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After the New Kindle App for iOS, What Remains to Be Done?

On May 1, Amazon released a new Kindle iOS application for Apple devices. While this new app takes advantage of the inherent accessibility of Apple products to afford the blind better access to Kindle content than in the past, more remains to be done.

Amazon continues to market a program called Whispercast to school districts nationwide with the stated goal of bringing Kindle content into every K-12 classroom in the country. Before that can happen, however, the accessibility of Kindle content for blind students must be truly equal to that offered to their sighted peers. This is not yet the reality.

While the new Kindle iOS app is a good first step, significant accessibility problems prevent blind users of the app from accessing all of the educational features and benefits of Kindle content that are available to sighted users. For example, a blind user using the new Kindle app on an iPad will encounter the following barriers:

- **Footnotes/Endnotes and Table of Contents**– Internal links cannot be activated by a blind user of the new Kindle iOS app. This means that a blind user cannot access any footnotes or endnotes, and cannot use a Table of Contents when that Table of Contents is located in-text rather than in the “Go To” Menu.
- **Selecting Text** – A blind user of the new app is expected to double-tap and hold to select text on the page. However, this method is at best deeply flawed and at worst unusable. When a user attempts to double-tap and hold to select text, about one-third of the time the page changes, one-third of the time the menus appear, and one-third of the time a word is selected. But even when a word is actually selected, it is almost never the word that the VoiceOver cursor is highlighting. It is usually a word on the same line, but if a user has a page full of text, it can be difficult if not impossible to then find the actual word she wishes to select.
- **Note Taking and Highlighting** –A blind user is able to take notes and highlight passages if she is able to successfully select the text she wishes to annotate or highlight. (See “selecting Text” above). However, the note taking feature merely leaves a note in the list of associated information in the “Go To” menu. This means that a blind user who is later re-reading the annotated text will not be aware that her note is actively there. In other words, she may not remember that she annotated or highlighted a particular passage and will not be notified about her annotation as she re-reads the given passage. Nor will she be notified

that a given passage has been highlighted or annotated by another person, such as a teacher or another student.

- **Dictionary** – Again, a blind user can access the Dictionary function, but only if she can actually select the particular word she wishes to define. (See “Selecting Text” above).
- **Braille** – There are several significant problems with using the new Kindle iOS app in conjunction with a Braille display, diminishing its utility for many Braille readers and virtually all deaf-blind users. First, reading the text itself on a Braille display paired with an iPad is buggy at best. It is fully possible for a Braille user to crash the access to Braille in the app by trying to move to the top or bottom of a page. If this is attempted, a user may find that the Braille display no longer pans, and the only way she will get Braille function back is to close the book she is reading (using the screen) and open a new book. Turning pages also seems to remedy the behavior, although strangely the Braille is about a page behind the voice if speech has not been silenced. Second, the text cannot be navigated with a Braille display with the same granularity as with speech. This is because a Braille display paired with the iOS app sees the entire page as a single chunk of text. Thus, a Braille user can turn pages and begin reading at the top of each page, but she is unable to navigate through the page using the rotor commands that are available to speech users and thus has no ability to move by word or line. Third, during our testing, the Braille display and speech would lock up when trying to navigate through menus on an iPad. If it is possible to use menus successfully with Braille, it is buggy, at least on some devices, and can get users locked into a state they cannot exit without crashing the app. Therefore, deaf-blind users may not be able to access the Kindle app. Finally, because there is no equivalent for “double-tap and hold” on the Braille display, all commands that require this gesture, including selecting text, highlighting, annotating, and looking up words in the dictionary, are unavailable to Braille display users.

In addition to the specific shortcomings of the new Kindle iOS app explained above, it should be remembered that nearly all other means of accessing Kindle content are even less accessible to blind users. A blind person wishing to read Kindle content should be able to access that content regardless of which device and platform she happens to own. Amazon still has a long way to go to make its devices and other platforms accessible.

For more information about the inaccessibility of Kindle e-books and Whispercast please visit <https://nfb.org/kindle-books>.