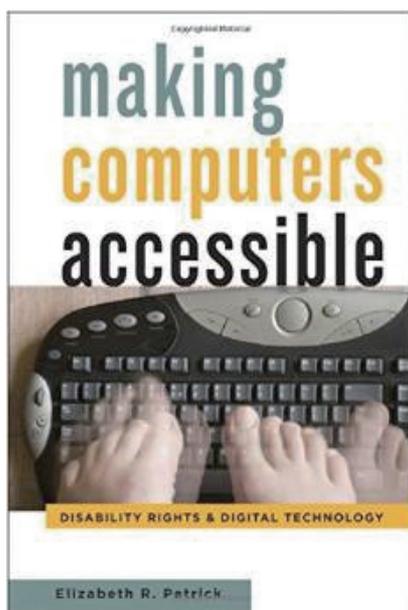


Book Review



Making Computers Accessible: Disability Rights and Digital Technology, Elizabeth R. Petrick, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015, 208 pp. hardcover. ISBN: 1421416468

The first look at the title made me expect a technical source for my lectures in eAccessibility and Assistive Technology (AT). This is why I immediately agreed to review it. The second look at the subtitle told me it is broader by also addressing legal and social aspects, which made me doubt if this is the source I expected. The third look at the back cover outlined that it is a historic view and analysis of making computers accessible. This struck me, as already several years ago I outlined with some colleagues: “A field that has no and does not take care of its history has no future”. We wanted to set up sessions and a series of articles in conferences outlining the background and the path how Assistive Technologies (AT) were implemented – to learn from success and failures. It did not really start – the call did not meet with response.

And now I have a book in my hands promising what we identified as crucially missing. I started to read with

interest, stories which I knew, things which were new to me, all well written and easy to read: The story behind Kurzweil’s Reading Machine, alternative input devices, first steps towards AAC, how accessibility features entered standard PCs, establishment of labs and pressure groups and in particular, the role of the disability rights movement before and during the ICT revolution.

Working in the field one immediately starts to ask, what about other technologies, solutions, approaches? I miss this and I miss that? It is very much US centric. The book by nature has to be selective. For sure any reader with a background in AT and eAccessibility would argue things that **MUST** be part of the history of making computers accessible. And this can’t be seen as a failure of a single book but only as an invitation to contribute to the history of AT and eAccessibility and to write your own chapters.

The book is non-technical and asks for readers’ attention from the beginning to the end. It is not web or technical selective reading. It tells a story of changing the mindset and culture concepts from a medical/charity model towards a social independent living model and outlines the role of computers. It underlines how technology impacts on people, how powerful but also harmful it can be.

It is not exactly what I expected for my lectures, but as any user-centered design and development process has to start from understanding the situation and the user, this is a terrific source for the reading list and for discussion and demonstrations to establish the needed mindset and understanding.

The book also reminds us that there is a history behind the state of the art we are working on and we should honor, respect and start from it.

I hope more will follow and more people will take the effort to tell the story. Very much recommended!

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