People with Disabilities
Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences

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This entry discusses people with disabilities in relation to libraries and other information institutions. It briefly summarizes the social category of disability, the disability rights movement, relevant laws, and the history of disability in the literature and practice of information studies. It focuses largely on libraries, with some discussion of archives, museums, and for-profit information professions. The United States is the primary geographical focus, although other countries and international bodies are discussed. In addition to addressing accessibility of physical spaces, print resources, and electronic resources, the entry discusses disability as subject matter, library staff members with disabilities, and outreach. The importance of involving people with disabilities, both in scholarly research that concerns them and in practical accessibility evaluation and planning, is emphasized.

Keywords: Disability, accessibility, access to information, ADA, assistive technology, universal design

Introduction
Disability is a part of the human experience. Approximately 15% of people around the world have physical or cognitive impairments that limit their ability to perform one or more important functions.[1] The interaction between these impairments and barriers in the environment is defined as disability.[2] Disability is a category that anyone can enter as life circumstances change; some activists highlight this fact by referring to people without disabilities as “temporarily able-bodied.”[3] People with disabilities are almost certainly present in any community served by libraries or other information institutions.

In recent decades, people with disabilities have made important gains in asserting their right to live, work, and play alongside others in their communities. Laws in many countries have affirmed the idea that social institutions and public spaces should be accessible to all. However, people with disabilities are still socially and economically marginalized. They face barriers to full participation in education, public life, and the workforce. Libraries, museums, websites, and other sources of organized information can be empowering resources for this underserved group; they also have the potential to contain barriers to access, reinforcing marginalization and isolation. Most information institutions contain a combination of enabling and disabling features. Information professionals need not wait until our institutions are perfect before cultivating relationships with the disability community.

Information professionals believe strongly in equity of access. The notion that resources should be available to everyone in a community is a core ethical principle of information professions. In practice, however, institutions often fall short of the accessibility ideal, for a variety of reasons: finances, competing priorities for time and attention, attitudinal barriers, and lack of awareness. Many dedicated
information professionals have worked for decades to promote empowering and fair services for people with disabilities. In becoming allies with people with disabilities, information professionals enter a mutually beneficial relationship with a large, diverse sector of the community.

**Disability as a Social Category**

The meaning and scope of the category of disability varies among cultures and countries. A given set of physical or cognitive characteristics might be considered a disability in one context, but thought of as simple human variation in another context. Although the context-dependent nature of the term disability makes it difficult to quantify, the World Health Organization estimates that 15% of people worldwide have a disability.[1]

The contemporary understanding of disability is that it is a social phenomenon. The social model of disability represents a shift from the previous conception of disability as an individual problem. Historically, the responsibility for disabled individuals’ quality of life lay with the individuals and their families. Institutions that made accommodations for people with disabilities did so out of charity. In the second half of the 20th century, due largely to activism and organizing by people with disabilities, a social model of disability emerged. The social model contests the idea that individuals and families should bear the burden of conforming to a non-disabled world. Under the social model, society is responsible for building its institutions in ways that include all citizens. The social model calls attention to the way that disability results from the interaction between a person’s impairment and their environment.

There are many different kinds of disability. Some broad categories of disability are:

- Mobility disabilities
- Sensory disabilities
- Cognitive disabilities
- Learning disabilities
- Mental illness

Many disabilities change in severity and expression over time. Some people experience multiple disabilities. Many disabilities are “invisible”; arthritis, epilepsy, learning disabilities, and many more are not apparent to an outside observer. In most cases, information professionals do not need to know the details of our users’ medical diagnoses; the important thing to understand what they need to effectively use information resources. In many cases, the best way to learn about what people need is to ask. A great deal of the current literature on accessibility of information institutions emphasizes the importance of consulting with people with disabilities.

The disability rights movement, which began after the end of WWII and continues today,[3] focuses on the rights of disabled people to make their homes outside of institutions and to participate in all aspects of society. Some histories of the disability rights movement are Shapiro’s *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement*.[4] and Fleisher and Zames’s *The Disability Rights Movement: From Charity to Confrontation*.[5] The academic field of disability studies, which is closely aligned with the disability rights movement, developed in the 1980s.[6] The *Disability Studies Reader*, a good introduction to the field, is periodically updated with new editions.[7] The major professional organization in the field is the Society for Disability Studies, which publishes the journal *Disability Studies Quarterly*. 
Print disabilities
The category of print disabilities is convenient when discussing disability in relation to libraries and information. Print disabilities are any disabilities that affect a person’s ability to read standard print, and can include blindness, low vision, some learning disabilities, and some cognitive disabilities. The category includes people who have difficulty holding a book or turning pages. The term “print disabled” was coined by George Kerscher in the late 1980s.[8] Ways for print-disabled people to access books and articles include magnification, change in font, text-to-speech technologies, audiobooks, and Braille.

Language
Among people with disabilities, as among many historically marginalized groups, language and labels are taken seriously. Words are understood as vehicles for social power that can either enforce or subvert oppressive structures. Historically, people with disabilities have been given many labels, many of which strike the modern reader as dehumanizing: invalids, cripples, freaks, and the insane. In the 1980s, the people-first language movement grew out of a concern about the dehumanizing nature of much of the language used to describe people with disabilities.[9] Advocates of people-first language promoted the use of words and phrases that emphasize the person rather than the disability. The American Psychology Association’s “Guidelines for Non-Handicapping Language in APA Journals”[10] explains key principles of people-first language. Examples of preferred language include “blind people” rather than “the blind;” “people who have epilepsy” rather than “epileptics;” and “people with disabilities” rather than “disabled people.” Terms with superfluous negative overtones, like “a victim of…,” “afflicted by…,” or “confined to a wheelchair,” are discouraged.

Person-first language is not universally embraced; there is ongoing debate about it within the disability community. Especially in the United Kingdom, writers and activists tend to use “disabled people” rather than “people with disabilities.” Many in the Autistic and blind communities also embrace identity-first language. Those who use identity-first language often view it as less linguistically cumbersome and as a way to assert their social and political identity.[11] Both people-first and identity-first language are used in this encyclopedia entry.

In another example of the significance of language, many Deaf people capitalize the term to denote Deafness as a culture, while the term deafness with a lowercase “d” describes the physical condition. Hard-of-hearing is often used to describe the condition of partial hearing loss.[12]

Some writers reject the term “hearing impaired:” Harlan Lane writes, “The label has embedded within it the infirmity model that legitimates that establishment; and it exists only in opposition to hearing; in this it is like ‘non-men’ as a label for women, ‘non-white’ as a label for people of color, or ‘sexually impaired’ as a label for gays.”[13, p. 89] Others, in contrast, find “impairment” a useful term. Lennard Davis writes, “An impairment involves a loss or diminution of sight, hearing, mobility, mental ability, and so on. But an impairment only becomes a disability when the ambient society creates environments with barriers—affective, sensory, cognitive, or architectural.”[14, p. 41]

As cataloging and metadata librarians are well aware, language norms are culturally relative and change over time. The most important policy for information professionals is to speak respectfully, be willing to
ask people about their preferred language, and be open to changing language after receiving new information.

**Legislation**

In 1990, the United States passed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a major piece of legislation addressing the civil rights of people with disabilities. Among other provisions, the ADA requires that employers make reasonable accommodations for workers with disabilities and that public buildings offer ramps, accessible parking, and accessible bathrooms. Several other countries also passed major civil rights legislation in the 1990s, including Australia (Disability Discrimination Act of 1992) and the United Kingdom (Disability Discrimination Act of 1995).

Another relevant law in the United States is the Rehabilitation Act, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability by the federal government. Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act requires that websites and other information technologies used by the government be accessible to people with disabilities.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, an international treaty obliging countries to protect the human rights of people with disabilities, was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2006. As of this writing, 158 countries had signed the convention and 149 had ratified it. The United States is not among the countries that have ratified the convention.

**Non-Library Information Institutions**

While this entry focuses primarily on libraries, information needs and perspectives of people with disabilities are highly relevant to all information-focused institutions. Many of the entry’s statements about libraries hold true for other types of institutions.

**For-Profit Sector**

Many information professionals are employed by for-profit companies, working in fields such as usability, information architecture, and database management. Accessibility of electronic resources is an important aspect of these fields. A 2007 special issue of The Information Society provides a multidisciplinary analysis of disability in information technology, addressing questions about how to align accessibility with the profitability goals of corporations.[15]

**Museums**

In museum studies, there are ongoing conversations about ways to design exhibits with accessibility in mind. Strategies for enhancing the museum experience for disabled people include tactile exhibits, touch-tours, audio description of visual works, and closed captioning of audio works. A 2013 special issue of Disability Studies Quarterly focuses on museum experience and blindness, featuring best practices, curators’ perspectives, and personal accounts of museum experiences.[16] Designing for accessibility can be a creative endeavor: Cachia, an art curator and chair of the Dwarf Artist Coalition of the Little People of America, calls on museums to “think about how access can move beyond a mere practical conundrum, often added as an afterthought once an exhibition has been installed, to use as a dynamic, critical and creative tool in art-making and curating.”[17]
A few museums focus on disability as subject matter. The June 2014 issue of the Journal of American History features exhibition reviews of several brick-and-mortar museums: the Museum of disABILITY History in Buffalo, New York; the Oregon State Hospital Museum of Mental Health; and the Museum of the American Printing House for the Blind.[18] Several online museums and exhibits document disability history. The Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History hosts EveryBody: An Artifact History of Disability in America, which launched in 2013, as well as an ongoing web version of their 2000-2001 exhibit The Disability Rights Movement. The University of Leeds maintains the online Disability Archive UK. Another major online museum is the Disability History Museum maintained by Straight Ahead Pictures. Laurie Block, founder of the Disability History Museum, discussed the challenges of collecting and describing artifacts for the online museum in a 2007 article.[19]

Representing disability in museums is complicated by historical traditions of exploitative, dehumanizing presentations of disabled bodies. Sandell, Delin, Dodd, and Gay discuss this topic in their article “In the Shadow of the Freakshow.”[20]

Archives
The archival record of disability experience, like the archival record for many historically disenfranchised groups, is fragmented. Some archives, such as the University of Toledo Archives, have proactively sought to find and preserve historical materials by partnering with community organizations.[21] The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley has a substantial collection of records from the disability rights and independent living movements. Articles in the archives literature have addressed finding aid accessibility[22] and people with disabilities as archives employees.[23]

History
Libraries began addressing the needs of people with disabilities long before the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, a variety of books and articles discussed library services for disabled patrons, particularly those with visual and mobility disabilities.

In the United States, the Boston Public Library established the first collection of embossed books for blind people in 1868, followed closely by the Library of Congress Reading Room for the Blind.[24] In 1931, Congress passed the Pratt-Smoot Act (Act to Provide Books for the Blind), establishing what is now the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS). The NLS produces Braille materials and audiobooks—also known as talking books—and distributes them by postage-free mail to borrowers’ homes. They recently began offering online access to talking books and Braille books (digital Braille books can be downloaded and printed using embossing hardware). The NLS operates through a national network of libraries in each state.

Before the independent living movement of the mid-20th century, many people with disabilities lived in institutions. A few authors have explored the histories of libraries patients’ libraries in hospitals and mental institutions.[25,26]

After the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed in 1990, many libraries made changes to come into compliance with its requirements for physical spaces. In a 1991 American Libraries article, Gunde describes efforts by the library profession to respond to the ADA. He describes brochures and conference
programs sponsored by Association of Special and Cooperative Library Agencies (ASCLA). In colorful language, he calls on libraries to do more to make their programs and services inclusive: “Many citizens with disabilities will come to question the sincerity of our commitment to the professional principles that we so eloquently proclaim at our overcrowded conferences and in our bombastic Association resolutions.”[27]

In 1994, Scheimann studied ADA compliance among Ohio public libraries.[28] Although the study’s scope is limited, it provides a useful glimpse into a point in time shortly after the passage of the ADA. Libraries reported relatively high levels of physical accessibility and provision of alternative formats – 87% had accessible parking, 71% had appropriate aisle width, and 95% provided large print, for example. Most libraries had not solicited significant patron input – only 7% had done so, with some including patrons with disabilities on an ADA evaluation committee, some distributing evaluation forms, and one inviting members of the local Handicapped Society to tour the building and offer suggestions. Many libraries had neglected to perform the self-evaluation that public entities were legally mandated to perform in 1993. Survey respondents expressed concerns about the cost of modifications, and several stated a perception that their service community did not include people with disabilities.

Perry’s 2014 study of information services for older adults showed that many, but not all, libraries were in compliance with ADA guidelines.[29] Perry surveyed libraries in suburban counties, receiving 91 responses. Over 90% of responding libraries provided large print and audiobooks, 87.9% of buildings met ADA guidelines, and 81.3% of library websites were ADA compliant. In a variety of other categories, including assistive technologies, large-print brochures, and visible and high-contrast signage, between 35 and 45 percent of libraries provided accommodations.

The Association of Special and Cooperative Library Agencies, a division of the American Library Association, has done substantial work promoting improved library services to people with disabilities. ASCLA maintains a series of library accessibility tip sheets that provide brief, readable introductions to topics such as assistive technology, service animals, and various categories of disability.[30] In 2001, ASCLA was instrumental in adding a section on Library Services for People with Disabilities to the policy manual of the American Library Association.[31]

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) is another long-time player in the field. What is now IFLA’s section on Library Services to People with Special Needs was founded in 1931 as the Sub-Committee on Hospital Libraries. From 1981 to 2008, it was called the Section for Libraries Serving Disadvantaged Persons.[32] During the section’s long history, it has facilitated international cooperation among libraries serving people with disabilities and has published many sets of standards, guidelines, bibliographies, and resource lists. In 2005, it published the Access to Libraries for Persons with Disabilities Checklist, which is used internationally to evaluate and improve services.

In a content analysis of disability and accessibility in the library and information science literature from 2000-2010, Hill found a strong emphasis on accessibility of electronic resources and on visual disabilities.[33] A comparatively small amount of research has focused on information behavior or on attitudinal and social barriers to access. Thirty-six percent of the research articles Hill examined involved
participation by people with disabilities, and she states that increasing this proportion would benefit the
field.

In the United Kingdom, the now-defunct Museums, Libraries, and Archives Council produced several
tools and documents related to people with disabilities, including a database launched in 2005 of
disability trainers and consultants with an interest in working with heritage organizations.[34] The
Museums, Libraries, and Archives Council was closed in May 2012 as part of government restructuring.
Some of the Council’s responsibilities were taken over by Arts Council England and the National
Archives, but the Disability Experts database appears to no longer be maintained.

Physical Resource Accessibility

Space
Accessibility of physical spaces is an essential aspect of library services to people with disabilities. People
who use wheelchairs, walkers, or scooters need wide enough pathways to navigate library buildings.
Some physical space considerations, such as signage, also affect people with visual and cognitive
disabilities. The Americans with Disabilities Act mandates that any new construction or renovation of a
public space follow accessibility standards. Institutions that do not follow these standards are open to
lawsuits. The ADA Standards for Accessible Design were updated in 2010, replacing the 1991 Standards.

The practice of designing spaces to be inherently accessible to all, including elderly and disabled people,
can be called universal design, accessible design, barrier-free design, or inclusive design. Universal
design from the beginning of a project is easier than retrofitting non-accessible spaces, and it is more
inclusive than making only certain areas accessible. William Sannwald’s Checklist of Library Building
Design Considerations includes a chapter on ADA considerations and is periodically updated to keep
pace with current standards and technologies.[35] Several libraries have successfully obtained grant or
government funding for ADA compliance construction projects.[36]

There are many ways for libraries to improve their physical accessibility without undergoing new
construction or renovation. They can provide plenty of seating, good lighting, and large and high-contrast
signs. They can make sure that aisles, workstations, and handrails are kept clear. Tables can be raised or
purchased at an appropriate height for wheelchairs. Vincent’s Making the Library Accessible for All has a
clear and concise chapter on architectural and environmental accessibility.[36]

Physical Books and Media

Physical books present inherent accessibility challenges to many people with visual disabilities, learning
disabilities, and mobility disabilities. Libraries have a long history of collecting large-print books, which
facilitate access by people with low vision. Another way to increase accessibility of physical books is to
offer assistive technology that magnifies printed text, such as closed-circuit televisions. Many libraries
arrange accommodations such as extended borrowing periods, proxy borrowers, renewal by phone, or
extended reference help to facilitate access by disabled patrons. Communicating directly with patrons is
the most effective way to learn what accommodations might help them use the library’s books.
Under the 1996 Chafee Amendment, the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS) has permission to convert print materials to accessible formats, such as audio and Braille, without being subject to copyright law. Materials converted under the Chafee Amendment can only be distributed to eligible borrowers with a documented disability. These materials represent only a small fraction of the books published in any given year.

Standard type can often be made accessible through scanning. Scans can be run through optical character recognition (OCR) programs to produce text that can be converted to audio, Braille, more readable font, or large print. In 2013, the University of California, Berkeley library announced that it will scan materials on demand for students with disabilities, as part of an out-of-court settlement following structured negotiations with four students.[37]

Deaf and hard of hearing patrons can access a much larger proportion of a library’s holdings than visually disabled patrons, but videos may present an accessibility challenge. Many DVDs and Blu-Rays include captioning. Some libraries lend audio-described videos, which provide narration of the film’s action for blind viewers.[36]

**Services and Programming**

Libraries offer a wide range of programs, classes, book clubs, and other events. One way to avoid excluding people with disabilities from events is to publicize the fact that sign language interpretation or other accommodations are available if the library is notified a certain number of days in advance. Providing reasonable accommodations so that people with disabilities can participate in library programs is not only ethical, but likely falls under the Americans with Disabilities Act’s provision that no individual should “be denied the benefits of the services, programs, or activities of a public entity.”[38]

Staff delivering presentations can increase accessibility by making sure slides and visual aids are clear and readable, with large text. White text on a dark background is easier to read by people with low vision.[36]

Libraries increasingly produce video tutorials. An article by Oud offers guidance for creating accessible screencasts.[39] She recommends Captivate or Camtasia for creating accessible videos. Best practices for accessibility include captioning, keyboard alternatives to mouse clicks, avoid videos that start automatically, and including either alt text or spoken narration that describes what is happening onscreen. She writes that closed captioning (hidden by default) is preferred over open captioning (visible by default), because open captioning has been shown to be distracting to nondisabled users.

Many libraries provide programs specifically geared for people with disabilities. The Seattle Public Library, for example, hosts a book club conducted in American Sign Language. Several books and websites offer suggestions for programming for children and youth on the autism spectrum.[40,41]

There is a long tradition of programs that deliver library materials directly to people’s homes, historically called “homebound” or “housebound” services. These programs serve people who have difficulty getting to the library for a variety of reasons, including age, illness, and disability. In a 2004 study of home library service in the United Kingdom, Ryder found that libraries provide home library service to over
120,000 people, that volunteers—often in combination with paid staff—support programs in over half of responding libraries. Only 62% of responding libraries publicize their home library service, partly due to fear of not being able to cope with demand, which may make them legally vulnerable under the UK’s Disability Discrimination Act.[42]

**Electronic Resource Accessibility**

Born-digital electronic resources have the potential to be more inherently accessible than print, since assistive technology can modify text in a variety of ways to make it possible for people with disabilities to access. Assistive technology can change font size, style, or color; convert print to spoken word; or convert print to Braille. Other types of assistive technology allow users to use speech for text input or to navigate resources using a keyboard, mouth stick, or head wand. Unfortunately, many websites and electronic resources contain features that make them difficult or impossible to navigate using assistive technology.

Nina McHale provides a concise overview of web accessibility guidelines.[43] Accessible web design is defined by two major sets of guidelines: the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), which are produced by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) and followed voluntarily, and the guidelines of Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, which are mandatory for federal agencies.

Many web accessibility guidelines are related to website performance on assistive technologies such as screen readers, while some, such as the recommendation to provide text transcripts of videos, address accessibility needs that are not related to screen readers.

Tatomir and Durrance developed a ten-point checklist, the Tatomir Accessibility Checklist, which provides a quick overview of some key components of accessibility. The checklist was inspired by a combination of the WCAG guidelines, Section 508 guidelines, and personal experience.[44] The ten elements of the Tatomir Accessibility Checklist are:

1. accessible versions of PDF webpages and documents;  
2. skip navigation and jump-to links;  
3. clearly labeled page elements;  
4. text captions for tables, images, graphics, graphs, and charts;  
5. limited use of incompatible programming languages and scripts;  
6. the absence of identically named page elements;  
7. text transcripts of videos, animations, and podcasts;  
8. logical and consistent page organization;  
9. absence of timed responses; and  
10. digital forms and functionalities accessible and usable with adaptive technologies.

[44]

Accessibility often goes hand in hand with usability. Accessible websites tend to be well-structured, quick to load on slow connections, compliant with web authoring standards, optimized for search engines (due to semantic markup), and easy to view on mobile devices.[36]
Accessibility of electronic resources is relatively well covered in the library literature, although gaps still exist in many areas, such as usability testing by people with disabilities.[33] Schmetzke edited special accessibility issues of Library Hi Tech in 2002[45,46] and 2007.[47] In 2012, Booth edited a special accessibility issue of Library Technology Reports.[48]

**Vendor Databases**

One of the more troubling findings in the literature on electronic accessibility is that many vendor-supplied databases, to which large portions of library budgets are dedicated every year, do not meet accessibility standards. Tatominir and Durrance studied 32 vendor databases and found only 9 to be moderately accessible; most were either marginally accessible or inaccessible.[44] Tatominir and Durrance gave relatively high marks to government websites, Google Scholar and Google Books, JSTOR, ProQuest, and OCLC World Cat. They noted that as of 2010, important accessibility elements were missing from databases produced by Gale, Lexis-Nexis, and Elsevier Science Direct. EBSCO databases were marginally accessible. Through a questionnaire directed at database vendors, Dermody and Majekodunmi found that most vendors did not work with people with disabilities to conduct usability tests.[49]

ASCLA maintains an online toolkit entitled Think Accessible Before You Buy, which provides checklists and questions to ask when evaluating electronic resources for accessibility.[50] Libraries can require that potential vendors submit a Voluntary Product Accessibility Template (VPAT), a standardized document for reporting a product’s compliance with accessibility standards. Many federally funded projects require a VPAT.[51]

The Universal Accessibility Interest Group of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) maintains an online guide to resources on web accessibility, which as of this writing included information on vendor databases and LibGuides in addition to websites.[52] Mulliken compiled a list of statements from vendors on their products’ accessibility or lack thereof, which is no longer being maintained but remains informative.[53]

**Library Websites**

Website accessibility may be a new field for many managers of “homegrown” library websites, and even for some professional web designers. Several websites and books outline small changes that can make a big difference for accessibility.[36,54,55]

Comeaux and Schmetzke have collected longitudinal data on accessibility of North American academic library websites since 2002. In both 2010 and 2012, approximately 60% of websites were approved by Bobby 3.1.1, an automated checking tool.[56] Maatta Smith used another checking tool, the WebAIM Accessibility Evaluator (WAVE), for a 2014 study of 127 urban public libraries in the United States. She found that all websites contained some errors, with the most common being contrast errors (low contrast between text and background), missing alt text (no text alternative to images or video), and missing form labels (no navigational aids to help users identify and fill out forms).[57]
Circulating Equipment
Increasingly, libraries circulate electronic equipment such as e-readers. Some e-readers are accessible to people with print disabilities, and some are not. The Free Library of Philadelphia and the Sacramento Public Library have both been sued for loaning inaccessible e-readers.[58] The Department of Justice and Department of Education issued a Dear Colleague letter in 2010 stating any e-readers used by colleges and universities should offer text-to-speech functionality.[59]

Assistive Technology
Many libraries provide assistive technology, also known as adaptive technology, for patrons’ use. Vincent’s book *Implementing Cost-Effective Assistive Computer Technology* provides an overview of options and considerations.[60] Decisions about what technology to offer should be based on assessment of local needs.

Staff Training
One of the most important accessibility resources a library can offer is quality public service. All public services staff should know the library’s accommodation procedures and the basics of using assistive technology within the library, including what is available through operating systems, browsers, and Microsoft Office. Accessibility information can be compiled in a staff manual easily accessible from service points. Training can be provided in-house, with outside trainers, through webinars, or through attendance at conferences.[36]

In a qualitative study of library access, Clayton Copeland quotes from interviews with several people with disabilities. One of the participants, Nate, offers his impression of library staff attitudes:

…librarians are among the people who are most interested in helping people…their whole job is to help you find the book that you want and maybe even the book that you didn’t even know you wanted. And I think that tends to carry over into how they treat people with disabilities. Now in a modern situation where all jobs are getting more and more duties put on top of them, and cutting back on how many staff there are…If anybody comes along and needs a little extra work [deep sigh], that can be a problem. And certainly, you know, I think they catch their breath before they take on a whole new area. But I don’t find a lot of resistance.[61]

As Nate observes, the vast majority of library staff are friendly and willing to help, but many are unsure and hesitant when it comes to disability issues. Clear policies and staff training on effective communication with people with disabilities can increase the quality of service and decrease staff uncertainty and anxiety.

The tipsheets provided by ASCLA provide a good overview of best practices and etiquette. For example:

Staff should ask, "What's the best way I can help you?" when a patron requests assistance. Let the person guide you.
After offering assistance, wait for acceptance; don’t be afraid to ask questions if you aren’t sure about something.

Respect the patron’s privacy. Do not ask questions about his or her disability or its cause.

Understand that the adaptive equipment of a person with a disability is an extension of his or her body—this is true for adults and children. Ask for the person’s permission before touching or moving the equipment.

Always speak directly to a person with a disability—not the person’s companion, aide, or sign-language interpreter.[62]

Use normal language. “See you later” will not offend visually impaired persons.[63]

Written library policies can include statements that affirm the institution’s commitment to the ADA and to providing access to all patrons. Policies and procedures can also outline the steps a library will take if it receives a complaint or request. Some libraries might write transition plans for changes that are not yet financially or logistically feasible.[64]

**Library Staff with Disabilities**

People with disabilities are underrepresented in librarianship and library work. As the library profession works to increase diversity in its ranks, disability is one of the areas targeted. The ALA Century Scholarship is provided annually to support a library school student with disabilities. Few empirical studies of librarians with disabilities have been conducted. A study of academic library managers in the Republic of Ireland found that they were aware of the need to accommodate disabilities, but that one-third of their libraries did not have procedures in place to address requests for reasonable accommodation.[65]

In the title of a 1995 opinion piece in American Libraries, Barlow exhorted, “Don’t Just Serve People with Disabilities—Hire Them.” She recounts the struggles and successes of several library employees with disabilities, gathered from a listserv query. Marilyn McLean, then head of science reference at Boston Public library, who has spina bifida, stated, “I frequently have had students writing paper or other people call about disabilities or birth defects, and I can often lend a personal touch to the reference encounter.”[66]

Fran Ziglar, station manager of the Nashville Talking Books Library, wrote about her experiences in a 2006 Tennessee Libraries article. She writes, “There have been a few issues about accessibility: what to do when the elevator broke; early accessible bathroom stalls with curtains rather than doors, etc. Overall, I think that a sense of humor, concerned supervisors, and supportive co-workers have made the way successful and meaningful.”[67]

**Outreach**

Community members with disabilities might not know that the library has resources for them. Especially if they have had negative experiences with libraries in the past, the prospect of going to a library without knowing whether they will be able to carry out simple tasks could be daunting. Outreach is an important part of an accessibility strategy. Used here, outreach refers to communication with community members who may not be library users, and includes both informing people about what the library offers and asking.
them about what they need. Outreach might be conducted through partnerships with disability organizations, schools, or senior centers. Outreach could include co-hosted events or inclusion of library information in outside organizations’ marketing materials.

In *Making the Library Accessible for All*, Vincent recommends that every library recruit a group of “accessibility resource people.” This advisory group would provide ongoing feedback on local needs and accessibility issues. Accessibility resource people could provide information either through in-person meetings or electronic communication; she recommends SurveyMonkey as the most accessible of the free online survey tools. Vincent’s book includes a sample list of questions for initial information-gathering. She quotes Alan Bern of the Berkeley Public Library: “There is, perhaps, nothing more important than a focus group—or, better, an ongoing Advisory Group—to discuss accessibility issues at your library. You WILL get requests you cannot meet—and even off-base questions and requests—but the number of spot-on questions and requests AND unexpected, fantastic ideas far outweighs any negative outcomes.”[36]

Once people with disabilities feel welcome in the library, they are often enthusiastic and active patrons. Vincent quotes computer accessibility expert Marc Sutton: “There are many books and magazines available through online library databases that would otherwise not be accessible to print-impaired persons. Often, a patron just needs a little help finding these items and then a whole new world of knowledge opens up.”[36]

**Disability as Subject Matter**

Discussions of disability and libraries often focus solely on the accessibility of resources and services. Another important aspect of disability, however, is disability as subject matter. Materials related to disability culture, art, and politics, as well as materials created by people with disabilities, are of interest to library users with and without disabilities. Strong collections will include materials that reflect the intersections of disability with other aspects of diversity, including class, race, gender, and sexual orientation.

Collection development in the disability field may involve turning to some specialized reference sources or small publishers. Many mainstream depictions of disability, especially in film, continue to rely on stereotypes, portraying people with disabilities either as villains or as one-dimensionally inspirational or tragic figures.[68] The Schneider Family Book Awards, administered by the ALA, are given yearly to children’s and young adult books about the disability experience. A bibliographic essay by Cole, focusing on disability studies, also contains useful references to materials on disability history, culture, and memoir.[69] An annotated bibliography by Klauber, although out of date, lists categories of books providing practical information about aspects of living with a disability: College and Careers, Easier Living, House and Garden, Love, Marriage, Baby Carriage; and Recreation and Travel.[70]

**Cataloging and Indexing**

Because the terminology used to describe disability has historically reflected discriminatory cultural attitudes, library catalogs can contain archaic or insensitive words. The word “handicapped,” for example, is commonly found in indexes despite not being in general use. Emmett and Catherine Davis discussed subject access to disability materials in 1980’s *Mainstreaming Library Service for Disabled People*,...
where they critiqued then-current Library of Congress headings such as *Idiocy* and *Castration of Criminals and Defectives.*[71] In a 2013 study of award-winning books about disability for youth, Kaney found that catalog terms failed to adequately represent many important disability issues.[72] In a 2014 article, Koford interviewed nine disability studies scholars about their impressions of subject headings, finding that they often encounter and use non-preferred language when searching.[73]

Catalogers and indexers continuously change standards to reflect changes in society and language. Drabinski argues that problematic subject access terms can be used as pedagogical tools, helping library users better understand historical and social aspects of information.[74] In the *Disability Studies Reader,* disability studies scholar Lennard Davis recounts a meeting between the Committee on Academics with Disabilities and a bibliographer from the MLA Bibliography. He writes, “an article on ‘crippled saints’ could not be searched by computer because the word ‘crippled’ was disallowed by MLA regulations as constituting discriminatory language. The bibliographer therefore filed the article under ‘saints’ thus rendering it unretrievable by anyone with an interest in disability.”[7] This story illustrates the idea that access structures cannot be fixed by replacing terminology; rather, structures serve as evidence of history, struggle, and change. In practical terms, the variety of words historically used to describe disability means that searching for disability information is challenging and might require extra time and creativity.

**Conclusions**

Access to information, both about disability and about other topics, is essential for people with disabilities. Many disabled people have had positive experiences finding information through websites, databases, museums, archives, and libraries; at the same time, many have encountered barriers that prevented them from accessing the full range of information available to non-disabled people. Awareness of some disability issues, such as the importance of large-print books, is high within the library profession, while awareness of other issues, such as the poor accessibility record of many vendor-supplied databases, is low. There are many gaps in the library and information science literature on disability, and more studies that include disabled people as participants are needed. Some key principles that emerge in the literature are:

- People with disabilities should be involved in the accessibility evaluation and planning process.
- Universal design, when it is possible, is more efficient and equitable than retrofitting non-accessible structures or building alternate versions. This principle applies both to physical spaces and to electronic resources.
- Designing for accessibility often leads to usability. For example, large and clear signs benefit not only people with low vision or cognitive disabilities, but also non-disabled library users. Websites designed for accessibility tend to perform well not only on screen readers, but also on slow connections and mobile devices.

Providing equitable access to information for all people, including those with disabilities, is an ongoing process. Asking questions and opening lines of communication is essential to improving library services to people with disabilities.
References


