

NEW MOON

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Introduction

The embossed Moon code was invented by Dr William Moon in Brighton in 1847. The main advantages claimed for Moon include ease of learning and that it does not require a good sense of touch. However Moon readership in the UK is estimated to be just over a thousand, and less than two thousand in the whole world. These very low readership figures have encouraged the belief that Moon will be phased out in the near future; RNIB have recently stated that this will not happen.

The factors limiting readership appear to be the shortage of teachers, limited range of material in Moon, and that there is no easy way of writing it by a blind person. A prototype Moon writer was developed by a school in Sevenoaks and is now being manufactured by Possum Controls Ltd in Slough; it will be marketed by the Royal National Institute for the Blind.

There may be a large potential demand for Moon for simple applications such as labelling; few elderly blind people seem to be aware that Moon labels (self-adhesive, magnetic or tie-on) are available free of charge from Moon Branch.

Teaching Kit

With the shortage of trained rehabilitation officers for the blind and the likelihood that local government funding will be tight in the foreseeable future, it was decided to investigate the possibility of using trained volunteers to teach Moon. After consultation with a number of teachers, the Unit put together some prototype kits in collaboration with Tom Brown (Moon Branch, RNIB), Lynda Hodge (Leicester Society for the Blind), Allan Leach (National Library for the Blind), Ann Barnett (National Deaf-Blind Helpers' League) and John Mills (Warwickshire Association for the Blind). The kit (see Fig 1) included over twenty items and a specially written handbook (largely prepared by Lynda Hodge).

(insert Figure 1 here)

The kit was field tested in Warwickshire with the help of Warwickshire Association for the Blind. The Association advertised for volunteers who had to have their own transport and be qualified teachers; against all predictions there were more suitably qualified applicants than

vacancies. The first five volunteers were given a one-day training course at the George Marshall Centre. Feedback from these volunteers has resulted in some modifications being done to the kit - mainly concerned with duplicating items; the Unilock Moon aid will be incorporated in the kit. Moon Branch are prepared to consider stocking the teaching kit if there is sufficient demand.

Production systems

The present production method has been in use for many years and works well, but it is very labour intensive. The Moon is hand typeset from individual lead slugs, and copies are pressed on damp paper in a conventional press. This system has severe disadvantages for single copy transcription of correspondence or documents.

Moon is produced in a range of quantities - magazines are typically produced in a few hundred copies, books from 8 to 50 copies, and documents in less than 10 copies. Also inserts for greetings cards make up a significant part of Moon Branch's production. It is unlikely that there will be a single ideal production system.

Various experiments were done by Tom Brown, the recently-retired Manager of Moon Branch, with encapsulated paper (as sold by Minolta and RPH-SYN in Sweden) with very positive reactions from existing Moon readers. The problem was to produce a dense visual master of the Moon; a Letraset or typewriter approach did not allow for the fact that Moon is proportionally spaced and justified (but not microjustified). Ideally any new system should not require the operator to know the rules of Grade 2 Moon. The complexity of the rules are less than for Grade 2 braille except that in Moon it is essential to divide words correctly at the end of lines (most braille programs just move the whole word onto to the next line).

BUMPS (Brunel University Moon Production System) was developed to Mr Brown's specification for the production of documents and inserts for greetings cards. The system utilises a microcomputer and a desk-top laser printer to produce a visual master of the Moon (see Fig 2). The software permits the operator to choose Grade 1 or Grade 2 Moon, and normal or wide line spacing. A laser printer is used since it can produce a very dense well defined image; it has other advantages such as quietness and speed (about six pages of Moon per minute). This system is now in use at Moon Branch in Reigate.

(insert Figure 2 here)

BUMBLE is a further development of this system to permit a typist to produce documents in Moon (uncontracted and contracted), braille (uncontracted and contracted), large print and ordinary print. The system is based on the Hewlett Packard Touch-Screen computer, but versions have been made for other computers. A special version has been developed which can accept digital

data from National Library for the Blind and Scottish Braille Press; this means that it is technically possible to produce Moon and large print editions of books which have been transcribed into braille on the computer systems used by these two organisations.

Future of Moon

These developments, plus the Possum Moonwriter, may encourage more people to use Moon. However the greatest hinderance to greater utilisation is likely to be its image; only when Moon acquires a new image will professional workers be likely to encourage the use of the system to its full potential.

