

MARKETING ISSUES RELATED TO COMMERCIAL AND SPECIALISED AUDIOBOOKS, INCLUDING DIGITAL DAILY NEWSPAPERS

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Abstract

Audiobooks or talking books are becoming very popular. They used to be recorded only in specialised production centres for use by people with visual impairments. Since several years ago, many commercial publishers have found an interested public which appreciates listening to these books for leisure.

In this contribution, which is a follow up to my ELPUB2008 paper "A new electronic publishing trend: Audiobooks for leisure and studying", I will focus on the delicate balance between commercially published books and the role of specialised production centres. Also issues of cataloguing metadata for audiobooks are discussed.

Keywords: audiobooks; talking books; cataloguing multimedia material; Daisy; MARC 21.

1. Introduction

Audiobooks or talking books, recorded on CD or DVD have become quite popular with the general public, and no longer only for people with visual impairments. In this report several technical and economic aspects will be documented. Also the correct cataloguing of audiobooks (seen as a subclass of multimedia documents) still presents some pitfalls which will be discussed. It is a follow-up to my ELPUB2008 contribution [1].

2. Specialised production centres

In practice audiobooks are being produced via two different paths. For a very long time having the text of a book read aloud and recorded has been the favourite solution to make literature accessible for persons who have a serious reading impairment such as blindness or low vision. These books are produced in specialised, often also subsidized, production centres.

Nowadays, all these production centres use the Daisy standard [2]: a book consists of several audio files (mostly mp3) and several xml/SMIL files for the navigation and, possibly, for storing the electronic text of the book. In the latter case it is called a *hybrid book*. Reading requires a computer or a specialised Daisy player. The mp3 files can be listened to on any mp3 capable device, but the navigation gets lost if no Daisy software is used. Table of content based navigation with several sub-levels is the main advantage of the Daisy system, as it allows jumping rapidly to any part in a book. Also Daisy newspapers, which sometimes have over 400 different articles, can be navigated easily.

3. Commercial audiobooks

On the other hand, a large market does exist for commercially produced audiobooks and several companies have popped up over the last years to produce them. To make them universally usable, most books were recorded on audio CD's, often resulting in a dozen or so CD's for one book (because of the limited recording time of audio CD's). Nowadays more and more mp3 based books (on data CD's) become available as mp3 files which can also be read by all modern audio equipment.

But the most striking difference with the Daisy format is the lack of any sensible navigation through the audio files. The Daisy standard is not (yet) used in the commercial audiobook world. In an attempt to improve this situation, the Daisy consortium has supported the development of easy to use book conversion software, e.g. a "save as Daisy" – option in Microsoft Word or Open Office [3].

4. Evolution

Collaboration

Over the last few years we had seen a number of collaborations between the commercial and the non-commercial publishers (cf.[1]). This trend is no longer con-

tinuing. Sometimes the argument used is that listening to books remains a kind of a limited approach, as most people simply prefer reading a book.

The same conclusion is valid for the audio newspaper, such as the one that is produced daily in Belgium by the Kameleleo foundation. It does not have the success its promoters where anticipating [9].

Educational applications

More and more applications for audiobooks do pop up in the field of education where quite often multimedia “books” are used, combining text, pictures, audio and video material. In the field of education for persons with dyslexia, a growing number of PDF based documents is produced. If they have been “tagged” [4] correctly they can be read aloud. In this case people with dyslexia use the visual representation for navigation and the speech output for getting access to the content itself.

Cataloguing

Correct cataloguing of audiobooks (and also books in large print) in a library catalogue presents several pitfalls, as the use of multiple media for one content block requires definitely more different detailed fields in a catalogue record.

One of the simplest (but technically unacceptable) solutions we came across was to add the words “ – grote letterboek” (i.e. large character book) to the *title field* of a book.

Some pitfalls have been discussed during ELPUB2008. Here are a few more:

- how to describe abridged and unabridged versions of a book
- the need for a field for total reading time.
- the need for fields with technical recording specifications such as:
 - if read by a human or by computer voice, table of content handling: “none” or the use of Daisy standards v2.2 or v3.0;
 - if human voice is recorded: name, details of the narrator; language or language variant (German, Bavarian, Austrian... or French/Canadian, French etc.);
 - if synthetic voice is used: audio quality/sampling frequency, audio file types and compression characteristics;
 - if a hybrid book is made, containing both text and audio, one has to describe the audio to text linking mechanisms used in the hybrid book. Is synchronisation possible on word, paragraph or page level?

Solving these multimedia cataloguing issues is not only essential for public catalogue access but also for archiving material: for retrieval metadata have to be

added. In Belgium the Faro-project [5] is being funded by the government to handle the archiving issues. It is anticipated that the different Library networks will be highly interested in its metadata handling too. Also the FOBID organisation, grouping all Dutch Library Networks [6], is specialising in multimedia cataloguing.

One of the major cataloguing systems, MARC 21, has provisions for electronic documents. However, the specific case of hybrid books (audio + text/graphics) has not been considered yet [7]. Finally, it is also an important focus point for IFLA (the International Federation of Library Associations), which has a section on "Libraries Serving Persons with Print Disabilities" [8].

5. Conclusion

Audiobooks, despite some messages about early saturation of the market, will remain an important source of information, not only for those who cannot handle a printed book.

Finding audiobooks in library catalogues, however, remains a difficult problem for which further research will be required.

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Notes and References

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