Books
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Putting books online for the visually disabled

By Samar Farah

Imagine spending hours tediously scanning hundreds of pages and converting them to a special digital file every time you wanted to read the latest bestseller. (Not to mention the cost of the scanner itself.)

Until now, many who are visually impaired have resorted to just that. Less than 5 percent of books are available in Braille or audiotape formats, by some estimates.

But Benetech, a Silicon Valley nonprofit technology developer, has come up with Bookshare.org, a book-swapping website that brings more than 10,000 books to people with visual disabilities.

The site, which launches today, works much like Napster - except it's completely legal under a recent provision that keeps certain organizations catering to the disabled from having to pay copyright fees.

It also veers away from the Napster model by charging members a $25 installation fee and a $50 yearly subscription rate. Only those in the United States who are able to show written proof of a visual disability can qualify.

Relying entirely on individuals who are already scanning books in their homes, offices, and schools as well as volunteers willing to help scan at their Palo Alto office, Benetech CEO Jim Fruchterman expects the site's library will continue to grow at the rate of about 2,000 books a month for the next few months.

The current collection is mostly fiction and includes 3,000 books, all scanned by one man over the course of about a decade. Mr. Fruchterman says he's in the process of securing another private digital collection - this one containing up to 5,000 books.

To prevent unlawful distribution, Bookshare.org uses encryption software and electronic fingerprinting to keep track of how subscribers use the texts.

"We go to some length to make it harder to abuse copyrights," says Fruchterman, adding that while publishers are not likely to "publicly endorse" his mission, they've been extremely "cooperative."