How many people who do not have to would choose to listen to an unabridged version of a book being spoken in a synthetic voice? How does Treasure Island being read in a voice not dissimilar to a car satellite navigation system appeal? This is the question which is at the heart of the recent disputes over the Kindle 2’s text-to-speech function and also the read out loud function of the Adobe e-book reader.

Origins and nature of the disputes

In February 2009 Amazon announced that the Kindle 2 would have a new text-to-speech function which would allow the text of a book to be spoken out loud at the press of a button (Jones 2009). This caused great excitement amongst some in the visually impaired community, as it seemed to put access to a huge number of e-books within reach. However, the Authors Guild in the US asserted that this was a violation of copyright, describing Amazon’s move as a pre-emptive grab of multimedia rights and demanding that the text-to-speech function be turned off; Roy Blount Jr., president of the Authors Guild, wrote an op-ed piece in The New York Times claiming that the text-to-speech function was a threat to the audiobooks industry (worth a billion dollars in the US). He argued that people would buy the cheaper e-book, dismissing arguments that nobody but the visually impaired would use the function with examples such as Norman Mailer fans using the Kindle 2’s female voice to access some of the racier parts of his novels, and also by arguing that although synthetic voice technology was not ideal at the moment, it was getting better all the time and would reach a point where it could match a human voice in quality (Blount Jr. 2009). At first Amazon refused to disable the text-to-speech function, but after a couple of weeks they
agreed, although still asserting that the function was actually legal (Jones 2009).

This caused outrage amongst disability activists in the US. Various organisations joined forces to create the Reading Rights Coalition and in April 2009 they picketed the Authors Guild, carrying placards with slogans such as “We'd have access to the Kindle sooner if it weren't for Roy Blount Jr.” “No need for greed, we want to read,” “E-books aren't just for looks,” “The Kindle Swindle” and others besides; their picketing received coverage in *The New York Times* (Andreani 2009) and since then the coalition has launched an online petition (currently 8000 signatures) and run public awareness raising activities in a public relations campaign aimed at and including authors and agents to try and persuade them to have the text-to-speech function enabled for their books. The coalition's view is that the Authors Guild's stance violates four pieces of equal rights legislation, and that it makes good business sense to have the text-to-speech function enabled as there are 15 million Americans with reading disabilities who can be turned into potential customers for e-books this way (Reading Rights Coalition 2009).

The Authors Guild made two offers to try and settle the dispute. First they proposed a system whereby reading disabled people would provide proof of their disability and then have their Kindle 2’s text-to-speech function enabled online by means of a special registration. The coalition rejected this as unworkable. The Guild then suggested that the visually impaired should have to pay extra for e-books with text-to-speech enabled, which the coalition dismissed as “a disability tax” (Reading Rights Coalition, 2009). The nearest to a solution that the two parties have come to is a compromise agreement reached with Hachette, whereby text-to-speech would be enabled if a full-length audio version of the book on traditional media or as a digital download did not exist (Wise 2009). If this solution were enforced it would effectively force a visually impaired customer to buy the full-length audio version which, in most cases, would be more expensive.

The dispute has not been limited to the US. The UK's Right to Read Alliance has also been pushing for a solution, though much of the argument has been conducted behind the scenes. In March 2009 a senior manager at the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) who has been involved in negotiations with the publishing industry wrote to the then president of the Publishers Licensing Society stating that if a solution had not been reached by the end of the year, the visually impaired community would interpret the disabling of the text-to-speech function as a “fundamental attack on accessibility.” Leading figures of the Right to Read Alliance have been involved in meetings with the Publishers Licensing Society, the Society of Authors in an attempt to reach a mutually acceptable solution. Asked for their position on this, the Society of Authors and the Association of Authors' Agents gave replies which could best be described as “holding positions,” both stating that there were precedents for resolving issues of this sort in a co-operative manner and that a solution should be attainable. However the way that things were described to the meeting of the Right to Read Alliance held in March 2010 suggests that things are not quite so cosy, with reference being made to the fact that all the industry stakeholders are afraid that they will sue each other and that the Alliance has been “applying pressure.”

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So is this all a nonsensical storm in a teacup, or, as the first part of the title of this article suggests, much ado about nothing? Is there any evidence that the audiobooks industry has something to fear from the text-to-speech functions in e-books? It is a commonplace view amongst the visually impaired community that sighted people who did not have to would never listen to synthetic audio for any length of time (there doesn’t appear to be formally...