Rights into reality: information access for people with disabilities

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Readers of this publication need no reminder of the immense and ever-increasing importance of information access as a key to economic, social, cultural and political participation in our society — or of the important role of libraries in promoting equitable information access in communities across Australia.

The development of the World Wide Web and other new information technologies has not displaced that role, and in some respects in fact has expanded its importance. Libraries are, or could be, one of the keys for preventing further opening of a digital divide between information rich and poor.

People with disabilities are disproportionately represented among the lower income groups for whom purchase of a computer, and internet access fees, remain unaffordable — and for whom, for that matter, a book is an expensive item. So they are likely to depend more heavily than many others on community access through libraries. Also, older people have a significant rate of library use, and of course the rate of disabilities increases with age.

The right of people with disabilities to equally effective access to information services is underpinned by the federal *Disability Discrimination Act*, and by equivalent provisions in State and Territory discrimination laws.

In eight years of operation of this Act there have been few complaints regarding libraries. This may reflect generally effective efforts by libraries to address the requirements of people with disabilities, but obviously is not a reason for complacency.

There is clear evidence from complaints against other information providers that the expectations of people with disabilities for equality of information access are rising, with awareness of expanding possibilities for equal access offered by new technologies. Mr Bruce Maguire's complaint, upheld last year against SOCOG for failure to provide the Olympic Games ticket book in accessible form, is perhaps the best-known example. There have also been complaints, resolved less publicly, against a number of government agencies for failure to provide documents in accessible formats; and for failing to provide disability accessibility in public information technology, such as touchscreen kiosks.

One tendency of current information technology — particularly digital technologies — is to reduce the expense and difficulty of providing for information in different formats. The same electronic text or HTML file, for example, can yield standard print, large print, Braille or speech output. At the hardware end, there are also hopeful signs — driven partly by United States legislation, which in this area goes beyond Australia's — of a greater emphasis on universal design, so that the one piece of equipment is capable of meeting a range of user requirements, in particular for information input and output in various formats, rather than a series of specialised and expensive devices being required.

It is still early days for universal design in information technology, though, and meeting the requirements and expectations of library users with disabilities will, in the medium term at least, require specific efforts and specialised equipment in some cases. The call this places on resources may well increase in the immediate future — as demand expands with the possibilities and people's awareness of the possibilities.

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) issued a report last year on access to electronic commerce, and other new information and service technologies, for people with disabilities and for older Australians. The report recommended increased support for community access points for online services and for awareness, education and training for people who might otherwise remain on the wrong side of a 'digital divide'.

Regrettably, perhaps, HREOC can only recommend, rather than being able to guarantee, increased resources. How, then, to deal with gaps between what can be or is being delivered today in access to library services, and what users with disabilities require?

One mechanism offered by the *Disability Discrimination Act* is the development by service providers of voluntary action plans on how they intend to move towards greater equality of access to their services. Extensive information on action plans is available in the disability section of HREOC's website: http://www.humanrights.gov.au/disability_rights.

Few libraries have lodged action plans as a public statement of the actions they are taking to ensure equal access for people with disabilities. The National Library is an exception and its plan is available on the Commission's online register of action plans. Some libraries of course are encompassed within local government action plans, but there may be merit in even those libraries considering their own action plan to provide a more specific focus on the distinctive services that libraries offer.

One area of barriers to equal access for library users with disabilities, which may be less within the control of libraries themselves, is that of copyright issues potentially affecting the ability to use digital technology to meet user requirements for material in various formats.

The Digital Agenda amendments to the *Copyright Act*, which took effect in March this year, extended the statutory licences for educational institutions and institutions with a principal function of assisting people with print or intellectual disability, to enable them to digitise copyright material. It seems less clear how far the ability of libraries more generally to use digital technologies to meet disability needs has been satisfactorily addressed. The Commission will be encouraging discussions in coming months on this issue, in the hope that fully equal information access for people with disabilities in Australia will not unnecessarily nor long be delayed. ∎

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