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What do Blind People Want from Talking Books?¹

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Abstract

There are two tracks of recorded books: one for the blind (talking books) and one for the general population (audiobooks). There are differences relating to the reading style between these two groups of books. These differences raised questions such as:

- 1. Why are there differences between recorded books for the blind and for the general population?*
- 2. What are the differences between the two tracks of recorded books?*

*In this presentation there will be an attempt to answer these questions based on the literature and on a study of 409 adult's patrons, 369 of whom were readers of talking books in The Central Library for the Blind in Israel. The data were collected by means of telephone interviews. The study focused on the visually impaired preferences regarding talking books. The aspects covered were dramatization, interpretation, changing of voices for representing various characters of the book, narrator's gender, reading speed and the narrator's age of voice. These results raised some thoughts as to policies regarding the recording style of talking books for blind people and led us to the third question: *Is there any justification for having two book recording tracks?**

Over the years, attempts have been made to find reading alternatives for visually impaired people. Technological developments gave a significant push for new initiatives in this area as well as for improving tried and tested old systems.

¹ Special thanks to **The Central Library for the Blind in Israel**, for their support in the funding and the operation of this study.

Throughout recent history, those who could see used to read aloud for the blind. The technology of recording voices allowed for reading aloud in real time into a machine that allows us to listen to the recording whenever we want. The gramophone was invented by Edison in 1878. He thought that it might be good for recording books for the blind, but he didn't see any commercial future for this use (Kozloff, 1995). Fifty years later, the Library of Congress adopted Edison's idea; they started to record books and distribute them to the blind (That All May Read..., 1983). Today we may find those books on cassettes, CD-OM, MP3-CD and on the internet: e-books. (Oder, 2000). Those books will be called talking books in this presentation. Recorded books didn't remain the sole prerogative of the blind and impaired. In the 1970's, private companies discovered the potential in the books recorded for the whole population, and they started to distribute them commercially. Their success was huge, and the number of those books and their readers is growing constantly (Oder, 1998). Those books will be called audiobooks in this presentation. Although it looks as though books for the blind and books for the whole population are the same, they aren't.

This situation of two different recording tracks raises three questions:

Question No. 1 Why there are differences between the recorded books for the blind and for the general population?

The purpose of recording books in each track is different and it caused differences in the end products of each. Audiobooks are produced by commercial companies, which regard audiobooks as an adapted version of the original print book (Annichiarico, 1991; Shokoff, 2001) or as a supplement or enrichment to it (Baird, 2000). The audiobook is one sort of book adaptation among many others such as plays, films, or even operas. Talking books for the visually impaired reader are generally produced by non-profit companies and their purpose is different. They try to reflect, to mirror the book, to be as close as possible to the original. The aim is to simulate the reading experience and to let the reader interpret the author's words in his own way. The late narrator, William Arthur Deacon, said that he had tried to make himself "into a panel of glass through which the reader could see the book as if he held it in his own hands" (West 1995).

Question No. 2: What are the differences between the two tracks of recording books?

Out of the difference in purposes derive other differences.

The Audience

The audience for audiobooks is everyone who chooses to hear a book instead of, or in addition to, reading it. Generally people listen to it, accompanied by some other activity such as driving, engaging in sports, doing chores at home, or before going to sleep ("Growth of... ,1999; Baird, 2000). Around 23% of the American households listened to audiobooks (Audio Publishers Association, 2001).

The audience for talking books are visually impaired people who generally have no other way to read unless they read Braille, and not many people do². Talking books are the

² In UK 3% of the RNLB's patrons read Braille (Out of sight..., 2002), in USA, 4% of the NLB's patrons read Braille (Cylke, 1998) and in Israel, 3.9% read it, according to our study, in the Central Library for the Blind.

major reading format of most of the visually impaired. The RINB (Royal National Institute for the Blind) reported that 80% of the respondents in their study visit the library mainly to borrow talking books (Chartres, 1998). In Israel, according to the current study, the major reading format in The Central Library for the Blind in Israel is also talking books (90%).

Loyalty and similarity to the print book

If audiobooks are perceived as an adaptation, there may be differences between their versions and the original book. And indeed, there are a lot of abridged books. Abridging a book means to cut characters and scenes. Generally the books are cut to around three hours per book which means that one can read a book in a week if he listens half an hour per day. (Annichiarico, 1991). There is a debate related to the issue of “to abridge or not to abridge” (Annichiarico, 1991; Baird, 2000). Now there are some trends towards unabridged versions (Rosenblum, 1999) It seems that the use of MP3-CDs, that allows the packaging of 20 hours or more onto one disc, might increase the number of unabridged books produced. (Oder, 2001).

This question doesn't arise in relationship to talking books. If the purpose is to mirror the book, then there is no place for abridging. Furthermore, the willingness to present the book as it is leads to reading every single word that appears in the book, including the abstract on the cover, acknowledgements, notes and even print mistakes.

The Reading Style

The adaptation of print books to audiobooks dictates a special reading style in which we find dramatization and interpretation. Often the narrators are referred to as performers. We can find a fully voiced narration when one narrator does all the voices that represent the various characters in the story, and we can find a multi-voiced narration when several narrators represent the various characters. Sometimes we might find music and sound effects that create the book's atmosphere. (Annichiarico, 1992, Kozloff, 1995; Baird, 2000)

On the other hand, since the talking books are supposed to transfer the original book as it, there is no place for dramatization, interpretation multi-voices and effects. The narrator will try to transfer the book spirit without interpreting it (West, 1995)³.

Keeping these differences in mind, we wondered whether the audience of talking books is pleased with the reading style of their talking books. The head of the Putman County Library System claims that this question doesn't bother his unimpaired patrons who listen to audiobooks (Annichiarico, 1994), but does it bother visual impaired people? This was one research question among others that was asked in a comprehensive study that was conducted among a sample of 409 adults patrons (age 18+), where 369 (90%) declared that they are readers of talking books. The data were collected by means of telephone interviews among the patrons of The Central Library for the Blind in Israel. The research question was whether there is a preference in reading talking books in regard to dramatization,

³ We can find some commercial companies, such as “Books on Tape”, that have similar recording policy 1 (Annichiarico, 1994)

interpretation, changing of voices for representing various characters, the narrators' gender, and the narrators' age of voice.

Two previous studies that dealt with some of those topics were found. One was conducted by Murry, Huynh and Williamson (1995), among the RVIB (Royal Victorians Institute for the Blind) customers in Australia, and the other was conducted by Chartres (1998) among the RNIB customers in England. Their results will be presented in comparison with the current study.

The results of our study show that about one third (36%) of the participants confirmed their preference for the current tendency of objective reading style, and about half (47%) preferred reading without changing of voice. The interesting findings are that almost 30% preferred either theatrical reading or interpreted reading (see Table 1.) and 30% preferred changing of voice. This tendency is stronger in UK, where about 80 % would like the narrators to change their voices (See Table 2). Does it have anything to do with their theatre culture?

Table 1: Preferred Reading Style

N=(367)	
Objective reading	36% (131)
Theatrical reading	22% (79)
Interpreted reading	6% (22)
No preference	37% (135)

Table 2: Changing Voice

	Israel N=368	UK N=720
Without changing voice	47% (173)	
Changing voice	30% (112)	79% (624)
No preference	23% (83)	

Another question relates to the narrator's gender. This variable was found to be less important than the variables mentioned above. But still, we found 20% who have a preference for female narrators, not as in the other studies where male narrators were preferred (see Table 3).

Table 3: Narrator's gender

	Israel N= 369	UK N= 720	Australia N= 148
Female narrator	13% (48)	7% (50)	5% (7)
Male narrator	6% (22)	26% (187)	14% (21)
No preference	81% (299)	67% (483)	81% (120)

Two other preferences that were investigated are the voice age where there is a slight preference for young voices (17%), and the reading speed where there is a strong preference for moderate speed (64%).

These findings show that the mainstream policy doesn't necessarily fit the preference of 20% to 30% of our subjects. The differences found between nations might indicate that each nation has its own characteristics. This strengthens the contention that we must not

automatically generalize from one population to another, but it does raise a question that should bother everyone:

Question No. 3: Is there any justification for having two different book recording tracks?

How do we treat that 20-30% whose preferred reading styles don't fit the talking books recording policy? They are the minority, but do they have any reading alternatives? Our duty in a democratic society is to give all citizens access to everything that is published, taking into consideration our budget and technological limits. And if we are the only reading source available to this minority, how much more are we obligated to meet the preferences of each group? Perhaps commercial audiobooks might be a solution for them? As reported at the Loughborough University study, 20% of the visually impaired bought commercial audiobooks (Out of..., 2002). But is it a satisfactory solution?

Dealing with this question, we have to remember that although the number of audiobooks titles is growing numerously, not all books are available in this format. Our talking books collections are bigger and much more extensive. Or maybe we have to change the talking books recording policy and record in two styles?

I'll leave these questions open and let us discuss them.

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