

The importance of Braille literacy

In 2010, the Canadian National Institute for the Blind almost closed its library because of funding issues. Yet some argue that those who can't read Braille are akin to illiterates, writes Katie Engelhart.



In January 2010, the [Canadian National Institute for the Blind threatened](#) to close the doors of its library. CNIB reported that its facility, which holds the country's largest stock of [Braille](#) books, had been starved of federal funds and could no longer afford to circulate material to the [836,000 Canadians](#) with significant vision loss. The library [holds](#) hard-to-come-by material, including a 72-volume Braille dictionary, which CNIB staff fondly refer to as "the pocket edition".

Some argue that technological innovations - digital "talking players", audio books, and large-print computer settings - have [rendered](#) Braille, that centuries-old system of raised dots, obsolete. Braille texts, in comparison, are expensive to produce and distribute.

Yet others, like the [US National Federation of the Blind's](#) director Mark Riccobono, [charge](#) that those who cannot read Braille are akin to illiterates. One study, conducted by Dr Ruby Ryles of Louisiana Tech University, [found](#) that children who do not learn Braille score significantly lower than sighted students on standardised tests. They are also less likely to be employed than Braille

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readers. For others, like CNIB library user Myra Rodrigues, it is more a question of magic. “Braille makes everything come alive,” she [told](#) me in 2010; audio books do not.

In 2011, the government of Canada [announced](#) a grant of over \$7m to keep the CNIB library afloat. The grant was a one-time offer.

If depriving the visually-impaired of access to Braille makes them *less* literate - and thus, conceivably, less expressive - can this dispute over library funding be cast as a free speech issue?

Published on: July 6, 2012