

Proceedings of the 8th Annual Federal Depository Library Conference April 12 - 15, 1999

Hands-On Technolog(eye)s, Touching The Internet

David Poehlman, Independent Consultant
Wheaton, MD

What do people with disabilities use to access the Internet? There is not a simple answer even though the question may appear to be simple. It has many aspects upon which I will touch, but first some background on me and then I will provide the answer.

I have been involved with the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS) since I was quite young. First as a patron of a special program which they administer through regional libraries around the country to produce books and other materials in formats other than standard print so that those with print impairments such as dyslexia or blindness can read them. Later, I became a volunteer technical consultant in Braille production for the Maryland State Regional Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (LBPH) in Baltimore. You can find more on this service at:
<<http://lcweb.loc.gov/loc/visit/ada.html#nls>>.

The Internet began as primarily a text tool and remained that way for most of its short history. It is only recently, say in the past 5 years, that the Internet has begun to be littered with things we can't access. Rather than replace libraries, though, the Internet has come to enhance their services and potential offerings.

Beginning to answer the question: People with disabilities use the same things that we all use to access the Internet and work, live, and play on and in it. Telephones, PDAs, set top boxes, computers, monitors, mice, microphones, headphones and keyboards all play a part, sometimes subtractively, in this. Using the industry and resources, we have to adapt to society and raise awareness of the issues. We can continue to do so and expandingly so rather than diminishingly.

As we move towards a more advanced technological age, it can mean that many people, due to a need for diversity, are closed out due to the narrowing of potential avenues of access. Or, it can mean that we all shall have access because of the greater diversity and flexibility that can be achieved with the technologies that bring this about. Much on how this can be accomplished can be found at Web Able whose Internet address is:
<www.webable.com>.

The Internet can and has often leveled the playing field between us. As a matter of fact, it is doing this right now as I compose and send my thoughts to you. Through this tool, we can interact, create, share ideas, images, and sounds as well as meet instantly through the power of the Internet and multi-media.