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ACCESSIBILITY FOR JUSTICE: ACCESSIBILITY AS A TOOL FOR PROMOTING JUSTICE IN LIBRARIANSHIP

In Brief

“ Recent critiques of diversity in higher education and librarianship by Stewart (2017), Hudson (2017), and Hathcock (2015) have encouraged a critical shift away from diversity talk and initiatives, towards attention to equity, anti-racism, and whiteness. They point out that diversity initiatives often fail to address deeper power imbalances, and they offer new language for the effort to make our institutions more just.

This essay offers another term for that effort: accessibility. Linked to legal discourses of compliance on the one hand and to library values of access on the other, accessibility is rhetorically very useful. It is also historically complex and politically powerful. The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) was achieved through coalitional activism that reflects the intersectional nature of disability and, because the law prohibits discrimination by design, it demands active design agendas that stand to benefit people with and without disabilities—and marginalized people in particular. Librarians committed to justice can use accessibility as a starting point to change our institutions.

by Stephanie Rosen

Introduction

Recent critiques of diversity initiatives in higher education have encouraged a shift: away from individual acts of inclusion and celebrations of difference, towards transforming the policies, cultures, and conditions of our institutions. Writers from the library to the professoriate have shown how current efforts make minor changes but maintain larger, structural barriers, and several of these writers have suggested a way out of this problem by offering a change in language.

Stewart (2017), Hudson (2017), and Hathcock (2015) argue for a critical shift away from conversations and initiatives about *diversity* and towards interventions focused on *equity*, *anti-racism*, and *whiteness*, respectively. All point out the paradoxical ways in which diversity (and sometimes inclusion) initiatives actually require the deeper power imbalances they fail to address, and each writer provides a new, alternate term to replace diversity.

All of them are right. In the effort to make academic institutions more equitable and just, we need all the language we can get, just as we need a range of strategies. We ought to use all the rhetorics at our disposal. Yet a change in language will not solve our challenges once and for all. The work we do in the name of diversity and inclusion, or did in the name of equal opportunity and affirmative action, is always evolving and always greater than the terms we use, each of which have unique strengths—rhetorical, historical, and political—to offer our efforts.

In this essay I'd like to offer another term for use in this work: accessibility. Like *diversity*, *accessibility* is unique in that people often agree on its value (accessibility is good, we are committed to accessibility) but may disagree on its meaning (is this accessible? how do I make that accessible?). This quality, as well as its links to legal and technical discourses of compliance on the one hand and to library values of access on the other, makes accessibility rhetorically very useful. Promoting access is a core value in librarianship, and many in the profession are aware that we are supposed to promote accessibility.

In addition to its rhetorical usefulness, *accessibility* has a more complex history and politics than at first glance. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), which mandates accessibility, was achieved only through coalitional activism that reflects the intersectional nature of disability. Even today, while disability is said to "affect everyone," it still disproportionately affects people of marginalized racial, socioeconomic, and gender identities. Centering the needs and experiences of people with disabilities can therefore be a way of practicing social justice. And because the ADA prohibits discrimination by design, it requires active design agendas that stand to benefit people with and without disabilities, and marginalized people in particular.

Accessibility is not the only term we need in making academic institutions more equitable and just. Yet its enormous potential becomes apparent when we consider the wide reaching consequences of accessibility, the intersectional nature of disability, and the coalitional history of disability activism.

What's wrong with diversity?

Recent critiques of diversity in higher education and librarianship by Stewart (2017), Hudson (2017), and Hathcock (2015) have encouraged a critical shift away from diversity talk and initiatives, and towards attention to justice, anti-racism, and whiteness. While none of these writers opposes the basic aims of diversity—"to diversify and thereby enrich the [library] profession" (ALA) or to create "responsible and all-inclusive [library] spaces that serve and represent the entire community" (ACRL)—all of them explain that the basic methods of diversity often maintain the status quo.

Stewart (2017), writing about institutions of higher education in general, cautions that diversity and inclusion have too successfully appeased powerful donors and

student protesters alike, fooling us all with a false sense of progress while avoiding real transformative change. A shift to equity and justice, Stewart explains, would realign campus efforts with the original “goals of the student activists of the 1960s through the 1980s.”

Stewart puts faith in equity and justice to ask tougher questions and push more radical agendas:

“ Diversity asks, “Who’s in the room?” Equity responds: “Who is trying to get in the room but can’t? Whose presence in the room is under constant threat of erasure?” Inclusion asks, “Has everyone’s ideas been heard?” Justice responds, “Whose ideas won’t be taken as seriously because they aren’t in the majority?” (Stewart, 2017)

The warning here is that mere attempts to “include diverse perspectives” will not lead to questions about why certain perspectives are dominant, or why certain people are in power. Without the impetus to question dominant perspectives, there is little opportunity to change them.

Hudson (2017) offers a critique of diversity and inclusion initiatives in LIS degree programs and professional library associations. In spite of decades of research on “race as a historically contingent phenomenon” (p. 1), Hudson points out that LIS diversity discourses rely on a relatively simple and stable version of race. Degree programs are often preoccupied with identifying and counting racial minorities among their student body. Programs are therefore less attuned to questions of how racial formations are produced in the first place, and how LIS as a field may participate in this production.

Furthermore, a focus on individual cultural competence—overcoming “individual attitudes and (mis)understandings through education” (Hudson, p. 18)—precludes more structural approaches to reform. Hudson wishes to inject the limited anti-racism of library diversity initiatives with the power of critical race theory so that the profession can participate in a broader “inquiry into the specific ways in which race is constructed” and more effectively reform itself (p. 19).

Hathcock (2015) focuses on whiteness, not only of the profession itself (which is over 85% percent white [Bourg, 2014]), but even of the diversity initiatives

ostensibly designed to alter the demographics of the profession. For Hathcock, drawing on Galvan (2015) and Hall (2012), “whiteness refers not only to racial and ethnic categorizations but a complete system of exclusion based on hegemony.” Whiteness is what’s “at work when a librarian of color is mistaken for a library assistant by white colleagues at a professional conference”; whiteness is why LIS diversity initiatives have onerous application requirements; and whiteness is what is recruited, promoted and retained as a result (Hathcock).

Hathcock argues that LIS recruitment for diversity is not working because the conditions of our recruitment select for only those “diverse” candidates who can “play at whiteness.” All librarians, regardless of their bodies or their backgrounds, are expected to conform to social, political, and professional norms traditionally associated with whiteness, all of which leads to the reproduction of the same librarians and library cultures and the attrition of librarians who are different.

These critiques of diversity probably ring most true for those of us most committed to diversity. Ahmed (2012) has shown that “diversity practitioners”¹ are already aware that writing institutional diversity statements, policies, and documents can often get in the way of changing the institutions. Even worse, exemplary diversity policies may lead to false assumptions of exemplary conditions for diverse people, even causing institutions to ignore or underestimate evidence to the contrary (Chapter 5). Yet Ahmed’s interview subjects also explain that although the term may be “an empty container” (p. 80), it can be used strategically in multiple ways “to get people to the table” (p. 67). In what follows, I look at what’s inside the term *accessibility* and how it may likewise be used.

What is accessible? Legal definitions and political potential

When someone asks you if a library is accessible, you may begin to think about entrance ramps and elevators, or screen magnifiers and large print, or video captions and ASL programming. In short, you may begin to think about whether the library’s spaces, collections, and services are “readily accessible and usable to people with disabilities” (ADA, 1990). This phrase appears repeatedly throughout the text of the Americans with Disabilities Act. It can serve as a preliminary definition of accessibility, but it also introduces a slew of questions. For example:

1. What does “readily accessible and usable” mean in different contexts? What might it mean for physical spaces, online resources, interactive events?
2. Who are “persons with disabilities” and what specific needs do they/we bring to library contexts?

The first question is addressed by a body of literature and documentation known as standards. We have the 2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design, which describes architectural requirements for physical access. In the digital realm, we have the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0, which describes principles and criteria for accessible digital content and links to associated standards that describe criteria for interactive web applications, digital authoring tools, and electronic publications ([ARIA](#), [ATAG](#), [EPUB](#)).

Beyond these two most important documents, there are many other relevant standards—including perhaps the [Section 508 Guidelines](#) and the [21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act](#)—as well as softer guidelines, in the form of best practices and recommendations, that cover everything from teaching practices to exhibit design. When we have a specific question about how to make a specific context accessible, there are many places to look for an answer.

The second question is addressed by the ADA itself, which offers a broad definition of disability. According to the ADA, a person with disabilities is any person who:

- has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity
- or has a record of such impairment
- or is regarded as having such impairment (§ 12102)

The question is further addressed by the US Census Bureau, which reports that nearly 1 in 5 people in this country have a disability (Brault, 2012), and the World Health Organization, which reports that 1 in 7 people globally have a disability (2011). But these numbers and definitions do little to describe who people with disabilities really are, how they/we are unique, and how they/we are distributed among the total population.

To begin to answer this question, people with disabilities are an extremely diverse group in every possible way. First, they/we are diverse in terms of ability. Extrapolating from the ADA definition, people with disabilities may include:

- people with mobility impairment or differences in motor control
- people with visual impairments, blindness, or differences in vision
- people who are Deaf or hard of hearing
- people with cognitive or emotional differences, Autism, PTSD, learning disabilities, depression
- people perceived as having a disability or a stigmatizing medical condition: diabetes, epilepsy, obesity
- people with previous disability: cancer survivors, people recovering from addiction

Furthermore, there is of course a great diversity in ability among people with disabilities in general and within any specific disability category. For example, the spectrum of visual acuity among people with so-called low vision is just as broad and varied as the spectrum of visual acuity among people with so-called typical vision.

Second, people with disabilities are diverse in terms of every other aspect of identity. People with disabilities are people of every background, race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, economic status, nationality, and religion. And yet, people with disabilities are not evenly or randomly distributed among the total population. They/we overlap in striking ways with specific identities. For example:

- Among Americans over the age of 80, 70% of people experience disability (Brault, 2012, p.5).
- LGBTQ Americans are two times more likely to experience a mental health condition (NAMI).
- Among Americans with disabilities of working age, over 55% are unemployed (Brault, 2012, p. 11).
- Among Americans with disabilities of working age, over 25% live in poverty (Brault, 2012, p. 11).
- Among the world's approximately one billion people with disabilities, 80% are located in the global South (Grech, 2016, p. 3).

These overlaps have complex social, political, and biological backstories. For example, the high incidence of unemployment and poverty among people with disabilities is not only because disability may keep some people out of the work force and therefore at risk for poverty. Poverty itself increases the risk of developing disability because it often corresponds with lack of resources and

exposure to environmental hazards (Pokempner & Roberts, 2001). As a corollary, because in this country poverty and wealth correspond to racial differences, this means that disability is not equally distributed across all races. For example, in the US among people age 22 to 44, severe disability is about 2 times more common among Black people than among White people (Pokempner & Roberts, 2001, p. 434).

People with disabilities are extremely diverse, but not randomly diverse. They/we intersect in significant ways with other marginalized groups. The latest thinking in disability studies and adjacent fields addresses these realities with more expansive frameworks—for example, debilities and capacities (Puar, 2017), infrastructural neglect and environmental injustice (Kim, 2016), and the uneven distribution of life chances (Spade, 2015).

These frameworks describe the conditions that produce disability among some populations and not others, in some places and not others. They point out that some people can claim disability—along with disability rights and disability pride—but many more people experience disability and debilitating conditions. All of these emerging frameworks from trans, queer, critical race, and postcolonial studies suggest that a focus on disability alone is not enough to understand disability for what it is: always an intersectional identity. Fortunately, accessibility as a practice has the potential to affect the many identities that intersect with disability.

What is Accessibility? Design philosophy and coalitional history

Accessibility is a design philosophy that centers the needs and experiences of people with disabilities. I have developed this working definition over several years of thinking back and forth across accessibility discourses and disability studies. It emphasizes the open and adaptable nature of accessibility, its accountability to people with disabilities, and its far-reaching consequences.

By *centering* the needs of people with disabilities, accessibility puts those needs first, not to the exclusion of other users' needs, but rather to the benefit of the overall design. By centering the needs *and experiences* of people with disabilities, accessibility is accountable to the embodied knowledge of real people even as their/our needs change, rather than wed to often outdated

standards. As a *design philosophy*, accessibility is a system of values and goals we can bring to everything we do, from collections to services to hiring.

Accessibility as a design philosophy also brings us back to the ADA, its uniqueness as legislation, and the coalitional history that led to its passing. The ADA, signed into law in 1990, drew very significantly on the legacy of Civil Rights activism and civil rights legal theory. For example, in 1977, disability rights activists occupied the San Francisco Federal Building to force the US government to sign Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (the first piece of US legislation to prohibit discrimination against people with disabilities), clearly using tactics of civil disobedience developed in US Black civil rights struggles (Longmore). Indeed, some of the activists, like Black Panther party member Bradley Lomax, were involved in both struggles (Schweik, 2011).

Following the 1977 occupation, some of the same disability rights activists went to Washington and made connections with prominent civil rights activists, lawyers, and politicians (Davis, 2016). This eventually led to a 1981 summit in which people involved in passing The Civil Rights Act of 1964 helped disability rights activists think through applying a civil rights framework to disability. This work eventually led to the ADA as we know it (Davis, 2016).

The ADA was made possible by earlier civil rights activism and legislation. And yet the ADA is also different from that earlier legislation. The Civil Rights Act (1964) prohibited “discrimination or segregation on the ground of race, color, religion, or national origin.” It outlawed the kind of active discrimination that was previously enforced through behaviors like segregation, intimidation, and denial of service. The ADA (1990) also prohibits discrimination. But that discrimination was previously enforced largely through inaccessible design. To prohibit this kind of discrimination, the ADA implies a proactive requirement to design things differently, such that people with disabilities are not segregated or denied service just because of the way things are made.

This proactive requirement is extremely powerful, as it gives accessibility the ability to promote active design agendas that stand to benefit many people with and without disabilities. For example, accessible web design benefits people accessing the web with assistive technology as well as older technology, slower connections, and mobile devices. Closed captions for the hearing impaired benefit people with varying levels of familiarity with the topic and the language.

Single stall locking restrooms serve people who use wheelchairs as well as people who are transgender or gender nonconforming.

These illustrations of resonant design—cases where 2 different groups have coinciding needs and preferences in a particular context—show that accessibility benefits not just people with disabilities, and not just “everybody” (as is often said). Accessibility, when used consciously as a tool for justice, can benefit people with disabilities and people with debilities, and people subject to infrastructural neglect, and people with limited life chances. That is, accessibility can be used consciously to impact, for example, people with less fluency in a dominant language, less access to computing and communications technology, or less safety moving through public space—people who may or may not claim disability.

From Access to Accessibility in Libraries

As Kumbier and Starkey (2016) have recently pointed out, accessibility can and should be positioned as a natural extension of the library profession’s commitment to access. The 2004 statement from the American Library Association (ALA) lists the 11 Core Values of Librarianship, beginning with Access: “all information resources...regardless of technology, format, or methods of delivery, should be readily, equally, and equitably accessible to all library users.”

This access statement rings of accessibility and universal design, stressing that access must be for all, and that it is our responsibility to understand and eliminate barriers to access. The Values Statement elaborates that access should be free, without cost and without legislative restriction.²

Kumbier and Starkey explain how this original commitment to access and equity might be updated with recent thinking about disability justice. They advocate for a more transformative approach, beyond “access to information” and beyond “access as problem solving.” Access as problem solving is a way of thinking that assumes that some people have access and some people have access problems (p. 478). Kumbier and Starkey want to think instead about a library in which no one is treated as an access problem and to suggest several avenues towards making our libraries accessible “in ways that exceed access to information” and would “contribute to the enactment of values like diversity and social responsibility” (p. 488).

Indeed, accessibility can help promote values of diversity and social responsibility, and can serve us in the work of making our workplaces and profession more equitable and just. As a tool for justice in librarianship, accessibility is inadequate on its own—just like diversity—and also necessary. Its rhetorical usefulness in a profession explicitly committed to access should not be overlooked. Neither should its historical particularities and its political potential.

Accessibility may help librarians interrogate the exclusions built into the design of our institutions. Beyond achieving compliance with standards and making accommodations for people with disabilities, a lens of accessibility has the potential to transform many aspects of what we do. Accessibility in hiring can be a starting point for addressing bias in job descriptions and search practices. Accessibility in meetings can be a starting point for shifting power dynamics among working groups. Accessibility in the classroom can be a starting point for inclusive teaching and engaged pedagogy. Accessibility in scholarship can be a starting point for open access and community-accountable projects. Accessibility in space design can be a starting point for built environments that invite and sustain more kinds of bodies and ways of moving or being.

Because disability is always intersectional and accessibility has more radical potential than at first glance, accessibility can be a powerful tool for justice, especially in a profession already committed to access. In centering the needs of people with disabilities, accessibility can impact a range of people with and without disabilities who are marginalized in library and other institutions. In altering the soft systems and physical infrastructures of our institutions, accessibility can affect how libraries work, and for whom, now and into the future.

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1. Ahmed’s study (2012) draws from twenty-one interviews with diversity practitioners working in higher education institutions in Australia and the UK. [[↻](#)]
2. This information is supplemented in the [ALA Policy Manual B.2.1.14 Economic Barriers to Information Access](#). [[↻](#)]

accessibility

disability

intersectionality

justice

Patron-Driven Subject Access: How Librarians Can Mitigate That “Power to Name”

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