

Watching movies through listening at any place in any time- a special event for visually impaired people

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Abstract:

Taipei Public Library Qiming Branch offers library services different to other branches which are specially for visually impaired people. As you know, visually impaired people have difficulty in reading so they rely on listening and touching to live and learn. Qiming Branch is devoted to not only providing braille books, audio books, e-books and large-print books but also meticulously designing a variety of activities to encourage the visually impaired to participate, such as a reading club, exhibition of touching art, and “watching” movies.

It is not that kind of movie watching that uses the eyes. The program “Watching Movies Through Listening” intends to give the visually impaired the same opportunity to watch and learn from videos.

“Watching Movies Through Listening” is an entertaining activity. We hope it can share joy and be fulfilling. Moreover, it’s a cultural activity. By participating, the visually impaired can broaden their horizons and gain much food for thought; and it’s also a social activity. We encourage the visually impaired to come out of their homes to attend.

The event is guided by a professional storyteller and volunteer team. They orally describe the characters, scenes, sounds and plots of the movie. Through the interactive discussions, participants are able to deeply understand the implications and what the movie director wants to express.

However, still many visually impaired people can’t come to library in person. In order to let the ones who can’t conveniently participate, audio recording is available. We upload the mp3 files on to the Taipei Public Library website and visually impaired people can listen online or download the record by inputting the ID and password. It supports computer, mobile phones and tablets and they can listen at any place they want, and it’s all free, mainly funded by the city government.

Started in 2003, the program has been executed for well over 10 years. We upload 6 to 8 movies on average every month and have had 540 movies so far. 31,233 people have used this service in total. This thoughtful service helps to open another door for visually impaired people and lets them experience the colors of life. We have also built up a database of oral movies that can be shared with other institutions providing services for the visually impaired and wish to bridge the information access gap.

Keywords: Special Library for the Visually Impaired; Oral Dictation of Movies.

1. Foreword

Taipei Public Library Qiming Branch (henceforth referred to as Qiming Branch) is located in Taipei City, Taiwan, and is one of the numerous services provided by Taipei Public Library. Taipei Public Library currently has one main library, along with 56 branch libraries which are dotted across all administrative districts within Taipei, serving a wide range of city residents. As times have changed and information technology has become more pervasive, a network has been established in order to provide a more convenient service, and smart self-service borrowing system has been created. There are currently seven smart libraries and nine totally self-service borrowing stations in operation.

Recently, in order to enable distance readers to also make use of library services, we have purchased digital resources, expanded our service network, as well as improved the usefulness of our resources. We have also begun to provide a remote service, and even though readers from external towns and cities may not necessarily be in possession of a real library card, they are still able to make use of an online service, and can use the database and e-books purchased by the library through a virtual library card which is applied easily online. This is a milestone in our digitalization plan.

As well as conventional readers, Taipei Public Library is always keen to take care of the vulnerable and disadvantaged, and, across all key services, we are working proactively to remove barriers to access. Examples of this are installation of inclined paths, elevators or barrier-free toilets; and at certain sites special facilities or collections have been installed. As an example, at the Datong branch of Taipei Public Library which neighbours the Taipei School for the Hearing Impaired, in order to help deaf and mute schoolchildren make use of reading resources, therefore a special collection of material for these users has been established. This includes films which use sign language or other related study resources. At the same time, Taipei Public Library carries out important activities or educational events, all of which seek to hire sign language interpreters to help those participants with hearing difficulties have the same experience as others so that they are able to communicate, learn and study un-impered.

As well as those who have hearing difficulties, support for those with visual impairments is also a key tenet of Taipei Public Library, and this article discusses the ways in which Qiming Branch has worked to provide a specialized library service for those with visual impairments.

2. A Brief Introduction to the Qiming Branch

The Qiming Branch of Taipei Public Library is a standalone building with four floors above ground level and one below, and it was formerly the Taipei Qiming Municipal High School. After the school moved, the building was turned into the Qiming Branch of Taipei Public Library. A number of services are offered, many of which take those with visual impairments as their audience as it seeks to become a special public library. Even though it, of course, opens to normal readers who come to read and enjoy, all resources and service items are arranged in a way which aids those with visual impairment.

As well as reading services, Qiming Branch has also given serious consideration to the reading speed and challenges of those with visual impairments. Adjustments have been made to the amount of time for which borrowing is allowed, and special reading regulations have

been established such that visual impairment material such as print-braille books, braille books and audiobooks are all available to be borrowed for 60 days, with a total of 30 books or items being allowed to be checked out at any time. Except audio and visual materials, other borrowed materials can be renewed once for another 60 days.

In thinking about the inconveniences faced by visually impaired users, we are aware that they may often require some help and assistance. Services provided by Qiming Branch are not only limited to Taipei City but in fact may be made use of by visually impaired users across Taiwan. All year round co-operation with Chunghwa Post Company means that blind users are provided with a mail service. Those who are visually impaired are able to leave a message via phone, email, or the website in order to apply for resources, and after the library has received an application for books to be borrowed remotely, it is able to provide these resources for the visually impaired by post. Once they have finished reading, visually impaired users are then able to return the books back through the post office. This service is currently free of charge and 2,266 books and items are sent out on average on a yearly basis.

When it comes to acquisition of resources, Qiming Branch has, over the past several years, committed funds so that as well as purchasing externally they are also able to exchange and tap into collections held by external groups. However, most of the collections for the visually impaired in the libraries have been reproduced by Qiming Branch. Under Article 53 of the Copyright Law, which outlines safeguards and protections, organizations are in a position to interpret and translate to braille characters, to digitally convert, as well as orally recount images or other forms of media for publication under the requirement of fair use and not-for-profit.

Qiming Branch has made copies of visual impairment materials in three key forms: print-braille books, braille books, and audio books.

The definition of a print-braille book is a book where braille characters are layered on the top of the book's text; and this kind of format is particularly applicable in books where there is less written text such as in picture books or in drawing books. At the moment, Qiming Branch has 5,641 such books in total held in a print-braille book store room and most of them are picture books, providing visually impaired individuals along with families or teachers one space where there are able to read together. This helps to facilitate shared or group reading.

Books making use of braille characters are, as the name implies, books which take text and reproduce it in braille format. The process for producing braille books is initiated by library staff selecting which books to convert into braille format; and each book must be converted by hand, with the text files being converted into braille characters. Once the content and format has been proofread, only then are they ready to be put on shelf. Because the Chinese language contains many characters which can sound similar, therefore it even more necessary to make use of a skilled proof-reader who is able to verify the content. The production of braille books relies on a great deal on manpower; as well as making use of visually impaired proof-readers, it is also necessary to rely on a great number of volunteers to comment on the content. The Qiming Branch at the present time publishes at least 200 braille works on a yearly basis, and at the moment there are 11,862 braille works in the collections.

Audiobooks are created when characters are converted into audio files, and at the moment it is the most frequently used method for reproducing resources for visually impaired individuals. At the Qiming Branch, audiobooks are recorded through manual voice

work, rather than making use of a machine to create audio files. At regular time periods, the library recruits a volunteer team who then go through specialized recording training and exams. Once passing through this, they are then able to become sound recording volunteers. Volunteers come to the library to record sound and audiobooks at fixed times; on a yearly basis at least 400 works are created. Currently, Qiming Branch has 31,641 items. The theme of the audiobooks ranges from art and culture through to design and economic affairs.

Qiming Branch is the leading library in Taiwan when it comes to making use of information technology to provide electronic resources for the visual impaired. In setting up a specialized “e-library for the visually impaired”, we have uploaded braille books, audiobooks, and other recorded media and information. Once visually impaired readers pass through an authentication process, they are allowed to download these resources for use. Our “e-Library for the Visually Impaired” also provides a non-instantaneous reader service; users are able to leave a message on the message board to request books to borrow or to provide ideas. After these have been received by the library, they are then processed and a reply is issued within 24 hours. For the past few years, Qiming Branch has also systematically provided barrier-free e-resources and eBooks on its website, and this has received a positive evaluation from visually impaired readers.

In seeking to provide special and personal services to those who are visually impaired, we have also established two other unique activities: a newspaper reading and life activities hotline.

Qiming Branch provides newspaper reading for free, and once visually impaired users have called the hotline, they are then given the opportunity to select which area of content they are interested in. Library volunteers are then responsible for reading to visually impaired individuals. Each time a user calls, they are allocated 20 minutes. According to statistics from previous years, the most requested content by visually impaired users is related to the stock market and fund prices, investment information, and sports and exercise reports.

With regards to the pay-for-use hotline for hearing about life activities, once users have called up the service, they are then presented with options that they can choose, each of which gives a brief description. The information provided relates to library services, promotional events, art and culture news and information, and welfare provided for those who are visually impaired.

In library outreach programs, Qiming Branch has held many activities which have been warmly received by the visually impaired. For example, a blind study group is held on the second and fourth Saturday mornings of each month. The study groups brings together those with standard reading abilities and those who are visually impaired, and has them read a good book together. They are then be able to talk about it, reflect upon it, and debate its merits. This style of study group has won recognition from Taipei city as a model study group.

In addition, thought-provoking activities have been held for fully-sighted individuals to experience what it is like to be visually impaired, where visually impaired individuals guide those with perfect sight to understand what it is like to not have perfect vision. They also help to provide advice and tips on how to make use of the white canes which are used to lead the blind, on the theory behind braille, and on the process by which audiobooks are recorded. This also becomes a good opportunity to educate those with normal sight how they might

best be able to interact with and provide assistance to those with visual impairments. This activity is held at a fixed time twice every month, and registration is required.

Recently, when it comes to innovation within the library, many workshops have been held in which the visually impaired are invited to use their hands and have tactile experience. For example, in one course a fragrance therapy expert explained the theory behind fragrance therapy and its usefulness. In addition, courses are arranged in areas which relate to problems which visually impaired individuals come across in life and work.

In Qiming Branch, many activities are promoted, but the most famous of these are the “Watching Movies through Listening.” A more detailed introduction on this is below.

3. An Introduction to “Watching Movies Through Listening”

Film appreciation has been enjoyed by a large number of library users across the years. However, there is a barrier to enjoying this kind of event for those who are visually impaired, and even though they might be able to listen to the film content, when it comes to the characters within the film, and their movements, interactions with one another, or looks, this is something which conventionally they would have no way of knowing. Conscious of this fact, from 2004 onwards Qiming Branch has had in place the “Watching Movies Through Listening” which invites director Huang Ying-xiong as speaker. For a long time, Huang Ying-xiong has trained a team to provide oral dictations for films, and in fact he has reaped the fruits of his efforts in regions across Taiwan.

The oral dictation of movies is a kind of descriptive video service, and as part of this process films are broadcast. Whilst dialogue is taking place, it provides narrated descriptions of the key visual elements of a television program, and inserted into the program during pauses in the regular dialogue (Cronin & King, 1990).

In other words, where there are points in the movie that do not have any textual explanation or dialogic exposition, main points will be indicated, the goal of which is to allow those who are visually impaired to enjoy the movie and be able to understand all of the key details which are normally interpreted through vision.

The descriptive video service can enrich experiences for people in exhibits, museums, theater-goers, folks watching television or at the movies (Synder, 2005). Indeed, it is possible to discover descriptive video service in many sites which conventionally imply visual sighting as a prerequisite for enjoyment.

Likewise, libraries are also spaces which rely on sight, and regardless of whether this is in reading books or enjoying film watching, those who have visual impairments will find that their ability to consume information is less than those with perfect vision. That is why that, under the premise of fair use and not for profit, we provide ways in which image content may be consumed through oral dictation, such as through audiobooks and through oral dictation of movies.

The descriptive video service began in 1964 when visually impaired individual Chet Avery suggested providing descriptive video service on films for people who were blind and he subsequently encouraged blind consumer organizations to apply for support (Synder, 2005). 53 years later, such a technique has already gained wide recognition, and, in fact, has

caused normally sighted people to pay attention to the requirements of those who have visual impairments. Taking the content from movies, digesting how this content is expressed, and then passing on this meaning sits at the core of what oral dictation of movies is about (Liu Zhi-qing, 2015). At Qiming Branch's "Watching Movies through Listening" events, professional describers are responsible for expressing the key visual elements of a film through speech.

"Watching Movies through Listening" requires special describers who have received screenwriting training and who, through the way in which they recount orally, are able to present key content from the movies. The describer must have a deep level of understanding of the film, and apart from knowing when to provide a voice-over or aside and when to remain silent, they must also have a good understanding of the role of the characters, dialogue, small movements and interactions, as well as looks and expressions. All of this ensures that they are able to give a good explanation of any scene so that the visually impaired audience may understand what is going on. From the moment that the film is chosen, the describer must participate throughout.

The duration of the activity is normally three hours, and before the film is broadcast a guide will first describe in general the content of the film to be covered in that day's film. They will also provide assistance to the visually impaired in providing a basic explanation of what is going to take place. Once the film begins transmission, the describer will, at the correct moment, interrupt the film to describe any scene which is not expressed through characters, ensuring that there is good understanding at all stages. Once the film broadcast has come to an end, the describer will once again guide participants to enter into a discussion, and will invite them to share what they had learnt from that day's viewing along with any questions that they might have.

The films which are broadcast as part of the "Watching Movies Through Listening" events cover a wide array of themes, from popular movies which have a business theme, through to arthouse or niche movies, as well as documentaries about the environment or nature, there is no genre left untouched and indeed describers are provided with a real test of their skills!

The most unique thing about the activity is the way in which Qiming Branch concert hall deploys sound recording equipment to record the events for future consumption. They are able to ensure that the visually impaired audience can receive good quality acoustics and adjust the sound. Once any activity has drawn to a conclusion, library staff and volunteers will edit the content and remove static and background noise. If there is a recording which fails or which requires more content, then once again the describer will be invited to the library to fix problem areas or improve sound. Finally, copies of the recording will be burnt onto CDs, and will enter into the library audiobook collection. This allows the library to offer to send these documents to blind or visually impaired viewers unable to access the live event.

Previously it was only possible to send the recordings to remote viewers by post, however, after the establishment of the "e-Library for the Visually Impaired" there has been a complete change! Recordings of all events can be downloaded for use or listened online from the e-library.

4. Digitalization of recorded media

With the maturity of the information technology environment, Qiming Branch has invested funds to establish an “e-Library for the Visually Impaired”, and this has taken some of the resources within the library provided for the visually impaired, along with braille books, audiobooks and electronic resources, and uploaded them all to a website where they can be accessed and downloaded by visually impaired readers after sign up. The “e-Library for the Visually Impaired” includes numerous digital recorded media files. Included within these are the recordings of “Watching Movies through Listening” which has become a key service.

Even though all of the “Watching Movies Through Listening” showings are burnt to CDs once they have taken place and are provided for library users to take home with them and listen to, now that PC are commonplace, it is now possible for visually impaired users who want to download them from their computer. This also helps to reduce the waiting period that blind users must go through in order to receive recordings to their house. So, Qiming Branch has started to upload the events to the “e-Library for the Visually Impaired” live.

“Watching Movies Through Listening” has been in place since 2004. In the early days sound recording equipment was somewhat basic, therefore the quality of the recordings at the events was somewhat poor. As a result, there is a relatively small amount of recordings added to the library audio collection from that period. As sound recording equipment has substantially improved, the number of events has also increased from once every Saturday to twice every Saturday (once in the morning and once in the afternoon). On a yearly basis, at least 40 films are covered. In the “e-Library for the Visually Impaired” there are already a total of 540 “Watching Movies Through Listening” recordings available for download and listening, and we will continue to add more.

The real strength of the “e-Library for the Visually Impaired” is that, within two weeks of the event, having taken place, a recording can be taken, tidied up, uploaded, and available for download and listening. There is no need to wait for the library to catalogue the recording, and this reduces the time needed to access the file and facilitates the reduction in the information gap between regular readers and visually impaired readers.

In addition, the film introductions and brief synopses carried out at each event are recorded for distribution after the event, and visually impaired users are therefore able to make use of the website’s voice broadcast function to listen to an introduction and abstract of the film before “watching” the complete work. In other words, Qiming Branch has attempted to create a situation by which visually impaired individuals living a distance from the branch itself are able to participate in and feel a part of activities held. This not only relates to listening to recordings taken at the same times as events, but in fact ensures remote users are privy to the introduction recordings taken before the events themselves. As such, even though these individuals may not be in a position to go in person themselves, they are still granted the full live experience remotely.

The “e-Library for the Visually Impaired” also offers a search function. Visually impaired readers are able to search with text as well as with braille characters in order to search through movie bibliographies. At set intervals, the Qiming Branch conducts an audit of all of its recorded media, and any damaged or corrupted file will be immediately fixed and

restored. With the proliferation of smart devices and tablet computers, we have also worked to gradually optimise the “e-Library for the Visually Impaired” for consumption on this kind of device, and we provide assistance for users in how to download and install on these devices so that visually impaired users feel empowered and in control and at no stage feel as if barriers have been put in place that hinder their consumption.

From the moment that they have begun to be published on the “e-Library for the Visually Impaired”, “Watching Movies Through Listening” files have been downloaded a total of 31,233 times, at an average of 325 people a month. By looking at satisfaction rates from over previous years, “Watching Movies Through Listening” has been the most well-received service from Qiming Branch, and, in terms of use of “e-Library for the Visually Impaired” services, it is second only to audiobooks in terms of use. Clearly, visual impaired users like film, and have given their stamp of approval to this service.

5. Conclusion

Visually impaired users have the same rights and demands when it comes to enjoying movies, and as progress has been made in the information technology environment, we have digitalized “Watching Movies Through Listening” to ensure that the service can be offered to the greatest number of users possible and enable those visually impaired who are unable to access the library themselves to feel as if they have truly travelled to the place personally and have experienced for themselves the pleasure of “watching” movies.

In future, Qiming Branch will continue to strive to expand its “Watch Movies Through Listening” service to other regions, with the hope that, through entering into exchanges with libraries in different regions carrying out the similar practices, a sharing of resources can take place and which will enable visually impaired users to have even greater benefit.

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