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FOLLOW-UP ON E-READER ACCESSIBILITY

January 14, 2010 by Jolynne Lyon

In an earlier post, this blog reported on accessibility issues swirling around Amazon's Kindle e-reader.

Since then, the Department of Justice has reached an agreement with four universities regarding the device. It states that they will finish a pilot program that used the e-reader in classrooms, but they will stop using the Kindle DX and similar e-readers when the project ends—until the devices are fully accessible to blind students.

The e-reader comes with a text-to-speech function, but its menu and navigation controls are not spoken, making it inaccessible to people who cannot read text. The Kindle's inaccessibility prompted a lawsuit against Arizona State University, which was one of a few universities participating in the pilot program. A student who is blind joined with the National Federation of the Blind and the American Council of the Blind, suing the university.

The Justice Department reached an agreement with Arizona State and the three other universities this week. "In passing the ADA and the recent ADA Amendments Act, Congress found that individuals with disabilities were uniquely disadvantaged in critical areas, including education," the statement from the Justice Department reads. "It is a core priority of the Civil Rights Division to strengthen and expand the educational opportunities for individuals with disabilities."

In a separate issue, Amazon has now left it to publishers to decide whether speech functions will be available for books, since the Author's Guild objects to the technology. The guild argues that the text-to-speech infringes on audio book copyrights.