



Ebook accessibility gains momentum

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Opinion - Publishing Tuesday, 13th October 2020

Martin Klopstock and Arthur Thompson believe now is the right time for publishers to rethink their approach to ebook accessibility



As publishers, we have a moral and commercial obligation to make our authors' content accessible to the widest possible readership. But currently, less than 10% of all publications are accessible to people who are blind or have low vision. There are over one billion people in the world with some form of disability, and the number will only increase as populations grow older (the number of people over the age of 60 is expected to double by 2050). This population not only has a right to the same privileges as any sighted reader but also has significant purchasing power (\$220 billion in the US) - so what can publishers do to serve them better? The answer: improve ebook accessibility.

Now is a great time for publishers to rethink their approach to accessibility. Legal requirements, technological advances, accreditation schemes and growing interest from the supply chain have pushed accessibility up the agenda and made it possible to make significant change.

Marrakesh Treaty

The provision of accessible content for users with disabilities has become a legal obligation in many countries. The Marrakesh Treaty, signed into EU law in 2019, makes governmental, further education and higher education institutions more accountable to their stakeholders. They are now legally required to facilitate access to published works for persons who are blind, visually impaired or otherwise print disabled, and therefore require the co-operation of publishers, who can make their lives easier by supplying highly accessible ebooks that do not require any remediation before they are passed on. The commercial supply chain is incentivised to ensure that all published content is accessible to all readers globally.

Publishing technology is at an inflection point - it has moved away from proprietary and incompatible applications and systems towards stable open standards maintained by the W3C. One result of this is that EPUB, the most accessible ebook format, is now aligned with the same technologies that power the web, allowing better interoperability, accessibility, security and stability. As the web develops, so will EPUB. Accessible ebooks no longer have to be one-offs, specially created products for the print-impaired community. We can create one ebook that is suitable for every reader.



How does one create an accessible EPUB? The specifications for building such an ebook have become much clearer and easier to comply with over the last few years. Well-defined standards, such as EPUB Accessibility 1.0, WCAG 2.1 and WAI-ARIA 1.1, provide guidance on how to semantically describe and format content accessibly so that EPUBs work with assistive technologies, such as screen readers, and are transformable and usable for all readers.

Adapting workflows

Though the future looks bright, it would be wrong to say the journey towards accessibility is easy. There are various ways a publisher can adopt accessibility features, but by far the best solution is to develop a born-accessible workflow, which involves embedding accessibility into content at the beginning of the production process. This is what we did at Kogan Page. Development took three years and significant buy-in from the business, but as a result we are now able largely to automate the creation of accessible EPUBs, at a faster pace and lower cost.

For our efforts, Kogan Page recently received Benetech's Global Certified Accessible (GCA) accreditation. This is the gold standard for accessible publications, and certifies that a publisher has demonstrated conformance to accessibility guidelines set forth by the Global Certified Accessible Consortium. This is important. It means that publishers are now able to prove and showcase their accessibility credentials. They are also permitted to include their titles in accessible-only ebook stores, exposing their content to people (such as academic librarians and disability support services) looking specifically for accessible publications.

In general, publishers can take large strides by producing properly structured EPUB files, but some factors take care, time and upfront investment. Image descriptions are a good example. These are the single biggest issue for all publishers, because they require training to get right, are hard to produce at scale and can vary significantly in cost. MathML and tables will also need attention. It is important to note that EPUB accessibility is not a binary. Developments do not have to be achieved all at once.

Growing interest

Publishers are not alone in their efforts to do the right thing. Accessibility continues to see growing exposure and interest from readers, book fairs, industry awards and platform providers. Vendors have upskilled and increased their expertise on accessible ebook production. E-reading platforms, such as VitalSource Bookshelf, are beginning to display the accessibility metadata provided by publishers to their users - information signposting whether an ebook includes captions, alt text and long descriptions, page numbers, a sensible reading order and an index, as well as providing a plain-language summary of the file's accessibility. This is extremely useful to people who want to know how a particular ebook will behave on a certain platform before making a purchase.



Awards have also played a part in motivating the supply chain to improved levels of accessibility. The annual ABC International Excellence Award for Accessible Publishing and the DAISY Award for Accessibility are two key industry initiatives. This year, Kogan Page received the IPG Digital Publishing Award specifically for its Accessible Ebook Programme. This highlights the importance attached to accessibility by the publishing community.

As we develop, it is vital that publishers, vendors and platforms communicate with each other and with readers. We need to be open about the various levels of accessibility to which we work. Accessibility statements are extremely valuable to librarians and other interested parties, who want to know what level of accessibility you have already achieved or are working towards. Going forward, academic acquisitions are likely to be driven in part by accessibility concerns. An ebook may take many paths - through online stores, platforms, devices, apps, VLEs



and assistive technologies - before reaching a reader. Readers need to know whom to contact if the ebook does not meet their needs. Helpfully, there is a verification service (ASPIRE) that provides best practice for writing accessibility statements.

As an industry, we have moved beyond the desire to do the right thing. The growing social, business and legislative incentives combined with the wealth of reliable guidance and stable standards have turned questions about accessibility from why to when. Dip your toes in now: the water's warm.

Photos: Arthur Thompson (*left*) and Martin Klopstock

Martin Klopstock, operations director, and Arthur Thompson, content solutions manager, lead the Accessible Ebook Programme at independent book publisher Kogan Page.

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