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Digitale Medien im Dienste eines barrierefreien
Museumserlebnisses

**museums
and the
internet**

Beitrag in englischer Sprache:
Accessible Digital Culture for Disabled People – Challenge of the Century

Abstract.

This paper presents **five best practice examples** in the use of **digital media** in the
service of **access to museums for disabled people** and provides links to further
examples. These examples demonstrate that a **shared cultural experience for disabled
people** is a field for **outstanding creative engagement** and not a dull duty.

It sets these practices against the background of the **barriers disabled people face** – in
particular barriers people with a sensory impairment and people with a learning difficulty
face to **intellectual access to collections**.

It presents **international policies** which clearly establish the **cultural rights of disabled
people**. It shows that **governments worldwide** do no do enough to implement these
policies – and thus **increase existing barriers**.

This paper presents the annual **International Jodi Award for accessible digital culture**,
first given in 2009 at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and **invites nominations
from readers**.

**It invites governments and all cultural organisations to write equal access for
disabled people into the script of every policy and project and develop a strategic
approach to bring about lasting and significant improvements, as called for by
Council of Europe Recommendation R(92)6.**

Keywords: access, intellectual access, disabled people, cultural rights, policies, barriers,
digital media, websites, web accessibility, sign language, audio description, best practice,
organisational change, International Award, cultural exclusion, cultural equality, shared
cultural experience, creative endeavour .

Content

1. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

The impact of the digital revolution is of a magnitude at least that of the Gutenberg printing revolution. It profoundly affects the way we learn, shape our thoughts and query reality. Myriad freedoms have emerged for people to engage with culture in ever new personalised ways through the digital media. But are these freedoms granted in equal measure to all citizen?

In spite of the depth of the changes, there has barely been any discussion in the cultural sector worldwide about the accessibility of digital media and digital content for disabled people. Yet, an audit of webaccessibility published in 2005 by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, England showed that disabled people face 216 potential stumbling blocks on the average cultural sector webpage (MLA, p 19). Furthermore, only a tiny number of museums worldwide use digital media to present and interpret collections in ways that are accessible to people with sensory impairments or with learning difficulties.

The barriers to participation disabled people face on-site in cultural venues, with or without the deployment of digital media are strengthened by a staggering lack of consideration for the accessibility requirements of disabled people online.

This less than half-hearted engagement of museums, ministries for culture and government agencies globally is in contrast to international policies which have begun to assert the cultural rights of disabled people since the 70ies and anti-discrimination legislation which has been adopted since the 90ies in a growing number of countries.

More than 50 million disabled citizen live in the European Union alone. With the ageing population their numbers will be growing.

We will be examining the policies which establish the cultural rights of disabled people, the barriers they face to a shared experience of museum collections, best practice examples and begin to chart the way out of current prevailing cultural apartheid.

2. THE CULTURAL EXCLUSIOIN OF DISABLED PEOPLE

2.1   A history of cultural exclusion

It is still uncommon to talk about the 'cultural equality of disabled people'. Not so long ago talk about making museums and cultural services accessible to disabled people has been seen an optional and benevolent act of charity (Delin, p 6).

Lack of access was seen as the disabled person's problem. The idea, that cultural venues, as a service to the public, have a responsibility to welcome all, in inclusive settings and at the time of their choice is far from being universally embraced in the cultural sector.

Newly built museums and museum extensions provide compelling examples of cultural exclusion against. Billions of Euros have been spent over the past decade on hundreds of new museums and their exhibitions. Only a small minority have planned even a small measure of intellectual access for casual visitors who are visually impaired, deaf or who have learning disabilities, whether or not digital media are deployed (Weisen, p18). Few evaluate what quality of service is provided. In terms of institutional knowledge management, this is a culture of neglect.

2.2   A whole organisation approach to accessibility

The accessibility of cultural venues is a complex and multi-dimensional reality. It needs to be seamlessly integrated into all aspects of the museum experience: visitor information – including via digital media; the physical environment, signage, exhibitions, interpretation and, last but not least, institutional attitude and staff welcome. Of course, direct knowledge of disabled people is key to good service provision. Budgeting and resource allocation which is inclusive of disabled people is fundamental. To be effective, accessibility needs to be planned in right from the outset into every project. In short, these are some of the key elements of a holistic approach to accessibility. Digital media need to be part of it and allowed to deploy their full emancipating potential. erected.

2.3   Experiences of disabled people

Let's listen to the experiences of a few disabled friends and colleagues of mine:
"I will never go back to a museum. There is nothing about my culture. It is as if deaf people did not exist."
"The theatre is new and physically accessible, but staff behave as if I came from another planet. I prefer to go to the other theatre, even though staff
need to carry me up a few stairs."
Barriers are inter-dependent and repeated experience of unnecessary barriers leads to frustration, anger, resignation and finally to cultural exclusion.

2.4   Worldwide a systematic approach to access is lacking

The few examples above – taken from many possible ones; bring home awareness that the creation of barrier-free spaces and cultural experiences requires a systematic approach. This is lacking worldwide. Less than half museums, libraries, archives in the UK, for example, are building commitment to accessibility into their core budgets, and this situation is typical for global practice (Bell, Matty, Weisen, p 4)– and these figures are optimistically skewed, as they derive from a small, responsive sample .

2.5   Focus on websites

The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, England, is one of the few strategic cultural bodies to have commissioned an audit of sector web accessibility (MLA/City University). Although published in 2005, it remains unusually interesting because of its strong user focus. In addition to customary automated testing, testing with disabled users took place in realistic settings. 300 museums, libraries and archives websites in England and 25 large museums overseas were audited. As web accessibility has not significantly improved since, the findings remain relevant today.

Only 3% of websites met world-wide Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG1) Level AA, the EU e-government requirement and the average cultural sector websites presented disabled people with 216 potential stumbling blocks on the average cultural sector webpage. Failure to meet 13 of the 53 WCAG1
guidelines accounted for 68% of the total number of problems uncovered during the user testing evaluations – which, on the by, shows the usefulness of the guidelines. Over half of these problems relate to matters regarding orientation and navigation. 22% of the problems identified, though, were not covered by WCAG1 – which highlights the limitations of the guidelines. Whilst generally useful, WCAG1 guidelines had not been up-dated for a decade and some began to make little sense. Some unknowing local authorities committed their websites to (top) Level AAA compliance, rather than emphasising usability and user-testing. Kelly from UKOLN led the debate on the pertinence of the guidelines and developed a 'holistic model' of web accessibility for the education context, which remains an inspiration for the cultural sector. The new WCAG2 guidelines, introduced in 2009 are strong on design principles (such as …), but come without any measurement tool. Web accessibility consultants therefore tend to stay with WCAG1, in-spite of some of their known shortcomings.

The survey was instrumental in bringing intellectual access to collections into focus, highlighting that only a handful of cultural websites worldwide presented and interpreted online collections and learning resources in ways that are accessible to disabled people, e.g. though the provision of verbal descriptions for visually impaired people and the use of 'easy-read' text for people with learning difficulties, deployed with image and symbol support. The survey, presented at EVA London 2005, also put the provision of information in Sign Language on the map, which did not feature in WCAG1.

2.6   Focus on digital media onsite

Many museums housed in listed buildings still shy away from using digital media in the service of visitor engagement and learning and making these part and parcel of any new gallery design. They fear a loss of atmosphere and 'authenticity'. Whilst this is wholly legitimate, seeing new media and personalised learning experiences as wholly compatible with the impulse for the conservation of the museum's fabric, look and atmosphere is a much more creative stance to take in the digital age. Where the full power of digital media is not embraced, disabled people will be one of the museum's many publics to have an impoverished experience.

Science museums tend to champion inter-actives and new media. In the vast majority of cases, though, these have not been designed for use by blind people. Sign language is barely ever considered. Our museums have not yet begun to explore the potential of digital media for a with people with a learning disability.

Accessibility and equality is not yet part of the script, and cultural bodies worldwide do not take pro-active responsibility (*or are very slow indeed in taking it)* to nurture the practices needed for a genuine culture of disability inclusion to grow. Guidelines are barely available, pilot projects, best practice sharing in this area are as yet to come onto the agenda.

This slowness is surprising considering that cultural rights policies for disabled people begun to be articulated in the 70ies.

It is shocking in ethical terms that billions are spent on new museum and gallery design in the age of anti-discrimination with little consideration given to intellectual access for disabled people. Disabled people remain all to often seen as the problem, rather than as part of the design solution.

3. THE HUMAN AND CULTURAL RIGHTS OF DISABLED PEOPLE

3.1   Cultural participation is a human right of disabled people

The idea that disabled people have cultural rights is as yet to become an integral part of the philosophy, vision and practice of most cultural organisations worldwide (Weisen, p 245).

The cultural rights of disabled people are implicitly enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 27.1):

"Everyone has the right freely to enjoy the arts andthe cultural life of the community…."

The UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, which came into force in 2008, explicitly recognises the cultural rights of disabled people for the first time: "States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to take part on an equal basis with others in cultural life, and shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities…" (article 30).The Convention is also explicit for the first time in recognising deaf people as a linguistic minority (as countries such as Finland and the UK have done earlier). This is important, because it builds the case for cultural organisations providing services in Sign Language, live and via digital media.

3.2.   The good European policies and the lack of commitment to implementing them

The European Union and the Council of Europe have developed some of the most advanced signs are that these are not being implemented. In 2003, the Council of the European Union passed the 'Council Resolution of 6 May 2003 on accessibility of cultural infrastructure and cultural activities for people with disabilities' and agreed to monitor measures taken by member states by the end of 2005. To date no such progress monitoring exercise has been undertaken.

The Council of Europe Action Plan (2006-2015) on "full participation of people with disabilities in society' emphasises equal opportunities in culture (chapter 3.2, p 13). It calls on member states to 'start with an evaluation of their existing disability policy programmes and identify in which areas progress has yet to be made …..and which specific actions will have to be carried out." (chapter 1.5, p 8). To date, I know of no single Council of Europe member state that has undertaken an evaluation of its cultural equality policy programmes for disabled people (and less so in any systematic way).

The Council of Europe Recommendation R(92)6 on the independent living of disabled people (1992) is the first international policy to call for the implementation of the cultural rights of deaf and disabled people: "Government institutions, leisure and cultural organisations should develop comprehensive access policies and action programmes designed to significant and lasting improvements for all people with disabilities." (chapter VIII, section 8.5). No national government can claim to have implemented this recommendation, as none has even developed a set of tools with which to measure whether 'significant and lasting improvements' have taken place.

e-accessibility, which covers all areas of life and is of profound significance is one area in which the EU has been continuously active. It has been policy since 2002 that "public sector web sites …. must be designed to be accessible."(Commission of the European Communities, p 4. European i2010 initiative on e-Inclusion). Information on national

policies regarding web accessibility can be found on the Web Accessibility Initiative of the World Wide Web Consortium.

4. ACCESSIBLE DIGITAL CULTURE: BEST PRACTICE EXAMPLES

4.1 The Jodi Mattes Trust: aiming to involve people with a disability at every level

The Jodi Mattes Trust, created in 2008, gives annual Jodi Awards for accessible digital culture media to museums, libraries, archives, heritage sites and disability organiations. Supported by the Museums Libraries and Archives Council England; Museums, Archives and Libraries Wales and the sector cultural bodies of Scotland, they celebrate best practice and promote the human, cultural and digital rights of disabled people.

Our mission is to promote the cultural equality of disabled people through the:

- use of accessible digital media;

- provision of accessible information and learning content;

- involvement of disabled people in the process of creation, design and evaluation of digital media.

Automated testing is being undertaken for all nominations for website projects. Shortlisted online projects are being tested a Panel of disabled users. For onsite projects disabled assessors undertake a site visit (UK only, for reasons of cost).
The Judges are museum, library and archive professionals, of whom half or more have personal experience of disability.

Selection criteria for selecting the Winners emphasise:

- involvement of disabled people in service design
- the wider organisational commitment to equal access for people with a disability
- meeting 'technical' accessibility guidelines where they exist (we recommend meeting WCAG1 Level AA, but do assess each project in context. A well designed small museum website meeting Level A may be a more imaginative achievement than a website that meets Level AAA only for reasons of organisational policy compliance)
- creativity and innovation (this could be in widening intellectual access to collections, but equally a clear communication strategy with people with a disability).

4.2   Tate i-map – clearly stretching boundaries, Jodi Award 2006 Winner
   www.tate.org.uk/imap

Description

 Four years on, these webpages still set a standard for global best practice. The site does what seems impossible to many people by making modern art - and its key concepts, accessible to blind and partially sighted people.

Created to provide learning resources for the Picasso-Matisse exhibition (and expanded since), Tate imap it is a wonderfully attractive learning resource. It is also one of first to describe collections for visually impaired people.

Caro Howell, then Manager Special Projects, and currently Head of Education at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London, describes how the project originated from a sense of frustration at the lack of learning materials for visually impaired pupils. She was horrified when a visually impaired pupil was asked by her tutor during a school visit to draw a dragon, whilst the rest of the class was to be initiated to the fine concepts of the emergence of abstract art.

Tate i-map represents paintings in high colour contrast, making them easier to see for many partially-sighted people. Colour contrast is being used as an integral part of the presentation and analysis of the works of art, making compositional elements and structure stand out.

During the early years of the WCAG1. Moving from de-constructed fragments to the re-constructed whole of a painting, the slow motion animations little by little build up a compelling picture of the transformation of figurative into modern art. This enriches every viewer's understanding. Visually impaired viewers can replay the animation when this helps see the picture better just like they may replay favourite scenes from a DVD at home.

The approach taken to provide access to totally blind viewers is equally innovative. The black on white outline drawings of the paintings can be printed out in schools and centres for visually impaired people, as well as blind people who have access to a 'tactile photocopier' and 'swell paper'. In the first month of the website some 3,000 drawings have been downloaded, demonstrating that a demand exists. Tactile drawings are not new in themselves – they have been used for some hundred and fifty years in education. What is new is their availability online in the cultural sector. On their own they make no sense, but Tate i-map also provides essential descriptive and interpretive information.

Reflecting in a global context

Tate i-map provides invaluable glimpses into modern art. It has an inclusive feel, being provided by an art gallery. But Tate i-map only represents a fraction of the wealth and significance of the world's great collections.

We can barely call this choice and cultural freedom for vision impaired people! Can we in the museum sector garner the ambition to produce five, ten, fifty, a hundred online learning resources of this quality and link them? This would of course still only represent a fraction of the world's great collections, but qualitatively, it would be close to awesome and a quantum leap of opportunity.

**4.3   Bantock House - a holistic approach to engaging with deaf audiences,
Jodi Award Winner 2007
www.wolverhamptonart.org.uk/bantock/the_house/bsl**

Description.

Wolverhampton Arts and Museum Service, which runs Bantock House, is a prime example of a museum service taking a systematic approach to removing accessibility barriers for deaf people. It also well illustrates how digital media are not an end in themselves, but find their place in a seamless fit within the museum's entire communication, exhibitions and interpretation strategy.
Wolverhampton Arts and Museum Service exemplifies how a medium size museum can deploy limited resources in a thoughtful way to provide choice and a 'portfolio' of services. The service embarked on a project to produce a PDA guide with British Sign Language (BSL) of Bantock House, which would enable deaf visitors to be 'drop in' and visit at a time of their choosing. In the process, the service became quickly aware that the pda guide would need to be publicised in Sign Language! Website information in British Sign Language was produced. The videos for the PDA and the website were produced by a local company of deaf people who are all BSL users, communicating effortlessly with members of the deaf community.

Aware that the pda guide only offers one story, regular guided BSL tours were introduced to widen access to the collections in personalised ways. In 2008, Wolverhampton Arts and Museums Service organised an exhibition of Deaf History about the lives of deaf people in Wolverhampton. In the process, it became (quite possibly) the first museum service in the UK to create archival footage in BSL – widening the outlook on collections policies and responding to the lack of representation of deaf and disabled people in collections.
It organised events at which deaf and hearing members of the community could get to meet – an excellent initiative, as deaf people are among the most segregated communities.

A deaf person was employed part-time to market Wolverhampton Arts and Museum Service's offerings to deaf community people – someone who knows how to communicate with the target audience.

Reflecting

Wolverhampton is a responsive service, with staff ready to learn and explore all dimensions of an issue. It has evolved a multi-layered approach to access, participation and representation in collections. When service provision gets multi-layered, one does get a sense that it is alive.
 In this example, 'traditional' museum offerings such as live guided tours and a social history exhibition go hand in hand with the use of digital media – a pda, website information and archival social history footage.
It may offer inspiration to medium size and smaller museums to develop a portfolio or services over the medium-term. Great change does not happen overnight.

4.4   Prisoner 4099, The National Archives, Jodi Award Winner 2008- visuall impaired pupils create learning resources for all
       www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/prisoner4099/

Description

This easy to use site breaks new ground. Young visually impaired people created learning content for both informal and curriculum learning to enjoy by everyone. The National Archives made the archival documents on which the visually impaired pupils based their radio play accessible by transcribing them.
Andrew Payne, Head of Education, was insistent at every stage of the website design that the website must be accessible to disabled people. He was forthright in challenging the web designers about their knowledge.

Reflecting

A truly inclusive effect was achieved, by reversing roles. Usually on the receiving end, people with disabilities were put in the driving seat.
Even in big, hugely busy institutions personal commitment matters and can bring about an altogether new quality of service.

4.5   The British Museum Deaf School project, Jodi Award Winner 2009 – deaf kids create learing resources for deaf kids
       www.britishmuseum.org/learning/schools

Description

In this project young deaf people produced signed curriculum resources for young deaf people, working with Frank Barnes School and deaf led media company Remark. The collaboration brought together a creative and appropriate mix of users, artists and designers with expertise in the area of BSL. The pupils confidently present the collections.

Reflecting

Information, learning resources and visitor information in Sign Language remain extremely rare in museums, as are Curriculum resources in Sign Language. We can speak of a situation of cultural apartheid.
The new UN Convention on the Rights of Disabled People for the first time recognises deaf people as a linguistic minority. This encourages use of Sign Language, at the least in medium size and large projects.

The exclusion of Sign Language from public spaces is, in the first instance, grounded in the failure to recognise deaf people as a linguistic and cultural minority – something scientist Oliver Sacks came round to understand 20 years ago and described in his book 'Seeing Voices'.[i]

An argument is made by some that deaf people read sub-titles. Yet, this is only partly true and many born deaf people have very poor alphabetical literacy skills. A number of young deaf people prefer Sign Language by far. Irrespective of what the law and policy might say, we should welcome deaf people on their own terms wherever possible. It all starts with inclusive budget setting. Personalisation and access requirements invite us to plan

communications and interpretation strategies which provide both Sign Language and closed captioning.

4.6   Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie – a global leader

Description

When the Cité des Sciences opened in 1986 in Paris, it had an Disability lAccess Unit with four full-time members of staff, which has now grown to eight (that is more than the total number of Disability Access Managers of all other national museums in Paris, London or New York). Among them are two deaf and one blind member of staff. Several others are conversant with French Sign Language (LSF).

All exhibitions, temporary and permanent, have to provide a degree of accessibility to visually impaired people. Curators and designers have to involve the Access Unit at planning stages – and though consultation is not always without tensions, a sophisticated culture of accessible exhibition design has grown which remains without a par.

In 2010, the temporary exhibition 'Earth' shows a DVD about the journey of stones from mountains to the building site. It is mostly a silent movie. The visuals are self-explanatory and have cartoonlike clarity of communication. They put deaf and non-deaf visitors pretty much on an equal footing. Six screens with silent film and sub-titles have been audio described for visually impaired viewers.

A number of tactile models explain the physical properties of traditional building materials all over the world with Braille captions. Here too a creative exhibition designer was at work to create elegant design solutions. They designed tactile models to communicate scientific knowledge to all.

On the next floor, in the temporary exhibition 'Bon Appétit', deaf actors perform in a hilarious movie raising questions about the healthy food and junk food. La Cité not only provides Sign Language on screen more abundantly than any other museum in the world, it creates DVD scripts which give visibility to deaf actors. At last year's temporary children's exhibition about sexuality, deaf actors explained human reproduction on screen. Non-deaf people were provided with headsets. It became the most popular exhibit of the show. A blind twelve year old blind child said: "This is great, for once I could enjoy the exhibit without my mum having to describe for me."

La Cité des Sciences also produces tactile books with audio sound tracts on DVD.

Reflection

Twenty five years of commitment and experimentation have put la Cité des Sciences at the forefront of accessible and inclusive exhibition design. Its exhibitions show a new emerging quality of accessible and inclusive design that reveals just how creative engagement for the cultural rights of disabled people
Designers and new media professionals, take note!

5. ACCESSIBLE DIGITAL CULTURE – a human right, political need, ethical duty and a field for creative expression

This talk showed that:

- the participation of disabled people in cultural life is a recognised human and cultural right
- in spite of progress, disabled people continue to face significant barriers to culture, and specifically so in digital media
- ministries for culture do not implement the policy commitments and aspirations for cultural equality they have expressed in policy documents
- few cultural organisations make disability equality integral to the whole planning process – and therefore are to be held responsible for the creation of unnecessary access barriers and for the denial of disabled people's cultural rights

This talk also:

- highlighted the largely untapped potential of digital media to be deployed in the service of the cultural equality of disabled people
- showed the high degrees of creative intelligence that are being freed up in the engagement with accessible and inclusive design
- affirms the belief that access and elegance, and access and creativity are not opposites, but go hand in hand
- holds up the unshakable belief that culture without concern for sharing its cultural wealth is uncivilised
- affirms the urgency for action at every level

It concludes with a few general recommendations, expressed in a spirit of burning patience and impatience:

1. ministries for culture should aim high and develop strategic implementation programmes for the cultural and digital rights of disabled people, which bring 'lasting and significant change' as called for by Council of Europe Resolution R(92)6
2. disability equality should be a criterion for all cultural funding
3. cultural organisations should make disability equality and access integral to all their work, including the budget
4. equality and access for disabled people should be in the script of every brief for digital projects
5. disabled people should be involved in the process

Whatever our role and contribution, we can take inspiration from Ghandi's humanising spirit of service. It is within our power and inner freedom to apply some of our passive admiration for Ghandi into the active every-day life of our cultural institutions:

"A customer is the most important visitor to our premises. He is not dependent on us. We are dependent on him. He is not an interruption on our work. He is the purpose of it. He is not an outsider on our business. He is part of it. We are not doing him a favour by serving him. He is doing us a favour by giving us opportunity to do so."

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