library of Korea (NLK) has especially focused on improving services for the visually impaired. The NLK has been very committed to serving the visually impaired since the web-based digital library services first opened in 2001 on the Internet. The NLK recognized that the visually impaired have the same right as the rest of the populations to gain access to publicly funded general libraries including schools, universities and public libraries.

In 2003 the NLK started their first project for the visually impaired nationwide, in which they put together a union catalogue of alternative format materials such as Braille books and talking books produced by disabilities institutions or libraries for the visually impaired. In the past, each institution and libraries catalogued their alternative format materials by themselves without having any particular standardized format. As a result, there have been major difficulties in integrating catalogues from different institutions. In order to make different catalogues more accessible between institutions and libraries, the NLK began to collect individual catalogues from 32 institutions and libraries and modified them based on the Korea Machine Readable Catalogue (KORMARC). Upon completion of the union catalogue, the standardized catalogue was uploaded to the Korea Library Information System – Network (KOLIS-NET), a shared cataloguing system, which gives details of holding information to all users. By introducing the union catalogue we expected a reduction in multiple copies of the same alternative format materials. However, this was not the case as the union catalogue was put together by already existing alternative format materials from many different institutions and libraries. The NLK now holds 140,000 records of alternative format materials in the union catalogue (*Table 2*).

Year	2003	2004	2005	2006	Total
Numbers of Records	90,000	20,000	10,000	20,000	140,000

Table 2. The number of alternative format materials catalogued each year.

The number of student with disabilities entering universities are increasing every year as more and more universities are introducing special admission offers for disabled students. In 2006, 388 disabled students have entered 63 universities nationwide. Unfortunately most universities are unable to provide suitable educational environment for the disable students and our particular concern was they do not convert printed text books in accessible format. In 2003, the NLK started to build a full text database (*Table 2*.) of university text books used in five universities and Korea National Open University. The Ministry of Information and Communication, as part of the *1st Master Plan for Closing the Digital Divide*, funded approximately US$ 635,000 for this project.

Year	2003	2004	2005	2006	Total
Number of Titles	1,430 (521,121p.)	846 (306,421p.)	709 (269,524p.)	431 (203,960p.)	3,416 (1,301,026)

Table 3. The number of university textbooks and pages digitized each year

This web based service reflects the NLK's particular concern and commitment to integrate the visually impaired into mainstream library services by making its collections more accessible and expandable. Moreover the NLK distributed assistive technology devices including screen readers, screen enlargers, CCTVs, Audio book readers to 194 public libraries in 2003. In addition 307 screen readers were given to individuals with visual impairment who use the NLK's web site and Braille libraries.

Most alternative format materials were selected and produced for adult users mainly which left behind limited choices for visually impaired children. Recently the NLK's interest and awareness on children has increased much more. In 2006 NLK ordered a library to produce children's two-way-books and a library to produce talking books which were widely distributed to a number of public libraries and special schools.

The Impact of ICT on library services for the disabled

As mentioned earlier, thanks to the *Master Plan for Closing the Digital Divide*, broadband high speed network is available nationwide and the distributed number of PC to the disabled are increasing every year. With development of sophisticated assistive technology devices such as screen readers, now totally blind people are able to search Internet and retrieve Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC). The NLK's initiative for web-based services to the visually impaired has raised awareness of information needs for the disabled in mainstream libraries and many libraries have digitized library materials and make them accessible to wider audiences through websites. Consequently visually impaired users are also to gain access to the electronic resources.

In the digital era the most distinguishing feature for production of alternative format materials is the fact that alternative format materials can now be made much more easily and quickly in comparison with the pre-digital era. For example, once original text is converted into digitized format by a scanner or manual typing, the same document can now be used to create different output formats such as Braille, voices, or large prints. This is of great benefit to those who are in increasing demand to offer different formats of alternative format materials to the visually impaired. In addition, multiple copies of the same format can now be done instantly within a short time which used to take several days or even months when it was done manually by some intensive methods. Currently, most talking books are being recorded by human voices but with technological developments and improvements in synthetic speech, there is a possibility of completely automatic production of talking books in the near future.

Unawareness of mainstream libraries to the needs of the disabled

Despite all of the improvements and developments in services for the disabled there are still many in mainstream libraries who are unaware of such services and are not willing to accommodate disabled people. Sadly speaking many in mainstream libraries still view services for disables as a service arising from sympathies for the disadvantaged rather than their equal rights and would only consider serving them after serving the more non-disabled users.

Through institutes or libraries for the visually impaired, people with visual impairment can access Braille and talking books. However for those with other wider disabilities including deaf, mental and physical disabilities face even more serious problems when using libraries. In particular, for those suffering from congenital deafness or deaf at childhood have difficulty in reading and understanding printed materials. These people are used to communicating with each other in sign language and find learning to read texts as learning a foreign language. Since the *Act on Installation of Convenience Facilities for the Disabled* in 1997 every 5 years a survey is taken to check the facilities for the disabled. As a result the facilities are improved gradually but the physically impaired still feel difficult to use their local libraries. Also if we compare the number of alternative format materials for those who find difficult to comprehend printed materials with mainstream library materials we can see how serious the gap is. At present in over 500 nationwide public libraries there are over 17million records with 5million titles in the KOLIS-NET. However in 32 nationwide libraries for the visually impaired there are only 140,000 records of alternative format materials. Sadly speaking most alternative format materials in institutes and specialized libraries are still being supported by private funds from the public and the publishing process highly depends on volunteers. Therefore most alternative format materials are much lower in quantity and quality in comparison with professionally published books of the mainstream. There are also an issue of lack of communication and cooperation among publishing organizations of alternative format materials leading to unnecessary effort and production in multiple copies of the same title. Furthermore, most alternative format materials have been selectively

produced regardless of subject but rather by basing on popularity among adults which limits choices of titles to choose from. There are significant differences in childhood development between disable and able children. For example if we compare how books can influence childhood development, visually impaired children, in particular, have nothing to read except listening to a few talking books while able children can look at a lot of colorful picture books and try to read the texts in the books before school. Most visually impaired children cannot even enjoy reading short stories as they cannot read Braille before they enter schools. Occasionally there are specially designed children's books for visually impaired which have pictures represented by dots following the outline of the picture but there is difficulty for children to understand what image when joining the dots represents.

For children with hearing impairments from birth or developed at childhood, are brought up using sign language and do not learn how to read at early stage of their lives. Therefore it is hard for them to read ordinary children's books. From the start the information gap between disabled children and non-disabled children exists and it grows widely.

Establishment of National Library Support Center for the Disabled (NLSCD)

Given that over two million people with disabilities among forty eight million populations in Korea have been excluded from tax-supported mainstream library services, drastic measures had been taken on a national level.

A new Library Act was proclaimed on October 4th 2006. The Act ordains mainstream libraries should offer services to the IAC in particular the disabled which are created by the rapidly changing of Information technology. To help mainstream libraries to integrate the disabled with the rest of the users, the NLSCD is established. The NLSCD will be a national body to formulate various policies related with library services to the disabled at the mainstream setting. The NLSCD will play a key role in formulating a comprehensive national plan for library and information services for people with disabilities. This would lay down an infrastructural framework for effective and efficient library services for disabled people. The plan should cover broad subjects from practical guidelines and standards for individual libraries to financial solutions.

It is essential to raise awareness of the library services, the information needs and the rights of people with disabilities among library professionals, the general public and the government. The NLSCD can make use of various methods to raise such awareness in library practitioners by in-house training, seminars, workshops, publications, and promotional materials. Furthermore the awareness of the general public can be raised by means of exhibition, fairs, use of media, websites, or even through the word of mouth and so on. The NLSCD could also organize various training programs for librarians covering areas of general difficulties and problems facing disabled people including their information

and reading needs, assistive technology and accessible web sites, alternative format materials, communication modes, disability etiquettes and skills in dealing with disabled clients.

Information services through websites are popular among libraries. To prevent disabled people from being excluded from the services, the body should guide individual libraries to design web sites accessible to disabled viewers as well. To promote accessible web site design to a wider audience the national body should first check the accessibility of existing library web sites, and tackle the common problems which make them inaccessible to disabled people.

To minimize the duplication of efforts and to maximize the availability of resources both in mainstream and other library service providers, the NLSCD should play the role of coordinator to help individual libraries cooperate with one another in resource sharing. As one of its major coordinating efforts, the NLSCD should separate the producers of alternative format materials from distributors. At present, disability institutions and special libraries both produce and distribute alternative format materials to visually impaired people. Therefore the duplication of efforts and undesirable competition has been generated within their very limited resources. On the other hand, the resources of mainstream libraries have not been utilized much by disabled people.

The NLSCD should conduct research and development in various areas related to library services for the disabled, in partnership with business sectors, higher education institutions and research centers. At present, many of assistive IT devices used by disabled people in Korea have been developed by disability institutions and special libraries. Unfortunately, due to high development cost and a small market in assistive technology, few business sectors show their interest in future development. As a result the assistive technology devices do not always have a good quality assurance. Therefore the NLSCD should encourage business sectors to be more involved in developing new IT devices or new alternative format materials, by providing relative funds. The NLSCD should also participate in international research and development projects in the area of library services for disabled people.

Conclusion

People with disabilities should freely be able to use general libraries as the non-disabled do. However, it is almost impossible for the disabled to use general libraries as they have physical, psychological barriers and the inaccessible library materials with difficulties in communications with librarians makes the situation even worse. Thereby the NLSCD was established by the government to take appropriate actions to solve existing disability discrimination and close the *digital divide*. This could also be a preparation for the enactment of the *Disability Discrimination Act* which was passed on 6th March, 2007. When the Act is implemented from April 2008, all general libraries are expected to have gotten over the problems that cause the difficulty in the disabled from using buildings, facilities, library materials, programs and services etc. However, some extreme situations which may be difficult

to deal or interfere with regular work around the library may be excused. Even though an enacting of a new law can be viewed as an issue taken seriously by lawful force it is almost impossible to expect all the libraries to integrate the disabled into mainstream library services. In fact nowadays most non-disabled people, except for those who have disabled family members or relatives, have been brought up without having a chance to really have a contact with the disabled. Hence, the general public having very little knowledge and experiences of disabilities and people with disabilities, integrating the disabled into the mainstream library services can be too early to initiate at this stage. Although basic tasks such as installing a new ramp or designing an accessible website for the disabled is just a phone call away, it is never easy to change fixed concept or prejudice about disabled people the general libraries may have.

It is likely that general libraries, accustomed to offering services to the non-disabled people, are inexperienced and therefore unwilling to receive disabled people as their users. Or even if they do serve disabled people it is likely that they provide services to the disabled from sympathies rather than their equal rights. This issue in particular is what worries the NLSCD the most and it is the most difficult issue that would be solved by the NLSCD.

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