A New Model for Accessible-Format Material in Public Libraries

What is a Print Disability?
A print disability or perceptual disability is defined in the Canadian Copyright Act as a mobility, cognitive, or vision impairment that prevents an individual (about 10%) of Canadians from being able to read traditional print.

The Book Famine
Books offer the opportunity for lifelong learning, community-building, and recreation as well as for political engagement and opportunities for civil discourse. However, not everyone has equal access to books. People with print disabilities are often unable to access printed material if it is not provided in a format that they can read (an accessible format). It is estimated that only 5-7% of published material is available in accessible formats. Some refer to this as the “Book Famine.”

A National Public Library Solution
People with print disabilities have traditionally had a complex relationship with public libraries as the public library has not always been empowered to meet their needs or to be able to treat them as any other patron. As a national, online public library of books in accessible formats offering on-demand production, the National Network for Equitable Library Service (NNELS) is working to empower libraries to better serve their patrons with print disabilities and offer the same level of service as they do for the rest of their communities.

A New Model for Accessible-Format Production
NNELS produces accessible-format books in a distributed network, using open-source technology to offer a digital service that meets the needs of its users. This new and unique model for accessible-format production is inclusive, user-driven, library-owned, and participatory.

Opening Access
Starting on October 1, 2017, all Canadians with print disabilities will be able to access NNELS through every public and post-secondary library in Canada, not just those in participating provinces and territories. Those in non-funding jurisdictions will not be able to request on-demand production, but they will have access to the publicly-funded collection.

Library-Owned
Public ownership is central to the NNELS model. Each local library selects the materials it needs, purchases them, and distributes them to its patrons. The NNELS model allows libraries to select and purchase books or other formats, with an open-source, cross-boundary methodology.

Participatory
The NNELS model is driven by the community, the public, and the patrons themselves. It is a participatory model in which the community owns the process and the output. Libraries can purchase books, or they can select from the NNELS catalogue, which is constantly changing.

User-Driven
The NNELS model is user-driven, with patrons selecting the books they need, the formats they prefer, and the dates they want to receive them. This allows patrons to choose the books they want to read, the formats they prefer, and the dates they want to receive them.