

# Accessibility, Disability, and Inclusion in Information Technologies: Introduction

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The pages of *The Information Society* have hosted and incubated a number of fine critical studies and discussions of inclusion and accessibility, not least on topics such as universal service, digital divide, community networking, development, and access to information, Internet, and telecommunications. In one sense, then, this special issue foregrounds questions of accessibility and inclusion as they are raised by disability. This may function as a more-or-less recognizable and indeed common characterization and understanding of disability. Indeed, the various contributions to this collection certainly do advance our understanding of the fundamental aspects of disability and impairment as they interact with and are constructed by information technologies. With the rise of concepts of the information society and developments with convergent information and communications technologies, this is a topic that has gradually become visible and legible to scholars, policymakers, scientists and technologists, business people, and civil society organizations. It still has not received, however, the sustained study, analysis, and debate it merits, so we hope the articles we present here will further this enquiry.

Our theme, however, has wider and deeper implications than are usually warranted, when it is custom-

arily regarded as a “special,” specialized, minority, or marginalized concern. Disability raises many of the questions considered in this journal: struggles for democracy in the information society; computers, networks, and work; e-commerce; construction of identity; the relations of gender, class, and ethnicity; and social and cultural shaping of technology. Disability needs to be framed in much larger, less conceptually barren and constraining ways than it has been. There is a dawning recognition of the important role that disability plays in the complex social, economic, and political environments of information technologies. When we do acknowledge these overarching bearings of disability, we find that, in various respects, we think disability stands to cross-fertilize these debates in timely, interdisciplinary, and multivoiced ways. This, at least, is our desire, in bringing forth these articles.

The special issue has its origins in a summer institute held in May 2005 at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, Canada, where earlier versions of most of the articles were presented. This colloquium was one of an annual series convened by the Canadian Disability and Information Technologies (Dis-IT) Research Alliance. The Dis-IT Research Alliance brings together academics and policymakers with a wide range of information technology companies, technologists, designers, advocacy organizations of people with disabilities, and service providers. The alliance is jointly led by Professor Deborah Stienstra from the Interdisciplinary Master’s Program in Disability Studies at the University of Manitoba, and Gary

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Annable, based at the Council of Canadians for Disabilities, two of the editors of this issue. Among other sources, its large-scale program of research is largely funded by the Initiative on the New Economy program of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada. The Dis-IT researchers have also joined with Australian counterparts to undertake an exploratory comparative study of disability, and one of these partners, Gerard Goggin from the University of Sydney, is the third editor.

The articles we have selected here may be placed in this context of long-term engagement, dialogue, and collaborative research and design deeply investigating the recurrent problems and paradoxes of accessibility and inclusion when it comes to disability and information technologies. Although there has been much work over the past two decades in understanding disability, in accessible and universal design, and in conceptualizing and critiquing inclusion and how it is produced through policies, practices, and technologies, we still lack answers to, and indeed workable strategies for, foundational questions of knowledge.

If accessibility allows more people to use technologies, so activating human rights, citizenship, and the possibilities of everyday life, why do we not see more inclusive technologies—especially in the much-vaunted realm of digital technologies? If designing technologies with the needs and aspirations of users in mind is not only a goal of social justice, but is also profitable, why are not businesses flocking to do it? If we now have readily available information on and perspectives from people with disabilities, why do policymakers not avail themselves of it? If there is much more acceptance of disability as a social, rather than purely medical, phenomenon, and greater public support for the removal of barriers and for an end to discrimination and exclusion of people with disabilities, why are information technologies—often the newest, most heralded ones—still disabling? What are the perspectives of the various actors on disability and technology, from the scientists and technologists, to those striving to ensure profitability in global firms, through those setting rules that create markets, and nongovernmental actors in disability organizations, to the users themselves and how they adopt, resist, or domesticate the technology, and, finally, to the technologies themselves as nonhuman actors in their own right? Written from a variety of perspectives, the following six articles address such foundational, troubling problematics, and seek to contribute useful insights, as well as indicating fruitful avenues for future research, policy, and technology development.

In “A Three-Way Dance: The Global Public Good and Accessibility in Information Technologies,” James Watzke and Gary Birch join Deborah Stienstra to enlarge the scene of accessibility to encompass its global dimensions, and

also to place two other important actors in the frame: governments and disability advocacy organizations. They offer a nuanced account of the articulation that regulation, usable products and standards, and education can creatively transform the contradictions at play among these three interdependent entities so often in unproductive, fatalistic conflict.

Gerard Goggin and Christopher Newell also recognize the various parties involved in the creation and perpetuation of disability in their “The Business of Digital Disability.” They recognize the potential of business engagement, and also the possibilities that flow from new paradigms of governance and self-regulation, for promoting accessibility. However, they also argue for the importance of an adequate theoretical account of the power relations of disability. This is indispensable for any genuine comprehension of the shaping of information technology and the betterment of the situation of people with disabilities through its democratization.

Aldred H. Neufeldt, James Watzke, Gary Birch, and Denise Buchner’s “Engaging the Business/Industrial Sector in Accessibility Research: Lessons in Bridge Building” squarely discusses the vexed issue of how to create genuine partnerships between research institutions and industry, in order to pursue what should be common goals of improving accessibility. Inspired by the difficulties they faced as researchers in opening doors to their industry and business counterparts, Neufeldt and his coauthors give us rare insider views on why the business of accessibility is so difficult to sustain.

These three research articles are authored by researchers located in, or holding adjunct appointments in, universities. The next three perspective articles are rare contributions by industry and policy practitioners and researchers.

In his “Accessibility and Product Ecologies” Jim Tobias draws on extensive, high-level experience in seeking to have accessibility taken for granted as a part of business profitability and technology design. He offers a lucid diagnosis of how products are conceived and made, and suggests precisely where accessibility might be inserted.

Another accomplished, expert business leader in accessibility technology and design, Helen Maskery, explicitly addresses one of the most mystifying and contested facets of accessible information technologies: the bedrock commercial discourse on the prospects for profitability. Her “Crossing the Digital Divide: Possibilities for Influencing the Private Sector Business Case” is an invaluable treatment of how industry approaches accessibility.

In the third and final perspective piece, “Working for Barrier Removal in the ICT Area: Creating a More Accessible and Inclusive Canada,” April D’Aubin discusses the Council of Canadians with Disabilities. Socially and culturally distinctive understanding of disability, and reviews

its engagements with government and industry in accessible information technology. They argue the case for a strong human rights approach, and governmental and regulatory framework, to create the preconditions for market actors to deliver accessibility and to be motivated by goals of inclusion and equality.

We are grateful to *The Information Society's* general editor, Professor Harmeet Sawhney, for his enthusiastic and supportive response to this special issue. We believe the journal is a fitting venue for these emerging debates and new knowledge on disability and information technology, and look forward to the response of *TIS's* readers.