

Disability and Digital Connection in COVID-19 Times

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There is no doubt that Eszter Hargittai's (Hargittai, 2022) book is a landmark in digital communication research—especially digital inequalities work. It seizes the opportunity of the COVID-19 “digital turn” and the unprecedented, throughgoing, and complex global responses to the pandemic to study how people responded to this epochal disruption.

Reading this book as disability scholars writing across time and space calls us to reflect on our own embodied circumstances across the pandemic, what Hargittai rightly describes as unprecedented, and that also highlights the vast digital inequalities that plague populations across the world. We first met just before the pandemic, and when lockdowns began in Singapore and Australia, respectively, we continued collaborating, seamlessly, using the Internet as the medium. We were very much connected in isolation, to use Hargittai's phrase. Yet, as Hargittai rightly points out, the pandemic only served to exacerbate the inequalities that perpetuate the digital. Even in advanced and developed societies, such as the United States, Italy, and Switzerland, which the book is focused on, the gulf in difference between the haves and the have-nots are gaping, enabling some but also hindering many.

Connected in Isolation (Hargittai, 2022) thus affords a critical lens to understand the inequalities amplified by the lockdowns that accompanied the pandemic. In doing so, it makes a novel, benchmark contribution in another respect. It is the first study on digital communication and use across the pandemic that quite seamlessly and tellingly integrates disability into its framework and analysis. It paves the way for Internet and digital technology to make inclusion of people with disabilities a permanent feature of how large-scale surveys are approached. In this way, her book takes a major step forward when around the world reliable, robust statistics and quantitative information, and indeed qualitative information, at societal or population levels are typically inadequate or missing (Goggin, 2022)—more so given the attention focused on disabled populations in her research.

Hargittai has a nearly a two-decade track record of research on disability, Internet, and digital technology use, laid out in a suite of field defining papers with Kerry Dobransky (Dobransky & Hargittai, 2006, 2016, 2020, 2021). Hargittai and Dobransky have been able to take advantage of the U.S. statistics and survey on disability and Internet and digital technology use. In their work, especially their most recent papers, they have challenged some of the key verities of disability and digital inclusion, charting, for instance, growing social media use by people with disabilities, despite barriers. Their work offers important

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insights into the relationships and innovations of people with disabilities with the digitality of communication, characterized by stubbornly rooted exclusions of information, communication, and media, yet also reliance upon and expanding adoption of digital technology.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an outpouring of research looking at a wide range of people with disabilities' experience of the pandemic and how they marshalled digital technology—often with little choice—and also what loss of nondigital options meant for their lives and their societies (e.g., Chadwick et al., 2022; Dai & Hu, 2022; Mhiripiri & Midzi, 2021; Scherer et al., 2023). The lessons from this treasure trove of pandemic research on disability, communication, and technology need to be collated and scrutinized, providing many insights, especially on the ambiguous and checkered dialectic of disability and digital technology.

Against this backdrop, Hargittai's book provides a headland view of this altered landscape of social life, digital technologies, and inequalities. She lays out several important findings, notably that:

- People with disabilities in her surveys of the United States, Italy, and Switzerland were less knowledgeable about COVID-19 health information (whereas women were more knowledgeable). As she explains, it is hard to say why, though "one possibility is that disabled people may have a harder time finding accessible communication channels through which they could stay informed about pandemic preparedness details" (p. 38);
- In relation to "autonomy of use," Hargittai highlights the unsurprising finding that a consistent factor across all three countries surveyed is that "those with low household income are more likely to have precarious home Internet access as they only have one device for it" (p. 54). Among those in "least privileged positions [who] have the least autonomy" (p. 54) are often people with disabilities, facing multiple disadvantages (especially low income). Interestingly Hargittai points out that in "both Italy and Switzerland, disabled people are more likely than others to have just one point of access to the Internet at home" (p. 54);
- Hargittai highlights how across the three countries "disabled people have similar skills to people without disabilities in 2020 . . . [and that] it is encouraging to know that both regarding general Internet skills and social media skills, disabled people are on par with others" (p. 61). Hargittai suggests that this "may reflect their considerable advocacy in recent years for more accessible technologies and workarounds to the limitations on what tends to be more available" (p. 61);
- People with disabilities were "more likely to need support and less likely to have such needs met than those without disabilities, exacerbating disadvantages such populations already face" (p. 63);
- "When possible, disabled people take advantage of the opportunity to share their voices online. Such findings show that it is not a lack of interest in online participation that

holds this population back from online engagement” (p. 69). Rather, Hargittai surmises a likely explanation still is that “most hardware, software, and web content is not created with disabled people in mind” (p. 67); and

- Disabled people have high rates of participation and engagement across various social media sites (p. 93) but continue to face barriers in technology use and access.

What is significant about Hargittai’s (2022) book is that it highlights how “long-term inequalities that decades of research has [sic] documented concerning widespread variations in people’s digital circumstances very much influenced circumstances during lockdown” (p. 125). In the course of the pandemic, such disparities could create greater isolation, putting populations at risk, and also lead to spread of misinformation. Hargittai provides important recommendations for organizations and service providers, especially about the crucial need to understand the digital technology use, preferences, and requirements of their diverse audiences with disabilities. As disability scholars, we also spotlight another recommendation that Hargittai makes in her conclusion—that disabled people’s struggles for accommodation and accessibility have paved the way for recognizing the kinds of possibilities that may emerge in both flexible and remote work arrangements.

As Hargittai advocates, while the pandemic has been officially declared over, we must continue to ensure that existing inequalities do not continue to be replicated. This will mean investment in addressing inequalities, and, crucially, investigating and understanding the evolving nature of digital inequalities for people with disabilities. This is especially the case given Hargittai’s (2022) resonant point that

the online experiences of disabled people are not as some may assume, because they are now online in large numbers in more active ways and with higher skills than before despite continued barriers that technologies pose. Nonetheless, they continue to have unmet technology needs that may pose barriers to their effective online participation. (p. 71)

Addressing inequalities, while requiring economic and design investments, will also require a fundamental shift in mindset to acknowledge the normative and ableist biases that may inhabit our worlds.

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