

Toward Inclusive Audiobook Production for Older Adults with Vision Loss

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Executive summary

Commercial audiobooks are often presumed to be accessible by default, yet for many older adults with vision loss, this assumption breaks down in practice. Recent research has shown that narration quality, navigation barriers, lack of standardized production formats, and inaccessible interface design can hinder meaningful engagement with audiobooks for older adults, which is a critical format for leisure, cognitive health, and social connection. This policy brief proposes the development of a national framework for inclusive audiobook production standards in Canada, informed by user experience research and stakeholder initiatives. Recommendations include integrating experiential accessibility features into audiobook publishing, supporting inclusive design practices that consider older adults' cognitive and sensory needs, and introducing a certification program to recognize auditory accessibility excellence.

Introduction

From their inception in the early 20th century, “talking books” have been considered inherently accessible, pioneered to address the lack of access for people with vision impairments. Over time, the talking book evolved from a specialized disability tool into a mainstream media format, laying the foundation for today's commercial audiobooks (Rubery, 2016). Despite the growing success of publicly available audiobooks, there has been a lack of unified production guidelines to ensure they meet the diverse needs of all users, especially those with print disabilities (Reid & Garrish, 2020).

As highlighted by the National Network for Equitable Library Service (NNELS), accessibility requires more than recording a book; it involves decisions around navigation, file structure, metadata, image descriptions, narration, and audio quality (NNELS, 2013). Inconsistent practices across the industry mean that many commercial audiobooks fall short in areas such as discoverability, usability, and customizability.

These shortcomings are consequential for older adults aging with vision loss. As vision declines, often alongside other age-related changes such as reduced manual dexterity, cognitive fatigue, or hearing loss, the ability to independently access and navigate audiobook content becomes more complex. Without consistent design standards that prioritize usability and flexibility, commercial audiobooks risk excluding a subset of their audience.

Although technical standards (e.g., Reid & Garrish, 2020) and accessible audiobooks initiatives (Castilloux et al., 2025) have emerged, providing essential production-side guidance, they do not fully address the lived experience of aging with vision loss. Recent qualitative research shows that older adults with vision loss report significant challenges in transitioning from print to auditory narratives, including difficulty navigating content, discomfort with synthesized voices, and a mismatch between technology support and individual needs (Mathiesen et al., 2025). These findings point to a broader disconnect between commercial production practices and user realities. This policy brief highlights the importance of bridging that gap by integrating structural standards with experiential research insights to ensure audiobooks are truly accessible across the life course.

Current status and policy approaches

Interest in accessibility is growing across the publishing industry, but current efforts remain uneven and split between technical infrastructure, production guidance, and emerging user-centred research. The following section outlines the current policy approaches and initiatives informing the accessibility of commercial audiobooks today.

The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) (World Wide Web Consortium, 1996) has published a technical standard (Reid & Garrish, 2020) to provide a unified framework for the structure and distribution of audiobooks. This specification focuses on production-side elements, such as how audiobook content is packaged, the inclusion of structured metadata (e.g., narrator, reading order, duration), and a manifest system to facilitate playability across devices and platforms. This would ensure content can be indexed, navigated, and parsed by user agents; however, it does not explicitly address the experiential dimensions of audiobook accessibility, such as voice qualities or narrative engagement components.

Complementing the W3C recommendations, a 2024 national research initiative led by the Centre for Equitable Library Access (CELA), funded by Accessibility Standards Canada, investigated the accessibility of commercial audiobooks through a collaborative, user-centred process (Castilloux et al., 2025). The project involved consultations with readers with print disabilities, industry stakeholders, and the testing of prototype audiobooks to evaluate features such as image descriptions, front and back matter, navigation, and footnote integration. Key findings revealed that commercial audiobook production often lacks consistency and accessibility due to unclear navigation, missing content, and platform incompatibilities. Narration quality, customizable features, and inclusion of typically omitted content, such as images or footnotes, emerged as priorities for both users with and without print disabilities. However, while this study laid a foundation for industry-wide improvements, its scope did not address age-related changes in auditory perception, cognitive load, or engagement patterns specific to older adults with vision or dual sensory loss.

Current industry initiatives mark a critical step toward more equitable access to digital reading; however, their scope underrepresents the specific needs of older adults experiencing vision loss or dual sensory impairments. The absence of detailed attention to age-related changes in e.g., auditory processing and navigation challenges across audiobook platforms, highlights a gap in the accessibility landscape. Complementing the existing policy landscape, this policy brief recommends incorporating experiential and emotional dimensions of audiobook listening later in life into accessible audiobook production.

Policy recommendations

The following three policy options are proposed to support accessible audiobook production for older adults with vision loss:

1. Establish national standards for experiential accessibility in audiobook production

Description: Develop and implement guidelines that integrate experiential accessibility features specific to older adults with vision loss within existing technical standards (e.g., W3C).

Key features

- Mandatory inclusion of perceptually human (natural) narration with user-adjustable pacing, tone, accents, etc.
- Standardized file structure, labelling, and embedded metadata to enable intuitive navigation and findability across platforms and devices, especially for older users with low vision or who may be experiencing cognitive fatigue.
- Include adjustable audio settings for noise sensitivity and hearing variability.

Advantages and novel contribution

- Fills a critical gap in experiential usability.
- Aligns with ongoing “born accessible” efforts.
- Encourages uniformity across publishers, improving usability.
- Builds on NNELS-tested best practices and CELA’s user insights.

Disadvantages

- May increase production timelines and costs and require new staff training.
- Publishers may need support to adopt/adapt evolving standards.

2. Fund co-design and user testing with older adults with sensory impairments

Description: Establish funding streams for publishers to collaborate directly with older adults with print disabilities in the co-design and testing of audiobooks.

Key features

- Require publishers to engage diverse older adults in iterative testing of interface, content navigation, and narrator choices.
- Support standing advisory boards or “hubs” of older adult “audiobook testers” (both new and experienced) to consult on new and retrofitted audiobook formats.

Advantages and novel contribution

- Centres lived experiences as a continuous input to design and production, ensuring audiobook features reflect the complexity of aging with sensory loss.
- Produces audiobooks that are usable in practice, not just in theory
- Builds trust and long-term partnerships between users and producers.
- Can serve as a model for other media accessibility co-design efforts.

Disadvantages

- Requires long-term commitment, facilitation, and administrative coordination.
- May be slower to scale across the full commercial sector and be underutilized by publishers without accompanying incentives.

3. Incentivize compliance through a national Auditory Accessibility Certification program

Description: Create a certification or “Auditory Accessible” label awarded to publishers that meet experiential and structural accessibility standards.

Key features

- Certification criteria combining technical compliance (e.g., W3C manifest) with experiential elements that enhance narrative engagement (e.g., navigation clarity, narration usability, customizability).
- Tie certification to public funding eligibility or procurement preferences in libraries, education, or health sectors.
- Government or non-profit administered (e.g., through Accessibility Standards Canada).

Advantages and novel contribution

- Offers the first standardized recognition of audiobook accessibility beyond file compatibility, validating design choices that reflect lived experience.

- Encourages industry innovation and leadership.
- Offers a recognizable standard/quality marker to help libraries, older adults, and caregivers choose appropriate materials.

Disadvantages

- Requires sustainable governance, oversight, and evaluation infrastructure.
- May take time to build consumer and industry awareness.
- May not address accessibility retrofitting for existing catalogs.

Conclusion

For older adults with vision or dual sensory loss, audiobooks offer critical pathways to information, absorption, and social connection. Yet without clear standards that reflect their lived experiences and sensory needs, these digital tools fall short. By integrating experiential accessibility into national production guidelines, supporting co-design with older listeners, and introducing a certification program to recognize excellence, policymakers can help create an audiobook landscape that engages, empowers, and includes all readers across the lifespan.

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