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Ontario Public Library Websites and the Framing of Disability Les sites Web des bibliothèques publiques de l'Ontario et la formulation des handicaps

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Article abstract

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Ontario Public Library Websites and the Framing of Disability

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Abstract

An environment may be technically accessible, in that it complies with accessibility legislation or makes space for those with disabilities, but that does not guarantee equality. A space or experience can be technically accessible according to a standard and still be unusable, difficult to use or not perceived to be inclusive of those with disabilities. This research takes this understanding of 'technically accessible' in order to examine a set of medium-sized Ontario public library websites. Overall, findings are promising as the websites use person-first language and provide a variety of information of value for those with disabilities. At the same time, there are opportunities for improvement.

Keywords

public libraries, accessibility, disability, websites

Introduction

In my work to try to be an ally for those with disabilities, I follow a variety of activists and people with disabilities on Twitter. They have shared many posts showing how inaccessible the world is to them. Accessibility legislation is meant to address this inequity, but it does not guarantee an accessible environment. Legislation does not—and cannot—cover everything.

An environment may be technically accessible, in that it complies with accessibility legislation or makes space for those with disabilities, but that does not guarantee equality. A space or experience can be technically accessible according to a standard and still be unusable, difficult to use, or not perceived to be inclusive of those with disabilities (Blechner, 2015; Byerley & Chambers, 2002; Byerley, Chambers, & Thohira, 2007; McCord, et al., 2002). This technical accessibility can come into play in every arena, such as building entrances (Sharti, 2018), parking lots (Chronic Illness Inclusion Project, 2019), classrooms (Da Silva, 2020), movie theatres (glamorous headass, 2020; Lopez, 2018; Maelee, 2019; Ratcliff, 2019), music venues (Nebulous, 2019), subways (Kreutz, 2020), and libraries (Burrows, 2019; Kim, 2019; Rieger, 2018). This technical accessibility does not make those with disabilities feel welcome (McDonald, 2019; savannah, 2019)¹.

This article takes this understanding of “technically accessible” in order to examine a set of Ontario public library websites. Public library websites are a significant point of contact for the community. As a specific example, my city’s library system had just over 2.4 million visits to its physical branches in 2017, while the library’s website had over 4 million visits (Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport, 2018). The library website is an instance of institutional discourse (Freed, 2015) where it acts as an official representative of the library organization. The website acts as a voice for the library in speaking to the community.

Research Questions

This paper examines the following broad questions. First, what instances of “technically accessible” are present on medium-sized Ontario public library websites? By technically accessible, I mean what components of library websites are not user friendly or inclusive of those with disabilities? Second, how is disability framed on Ontario public library websites? By framing, I mean how disability is defined.

These larger research questions are broken down into four sub-questions:

1. How easy is it to find information on accessibility?
2. What information on accessibility is available?
3. What language is used to discuss accessible services?
4. What information is co-located with information on accessibility?

Definitions

Disability

Disability in the Canadian context is generally defined using the United Nations’ (2006) *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. As such, those with disabilities “include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments

¹ For more examples, I recommend following the #HellInaccessible tag on Twitter

which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (p. 4, 2006). Prince (2009) went further by noting that disability is neither a fixed nor uniform phenomenon, but that it is “socially constructed, administratively negotiated, and politically constructed” (p. 6).

Persons with disabilities make up approximately 15% of the global population (World Health Organization, 2018). In Canada, the number is higher at 22% (Statistics Canada, 2018). Persons with disabilities are a growing population everywhere as people are living longer, chronic health conditions are increasing, and identifying as having a disability is becoming less stigmatized (World Health Organization, 2018).

Accessibility

At the federal level in Canada, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Canadian Human Rights Act focus on the equality of all, regardless of race, religion, national or ethnic origin, colour, sex, age or physical or mental disability (Government of Canada, 2018). Building from the Charter is the Accessible Canada Act (2019), which addresses the federal public sector, Crown Corporations, and federally regulated organizations. In addition, Canada is also a signatory of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006).

More specific legislation has been left to the provinces. There is Quebec’s Act to secure handicapped persons in the exercise of their rights with a view to achieving social, school and workplace integration; the Accessibility for Manitobans Act; the British Columbia Accessibility Act; the Act Respecting Accessibility in Nova Scotia; and the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA).

The AODA (2005) replaced the Ontario Disability Act (ODA) of 2001 (Beer, 2010). Originally the AODA was presented as a rolling implementation of accessibility. Five areas of focus include customer service, the built environment, transportation, employment, and information and communication. The Customer Service Standard was implemented in 2010 and the other standards were rolled into an integrated Accessibility Standard that is being implemented from 2012 to 2021 (Beer, 2010).

Libraries in Ontario have the above legislation to provide guidance, but there is also guiding policy on services to persons with disabilities from the Canadian Federation of Library Associations (CFLA, 2016). CFLA guidelines cover the areas of library mandate and policy, public services, communications and outreach, budgeting and procurement, human resources and training, collections, resource sharing, assistive devices and technology, physical access, and advocacy.

These guidelines and standards do provide guidance for policy implementation and direction for creating a more accessible—and therefore welcoming—online and physical environment for those with disabilities, but they are just the start. They represent the structural foundation of an accessible world, but following these standards does not guarantee accessibility, usability, or inclusiveness in society for those with disabilities.

Disability models

There are numerous models through which to consider disability. The most well-known frameworks are the biomedical and the social models. The biomedical model positions disability within the individual and proposes that something has “gone wrong” with their body. Disability is considered an affliction or condition for which the focus must be on rehabilitation, cure, or paternalistic care. Further, the medical model “treats the built and arranged environment as an invariable to which humans have no choice but to adjust” (Silvers, 2009, p. 27).

The social model shifts the concept of disability away from the individual and onto society, situating disability within the social interactions and physical structures that create a disabling condition (Oliver, 1981). The social model emphasises “a deliberate attempt to shift attention away from the functional limitations of individuals with impairments onto the problems caused by disabling environments, barriers and cultures” (Barnes, 2020, p. 18). Here the idea is that someone who uses a wheelchair is only disabled because a building lacks a ramp for access. The social model is currently widely accepted, but it has limitations (Owens, 2015; Silvers, 2009; Terzi, 2004). As an example, not all disability can be “fixed” by making structural and societal changes. A person with chronic pain will still have chronic pain even in the most accessibly designed environment. Despite this criticism, the social model of disability is the most widely used model and provides a lens for the present research.

Literature

Public library literature on accessibility

Much of the research on public library accessibility focuses on the accessibility of libraries’ websites. Website testing is generally done using software to determine if the website is usable by those who use screen readers, those with mobility issues, and those with colour blindness (Brobst, 2009; Conway, 2011; Conway et al., 2012; Hill, 2013; Liu et al., 2017; Matta Smith, 2014; Oud, 2012; Yi, 2015).

Examinations of the built environment (the structure of library building) are rare. Hughes (2017) noted numerous responses about the difficulty of making aging Carnegie buildings accessible. Library users interviewed by Copeland (2011) noted a variety of accessibility challenges, including entrance steps with no ramp, heavy doors, narrow stacks, and the inaccessibility of washrooms. Hill’s (2011) research confirmed some of the challenges noted by Copeland, while also outlining challenges to creating a more-accessible built environment, like a lack of funding and other administrative impediments. In a broader study on accessibility, Lazar and Briggs (2015) noted built-environment issues with the Baltimore County Public Library branches, like inaccessible signage and a broken ramp railing. Within the Canadian context, there has been controversy around the accessibility of Calgary’s new Central Library (Rieger, 2018).

Overall, this research focuses on the letter of the law around accessibility, rather than the spirit. The literature focuses on accessibility as it falls within various legislative guidelines and does not generally address inclusivity and acceptance at a broader level.

Library literature on website language use

Language use and framing of accessibility on websites have also been of interest in the literature. Library websites have been analyzed for their representation of diversity (Mehra & Davis, 2015), for their information on entrepreneurship (Faulkner, 2018), for their information on early literacy initiatives (Prendergast, 2013), and for the amount and type of information about children's programming (Kanazawa, 2014). Fauchelle (2017) examined jargon, prohibitive and welcoming language, and multilingual information on library websites, handouts, and signage. They recommended that libraries "carefully and frequently review the language of their signage, handouts, and websites" (p. 625).

Five studies in particular provide a base and shape for the research here. Each of these papers emphasised the importance of wording: What is said and how it is said matters.

Sometimes called a discourse analysis, a content analysis, or a document analysis, each of these studies examines how library websites frame disability and accessibility. The studies looked at what information was available on accessibility and how easy it was to find that information (Cassner et al., 2011; Gabel et al., 2016; Graves & German, 2018; Hill, 2011; Power & LeBeau, 2009). There was also a focus on where on the website that information was located (Cassner et al., 2011; Hill, 2011; Power & LeBeau, 2009). In addition, these studies noted the type of language used, categorizing language as student/patron oriented versus organizationally focused (Gabel et al., 2016; Power & LeBeau, 2009).

Two studies focused on examining accessibility on library websites in relation to specific contexts. Graves and German (2018) found accessibility to be very rarely mentioned in the context of academic library instruction and that this absence creates an uncertain end user who has little reassurance that their diverse needs will be met. Power and LeBeau (2009) focused on the accessibility of databases in academic libraries. They found that few libraries noted the accessibility (or not) of their databases.

The other three studies looked at library websites and accessibility through a specific lens. Cassner et al. (2011) used the American Library Association's 2001 *Library Services for People with Disabilities Policy* to frame their research on services, facilities, collections, and assistive technology. While noting that the vast majority of academic libraries examined had pages on accessibility, sometimes those pages were difficult to find and significantly varied in length and content. Gabel et al. (2016) examined if accessibility was discussed in relation to diversity or as its own category in academic websites. They noted that disability as diversity may address some of the attitudinal challenges surrounding accessibility.

Lastly, Hill (2011) looked at public libraries in Ontario in light of the newly passed AODA customer service standards. They found that accessibility information was generally

buried several pages down in website navigation, and few changes based on the legislation were evident. This finding was only a small part of a larger study. Hill only determined how deep one must travel into a website to find accessibility information and whether it was associated with library services or policy. The present research takes that small section of findings and greatly expands the scope.

In sum, the literature that focuses on public libraries and accessibility generally centres on the notion of website accessibility and, to a lesser extent, built environment, while the literature on library websites and the discourse surrounding accessibility often focuses on the academic environment. A gap in the literature exists between these two areas. There has been little research examining public library websites for how they talk about accessibility and disability.

Methodology

The present study is a discourse analysis of a sample of Ontario public library websites using Pauwels' (2012) six-step process for analyzing websites. The social model of disability and the concept of technical accessibility as outlined in the introduction provide the lens through which Pauwels' six-step process was utilized.

Pauwels' (2012) six-step framework provides for an informative analysis of websites. The six steps involve preserving the impressions of the initial 'look and feel' of the website, inventorying salient features and topics, doing an in-depth analysis of the content, looking at the embedded points of view and the implied audience, analyzing how the information is organized and spatially arranged, and doing a contextual analysis of culture and authorship.

A stratified sample of public libraries was chosen from the 2017 Ontario Public Library Statistics. Five libraries from each of the following service population ranges were randomly chosen using the lottery method: those serving 30–50,000, 50–100,000, and 100–250,000 people. These libraries were chosen as "Goldilocks" libraries: those that were neither too small nor too big. Websites of small public libraries are often subsumed under their municipality's website, which was out of scope. Public libraries serving very large communities tend to have a wider variety of expertise available such that comparisons with smaller systems are not equitable.

It should be noted that this analysis is not generalizable to all Ontario public library websites. The data set represents a small, specific selection of middle-sized libraries. The value in this analysis, however, rests in providing a frame for analyses of other public library websites. Analyzing the technical accessibility of a website using Pauwell's six-step process for analyzing websites provides strong guidance for assessing inclusiveness and user-friendliness for those with disabilities, and could prove to be a valuable tool for library staff wishing to assess their own websites.

Findings

RQ1: How easy is it to find information on accessibility?

Ease of finding accessibility information was assessed in two ways: distance from the home page and ease of navigation. These evaluation measures allowed for approaching the question from two different yet related perspectives. Distance from the homepage signifies the level of importance attributed to a piece of information; the closer to the home page, the more important that information is deemed. Ease of navigation represents a broader understanding of accessibility that emphasizes overall usability.

All of the websites had something about accessible services or formats on their websites. All but one site located accessibility information one click from the home page. Navigating to this information was intuitive on all of the websites, except one that required a search of the website to find the information.

Many of the libraries have put accessibility information in more than one area, creating even more ease of access. Five sites had accessibility information in two distinct places: “visiting” or “using the library” and the “about us” areas. One outlier had accessible information in the “using the library” section and in the “reading” section, dedicated to different types of reading. One had accessibility information in three places: “about us,” “using the library,” and “books and more.”

Fourteen of the sites placed most of their accessibility information on a dedicated page. One site incorporated their accessibility information into pages focused on similar types of services (e.g., under “reading: “kids reads,” “accessible reads,” “French reads,” “teen reads”). Accessibility information not generally included on the dedicated page was often related to the availability of accessible parking. Accessible parking was generally associated with other location information.

Home delivery of library resources is not always directly connected to other accessible resources or services. Thirteen of the websites include information on home delivery service. For one site this was the only information focused on accessibility, but the others inconsistency addressed whether home delivery is connected to other accessibility services or resources: Six websites included home delivery information on their accessibility page, three placed this information on its own page but did not connect this service to the accessibility page, and three websites had information about this service in two separate locations (the accessibility page and on its own page).

RQ2: What information on accessibility is available?

Each instance of accessibility-related information was inventoried with an advanced Google search for the words “disability,” “accessibility,” and “accessible.” The initial inventory was coded using a mix of deductive and inductive descriptive coding. Given the known consistency of certain information on library websites, a base codebook was created with additional codes developing through the research.

Information on accessibility was coded into two broad categories: “traditional library services and resources” and “accessibility of the facility.” It was initially expected that all codes would fall under traditional services and resources. The inclusion of information on the accessibility of the facility was an unexpected development, as previous research (Hill, 2011) found no information about the accessibility of the facility on library websites.

Traditional library resources and services

Traditional library services and resources were subdivided into two areas. The first area focused on collections, programming, and services, while the second consisted of what adaptive hardware and software was listed.

Large print and audiobooks were the most-frequently mentioned resources, with accessible reading materials from the Centre for Equitable Library Access (CELA) coming in a close third. The next-most prominent format was DVDs with closed captioning. Five libraries outlined the capability of OverDrive ebooks as an accessible format. Two libraries outlined their adult literacy collections. Other than noting that support persons may attend library programming free of charge, no library noted any information on accessible programming (e.g., sensory story time).

For accessible hardware and software, the predominant tools mentioned on these websites were the basic components of an adaptive workstation. Height-adjustable desks, large print keyboards, and trackball mice were the most-frequently noted items. The next group of items included tools to work with text, such as screen readers, screen magnifiers, and text-to-speech software. Less frequently mentioned were touchscreens, large screens, CCTV, headphones, communication boards, video relay service (used to make phone calls using sign language), scanners with optical character recognition, and handheld magnifiers.

Accessibility of the facility

When the focus shifted to aspects of the built environment, more than two-thirds of the libraries indicated some aspect of the built environment in or around the library. While this seems to indicate a strong focus on built environment, it should be noted that the amount of information available was sometimes sparse. Two libraries only specify the existence of accessible parking spaces.

Two websites indicate that “all library locations are accessible.” While seemingly ideal, this broad pronouncement is problematic. Does this mean there is a ramp and push button to enter the library? Does this also mean the washroom is accessible? As noted in the introduction, too often people with disabilities are told that a space is accessible, only to find that there is “just one step” or that the washrooms are inaccessible.

Just over half of the websites, however, went into much more detail outlining the facilities’ automatic doors, wide aisles, elevators, and accessible washrooms. Two libraries with multiple access points noted which specific entrances were accessible. A few even went beyond considering the inside of the library and included information

about the immediate vicinity, outlining sidewalks with curb cuts and the presence of accessible parking spaces.

The most common built-environment features mentioned included parking, washrooms, automatic doors, elevators, wide aisles, and wheelchairs available for use in house. Less-mentioned items included ramps, accessible shelving, accessible self-checkouts, Braille signs, strobe light fire alarms, and flush curbs.

RQ3: What language is used to discuss accessible services?

The websites universally use person-first language (e.g., “person with a disability”). In looking at the title or heading of information about accessibility, the term “accessibility,” is used almost universally. One site used the heading “accessibility and accommodation,” while another used “assistive services.” One used “special services”—a phrase now considered pejorative in the disability community—to head their page on accessibility.

There were more instances of pejorative language on other websites. Three websites (distinct from the one mentioned above) use the phrase “special services” or “special needs” in their description of accessible services. As well, one site notes its collection of “books for dementia and Alzheimer’s patients.”

There is little consensus on what to call home delivery of library services. There is a fairly even split between the terms “homebound service” and those who designate it as “visiting library service,” “home service,” or “home delivery service”

Four websites move beyond the idea of “accessibility for persons with disabilities” and declare an interest in universal access. Rather than simply a focus on accessible services, these libraries have added a prefatory mission of universal access.

The Library strives to provide ‘universal access’ to services for all people to the greatest extent possible without the need for adaptation or specialized design in order to integrate services to persons with disabilities. (Niagara Falls Public Library, para 1)

RQ4: What information is co-located with information on accessibility?

Co-location was analyzed in two different ways. The first part of the analysis involved looking at the position of accessibility information within the overall structure of the website. The second part involved an analysis of the information co-located with accessibility in the same section of the website.

Accessibility information was generally located through “about us” or “services” pages, although one library had this information under their policies page. There were nine instances of accessibility information under “about us” and eight under “services.”²

² Instances add up to more than 15 because some websites had information in more than one place.

Under the “about us” section, three libraries located accessibility information alongside other services for users, such as reference, business services, and local history. In the other six websites, accessibility was co-located with information not focused on users, such as jobs, newsletters, and donating to the library.

Something similar happens to accessibility information located under “services.” In half of the websites, accessibility was co-located with other traditional library services like book clubs, exam proctoring, reference, home delivery, and room rentals. In the other websites, accessibility was co-located with non-traditional library services like contact information and information on computers and garbage tags.

Discussion

Finding accessibility information was easy for all except one site. This ease of access was obtained by clear labelling, prominent placement, and having a dedicated “accessibility” page. There is a significant amount of convenience in placing accessibility information all on one page for users. As long as the page is easy to find, an informative page could put a user at ease knowing what was available for them at the library.

Two sites associated adaptive reading formats with other types of reading, like French language materials, children’s materials, etc. This placement creates an inclusive environment where those who use accessible materials are just another type of reader. This solicits the question of whether having a distinct page on accessibility is better than incorporating it into services for other patrons. It’s possible that having both—though somewhat redundant—would create a more equitable approach.

There was, unsurprisingly, a strong focus on readers on these websites. At the same time, the focus privileged a certain type of reader: the already-developed reader. Only two libraries mentioned resources for adult literacy learners and none of the libraries noted anything like sensory story times.

Most noted accessible collections of large print and audiobooks and the incorporation of CELA, but it is curious that OverDrive collections were only mentioned by five websites as being part of their accessible collections. Ebooks are a fairly ideal accessible format. For those with hand or arm strength challenges, holding and manipulating a print book for extended periods of time can be a significant, if not impossible, challenge. Tablets and ereaders provide a consistent, easy-to-hold device no matter the length of the book. In addition, most public libraries have access to OverDrive ebook collections and the Libby app is a main point of access to these ebooks. Libby allows for text resizing, the use of the OpenDyslexic font, and different lighting options, all which create a more-accessible experience.

The websites universally used person-first language (“person with a disability”) rather than identity-first language (“disabled person”). This use is not surprising, as person-first language tends to be the current default in North America. It should be noted, however, that preference for one or the other is an individual matter. There has been a reclaiming

of identity-first language by some people (see Dunn, 2015; Evans, 2019; Jamie, 2019; k., 2017; Laura, 2020; Michele, 2017).

At the same time, the continued designation of a collection for “dementia patients” and referring to accessibility as a “special service” or services for those with “special needs” denoted a pejorative connotation. This language places those with disabilities in the category of “other.” Designating someone as “special needs”—while initially a well-intentioned euphemism—is generally advised against, as it is found offensive by many activists and people with disabilities (Gerbsbacher et al., 2016).

There was also some interesting language around home delivery of library materials to people who are unable to come to the library. Half the libraries used the term “homebound” while the other half avoid that term and use “visiting library service,” “home service,” or “home delivery service.” It’s unclear at this time whether designation as “homebound” is pejorative or descriptive. The disability community is mixed on this wording (Buchanan, 2018; Chronic Illness Inclusion Project, 2018).

The language around disability and accessibility was generally good, save for the examples above. Where these websites often fell short was in placement of this information. In half the websites examined, accessibility was portrayed as an afterthought, something tacked on out of necessity. Whether placed in the “services” or the “about the library” section, accessibility information seemed to be placed in a miscellaneous category.

Consider the connections between the following information on a web page:

- Reading: Kids reads | Teen reads | Accessible formats | French reads

Now contrast the above with the following examples of co-located information:

- Accessibility | Donations | Employment
- Support the library | Jobs & volunteering | Accessibility | Newsletters
- Contact | Accessibility | Locations | Garbage tags
- Accessibility | Battery recycling | Computers

No other user group of the library is associated with donations or volunteering, let alone battery recycling and garbage tags. These libraries probably did not purposefully co-locate this information to alienate those who use accessible services; it’s more likely that this information was added in at some point after the website was already designed. It is clear, however, that some libraries have not considered how this placement may make accessibility feel like a miscellaneous add-on.

Conclusion

Accessibility legislation helps create general best practices for creating an accessible environment, but legislation cannot address everything necessary for creating an inclusive environment for people with disabilities. As public libraries provide such a

unique role in their communities, it is important to look beyond accessibility standards to see what kind of welcoming environment can be created.

The library website acts as a voice speaking to the community about who is welcome. One cannot understate the importance of the public library website in being not only accessible according to web design standards, but also being a place that is welcoming and inclusive of people with disabilities.

Overall, however, it must be stated that the findings of this research are promising. Accessibility information was almost universally easy to find and often covered the built environment as well as services and resources. All of the sites used the North American standard of person-first language.

There are, however, opportunities for improvement. A few sites still used phrases now considered pejorative. But most significantly, the way accessibility is placed within surrounding information could stand improvement. Co-location of information with accessibility can create an “othering” of people with disabilities, as their needs are discussed adjacent to unrelated information in a way no other patron groups are positioned.

Most libraries position accessibility information on a unified page, yet two sites provided a more integrated approach. There is value in both approaches as the former allows for ease of access to the information while the latter treats those who need accessible formats like just another patron group. It might be beneficial to recommend both approaches.

While the focus here has been a small sample of middle-sized libraries in Ontario, this type of research could benefit any library looking to examine their own websites with an eye toward accessibility.

There are a few avenues to build from this research. The first involves looking at a larger number of websites from both larger and smaller libraries. A larger set would allow more generalizable recommendations to be made. As well, a next step involves interviewing people with disabilities on their experiences using public libraries and accessing services in person and online.

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