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Review: Jaeger, Paul T. *Disability and the Internet: Confronting a Digital Divide*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012. ISBN 978-1-58826-828-0

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Since my current research focuses on issues of inclusion and access in relation to information and communication technology (ICT), I took an immediate interest in Jaeger's book (though I must admit that I was skeptical about its timeliness and relevance today considering the prevalent use of mobile devices). Since, the late 1990s, there has been a considerable amount of research on disability and Internet access. Earlier literature suggests that the Internet has the potential to remove disabling barriers and facilitate inclusion, but that the benefits of Internet use are not equally experienced by all disabled people due to the inaccessible design of websites as well as incompatible computer hardware and software. In *Disability and the Internet*, Jaeger echoes this sentiment and argues that Internet accessibility is integral for disabled people to experience equal social, economic, educational and political opportunity.

While I found myself questioning the need for another text about disability and the Internet, Jaeger makes a convincing case by pointing out that "many developers of websites and related technologies simply do not consider persons with disabilities when they create or update products" (3). The idea is that developments and improvements in the technology with which the Internet is used do not eliminate the need to create an accessible Internet. *Disability and the Internet* follows up on earlier literature in that it serves as a 'progress report' of sorts by revealing that despite the Web Accessibility Initiative's (WAI) internationally accepted Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) and a number of legislative provisions, such as section 508 of the *Rehabilitation Act*, the *Telecommunications Act* and the *E-Government Act of 2002*, the Internet continues to be plagued with access gaps. Jaeger's book is written with a wide

readership in mind including “teachers, scholars and students from any discipline” (8).

Accordingly, the ideas presented and the language used is free of technical jargon and easy to grasp.

The first chapter provides a basic summary of the key conceptual perspectives that inform disability studies, namely the medical and social models of disability and a discussion of disability in a social context including an overview of contesting views surrounding appropriate disability language. For disability studies scholars and students, the introductory chapter will be familiar. For readers outside the field of disability studies, the introductory chapter will prove eye-opening and will help to elucidate how and why access is a complex issue that demands social change rather than intervention at the individual level.

The second chapter provides a historical overview of the development of technology and accessibility. While Jaeger recognizes that for technology to be truly accessible it cannot rely on any particular sense or ability, he does not mention how accessibility might be achieved for individuals with multiple impairments. This is important as websites and the technology used to enable access often do rely on one particular sensory function or ability. For example, a textual alternative to audio content provided for individuals with hearing loss relies on the user being able to see and read visual text. The reality is that individuals often experience multiple impairments, which further complicates accessibility. Some discussion on how to make the Internet accessible for individuals who experience multiple impairments would have been useful. The discussion in the second half of the chapter progresses to an overview of legislative provisions in the United States that perhaps limits the scope of applicability for Canadian and other International readers. While there is a brief overview of how accessibility is implemented

in other nations, including two paragraphs on Canadian initiatives, this discussion is too brief to contribute to any substantial analysis in a Canadian or international context.

The third chapter investigates the impact that inaccessibility presents for disabled people by looking at the importance and reliance placed on the Internet in pursuing employment and education as well as engaging in social interaction, commerce and e-government. Jaeger emphasizes the importance of e-government and provides a detailed account of the types of services that are available online arguing that access to government information online is vital to upholding “democratic governance” and “citizen empowerment” (108,109). The chapter then transitions to a practical discussion on how to make e-government more accessible. This provides a topical segue to the fourth chapter, which looks at ways to improve website accessibility.

A particular strength of the fourth chapter is Jaeger’s differentiation between accessibility and usability. He explains that whereas accessibility refers to websites, software, and operating systems that are compatible with assistive technology, usability refers to interfaces that are easy to navigate and use. Another strength of this chapter is Jaeger’s discussion on methods of evaluating websites, which include user testing based on ‘functionality’, ‘usability’ and ‘accessibility’ as well as expert and automated testing. He provides a list of common results from user testing that signify a website is inaccessible and difficult to use, which include, among others, incompatibility with assistive technology such as screen readers and enlargements, lack of *alt tags* and confusing or inconsistent layout. Jaeger also provides a list of sample questions for web developers to ask when evaluating and designing a website. In this context, I found that Jaeger’s proposed readership could be expanded to include web developers and even policy makers and analysts.

The combined discussion on identity and advocacy in the fifth chapter focuses on the empowering potential of the Internet. Jaeger refers to representations of disability in the media to highlight how the Internet can be used as a vehicle to challenge stereotypical portrayals and perspectives. He also suggests that disabled people can play an active role in educating the government and companies when they encounter inaccessible websites. The section on advocacy was extremely relevant, but the brevity with which it was discussed made the chapter feel rushed and incomplete. More could have been said about how advocacy groups and disability organizations can get involved and promote accessibility by communicating directly with web designers and technology developers as well as policy makers.

In the sixth chapter, Jaeger concludes with a poignant anecdote of his personal experience encountering prejudice. His candid account was reminiscent of a research participant's personal narrative. While useful, this anecdote also drew attention to the absence of any original empirical contribution. The omission of original empirical data was surprising considering Jaeger quotes Heres and Thomas (2007) who state that "Despite the large number of policy references to the positive effects of information and communication technologies on people's lives, few of these claims are supported by empirical research" (quoted in Jaeger, 41). Jaeger later remarks that "For persons with disabilities, the individual has unique experiences with information and information technology access ..." (116). It would have been worthwhile to incorporate some accounts of "unique experiences" as reported by disabled people in order to substantiate the claims made about the benefits and barriers of Internet use.

Despite its minor shortcomings, *Disability and the Internet* makes a meaningful contribution to the existing literature. It offers very practical solutions to improve web accessibility and usability at both the technical and political levels that can be widely adopted.

Jaeger frames his argument on the need for Internet accessibility as a human rights issue. In doing so, he does not cast disabled people in a helpless, victimized role. Rather, he points out that disabled people with technical skills are being proactive in developing solutions to the inaccessibility they encounter online.

Overall, *Disability and the Internet* has a well-articulated message with a purpose that makes it a worthy and important read. This book explores how issues of access are further complicated by society's reliance on the Internet. As the Internet is now disaggregated among a plethora of mobile digital devices that offer specialized disability-related applications as well as built-in accessibility features, we can also raise important questions about access from both a technical and social standpoint that reach beyond the scope of this book. Yet for those interested in conducting further research on disability, access and ICT, this text offers a very useful starting point.