Emily Schmidt
INFO 660, Prof. Ballmer
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Collective Action for Digital Accessibility

Accessibility, and its more nebulous cousin "access," is commonly considered a core tenet of libraries. This paper explores the landscape of library accessibility through the lens of electronic resources in academic libraries, including the limited conceptions of disability and accessibility that prevail today. It considers some of the primary impediments to achieving accessible digital collections currently, ultimately arguing for a collective approach to creating a more equitable, inclusive library.

"The library" is increasingly a digital place, where *using* the library doesn't require actually being *in* the library. One area in which this is increasingly true is collections. While now acutely felt in 2020—when many libraries have shut their physical doors or otherwise curtailed services—the growth, both in volume and budget, of electronic resources was already on a sharp rise. According to a 2019 survey of 662 library directors, academic libraries in the U.S. are spending about two-thirds of their materials budget on online journals and databases. Spending on electronic resources is rising while spending on print resources shrinks, a pattern that "has changed considerably—and consistently—over the past decade," with largest libraries also the ones that are the "most digital" (Frederick & Wolff-Eisenberg, 2020, 68). Across academic libraries in North America, the share of serials budgets spent on electronic journals grew from 35 percent in 2007 to 81 percent in 2016 (PCG, 2017). E-resources are now both a focal point of library collections and their largest budget item.

Despite their centrality, electronic resources are an aspect of collections, and libraries more generally, with particularly acute issues for disabled patrons. Federal laws mandate equal access, but universities and colleges are failing to meet the directives. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits discrimination against the more than 12 percent of people in the United States that has a disability (United States Census Bureau, 2019). While the ADA is primarily focused on physical impediments, Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 addresses electronic resources and information technology specifically, requiring that individuals with disabilities have the same access to information as non-disabled individuals. Section 508 now follows the World Wide Web Consortium's (W3C) Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1), the international standard for web content and accessibility. Since

colleges and universities (and their libraries) receive federal funding, they must comply with these laws. For digital resources, this necessitates accessibility measures for people that cannot read standard text, use a computer mouse, hear audio, or have another impairment. A variety of sensory, cognitive, or mobility issues—ranging from low vision or blindness to language processing disorders like dyslexia—can impede the reading of print words. Assistive devices such as screen readers and screen magnifiers as well as accessibility criteria such as contrast, formatting, and optical character recognition (OCR) can aid print-disabled people in reading. Yet despite long-standing laws and guidelines for accessibility, "the fact remains that many online resources, library and otherwise remain insufficiently or entirely inaccessible for some users with permanent or temporary disabilities" (Kimura, 2018, 426).

Over at least the last decade, many libraries have increased their efforts to improve accessibility to web and electronic resources. Common efforts include sharing accessibility information with patrons, using accessibility as a criterion for purchasing decisions, conducting website accessibility checks, adding accessibility language to licensing contracts, and requesting Voluntary Product Accessibility Template (VPATs) from vendors. Making patrons aware of accessibility information can take different forms, from outreach and marketing to including accessibility information in catalog records (O'Reilly, 2020; Kimura, 2018). Including accessibility statements, which prioritizes or requires purchasing an accessible resource, in a collection development policy or an e-resource evaluation policy is another method to increase accessibility. Website accessibility evaluations typically involve automated (and sometimes manual) testing of sites against WCAG criteria and identifying where there are failures in accessibility best practices. Common features to look for include accessible PDF documents, clearly labeled headers, ability to bypass the site navigation, ability to navigate using the keyboard only, text captions for images and graphics, and more (Tatomir & Tatomir, 2012). Including an accessibility statement in a vendor licensing contract encourages or contractually requires greater accessibility compliance from the companies that own so much of the library content (Big Ten Academic Alliance, n.d.). Finally, requesting and assessing VPATs, a document for vendors to indicate conformance to Section 508 accessibility standards, during the procurement process has become a popular method for assessing accessibility (DeLancey & O'Reilly, n.d.; O'Reilly, 2020; Kimura, 2018).

While moving in the right direction, these efforts remain limited and insufficient. For instance, VPATs cannot actually ensure that a resource is compliant with existing accessibility standards.

A review by DeLancey (2014) to assess the accuracy of vendor-supplied VPATs showed that 16 of 17 documents had discrepancies and that, while useful, VPATs should be treated with skepticism. More broadly, VPATs and WCAG accessibility tests focus on meeting minimal technical requirements. Usability tests are largely performed by fully able-bodied people, and may not represent the actual experiences and accessibility issues of users with disabilities. WCAG guidelines primarily address vision issues, and not other aspects of print disability. Sites that on paper seem fully accessible may not actually be usable, while those that return lots of errors may actually have relatively minimal issues (Kumbier & Starkey, 2016; Kimura, 2018). These efforts are what Kumbier & Starkey (2016), drawing on the work of scholar Sara Ahmed, term a "tick-box approach," in which "what matters most is meeting specific, measurable goals and treating a given concern—for example, diversity or accessibility—as a problem to be solved through reaching performance indicators" (477). In this framework, accessibility can be achieved through a checklist because disability is just a problem to be solved. This kind of thinking follows the medical model of disability, which positions disability as an individual's issue of capacity and impairment that needs to be corrected or managed. Kumbier & Starkey (2016) advocate instead for a social model of disability that considers disability as inherently relational and has a much broader understanding of access and inclusivity. Rather than just a series of technical fixes and other small changes to reach compliance, they argue that libraries need to make a "sustained commitment to evaluating what access means for all users" (478) by looking at "the material, physical, and social environments that impose limitations or create barriers for people with impairments" (473). This requires not only participation but leadership by people with disabilities.

Yet for library e-resources, increasing accessibility has largely remained an act of remediation, a ceaseless effort to fix past mistakes and tick items off of the accessibility checklist. These retroactive remediations, the term used to describe eliminating accessibility barriers, are inferior and costlier (in terms of time, money, and effectiveness) than getting it right from the start. As Kimura (2018) reminds: "…[A]ccessibility failures do not come from anything inherent in digital technology but from choices that are made during development and implementation" (426). Despite being a systemic problem, accessibility issues are mostly addressed at an individual scale, with one library addressing its own accessibility issues. This piecemeal approach relies on library workers having the expertise, time, interest, and institutional mandate or support to address accessibility. Even more significantly, it means that accessibility improvements remain isolated fixes for one institution, rather than benefitting all users of a

specific resource. Accessibility negotiated on a library-by-library basis is fundamentally not equitable. And despite the effort, significant accessibility challenges remain that libraries are struggling to meet.

Increasingly, colleges and universities have faced legal actions over inaccessible web content and information technologies. These lawsuits and complaints have been brought at a variety of institutions and have required remedies for access issues as well as new commitments to accessibility (Carlson, 2020; University of Washington, n.d.). Of particular consequence is a 2019 case, *Payan v. Los Angeles Community College District*, which for the first time directed that remediated content has to be provided at the same time as non-remediated content. The "case also indicated that libraries are responsible for the accessibility of the content they provide, despite most of it coming from publishers and other third-party vendors on platforms that are not controlled by libraries" (Pionke & Schroeder, 2020, 137). Minimizing legal risks is one factor motivating accessibility efforts. The potential impacts and liabilities suggested by cases like *Payan* are compounded by the shortcomings of existing accessibility initiatives as well as another issue: the limited authority that libraries have over much of their digital collections.

For third-party electronic resources like databases, the library is primarily a (very complex) intermediary to another service over which it has little control or leverage. Bill Kasdorf (2019), an accessibility consultant to publishers, sums up the problem:

> Although nobody argues that publications and the systems that deliver and render them shouldn't be accessible to everybody, the issue of accessibility has often been more a source of guilt than action. Publishers have treated it as something they know they should get around to, someday. That someday doesn't come until the lack of accessibility causes them to lose sales—which rarely happens (that they're aware of). And institutions—for example, libraries—typically consider themselves at the mercy of the publishers. They can only provide what they can get (n.p.).

Being "at the mercy of the publishers," libraries may either be hesitant or have little recourse to bring about accessibility improvements. Responding to Kasdorf's acknowledgment of publisher authority, O'Reilly (2020) suggests that some libraries might not want to advocate for accessibility through measures like licensing language and can instead "more guarded methods to highlight accessibility" (121). Thus, a statement that says a vendor must comply with existing ADA regulations, and take responsibility to adapt any products that do not, may be considered incautious. In part due to the fact that different contracts are negotiated independently for the same products and services, each institution remains beholden to the vendor.

Yet some efforts at collective action have emerged, including the Library Accessibility Alliance, a partnership between the Big Ten Academic Alliance (BTAA) and the Association of Southern Research Libraries (ASERL) (Big Ten Academic Alliance, n.d.). Born in 2015 over frustrations with e-resource accessibility, BTAA libraries formed the group to "use their collective influence and strategies to improve e-resource accessibility, engage with vendors, and work together to not duplicate efforts in this effort" (Pionke & Schroeder, 2020, 138). The alliance funds a program to conduct high-level accessibility evaluations on select resources and share the results with vendors. The evaluations are, according to the alliance, simple ones conducted on a few pages and features of a given resource, testing for compliance of WCAG 2.1 AA criteria. The Alliance has also drafted standardized accessibility license language meant to aid libraries in negotiating vendor license agreements.

The member libraries of the Alliance are thus funding a program to tell the companies that they send a majority of their budgets to just how poor their services are with regard to accessibility. The hope then is that this prodding—in the form of a 5-10-page report listing accessibility issues sent to the vendor—results in remediation. The results to date have been "mixed," with some vendors making accessibility improvements while others have provided no response. The program is still fairly new, with about 50 resources evaluations conducted between 2017 and early 2020 (Pionke & Schroeder, 140). Vendors are also "provided with a free one-hour consultation with the company that tested their product so the vendor can ask questions and better understand the issues that their platform might have" (Pionke & Schroeder, 2020, 140). Currently a friendly approach to "encourage" vendor action and accountability, aiming to "collaboratively work with vendors" (138), the Alliance is still developing and growing (ASERL only joined as a partner in 2019) and develop new avenues for improving accessibility.

The "single largest issue" identified by the Library Accessibility Alliance's testing is PDF inaccessibility (Pionke & Schroeder, 140). The prevalence of PDFs is one of the major problems for e-resource accessibility generally. While it can now be born accessible (that is, accessible upon creation) or remediated for accessibility after the fact, it is not accessible by default. If a publisher fails to create an accessible format (which many do), remediating then requires specific software, knowledge, and time. Amelia Gibson, an Assistant Professor at the School of Information and Library Science at the UNC-Chapel Hill whose research includes health and disability, noted on Twitter last year: "I have yet to download a PDF version of an article from a journal publisher that has its accessibility in order. I get that accessibility can be hard if you're

on a shoestring budget or don't know where to start. But aren't publisher profits in the billions at this point?" She continued: "So now, I will spend the next hour or so making sure all these PDFs are properly accessible for my students. Because they *all* deserve materials they can use" (Gibson, 2019). The failure of many publishers to create accessible PDFs, the primary format of scholarly articles currently, creates inequitable conditions. Remediating PDFs before use is thus also relegated to the individual person or individual institution, an insufficient means for achieving accessibility and usability.

Perhaps it doesn't have to be that way, though. Deibel (2019) addresses the problem of "redundant remediation efforts" by proposing a number of collective fixes: shared repositories for remediated materials, sending remediated versions back to publishers, and joint demands for accessibility fixes, including discounts from vendors of inaccessible materials (slides 49-56). Based on her research as well as her work as the first Inclusion and Accessibility Librarian at Syracuse University Libraries, she argues that accessibility is the project of all the staff at a library, in dialogue with its patrons, and in community with other libraries advocating for change. The member libraries of the Federating Repositories of Accessible Materials for Higher Education also envision a collective approach to accessibility. A group of seven universities, funded by a grant from the Mellon Foundation and working with HathiTrust, Bookshare, and The Internet Archive, "will reduce duplication of remediation efforts across participating universities, allow the cumulative improvement of accessible texts, and decrease the turnaround time for delivering those texts to students and faculty" (UVA Library, 2019). The project builds on the on an earlier IMLS-funded report (Wood et al., 2017), which recommended that "libraries should pursue a consortial approach to addressing accessibility issues wherever possible and proactively construct collaborative infrastructure to better serve provide" (35). The Federating Repositories group and the Library Accessibility Alliance offer two consortial example of libraries paving a collective path forward. Right now, these coordinated efforts remain nascent and small compared to the individual testing and remediation done on an institutional level. Yet working collectively is a promising, and necessary, means toward accessibility justice.

Electronic resource accessibility is a thorny problem due to the sheer number of technical issues, the myriad actors who lack shared values, and the relatively limited framework and leverage for addressing issues. Improving digital accessibility instead requires a shared committed and coordinated action. This may come through consortial efforts, like those explained above; through the prioritization of accessibility in open educational resources (not discussed here); or

any number of other efforts. In reconceiving the concept of accessibility in libraries more broadly, Kumbier & Starkey (2016) offer a welcome professional ethic for this work:

> When we bring the framework of collective access into conversations with conventional library understandings of access, one of the biggest shifts we make is from thinking about accessibility as a matter of problem solving at the "tick-box" level to accessibility as part of a larger project to dismantle ableism in our libraries. When we conceptualize access in this way, we are asking libraries to understand it as an ongoing project, one that will transform our profession and organizations in ways we cannot anticipate (485).

Digital accessibility is a problem of file format specifications and website layouts, in part, but more importantly, it is a project to "transform our profession." Getting there will require a broader vision, executed collectively, that centers disabled workers and users.

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