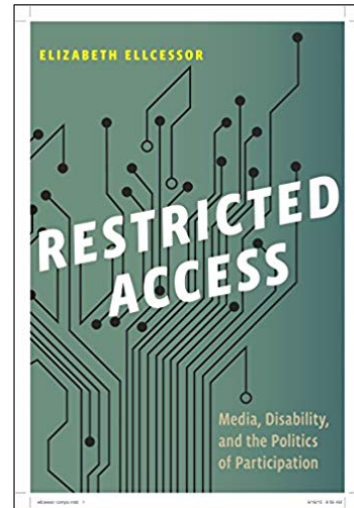


Elizabeth Ellcessor, **Restricted Access: Media, Disability, and the Politics of Participation**, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2016, 272 pp., \$80.95 (hardcover), \$28.00 (paperback), \$26.49 (Kindle).

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Since the beginnings of disability activism and disability politics in the 1960s, *disability* has been the missing term in the dominant triad of gender, class, and race. As disability has moved into the realm of political minority, it has gradually become a critical field of research that furthers society's understanding of human rights and equality. In the meantime, digital media, having developed rapidly over the past three decades, has demonstrated a potential to be useful to people with disabilities in their pursuit and achievement of rights and equality. Most previous studies, however, have marginalized or even overlooked the experiences of people with disabilities. Elizabeth Ellcessor's inspiring book **Restricted Access: Media, Disability, and the Politics of Participation** lies at the intersection of disability, technology, culture, and bodies, and it raises new questions in these intersecting research fields. It is a timely and welcome work that fills in the research gap between disability studies and media studies.



Ellcessor specifically questions the so-called participatory culture, which was initially understood as progressive, just, egalitarian, and collaborative. However, participatory culture turns out to exclude people with disabilities from cultural production, political participation, and social collaboration. In this sense, participatory culture has transformed into a regressive affirmation of existing power structures, facilitating the participation of those who are already privileged rather than less powerful populations, such as people with disabilities. Ellcessor supports her main argument through a thorough investigation of the policies, technology, and culture of digital media accessibility for people with disabilities. She suggests a reconsideration of the oft-celebrated digital participatory culture from the standpoint of disability as well as the broader culture and political structures. Unlike conventional technological approaches that focus on the technological details and affordances of digital media, Ellcessor adopts a cultural approach to focus on the discursive evolution of accessibility within which the access to digital media for people with disabilities has been constructed, negotiated, resisted, and innovated at the juncture of digital media texts, artifacts, and practices.

With a multidisciplinary lens, drawing on media studies, disability studies, cultural studies, and critical theory, Ellcessor develops an interrogatory framework, which she describes as an "access kit." She defines this access kit as a modular grouping of different interrogatories, perspectives, models, tools, and methods with which she examines the digital media practices of people with disabilities from various angles (p. 17). The access kit is organized around five categories: regulation, use, content, form, and experience, an assemblage of items that may be used individually or in concert. Regulation refers to policy developments in digital media accessibility; use refers to the creative and nonnormative uses and user positions of people with disabilities; form refers to the material, encoded, and presented structures of media technology; content refers to the

information, meaning, experience, and value conveyed by a media artifact; and experience refers to the unexpected outcomes and collaborative potential of media access.

These five categories structure the book's five main chapters. In chapter 1, "Regulating Digital Media Accessibility: #CaptionTHIS," Ellcessor explores the captioning of digital media to interrogate a range of regulatory contexts that affect accessibility. These contexts consist of legal policies (civil rights, employment, and telecommunications laws), extralegal regulations (World Wide Web Consortium), the internal regulatory standards and practices of industry (local companies and industries), self-regulation and professionalization of social communities (the communal motivations and criteria of individuals and organizations), and regulation in grassroots and activist contexts (counterdiscourse, policy translations, and negotiations). Ellcessor argues that these legal, extralegal, industrial, professional, and activist forms of regulation define, limit, extend, and authorize digital media accessibility. They are "not a single process but a web of meanings and practices within which particular meanings of technology and access are achieved and come to be powerful" (p. 59).

In the second chapter, "You Already Know How to Use It: Technology, Disability and Participation," Ellcessor analyzes advertisements from the early Web, Web 2.0, video games, digital audio, and communication devices. The focus of this analysis is a discussion of the normative image of the ideal and preferred model of a user: an already-empowered, abled-bodied, financially advantaged, White, male, active Westerner. In particular, neoliberal discourse on a "you" based on consumer choices in the Web 2.0 constructs the ideal user, who serves as the standard for technological design, use, and meaning, maintaining the centrality of ability and the absence of disability. According to Ellcessor, this indicates a hegemony of a "preferred user position" within online media (p. 74). In other words, this preferred user position has been taken for granted and further institutionalized within broader technological, social, and political structures. Ellcessor is still optimistic, however, that disability may challenge hegemonic preferred user positions, though such challenges are rarely easy.

The specific technological, material, and linguistic structures (hardware, software, and code) that govern digital media accessibility are the focus of chapter 3, "Transformers: Accessibility, Style, and Adaptation." In this chapter, Ellcessor analyzes several specific forms of digital media, including graphical user interface, HTML, Flash, mobile devices, and universal design, as they relate to accessibility for people with disabilities. Ellcessor argues that these forms are sites of transformation, flexibility, and possibility because they facilitate the possibility of access and address the needs of nonnormative users. However, they may also, paradoxically, be inaccessibly designed, thus preventing people with disabilities from accessing particular content. Therefore, Ellcessor suggests that forms and devices are never neutral but a contestation of dominant ideology, that is, "they reflect their contexts, are shaped by their uses, and become part of chains of cultural and technological adaptations" (p. 120).

The domains of the subsequent chapter, "Content Warnings: Struggles over Meaning, Rights, and Equality," are content, "the cultural signifiers and meanings conveyed by a media artifact" (p. 126), and the relationship of content to accessibility. Based on cases studies, Ellcessor demonstrates "how content is imagined, produced, and received in relation to disability and technology" (p. 125). First, a hierarchy of content—information has priority, communication is a distant second, and entertainment is a luxury—perpetuates a politics of "disability as deficit and access as charity" (p. 129). Second, content accessibility also raises difficult questions about free speech, copyright, sameness, and transformation. The voices of people with disabilities

concerning content quality are almost absent from these discourses, raising new questions about equality in accessible media content.

The last and perhaps most important category in Ellcessor's access kit, experience, is explored in chapter 5, "The Net Experience: Intersectional Identities and Cultural Accessibility." Experience articulates every piece of the access kit in combination, all of which make, unmake, and remake each other in contexts in which "lived, embodied, social, and material factors produce particular relationships between culture, bodies, and technologies" (p. 158). For Ellcessor, the term *experience* refers to the experience of not only having access to and accessing media but also creating and granting access. Based on her ethnography on a disability blogosphere, Ellcessor investigates the access strategies of people with disabilities, opposed to normative technological structures, for the use and production of digital media and explains the political implications of such activities and contexts. Beyond the technical, legal, and professional, Ellcessor proposes a cultural formulation of access experience, namely, "cultural accessibility," aligned with and rooted in coalitional identity politics. Ellcessor believes that cultural accessibility is related to bodies, identities, and media practices as well as being a possible path toward a technocultural future founded on inclusion and variability. Ellcessor seems quite optimistic about this imagined technocultural future in which "media are not only technologically accessible to people with disabilities but may be culturally relevant, actively inclusive of difference, and ultimately a co-created process that moves ever toward greater flexibility and lesser restriction" (p. 180).

In the concluding chapter, Ellcessor calls into question the assumptions of access and equivalence, as disability has always been marginalized and often ignored in most previous studies of participatory culture. Therefore, she suggests that disability may propose important challenges to technological hegemonies, power structures, and identity ideologies by delving into issues surrounding access to media for people with disabilities, namely, the regulation of media, forms of technologies, types of content, uses of digital media, and experience of media access. She delves into these issues to investigate media accessibility as "a conjoining of bodies, technologies and culture that produces variable relationships to media, to other people, and to society at large" (p. 196). Ellcessor further suggests that accessibility is a core component of the collaborative, ongoing, and responsive forms of participatory culture; it is not a prerequisite to participatory culture, but "*access and participation depend upon each other*" (p. 196, emphasis in original), which indicates possible "models of interdependence" (p. 198).

Overall, Ellcessor demonstrates both the potential and limits of participatory culture and digital media accessibility for people with disabilities in this insightful book. It is encouraging to see that Ellcessor attempts to develop an analytically useful framework, her access kit, to tease apart different dimensions of media accessibility so that we can logically examine each of the varied relationships that constitute media accessibility in a broader context. However, just as access is not an end state but a phenomenon-in-progress, this analytical framework should be neither a fixed model, method, nor tool, but flexible and moveable, always available for repurposing in other contexts besides the American one in this book. Furthermore, digital media technologies are developing and evolving so rapidly that many distinct media technologies are not addressed in this book, including artificial intelligence, augmented reality, virtual reality, mixed reality, and wearable devices. I think the changes and influences from this new trend in media technology may propose new challenges to the applicability of Ellcessor's access kit as well as opportunities to update it.

However, it is beyond the scope of any single book to be exhaustive, and this ambitious book is still highly important for its comprehensive discussion of media access and participatory cultures, making it a great candidate for the reading list of anyone interested in disability studies, cultural studies, or media studies. It will be of particular interest to anyone focused on the role of digital disability and participatory culture in the changing media technology landscape. This book should also be useful to advanced undergraduate and postgraduate media courses as well as to professionals such as legislators, manufacturers, designers, and managers, who are engaged with digital media and information technology.