A Social History of Web Accessibility in the United States: Aggregated Interview Responses from Participants in a Disability Blogosphere

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As part of the research for my PhD dissertation, *Access Ability: Policies, Practices, and Representations of Disability Online*, completed at University of Wisconsin – Madison, I conducted ethnographic research in a disability blogosphere. The research site was determined through selection of three seed sites, *Blind Photographers*; *Feminists with Disabilities*; and *Disability Studies, Temple University*, from which I followed blogrolls to form a snowball sample. Ultimately, participant observation included 52 blogs, 30 Twitters, 26 Flickrs, and 11 Tumblrs. During and after this immersion, I conducted roughly hour-long interviews with individual bloggers with disabilities. Some participants chose to maintain confidentiality of their identities and data, others were willing to be quoted and even identified. To accommodate the diversity of confidentiality preferences, I've assembled an aggregate retelling of the interviewees' responses to six questions that were asked in all interviews. Responses to questions specific to any individual's experience are not included, nor or responses that would provide identifying details.

The interview population consisted of ten bloggers. Although I did not request detailed demographic data, this sample included three men, one gender-queer participant, one non-white participant, and one person from outside the United States. These imbalances were not the result of intentional choices; several other men and people of color were approached for interviews. Most often, those requests went unanswered, leaving me no indication of reasons for refusal. These known demographics represent a limitation of the interview research, as they are certainly not indicative of a representative sample. Finally, while I did not ask for diagnostic information, participants often volunteered information about their disability status. My interview participants included people with impairments ranging from blindness to mobility impairments, attention disorders, progressive muscular disorders, and heart conditions. Certainly, this is not an exhaustive list, and once again, is not fully representative of the diversity of impairments within the larger blogosphere. However, this spectrum does indicate that my interview findings were applicable beyond single disability communities and spoke to a kind of cross-disability identification.

I. *Why did you start blogging?*

The most common motivation to begin blogging was a desire to share a particular disability experience and provide resources for others. Several bloggers discussed an absence of online resources devoted to their particular disabilities, or a lack of community, and started their blogs in order to build those resources and communities. Often, this meant that blogging became a "critical" part of daily life, an important outlet for creativity as well as something that they dedicated significant effort to. One blogger mentioned that she saw her blog as a way of "talking back" to a society that often looked at her with pity, and a way of exploring her identity as a disabled woman, worker, and family member.

Others began blogging for reasons very common to all bloggers, including for personal journaling, as a form of feminist or disability activism, or to connect with family or creative communities. For some, this has led from blogging to freelance writing work for a variety of publications. For others, blogging began as an extension of other writing, as a means of publicizing book projects or gaining online presence as a writer. These more professionalized uses of blogs also meant that these bloggers, roughly 4 out of the 10 interviewed, were more likely to discuss blogging as work, or to draw attention to the challenges of writing for an online audience than were others.

II. *What accessibility measures or assistive technologies do you use? Does inaccessibility lead you to avoid any online sites or services?*

Several bloggers used various forms of assistive technologies. One of the most popular technologies for accessibility was the iPad. Bloggers identified it as useful for alternate means of typing and navigating websites. Other assistive technologies used included text-to-speech headsets and dictation (speech-to-text) software to ameliorate looking at a screen or pain while typing. Those with more severe motion impairments found mouse-based navigation a struggle, and one reported enthusiasm for a new mouse that could be operated with one's chin or tongue.

For other bloggers, accessibility was largely managed through avoidance of particular sites. Several mentioned that video, animated graphics, and similar features caused them discomfort and made it difficult for them to get any informative or entertainment value from these kinds of media. One blogger mentioned using many browser extensions to minimize the effects of these media. However, some bloggers found that such problems were not easily fixed through assistive technology, and instead avoided sites that they knew to be difficult. One blogger described it as clicking away and never returning. Tumblr came up often as a site to avoid. Ideally, these users wanted "an opportunity to turn that off," so that they could reach other content without going through aggravating graphics.

III. *Has blogging been a community for you?*

Bloggers who experienced blogging as a community were often those who entered in order to share disability experiences. Because they were sharing such personal information, they were contacted by readers sharing their own stories, and often entered into longer term friendships with readers or commenters.

Many bloggers also spent at least some time as very active members of a disability blogosphere, reading, writing, and commenting around the Web. This affiliation with the blogosphere shifted with time, with most people who discussed engagement with a blogosphere saying that they had later stepped aside from these interlinked spaces due to burnout with particular conversations, or due to simple evolving interests.

For others, for whom blogging is more of a professional outlet and a form of writing, community was in some ways less salient. They tended to see online writing more in terms of conversation, without the expectations of support and inclusion that may be part of forming a true online community.

IV. *Do you consider yourself knowledgeable about accessibility?*

In interviews, when asked to define accessibility, bloggers initially hesitated, perhaps reflecting the sense that it was an exclusive professional concept. Similarly, participants exhibited a reluctance to claim their own experiences as the basis for knowledge of accessibility. There was a persistent expression of accessibility as a professional discourse that was distinct from personal experience: "At a theoretical level, which would be at the level at which standards are defined and debated and so forth, there are probably a lot of things I don't know. At a practical, existential level, I wouldn't have a job, I wouldn't have a life if I didn't know something about how to make it accessible for me!" Declarations of knowledge were very measured: "I might know more than, like, a random average web user." Bloggers often felt most knowledgeable about those elements related to their own disability, or about "obvious" things. So-called "obvious" or "basic" accessibility features included closed captioning, narrative descriptions, document structure, and alternate text for images. This led to contradictory statements, such as the following: "I am somewhat knowledgeable, although I would like to be more so! I don't know a ton about accessibility from a technical standpoint (HTML, CSS, etc) other than providing image descriptions for pictures, and transcripts for musical or video material where appropriate, and not using .gifs or moving images out of consideration for migraineurs and people with epilepsy." Clearly, this blogger did know quite a bit about the practices of accessibility, if not about the policies themselves.

Many bloggers' knowledge came from friends, or other bloggers, via word of mouth. Resources such as the World Wide Web Consortium, A List Apart, and Jeffrey Zeldman's site were discussed as sources by which bloggers learned more about accessibility. Most often, accessibility was learned about through situations that required it, either for personal use or on behalf of an audience. As one blogger said, "I learned through research, talking with other disabled people who had specific access needs, and interacting with people in the tech community working on access topics." This also led to a strong emphasis on individual needs, as "I understand a little bit, and have gone through checklists and tools for making sites more accessible. To really understand more perspectives I would want to watch and interact with people who have particular needs actually using a site."

Finally, a significant number of bloggers mentioned that because they were people with disabilities, others assumed that they had knowledge of accessibility. As one blogger, who also works for a major website, put it: "They assume I'll know how, that the answer is fairly simple, and that I'll do that work for them for free." This was true even for people with physical disabilities, such as wheelchair users, who had no need for web accessibility features. Bloggers found themselves imposed upon, as "The fact is that accessibility consulting is actually a *paid job* that involves a lot of comprehensive knowledge, and people seem genuinely shocked when I indicate that I am not available to provide free consulting services."

V. *How would you define accessibility?*

Many bloggers struggled with this question, with a number of false starts or stammers before they settled on a definition. This, itself, is potentially indicative of either a lack of knowledge about web accessibility, or of a variety of available understandings of accessibility from which to choose. Once they began speaking, definitions of accessibility focused largely on individual needs, inclusiveness, and questions of culture.

Needs
Equivalency – whatever it takes to level the playing field
 "Accessibility is taking into account the range of needs a population may have in making use of a particular service, place, or thing, and designing it to accommodate those needs as best as possible."
""Accessibility," like disability, is subjective. Generally, I think any service or product available to the public should be "accessible" to be used by the widest possible audience/customer."
 "The extent to which someone can access or use something is accessibility"

Inclusiveness
"Making sure that... new technologies that are moving forward are inclusive and will allow people to participate."

"I think "accessibility" is not only being mindful of, but working to implement, policies and procedures that allow the greatest number of people possible to experience something even if they have impairments."

"Accessibility is a very granular thing when it's something that you do, you know, that you struggle with every day, you know, what's accessible for one person is not accessible for another."

Culture

"I think accessibility is a huge spectrum of different accessibilities and possibilities. The more there are, and the more information about them that are available, the more accessible something is."

"An ongoing process of education in how to think from multiple perspectives."

"Accessibility in a web sense means as many people as possible can interact with material, extract key information from it, and enjoy the process. It may mean a certain degree of flexibility and user control."

"accessibility is about equal access to all spaces. It's about being safe and comfortable. This includes both physical access, in the sense that people need to be able to physically enter a space and be safe there, and what I call 'emotional access,' that people feel welcomed. A building may be ramped, for example, but if the staff are clearly hostile to disabled visitors, it's not accessible. "

VI. *How would you define disability?*

Most bloggers with disabilities defined disability in terms of either a social model of disability, or in terms of deviance from a norm. The social model of disability, in which bodily impairments are made problematic by social structures, has been important to the U.S. disability rights movement, which advocated for rights to live in the community and have access to transportation, education, jobs, and housing. Finally, some bloggers used colloquial definitions focused on difference from a norm.

Social Model

"Disability is the social dimension that becomes attached to individuals' impairments."

"I absolutely believe the disability is a social process."

"A physical, mental, emotional or neurological condition that fundamentally impairs an aspect, or several aspects, of someone's life."

Deviance from a Norm

"I have to use something to help me participate in a "normal" activity."

"A bodily or mental impairment that affects one's ability to do things that most other people can do within a fairly arbitrary range of things possible to do and also within the structure of society however it happens to be structured."

"Disability is any variance from the norm of the basic physical/mental condition of an individual."

"It's a variation of the body and/or mind that results in approaching and experiencing the world differently from the people around you."

"I would say just the extent to which you don't have the physical or cognitive capability of the average, typical person. Yeah. But it can be worsened, or improved by, society, I would say. Yeah."