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PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL ON THE INTERNET

Disability and the Internet in 2015: Where to now?
by Katie Ellis and Mike Kent

Earlier this decade, the emerging field of disability media began to focus on the Internet and people with disabilities. Books such as Paul T. Jaeger's *Disability and the Internet* in 2012 and *Disability and new media* by this issue's editors in 2011 both extended earlier work in this field particularly Goggin and Newell's 2003 *Digital disability*.

This new focus incorporated changes to the environment with the hype around Web 2.0, the rise of online social networks and the increasing prevalence of smartphone and other mobile devices being used to access the Internet, as well as the evolving legal environment around access to technology for people with disabilities.

Our aim in compiling this special issue was to continue the work we began with *Disability and new media*. We never saw that book as a finished project but rather a discussion that could lead to much needed debate in the area. We concluded the book with 'more hope than trepidation' and called on other scholars, activists, people with disabilities and their allies to continue the work:

> There have been great strides made recently in terms of accessibility to new media for people with disability. While it would obviously be preferable that these changes were not necessary we hope that a threshold of awareness is being reached in this area that will inform future developments with an awareness of the importance of accessibility to this important area for people with disability. We hope that this book is a step in that process. [1]

In only four years there have been great strides in this area and disability media studies is no longer a peripheral area of concern. As we approach the second half of this first decade of the twenty-first century, this special issue of *First Monday* brings together scholars in disability media and related fields to look at the contemporary Internet and the challenges and opportunities it presents for people with disabilities. This issue includes nine academic papers which look at a variety of topics related to disability and the Internet. As the papers in this special issue show, online accessibility for people with disabilities is an issue that cuts across a number of fields including education, mobile telephony, television studies, and human rights.

As many of the papers in this issue draw on Gerard Goggin and Christopher Newell's *Digital disability* as a foundational text, we asked Gerard Goggin, who contributes a paper on the mobile Internet to this special issue, to reflect on the process of publishing *Digital disability* 12 years ago and how the discipline has changed/stayed the same for this introduction to the issue.

What motivated you and Christopher to write *Digital disability*?

> "We had been activists working on accessibility and disability in telecommunications policy since the early 1990s. Increasingly we had been writing academic papers arguing for the need for a more comprehensive approach to disability and technology — grounded in a recognition of the lived experiences of people with disabilities, but also human rights and what are now called 'critical disability studies' perspective. Especially because of the sweeping changes of digital media convergence, and the rise of the Internet, we felt that a book on this phenomenon was needed."

How did you go about finding a publisher? Was it difficult to get work in this area published?

"We approached different publishers — in Australia and internationally. It was hard going, because publishers did not understand disability — or understand the growing need for good books on the topic. So it took five years to get a contract!"

What has been the response to the book?

"We were delighted and amazed that people really responded to it. We experienced this first-hand in launches and seminars we organized ourselves to publicize and get discussion going on the book (this is when we discovered that academic publishers are often not keen on organizing or paying for launches!). Then the book slowly gathered widening audiences, and provided not only useful but quite a spur and support for many scholars, policy-makers and activists. Sadly Christopher died in 2007, but he would have loved to see the book still finding readers over a decade after it was published."

Did you realise at the time how important it would be?

"No, not really. We were passionate about the need for critical accounts of disability to be generated and influence — indeed, reframe — how policy, design, and technology was done. I think we were surprised that there was no obvious book — or indeed books! — that made these arguments in a comprehensive way. So it's been wonderful to see other books, articles, research, blogs & social media, critique, and so gathering real momentum in recent years (not least your own great 2011 book *Disability and new media*)."

Have you observed any significant changes in the area of digital disability since publishing the book?

"There have been many changes indeed. For instance, in the rise of intellectual property — and the Marrakesh Treaty — in shaping digital technologies, through copyright laws, as is obvious in the debates over e-readers. Also in the vast expansion of areas of digital technologies relevant to disability, well beyond the crucial yet at least acknowledged (if still not delivered) Web accessibility. Think, for instance, of the emerging cultures of disability user and design in hacking, 3-D printing, and so on."

Something I've always found really interesting about digital disability is it was written just before Web 2.0 (for a lack of a better word) but it was still so relevant. How have things changed/stayed the same?

"There's lots of continuities between early histories of the Internet, and how it developed, and the period of Web 2.0 discourse, as well as the current phase of social media. Many of the 'affordances' (features, capabilities, scripts) of social media technology are anticipated in early chat rooms, Bulletin board systems, e-mail, and so on. And the critical concepts about disability and technology are long-lived. Mind you, there are some real clangers and out-of-date things in the original *Digital disability* — so if there is ever a second edition ..."

From these reflections on the last decade and more since the book was published this issue now focuses on the contemporary Internet and its relation to people with disabilities. We are happy to have collected together here papers that address this topic from a number of different perspectives.

The first paper in this issue by Paul T. Jaeger, argues that significant changes can be made to the relationship between disability and the Internet by framing accessibility in this context as a human rights issue as much as a technical or legal issue. The next article by Justin Brown and Scott Hollier looks at the evolving concept of Web accessibility. Charting its evolution over the past 15 years they observe that "disability awareness, more than technology and policy, is perhaps the primary obstacle to a more universally accessible Web" and note that the goals of a fully accessible Web site are yet to be fully met.

The following two articles turn to issues or regulation, guidelines and standards. David Kreps and Mhorag Goff write an fascinating analysis of the development of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0 and the people and groups involved using a Latourian reading of the process to open the 'black box' of these debates and negotiations. G. Anthony Giannoumis

follows this with his article looking at the role interest organisations can play in Web accessibility, specifically exploring the role of auditing and certification can play in this process.

Chen, Sanderson Kessel and Królak follow this with a heuristic evaluation, based on the Authoring Tool Accessibility Guidelines 2.0, of different learning management systems used in higher education. Significantly, and perhaps an indication of the evolution of this field, their analysis focuses on the use of these platform by teaching staff rather than the more traditional student focused analysis. Denise Wood's article maintains this focus on inclusive higher education within a model that "incorporates accessibility, usability, personalization and transformative pedagogy within a holistic model".

Elizbeth Ellcessor's paper then turns to the mobile Internet, specifically using the case of Windows iOS 7 to discuss accessibility issues in this context. This leads into our own submission for this special issue that looks at the migration of television to the Internet and the challenges for industry regulation and online activism that accessibility to this long standing format in this new context present.

Finally just as Gerard Goggin's interview opens this issue his final paper closes it. This article looks at disability and the mobile Internet. This too picks up on the themes of how accessibility can be maintained as the Internet is transformed in this context and enters "this exciting yet perilous period of the Internet's mobile future".

As Goggin observes above there is a continuing resonance of the issues raised in *Digital disability* some 12 years after publication. However, Jaeger also notes in his conclusion that his hope is that in five years' time when we reflect on the state of disability and the Internet we are not still having the same debates. In the last 15 years there have been many changes in the Internet, the way it is accessed, the form and content, and its position in global culture. Over this period we have seen access to this environment for people with disabilities ebb and flow as the medium evolved. However we still look to the future online for people with disabilities with more hope than trepidation. What all the authors of this special issue would aspire to is that we reach the point where awareness of accessibility for people with disabilities is no longer an issue that needs to be agitated for, but rather it is the accepted standard for any online development. **FM**

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Note

1. Katie Ellis and Mike Kent, 2011. *Disability and new media*. New York: Routledge, p. 151.

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Editorial history