

The Future of Braille

N Krishnaswamy, Chairman of Vidya Vrikshah

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Braille has had a great past. But does it have a future? The answer to this question turns on two more questions. What do the blind themselves need or want? And how are the others, individuals and institutions, who seek to assist the blind, through services or through promotion of ideas, designs, equipment solutions and products for the blind, responding to what the blind need or want? There is mounting evidence of a slow decline in the demand for and the use of braille. The Service Providers are worried that this could be a terminal decline. The Solution Producers appear not worried. There is clearly need for meticulous introspection here.

The first question relates to learning and communication needs of the blind. They have an innate Hear & Speak faculty serving this purpose. But surely they would need a Read and Write support facility as well. Braille is the only solution with which they can started building the Read & Write skill.

Affordable learning and communication Hear & Speak Solutions that utilize the Hear & Speak faculty are today far easier for the blind to come by and learn and use. These solutions are also far easier for Solution Producers to make and provide at low cost, as these features can be easily incorporated into low-cost mass consumer products such as cell phones made for the whole population. In fact, the cell phone will probably be the greatest threat to the future of braille

On the other hand affordable Tactile Read & Write solutions are hard to come by and more difficult for the blind to learn and use. Paper based embossed braille means high one time cost on Embossers and high recurring cost on paper. Refreshable Braille Displays would eliminate recurring cost, but their one time cost is prohibitive. They would be the ideal solution but only if they become affordable. They are difficult for Solution Producers to make because of the inherent complexity of their technology. Complex technology means high unit price, which therefore provides an elitist and tiny niche market for the Solution Producers, who will not give it up easily.

Service Providers have so far preferred to let the Solution Producers call the shots. Many blind persons have, thanks to their access to the high tech solutions, made it to the top positions of many Service Provider organizations. There they have inevitably tended to set and support the technical specifications that can be met only by high tech products. This inevitably reinforces the elitist

hold of high tech Solution Producers.

The ultimate result : Limited availability of Read & Write Solutions, and Extensive availability of affordable Hear & Speak Solutions, are leading inevitably to the decline of braille, perhaps now in terminal decline.

So what are the options available to Service Providers today? Pay lip-service or say a final bye-bye to braille? Or be honest to the cause of braille by making a firm commitment to spread it extensively by making it quickly affordable? Is an investment in futuristic high tech of Page Displays with new Magic Materials realistic in terms of emergence of either early or affordable braille solutions? Yes, a cell phone with a tactile screen would be great and may even be possible or become affordable in the future. But tell this to the common blind man in the street, and he will laugh and ask you whether you are talking of the Holy Grail.

My appeal to Service Providers and Solution Producers : yes, by all means, invest in high tech solutions for the future long term. But also undertake concurrently a few more honest and modest initiatives that provide affordable solutions with today's technology that are distinctly possible. A sizeable world blind market awaits such solutions. But talking of affordable braille in the long term does not make sense. For in the long term, braille could be dead.