"Downloads by the busloads – the way forward for talking books"
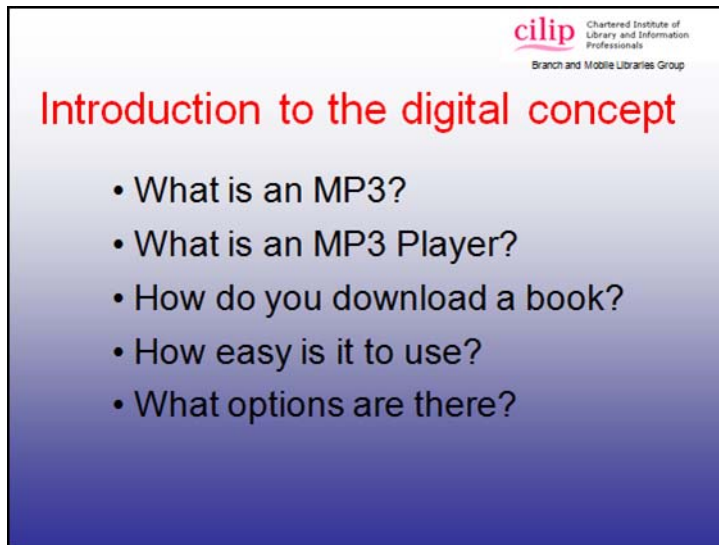
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ABSTRACT

Discusses MP3 downloads and their effect on visually impaired and older people and how libraries can serve older people with recorded sound. The author believes that this is one of the big topics of the next couple of years. He had implemented an outreach project for housebound readers but felt the library could do more. He started a service for older adults that is more than just a book delivery – he brings older people into the library by special bus to choose their own books and to have the whole range of library services available to them. He

is now giving the older and visually impaired users the option to download audiobooks for their MP3 players and, and while the staff perform these downloads, the visitors are free to make use of reference services, archive facilities, etc. So people who are unable to get to the library by themselves and need help with the MP# downloads have both needs met. The cost of the buses is about the same as or a delivery van.

Introduction to digital audio
Introduction to the digital concept

What is an MP3?

An MP3 is a digital audio computer file, compressed to take up much less disk space that an ordinary CD audio track, allowing easy transfer between formats. It is recognised by all modern computer operating systems (Windows, Apple Mac, Linux). Although the file size can vary between different levels of compression, a reasonable benchmark is that 1 minute of audio is around 1 Megabyte .

What is an MP3 Player?

An MP3 player is a portable device, usually around the same size as a mobile phone or smaller. It allows many MP3 files to be stored an played. Most new mobile phones and DVD players also now include MP3 players as part of their standard operating software

How do you download a book?

A digital audio book is almost always in MP3 format, so can be stored online by suppliers, to be downloaded on-demand by consumers. The file is saved to the user's computer hard drive, where it can be listened to directly, or moved to a portable device such as an MP3 player. Once a download has started, it may take some time to download, depending on the size of the file, but can be left unmonitored until it is complete.

How easy is it to use?

Downloading MP3 files and moving them to an MP3 playing device is very straightforward for anyone with a basic grasp of modern computer use (use of internet, office software etc). Once the file is on the portable device, the ease of use is down to the player itself. Some players have small controls and many options, which restrict their market to the proficient user. However, many models are clear, tactile and uncomplicated and could be used by VIPs – especially as the basic commands (play/pause/stop) have the same format as a cassette or CD player.

What does an MP3 look like?

Unlike a CD, an MP3 is not a tangible object so doesn't really look like anything. It is essentially just data, made up of computer code. The MP3 player itself is the tangible part of the equation, and is a small hand-held device about the size of a mobile phone.
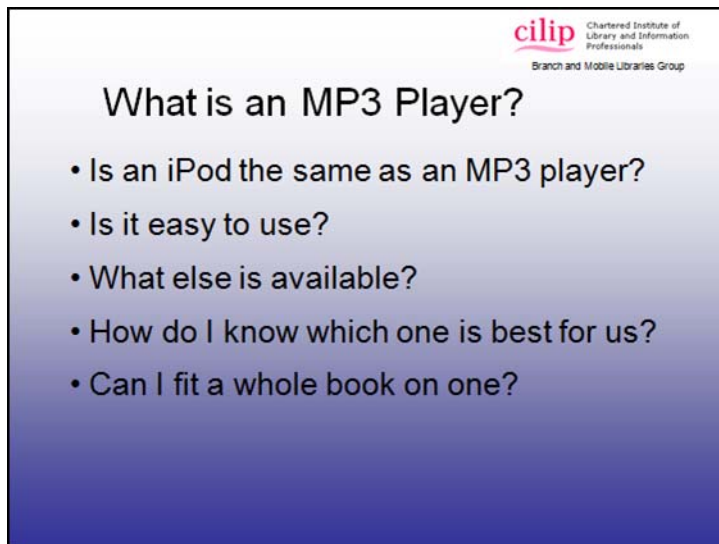
What can MP3 give us that CD can't?

Because MP3 is just data, it is much easier to store than CDs, requiring only computer storage, rather than actual shelf space. Because it can be downloaded it means that an audiobook could be received the day it is ordered, rather than waiting for postal delivery. It is also fairly futureproof, as it can be converted to other formats with ease and can be used again and again, without any deterioration. The easy transferability also means that different branch libraries could share the same central resource and all have access to the same audio books.

Price comparison

        Once you have made the initial outlay on the equipment, the MP3 data is much cheaper than CD as is it not a tangible resource, so does not need to be manufactured, just reproduced. The publishers would make less revenue from the digital format, but admin and production costs would be low enough to ensure a comparable profit margin, particularly as once they have the data stored online, they do not need to manually issue it, the library would collect it themselves, cutting down on labour costs

Size Matters

        MP3 files only need a computer hard disk for storage, not actual shelf space, so vast numbers of audiobooks can be stored on one single computer. The files can be saved to a CD, but take up much less space than normal audio files, meaning that, for example, an audiobook which requires 15 CDs in the normal format, would fit on one CD in MP3 format – it would not then work on a normal CD player, but many devices are now available which will play MP3 CDs, including most DVD players and many modern stereo systems.

What is an MP3 Player?

Is an iPod the same as an MP3 player?

In many respects "iPod" is to "MP3 Player" what "Ford" is to "car". It's a brand name for the Apple MP3 player - all iPods are MP3 players, but not all MP3 players are iPods. Also, as with Ford, the iPod holds a large market share, but is far from being the only option. It is currently unique in the Market however in that it is the only product to have a dedicated, cross-platform software system.

Is it easy to use?

"Does my bum look big in this?" There's no right answer to this question. Some players are very complicated with numerous peripheral functions and small, sensitive controls

which would be difficult for inexperience users to fathom – particularly VIPs. Conversely, many players are very straighforward, with just the basic Play/Pause/Stop/Back/forward controls used on CD and cassette players.

What else is available?

As MP3 and digital audio grows in popularity, new products are appearing all the time, so there is a wide choice available, in addition to alternative formats such as the Daisy Audio player, which uses a variation of the MP3 technology and is specifically designed for VIPs. Big names such as Microsoft and Sony have products on the market, though as with the iPod, these are not designed for or targeted at VIPs and are often complex and expensive. There are also much cheaper and more straightforward options available – many supermarkets now stock smaller MP3 players in their electronics section – some for less than £20 – though the size of storage is usually less than on the more expensive models.

How do I know which one is best for us?

As with most electronic devices, there is no hard and fast rule. The player you choose is dependent on your target audience, your budget and so on. Searching for MP3 players on kelkoo (www.kelkoo.com) or google should give you an idea of prices for individual players. It is also worth speaking to your existing talking book suppliers, to see if they favour any particular make. It is definitely a good idea to have a fairly clear idea of your requirements *before*, shopping around, so you can compare the features of each player against your own objectives.

Can I fit a whole book on one?

Yes – plenty of MP3 players now have upwards of one Gigabyte of memory, which will comfortably fit about 20 hours of audio – enough even for Order of the Phoenix.

Where do I get them?

iTunes is the Apple programme which is needed to put audio files onto an iPod, but it also has an online store with a large selection of audiobooks. iTunes is free software, and can be used as a media player without having an iPod, but most of the MP3 files available have encoded security which allows them to be played only in iTunes, or on an iPod, so cannot be transferred to other brands' MP3 players. Aside from these restrictions, if used with an iPod, the iTunes store is a very straightforward and secure way to acquire talking books

www.daisy.org
The Daisy Consortium offers a number of solutions, including the daisy player. Have a look at the website for full details.
www.audiobooks.org
www.audible.co.uk
Another couple of websites with a large collection of audiobooks available for download

www.prestongrange.org
Preston Grange is a Museum in Scotland, mentioned here not because they offer talking books, but as an example of how digital media can be put to good use for improving public services. The Museum has an Audio Tour, for which they provide MP3 players to visitors when they arrive. They also offer downloads of the tour, so that visitors can put the tour on their own MP3 player prior to arriving at the museum (The site will also soon be hosting a German version of the tour, read by your humble narrator) This idea could also be used for providing tours of libraries for VIPs (and indeed other users) and for providing other information about libraries and public services.

There are quite a number of websites now, which offer downloadable audiobooks, some of which are free for libraries. The sites listed here are a very small selection. Searching in google for "audiobooks" will give you a wealth of sites to consider for the provision of material.

How easy is it for staff to use?

- How well will staff cope with downloads?
- How long does a download take?
- How do we get it to the customer?
- Can we use the same download twice?
- May we use the same download twice?

- Staff should cope easily with a little training
- Depends on download capability but a good library system should only take a few minutes per title
- Many different ways
- Yes
- Depends on contract with supplier.

How easy is it for customers to use?

- Will customers have to download books?
- Is it tactile?
- How big are the controls?
- Does the user have to use headphones?
- How good is the sound?

- They can do or library can
- Some machines are made for Visually Impaired People
- Big enough for most people with poor sight
- Not necessary but can do
- How good is your equipment - equal to any hi-fi equipment

What are our options?
1 Library downloads from supplier's site onto device and posts or delivers to customer
2 Library downloads from publisher's site onto device and posts or delivers to customer
3 Customer downloads from
       - Library site
       - Supplier site
       - Publisher site
4 Supplier downloads and posts to customer

Opportunities
All readers could have the same title
No waiting lists - but no income from reservations!
Library could add messages of its own: what's on, new charges, different delivery times etc.

As all books published are now produced in digital format there is the facility to do any book on demand and doing it in a different language, with synthetic voice software

What are our options 2

- The library brings customers into the library by bus

- They then help the customer download onto their MP3 players

This is my personal idea to get VIPs using MP3 players. Bussing people into the library is a tried and tested scheme which works

Staff can help people more easily in the library than having to go out

Dial-a-read

For those who cannot travel to a library but want to choose their own books we have
Dial-a-Read

I ran the Dial-a read scheme in Barnsley UK for 4 years
It worked well and increased by personal recommendation, the best feedback possible

What is Dial-a-Read

People who want to chose their own books, but are confined to their own home, are taken by Dial-a Ride bus to a nearby Library
There they can chose any book they wish.

They can be helped to download MP3 books

Its more than just changing books
Meet people

What is Dial-a-Read

A chance to get out of the four walls and have a trip out

There are special sessions

A chance to meet new friends

Tea and biscuits

Chance to use library facilities Photocopier, fax

Get out of the house
Join in and contribute to sessions
A little learning
A little chat
A lot of fun

On feasibility issues, make sure it's clear that we are discussing feasibility, not legality. That would be in the hands of the suppliers.

On piracy – make the point that while it is possible to copy from an mp3 player onto a computer, files can be security restricted to only work on a certain number of computers. Cost effective – for a basic MP3 player and basic speakers you would pay less than for a new audiobook. Thereafter, you need buy no further tangible products. If the suppliers were to offer the full package of providing the material and the means with which to play it, they could offer the libraries a one-stop-shop service and also benefit from supplying the hardware. They could also then ensure that the software they provide is compatible with the hardware it will be used on.