



A Closed Book: Library Services for Print-disabled Canadians

Presentation by Jim Sanders, CNIB President, to the Council on Access to Information for Print-disabled Canadians, April 7, 2003

I have stated over the last number of years that the equivalent of the Gutenberg Press has come to those unable to read print because of a disability, particularly those who are blind or vision impaired. I really believe the analogy of the Gutenberg Press is valid. Prior to the printing press, information was controlled by the elite, the rich and the creators of information. Information was spread primarily through word of mouth and the transcriptions of scribes.

In this digital age the Gutenberg Press has arrived for me. I have direct access to a large world of information through my print scanner and computer. Having the right equipment and the right training puts me in an elite position. I am also aware that I am in an elite position due to the fact that I have a job, live in Ontario where there is government support for the acquisition of the necessary equipment, and I have the knowledge of what's available. That puts me in an elite position.

A person in an elite position also has responsibility. The Gutenberg Press provided enormous opportunity to broaden access to information to the majority of the population who were illiterate. We have a responsibility to ensure that all disabled Canadians have the same access to information as the elite (to continue my analogy). My message today is the need for a nation-wide public library service that offers a full-array of services in alternate format. Canada has a reputation for being an egalitarian society where services are available to enable individuals with skill and potential to achieve whatever they can achieve through their own means. Disabled Canadians do not always have the same opportunities, but the digital age and our knowledge in providing access to information to those unable to read print, has the potential of achieving that egalitarian society. But this will require national leadership, federal leadership and the commitment of public policy. Partnerships of governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) at all levels will be required to provide a truly equitable alternate format public library service.

It is clear in the Constitution that public libraries are the domain of the provinces and provinces have funded their libraries largely through property taxes. Canada, I should repeat, has a good reputation of having a superior public library service throughout the country. But we also have a poor reputation when it comes to access to alternate format material through a public library service. I ask myself why. In part it goes back to the roots of the CNIB. The free Braille library for the blind started in 1909 as a not-for-profit organization sharing Braille materials. In 1918 when CNIB became an organization, it assumed the responsibility. We had little or no contact with the public library services. We created the impression, with the best of intentions, that everything was under control and governments and other agencies did not have to worry about provision of services to the blind. CNIB went on raising money, recruiting and training high-skilled volunteers

and providing a very good alternate-format service equivalent to a public library, or so we thought.

The public library system and its supporters, have failed to take up the cause for disabled users, perhaps in part due to a misunderstanding of the need because of CNIB's role and, in part, because of budget restrictions. These are legitimate concerns. Budgets of libraries have been shrinking while demand increases.

The situation is becoming worse and I am here to tell you that CNIB can no longer provide resources on its own (if it ever could). CNIB is committed so much that we have gone out on a public fundraising campaign for \$33 million to, in part, convert an analog system to a digital production storage and distribution system that will be state of the art; however we had to make some hard choices. CNIB for the first time in its history borrowed money from the bank and we are now fundraising. As many of you know, we have made a request through the federal government and some provincial governments to do that. I have also been meeting with senior government officials at the provincial level as well as some premiers. One of the premiers said to me: "I do not hear any complaints, I do not hear any problems, I do not hear any concerns." I had to stop and think about that. In part it has to do with the fact that the CNIB is equivalent to a public service and there has been support for visually-disabled Canadians. But it also has to do with the low expectations of those with print disabilities, the majority of whom are older. You lose your ability to read and somebody comes along and says that they have 10,000 titles enabling you to read novels, history, fiction and non-fiction. You think you have gone to heaven before you died because up to that point you thought you would never read again. Those days are coming to an end for two reasons. First, the baby boomers are getting older and with age come age-related disabilities like the loss of the ability to read print easily. Second, those baby boomers are coming with higher expectations and higher requirements. It is no longer good enough to say we have 10,000 titles enabling you to read again. According to statistics from the Literacy Secretariat, if I understand them correctly, at present 20% of people over 65 of age have a keen desire for high-level access to literacy and information; but 35% of people between 50-65 have the same expectations. And this is the group we are facing. There is another reason. Since the mid-1970s, CNIB has done whatever was necessary, including clearing copyright, to permit its collections to be available to all print-disabled Canadians, including the learning disabled, through their public libraries. This was a change to the internal mandate of the CNIB. But the collections would be more directly and easily available if the resources were in place so that direct access was available to all.

I will also tell you that CNIB is not meeting the full needs of those we serve. Content is lacking, as all of you know, and it does not matter whether it is 3%, 10% or 30% of material available to those in print that is available in alternate format. The percentage does not matter, it is just "damn low." It is not at all acceptable. What do we do about it, how can we marshal the forces, the knowledge and the skill of groups like this Council? All print-disabled people need to say "enough is enough, I am not going to take it anymore." We need federal, provincial/territorial and municipal governments to stop

saying “not in my backyard” and work to develop partnerships between federal, provincial/territorial and municipal governments and the private sector to harness the wonderful resources that this country has collectively.

CNIB has a world reputation for what it does in access to information and it is well deserved. I am not embarrassed nor boastful to say so. People come from all over the world to see what we do. Let’s harness that. At minimum CNIB spends \$15-18 million a year when you take into account direct money spent on the CNIB Library for the Blind and through the network of 60 offices across the country. We visit homes, bring out machines, explain the service and through the expertise of highly-skilled volunteers, narrators, Braille transcribers, artisans producing tactile information all of which, if you were in most any other country in the world you would be well paid. We bring them to the table. We will be bringing by December 2003 a relatively fully automated production storage and distribution system for digital material.

What is required, what is lacking is content and access. I truly believe the federal government has a role to play in the matter of content. The Task Force on Access to Information for Print-disabled Canadians, recommended that the federal government appropriate at least \$7.5 million to support the production in Canada of multiple formats. I believe that provincial and territorial governments are responsible in the area of access to content and I believe that CNIB and other private sector organizations have a responsibility to offer their infrastructure in partnership with everyone else. In order to provide for the development of a digital library within CNIB we had to make some tough choices and this year we had to sacrifice on the majority of the acquisition of some books in order to complete the infrastructure. How many public libraries in this country will not be buying books this year? It is a disgrace for CNIB to even call itself a library when we are not even buying books and I am ashamed as the President of CNIB to even tell you that. We also know that in order to have access to digital material we require playback machines. We cannot buy the playback machines as we have in the past to loan to clients. That for me is both an ethical and a practical dilemma. We are going to request from those who use our service to buy their own machines. I expect there will be human rights challenges to CNIB, to the federal government, to the provincial governments and to the territorial government as a result. Whether they are valid or not, they are going to exist. Therefore we need a new approach in this country.

We need a made-in-Canada model. Frankly I do not think any of us knows what that is. I am asking and challenging each of the premiers across the country to help us develop that model by putting the best people in place. The best you have in senior public library service expertise, the best you have in alternate format, the best you have among those who are going to use the service to figure out that model and then, as perhaps fantastic as it may seem, ask the federal government, all provinces and territories and the private sector to come up with a uniform approach to making use of the wonderful resources we have in Canada. My dream is to walk into my local public library, register as a client, be told what I can receive, make that selection and then have access to the services without worrying whether it is going to come from CNIB, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec

or wherever else it comes from. I dream to be able to get access to the full array of services – Braille, audio, digital audio, descriptive video, research and reference service in alternate format. Am I assured of that? No. Not under the present system.

I challenge this Council to work with the CNIB to develop the partnerships necessary with governments at all levels and other NGOs to challenge, debate, and implement my dream. We must not allow anybody to say “not in my backyard” again. That is not good enough any more. Thank you!