THE BRAILLISTS FOUNDATION

WORLD BRAILLE DAY 2021

Hello, everyone, I'm [UNSURE OF NAME] from Belgium and the reason why I do love Braille is because I do remember the spelling of certain words which I would otherwise forget very easy.

Braille makes me a better writer. I find I can work in more detail if I'm working with Braille just because I find it easier to read things with my hands and also because of how things like punctuation are presented so briefly.

My Braille related memory was that when I learned to read Braille properly, the first thing I read was the poem called A Catechism of Polish Child. Klaudia from Stoke-on-Trent.

Hello from New Zealand. My name is Julie Woods and in 2001 I learned Braille as a 35 year old adult. I fell in love with it so much, I now have a dream to write the names of 1,000,000 people in Braille.

My name is Kevin and Braille is important to me because it teaches you how to spell, how words are written and sentences composed which will really help for your future education and career.

Hello, my name is Rachel Fletcher and I go to New College, Worcester. I read and write in Braille.

Braille is very important to me. I use it to read and write books, to learn languages and to access the world around me. It is the most important but special thing in my life.

Braille is super important to use in everyday life, from knowing where you're going to reading government documents and also even helping during meetings for employment.

For me, Braille is important because it gives literacy and independence, from simple things like labelling a CD right the way through to advance mathematics or learning a piece of music. It's all available in these amazing six dots.

Braille is very important to me because it's my primary reading medium and I don't have to constantly go back and check how things are spelled.

I was privileged to start learning Braille when I was three and I've used Braille to read and memorise music, to read in new languages, to make sense of maths at school, to take notes in class, to prompt myself during presentations, to type with a Braille screen, input in my phone and much more.

I've been a Braille reader since I was two years old. I can't imagine what it would have been like to grow up without the pleasure of opening a book and really getting to enjoy that in the way I do with Braille.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Hello, everyone, and welcome to our first event of the new year. We as the Braillists Foundation are really, really excited to welcome you to 2021 and also to our event for World Braille Day where we celebrate Louis Braille and the contribution he gave to us as blind people with the reading and writing code Braille. So today we're going to chat to a few people who use Braille in their lives, particularly in their careers or studies and we're going to talk about how Braille has benefited them and how Braille may be of use to the blind community in future because there's lots of conversations that take place around, well, how relevant is Braille now we have technology, do blind people even still use it and we really want to talk about that and look forward to where Braille may develop in future. On our panel today, we have Saima Akhtar. Saima is a recent university graduate and she used Braille very heavily at university and will be able to talk more about her experiences with that. We also have Gary O'Donoghue who is political correspondent for the BBC. He spends much of his time out in the United States which I'm sure is very interesting given the political situation over there, certainly at the moment. We also have Doctor Fred Reid who was head of the history department at the University of Warwick and who is also a Braille user. So we have an interesting group of people and I just want to say thank you to all of you for joining us.

So I think to start with, it might be good to get our panel, as it were, to talk about themselves, maybe just in two or three sentences. So I'm going to call on each panellist individually to introduce themselves and maybe say what they would like to share about themselves, as opposed to what I've shared. So can I start with Saima?

Saima Akhtar: Hi, I'm Saima. I've graduated with an English Literature and Creative Writing degree and the plan is to go into teaching and I genuinely don't think I would have got through my degree without Braille.

Holly Scott-Gardner: That's great, and Gary.

Gary O'Donoghue: I'm Gary O'Donoghue. I'm a journalist and I've been a journalist all my working career. I use Braille every day. Like Saima, I don't think I could do what I do without Braille. I started learning it when I was eight years old, having been partially sighted up to that point and started off learning print. I found that the way I use Braille has evolved quite significantly in the last, I'd say, ten or 20 years which maybe we can talk about as a combination skill with speech output and using it in different ways. To me it is essential.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Thank you and we'll definitely talk about that some more. Do we have Fred?

Fred Reid: Yes, I'm here, Chair. I'm Fred Reid. I'm ancient, I'm 84 nearly. I never thought I'd live to this age. I went blind when I was 14 and learned Braille at that time and was dependent on Braille for my early education, until I went to university. After that, a bit like Gary, I started using readers reading print to me in combination with Braille because there weren't many Braille texts in relation to history which I was studying. Then I got a job at Warwick University in 1966. Braille was extremely important for lecturing. It's practically the only way, I think, that you can use lecture notes, certainly if you're doing any extensive quotation. Then the digital revolution came in for me in the 90s really. I was aware of course before that but it became effective for me in the 90s and since then Braille has dropped a long way down in my access to information, mainly for the reason that I'm not a quick Braille reader and I think that's one of the things we might discuss is why do reading speeds vary so greatly. I never get much above 90 words a minute and I'm far below that now. For that reason I've made much more use of digital technology for access to information because I look and listen to stuff at about 350 words a minute quite easily. So there's a big imbalance there. I still greatly value Braille. I call it auxiliary Braille in my case.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes, I think many of us probably can tell stories about that, how Braille is something that complements what we do or we use it in conjunction with other things and I think that's important to acknowledge that whilst Braille is vital in many ways, it's not the only tool we have and that is something important. So I guess my first question to our group is how do you use Braille currently, if you're using it right now. So I know particularly both Saima and Gary said they can't do what they do without Braille so how are you using Braille presently? I don't know who we want to start with. Do we perhaps want to start with Saima to talk a bit about university?

Saima Akhtar: Well, like other people have said, it's certainly not the only way to access information and you do definitely need other ways of accessing information. Speech software was incredibly important as well, in terms of accessing lecture notes and things like that but the reason I say I really couldn't do what I did without Braille was because I used it as a form of just kind of being able to read back over what I'd written. So a lot of my course was essay based, being English Literature it was all just essays and it was important for me to be able to actually physically read it back rather than hear it back because I think in terms of spelling which other people have talked about, you're able to pick up on things a lot more accurately than you would with, say, speech. So I think for that reason it was important. Also I felt like the use of technology alone can exclude you. So I think in terms of, you're in a seminar, you're asked to read a piece of text, well, you can't do that if you've just got technology, no Braille, because it's the technology reading it so you get left out. I think that can exclude you in a way.

Holly Scott-Gardner Yes, that's a really good point. I like both of the things you've said about having access to the actual text itself in terms of things like punctuation but also being able to read out loud and I think whilst it's possible to read from a screen reader, you've got to have your headphones in and things like that and perhaps reading from Braille is more sociable and gives you that access to the classroom environment which is definitely something important to acknowledge. What about for you, Gary? You said you use Braille in your job as a journalist.

Gary O'Donoghue Yes, so I use Braille a lot for reading out what I would call scripts or tracks which are effectively pieces of writing that I've done, quite short in many cases for news bulletins of 40 or 45 seconds long and going into a studio, usually, when we were working in the office, printing them off on an embosser, taking it into the studio, ringing up London and reading it so it can be recorded in London then played out on a news bulletin. I do various versions of that, sometimes longer pieces of a minute or two minutes, sometimes what we call a television track which is when you hear a reporter doing the voiceover for a piece on the television, that's him or her sitting in an edit suite with an editor, recording their voice, cutting them to the pictures. Particularly, actually, in that circumstance, the ability to change the words that you're laying is incredibly important because sometimes the picture editor will cut the sequence and your words don't fit. They either don't fit because they don't reflect the pictures properly or just the sequence of shots means you've got too many words so you need to lose some words. So in those circumstances in particular, I will take my script in on a Braille display, on an electronic Braille display and I can edit it live and say, "Okay, let me re-track that bit for you." Take some words out, put some words in and then rerecord that little bit of track. So the live ability that I have now with Braille displays to edit that text and read it straight out loud, without having to lug a laptop and a pair of headphones, just a 40 cell display, I don't know honestly how people do it without that ability. Now I do know some blind journalists that do try and read scripts by listening to JAWS in their ear, having written their piece and listening to that and speaking out loud. I couldn't do that. I marvel at them for being able to do that but I simply couldn't do that. I couldn't get the natural rhythms of the language doing that. I don't understand it.

The other way I use Braille in my job is taking notes so if I'm at a press conference or just at an event or a rally or something like that and I'm jotting down a few quotes or Tweeting. Again that will be with an electronic Braille displayer and the one thing I've realised over the years is that you should always have a Braille display with a lanyard because inevitably you have to take notes standing up. That's really hard if you can't hang it round your neck. That makes you very mobile so I use Braille a lot in that way.

The other way I use Braille is in my leisure time and this is what I was mentioning at the start. I found that I've started to use a hybrid way of reading. I use a lot of audiobooks generally but I also read a lot of books, particularly non-fiction stuff, on Kindle and iBooks or Books as it's now just called and I find myself using a combination of voiceover but then reading the odd page here and there or one page in ten on a Braille display. That's something I've just developed from my own taste in the last few years and I've found it has improved my concentration. It's also reinforced spelling issues if you're reading a book about a particular subject area and there's specialist jargon or words in it. It's just worked really, really well. So I've got the speed of being able to crank through it with voiceover, as Fred said 300 words a minute, but just occasionally having that moment of slowing down and reading a couple of pages in Braille to improve concentration and get the spelling.

I don't think I'm a particular fast Braille reader even though I've been reading all my life. I don't think I was ever particularly fast. There were people at school who were naturally incredibly fast Braille readers and I certainly wasn't one of those. I'm one of those naughty people that only reads really with one hand. I've cherished Braille for a long, long time and it is absolutely an integral part of my daily life.

Holly Scott-Gardner: I think one thing that really struck me is your point about having a Braille display that you can easily carry around and having it on a lanyard and I've definitely found the same thing when I've done presenting or perhaps having to take notes. I remember doing an experiment at university which was actually a sociology type thing and I had to take notes whilst observing a group of people and move around and you can't drag a table around with you. You've got to have something attached to you really and it is a really great way of doing that, having a Braille display.

Gary O'Donoghue: I think it's been one of the really good developments of the Braille display technology in the last few years where we've got these hybrid devices now. So you don't just drive our iPhone from them but they have some sort of built-in notepad, scratchpad, very basic and I use that all the time on my Braille displays that I have. All the time I'm switching into that kind of scratchpad type mode to jot stuff down.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes, me too. That's a really vital feature that I would say I use it for all the time and it's something I look for in a display if I'm buying one. Now I have to have both. One thing that interested me about something Fred said was the use of Braille when lecturing at university and I think this is really interesting and I would love to know more about that, how you, Fred, used Braille when you were teaching.

Fred Reid: Yes, I was going to say a bit about that. Incidentally what Gary said rings very true. I was going to say a bit about that but there's a point I would like to make even before that. It's a historical point really, you'll not be surprised for a historian to make a historical point. We shouldn't forget how absolutely, crucially invaluable Braille was to the development of education of the blind from roughly 1867 through to 1970s, 1980s. It was the only feasible way of getting access to information and I just don't how my education could have worked out but for Braille when I met it at the age of 14. I was telling Matthew some time ago that I learned to do Braille mathematics before the age of the upward writing machine. It was about ten years before the Perkins Brailler came along and we had to do algebra on an old-fashioned hand frame. I was telling Matthew that our teacher had devised a brilliant way of doing it. I don't know how many of you are familiar with a hand frame but I won't go into great detail about it. But the first line of your quadratic equation or your simultaneous equation or whatever you're doing, you wrote it on the first line of the page because you were embossing through the page, you were embossing through a mirror image, you wrote it on the top line of the first side, then you turned the paper over and you took the Braille guide right down to the bottom and you wrote the second line of the equation on the last line of the second page and then you turned it over and you wrote the third line of the equation on the second line of the first page. It sounds cumbersome and even clumsy but it did actually work. That huge importance that Braille directly contributed to opening up access to information for blind people, it's just amazing.

Just to take one little other example before I get on to lecturing, never, never undervalue the ability to write to one another. Historically before the coming of embossed type, blind people used to write to one another with knotted string and they developed a code of so many knots for each letter or word, I don't know exactly how the code worked. That must have been awful. For them of course it was probably rather good because it felt they were conquering a problem. When you look back at it, it kind of shows the way we've come, how far we've come.

To come to lecturing, Braille is very crucial there but as I've said, I really never got up much speed at Braille. On a good day I could read silently to myself at 90 words a minute. That meant that I could never use Braille to read a lecture, not that I'm advocating reading lectures but that just wasn't a possibility and particularly when you had to quote a passage verbatim, I couldn't read fast enough really to do it smoothly and intelligently and intelligibly. So I had to develop a way of dealing with that and I taught myself Braille shorthand and that was a great advantage because it reduced the number of characters. I read with two hands but I read with only one finger of each hand. Braille shorthand reduced the amount of characters that your fingers had to cover. I lectured by making notes of roughly three words for each sentence. I've got a good memory of course which probably most of us blind intellectuals, if we can call ourselves that, we've all good memories, I think, so that helps. I found I was able to lecture fluently using Braille notes in that form. There was still the problem that if I wanted to quote a passage of more than a couple of sentences really, it was very difficult to do it fluently and intelligibly and I found that I had to rehearse these passages very carefully so that I practically almost memorised them and then I was able to read them by tactile method and not stumble and lumber about so much so that they came out intelligible. That was how I got through lecturing.

I still lecture but I'm finding that as my brain slows down, I can't ingest shorthand notes with the speed that I used to be able to do and therefore I have to do much more rehearsing so that I've got the notes pretty clearly in my mind and that's getting harder and harder as the years go by, I have to admit. But I can still do it. Like Gary I can't imagine how anybody manages without that. I know that there have been blind lecturers who did lecture without the use of Braille. They must have had great memories, I think. Then there's this amazing thing and I don't understand how anybody has something in their ear and lectures fluently from getting a prompt in their ear. I couldn't do that but that's because I'm an old has-been, I expect.

So that's lecturing but finally I also wanted to say something else. I've published three books as a historian. I'm working on my fourth book now. The first book that I published, my lay book on Keir Hardy, the British Labour leader, I wrote a biography of him, I did that before digital came along and I wrote that in Braille and typed it up on a manual typewriter and just had to get sighted people to do the proofreading for me. The second one was a life of my grandfather and I wrote that using digital technology in the 1990s and my third one which was called Thomas Hardy And History, published in 2017, I wrote with technology. I found that there are many pitfalls in it. It's really, with the best will in the world, very, very difficult to get your text absolutely into a fair text form, to be absolutely letter and word perfect, very, very difficult indeed. With this last book, Thomas Hardy And History, I had to rely on the support of a former student of mine who gave me a great deal of support in polishing off the final text . Even so a lot of mistakes crept in and it's quite regrettable really.

Probably if I had been more competent in Braille, I could have used a refreshable Braille display to better effect. I didn't and one of the reasons I didn't do that, and this is the last point I want to make, is that since I left the university, I don't have technical support and I think that it's often underestimated that those of us who are out here in the sticks just working at our desk privately can't just pick up the phone to the technical department and say could you come and sort this out for me because my refreshable Braille display is not reacting properly or whatever. You do get stuck in all sorts of complicated ways that I won't bore you with. I could tell you endless stories about problems that arise with technology and Matthew, I'm sure, would concur. He's heard me lamenting about them endlessly so he's probably having a wry smile at this point. When we celebrate digital technology, and nobody celebrates it more than me, it does take a lot of technical backup if you're to use it safely and securely and to a high level of accuracy.

Holly Scott-Gardner Yes, I think these are all excellent points. One of the things I've observed as a student is that the more I move forward in academia, the more I'm using technology to access journals and books and things like that but when I'm expected to present, I just need Braille because I can't use technology or certainly not without a refreshable Braille display to deliver those kinds of presentations. So what you said about lecturing rings very true and it is hard if you're not a very fast Braille reader. This is something I've been forcing myself to work on, is to become a really efficient Braille reader and a very quick one which is I think a difficult thing to do and depends on what age you learn Braille, I think, as well. Certainly if you're able to do that, that's very useful but I liked your point about using Braille shorthand and I think that's a really important skill and that is something we've talked about at the Braillists, should we maybe run some sessions on Braille shorthand to introduce people to that and I think that still has a place now.

Gary O'Donoghue: It's something I've thought about over the years because there was once upon a time some sort of Braille shorthand system, I think.

Fred Reid: You're right, Gary, there was. It was invented around about 1911 by Stainsby, the man who invented the Stainsby writer. He invented the Stainsby writer to enable him to write shorthand quickly and it went on from there.

Gary O'Donoghue: I've never seen a manual for it and I've certainly over the years just developed my own, when I'm making notes for myself that don't need to be translated. I have a sort of semi system. My partner can write Teeline shorthand and she can write pretty much as quickly as you can speak and I would love to be able to do that. Even though Grade 2 Braille does mean you're a lot faster than someone taking down longhand, you're still not quite, I don't think, at verbatim speed. There was also once upon a time, I remember, I think, maybe a Russian guy developed something called Grade 3 Braille.

Fred Reid: Yes. In England we had Grade 3 Braille in my time, when I was learning. I don't know if it's still in use at all but there was definitely a Grade 3.

Holly Scott-Gardner So this is actually something that we are talking about as the Braillists is running some sessions on Grade 3 because we do know someone who knows Grade 3 so this is something we've wanted to look at. So it's definitely on the cards for 2021 because I think particularly as we've been giving hand frames, so slates and styluses and sending them out to people, this is something we really want to do. It's how can we maximise how people are using Braille.

Gary O'Donoghue: It's obviously not a code that's accepted by the different Braille authorities, I'm guessing. Is it something that someone's just invented basically?

Holly Scott-Gardner: I don't think it's accepted any more. Matthew would be the right person to answer this.

Fred Reid: Yes, it was in my time. When I was learning Braille as a youth, you could borrow Grade 3 books from the National Library.

Holly Scott-Gardner Yes, I don't think you can under the new Braille rules.

Matthew Horspool: Yes, it's not in general circulation anymore. It's not a recognised code. That said, it's not an unrecognised code either. The Braille police are not going to come knocking if you start using Grade 3 and there is definitely a resurgence in Braille shorthand codes. There was Grade 3, there was Braille shorthand which is different to Grade 3 and actually the Braille shorthand manual, if you want it, is available from RNIB. They digitised it and it's still in print. There was an Australian code called Braille User Oriented Code and there's definitely some work nationally and internationally to revitalise those codes.

Holly Scott-Gardner: I'm glad we have Matthew here to answer those kinds of questions.

Gary O'Donoghue: Could I pop another quick question in while we're on this point because one thing I've not really grasped, I have to say, and this is a hell of an admission, I know, is that my transition to UEB, for example, has been incredibly haphazard and patchy and slow? I have started to embrace it because it's very difficult on Braille displays and using Twitter clients and things if you don't know UEB to get symbols right. I've tried to look for a good place to learn UEB properly as a Braillist and I can't say I've lighted on the right resource so if anyone has tips for the correct resource to go to, I think that would be incredibly useful for people like me as well.

Holly Scott-Gardner Yes, so there's definitely a few things. So the RNIB has several briefer guides, notes, lists, more for existing Braille users that will introduce the changes to you. There is also the UEB rules if you want to delve really deep into it. Again I'm going to call on Matthew.

Matthew Horspool: Yes. I'm not on the panel officially of course. The book that I recommend, speaking personally now rather than with any particular hat on, the CNIB over in Canada, created, under the direction of Darleen Bogart who chaired one of the UEB committees and Phyllis Landon who also chaired one of the UEB committees, a course called Upgrade To UEB. This was an American course, upgrade from American Braille to UEB. RNIB and UKAAF adjusted it for a UK audience and I believe it's available for download at ukaaf.org/ueb. However I will double check that and anybody who wants a copy of it, email help@braillists.org and I've got a copy of it and I can send it out. It's a free resource and very detailed and it will get you up to speed with the changes between SEB and UEB and give you practice exercises and all of that sort of thing. I found it a very, very useful resource.

Gary O'Donoghue: Thank you. That's super helpful.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes, that's definitely good to know. So moving into a similar realm, talking more about future Braille usage, so I want to ask all of you, and I'm going to start with Saima again, how you think Braille will adapt to our changing needs as the blind community. So going forward, whether that be we're doing more stuff electronically or more kinds of devices that you think you'll see more of, do you think Braille is something we still need as a community going forward and if so what would you like to see from it?

Saima Akhtar: Yes, I think it's definitely still crucial and I think it always will be because I know there's talk about why it's necessary to teach younger kids Braille. I've got a cousin who's seven who's just losing sight now and just the idea of not teaching a child Braille from a young age is ridiculous. Children learn how to hand-write so why shouldn't young children, blind children get introduced to Braille? I was taught Braille from the age of four and I think that's why I took to it really quickly. I'm quite proficient and I use it a lot, I read a lot of Braille books still. I think in terms of spelling I've noticed a couple of friends that I've got who are blind and haven't taken to Braille, their spelling isn't as good as people who read it and write it more often and because of that it is definitely something that needs to continue. I do think obviously technology is progressing.

Even if you're thinking about labels, medicine, a lot of medicine has Braille labelling on it and there's the argument about technology apps like Seeing AI and things like that and, yes, they are useful. I can't say I'm the best with Seeing AI, I'm rubbish with it but apps like that are great, they are useful. But to take Braille off medication or to argue that it's not essential on packaging, I just think it's ridiculous because I think it is something that people will always need. You need that tactile feedback and it's just another way of accessing information where, like I said, people like me who struggle with apps like Seeing AI. If you were to take the Braille off medicine packaging, I'd struggle until I really take to it, you still need that feedback. So I think for that reason, just because technology is obviously progressing, I do think Braille still should be emphasised and Braille books still should be a thing and it should be encouraged.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Right. I think that's an excellent point that we can talk about tech and its usefulness and that's very true but one doesn't have to stop the other from also being useful. You can have your technology but that doesn't mean we should take Braille away and I actually really strongly agree about medications. By the time I've got my phone out of my pocket and I've opened my app and even if I was fairly quick using the app, I could have read the name of the medicine and how many milligrams it is in much less time and I can certainly read it through the packet as well. If it's in a bag, then I can often feel the Braille through that which is quite convenient too.

Gary O'Donoghue: I completely agree with that. I think the medicine labelling has been one of those really big steps forward for us particularly because it's all done in Grade 1 so it opens up that kind of opportunity for people who aren't so confident with Braille to be able to identify things that really matter to them, taking the right pill at the right time of day, the learning curve for being able to do that independently with Grade 1 Braille on medication is an absolutely huge step forward. I agree also that these low tech solutions are incredibly useful and I take advantage a lot of them. I've still got a one of those old Dymo tape Braille labellers and, like I'm sure a lot of people do, the spice jars in my cupboard in my kitchen are labelled in Braille just because, sure I could do it with Seeing AI but that's so much more hassle than just running your finger across it.

Saima Akhtar: Yes, I'd have to agree with that. Even in terms of you've got things like RNIB's PenFriend and it's great. I have a PenFriend and for some things it is great, especially washable labels and things like that but who's going to walk around a kitchen carrying that when you've just got Braille labels on everything? I've marked up my spice jars with Braille labels as well and they do last.

Gary O'Donoghue: You can just put the refills into the same jar so you don't even have to re-label things

Saima Akhtar: Exactly, yes, it's just so much easier. I've used the other PenFriend labels on the jars and they just come off after a while.

Holly Scott-Gardner: I think that's a really great point. This affects how we're using Braille and it doesn't have to be, oh, you read 300 books per year in Braille or whatever. Maybe you do, that's great too but it can just be using it for labelling in your kitchen. One thing I always stress to people is that that's as much of a valid use of Braille and is still really, really important. The real thing I want to delve into is how do you envision Braille will change or will Braille change to meet the needs of the blind community and to meet the needs of those using the technologies.

Fred Reid: Good. That is bringing us back to the question. I thought we were beginning to get a bit cosy there. As Braille users, there's a great danger that we get into this common conversation that's fascinating for us. I'm not entirely confident about the future of Braille. I think it's got a future. I'd be prepared to make an argument that it's got a future but I think there are big problems that we really need to look at. About 20 years ago I was asked to talk to a group of blind computer users in Leamington Spa near where I live. They were all over 70. They were very sharp, very competent in their use of technology. I was talking to them about how I use technology and I was talking about the way I use auxiliary Braille and I got a wee bit evangelical and started to sort of preach at them about how useful they would find auxiliary Braille and I met a wall of resistance. I can't describe to you how negative they were about Braille. They just did not want to know. They couldn't see the point. I made all the points that we've been making about spelling and formatting and labelling and keeping lists and so forth but no, no, absolutely not, they wouldn't have it.

I would like to think that there are people somewhere who are actually doing serious scientific work on the problems of reading Braille and the problems of learning it, reading it, developing a rapidity in it and so forth. I went to the bicentenary of the Louis Braille Conference in Paris in I think it was about 2004 or thereabouts and I was on a panel like this. Being the irritating person who raises difficult questions, I was asking various questions like if you really were a person that went blind, say, at the age of 40 and you had to keep going in your career, would you really take the time out to learn Braille, given the other possibilities that there are? It was a fairly evangelical meeting as you can imagine and they weren't too pleased with me asking these kinds of awkward questions. But, and this is the last point that I wanted to come to, there was a very interesting lady and I meant to look up her name for this conversation and didn't get time to do it today, but a very interesting lady, an American lady, who was a long-standing expert on the teaching of Braille. When I say a long-standing expert, I mean a serious academic. She was in the audience in my session and she got up and said that she would like to see a lot more research done on why reading speeds vary so much. My heart went out to her. I thought that's absolutely what we need to know because it varies a bit with the age you learn it at but my wife learned it at the age of six and she's not much quicker of a Braille reader than I am. Whereas at this bicentenary conference there was a Spanish news presenter on television who'd learned Braille at 14, the same age as me, and she could just take it off the Braille embosser, get it plonked down in front of her, they showed us a film of her doing it, Braille embosser, they just whipped it out, they stuck it down in front and she was just zip, zip, zip, right through it. It was like a dose of salts. It was just amazing. Now does anybody know why these differences exist? Given that they exist, does anybody have any scientific knowledge about how you get a person from my level of 90 words a minute at my best up to, say, 300 words a minute? Not that I want to read at that speed, well, I would like to read at 300 words a minute but 150 would do me. Does anybody know how that's done? Matthew, you people from the Braillists Foundation are probably much more into this than I am but I just have a very strong sceptical doubt that anybody knows and that worst still nobody much cares.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Well, this is actually, I think it's fair to say, one of my maybe not obsessions but certainly my areas of academic interest and something that took me during the International Council on English Braille General Assembly was that there was some research done into learning Braille. What really struck me is that there isn't enough actually and this is something I was going on and on about all week to poor Matthew who had to listen to me going on about it. But it is something that I think is important and when we look to the future, it's vital because one thing that's really important is teachers and without getting bogged down in it, it's teaching theory. So when you become a teacher of sighted students, you learn a lot about teaching theory and how students learn and why they learn a certain way and why certain reading programs exist. There isn't actually the same for blind children. There's research that says blind people are slower at reading Braille but I think that there's a temptation for that to become a self-fulfilling prophecy because if you say blind people are slower then you never actually push a blind person to get quick at reading. Not all blind people are slow at reading Braille. So is it the truth? I'm absolutely with you on this and, well, maybe I'll get accepted into a PhD program and if I do, maybe I'll research this. That depends on my academic success, I think, but it is something that I agree certainly from my perspective when we look towards the future, we need answers to those kinds of questions.

Gary O'Donoghue: When I was at school, they actually put a stopwatch on us to time us. I'm not sure that's a great way of doing it. The variation was large. They used to talk about in terms of pages in those days in the standard Braille book. People were in the sort of mid to late 20s, early 30s pages per hour but there were some incredible people who were at 60 pages an hour. There was no explanation about why that difference occurred or what to do about it other than try harder.

Fred Reid: Yes. They told me at my blind school when I went there at the age of 14, my home teacher had taught me Braille and now looking back on it, I think he wasn't a very good teacher but he did get me started and the English teacher came up to me and said, "I hear that you're already reading Braille," and I said, "Yes," so he said, "Read me this," gave me a page from this book. So he plonked the book down in front of me and I slowly read along and he said, "Yes, that's a good start." He was blind and he felt my hands to make sure that I was keeping my hand flat and so forth. He said, "That's a good start. You'll get quicker. If you read for an hour every night, private reading, you'll get quicker." So I took that seriously and I did and I slowly got a bit quicker but it was 60 words a minute for a long time and it wasn't until I went to university and I really had gunpowder under my tail that I began to get up to about 90 words a minute. That's not much use for rapidly assuming a great deal of literature.

So even in those days, when Braille was much closer to its heyday than it is now, there just didn't seem to be any systematic knowledge or scientific way of understanding these things. That lady I was talking about, the American academic, she actually wrote to me after the bicentennial and she said, "I'm in the Braille academic community here in America and I'd like you to write me an article and I'll see if I can get it published, looking for some of your sceptical thoughts." So I did that. It came back, "Rejected" on the grounds that it was too polemical. There's such a cosiness around it. It really makes me angry or used to make me angry, I'm too old to get angry now but it did make me angry.

Gary O'Donoghue: In terms of the future, I am very excited by the various bits of research that are going on in different places around the world into how you might get page size electronic Braille in a sort of format that is useful. I know that there are some big hefty machines that do it now which you'd have to sit at on a desk but something the size of an iPad that just gives you that page experience of being able to read Braille like that. I know people are working on those sorts of technologies, beyond the piezo cell and those sorts of things and polymers and other things, aren't they? That would really excite me, being able to have something like that.

Saima Akhtar: Yes, I think it would. People have their pros and cons about Braille, one being obviously having books and it being quite cumbersome. So if you could get something like that, it would kind of give you the added benefit of experiencing a page, the size of a page, but doing it with technology. You can't deny it, Braille books are heavy and they are a pain to carry around so, yes, that would be cool. It's interesting because I was talking to someone else who is blind and she absolutely hates Braille, just doesn't like it at all, hasn't taken to it and I was talking to her and she said, "My issue with it was actually Grade 2. I was fine with Grade 1 and I didn't like Grade 2." She thinks that Grade 2 is the reason she struggles now with spelling in the first place whereas if it had just been Grade 1, she thinks her spelling would have been better today which is an interesting thought. It is true. You have your abbreviations and, yes, I guess arguably we'd read even slower with just Grade 1, no Grade 2 and there are of course benefits to Grade 2, I use it all the time, but it's an interesting point because obviously it does affect your spelling. Looking at my own experiences, I teach Arabic Braille. Now whether there is a Grade 2 in Arabic Braille, I don't know but I have my Arabic Braille and it's just one grade and it's letter by letter and I teach it and to be honest, I don't think I'm much slower with that grade of Arabic Braille, reading it, than I am with my English Grade 2. Obviously I'm not going to be as efficient with it, though having said that, I learned Arabic Braille when I was ten. I've been teaching it for the last three years but I learned it when I was ten and as I said it's one grade and it's letter by letter, there's no abbreviations in it and I don't think it makes me any slower. I think I am still as proficient. So it's an interesting thought whether people would object less to it if it was just the Grade 1. Would that just simplify it?

Fred Reid: That's a very radical and provocative and interesting point. I went to a conference once, an international blind conference, and I sat down with a friend of mine, guy called Tom Parker, Gary might remember him, and he didn't read Braille very fast or much. He could read it but he wasn't proficient at it. They handed out the agenda in Braille for us and he asked me to read it out to him and I started reading and I was about halfway down the page before I realised it was in Grade 1. I just hadn't noticed.

Saima Akhtar: That's interesting because if you give me Grade 1 now, I'm really slow. I'm very, very slow with Grade 1. I think that's just lack of use, purely lack of use. So that's interesting. I think it is important to have that feedback of learning a language. I remember when I was at Coventry uni, I did a module and it was a Spanish module and I'd never really learned Spanish at all and I failed. Well, I didn't fail. They had to just give me a concession. But because I was learning purely through listening and speaking, I wasn't given any written material, so when it came to dictating in the exam, I had no idea how to spell so I spelled all the words wrong because I had no idea how any of the words were spelled. I was just going by phonetically how I thought they were spelled. I think that did take away from the language.

Gary O'Donoghue: One of the things that Saima and Fred have mentioned which has popped a thought into my mind, is coming across other blind people who are very hostile to Braille. I've done that as well, come across people who are hostile, speech warriors kind of thing. It struck me and I wonder because quite a lot of Braillists, and I've done this myself in the past, have said Braille is a literacy issue. If you can't read Braille, you're illiterate. I've wondered, hearing the hostility, do we think that or is that the way to really put people off learning Braille? I don't know. But it is a thing that Braillists say, isn't it?

Fred Reid: It is, yes, exactly. It's baloney, in my opinion. It's extremely arrogant as well. I do literary criticism simply using digital technology and I tell you, I prefer a text read out in synthesised speech to a human reader reading it to me because a human reader inevitably puts a certain spin on the text. You listen to their voice, etc, in all sorts of ways whereas synthesised speech gives you a much more neutral and objective understanding of the text.

I think there are some points that are well made. For instance, I wouldn't for one minute contest that a child, a totally blind child, should be taught Braille. I'm not so sure that a child who has enough partial sight to be able to read print with some fluency that they should be taught Braille, especially if they're resisting it, but certainly a totally blind child. I buy some of the argument that constructing paragraphs and so on, it's probably easier to teach if it is in Braille but it's not impossible and people managed without Braille for hundreds and hundreds of years. I simply don't buy the argument that you're not literate if you can't read Braille.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Well, I think it's definitely something that we have to approach with compassion and wanting to support people to learn and I hate to wrap this up. This has been absolutely wonderful. I'm definitely here for these controversial questions and I suppose I'm here for the controversy in general, because it's the only way as a community that we can kind of scrutinise what we do a bit more and actually say, "Okay, how can we do better?"

I just want to finish by saying thank you to the three of you for joining and for speaking to us and really sharing your views on how Braille has been important to you but also asking these questions and provoking this kind of conversation because it's been extremely beneficial, I think, for everyone who's been able to attend.

Fred Reid: Thank you, Chair, for the invitation to the meeting. It's lovely.

Gary O'Donoghue: It's been a pleasure. Thank you for the invite, yes.

Matthew Horspool: Gary O'Donoghue, Washington correspondent at the BBC; Doctor Fred Reid, Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Warwick; and Saima Akhtar, a recent graduate in English and Creative Writing from Birmingham City University, bringing to a close this episode of BrailleCast. It was recorded in front of a live audience on the evening of the 4th of January, 2021, hosted by Holly Scott-Gardner and made possible thanks to a grant from the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust. For more information about the Trust, you can visit wcmt.org.uk and for more information about the Braillists Foundation who organised this event, you can visit braillists.org and in particular braillists.org/events where you can find out about future events being held by the Braillists Foundation including Braille For Beginners, starting on Monday the 11th of January at 7pm and Braille For Academic And Career Development, starting on Tuesday the 12th of January at 7:30pm. I've been Matthew Horspool. Thanks very much for listening and until next time, bye for now.