

The Boston Globe

Webcast adding literary options for nation's visually impaired

By [Emily Sweeney](#) , Globe Staff / August 25, 2011



The Talking Information Center is about to go big time. The Marshfield-based nonprofit is launching a new webcast for people who are visually impaired that will feature news of national interest and broadcasts of best-selling books and popular magazines.

The online reading service will be an extension of what the Talking Information Center has been doing in Massachusetts for decades: producing audio versions of local newspapers, magazines, books, and other printed information that can be difficult for blind people to access otherwise.

The Talking Information Center, or TIC for short, reaches more than 25,000 listeners in Massachusetts. That number is expected to jump when its national reading broadcast goes live next month.

The new service will be provided on a separate audio stream on the TIC website - www.ticnetwork.org - and the

content will be geared toward a broader audience, said Ron Bersani, TIC's executive director. Listeners will be able to hear readings of best-selling books, several major newspapers (USA Today, The Washington Post, The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and Christian Science Monitor), magazines (National Geographic, Parents Magazine, BusinessWeek, Time, and Rolling Stone), and even some tabloids (The National Enquirer and Star).

The goal is to provide a variety of content that appeals to people all over the country, "whether you're in Texas or Maine," said Bersani.

TIC will continue to provide its more local programming so listeners in the Bay State will still be able to get area supermarket ads, department store sales, neighborhood events, and news items from the regional suburban newspapers that are regularly read aloud by TIC volunteers. The local programming is broadcast over TIC's designated radio signals (like WVBF 1530 AM in Middleborough) and some cable TV channels, and streamed on the TIC website.

And this fall, TIC's Massachusetts-focused programming will also start airing from Middleborough on the FM band, at 88.5 WRRS-FM. RRS stands for "radio reading service," said Bersani. "We were lucky to get those call letters."

The launch of the national online broadcast is a huge step for TIC, now in its 34th year of operation. TIC goes back to 1977, around the time Marshfield radio station WATD first went on the air. WATD's founder, Ed Perry, had heard about reading services for the blind in other parts of the country, and he decided to start one at WATD. Bersani, then a teacher at Marshfield High School, agreed to help out as a volunteer, and TIC started broadcasting on June 19, 1978, from a small room on the third floor of WATD with two borrowed microphones, an ancient cassette deck, and an old reel-to-reel recorder.

The Talking Information Center has come a long way since then, evolving into a network that broadcasts 24 hours a day, seven days a week, with affiliates in Boston, Lowell, Mashpee, Worcester, Springfield, and Pittsfield. Its

programming has expanded and improved, winning 30 awards from the International Association of Audio Information Services. The center now has an annual budget of \$750,000, said Bersani, and employs four full-time and five part-time employees with more than 600 volunteers who help out and read on the air.

Every morning, from 8 to 11, volunteers read The Boston Globe, Boston Herald, Patriot Ledger, and other daily newspapers at the TIC studios, located in the WATD building at 130 Enterprise Drive in Marshfield.

TIC began playing a much bigger role in the past two years, as other radio reading services downsized or folded completely because of lack of funding.

"Most of the radio reading services are small operations," said Bersani. "A lot of them are struggling."

Bersani said a national reading service in New York run by The Jewish Guild for the Blind, for example, closed as a result of

the Bernie Madoff scandal. More recently, reading services in Florida and Alabama went off the air this summer, according to the International Association of Audio Information Services.

Bersani said about two years ago "we started getting calls from services all over the country" requesting permission to use some of TIC's broadcasts, like its morning reading of the Wall Street Journal. TIC programs are now carried by reading services in 22 states, including Kansas, Illinois, California, Iowa, North Carolina, Florida, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Colorado.

"We've got a lot of people listening," said Bersani.

The launch of a dedicated national broadcast is a logical next step. The broadcast will be offered on the TIC website at no charge.

Funding for TIC's national reading service came from the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind, corporate contributions, private

donations, and a \$10,000 grant from The Verizon Foundation, Verizon Communications Inc.'s philanthropic arm.

Stephanie Lee, Verizon's regional director of public affairs, toured the TIC studios recently and said she liked what she saw.

"I was very impressed with the work they are doing . . . and that they're trying to expand their services to reach more people," she said.

By turning the printed word into sound, "I think they really help level the playing field for [visually-impaired] people," she said. "It's a simple service, but what an important service they're offering."

If all goes according to plan, TIC will unveil its national Web stream immediately after the Labor Day weekend. Bersani said the target launch date is Sept. 6.

"This is a great thing to be doing," said Bersani. "It's something we've been hoping to do for a while."