# Am I Dreaming? George Kerscher’s Keynote at the Digital Publishing Summit 2025

I'd like to start by thanking my friends at EDRLab for hosting this conference, and for inviting me to speak today. It's a real honor.

I'm going to take you on a bit of a journey into digital publishing's roots and how it got started. So first, in 1986, I left my job as a teacher in school and went for a degree in Computer Science. I was rapidly going blind, and I had gotten my first primitive talking computer. And when I got to the university, I discovered that there were no books that were available that I could use. The analog cassette books that were available were not covering the materials covered in a Computer Science class, so there were absolutely no books available to me.

I wrote some letters to publishers of technology books and asked them for the stuff that drove their printing presses. Cybex a publisher, they had the "Mastering" series- Mastering WordPerfect, Mastering dBASE, and so on, sent me three diskettes and I put them into my computer and looked at them. And it was just gibberish, it was just garbage. Couldn't read anything. So, I put them in my drawer, continued my studies, and at Christmas break in 1987, I started to write computer software to convert that into a digital book. By the end of Christmas break, I was sitting in front of my computer and my mouth was open. I was just blown away. I had my talking computer reading this book to me at that time, I instantly recognized that this was a breakthrough technology for people who are blind.

That summer, I started Computerized Books for the Blind and Print Disabled and “print disabled” was coined. It is a term that you know is being used today. So, as I named the organization that I started, and added the term print disabled, it coined that term. And we've been using it ever since. Other publishers, including Microsoft Press, Microsoft Corp and others, sent me files and I wrote the software to convert that content, those source files into the first digital books. I copied them onto diskette and mailed them around the world, in the post. Anybody here get any of those books?

- [audience] clapping, woo hoo!

My old friends! That's great. Yeah.

- [audience] Thank you George!

People loved it! The blind people that were using computers, it grew like wildfire It was it was just tremendous. And I continued that for a while.

But now I want to move on to 1996 when organizations, libraries, the leading libraries serving the blind and print disabled around the world came together to form the Digital Accessible Information Systems Consortium, the DAISY consortium. And they had a vision that information and knowledge should be available to everybody, including people with disabilities. The audio books that were available at that time were on analog cassette, and the analog cassette was going away. It was just disappearing. It was becoming extinct. So, the first job was to develop a specification for talking books that would allow those analog books to be digitized, and we created the DAISY 2.02 specification, which became wildly popular. Later, we went on to develop DAISY 3, which included an XML markup for the textual content. So, the DAISY books had rich navigation: text and audio synchronized through SMIL synchronized multimedia integration language, and that came from the W3C. The DAISY Consortium joined the W3C and helped to establish the Web Accessibility Initiative. The WAI.

OK, in 2001 we had a specification. We were writing software to convert analog to digital, but people needed to know how to use it. And we held a technical conference, just before the Cal State University Northridge Technology for People with Disabilities conference (CSUN) that's been running for a long time. And the weekend before that conference we had the training. A technical conference for DAISY people. A couple of hundred people came, it was very well attended, and I was asked to make a speech at that time, kicking off the conference. I wanted to share the DAISY vision at that time. And so, I borrowed from Dr Martin Luther King's civil rights speech "I have a dream". And I said to the people I have a dream that someday people who are blind and print disabled will be able to have access to all the published information in the world. I have a dream that people with low vision will be able to enlarge the characters on the screen and have their computer read to them. I have a dream that people who are dyslexic will be able to change the font and spacing and colors, and have their computer read to them while the information is being highlighted. Now is the time to work together to develop this technology. I had a lot of fun doing this speech when I was there!

It was about that same time when the mainstream started to develop these handheld devices where people could read books, and everybody was doing something different. NIST in the United States started an initiative to standardize what the content of the material would look like. And about 150, 200 people came together for that first meeting in Washington, DC. And about six of us were blind. And it was very interesting to have blind people at a mainstream conference talking about digital books. And what was interesting is that we were listened to. In fact, we were leading the discussions. It didn't hurt that we had a ten-year head start on working on this technology, and that people have been reading digital books, if you're blind, they knew what they wanted, they knew what the features were, and we help drive that specification. In 1999, the first spec came out It was called the Open EBook standard, OEB. and it was, you know, a zip file with HTML and a navigation and it worked pretty good material was fully accessible.

But there was a problem. The companies that were making reading systems did not pay attention to how software, screen readers and other assistive technology access the information. So, screen readers were not working with these first-generation reading systems. And what made things worse was DRM. Digital Rights Management was added to it, that encrypted the content and locked us out. All of these materials that were being developed were not accessible. Jim Fruchterman and I (Jim founded Bookshare) and I wrote an article called the Soundproof Book talking about the injustice, the insanity, of having these books that were perfectly accessible, that blind people couldn't use. We continued to work with publishers and with the technology companies to change all of this around. We moved the OEB spec, it became, morphed into, changed into the EPUB standard. And in 2011, the EPUB 3 specification was published. We brought this to the DAISY Consortium board and the board decided to endorse that spec, adopt it, and put all of our resources into the mainstream development. So, DAISY 2.02 and DAISY 3 is still being maintained, but we didn't develop it any further. We put all of our efforts into EPUB. We also embraced web accessibility and the Web Accessibility Initiative. And, you know, we still work on, HTML and the web because that's a fabulous source of information for everybody.

The DAISY board also, asked us to test reading systems, and we took over EPUBtest.org where we would test reading systems for their accessibility with assistive technology and how well they presented information to people with disabilities. I'd be happy to announce that this past, month, we have published new test books that we will be using for the evaluation of reading systems starting tomorrow. And so, I invite any developers here that have reading systems, please ingest those books because we want to be testing them on your systems, and we publish that information and make it available to the public. Regarding the DRM piece, I'm delighted to see in the program today, work on LCP as an alternative to the proprietary DRMs that have been developed. So, I'm looking forward to that.

But it's 2024. It's one year until the EAA comes into effect. And the EAA promises that these books are going to be accessible to people with disabilities. I see in the program today that we're going to be looking at the problem of the backlist, and it's going to be a big problem. I'm looking forward to that presentation. The EAA promises that reading systems will be accessible to people with disabilities. I see in the program today a session on Thorium, which I just love. It's my favorite reading system, it's a terrific product, and we're going to certainly learn more. The EAA promises that people will be able to learn about the accessibility of the books before they're published, and we have here today, some of the editors and authors of the User Experience Accessibility Guide for Accessible Metadata. We got Gregorio, Gautier, and Avneesh here and others that are working on this, and it will make it very clear how to present accessibility information to users before they buy. And we want libraries and bookstores to display this information to people. The EAA also promises that the catalogs will be accessible, and that the distribution mechanisms, the way to purchase and obtain the books will be accessible.

Am I dreaming? Am I hallucinating? I don't think so! This is real and my dreams are coming true. We're counting down to the EAA. The DAISY Consortium has announced a series of webinars that will be starting in June and running throughout the year, but I view this conference as the kickoff to that countdown to the EAA. There's a lot of sessions that are fascinating. There's a session on AI, which has the potential to change a lot of things and make the world better for people with disabilities. I'm a little afraid about what AI might do as well, so I think the disability community has to be vigilant and work together with everybody to make sure that that technology evolves in a way that will work for everybody. So, we have an interesting program ahead of us today. There's a lot of sessions that will touch on the areas that I covered in this presentation.

So, I again want to thank EDRLab for inviting me up here today. And I hope all of you have a wonderful conference and make sure to work together and collaborate to provide the best possible reading experience for everybody, including people who are blind and print disabled. Thank you.

- [audience] applause