

TNF Fact Sheet

History of Talking Newspapers and Magazines

In 1968, senior librarian Ronald Sturt went on a study visit to Västerås in Sweden. The library there had, with the local association for the blind, started a talking newspaper, Arosbandet.

Weekly recordings were sent on an open-spool system to 130 'readers' on a three-day loan basis. The Swedish initiative was designed 'not only for the blind but also mentally retarded children and adults who would never be able to read'. Swedish law dictated that those who needed them were entitled to talking book machines. Ronald was hugely impressed.

He returned to Aberystwyth, where he was on the staff of the College of Librarianship Wales, and he talked enthusiastically about what he'd seen to anyone who cared to listen.

Several members of the local Round Table were very interested in promoting the idea in the UK and offered to meet the cost of investigation and experimentation.

The Round Table held a Donkey Derby to raise funds, and met on 1st September 1969 to discuss their ideas. The concept instantly commanded the support of people of business or professional standing, who readily volunteered their experience and expertise to help the project. These volunteers included a consultant ophthalmologist, a newspaper proprietor, a recording engineer, a broadcasting journalist, a bank officer with engineering training, the Round Table chairman (an insurance manager), the National Librarian, a blind 'reader' who managed a newspaper depot, and Ronald Sturt. They gave themselves four months to launch the scheme.

A budget was set for a recording and high-speed copying studio. Using expert advice and precise costs from the Director of the Royal National Institute of the Blind (RNIB) Talking Book service in London they drafted a constitution in close consultation with the Charity Commission. They gained recognition by the Head Postmaster in order to use the first class freepost facilities of the Articles for the Blind convention. They also engaged, albeit warily, the support of the Social Services manager who wrote to those blind people he thought would respond to recordings of the local news.

And so, in January 1970, one of the first Talking Newspapers was born. Tape cassettes dropped through the letterboxes of twenty blind people in Cardiganshire. The idea caught on and, slowly but surely, Talking Newspapers began to spring up in other parts of the country. By 1974, there were enough to warrant the formation of a national membership body, the Talking Newspaper Association of the United Kingdom (TNAUK). Its objectives were to unite and serve the growing number of active local Talking Newspapers and to stimulate their creation to reach every blind reader in the four nations who wanted to keep in touch with the local community.

The reach of talking newspapers was extended in August 1983 with the advent of the National Service, based in Heathfield, East Sussex. From modest beginnings, with just the Sunday papers being recorded in a small room above the Oxfam Shop in Heathfield High Street, the service gradually expanded to the substantial operation it is today. Eight studios, fifty staff, 230 volunteers and a battery of high-speed copiers enable over 230 publications to be recorded onto tape, creating an output of around 2,000,000 cassettes per annum. In recent years we've also seen the development of the national electronic service. This means that TNAUK can now transcribe publications into formats suitable for use with computers equipped with screen readers, voice synthesizers and/or text magnifiers. Delivery times have been greatly speeded up and there are now a number of blind and partially sighted people who receive and browse their daily newspapers more quickly than sighted readers!

In 2004 a decision was taken to restructure TNAUK. It was agreed that the membership association role should be handed over to a newly formed organisation, the Talking News Federation. This meant that TNAUK could concentrate entirely on running the National Service and its commercial subsidiary, Sound Talking. The organisations separated on March 31, 2005 and TNAUK was ready to enhance its unique position as national newsagent for the blind and partially sighted section of the population.