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> Whereas a work written on a page is locked in that format, once a work is a digital file it can be transformed to suit any person trying to access it. It can appear as the written word, it can be automatically translated into another language, it can be interpreted as an image, it can be shown in sign language, and it can be displayed on a Braille tablet. Once that file is connected to the Internet, all these different forms of access can take place simultaneously, all over the world.
>
> This information can be requested through a traditional keyboard, by speech, through eye-tracking software or by moving any number of different mouse devices. Making that content accessible is a choice. Making it inaccessible is also a choice (148).

In the introduction of *Disability and New Media*, Katie Ellis and Mike Kent assert that new media and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)—including the Internet or Web 2.0, social media, and mobile digital devices—hold great transformative potential for disabled people particularly, as they allow access to much text-based information previously unavailable to people with "print impairments."[1] As well, they give many disabled people the means to greater inclusion in all areas of an increasingly technologically-minded and dependent society, including the means to develop their own disability-led communities and advocacy initiatives.

At the same time, Ellis and Kent are building on and continuing the work of critiquing the development of ICT and new media from a critical disability perspective (81), started by Gerard Goggin and Christopher Newell (2003) in their book *Digital Disability: The Social Construction of Disability in New Media*. Therefore, at the forefront of Ellis and Kent's analysis is an

[1] Much of print information that is now digitized and accessible for people using Braille tablets, screen readers, iPads, and eye-controlled mouse remains inaccessible to them in print form (2).

acknowledgement that having the potential for inclusion does not mean inclusion is being achieved. Goggin and Newell were examining the moment shortly following the widespread adoption of Web 2.0's that increased digital participation via user-generated content and the inclusion of audio-video components to the digital environment, and Ellis and Kent pick up where they left off. Ellis and Kent examine the transformation this moment has created, and how ICT and new media have developed following it, including how recent technological advances have continued to both digitally enable and disable people with different disabilities.

Disability in Technology

There is a decidedly temporal and spatial flow to the organization of this book, which carries the reader along from the present, back to the past, and finally into possible futures. This establishes the notion of technological developments as shaping societies and the people in them just as much as they themselves in turn are shaped. The book starts with a characterization of the moment in which disabled people presently find themselves—an inescapably and increasingly digital society—as being "at the Crossroads." Ellis and Kent explore how and where disabled people are positioned in it at the end of the iDecade (30), which saw a proliferation of audio-visual components in ICT and new media that decidedly left the more accessible text-based digital environments behind.

Using a human rights perspective they highlight some of the legal ramifications to creating digital technologies that exclude disabled people due to their web inaccessibility. On the one hand, many countries now have legislation that ensures social inclusion for disabled people in all areas of life, and since new media and ICT are now part of all areas of life, continued exclusion from them becomes legally unjustifiable (19). On the other hand, despite human rights

legislation, most new media and ICT are still being developed with little to no account of disabled people's needs, and little to no desire from governments to inhibit industries by enforcing web accessibility standards (25).

Additionally, Ellis and Kent demonstrate that this present technological moment is also one where universal accessibility could easily be attained if industry leaders and policy makers were to include web accessibility standards at the earliest development stages of all their projects and initiatives. The authors offer a detailed exploration of universal accessibility as it could be conceived of in its digital applications (131), bringing to the fore issues of usability, interoperability, and web accessibility, which position disabled Internet users as the—mostly overlooked—experts in bridging the knowledge gap that would make it a reality. This is the ongoing conundrum of universal web accessibility, that while we have the knowledge and the means to develop universally accessible ICT, there is little willingness to implement changes until doing so requires costly and time-consuming retrofitting of already deployed and inaccessible new ICT and media. This trend continues despite increased web accessibility having been proven to benefit all people—non-disabled people included—to drive further technological advancements, and to be highly profitable. Goggin and Newell, and now Ellis and Kent, have demonstrated that the reason for such continued resistance can only be explained by the continued unexamined ableism that pervades our social and cultural structures and imagination.

Apple's journey (29) is used as an example to illustrate some of the problems that arise in developing inaccessible hardware and software that needs to be retrofitted after the fact, as well as an example of how disabled people's direct advocacy to increase accessibility was (mostly) positively received by Apple, resulting in more access to new media by people with different impairments. Nonetheless, Ellis and Kent remain cognizant of the fact that Apple is motivated by

profit margins to produce technology that is usable via multiple platforms and devices, and has worked to bolster their image as a company that cares about web accessibility and disabled consumers once they realized how these needs intersected with that goal.

Ellis and Kent advocate throughout their book for a greater inclusion of disabled people in defining and developing web accessibility standards, following the processes of user-generated content (49) already in place in other areas of new media development. More and more, the degree of usability and accessibility of a platform seems to be linked to its survival (107). To that end, Ellis and Kent examine a number of current and past social media platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter (95), the inventors of which were willing to increase their accessibility once disabled users petitioned them to do so. These examples are compared to others such as MySpace and Friendster which were not, and are now lagging behind other social media sites in popularity (111). Despite these examples of the cost of inaccessibility, the lack of desire to meet the expectations of disabled Internet users remains.

Disability in Digital Futures

In their 2012 article "Access & Praxis" in *Bitch*'s Frontier Issue, s.e. smith offers a much needed history lesson on the presence and role of disabled users in the development of the Internet, pointing out that one of the first listservs active in its earlier, more text-based days was a disability listserv. smith also makes the point that one of the first groups to organize politically online and to organize politically using the Internet were disabled people, because the Internet made it possible to overcome inaccessible environments, forced social isolation, and ableist discourses and processes that tried to relegate disabled people to the margins of political agency and cultural representation. Non-disabled people more generally, but also industry leaders, policy

makers, and government administrators, who wield more power in affecting lasting changes tend to forget that those who have the expertise about Adaptive Technologies (AT) are those who use them regularly. Similarly, there is a lack of awareness about existing AT, which reinforces the notion that disabled people are not online and cannot use any of the new ICT and media.

Disabled people are still largely denied access to new media and attendant technologies; only 35% of disabled people in North America have access to them, compared to 75% of non-disabled people (Jaeger, 2012). Digital lack of access illustrates disabled people's under-representation in other areas of society. Additionally, it also makes salient disabled people's marginal status within our society, as much of ICT and new media proficiency is developed via peer to peer interactions with other users (70), either on or offline. This is what Ellis and Kent call "cultware" which "measures the social network that might enrich online experience as well as those networks, both digital and analog, that might determine an individual's ability to enhance their own knowledge and experience through their social network" (69). If people with different types of impairments are impeded in accessing digital environments because of arbitrary web inaccessibility, then they cannot develop the necessary cultware to become part of cyberspaces.

Disabled Internet users have demonstrated their willingness to drive change online by challenging creators of technologies (117)—of platforms and virtual worlds and digital games—to address issues of inaccessibility, and they have organized in order to do so (AbleGamers, Ability.net, Gimp Girl Community, virtualability.org). However, they remain only one part of the solution, the other part being the industry and creators of new technology and media, and, finally, the non-disabled users who are online. The future of ICT and new media depends on having more disabled Internet users who interact with others, disabled and non-disabled, create

counter-discourses about disability and disabled people, online communities, and new cyber cultures where universal web accessibility becomes the standard on which the digital world is based.

Disability in New Media

Disability and New Media is an excellent resource if you want to learn about the issues faced by disabled people when they try to use new media and ICT. My wish would be for it to become required reading, not only for computer programmers, software developers, and industry leaders, but also for all Internet and media scholars and researchers.

The history of how the Internet has developed as it relates to accessibility demonstrates clearly the interdependent nature of technology, embodiment, cultural beliefs, and hierarchies of power. Additionally, the history of advocacy and activism that disabled Internet users have created online, as well as the personal narratives and experiences of disabled peoples, are inherent to and examplars of what the Internet enables and impedes when it comes to participation in cyberspace and e-democracy. As an Internet and media scholar, however, I am constantly reminded of the disregard and indifference with which those experiences are met by mainstream scholarship and research; disability/disabled people/accessibility is considered relevant either when it is *the* subject of study, or when used as an example of the liberatory potential of the Internet. However, the work of critical disability media scholars and researchers, such as Ellis and Kent, is still not considered to be of central importance in mainstream media scholarship, and it should be, because the absence of disabled people online indicates the fault-lines where the promise of Internet democracy fails to deliver.

Furthermore, *Disability and New Media* should be required reading for all critical disability scholars and researchers because at the centre of Ellis and Kent's scholarship are disabled people themselves, who are participating in cyberspaces and are contributing to online cultures. Disability studies hasn't yet fully understood how crucial access to new media and ICT is to disabled people's struggles for social justice, agency, and greater self-determination, but disabled Internet users have, and Ellis and Kent give them voice and body in their book. If we are to truly conceive of experiences of disability, disablement, and impairment in emancipatory ways that enable us to fulfill our role of challenging a status quo that would prefer disabled people disappear altogether, we need to realize that the revolution *is* being mediatized by disabled people: via Facebook statuses, Twitter hashtags, and Pinterest networks. Disabling imagery and inspiration porn are being transformed into disability pride and online forums. We, as disability scholars and activists, need to pay attention to the disabled people who are contributing to changing the discussion about disability, and to the scholarship about it, such as Ellis and Kent's invaluable contribution to disability studies.

References

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