“Access, Media, and Equity in a (Post-)COVID World”
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Since the March cancellation of the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics and subsequent declaration of a national emergency, it has become a common refrain in Japanese news commentaries that the necessities of social distancing will instigate new technological innovations to recreate or even surpass the pleasures of the physical world once taken for granted pre-COVID.¹ Rhetorical references to impairment and disability continuously crop up in these discussions, whether in reference to human bodies, minds, or national economies.² In these discussions, the world of social distancing easily facilitates the acquisition of what I call virtual impairments. Virtual impairments include the physiological and psychological effects of isolation and increased screen usage apparent in what some outlets have named “Zoom fatigue.”³ But virtual impairments can also include the rhetorical conception that people are suffering from social isolation and in need of new assistive technologies. In this brief article, I use recent developments in Japan to ask what the appearance of pandemic-era technologies indicates for future media landscapes and social structures. I argue that in order to understand these landscapes, we must draw from disability studies scholarship on the history of assistive technologies and the lived experiences of persons with disabilities.

Just as the national emergency was being lifted in May, a Japanese business newspaper ran an article with the headline “Panasonic Sets Sights on a Post-Corona World, Refines Sports Assistive Technologies.”⁴ This article detailed a future in which “sports assistive technologies” include devices like the CheerPhone, a system of wrist sensors that transfer the cheers and screams of fans watching sports games at home to fans in a socially distanced stadium in order to alleviate the supposedly debilitating condition of watching a game in social isolation. Although it strives to connect people by delivering “wish(es) at a distance,” the CheerPhone relies on people staring at screens and listening to each other’s digitally filtered
voices through small speakers, much like many are doing now.\textsuperscript{5} Assistive technologies-to-be like the CheerPhone at once attempt to alleviate feelings of isolation while also doubling down on the online infrastructures and screen cultures integral to the virtual impairment that instigated its creation in the first place.

As Elizabeth Ellcessor points out, digital media always already have the potential to create new kinds of disabilities through “new interfaces, actions, and expectations for human bodies... and through the social pressures that increasingly construct the functional life to be the technologically competent life.”\textsuperscript{6} Ironically, in attempting to address virtual impairments, new assistive technologies will create and exacerbate impairments of their own, and the distribution and effects of these resultant impairments will likely reflect existing socio-economic, racial, and sexual inequities and disparities. The CheerPhone, for instance, will require users to connect over an app, share wrist sensors among one another, and later regroup to return the sensors to the original owner. This process may easily exclude people who cannot navigate the inaccessible infrastructures that still populate Japanese urban landscapes, people without a stable Internet connection and smartphone, and so on.

If the practical and theoretical implications of these new assistive technologies deserve our attention, we would do well to remember this is the sort of analysis that “traditional” assistive technologies have always deserved. Disability researchers and activists have been here all along, fighting to have their analyses, warnings, and demands taken seriously at the doorsteps of governments and academia alike. Without careful attention to disability studies concepts, an analysis of pandemic-era technologies could run the risk of reinforcing rhetorics of ableism and discrimination rather than critically examining them.\textsuperscript{7} Furthermore, as the pandemic goes on, we may observe virtual impairments serving as what Mara Mills calls the \textit{assistive pretext}, or the use of assistive technologies and persons with disabilities as a method to ultimately pursue more profitable ventures, such as increased surveillance or the mass adoption of proprietary formats.\textsuperscript{8} We have seen the assistive pretext at work before, like how telecommunications
researchers relied on the contributions of deaf persons only to exclude their needs from the technological end results. Persons with virtual impairments may serve the same purpose in the years to come. An understanding of the assistive pretext and other concepts from the study of disability technologies will be crucial in media analyses of the pandemic.

It may be argued that the frequent references to disability and impairment in wider discourse are opening the floodgates to ideas from disability studies enjoying the kind of larger interest I am advocating for. Concepts like “crip time,” for example, are now being addressed in popular publications, which often usefully talk about ways in which certain cultural notions from disability communities can contribute to other people’s emotional survival in pandemic times. But we must also not forget that for many persons with disabilities, “survival” has taken on new meanings: restricted access to essential technologies, absent interpreters and translators, and the threat of life-ending eugenic decisions by medical practitioners. As allusions to disability and impairment continue to be in the discursive spotlight, we must recognize the historical and continued erasure of the actual needs and societal contributions of persons with disabilities. In a time when people are coming to grips with restrictive lifestyles, disabled lives must no longer be the assistive pretext to improving the lives of everyone else.

Pandemic-era assistive technologies will not return social infrastructures to the way they were. We can instead use them to interrogate the social formations and socio-economic inequities they attempt to revive. All the while, we can rethink what mediation, access, and technology mean, and acknowledge the all-too hidden role assistive technologies and disability communities have played in building larger media infrastructures. Now that nobody can take access for granted, we would do well to remember Ellcessor’s observation that “disability upends universalism, requiring new, robust means of studying a mediated world in which media’s access, use, and meaning occur in diverse contexts and infinite variations.” The world post-COVID is wide open. By rethinking access from the ground up, we can come closer to equity for all.
1 For one example, see Michiaki Tanaka, “Why Microsoft’s Latest Technology Will Completely Change the “Post-Corona World,” Manē Gendai, April 4, 2020, https://gendai.ismedia.jp/articles/-/71280.

2 The Japan Times, for instance, has reported that local Japanese inns are adapting to the “crippled economy” by offering a virtual hot spring experiences in one’s own home. Alex Martin, “Getting the wheels back on Japan’s travel industry,” Japan Times, June 6, 2020, https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2020/06/06/travel/tourism-industry-coronavirus/.


Mills 2010, 52—53.


Ellcessor 2016, 3. Mara Mills and Jonathan Sterne 2017 make a similar observation while advocating for their concept of dismediation: “Dismediation centers disability and refuses universal models of media and communication. It begins from a presumption of communicative and medial difference and variety rather than seeing media as either the tools to repair a damaged or diminished condition of human communication, or themselves the cause of a fall from prior perfection,” 366.