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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Mogendorff, K. (2023). Managing Accessibility Conflicts: Importance of an Intersectional Approach and the Involvement of Experiential Experts. *Social Inclusion*, *11*(3), 271-274. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v11i3.7150

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Social Inclusion (ISSN: 2183–2803)
2023, Volume 11, Issue 3, Pages 271–274
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v11i3.7150

Commentary

Managing Accessibility Conflicts: Importance of an Intersectional Approach and the Involvement of Experiential Experts

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Submitted: 4 May 2023 | Accepted: 17 July 2023 | Published: 6 September 2023

Abstract
In this commentary, I reflect on how digital communication technology and products are both an opportunity and a threat to the inclusion of disabled people. Drawing on my personal and professional experiences with research and user-led empowerment projects, I argue that a life course intersectional approach, together with early involvement of disabled people in technology and product development, may prevent accessibility conflicts and further participation and inclusion.

Keywords
accessibility conflicts; age; de-ableism; disability; life course intersectional approach

Issue
This commentary is part of the issue "Expanding the Boundaries of Digital Inclusion: Perspectives From Network Peripheries and Non-Adopters" edited by Rob McMahon (University of Alberta), Nadezda Nazarova (Nord University Business School), and Laura Robinson (Santa Clara University).

1. Introduction

Digital technology and media offer both opportunities and threats to disabled citizens. New media and technology may enable disabled people to conduct activities more efficiently and effectively, but they may also exclude them; disabled users can either not reap the benefits of new media technology altogether or do so with more difficulty than other citizen groups (Scholz et al., 2017). Opportunities and threats are informed by societal views on—and treatment of—disabled people in general and by how disability is treated in media technology development in particular. Disability is still largely viewed in society as an individual problem that is best overcome. Disabled citizens are expected to try their best to participate "normally" in society alongside their able-bodied peers. Accommodations tend to be made *after* the occurrence of participation problems.

Digital products and services tend to be developed for everyone, that is, the "reference man"—the able-bodied, able-minded, heterosexual, right-handed, middle-class White male in his prime who serves as the standard in product and service development (Mogendorff, 2022). Although disability is not considered in technology development as a matter of course, disabled people may, depending on their specific impairments, skills, characteristics, and circumstances, be able to use ableist (digital) technology "normally," use the technology with difficulty, or not be able to use the technology altogether. If disabled people encounter problems, software and devices may be adapted and informed by accessibility guidelines; alternatively, disabled citizens may apply for adaptations tailored to their individual circumstances.

In the last decades, inclusion is increasingly viewed as a two-way process. Instead of disabled people having to adapt to able-bodied society one-sidedly, the UN Disability Rights Convention obligates governments to ensure that disabled citizens may participate in online and offline society on equal terms with able-bodied citizens, e.g., by adapting existing ableist legislation, ensuring that (semi)-governmental institutions are truly accessible to disabled citizens, and providing subsidies for inclusion initiatives of organizations and businesses (United Nations, 2006).

Problems with digital inclusion are important to address particularly because public administration–citizen, business–consumer, and social interaction is

nowadays largely digital in nature. For instance, a problem with digital inclusion is the conditions for access to one's digital identity (commonly referred to as DigiD). Dutch citizens need their unique DigiD to exercise their citizens' rights and duties. It is increasingly difficult to pay taxes and access public education and healthcare services without a DigiD. This is a problem for citizens who are judged legally incompetent due to illness or disability; they and their guardians cannot (easily) obtain and access DigiD and it takes time to adequately address these problems (Netherlands Court of Audit, 2023).

An instrument deployed to promote (digital) inclusion is specific funding schemes that focus on (online) societal participation of disabled citizens. For example, in 2019, I acquired, together with others, funding to co-develop with media and experiential experts a digital Dutch free-learning multimodal module about aging with lifelong or longtime disabilities. This module is called Aging Well With a Longtime Disability (Goed Ouder worden met een langdurige beperking in Dutch). A condition for funding was that experiential experts were involved and had a say in the project from design to implementation. This user-led empowerment project by and for aging disabled people was conducted in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic. Disabled people as experiential experts were digitally involved in all project phases and on all levels from co-designer to project leader. The involvement in all phases and on all levels of experiential experts ensured that experiential knowledge of aging with a disability was incorporated in the resulting free digital learning module; this module is in Dutch only and may be accessed at https://www.ouderwordenmeteenbeperking.nl.

It is useful to address problems at the intersection of disability and age because the problems aging disabled citizens encounter differ significantly from the problems disabled citizens in general face and the problems of aging able-bodied citizens. For one, disabled people who age with a disability generally have more impairments at an earlier age than their peers who acquire impairments only with age. Co-morbidity tends to complicate (digital) participation (Kemp & Mosqueda, 2004). It also matters when during the life course one becomes disabled, if you become disabled while of working age you need to be digitally included in work life, if one acquires a disability after retirement digital participation needs and problems are different (see also Scholz et al., 2017).

Despite good initiatives, such as the aforementioned Aging Well With a Longtime Disability project, there is still much work to be done before society is adequately inclusive. An underlying barrier to offline and online participation and inclusion is ableism. Ableism is deeply ingrained in culture and society; the omnipresence of buildings, hardware, and online and offline services that are not adequately inclusive shows how much able-bodiness and able-mindedness are taken for granted. Moreover, ableism is often quite explicitly expressed. For instance, as a visibly disabled postdoctoral researcher, I questioned in-person Dutch public servants about public commissioning and accessibility before ratification by Dutch parliament of the UN Disability Rights Convention in 2016: "It [the building] is already accessible [current legal accessibility requirements have been followed]"; and: "It is too expensive to make everything accessible in keeping with the Convention"; "Not everything [buildings or services] needs to be accessible"; "It does not make sense to make a building accessible when disabled people cannot reach the building anyway."

Underlying public servants' ableist stances is the consensus that (digital) services and buildings that are primarily designed for disabled citizens need to be accessible, but opinions differ on the matter when disabled citizens are not the imagined primary users of the service or building. Moreover, some public servants seem to imply that independent access—disabled citizens can enter public buildings and use (digital) services housed in the building without needing to ask for assistance—is not necessary by saying that disabled people may ask for help or bring help with them (see also Mogendorff, 2021). Poorly accessible buildings are problematic concerning digital participation and inclusion particularly when they house hardware and services disabled citizens need to be able to participate digitally in society, e.g., libraries and (semi)public service organizations that provide on-location (free) access to Internet, specialized software or services, or in-person support for citizens who find it difficult to access online services and social benefits.

Another problem is that disability tends to be treated in mainstream societal discourse, policies, and practices as a master identity that overshadows everything else (Mogendorff, 2021, 2022). While nature and severity of impairment may affect (digital) participation and inclusion in an ableist society, two persons with the exact same impairments may be limited in their participation in digital society in different ways. Disabled people's life history and other social characteristics such as gender, socioeconomic position, age, and educational level may have a greater impact on access to and use of digital technology and media than disability (Gopaldas & DeRoy, 2015).

I will elucidate the latter with an example of how the life history and different social characteristics of a disabled participant intersect in a digital project I was involved in as a project lead in 2006–2007. This project focused on the empowerment and digital inclusion of resident councils of nursing homes. The elderly members of the councils generally had age-related impairments. I found that a higher educated project participant and former manager in her 70s had more to learn about Internet use than her practical educated non-manager peers. When she was employed as a manager, she had a secretary who took care of her communication and correspondence. She was pensioned in the 1990s when Internet use and digital technology were not as omnipresent as

they are today. Consequently, she hadn't felt the need to learn how to use the Internet but was motivated to learn to do so in her 70s to become a more effective council member. Thus, in this case, digital literacy and, with that, digital participation partly depends on the participant's specific life course, which is marked in part by privilege; relatively few Dutch women born in the 1930s were managers. It is also relevant that this participant mostly lived and worked in the pre-Internet era. Her impairments did not significantly affect her use of the Internet during the project other than that she had to enlarge everything on the screen and that everything had to be translated from English to Dutch, including English terms that are adopted in the Dutch language such as "downloading." Like other participants in their 70s or older, she had not been taught English in school. This example highlights that life course and the times in which one is educated and socialized may affect digital participation alongside disability and other social characteristics such as educational level.

Given that disabled people have very diverse backgrounds, impairments, and characteristics, there are significant ingroup differences in digital participation and inclusion of disabled citizens (Gopaldas & DeRoy, 2015; Tsatsou, 2020). Given the many characteristics and circumstances that may influence disabled citizens' access and use of digital technology, an intersectional approach and life course approach is warranted. An intersectional approach means that one does not single out one social characteristic of digital media users such as disability, but considers how different characteristics of actual people—such as disability and age—may intersect and subsequently affect digital media use. An intersectional approach may provide insight into how participation and inclusion may best be promoted for different subgroups, e.g., for higher-educated young disabled women, practical educated middle-aged disabled men, etc.

A life course approach is helpful in addition to an intersectional approach for two reasons. Firstly, deprivation and privilege tend to be cumulative in nature across the life course. People's educational and social deprivation and privilege throughout one's life span may affect the knowledge, skills, and motivation necessary for digital participation in the present and in the future. Secondly, as the provided example shows, it matters in what media and technology era people have been socialized. The digital literacy of disabled citizens in their 70s in 2023 is likely to differ from the digital literacy of disabled citizens who were in their 70s back in 2006. Over time there are changes in school curricula, legislation, norms, and technology that may affect (digital) participation and inclusion.

Additionally, providing an opportunity to use digital technology for different subgroups in the present is not enough to ensure durable equal participation and inclusion. People, concepts, and media tend to evolve. Access to and usage of media can be lost, e.g., when media develop in ways that are no longer compatible with users' abilities and impairments. For instance, the shift from text-based online communication to multimodal communication poses both opportunities and challenges for deaf/Deaf digital media users: opportunities because multimodal video-based communication enables Deaf people to communicate in sign language with other Deaf people while text-based digital communication does not; it is also a challenge because video-based communication with hearing people is not subtitled as a matter of course, whereas text-based online participation does not require subtitling.

Moreover, voluntary or involuntary non-use of technology may become more problematic over time. When usage of a new medium becomes normalized, as is the case with the aforementioned DigiD, non-use becomes increasingly difficult particularly when older media infrastructure gets removed from the public sphere, e.g., the institutional processing of paper forms is increasingly discontinued and the once omnipresent public phone booth in the Netherlands is now a museum piece. The continuous evolvement of media and its infrastructure implies that facilitating digital participation and inclusion is an ongoing effort that requires the involvement of disabled people.

2. The Importance of Early Involvement of Experiential Experts: Avoidance of Conflicts

An intersectional life course approach is most effective when experiential experts are involved from design to implementation, if they are involved later in the process—e.g., in the implementation phase, most decisions are already made. Although it is an established insight that stakeholders and users should be asked for their input from the start, their voices are not typically included (Oudshoorn & Pinch, 2005). In part, this may be due to power imbalances. The ableist attitude or "blind spot" of many design professionals may also play a part in that professionals may see themselves as adequately equipped to represent disabled citizens' perspectives in the design process (Oudshoorn & Pinch, 2005; Tsatsou, 2020).

The added value of involving disabled citizens with diverse impairments and backgrounds from design to implementation is that it makes it more likely that (potential) accessibility conflicts are prevented (Tsatsou, 2020). Accessibility conflicts arise when digital technology supports the participation of one disabled user group but hinders (the interests of) other disabled or non-disabled user groups. An example is the differences in preferences and stakes concerning working online or offline.

People like me who have visible neuromotor impairments may prefer everyday online meetings for routine work-related purposes because online one does not experience locomotion problems or stigma associated with impairment visibility. The dependence on online communication during the Covid-19 lockdowns felt like levelling the playing field for me; I did not have to spend

more energy on mobility than able-bodied peers and, consequently, could attend more conferences and activities. More importantly, our interaction was less affected by the visibility of impairments—or not affected at all. However, other able-bodied or disabled people may prefer offline meetings for various reasons, e.g., because one misses basic stimuli online such as seeing one's audience. These differences in preferences, stakes, and needs when it comes to online working together may, if left unaddressed, cumulate in conflicts—conflicts that may, at least in part, be prevented if one does not treat disability as a monolithic whole, but as the diverse category it actually is.

Diversity may be managed by committing to giving disabled and non-disabled user groups a real say in technology and service development from design to implementation. This requires more than dialogue or listening to non-dominant voices; it requires clear ex-ante agreement between involved stakeholders on how experiential knowledge is evaluated and incorporated into technology development (Romsland et al., 2019).

To conclude, every change in media technology in ableist society creates new opportunities *and* new potential problems for everyday (digital) participation and inclusion of disabled citizens. The ongoing involvement of experiential experts from different impairment groups and backgrounds in all development phases of new digital technologies, products, and services informed by a life-course intersectional approach may contribute to less accessibility conflicts and, with that, greater participation and inclusion.

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank the diverse (disabled) people she encountered in the last two decades and who partly inspired this commentary. She also would like to thank the editors for their feedback on an earlier version of this contribution.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

About the Author

Karen Mogendorff (PhD) is a Dutch disability scholar with a background in anthropology, communication science, and STS. Her work focuses on understanding and increasing societal participation of disabled people through the use of experiential knowledge alongside professional and scientific knowledge in research and product development.

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