Accessibility Metadata: Statement and Principles

Preamble

Accessibility metadata is information about a resource's accessibility features. It enables persons with disabilities to find, identify, and select resources that meet their specific needs and preferences. Examples of these features include audio descriptions, closed captions, screen reader compatibility, alternative text, and navigable structures like tables of contents.

Libraries are responsible for providing users with access to information and collections. Accessibility metadata is fundamental to ensure equitable access for users with disabilities. The creation, integration, and maintenance of accessibility metadata are critically important to the mission of libraries to provide access for all users. There are also legal and ethical obligations for libraries.

At the international level, the right of access to information is enshrined in United Nations (UN) treaties and conventions. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (United Nations,1966), ratified by 172 of 193 UN member states, is a binding agreement that enshrines the human right to freedom of expression, including the right to seek and receive information in any media of choice (UN, 1966). The Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD) (UN. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2006), with 188 UN member state signatories, obliges the state to ensure its national laws and practices apply equally to people with disabilities (UN. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2006). This widely implemented human rights policy and legislative framework informs librarians and information professionals worldwide on ensuring full access to resources for people with disabilities.

The foundational principles of non-discrimination, equal opportunity, accessibility, and full and active participation and inclusion in society, as declared in the ICCPR and CRPD, form the starting point for this statement. People with disabilities are entitled to seek, receive, and share ideas in all forms of communication and access cultural materials in accessible formats.

Despite longstanding calls for equity of access from within the library community, most works in libraries remain inaccessible to people with print disabilities (Jaeger et al., 2017). Providing access to works for people with disabilities, "on an equal basis with others" is multifaceted and challenging (UN. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2006, article 9).

Problem Statement

For individuals with disabilities to fully exercise their right of access to information, they must be able to discover and identify resources that offer accessible content. The absence of accessibility metadata impedes equal access by making it difficult to find resources that they can use. The obstacles to locating accessible resources have even more impact when the number of accessible resources is limited.

To address this inequity, libraries must support and engage in the use of accessibility metadata, integrate this metadata into their public discovery systems, and develop clear guidance for standardized, globally applicable metadata that is appropriate for use in the library context.

This statement aims to raise awareness of the need for accessibility metadata and to recommend a set of principles for the use and design of accessibility metadata.

Call to Action

Information about accessibility features should be recorded as accessibility metadata.

The international library community is prioritizing the development and adoption of standardized accessibility metadata and working with related communities to support interoperability of accessibility metadata across different cultural heritage sectors, following user-centred design practices.

The IFLA Accessibility Metadata Network calls on all stakeholders—librarians, information professionals, metadata management system providers, publishers, distributors, producers of adapted or alternate format versions, and cataloguers—to create, maintain, disseminate, and preserve accurate metadata that describes accessibility features. Each must act within their role to increase knowledge of inclusive practices and support inclusive resource production, discovery, and equitable access for all, including users with disabilities.

Recommendations

To overcome barriers to access, the international library and information community shall:

- Develop guidance for the use and design of accessibility metadata
- Develop standards needed for the use and design of accessibility metadata
- Integrate the use of accessibility metadata into library workflows
- Form partnerships with relevant stakeholders, especially users with disabilities

When developing and using accessibility metadata, it is recommended to observe the following principles.

Principles

These principles align with two widely supported IFLA metadata documents: the Professional Statement on Universal Bibliographic Control (UBC) and the Statement on International Cataloguing Principles (ICP). UBC promotes shared responsibility for creating and globally exchanging authoritative bibliographic metadata. ICP provides the basis for international standardization and consistency in the recording of bibliographic metadata. These alignments will ensure that accessibility metadata is consistently applied, and accessible resources are discoverable by users with disabilities in libraries around the globe.

Principles Related to the Usability of Accessibility Metadata

Convenience and Centrality of the User
Accessibility metadata elements and vocabularies shall be developed in collaboration with primary users, so that the resulting accessibility metadata aligns with users' understanding and needs.

Display of Data
Accessibility metadata shall be indexed, searchable, and available through public-facing library catalogues, discovery systems, and collection development tools. It shall provide sufficient detail to help users determine if a resource meets their needs without requiring access to the content for verification of accessibility features. Accessibility metadata displayed to the user shall be comprehensible, clear, and meaningful for users at all levels.

User Autonomy
Accessibility metadata shall enable autonomy and independence of users with disabilities to discover and choose content that meets their unique needs.

Accuracy
Accessibility metadata shall accurately describe the accessibility features of resources without exaggeration or misrepresentation. Information about the provenance of the metadata shall be recorded, where possible, as an indicator of accuracy and authoritativeness.

Principles Related to the Design of Accessibility Metadata

Consistency and Standardization
Accessibility metadata shall conform to internationally accepted standards and best practices to allow for metadata exchange and reuse globally.

Granularity

Metadata shall provide sufficiently detailed descriptions to support the user's ability to find, identify, and select resources and features meeting diverse user needs. Granular metadata allows for personalized user profiles and facilitates precise search and filtering.

Interoperability

Accessibility metadata shall promote collaboration by supporting exchange and reuse across platforms, systems, and sectors. Metadata shall also be designed to be usable by both humans and machines.

Extensibility

Accessibility metadata and vocabularies shall be designed to accommodate new knowledge about disabilities and future developments in technologies, functionalities, and standards.

ANNEXES

1. Limits of What Can Be Achieved with Accessibility Metadata

- Accessibility metadata plays a crucial role in the discovery of accessible content, but it does not address the lack of accessible resources.
- If platforms, systems, and catalogues do not display or index accessibility metadata, resources remain undiscoverable to users with disabilities.
- Metadata describes a resource's accessibility features, but neither improves its inherent accessibility nor guarantees that these features function through the distribution channels available to the user.

2. Other Factors that Affect a Library's Success in Creating an Accessible Environment

Despite advances in accessibility policies, guidelines, and legislation, library users with disabilities face significant barriers to accessing resources.

Key challenges include:

High-Level Commitment to an Inclusive Ecosystem

There needs to be a sustained and high-level commitment of resources at the administrative level to promote and maintain an inclusive ecosystem throughout an organization. Equitable access to resources is more strongly supported when there is also active involvement of people with disabilities, when an organization uses inclusive hiring practices, when all library staff are trained in using inclusive practices and technologies, and in creating accessible spaces.

Diverse Accessibility Needs

Accessibility requirements vary widely among users. A resource deemed accessible by one individual may not meet the needs of another.

Variety of Resource Types

Accessibility metadata must cover all resource types collected by libraries, including textual documents, visual resources, audiovisual resources, extended reality, and more.

Assistive Technologies

Users often rely on assistive technologies like screen readers or speech recognition software. Metadata should indicate whether a resource meets the requirements of such technologies, for example, structured navigation for screen reader technologies.

Reading Platforms and Distribution Channels

Many reading and viewing experiences require the use of reading platforms or distribution channels such as automated interlibrary loan systems. If these platforms or systems contain

obstacles, then materials that are built to be accessible will be experienced by users as inaccessible. Libraries play a role in evaluating the reading platforms and systems they use, including requiring that the platforms and systems meet the needs of users with disabilities.

Knowledge Gaps

Content creators, publishers, distributors, and librarians often lack awareness of, and training in, accessibility standards and metadata creation, leading to insufficient metadata on discovery platforms.

Selection/Collection Development Policies

The presence of accessibility features and accessibility metadata included as a selection criterion in collection development policies is a best practice. Selection of versions that are free of technological protection measures (TPM), when available, is preferred. However, for libraries and information organizations in countries benefiting from the provisions of the Marrakesh Treaty, the national enabling legislation permits the creation and access to digital works, and their sharing and use by authorized entities and users (Helfer et al., 2017).

Reliable Certification and Credentials

Accessibility metadata has value only if the metadata corresponds to the accessibility features that actually exist in the resource. Third-party certification provides a more reliable assessment. Given user reliance on the accuracy of statements about accessibility, libraries have a responsibility to share certification information with end users.

Preservation and Durability of Metadata

Accessibility metadata must remain reliable over time, preserving accuracy and usability as technologies evolve. Preservation practices should maintain the metadata's integrity, ensuring its lasting usefulness as a resource for current and future users.

Accessibility of Metadata Authoring Systems

Metadata authoring systems are tools used for cataloging and metadata input into bibliographic descriptions. Many of these systems may not be fully accessible to library staff with disabilities. Ensuring that metadata authoring tools are accessible, including conducting regular digital accessibility audits, is crucial to enabling inclusive participation in the cataloging process.

3. References and Resources

a. Citations in the Text of the Statement and Annexes

Helfer, L. R., Land, M. K., Okediji, R. L., & Reichman, J. H. (2017). *The World Blind Union guide to the Marrakesh Treaty: Facilitating access to books for print-disabled individuals*. Oxford University Press.

Jaeger, P., Wentz, B., & Bertot, J. C. (2017). The intersection of human rights, social justice, the Internet, and accessibility in libraries: Access, education, and inclusion. In J. Lazar, & M. A. Stein (Eds.), *Disability, human rights, and information technology* (pp. 58-70). University of Pennsylvania Press.

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United Nations. (1966). International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights

United Nations. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2006). *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).* https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html

b. *Metadata and Professional Practice Frameworks*

IFLA Metadata Framework

IFLA Professional Statement of Universal Bibliographic Control (UBC), 2012
  To be superseded by the new version (still in draft):
  IFLA Professional Statement on Universal Bibliographic Control, 2025
Statement of International Cataloguing Principles (ICP), 2016
  To be superseded by the new version (still in draft):
  Statement of International Cataloguing Principles, 2025
IFLA Library Reference Model (LRM), 2017

IFLA Professional Practice Framework

IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto, 2022
IFLA Code of Ethics for Librarians and Other Information Workers, 2012
IFLA Vision and Core Values
IFLA Strategy 2024–2029

Data Principles

FAIR Principles

c. *Accessibility Standards*

W3C Accessibility Standards (WCAG 2, etc.)
EPUB Accessibility 1.1
Schema.org (accessibility properties of CreativeWork)
ONIX 3 (especially code list 196)
Accessibility Metadata Display Guide for Digital Publications 2.0
  Display Techniques for EPUB Accessibility Metadata 2.0
  Display Techniques for ONIX Accessibility Metadata 2.0