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The Right to Read, the Marrakesh Treaty, and People with Intellectual Disabilities

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ABSTRACT:

The right to read can be realized for people with intellectual disabilities when we achieve the technical ability to transform texts into plain language formats and when we can agree on intellectual property rights for texts that are so transformed. We need to create plain language standards. Many of the out-of-school children and non-reading persons in the world have intellectual or learning disabilities. They need access to humane letters as well as important documents in order to participate fully in their personal and political lives. Plain language can benefit everyone.

Keywords: Intellectual disability, right to read, out of school, freedom to read

The Right to Read, the Marrakesh Treaty, and People with Intellectual Disabilities

I am grateful to be invited to speak about the right to read in Alexandria, where the intertwining histories of various books and various peoples have had such an impact on world history. In my country, librarians have played a major role in protecting the right to read since 1953 when they issued the Freedom To Read Statement in response to political efforts

to restrict access to ideas after WWII.¹ We consider reading fundamental to democracy and civil society and, as Robert Maynard Hutchins taught, books are fundamental to education and to culture itself. Great books comprise the great conversation that is our shared human existence.

Many other nations and peoples join us in this great conversation, and people consider reading fundamental to their humanity, their culture, and their faith. Now, to be citizens of the world, we are all People of the Book – even though the Book has become more multifaceted, more various, faster moving, and more free-flowing than was ever imagined by the great minds who toiled here. Perhaps the blind poet Borges imagined it, thinking colorfully in Geneva or Buenos Aires. Aristotle, Caesar, the great Sultans, or Maimonides never did. No library contains it. All of the clouds in the heavens do not contain it.

The WIPO, through the Marrakesh Treaty, has brought tremendous hope that we might eradicate the book famine that blind and print disabled people experience around the world. Some advocates, proud of their progress, even say it is important to support Marrakesh because it supports the right to read for everyone.

It is commonplace, however, when discussing the right to read, to limit the reference to people who are blind, visually impaired, and otherwise print disabled.

So the right to read has been supported for not quite everyone.

People with intellectual and learning disabilities may still need formats other than the accessible digital formats that now can be shared across borders under Marrakesh and read in refreshable Braille or listened to in audio without the necessity of seeing or turning pages.

Worldwide, there are more than 261 million children, adolescents and youth out of school (UNESCO-UIS, 2018)². Most estimates say many of them have intellectual or learning disabilities – some estimates say half. Even if they do attend school, many people with intellectual disabilities are not taught to read.

There is a technical problem, and a policy problem. People with intellectual disabilities tell us they need anything they read to be presented in plain language. Plain language, unlike Braille or audio, is not usually seen as an accessible version of the work itself –it is seen as a fundamental alteration of the work for which the author or publisher holds intellectual property rights. So a plain language version of the work, even if it could be created, could not fairly be represented as the work.

Furthermore, in 2019, the state of the world is that there are not clear standards for what is plain language. Inclusion International, the global advocacy organization for people with intellectual and related disabilities and their families, uses the following definition and standards to describe Plain Language:

¹ "The Freedom to Read Statement", American Library Association, July 26, 2006.
<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/freedomreadstatement>

²UNESCO Statistics Database;
http://data.uis.unesco.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=EDULIT_DS&popupcustomise=true&lang=en#

Plain language is a way of writing information to be accessible to people with an intellectual disability. Plain language is information that is written in a short and clear way. Plain language information is easy to read and easy to understand. Plain language information is helpful for lots of people, including people with an intellectual disability. A good plain language document works for everyone.

Plain language information:

- Is clear
- Is short
- Is easy to understand
- Uses everyday language
- Is spaced out
- Uses a large and easy to read font
- Does not use jargon like acronyms
- Explains complicated words
- Uses short sentences with one idea per sentence
- Uses bullet points to separate information
- Is separated into topics with clear headings or illustrations
- Arranges each topic is on a new page
- Should not be a ‘translation’ off a complicated document
- Should cover the key ideas
- Should allow the reader to find more information easily

You can see the difficulty of translating the modern novel, or Shakespeare, or reports of progress in averting climate disaster or even the proceedings of the UN into plain language that meets our standards.

We are certain of one thing: plain language is not about “dumbing down” the ideas in literature and important documents.

We have all heard of the curb-cut effect. When accessibility improvements are made, such as curb cuts at street corners, they benefit many people other than the wheelchair users originally intended to benefit. Mothers with baby strollers, people who are blind, delivery people with carts, people with rolling suitcases, and many others find life easier when there are curb cuts.

Likewise, in our world of constant information, plain language can benefit many people other than those who have intellectual disabilities. For example, when the CRPD was first made available in printed form at the UN, there were stacks of the document as negotiated next to stacks of the plain language version. The plain language version supply was the first to be depleted.

Historically, the emblem literature that was popular in Western Europe in the early Renaissance included an illustration, a simple title, and a poem or song to introduce complex and serious ideas about morality and religion to a people who were largely illiterate. Shakespeare even made use of emblems. So the idea of combining pictures and plain language words with clear titles to convey important ideas is not so new after all.

We can imagine how the transformation of important documents and books into plain language would benefit people with intellectual disabilities and many others.

Another example of how libraries might serve people with intellectual disabilities is the series “Books Beyond Words,” published in the UK. Subject matter experts in partnership with advisors who have intellectual disabilities develop the illustrated books. The books contain no words. The series is intended for people who don’t read at all or who become anxious when confronted with words. It covers topics that are important for people with intellectual disabilities such as health management or legal rights, and topics that are important to people with intellectual disabilities, such as how to join a theater group, how to manage a relationship, or how to understand a death in the family.

In the UK, the books are used to form “Book Clubs” for non-readers in libraries to afford people with significant intellectual disabilities an opportunity to talk with others about these key topics. The books are online in e-book form at [\[https://booksbeyondwords.co.uk/ebooks\]](https://booksbeyondwords.co.uk/ebooks).

In conclusion, we in the intellectual disability world are grateful for the advances in reading that the Marrakesh treaty makes available, often for the first time. We are grateful for the trailblazing leadership of the blind and low vision community and for the hard-working wizards who built the standards and the technology. We are grateful to the negotiators of the treaty.

We know that we bring different and new technical challenges. I spoke with Google leadership who told me AI might be useful if we could provide a million texts with their plain language translations. We don’t have that. I hope they and others who invent the future are intrigued and not put off by how difficult the task will be. I hope they can make AI more I.

We look forward to a time when people with intellectual disabilities will be supported equally so that they, too, may be People of the Book.