

# **University Library and Accessibility in the Remote Assistance to Users with Sensorial Disability**

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## **Abstract**

*In a context marked by mandatory social distancing as a measure of fighting the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19), the Universidade Federal do Maranhão (UFMA) library had to intensify offering their services remotely. Therefore, we analyzed how these services are disseminated through the website for the users with sensorial disabilities. We performed a documental analysis, evaluated the library's website through the "Web for all movement" organization, and through direct observation of the services made available by the library's website. Accessibility and communication problems for users with sensory disabilities included the inexistence of audio description for blind users and the interpretation of the Brazilian Sign Language by the avatar, which does not meet the informational necessities of deaf users. Given the observed facts, we found that UFMA's library has to articulate improvements regarding the rules of communication accessibility aiming for information democratization, autonomy and promotion of social and educational inclusion of the disabled person.*

**Keywords:** university library; sensory disabled users; web; accessibility

## **1. Introduction**

In face of the global pandemic scenario caused by the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19), on March 23rd 2020 the University Library of the *Universidade Federal do Maranhão* (UFMA) began to remotely assist its users. This assistance included providing guidance on the standards of the Brazilian Association of Technical Standards (ABNT), issuing no-debt statements; clearing book rental fines; elaborating catalog

cards; and assessing scientific databases.

Within the context of the services provided, we observed that sensory-disabled users were not covered, more specifically blind or low sight, deaf or hearing disabled, and deaf-blind users.

Therefore, the interest in this matter aims to contribute to the social and educational inclusion of disabled people, and to bring visibility to their rights for informational and communicational accessibility, as foreseen in art. 2º of Law 10.098 (2000). This law assures accessibility as a possibility and condition to the safe and autonomous use of spaces, furniture, urban equipment, buildings, transports, information and communication, including its systems and technologies, and other services and facilities, private or public, both in the urban and rural zones, by the person with disabilities or reduced mobility (Law 10.098/2000). Against this background, we question whether the remote assistance provided by UFMA's University Library via the internet is accessible to users with sensorial disabilities, and propose to answer this question by carrying out a documental research, evaluating the library's website through the organization "*Movimento web para todos*" (Web for all Movement), and directly observing the services provided by the library's website.

It should be highlighted that the university library's main role is to provide support for teaching, research and extension activities with the precision and speed required by academia. Thus, to meet its users' demands, the library needs to evolve together with the university, and contribute to making information increasingly democratic and to promoting social inclusion.

## **2. University library and full accessibility**

The university library is a tertiary teaching institution that meets the information needs of university faculty, students, and staff, providing support to teaching, research and extension activities. It can be both a single library, or several ones organized as a system or network (Cunha & Cavalcanti, 2008). As a democratic, opinion-making and knowledge-producing space, it must guarantee that all its users have an access free of architectural, communicational, and behavioral barriers, aiming to break prejudices, segregation, and exclusion concepts.

In the library context, accessibility is a fundamental process to meet individual rights and to promote citizenship. Hence, it is necessary to identify and eliminate barriers that may prevent anyone from performing its social roles. The presence of disabled students in academia is a challenge to be faced by tertiary education institutions, and thus by libraries. Therefore, these must be reorganized to welcome, assist and provide these students with access to information, as well to create new services that are accessible to them.

Therefore, it is up to the university library to provide, besides the accessibility and adaptation in the physical space, the promotion of information to members of the university community, including those with any kind of disability, without discrimination. Thus, it is important to meet the specific needs, by offering access to information in different ways, contributing to the intellectual development and citizenship. (Stroporo & Moreira, 2016, p.215).

Thus, focusing on the psychosocial dimension of accessibility in University Libraries means recognizing the role accessible structures play on the life of its users, both inside and outside university. This includes

feelings that may both strengthen or weaken the emotional structure of individuals, resulting in adequate or inadequate behaviors regarding their professional future. It is up to librarians to constantly search for inclusive practices on behalf of people with disabilities.

An accessible and inclusive library works beyond the perspective of access to the collection, but also the physical space itself within the organization, aiming to provide adequate assistance conditions. Therefore, these spaces and their staff should be valued. The librarian is the one who is mainly responsible for the library's quality, good service, and access to all its possible users.

Librarians' commitment to contributing to an inclusive society, consolidating the accessibility and inclusion of disabled students in university libraries can be achieved through actions such as: identifying weaknesses in the assistance to users with disabilities; proposing the acquisition of assistive technologies for informational accessibility; eliminating architectural/physical barriers that may hinder the movement of users with physical disabilities or low mobility, among others (Silva, Costa & Crivellari, 2014).

We highlight that, in 1931, the librarian and mathematician Ranganathan already cared about assisting any kind of user, as seen in his book "The Five Laws of Library Science", in which he writes about the second law – "every reader his/her book" –, emphasizing that all individuals have equal rights to information access, i.e. the same opportunities, "[...] However, the Second Law will treat all as equal and offer to each its book. It will scrupulously obey to the principle of equality of opportunities regarding books, teaching, and entertainment". (Ranganathan, 2009, p.92).

In this perspective, we highlight the blind user, who relies on printed books being written in Braille in order to have access to them, in addition to the necessary information, so that they can access a library safely and autonomously. In this specific case, this includes tactile flooring, adapted computers, marked shelves, etc.

Based on the discussed facts, it is up to university library staff to identify the needs and to guarantee that their products and services are aligned with their users, safeguarding the equal access to information and knowledge (Stroporo & Moreira, 2016). Librarians must know the singularities of each user to provide access to information in a precise and coherent manner. In this sense, we emphasize that making physical and virtual environments accessible is not enough. It is also necessary to provide information and knowledge that deconstruct unfavorable social behaviors regarding people with disabilities.

Social attitudes, such as pursuing good quality education for everyone, fighting against prejudice and stigmas, raising awareness about the role each individual has in society, and constantly debating about universal human rights are of great importance to the construction and strengthening of a fair and inclusive society, and of all of its citizens (Souza, 2013).

Aspects of full accessibility should be included in the planning of university libraries so that their services and products, as well as their physical and virtual spaces, are available and accessible to the human diversity, contributing to the consolidation of a society that respects each individual's specific needs.

### **3. Communicational accessibility in the university library: the inclusion of users with sensorial disability during the pandemic**

At the beginning of 2020, society was surprised by a pandemic caused by Covid-2019, which determined social distancing measures and the restriction of everyday activities worldwide. In face of this new scenario,

the importance of access to information through virtual media was made even more evident and necessary to the safety, protection, care, and guarantee of life.

Information for all is a right envisaged by the Brazilian Federal Constitution of 1988, and it is fundamental for a democratic society. However, many people are still excluded from the communicational and informational process due to several barriers, among which are technological ones. For those with disabilities, the lack of and/or poor accessibility in communication and information hinders the access to goods and services everyone is entitled to.

To better approach the accessibility issue, we mention the Brazilian Law for Inclusion (LBI), Law no. 13.146 (2015) from July 6, which defines the six barriers faced by persons with disabilities in Brazil, namely: urban, architectural, in transports, in communication, in information, behavioral, and technological (BRASIL, 2015). Therefore, considering the university is a democratic, opinion-making and knowledge-producing space, it should contribute towards guaranteeing the rights of everyone with access to the institution, promoting full accessibility in academia.

In the university context, the library is mainly responsible for providing bibliographic, documentary and informational infrastructure to support academic activities, centering its objectives on the needs of its users by providing services, access to information, reading material, and other available resources, all of which are tools of society. It should support teaching, research, and extension programs, addressing the profile of each user and guaranteeing an accessible space. The library, as an inseparable part of the institution, must be seen as a diversity, equity and citizenship model.

In this sense, the library is an important ally for fighting the oppression and discrimination imposed by society, which insists on putting the person with disability aside. As highlighted by Moraes (2010), fighting this type of ideological domination in pursuit of social emancipation, and thinking of new ways to build existential territories where it is possible to undermine a certain ordainment – a principle of normalization, which makes the disability exist as a lack, failure, inefficiency – is indispensable to build a collective and plural society.

The impacts of the pandemic reinforce the need for continuous actions to promote, defend, and guarantee the rights of persons with disabilities, including the right for information. This is especially important, since the risk of contamination increases as a consequence of communication barriers, i.e., “the probability of someone being infected with Covid-19 increases three times due to lack of communication accessibility” (Gertner & Vasconcellos, 2020, p.21).

Therefore, information should be accessible and egalitarian, being a responsibility of the library to provide a physical and virtual space that can be explored by anyone, considering one’s specificities and the individualized pursuit of knowledge. Thus, the librarian needs to invest in inclusive practices on behalf of persons with disabilities. An accessible and inclusive library works beyond the perspective of access to the collection, but also makes all its services available in a democratic way. The librarian must show favorable behaviors in the context of social inclusion, aiming to provide good assistance, access to sociocultural knowledge and other services provided by the university library to all possible users.

Because of the pandemic, the on-site assistance at libraries was suspended, and these started to exclusively offer their services remotely. It should be noted that libraries must be prepared to offer the same level of quality in both digital and on-site access. In this sense, the library must be adequate to the needs of its

public, and not the opposite. This is valid for society as a whole, as well emphasized by Sasaki (2010):

It is up to society to eliminate all architectural, programmatic, methodological, instrumental, communicational, and behavioral barriers so that disabled people may access services, places, information, and necessary goods for their personal, social, educational, and professional development. (p.45).

From this comes the need for the librarian to know its users' particularities and demands. Indeed, these may enable them to define goals and strategies to provide services and products as envisaged in the article no. 69 of the Brazilian Law for Inclusion, regarding the provision of correct and clear information on the different products and services offered by any communication means used, including in virtual environments, containing the correct specification on quantity, quality and characteristics.

Aiming to better understand users with sensorial disabilities at UFMA's university library, it is necessary to present some of their relevant characteristics for librarians to consider when providing services and products:

Information for blind, low-sight and/or monocular users are generally provided through the Braille writing system, audio description, screen reader software, and/or larger font sizes; deaf, hearing impaired and/or deaf-blind users access information through the Brazilian Sign Language (LIBRAS), lipreading, images, captions, and the Tadoma method.

This knowledge on sensorial disability may provide guidance for the librarian to provide a more accessible, humanized, and inclusive assistance to its users. Besides the general information on the types of disabilities, it is important for librarians to know each user's particularities, which can be obtained through conversations.

Planning is also fundamental for disabled users not to be excluded from the informational context during the pandemic. Adopting accessible digital tools must be considered before and after the return of on-site activities, as it provides the means of access and participation by expanding the accessibility resources linked to website and social media content in a safe manner.

#### **4. UFMA's library website and the remote assistance to users with sensorial disability**

The internet is currently one of the most commonly used tools by institutions for providing information and, in the scenario of suspended on-site activities as a social distancing measure, the use of digital platforms becomes an important and strategic way for the maintenance of their services. To preserve their mission, libraries intensified the provision of services and goods through digital media.

At UFMA's university library it was no different: from March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2020 on, activities started to be exclusively remote. Services included guidance on ABNT's standards, issuing no-debt statements, clearing library book rental fines, elaborating and issuing catalog cards through the official library's electronic mail, sharing information on the deadlines of rented information material through the library's website (<https://portais.ufma.br/PortalUnidade/dib/>), free access to legal and health platforms, tutorials on how to access scientific databases, besides charity campaigns to provide basic food baskets to people in vulnerable situations, and a virtual reading group promoted by the sectorial library of the Human Sciences Center.

We highlight the initiative of the Library Board (DIB) in creating a DIB/UFMA *Instagram* profile with the

objective of presenting users with essential research tips and promoting the access to the library’s website. UFMA’s library defines its expectation as offering a dynamic and modern assistance to its users, with a focus on accessibility and services that favor items such as agility and autonomy, offering self-service totems for title lends, returns and renovations, for example (Universidade Federal do Maranhão [UFMA], 2020a). Considering this, we contextualize the remote assistance and access to information by users with sensorial disabilities provided through the library’s website. According to the Accessibility Board (DACE), there are 106 students with sensorial disabilities at UFMA, among which 77 belong to the visual disability category, and 29 to the hearing disability category.

Among the many obstacles, one of the most detrimental to disabled persons is related to the information access. Therefore, the current concern is guaranteeing accessibility principles, including in the digital media. An accessible internet is available to people regardless of their limitations and differences, in which digital technologies are means that make for a more inclusive society (Sousa, 2018).

Internet accessibility implies that websites and portals are planned so that all people can receive, understand, navigate, and interact effectively with all pages. When there are interface barriers, users may feel lost and unsatisfied, as if they are wasting time searching for the desired path and are, many times, unsuccessful in accessing information: “Without accessibility in the internet, people with disabilities and reduced mobility lose autonomy and must rely on other people’s will to execute simple and essential tasks” (Movimento Web Para Todos, 2017, non-paginated).

Therefore, it is necessary to think about means that may contribute towards everyone having opportunities for accessing information, since when we understand what are the barriers hindering the disabled user’s right to come and go, along with its pluralities, it is easier to put communication accessibility into practice. In this perspective, we requested an evaluation of UFMA’s and UFMA’s university library websites to the organization **Web Para Todos** with the objective of verifying which aspects need to be improved and, consequently, tackling access barriers faced by users with sensorial disabilities as seen in figure 1.

LIBRARY		UFMA	
Keyboard navigation	YES	Keyboard navigation	YES
Shortcut links	YES	Shortcut links	YES
Image descriptions	NO	Image descriptions	<b>NEEDS IMPROVEMENT</b>
Color contrast	YES	Color contrast	YES
Page language	YES	Page language	YES
Libras	<b>NEEDS IMPROVEMENT</b>	Libras	<b>NEEDS IMPROVEMENT</b>
Accessibility page	YES	Accessibility page	YES

Figure 1. Evaluation on the accessibility of UFMA’s and its library’s websites  
 Source: Sá (2020).

Figure 1 audio description: Rectangular-shaped image with four columns. In the upper region, there are

two horizontal red bars, inside of which are written, in white, the words “Library” and “UFMA”. Below the “Library” bar are two columns, the first with a white background and black font, and the second with a white font and green, red, and yellow backgrounds. The information in these two columns are as follows: keyboard navigation-yes, shortcut links-yes, image descriptions-yes, color contrast-yes, page language-yes, Libras-needs improvement, accessibility page- yes. Below the “UFMA” bar are two columns, the first with a white background and black font, and the second with a white font and green and yellow backgrounds. The information in these two columns are as follows: keyboard navigation-yes, shortcut links-yes, image descriptions-needs improvement, color-contrast-yes, page language-yes, Libras-needs improvement, accessibility page-yes.

Considering these data, we verified that the lack of communication through audio description and the LIBRAS are the main factors contributing to these websites not complying with the article no. 63 of the Brazilian Law for Inclusion demands, which deals with the obligation of accessibility in websites kept by companies located or with commercial representation in the country, or by government bodies, to be used by the disabled person, securing them access to the available information, according to the best accessibility practices and standards adopted internationally (Lei nº 13.146/2015).

Regarding the library, we found no image descriptions. Without this audio description, users with vision and other kinds of disabilities cannot conduct an efficient research on the library’s digital collection. According to Motta and Romeu Filho (2010), an audio description can be defined as:

[...] a linguistic mediation activity, a mode of intersemiotic translation, which transforms the visual into verbal, uncovering bigger possibilities of access to culture and information, contributing to the social, cultural and educational inclusion. Besides visually impaired people, audio description also expands the understanding of people with intellectual disabilities, the elderly and the dyslexic. (p.36).

The library must guarantee the accessibility both in physical and digital spaces, with the objective of making its services and products available to all users while considering the characteristics of each so that the information can be transmitted in an accessible and democratic manner.

We understand that the information made available by the UFMA’s library website should be directed towards the entire public comprising the university context. In this specific case, users with visual disabilities, have no access opportunity due to the lack of image audio descriptions. We use the “tutorial on how to access scientific databases” in figure 2 as an example.



Figure 2. Tutorial on how to access scientific databases

Source: UFMA (2020b)



Figure 2 audio description: Rectangular-shaped image. On the left side over a red background the words “Access scientific databases from home” are written with a white-colored font and, below these, the words “click and see the remote access tutorial” are written with a yellow font. A bit further down a computer screen with a red and white background is shown. On the right side over a white background are the logos from UFMA and the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES’) portal. The library must be careful when spreading information, as it is paramount that its services are offered in multiple formats to reach the entire public. The cliché “a picture is worth a thousand words” certainly meets the needs of many people, but it only guarantees information for all with an audio description. As explained by Sonza, Santarosa and Conforto (2008), in case it is necessary to provide image files in Portable Document Format (PDF), other formats should also be included, such as TXT and/or DOC, with all of the non-text content properly described/adapted. This enables the access with text browsers, besides the complete understanding of all elements present in the file by users with visual disabilities.

A reasonable initiative was the creation of an *Instagram* profile to support services developed by the library, enabling the optimization of important information as a basis for students learning. This is in agreement with Pereira, Borges, Batista and Teles (2019), who report that “social media may have important roles in the learning process” (p.17), and, once again, we notice the need for audio description in posts, the lack of which excludes users with visual disabilities from this informational context, as observed in figure 3.



Figure 3. UFMA’s library Instagram profile  
 Source: Universidade Federal do Maranhão (2020c)

Figure 3 audio description: Square-shaped image. In the upper left corner, over a grey background written with a black font is “Today we have...”. Right below it is a computer screen with the words “Normalization tips” written over it with a blue font. On the right side are the words: “same-author document citation and we don’t know how to properly cite them in the text. So, we are going to help!” written in a black font. In the lower corner over a white background are the words “Ufma\_dib. Follow our normalization tips”. Regarding deaf users, the evaluation is defined as “needs improvement” for the Libras communication. This was identified both at UFMA’s and at the library’s websites, indicating that communication barriers still exist. In this specific case, we mention: lag when opening the VLibras software; signs that do not represent Maranhão state’s regionalisms, and fingerspelling words to which there are already signs, as demonstrated in figure 4 regarding the translation for the word “library”:





Figure 4. Libras translation for the word “library”

Source: Universidade Federal do Maranhão (2020d)

Figure 4 audio description: Rectangular-shaped image. In the upper region, over the red background to the left, the letters “DIB” are written with a white font, and next to it is UFMA’s logo. In the lower region, over a white background, there is a title written in red letters: “Education, work, dedication, merit and conquest”. On the left side there is an avatar, and right above it the word “library” is written. Right below are two avatars signaling the word “library” in Libras.

For the deaf user, access to information and communication implies specificities that must be observed to guarantee their full participation in the library. In this sense, the Decree n° 5.626 (2005), of December 22nd, in item IV, emphasizes that:

Federal teaching institutions, from basic to higher education, must provide its deaf students with Libras-Portuguese translators and interpreters in the classroom and other educational spaces, as well as equipment and technologies that enable the access to communication, information and education.

When the library provides information in several formats, user potential increases, turning it into an inclusive space that hosts and respects its public’s diversity. This is exactly the objective: making knowledge accessible, broadened, and democratic.

The current social distancing scenario challenges librarians into thinking of practices that debunk the invisibility of the user with disabilities, since the access to information enables these users to break out of another type of distancing caused by prejudice and discrimination. As discussed by Santos (2020), the limitations imposed by society on people with disabilities make them feel like being in a permanent state of quarantine, that is, social distancing. Therefore, the university library considerably benefits people with disabilities by providing its services through an accessible website. Regarding people with sensorial disabilities, **Web for All**’s objectives are that:

**People with low sight capacity, who may or may not use screen magnifier software, have no issues with contrast or with identifying and clicking hyperlinks, bars and buttons or with increasing font**

**sizes; blind people who use screen reader software may navigate easily through the website, fill out forms, activate buttons through keyboard commands and even access information available in images through audio description texts; deaf or hearing impaired people may access information in audio or video with transcriptions, subtitles and translations in Libras.**

For the university library to become truly accessible, librarians must be motivated, involved in the inclusion process and, most of all, properly trained to deal with diversity, with the needs of its users with disabilities and thus contribute to these students' education.

Therefore, we present some recommendations that may guide librarians in the process of including users with sensorial disabilities: in-text hyperlinks must indicate the link's destination. We recommend avoiding expressions such as: "Click here", "Learn more", and "post". The instructions should be: "Access the website (website's name)" and "Learn more in the portal (portal's name)", since visually impaired people navigate through links only; all non-text digital content must contain a description of the image (photos, illustrations, tables, graphs, gifs); there is a simplified method that directs the audio description: shape + person + scenery + context + action; in the audio description, the information must be direct, and it is necessary to avoid redundancy (pleonasm) in the description such as "the photo illustrates"; adjectives representing judgements (pretty, ugly, good, bad, etc.) are not part of the description; video content must be accompanied by an audio description; all video content with spoken text must be followed by a subtitled version (for deaf people literate in Portuguese). Besides subtitles, it is essential that all content also includes a Libras window (preferentially with an interpreter-translator) for the non-oral deaf; audio content (e.g. podcasts) must be transcribed into text; texts should have a simpler structure, with short phrases and paragraphs, direct order, active voice, without figures of speech or unusual terms.

During quarantine, the virtual environment intensified the opportunity for "new learnings and reflections that lead us to rediscover new fragilities and our roles within a society" (Martins, 2020, p.251). The live streams and webinars carried out through social media and YouTube are digital platforms favoring the training of librarians by developing accessible behaviors in the library.

In this sense, we highlight the university library from the *Universidade Federal do Ceará* (UFC), which presented live streams of themes that contribute to the strengthening of a more democratic library through the YouTube channel "*Seção de Atendimento à Pessoa com Deficiência (Biblioteca de Ciências Humanas (BCH) – UFC)*". The librarian Clemilda Santos disseminated important information in the live streams, namely: "Audio description in mediating imagery information: the librarian's role", "Public accessibility policies for libraries", "Accessibility to information: account of experiences in UFC's library system", "Deaf art: multiple looks", and "Library in action during quarantine: resources and services for disabled students" (This and other live streams are available through the hyperlink: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC-gmZZRqRWIXH2g1zT4GP5Q>). As contextualized by Santos (2020), the pandemic and quarantine are revealing possible alternatives to societies, so that they may adapt to new ways of living.

## 5. Conclusions

The scenario of social and/or physical distancing may represent a definitive push for the university library

to be reshaped into a space where inequality and exclusion are not allowed. Users with sensorial disabilities cannot be cast aside in this moment that requires a fast response from the library in the sense of guaranteeing, with safety, the continuity of its activities.

Considering the motto “The university that we want”, UFMA’s library plays an important role in supporting teaching, research and extension activities through its collection and services. Therefore, full accessibility must be included in this perspective, aiming to eliminate barriers regarding informational access of disabled students in tertiary education.

Access to information is a social right envisaged by the constitution. Therefore, guaranteeing this right is related to the democratization of society, and to the exercise of citizenship (Martins, 2002). In this sense, UFMA’s university library must create accessible services to users with sensorial disabilities, so that they can access all services provided.

Against this background, it is essential that UFMA’s university library develops informational and communicational accessibility measures through services and products that include the informational specificities and necessities of users with disabilities. Therefore, digital and assistive technologies promote the autonomy of users with disabilities in the library’s virtual spaces.

We expect that, based on the understanding that all persons are equal in their rights, and that society should be egalitarian, improvements should be pursued so that no one feels socially, educationally, and professionally excluded. Therefore, the library should be a space of inclusion, socialization, and knowledge, favoring the construction of a more righteous and fraternal society, compliant to human rights.

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