Commercial Audiobook Research Project: Detailed Executive Summary

# Why We Undertook This Project: Introduction and Landscape Review

The Centre for Equitable Library Access (CELA) created the Commercial Audiobook Research Project to investigate and address accessibility gaps in commercial audiobook production for individuals with print disabilities. While digital publishing has advanced accessibility—particularly with ebooks—commercial audiobooks lack standardized accessibility practices, despite being a primary reading format for many.

Unlike ebooks, where accessibility standards like EPUB 3 and associated guidelines apply, commercial audiobooks lack accessibility standards and generally do not support navigability, image descriptions, or text-to-speech compatibility. While alternative format libraries like CELA, NNELS and SQLA offer formats designed for people with print disabilities, commercially produced audiobooks are in high demand due to their selection, professional narration, and timely releases. However, they often exclude essential accessibility features, limiting usability for print-disabled audiences.

At the same time, publishers and audiobook producers who wish to improve the accessibility of their audiobooks and reach potentially larger audiences need information and guidelines based on user needs and preferences.

This project sought to bridge this information gap between industry practices, needs and readers’ experiences by assessing accessibility barriers, exploring user preferences, and evaluating industry feasibility. Our goal was to determine how commercial audiobooks could be made fully accessible while balancing industry constraints and general reader satisfaction.

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# Key Findings

## 1. Commercial Audiobooks Lack Standardized Accessibility Features

Current industry practices do not uniformly include essential elements such as structured navigation, image descriptions, and metadata for enhanced discoverability. Many commercial audiobooks omit front and back matter (e.g., about the author, bibliographies, footnotes), leaving listeners—especially those who rely entirely on audio formats—at a disadvantage in accessing full content. Additionally, audiobook platforms often have accessibility barriers, such as unlabeled buttons, inconsistent playback controls, and poor compatibility with screen readers.

Key barriers to audiobook accessibility:

* Navigation and Structure: Many commercial audiobooks lack structured navigation features, making it difficult for readers to jump between clearly labelled sections, chapters, or bookmark key passages.
* Omissions in Audio Content: Critical content such as image descriptions, footnotes, and references is often absent, leaving readers with an incomplete experience.
* Metadata and Discoverability: Accessibility metadata specific to audiobooks is not well-developed.
* Audiobook production is costly and complex, especially for independent Canadian publishers, and innovation for enhancements in this area requires funding. Copyright, licensing and distribution systems also create limitations.
* Platform-Specific Barriers: Many audiobook platforms do not fully support assistive technologies, making it difficult for users to find, purchase or borrow, and read effectively.

## 2. User Habits and Preferences: A Case for Born-Accessible Audiobooks

The findings of this project support the case for born-accessible audiobooks, as habits and preferences for people with and without print disabilities align in many ways.

* **Shared Preferences for Accessibility Features:** Many accessibility improvements—such as better navigation, image descriptions, high-quality narration, and metadata—are also valued by users without print disabilities.
* **Enhancing Usability for Everyone:** Features like navigable tables of contents, properly structured chapters, and descriptions for images make audiobooks more versatile and functional, much like how curb cuts benefit all pedestrians.
* **Demand for Customizable Experiences:** Reader preferences vary based on genre, context, and personal habits. Customization options improve the audiobook experience for all users.

## 3. The Audiobook Industry Needs Greater Collaboration on Accessibility

Currently, accessibility in audiobooks is fragmented across production, distribution, and platform technology. Implementing certain recommendations, such as customization, requires coordination between multiple stakeholders. Some publishers and producers implement best practices, but the absence of standardized guidelines results in varied user experiences. Our research highlights the need for collaboration between publishers, audiobook platforms, accessibility organizations, and technology providers, all working to enhance accessibility in their part of the supply chain.

# Recommendations

## 1. Key Recommendations for Publishers and Producers

* Content Completeness:
  + Include all print book elements (e.g., footnotes, indexes, bibliographies, appendices, image description) and avoid abridgment unless clearly indicated
  + Provide supplemental materials in accessible text formats (e.g., downloadable documents or EPUBs).
* Narration Quality:
  + Use clear, well-paced narration with explicit cues for footnotes, image descriptions and headings.
  + Optimize sound design and file compression for various playback speeds to maintain clarity.
* Navigation and Structure:
  + Produce a detailed, accessible Table of Contents (ToC) using track lists, manifest files, and name the files themselves meaningfully.

## 2. Recommendations for Audiobook Platforms and Libraries

* Platforms:
  + Build platforms that support end-to-end accessibility, including voice commands and customizable settings.
  + Enable interoperability across devices and reading systems.
  + Develop reading technologies that allow customization and support further accessibility features and flexibility.
* Public Libraries, Academic Libraries, and Libraries Serving People with Print Disabilities:
  + Prioritize accessibility in the procurement of digital resources.
  + Offer diverse audiobook collections and provide training on digital literacy and accessible services.

## 3. Industry-Wide Recommendations

* Establish an Audiobook Accessibility Working Group or Summit to bring together publishers, platform developers, accessibility advocates, and users.
* Develop and adopt common accessibility metadata and standards.
* Explore technological solutions to allow readers to customize their experience (e.g., choosing which elements to hear or skip).
* Work toward allowing synchronized text and audio books to enhance compatibility with assistive tools and respond to reader preferences generally.
* Explore advanced features like AI-driven bookmarking, summarization, and voice-activated commands.

# Conclusion

The findings of this research demonstrate that accessible audiobooks are not just a necessity for users with print disabilities but an improvement for all listeners. The commercial audiobook industry has an opportunity to embrace accessibility as a fundamental component of production rather than an afterthought, or the responsibility of alternate format producers alone. By implementing industry-wide standards, improving usability, and fostering collaboration across stakeholders, audiobooks can become an inclusive and fully accessible format for all readers. With the right investments and policy shifts, the industry can ensure that all audiobook users—regardless of disability status—have equal access to information, literature, and entertainment.