Braille translators

By Mark Bolotin

The use of computers as a means of making more information readily available to the blind has received the attention of several groups of faculty and students at MIT whose research is part of a growing technical interest in sensory aids for the blind.

Braille typewriters

Among the possible innovations presently being studied by these researchers are machines that read aloud from books, newspapers, and other printed material; the use of computers to enable a typist to turn printed material into braille quickly; and folding equipment that can be tucked away in a pocket when not in use, but which retains enough rigidity, when extended, to yield the same quality of tactile and kinesthetic information available from present folding cases.

These research activities, presently being conducted in the Research Laboratory for Electronics, the Design Division of the Department of Mechanical Engineering, and the new Center for Sensory Aids Evaluation and Development, are just a portion of the nationwide work supported by the Vocational Rehabilitation Administration and the National Institutes of Health.

One of the leading researchers in this field is Prof. Edward L. Glaser, a blind computer designer who directs the writing of high-speed braille embossing equipment and English-to-braille translation programs enable him to communicate with the central MAC computer. His braille console, still full of faults and not yet ready for general use, was designed and built for him by the Department of Mechanical Engineering. Glaser, however, developed the translation programs.

Weber aided blind research.

MIT’s earliest work in sensory aids for the blind dates back to 1932 when Professors Jerome Wiesner, now Provost, and the late Norbert Weiner carried out investigations on how the deaf-blind might be given access to spoken words. Although the emphasis was on theoretical work as part of the group’s overall interest in communications science and information theory, some equipment was built and evaluated at the Perkins School for the Blind in Watertown.

In 1952, another group under the late Dr. Clifford Witcher experimented with a photo cell-type mobility aid that would help the blind detect objects and terrain changes. Dr. Witcher himself was blind.

Reading machines

The most recent research in sensory aids for the blind has come from the NLE’s Center for Communications Science and Engineering under Prof. Samuel J. Glaser. This group has been working principally in the areas of reading machines, handheld guidance aids, and computerized equipment to make braille more available.

For so far, the most promising device to come from research here is the high-speed braille processor used by Professor Glaser.

The goal is to make virtually all published material available to the blind in braille. With central time-shared computers reached via telephone lines, schools where blind children are integrated into classes with sighted children might be equipped with electronic typewriters and high speed braille embossers.

When reading materials are needed, a typist might dial the central computer, type the material in, and get it back in braille almost instantly.

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