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A serendipitous meeting of minds.

The background to the eBook accessibility audit (UK Higher Education)

Ben Watson, University of Kent.

Introduction

Obtaining materials in alternative formats can be a costly¹ and extremely time-consuming exercise. Where an electronically accessible resource cannot be found, a catalogue of interventions is precipitated in order to deliver an alternative format (see Figure 1). The easiest way to resolve this would be to depend on existing mainstream methods of delivery (e.g. standard commercial eBook platform) to offer inclusive access to all of our users at once. Sadly, there are currently no guarantees that the eBook platforms we subscribe to deliver a consistent standard of accessibility and even where such features exist they are not always well promoted.

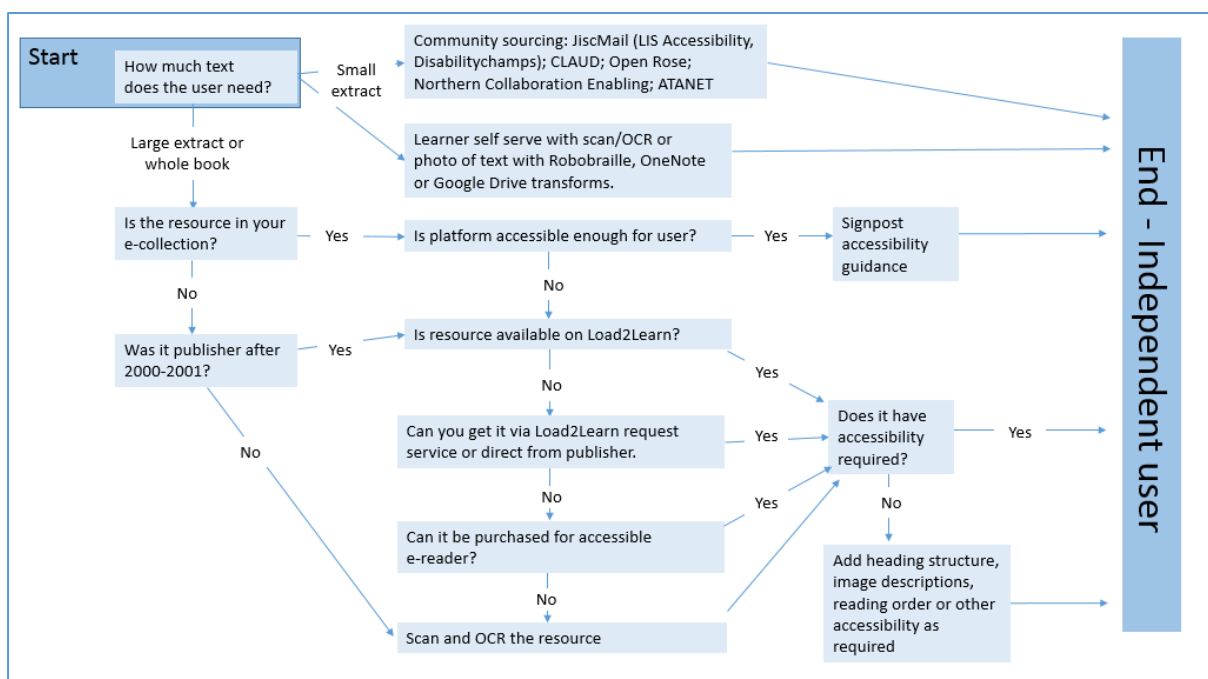


Figure 1 Flow diagram showing some recommended alternative format workflows. From Alistair McNaught, Jisc.

The imperative to ensure mainstream accessible approaches to eBook delivery is reinforced by the changes to the way in which the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) is to be funded for 2016/2017. The changes place a great deal of extra responsibility for meeting the needs of students with disabilities onto institutions directly (the view being that universities should absorb the cost of standard support for disabled students and further develop inclusive approaches to support for learning and teaching).

¹ A breakdown of the costs of obtaining resource in alternative formats has been published by Andy McMahon at the University of Dundee e.g. cost for manual scanning = £0.96 per page.

The eBook accessibility audit, which launched in August 2016 (a joint project of UK Higher Education Institution (HEI) disability and library services), supports a mainstreaming approach by seeking to introduce a benchmark for accessibility in eBook platforms. This will allow us, for the first time, to measure basic accessibility functionality and guide platform improvement towards the goal of implementing a meaningful minimum standard of accessibility for mainstream platforms.

Background

At the University of Kent, we had been researching accessible information processes and our enquiries led us to undertake a trip to Leeds Beckett University to understand alternative formats processes from Learning Support Officer (Disability and Dyslexia), Susan Smith. As we discussed alternative formats processes and frustrations around the lack of a quality assurance accessibility framework for eBook platforms, we hatched a plan to research and develop a basic standard to measure accessibility through the promotion of a simple and reliable benchmark.

The main vehicle for developing the audit and testing processes was the newly formed LIS-Accessibility mailing list (a community stakeholder group with some 200 members representing library and disability staff from most UK universities). The LIS-Accessibility mailing list represented a highly relevant audience to crowdsource a sector response to provide publishers with a clear usable dataset to demonstrate the need for development – a need that was consolidated by regional purchasing consortia involvement.

The recruitment of the team² was very serendipitous, with the group ultimately pulled together through Alistair McNaught's extensive knowledge of existing networks and projects facilitating timely communications. Fundamental to it all was a common vision:

To make eBooks more reliably accessible to all and develop a common measure to describe this accessibility.

Further research, forum posts, and many, many, many Skype calls later we had evolved an action plan, strategy, set of questions (the audit itself), help documents, administrative processes, publicity and communications. We also acquired invaluable feedback, critique and support from the Publisher's Association and a range of publishers.

The process

The process we identified was that university volunteers and publishers would complete a questionnaire about the accessibility of a selection of eBook platforms focussing on things that directly impacted on user experience and could be checked easily by non-specialists (such as text display, navigation, text to speech, image description, accessibility guidance). The audit considered only eBooks supplied to

² Vicky Dobson (Leeds Beckett), Gopal Dutta (Manchester Metropolitan University), Alistair McNaught (Jisc), Ruth Macmullen (York St Johns), Susan Smith (Leeds Beckett), Ben Watson (University of Kent).

the education sector in the United Kingdom (rather than books for mainstream commercial consumption e.g. popular fiction).

We aimed to have each of the major platforms/suppliers audited by two HEIs and the supplier themselves. The involvement of the supplier was critical because they may have little control over the delivery environment. Publishers assessing their own products gave them a vested interest in the process as well as the opportunity to identify differences between the inherent accessibility provided and the delivered accessibility experienced by the reader. It is impossible to resolve the weak links in the supply system (some of which may exist in the HEI themselves – for example out of date browsers) without identifying first where they occur.

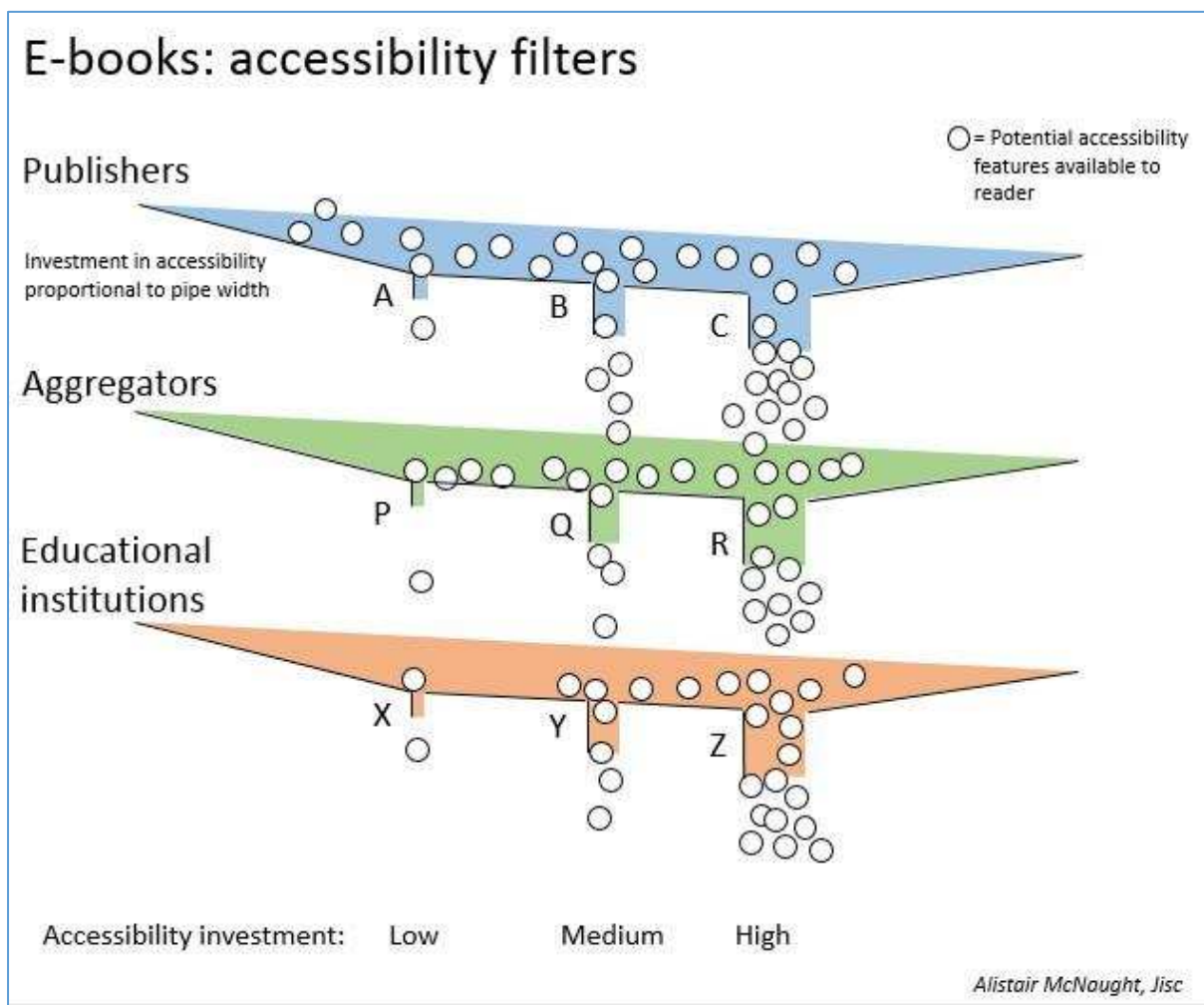


Figure 2 Visualising the different areas of the supply train where accessibility features can be lost. We felt it was important for suppliers to do their own audit as a triangulation to help them contextualise these risks.

The key thing the audit was trying to achieve was to make the accessibility features of any platform as transparent as possible. We were already aware of the high commitment to accessibility from many publishers but - from the library and end-user perspective – there were two areas of variability:

- The accessibility features provided vary - both across delivery platforms and across the different publisher titles within a delivery platform.

- Even when accessibility is well supported, the accessibility information can be hard to find.

We hoped that the results would help publishers who had already invested in accessibility to gain benefits in the marketplace and those who hadn't to make a business case for doing so.

We anticipated four positive opportunities for universities and publishers:

- the accessibility investment publishers have made will be publicly and objectively available to potential purchasers/licensees to aid procurement decision making.
- any discrepancies between features provided and the perception of users will become clear. This can help to promote accessibility features more effectively.
- any undermining of accessibility investments by other parts of the supply chain (e.g. the resource discovery layer or a third-party interface) would be identified.
- highlight areas for future accessibility investment.

We felt that the audit is a great opportunity for Higher Education as a sector to specify what accessibility means to us and standardise thinking in this area in order to set some clear targets for publishers. To support this, we are also developing a strategy network (constituted by university library directors) to maximize the potential to influence procurement decision-making and place accessibility at the heart of policies in a way that will have real teeth in the sector.

What happens next?

EA Draffan and Abi James of the University of Southampton have kindly offered their services to help with interpreting the project data. It will then be published centrally and presented in such a way that it can be interrogated according to the needs of the widest possible range of learners.

The project is not intended to be a stick to beat publishers with but a joint venture to achieve what is a vested interest for all stakeholders: as many readers as possible getting as good an experience as possible. It is an opportunity to focus on accessibility priorities, using our users' experiences as a catalyst, to inform platform development and sector procurement decision-making.

Huw Alexander from Sage commented that the project represents an 'exciting opportunity to highlight the significant accessibility investments the industry has made over recent years. Considerable strides have been made to improve and support accessibility throughout the sector and this valuable initiative will allow us to continue to learn and develop together'.

References

A. McMahon (2016) Alternate Formats Annual Report 2015/16. [Online]. Available at: <http://atanet.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/University-of-Dundee-Alternate-Formats-Annual-Report.pdf> (Accessed: 20/08/2016).