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# Technology makes reading more accessible for the masses

**Canadian public libraries now offer over 800,000 non-print titles to assist readers with print disabilities**

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*Special to Postmedia Network*

For avid readers, there's nothing quite like opening a new book or a stack of fresh magazines.

But not everyone can read traditional print media. Maybe you're visually or physically impaired, or you have a learning disability that prevents you from reading easily.

Luckily, these days, there are plenty of options to choose from, as digital media alternatives — such as e-books and audiobooks — have leaped into the mainstream.

"It has been estimated that one in 10 Canadians has some sort of print disability,"

says Laurie Davidson, the executive director of the Centre for Equitable Library Access. "There are so many people out there who can't read conventional print."

That is why the national not-for-profit organization works with public libraries in Canada to offer over 800,000 titles such as digital audiobooks, e-readers, CDs and braille publications to people with print disabilities.

According to Davidson, about one in 10 books in Canada is currently available in a non-print format, which is good news for anyone who struggles to read the average paperback or newspaper — and for those who support them.

But the demand for

virtual reading material isn't just from those with disabilities. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the biggest request for digital content at the Calgary Public Library came from older readers looking for fiction e-books and audiobooks.

Now, demographics are varied: sighted and visually impaired, male and female, commuters and travellers, young and old.

"It's that convenience factor," says Heather Robertson, the director of service designs at Calgary Public Library. A big reader, she downloads titles before she travels because of the convenience and the weight; it's considerably easier to pack a phone than 10 or 12 books, she says.

"You can just pull them up on your phone, your tablet or your computer, 24/7."

In 2020, when the physical libraries were

closed for much of the year, more than seven million e-books and audiobooks were borrowed from the Calgary Public Library, an increase of 32 per cent — "primarily in response to COVID-19," Robertson notes.

Also in 2020, the demand for e-books and audiobooks for children grew 70 per cent as parents and teachers adjusted to online schooling and limited library access, Robertson says. "The demand spiked, obviously, when everyone had to move to virtual this year."

Then there are those who are visually impaired but want to pursue a post-secondary education. Accessible reading formats are a necessity, pandemic or not. They need non-print forms of books and study materials if they're to succeed in the academic world.

"When we speak about equitable access to reading,

we speak about this as a human right," Davidson says. "An equitable access to reading ensures a person's ability to participate in society in an equitable fashion, not just for education but cultural and social wellbeing, too."

"It's about offering things in a variety of mediums so that people can find what they need in the way that they need it," adds Robertson.

For almost 100 years, people have been taking advantage of available technologies to create accessible reading opportunities for others. Audiobooks, for instance, were invented in 1932, when The American Foundation for the Blind began releasing recordings of books on vinyl albums, according to Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). The plays of William

Shakespeare were some of the first recordings; each album side held about 15 minutes of dialogue.

The technology has changed considerably since those early days, but audiobooks have been a window to a vast literary world for the blind and visually impaired — as well as people with dyslexia and similar learning and cognitive disabilities — ever since.

Still others may not be able to hold a traditional print book or turn its pages, but e-books and audiobooks let them have a similar — and equally important — experience to words on paper.

"Digital has just opened up the world to people with print disabilities," says Davidson. "Technology enables so much more access for people. It's tremendous."

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## How The Reading Foundation teaches reading

Learning to read and spell are two of the most important skills that a student needs to learn. Strong reading and written language leads to strong academics and brighter prospects for future education and employment, as well as improved confidence. While there are many students who achieve at least an acceptable level in these two key skills, anywhere from 30 to 35 per cent do not, and evidence shows they tend to stay weak in those skills over time.

Students who struggle with reading and spelling are particularly challenging. Parents often note when they bring their child to one of our clinics, that they have lost the bright, creative, and inquisitive child they once knew. The student started school enthusiastically, but once their reading and spelling difficulties surfaced, their confidence and self-esteem waned and comments like "I hate school," or "I hate reading," appeared. Their frustration seemed to grow worse as time went on.

The student didn't seem to catch up as time went on either. Parents notice that other bright children in the same class are learning to read, so they wonder what's wrong with their child. The fact that it may lie in the teaching method itself is not considered. Then begins a search that may go on for many years, for answers and remedial help.

Frequently though, the student does not respond in any meaningful way to assistance from the school or various



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forms of tutoring. Frustration continues to mount, and multiple psychoeducational assessments and a variety of diagnoses and individual education plans (IEPs) later, there are no real answers. Often there is also very little in the way of actual reading and spelling progress.

What's gone wrong? Dr. Steve Truch, founder of The Reading Foundation, believes that a primary difficulty stems from the way students are taught to read and spell in the first place. The pendulum

in reading instruction for the last 100 years has shifted between "whole word" and "phonics" in various iterations. However, almost none of the teaching methods on this pendulum have managed to teach the child how the English alphabet code actually works. The code is the complex manner in which only 26 letters can represent the 44 basic sounds (phonemes) of spoken English.

Our experience at the three Reading Foundation clinics with thousands of students

of all ages shows that, with our teaching method, virtually all students can learn to read and spell. If the student is systematically and directly taught the sound/letter combinations needed to spell and read even "big words" in a sequential progression, then they can become a much more accomplished reader and speller.

Once assessed, students attend four hours of one-to-one instruction with our trained and experienced staff, each day for five days a week. This

immersion contributes to a steep and positive learning curve and many opportunities to correct some ineffective reading habits (like guessing at a word) that are not suited to an alphabet system. The student attends for the number of hours they need. Some will require far fewer hours than others. However, the good news is that they all respond.

Students generally attend in the mornings or afternoons for those four-hour blocks. That means that if

they come during the school year, they could be missing some school time to do so. Most schools are cooperative as they realize that this kind of remedial work is very specialized, and in the student's best interest. Missing a bit of curriculum time is worth the trade-off. Our door is also open to meet with school personnel once the student completes their recommended hours, so we can share follow-up strategies and materials on behalf of the student.

The reading and spelling outcomes from our program have been cited as among those with "Highly Successful" outcomes, the highest category rating. Of equal importance is the change in the learner. The turnaround in confidence and self-esteem is frequently noted by parents and demonstrated by the students themselves. "We change lives" is our motto.

Over the years, in addition to our highly successful reading and spelling program, we have written our own remedial programs for comprehension, written language and math — the four core literacy areas where students typically struggle.

If your child does struggle in any of these core areas, contacting one of our clinics, located in Vancouver, Calgary and Toronto, is a critical first step in helping them. Our programs are offered both in-person and virtually, so we can help students from anywhere become stronger spellers and readers.

For more information, visit [readingfoundation.com](http://readingfoundation.com).