



By Gena Ng
POSTED: 08 Jun 2014 08:00


MORE LIFESTYLE NEWS

- 

Dinosaur metabolism: not too hot, not too cold

4 hours ago
- 

Shop-cafe brings World Cup fever to Japan

13 hours ago
- 

US foodies fight back in cheese ageing row

1 day ago
- Obama: "I'm a good, fun dad"
 - Super-sticky frog leaves scientists tongue-tied
 - Australia says pollution falling at Great Barrier Reef
 - World's largest vertical garden in Singapore
 - Swiss wingsuit divers make first jump from Matterhorn
 - HiddenCash anonymous US donor steps forward
 - Australia shark cull could snare more than 900 animals

Getting reading material remains a challenge for an estimated 285 million people who are blind or have low vision. But under an international copyright agreement, the Marrakesh Treaty, a new reading world could open up.



SINGAPORE: Reading this may seem quite normal for you, but for someone who is visually handicapped, it is a challenge as technology hasn't caught up.

Getting access to reading material remains a struggle for an estimated 285 million people who are blind or have low vision.

In the case of books alone, only some seven per cent of published books are made in formats that the blind can read, according to the World Blind Union.

To help end the “book famine” faced by the visually handicapped, 186 member states under the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) negotiated and signed the Marrakesh Treaty in June 2013.

The treaty, explained Ms Christina Lim, director of the communications and engagement department at the International Property Office of Singapore (IPOS), is to make “a practical difference to the lives of the blind... by allowing them greater access to published works such as books, periodicals and magazines”.

In Singapore, there are about 3,000 people who are visually handicapped.

Under the current copyright law, institutions such as the Singapore Association of the Visually Handicapped (SAVH) and the Lighthouse School are only allowed to reproduce published books in formats such as Braille, large print, as well as photographic and sound-recorded formats.

According to SAVH’s operations manager Mr Francis Tay, who has low vision, most publishers when approached, have so far been “very kind” in giving the organisation permission to reproduce their books.

But the issue of copyright law often proves an added hurdle.

“There are people who will ask questions about copyright – do we have permission to record [the books] into the format that we want?” said Mr Tay of the efforts that were “fearful”.

As he pointed out, “we didn’t understand about copyright rules”.

“After all, it’s for the blind people to use. We didn’t do things like sell it, or make money out of it. We did it because our clients are blind people [who] enjoy listening to novels.”

However, teenager Adelyn Koh does not want to read novels.

What the musically talented secondary school student wants are music theory books.

“A theory book is something that [we] can’t get easily in Braille. We’ve been trying for ages but we can’t,” said an agitated Adelyn.

“My piano teacher has already emailed different countries – she got as far as that – to try and order a theory book in Braille for me. But we can’t because she didn’t get a reply”

Adelyn, who was born with a rare congenital eye disease, made headlines as an 11-year-old when she decided to sell CDs comprising her own compositions to raise funds for an eye operation.

The operation that helped her see better as she pursued her musical talent has been showcased at events such as the President’s Star Charity gala.

But what the 13-year-old really wants now, is to be able to take the Grade 6 piano exam and to move up the various grades.

To do that, she will have to take a Grade 5 theory exam, but is frustrated by the lack of theory books in Braille that is hindering her learning.

“I heard that there are Braille scores, but it’s very rare. I don’t think many VIs (visually impaired) have access to them,” lamented Adelyn.

“I asked around in my secondary school, all those that learn the piano. I even asked the teacher from the resource centre but I didn’t find anything more than I already know.”

Adelyn is very sure that theory books in Braille are available, but added “it’s just not easy to get access to them.

“I don’t know where to order the scores even.”

When the Marrakesh Treaty kicks in, the blind will be able to gain access to a greater number of materials – including those that have yet to be invented.

“With the amendments to the copyright rule, these institutions and the visually handicapped community will be able to access other formats such as electronic books and even formats that will be invented in the future,” said the IPOS director of communications and engagement.

Getting access to electronic material means the blind will be able to reproduce them into the formats that they require more easily.

As the SAVH’s operations manager pointed out: “The new formats like electronic books, will help us a lot.

“People can use the computer and any of the assistive technology to help them to convert [into Braille or audio format] or read them electronically.”

Besides giving the blind better access to various formats, the Marrakesh Treaty will also allow works to be exchanged between WIPO member states that include Singapore, the United States, China, Switzerland and Japan, without infringing copyright rules.

“Some of us would want to borrow audio books that are produced in other countries,” said SAVH’s Mr Tay who gave the example of books in the US Library of Congress that are only for US citizens.

“We can’t borrow audio books from it. So by having this treaty, the copyright policies allow us to borrow the books from the Library of Congress.”

Although 67 of the 186 WIPO member states have signed the Marrakesh Treaty so far to signal their support, none of them has implemented it yet.

And the treaty will only go into effect when it has been ratified by 20 countries.

Singapore is expected to ratify the treaty at the end of this year.

In the spirit of making positive change in the lives of the blind, IPOS is working with SAVH on various projects throughout the year and has teamed up with independent Asian music entertainment company Ocean Butterflies to offer Adelyn a one-year music course to further her musical aspirations.

The work of IPOS towards meeting the Marrakesh Treaty also means that Adelyn could soon get electronic versions of music theory books.

“[The treaty] will allow the content holder of the theory books to reproduce it and allow the visually impaired community to use it in other formats. So opportunities are much broader in the future,” said Ms Lim.

That thought alone brightened up Adelyn, whose four words, “That will be easier,” sums up the sentiments of the blind to the words of the Marrakesh Treaty when put into action.

- CNA/sf