Podfic: Cultural Accessibility Through Digital Community

Olivia Johnston Riley
University of Wisconsin–Madison, US

Abstract

As an audio recording of originally textual fanfiction, podfic has an implicitly, technically accessible nature for those with print impairments. In the course of twenty interviews with podfic listeners and creators, this project discovered that the podfic medium does not merely provide technical accessibility, but its supportive fan community creates rich cultural access with affective and participatory aspects. The paper argues that this accessibility can only be understood, valued, and replicated in other contexts by first disrupting calcified boundaries around the concepts of 'disability' and 'access'. This makes room for people with so-called 'invisible' disabilities such as chronic pain, mental illness, and neurodiversity, as well as those with other forms of intersecting marginalisation, such as on the basis of gender, class, and/or race, to understand their access needs within a framework of disability. Within this critical inclusive framework, the overlap between 'access' and 'convenience' in regard to digital media like podfic encourages coalition among variously marginalised and dis/abled fans. Further, podfic community conversations and norms based in strong emotional and creative ties lay the groundwork for long-term disability access support. Thus, podfic as a case study can theoretically and practically inform diverse digital communities' efforts to generate inclusive disability access.

Keywords: Disability, Accessibility, Podfic, Fandom, Community

Introduction

> I'd spend the entire month in the hospital and then [fly back to university, on
> the other side of the world.] So... that sense of loss and not belonging and
> homesickness... everything sort of was like one big pile of trash. And my only
> escape was fandom, and the only way I could access fandom at that point was
> podfic.
> – Shyamala, describing why she listens to podfic
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> I like telling a story for other people... [I like] the idea that somewhere on this
> planet, somebody is downloading a story from me... and listening to it, and it's
> making their day, cheering them up, just as they cheer me up when I listen to
> a podfic from somebody else...
> – Participant, describing why they make podfic

Fans have recorded, edited, and uploaded almost fifty thousand works of fanfiction read aloud—known as 'podfic'—to the highly popular fan-run website Archive of Our Own (AO3)[1]. Podfic is free and available to anyone with an internet connection, unlike mainstream commercial media. Therefore, as a free-to-listen audio version of a textual work, and specifically as a fan-made performance of a fan-written text, podfic is a uniquely digital and fannish access measure. Although the most 'obvious' group of disabled people podfic could provide access for are visually impaired fans, it can benefit a broad range of fans with various print impairments. A print impairment is when some aspect of reading physical or digital text—often requiring holding up an object and reading on a small and brightly lit screen—is inaccessible at some or all times. Consequently, podfic can provide access for those with sensory disabilities, chronic pain and illness, mental health issues like depression and anxiety, ADHD and dyslexia, and other neurodivergent experiences.

Podfic is more than just an interesting and relatively unique example of user-generated accessible media. Serving as a case study, podfic can theoretically and practically inform diverse digital communities' efforts to generate inclusive disability access. Disability access in fandom is not, as my interviewee Jesse the K pointed out, about 'budgets and legal requirements', as it might be when discussed in terms of public, institutional, organisational policy. Access instead has to be born of the central regulating force in fandom: community. Podfic is especially a community object because it is a palimpsest of creative labour from the source text to the fan writer to the fan performer and listener. This paper therefore asks: how does disability access change when viewed as a creative community project rather than a

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[1] Podfic is hosted and shared on many different sites, from SoundCloud to Dreamwidth to YouTube, but AO3 is a central repository for preservation and access and is the first stop of many fans when seeking new fanworks. Viewing the AO3 'podfic and podficced works' tag provides a useful overview of the overall number of podfics and recent additions to this archive:
https://archiveofourown.org/tags/Podfic%20*a*%20Podficced%20Works/works.

labour of undesirable regulatory compliance? Can podfic fandom offer tools for digital communities to shift their framing of disability accessibility from 'an individual chore, an unfortunate cost of having an unfortunate body, to a collective responsibility that's maybe even deeply joyful' (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018: 21)? This paper combines disability theory and interviews with podfic fans to imagine a broader horizon of accessibility within which we can find actionable answers to these questions.

To understand how podfic fandom can generate these insights, I bring together Ellcessor's (2016) theory of cultural accessibility with Schalk's (2013) theory of 'identifying with' disability in order to demonstrate the conceptual viability of community-generated access in online spaces. Twenty interviews conducted with podfic fans complement this theory with evidence from the population in question, describing the empirical—if incomplete—success of access measures in podfic fandom. Mobilising this theoretical framework and practical data, the paper will first explain how podfic exposes the need to expand conventional understandings of 'disability' and 'access' to include a broader spectrum of marginalised experience and more diverse array of access needs. This growth is necessary for improved digital accessibility as ideas of 'access' inevitably blur with 'preference' and 'convenience' in digital media. This blurring also supports politically valuable empathy and coalition in podfic fandom as it draws attention to the overlap between diversely positioned participants' needs and experiences. More than podfic's technical affordances, the medium's affective, participatory, and communal affordances are the strength of its community-generated accessibility. Overall, the podfic community's strong emotional and creative ties lay the groundwork for the long-term alliance among variously disabled and marginalised fans necessary for an online community to maintain the labour of generating accessibility. Schalk (2013) notes that it is impossible for any space to be accessible to all people at all times but emphasises that it is more important to centre the principle of access than halt efforts in the face of practical difficulty. Podfic fandom has the potential to be one of these imperfectly accessible yet resoundingly political spaces, and thereby act as a model for other online community accessibility efforts in the future.

Literature Review

Fan studies has long centred community as a key animating concept of the discipline, for instance, Jenkins' landmark *Textual Poachers* (1992/2012) mobilises ethnography to figure the fan as part of complex network of affectively and socially bonded people and practices. In Jenkins' field-shaping work, fan communities distinguish themselves from other communities based in identity or geography as they are formed through a shared affective bond over fannish content and practices, and especially with fandom's explosion online, they require no physical connection or shared social identity like sexuality or ethnicity to connect with community members. Scholarship on fannish gift cultures establishes how community forms the basis for fandom's reciprocal relationships as participants circulate fanworks and

affective support in a mutually beneficial and usually non-profit economy of social and emotional recompense for time and effort spent (Helleckson, 2015). Podfic fandom is specifically sonic, and its central dynamics naturally overlap with those of other sonic communities, such as music collectors and podcasters. Most prominently, sound is often framed as inherently more intimate than other mediums as the physical sensory interiority of sound absorption and the human voice produce intimacy effects which in turn trigger listener empathy and engagement (Spinelli and Dann, 2019). The responsibility to maintain social cohesion and give back to the larger group of fandom's digital community gift culture prepares members to willingly participate in producing disability access. Podfic fandom's sonic nature further generates intimacy which enhances the empathetic connection of its members. The intersection of fandom and sound therefore places podfic at an especially informative junction for the study of online accessibility as an effectively community-generated project.

In my past work on podfic, I argued that the medium and community are structurally queer, as participants listen to stories about queer characters, read by people whose own identity performance queerly mismatches those characters' gender and sexual identities, drawing queer lines of desire between digitally distant fan bodies (Riley, 2020). I build on that work here by examining disability as an intersecting axis of marginalisation. Fan studies' engagement with disability studies has been limited in breadth and depth. Coppa (2014: 75) claims that 'fandom has a high percentage of disabled participants, and is concerned with issues of accessibility'. However, she provides insufficient evidence to support this claim, which is itself in support of a deeply problematic defense of fandom's 'beauty' in light of criticism of fandom's racism and other structural issues. Ellcessor's (2018) work qualifies Coppa's assertion, pointing out that while some digital fan spaces centre accessibility (such as the site Dreamwidth) others provide access only to an extent, after which, access requests are framed as burdensome (she particularly criticises the oft-lauded AO3). Similarly, a journal special issue addressing the dearth of disability-fan-studies includes a critique of how fan writers often mobilise harmful tropes and stereotypes about disability (Duchastel de Montrouge, 2019) and reinforce ableist narratives and themes (Newman-Stille, 2019). This would seem to confirm that despite fandom's supposedly transformative and critical edge, many fan communities are ill equipped to grapple with ableist media representations (Kociemba, 2010). This intersects with other critiques of exclusions faced by fans who do not share the history, investments, or able body of the white, feminine, hetero-normate (Wanzo, 2015; Pande, 2018). Yet there are documented pockets of fandom and disabled fans who have worked to build accessible and inclusive spaces, such as when Leetal (2019) argues that the widespread embrace of content and trigger warnings in Tumblr media fandom functions as a form of disability activism via care work. This diversity of experiences demonstrates the fragmented nature of media fandom, which is not a singular community but a vast network of interconnected virtual and physical communities, each of which may develop their own relationship to feminist, queer, anti-racist, and anti-ableist work.

Fandom's in/accessibility must be understood in the context of the broader internet's history with disability. At the turn of the millennium, Goggin and Newell (2003) argued that despite the internet's revolutionary potential, the internet will not be truly accessible until disability is understood and respected as a marginalised identity, and access needs are consequently centred. Newer work such as Ellis and Kent's *Disability and New Media* (2011) and Jaeger's *Disability and the Internet* (2012) come to much the same conclusion. The homogeneity of these works shows how profoundly the history of 'digital disability' (Newell and Goggin, 2003) has been shaped by the limitations of the disability studies they are based in, namely, the work of almost exclusively white and physically disabled scholars working in the 1990s and 2000s. The perspectives of disabled people of color and people whose experiences and impairments are less 'apparent' or 'visible' (including mental illness, chronic pain, neurodiversity, and more) are critically lacking.

To combat these exclusions, I base my understanding of disability on Kafer's (2013) political-relational model. This model builds on the strengths of the social model of disability by centring the inaccessibility of structures and the value of disability as an identity. Simultaneously, this model preserves space for the complex lived experiences of disabled people, especially around the realities of pain and impairment that can come with disability. As such, this model is well suited to addressing so-called 'invisible' disabilities, including mental disabilities and chronic pain, which have been historically neglected in disability discourse and insufficiently provided for in terms of access measures (Price, 2015; Wendell, 2001). Further, Kafer's framing centres the intersectionality of disabled experience, especially along those lines where queer and femme experiences of marginalisation and privilege overlap and diverge (Samuels, 2003).

This understanding of disability requires a similarly critical and intersectional understanding of disability access. Accessibility in media technologies is usually ideologically and technologically constructed according to normative and often ableist medical models of disability (Hagood, 2017). Ellcessor's (2016) concept of 'cultural accessibility' better captures the broad range of experiences, contexts, and technologies involved in digital disability access. Cultural accessibility goes beyond merely fulfilling legal or technical requirements; it means providing access to the 'affective dimensions of digital media use' and minding 'individual, varied needs and the *quality* of experiences' (Ellcessor, 2016: 181). Cultural accessibility grows from the experiences and cultures of disabled people, rejecting a paradigm of 'tolerance' in favour of active, pleasurable, diverse inclusion of 'different bodies, knowledges, perspectives, and possibilities' (Ellcessor, 2016: 184). As Brown and Hollier (2015) note, the mainstream uptake of accessibility is not restrained by technological difficulties but driven by social factors, including 'limited awareness, disability stigma and a lack of empathy' for disabled users. It is, in other words, a social and community problem. Therefore, Ellcessor's work is critical because it asks whether, in the absence of strong government or commercial enforcement of accessibility standards, a community can produce access for itself, and further provides parameters with which to measure the success of these communal measures.

Consequently, this understanding of access as communal and cultural requires a framework for understanding disability 'community'. I mobilise Schalk's (2013) coalitional framework of identifying 'with' disability and crip experiences to help shape my theorising about the podfic community, a group my participant data indicates is populated significantly but not exclusively by disabled folks. Identifying 'with'—not as—a group is akin to but closer and more invested than allyship, allowing for the recognition of the amorphous, unstable nature of identity, especially in regard to disability. Schalk's framing is fundamentally intersectional, a useful evolution of the oft-cited disability axiom that we will all become disabled if we live long enough (Garland-Thomson, 1997). Instead of centring a potential future of sameness, identifying-with affords variously marginalised people the framework to explore the dis/connections of their current lived experiences, including both shared aspects of marginalisation and recognition of differing privileges. By conceptualising community through identifying-with, we can preserve the politically salient distinction between access needs (i.e. a blind fan who cannot access purely visual formats) and access preferences (i.e. a non-disabled commuter who would rather listen to a story than read it). At the same time, this model centres the productive space of overlap between these experiences, demonstrating humanity's universal need for access at different times and in different conditions. So, fat fans, neurodiverse fans, aging fans, fans with temporary illnesses or injuries, fans in quarantine who find their physical or emotional circumstances impairing—all of these groups share space with disability and indeed may be disabled in various circumstances, even if that identity is not one that they feel comfortable claiming.

Podfic's vocalisation of textual fanfic adds another way for fans to interact with these stories and with fandom, similarly to how captions on movies and transcripts of podcasts make these media more accessible by increasing the number of modes through which they can be accessed. Of course, audio works are not accessible to all, including Deaf fans, people with hearing impairments, and various neurodivergent folks, among others. Fortunately, textual fanfic already exists for those seeking visual/textual access modalities—this paper works from the assumption that podfic is accessible in part because it is a *companion* to this already extant original mode of visual/textual access. Podfic provides an additional dimension of accessibility addressing those whose preferences and needs were not met by the dominant textual/visual modality; it is to this latter group that this paper primarily attends. There is no such thing as a single, perfectly accessible media object, rather Ellcessor (2016) reminds us that access is an on-going process we undertake through a layered variety of media modes addressing diverse access needs. Podfic fandom demonstrates that through identifying-with, community-based disability access can be 'beautiful and practical' as variously disabled and non-disabled people commit to learning about and caring for each other (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018).

Methodology

This article is based on twenty interviews with podfic fans, both listeners and creators. Having been part of the podfic community for a number of years, I decided that the best venue to begin recruiting participants in was a private podfic Discord server of which I am a member. After reaching out on Discord, the call for participants then spread by word of mouth and via Twitter, resulting in more than 30 podficcers expressing interest, of which I ultimately interviewed 20. This snowball sample included participants diverse in terms of gender, age, geography, and ability, though all connected interpersonally through social networks of podfic fandom. The interview consisted of a one hour zoom call (mostly with video, though some preferred to keep their cameras off) during which we discussed the broader podfic community and medium before focusing explicitly on disability and access in podfic. This mode of discussion captured a broad range of experiences related to disability, including those that fans did not always initially recognise as part of a system and ideology of dis/ability. There is, of course, no singular podfic community but rather many different overlapping podfic communities. However, the fans I interviewed often used the phrase 'the podfic community' to indicate their experience of a loosely cohesive and bounded group of people, platforms, and practices which constitute their personal podfic fandom experiences. This paper uses the phrase 'podfic community' as shorthand to indicate the experiences of fandom community described by the sample of podfic creators and listeners (primarily Discord and AO3 users connected socially through these platforms) with whom I spoke and whose specific experiences this research reflects.

16 of my participants where white, 4 were non-white. The majority (15) were cis women; the remaining quarter identified as trans, non-binary, and gender-queer. However, many of these women used she/they pronouns, gesturing to a broader swath of non-binary experience not captured by the initial 'gender' question. Additionally, most of the participants (14) were queer (asexual, bisexual, pansexual, gay, and more) and 5 identified as straight. Slightly less than half were from the US; the rest were from many different countries and regions, including Germany, the UK, Hungary, India, and Mexico. 7 of the interviewees were non-native English speakers. The average participant age was 35, the youngest being 19 and the oldest 65.

Of particular interest are my participants' disability identities. The question 'do you identify as disabled?' garnered a range of responses, indeed, of my small battery of demographic questions this easily received the least straightforward answers. 6 of my interviewees identified as able-bodied or non-disabled. About 12 identified as disabled for various reasons, including print impairments, ADHD, mental illness, and chronic pain. The remainder were uncomfortable identifying as either able-bodied or disabled, expressing their ambivalence with claiming disability as a status or identity due to the severity, fluctuation, or type of non-normative bodymind they have, while also recognising that 'able' may or may not be a suitable identifier either. Participants were not required to have a disability identity or experience in order to be included in the study. However, the advertisement describing the

study topic included the phrase 'disability access', so there was possible self-selection bias as those with disability and/or accessibility experiences may have responded at higher rates than those without. This sampling did not aim to be a statistically random or representative sample of fans, but the fact that the significant majority of participants were disabled—alongside interviewees' anecdotal evidence that they know a lot of disabled podfic fans—does still indicate there may be a higher-than-average percentage of disabled folks in podfic fandom.

These fans' engaging, thoughtful, self-reflexive conversations about disability identity are exemplary of the collaborative origins of this paper's ideas. Each of my interviewees contributed to the growth of the concepts presented here, whether from generously sharing the personal details of their experiences with disability, the conversations they had had with other fans in the past on access and disability, or their own activist and scholarly expertise on these topics. Further, as the interviews went on, I was able to 'test out' ideas with my participants. Putting forward themes I saw emerging and sharing opinions my other interviewees had mentioned, I was able to trace both similar and divergent experiences. Podfic's status as the 'red-headed step-child' of fan works (a phrase no less than three of my interviewees independently employed, generally meaning something that is unwanted, disliked without reason, and badly treated) means podfic fans have been particularly motivated to theorise about their medium and community, in order to defend it against attack and to support each other in continuing their work. Fans have long discussed their communities and practices in extensive and reflexive meta-discourse known as 'meta', where this self-theorisation is shared among peers as developing textual conversations on fan sites like LiveJournal or Tumblr, and plays a key role in how fandom views itself over time (Busker, 2008). Consequently, many of my interviewees drew explicitly on this robust history of communal analysis meta in framing their responses. In order to honor their contributions to the study while also respecting their privacy, participants were given the option to either remain anonymous in the text or have quotes attributed to their real first name or chosen fan pseudonym.

Definition Demolition: Broadening the Scope of Disability and Access

The majority of my participants were disabled, and many of them shared a sense that podfic fandom has a great deal of disabled participants, more so than fandom at large. Further, several disabled and non-disabled participants noted that they had experience outside of fandom in building access, especially access via audio, meaning these fans were already attuned to a diversity of access needs and methods for creating access. Several explicitly noted that making their works accessible is very important to them since they feel that the point of participating in fandom is to share creative joy with others, and so if their works are not accessible, then that goal is moot. Thus, podfic fandom has significant roots in disability,

even though not all participants are disabled. To capture this shared community investment in access requires tracing networks of disability identification and coalition that go beyond static conceptions of disability as rooted in discrete types of bodies.

As disability studies continues to grapple with defining 'disability' and 'access', so too my interviewees evidenced a wide range of evolving perspectives. Some non-disabled fans first thought of 'obviously' disabled bodies (e.g. limited to experiences like blindness and wheelchair use) when we broached the topic of access. Many other fans, especially disabled ones or ones with professional experience providing access, started from more inclusive understandings of disability as a contextually contingent lived experience of ableist society in a nonnormative bodymind (including space for neurodivergence and chronic illness). No matter their positionality, all participants were open to hearing about other fans' experiences of disability and adjusting their understanding accordingly. For example, when we discussed disability access in fandom as potentially including accommodations for carpal tunnel or ADHD, several fans began to talk about how podfic provided more types of access than they had initially thought. Some considered how podfic might be assisting their own access needs, though they did not usually conceptualise their engagement with the medium in that way. Additionally, several participants already understood podfic as part of their personal system of media access measures.

As noted above, some fans were hesitant to describe their own access needs as such, particularly in regard to calling them 'disability' access needs. They framed these access concerns as more about convenience or preference since they were still technically capable of consuming textual fic. Several of my interviewees wondered if their experiences of chronic pain would 'count' as a disability, or if identifying as disabled because of a bodymind experience like executive dysfunction would mean they were 'taking up space' not meant for them. Although such statements could indicate a degree of internalised ableism (i.e. not wanting to take on a stigmatised identity), more salient was a caution in claiming undue marginalisation and awareness of their intersectional axes of privilege. These fans who did not recognise themselves within typical definitions of 'disabled' were cautious of causing harm through appropriation of disability language or resources. However, these fans' 'preferences' can be usefully understood within a paradigm of access. After all, if a medium is uncomfortable, painful, or exhausting to consume, then it is not genuinely accessible for that person.

This broad and intersectional view allows us to see how many people—especially women and non-binary folks whose language in these interviews demonstrated a tendency to downplay their own experiences of pain and inconvenience—have access needs that are going unmet, often because they do not feel comfortable claiming them as 'needs' or as related to disability. For example, many of my interviewees noted how experiences like day-to-day exhaustion may lead them to find audio a more preferable medium than text. They may be exhausted for disability reasons (ex. chronic pain), class-related reasons (ex. working multiple jobs), gender-related reasons (ex. all-day caring for children and housework), and so on. Rather than fruitlessly trying to disentangle each of these individual causes from one

another, we can use 'access' as an intersectional framework through which to address the multiplicity of these experiences. Therefore, podfic is rooted in disability and access in Schalk's intersectional sense of 'with'. Not all podficcers are disabled, but many are, and even those not (yet) claiming that identity can and do work to make it a more accessible space to the benefit of all. Disrupting calcified boundaries around disability and access in this way allows both concepts to productively expand. Particularly, this highlights the political utility of embracing the overlap between media access needs and convenient modes of accessing media.

Convenient Access and Accessing Convenience

> I'm opening my audience of people who can consume my work…and not even [just] for people with disabilities! Able-bodied people [who] just wanna listen while they're vacuuming…
> – Participant, about recording podfic of her own fic

Preference and convenience are always already a part of access conversations, as able-bodied people and institutions cite inconvenience or displeasure as reasons not to provide disability access (Williamson, 2019). Further, *digital* disability access especially becomes blurred and ultimately inextricable from matters of 'usability', as new technologies both create and solve new problems of access and ease of use (Ellcessor, 2015). As my first interviewee Kristina noted regarding modern internet trends, increased stylisation creates issues that are 'not even about accessibility, just readability/comprehension', but which nonetheless have outsized impacts on disabled users and which often require access measures to fix. Indeed, one of the most dominant themes to emerge from my interviews was the blurring of 'access' with convenience and/or preference.

Several interviewees demonstrated the overlap between 'access' and 'convenience' by mobilising language from both categories in the same sentence. For example, Erika said, 'I have dyslexia, but not that bad…so while I don't have accessibility issues related to accessing the words written down, I am grateful that I can change modes to listening when I'm walking away from the screen.' Erika carefully parsed her own experience along lines of disability and convenience or preference, though this separation may not be necessary or even possible. The ideology of ability is what makes this bifurcation thinkable and natural, as the actual lived experience of a disability like dyslexia and run-of-the-mill exhaustion can be mutually constitutive if not indistinguishable. Exhaustion may increase a dyslexic person's difficulty with understanding text, and conversely, struggling to read a text may produce exhaustion. In either case, this person may require access measures to consume a text comfortably. Similarly, a non-disabled person experiencing temporary illness or injury may find themselves with temporary access needs, while a person with chronic pain may only have episodic access needs during flare-ups. Our understanding of access must be as flexible as people's

experiences. That is, not limited by normative temporality, degree of severity, or singular relation to a bodily condition. Such a narrow understanding of access not only restricts podfic's accessible potential but marginalises fans' varied and often unrecognised and unmet access needs.

For example, the physical and psychological toll of excess screen-time especially during COVID quarantine means that fans may turn to podfic since, as one of my interviewees argued, 'it provides a way for people to enjoy fandom that doesn't mean they have to sit there with a computer or whatever in their face'. Another participant pointed out how digital access and usability also overlap along classed lines, explaining how alt text on images can help those dealing with a digital divide in internet quality navigate online content even when large visual files do not load. One podficcer described receiving a deeply moving comment about motherhood and access: 'this woman was saying "I just had a baby and I thought I would lose fanfiction forever, but here you are making these stories [that she could listen to while caring for her child] …you've given me back fanfic"'. Thus, we see that broad conceptions of disability and access as intersecting with convenience produce positive externalities that both encourage the spread of disability access and assist folks marginalised along other axes, such as class and gender.

Additionally, true cultural access means considering convenience and comfort for disabled people. Many access measures are rendered uncomfortable and inconvenient, such as wheelchair accessible entrances that are jammed onto the unpleasant and even unsafe back ends and basements of buildings (Williamson, 2019). Access should take into account not just whether a disabled person *can* participate but whether the positive *quality* of their experience is comparable to an able-bodied person's experience (Ellcessor, 2016; Kafer, 2013). As my participant Erika explained, normalising access reduces disclosure labour on the part of disabled fans, who no longer have to self-advocate and ask for accessible formats, 'they can just prefer it'. Further, this can be a path towards a person recognising their own access needs and exploring the possibility of identifying as disabled. After all, a fan describing podfic as 'preferable' because of chronic migraines may be describing what another fan would call 'access'.

Avoiding the Pitfalls of Universal Design

The blur of access and convenience has been recognised before, especially in terms of motivating the actual, practical deployment of access measures. For example, the history of curb-cuts demonstrate that access measures are more readily provided when they are useful to 'all members of society, not just those that specifically rely on them' (Brown and Hollier, 2015). That is, when the linkage between specific disability accessibility and more generic usability is made clear. However, as the phrasing 'all members of society' may indicate, this elision of need with preference can de-centre disability-specific needs and access, especially when it comes in the form of universal design. Disabled designers and activists originated universal design (UD), encouraging designs usable for the 'greatest extent possible by all

people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability' (NDA, 2024). The idea of 'regardless' in UD's uptake disrupted the critical intent of the concept, as design should and must centre disabled people in its 'regard', rather than leaving them at the margin. As Hamraie (2016) argues, the mainstreamed version of universal design has effaced disability, access, and disabled activism by both ideologically and materially re-centring the able-bodied normate. Modern UD supports a depoliticised 'post-disability' narrative, in parallel to the sexist and racist effects of 'post-feminist' and 'post-racial' thought. Citing UD in design efforts has become a placating placebo replacing actual attention to and efforts to address access issues. Thus, the cost of UD's popular uptake has been the re-marginalisation of disability.

Hamraie concludes by imagining a new, 'disabled' form of universal design that would 'treat disabled users as valuable knowers and experts, understand accessibility as an aesthetic and functional resource, and foreground the political, cultural, and social value of disability embodiments' (2016: 20). This is cultural accessibility. Cultural accessibility must also be careful not to centre its benefits to a disability-absent 'everyone' at the expense of disabled people. The blur of convenience/access can be a fair-weather partnership: when an access measure is perceived as causing more inconvenience than it alleviates, this alliance may fail. However, key to UD's dilution has been its purposeful distancing from the ideas of access and barriers—by centring these concepts through cultural accessibility, the danger can be avoided. If willing to commit to critical self-reflection and sharing the labor of access creation, disabled and non-disabled people can embrace the blurring of convenience/access and dis/ability without only prioritising those access measures that also benefit able-bodied people.

Specifically, celebrating widespread convenience in accessible design within a framework of cultural access can lead to greater discussion and consciousness of specifically disability-related needs and preferences. For example, many of my interviewees who create podfic said that they like the idea that their art might provide access to, say, a blind person, but have received more direct feedback regarding their podfic being helpful to people who want to multitask while commuting or doing chores. I offered the idea that there might be a connection between a stay-at-home-parent using podfic to access fandom while doing housework and a chronically ill person similarly using podfic to access fandom in a more convenient format. Many fans exhibited interest in this experiential overlap and began to offer similar examples of how they have heard people talk about podfic's diverse utility. So, while many disabled fans discover podfic's accessible dimensions in the course of navigating their own lives and access needs, for non-disabled fans, noticing podfic's convenience can be a useful way to find commonality between their experience and a disabled fan's access requirements. Other fan and non-fan online communities could follow in podfic's footsteps, using the blur of access and convenience as an opportunity to discuss the state of accessibility in their digital space, to recognise their own in/attentiveness to access, and plan measures to address inconvenient and inaccessible aspects of their online community.

Components of Cultural Access: Affect, Participation, and Community

The broadened parameters for disability and access established by my interviewees renders a more inclusive range of sites of cultural accessibility apparent. Particularly, podfic provides access to the emotional aspects of fanfiction, to the pleasure of creative production and participation in fandom, and to a diverse community of supportive fellow creators. Investigating these tenets of cultural access both highlights the joyful nature of community access and draws attention to those areas that may be neglected within more rigid definitions of digital access.

Affective Access

> There are some podficcers who are so good at vocal performances, oh my god, they make you *feel* those stories!
> – Participant describing the affective dimension of podfic listening

Podfic does not just provide audio access to textual fanfiction; it also produces access to the affective dimensions of fanfiction. That is, although a fan could use text-to-speech (TTS) to listen to fanfiction, my participant argentumlupine pointed out that the human performance of podfic goes beyond mere conveyance of words to provide fans with an 'emotional connection' with the story. Especially in years past, TTS was highly robotic, emotionless, and unreliable in its accuracy. Several of my interviewees who use TTS in their day-to-day lives noted that podfic's more human, emotive, textured performance—as well as its greater accuracy due to a reader's familiarity with text- or genre-specific terms—can provide a different and often more pleasurable experience than TTS. Jesse the K also noted that getting comfortable using such tools as TTS and listening to synthesised speech is a process with a learning curve that takes time, so podfic provides 'double the fannish fun' by affording affective access and smoothing the transition to TTS.

This emotion is not simply a 'plus' for podfic, it is essential to its role as access. Podfic must be entertaining to listen to and have the capacity to generate emotion in order to provide access to the full emotional experience of reading fic. Podfic listeners discussed crying and laughing to podfic; Erika described enjoying 'that verklempt heart clench', that feeling of 'sitting around a campfire' and sharing funny tales in the company of the storyteller. Jesse the K reflected on her experience in both podfic and professionally recording audio for access purposes, noting that: 'No podfic that I've ever heard has been like the educational narration that I've done, where the reader tries to "get out of the way"…what's wonderful about podfic is it ain't that!' Podfic doesn't mechanically reproduce the original story; it creates new layers of emotion and interpretation. 'Access', then, can go beyond replicating an experience in a new medium, it can centre the artistry of access itself. It shows in relief how access is often perceived of as secondary, as an alternative to a preferable original, and it disrupts this logic

by creating a unique emotional and artistic experience that is born precisely of the creation of access.

Participatory Access

Transformative media fandom has historically been hailed as participatory (Jenkins, 1992/2012), but who can actually participate? Writing English-language textual fanfiction has been the hallmark of fannish participation, and yet for those whose first language is not English, who are exhausted by long days of writing for work, and/or who are living with various disabilities, the physical and psychological act of writing may be difficult or impossible. Other fan modes of engagement like drawing or vidding may be too stressful, time-consuming, or technically demanding. Additionally, some fans talk about how they used to participate via these other fannish modes, but have since stopped due to changing life circumstances, including disability. Consequently, many of my interviewees described themselves as being or having been 'lurkers', that is, consuming fan content but not interacting with other fans. This left some of them feeling sad, with the sense that they could not participate because they did not have the requisite skills, or that they could no longer enjoy participation as they used to—until they discovered podfic. Many of my interviewees named podfic as the way they feel most able or comfortable participating in fandom, since it does not (necessarily) require a great deal of energy, looking at a screen, or writing in English.

This is not the first time an audio medium has been hailed as a participatory boon: podcasting has often been called a democratising medium due to its low technical barriers to entry, e.g. the ubiquity of cheap recording equipment and audio editing software (Sterne et al., 2008). However, scholars and activists have been quick to criticise this as an all-encompassing assumption, pointing out how digital media are not inherently liberatory but often prone to replicating neoliberal, racist, sexist, homophobic logics (Florini, 2017). Especially as podcasting has so rapidly commercialised, it evidences familiar structurally inequitable demands that this novel audio content be salable to the broadest audience, thereby discouraging potentially fractious, genuinely critical political content (Hogan, 2008). Podfic shares the comparatively low technical barriers to entry of podcasting, but in the context of a non-commercial, women- and queer-centric community of largely supportive creators. This is not to say that podfic fandom is a utopia, as it is still embedded in broader normatively white fandom structures (Pande, 2018). Some participants had experienced fan authors responding negatively to podficcers' requests to record their stories, viewing it as an imposition or even as a kind of plagiarism. Not all fans' voices may be equally welcomed in podfic, as some of my participants wondered if their accented English, stutter, or feminine tonality (in contrast to reading predominantly male characters) might discourage listeners from engaging with their works. None reported explicitly encountering pushback against their voices, characterising their feelings more as internal, personal anxieties, but their existence nonetheless gestures to lingering structural racist, sexist, and ableist voice bias. However, the general consensus that 'everyone's voice is welcome' in podfic does indicate that these

participants value *perceiving* their medium and community as accepting of diverse voices—a step towards rejecting inequitable demands for compliance with limiting vocal norms.

Podfic's relatively low barriers to entry (as characterised by my participants) and supportive community provide an additional way for fans to 'access' creativity and participation, alongside existing fannish modalities such as writing. The majority of my interviewees took the time to note that anyone with a phone and an internet connection can create and share podfic and become part of this community, characterising podfic circles as welcoming of novices. In contrast to the dominant Western capitalist culture of aspirational professionalised hobbies, podfic's low-commitment amateur engagement and welcoming of purposefully unpolished content with extremely narrow audience appeal provides a welcome reprieve to normative demands for perfection, popularity, and profitability (Duffy, 2017). Regarding potential barriers of minimal technological and performance experience, blackglass said, 'that's something that we always tell the new podficcers: Whatever you make, there is an audience for you, there's someone out there that will love what you make'.

Podfic is also a way to access a specific form of participation: embodied artistic performance. Many podfic fans enjoy performance in general, such as singing, theatre, playing a music instrument, open-mic-nights, voice acting, recording pro audiobooks, and so on. However, these venues of performance can be physically inaccessible (too loud, too far away from home, not architecturally welcoming of mobility devices, etc.) and opportunities to perform may be few and far between (professional recording circles, for example, often have sexist/racist/American-centric norms restricting variously marginalised folks from participating). blackglass described podfic as a low-cost way to 'work those performing muscles' without the 'pressure to be perfect'. Podfic is a way to exercise these embodied performance skills without revealing one's face, body, or entire identity. Several of my interviewees noted that they feel safer and more comfortable in audio than visual mediums. Although my interviewees did not make this link explicitly, this indicates that podfic's auditory nature and community of women/queer/disabled folks can (partially) protect its participants from feeling vulnerable or unsafe as they might in mainstream (sexist, homophobic, racist, ableist) physical performance spaces.

Accessing Community
One participant laughed as she told me, 'I'm like 50 years old, people aren't telling me stories anymore!' Podfic fandom changes that. The majority of my participants cite this community connection as key to their enjoyment of podfic. In response to my observation of this, Jesse the K agreed that 'especially since the 'Rona [COVID-19] I don't have much face to face opportunity. And so, it's nice to have a voice talking to me, so it feels like I'm in a more slightly more social space'. It is notable that this seems similar to both historical work (Spigel, 1992) and newer digital work (Ellis and Kent, 2011) describing media's potential to give 'home-bound' disabled people access to sociality. It is important to be highly cautious of engaging with this argument as it has historically been mobilised to ableist ends, framing disabled

people's lives as inherently lonely and therefore eliding the structural problem of physical and social barriers to full disabled participation in public life. I would also nuance this to say that most media have the potential to give all people—disabled or not—a sense of social connection. Podfic's strength lies not in the generic para-sociality of media consumption but in the particular closeness offered by the medium and community. Podfic is very 'human', as Jesse the K said. It is not produced en masse by commercial entities; many participants valued how podfic provides opportunities for actual access to creators, not just mainstream media's typically one-way street of reception, or even fanfiction's purely textual comments-and-replies with an author.

Podfic fandom allows fans access to community they may not otherwise have, especially a community of queer and disabled women and non-binary folks who are supportive of one another's creative endeavours. As blackglass noted, 'it's been so invigorating…like I said I was such a lurker [laughter] before I was doing podfic, and I didn't really feel connected to any kind of fannish community and podfic has…opened up my world so much'. Even if a fan does not have the energy or desire to actively talk to others, being part of the podfic community through sharing works or following podficcers on social media can make them feel engaged and included. Similarly, several neurodivergent and chronically ill podfic fans noted that the medium and community allow for very useful control over degrees of social interaction, from simply providing companionable background noise for a listener as they clean their apartment or rest through an episode of fatigue, to sparking friendship between listener and creator. For example, one fan talked about listening to podfic during times of stress because 'it's like, I need somebody to talk to me but not perceive me!' For her in that moment, she needed a meaningful one-way connection that was 'calming, nice, soothing', but not demanding anything of her in return. Podfic could provide that, and in a queer and disability friendly fannish context.

How the Access Gets Made: Conversation, Care, and Community Norms

Podfic creation and community provide for many facets of cultural access, as demonstrated in the previous section. This disability access is an on-going process, not a destination (Ellcessor, 2016). Further, within the dominant ideology of compulsory able-bodiedness (McRuer, 2006), access needs—especially those for 'invisible' disabilities—often go unrecognised and unaided. Therefore, key to providing access is ensuring that conversations about the vast diversity of disability experiences and access needs flourish in the long-term. In these interviews, the most commonly mentioned method for supporting access was recurrent conversation around disability that helped develop access-centric community norms. The majority perception among participants was that if fans expressed an access need clearly, and both the need and how to accommodate for it were widely understood, then podfic fandom was very receptive to making change. One fan said that in her experience,

podfic community was 'one of the early adopters of "hey, let's take this time [especially the summer of 2020] to take a look at what we're doing and make sure we're making podfic accessible and representative of more people—let's have a conversation"'.

Long-time fan, disabled person, and access advocate Jesse the K also felt 'that there's been more discussion of disability in fandom…not necessarily an explosion in consciousness', but increased conversation. In some cases, however, conversation was not enough to effect change. For example, she recalled negative reception to her push a number of years ago for access via the vocal inclusion of metadata (author name, posting date, content tags, etc.) in podfic. The recitation of metadata was especially important for accessing that essential information before the rise of AO3, she noted, which tends to make such information more accessible. Unfortunately, this access need was not widely perceived as significant, and some fans essentially replied to her call with the complaint that, 'it's too much work and it's boring!' This demonstrates an important limitation to the power of conversation: when the access need is expressed by a small number of people, or its accommodation seems too large a demand on podficcers' time and labour, then it may be silenced.

However, Jesse the K and other disabled fans found more success in a later campaign to instate community access conventions around having music and music-free versions of podfic. Many non-disabled fans were unaware that having music or sound effects played at the same time as story narration could render the podfic inaccessible to those with auditory processing disabilities. Fan access advocates shared this information and asked that podficcers offer both music and music-free versions or simply avoid music and SFX, where possible. Most of my interviewees agreed that this has since become community-held 'best practices', where much newly produced podfic models this choice and how-to guides encourage new podficcers to take this access need into account, thus structurally encouraging access. This is another example of the utility of the blur between convenience and access, as both disabled and non-disabled fans may prefer to listen to podfic without music for various reasons. On the one hand, some people simply do not care for music on an artistic level, on the other, correctly modulating the level of music with the narration so neither is overwhelmingly loud can be technologically tricky, resulting in podfic that is inaccessible for technical rather than disability-related reasons. Rather than having to separate these intersecting issues, the community norm of multiple versions provides for a variety of access needs and creative tastes.

Affective connection drives these access successes of podfic fandom. Although any fandom by definition includes some level of social attachment, many podfic fans noted that the auditory nature of their medium and the especially tight-knit bonds of their community made them feel significantly closer to each other than to non-podfic fans. A number of podfic listeners mentioned the sense of 'trust' they developed with particular podficcers, not necessarily because they knew or interacted with them directly, but because they had demonstrated a similarity in taste and interpretation of character and story. On the creation side, several podficcers said that the thought of giving podfic as a gift to either individual friends or the community at large motivates their work. In contrast to the disappointing

pushback that she had received earlier regarding reading metadata aloud, Jesse the K recalled the success of advocating for music-free podfic options and how she was 'very pleased to see that some people actually make *both* [versions]…which blows me away'. She was touched by the care demonstrated in podficcers' willingness to engage in the labour of not just sharing their art but producing multiple iterations to accommodate various access needs and creative preferences. This framing of kindness and care cropped up over and over in these interviews, not in paternalising or charitable ways, but in terms of friendship and mutual benefit.

One particularly specific, concrete, and transportable finding from this study of podfic communities and access is the importance of making the production of accessible media an easy and accessible choice in itself. Disabled people often have to make their own access, an exhausting demand by ableist structures on their time and energy (Ellcessor, 2016). Therefore, in a disability-led community accessibility effort, producing access must not be an oppressively difficult or isolating, individualised task to undertake. Further, making access the route of least resistance renders its mainstream uptake a far easier sell to those not invested in equity. However, making access a simple, ready, natural community choice rather than a hidden task for individuals requiring effort to unearth and execute demands significant structural supports. Podfic community demonstrates how the cultivation of shared tools, skills, and resources for accessible media production are key to making access more of an automatic process than an undesirable and skippable option.

To integrate accessibility into a community's norms first requires receptivity to the idea: many of my interviewees described podfic as a particularly open and supportive community where members were always happy to talk to newcomers about the medium and how to participate. Podficcers share digital how-to documents and recordings, walking through everything from general steps for recording your first podfic to detailed guides on how to do specific complicated technological tasks like using CSS to style the appearance of a podfic in AO3's interface. These communities maintain Discord server(s) (there are no doubt many different private podfic-focused servers of varying size, but there is one particularly popular server often colloquially referred to as 'the' podfic Discord with almost a thousand members, hundreds of whom are online at any given time) where podficcers new and old can join in and ask and answer questions in relevant channels about anything and everything, from software troubleshooting to advice on how to interpret a written story element verbally. These online spaces centrally gather and organise podfic resources, making them easy to find and cushioned in a supportive environment that does not shame participants for what they do not know, but rather frames the act of sharing information as a runway to greater friendship among established and early participants. The development and distribution of these community resources illuminates how making the art of podficcing accessible (taking a potentially difficult technological and creative process and smoothing the way with resources and social support) in turn encourages accessible podfic (ensuring it is not intensely laborious or complicated to follow additional accessible standards such as having non-music versions).

Conclusion

> I was having a mental health crisis and listening to this one podficcer who had this epic 120,000 word thing, and I would listen to her in the middle of the night when I had insomnia, and…it literally saved my sanity.
> – Jesse the K

The podfic community is a living experiment in online community-based cultural access. The podfic listeners and creators who spoke with me have had overwhelmingly positive and supportive experiences of podfic community. Podfic has been no less than life-changing for many participants: it is where they have developed confidence in their creativity, found emotional support in challenging times, and even fallen in love with a person who became their life partner. These specific social experiences of podfic community may be unique, indexing the value of studying this particular community on its own merits, but the broader structure of community-based access that it forwards can speak to other online communities interested and willing to invest in digital disability accessibility. This paper has explained how podfic community proves the viability of disability access as distributed community responsibility. When a community incorporates access centrally into its structural and social norms, when access labor is shared equitably among members, when conversations about maintaining and improving ongoing access are regularly encouraged, then online spaces can and do produce significant forms of cultural accessibility.

However, the tangled threads obscured on the back of this paper's tapestry were podfic fandom's less accessible aspects: fan reluctance to provide labour beyond a certain point or in certain circumstances, the centring of certain kinds of disabled experiences and the marginalising of others, and the occasionally binary conception of disability access and podfic artistry as opposed. Extended meditation on such issues lies outside the scope of this article. I set these parameters because podfic fandom's ableism is predictable and uninteresting (for instance, using familiar harmful language describing accessibility efforts as a 'burden' on 'normal fans') but its *responses* to ableism are informative and galvanising. Other disability scholars have well explained the typical forms of ableism occasionally mentioned by my interviewees (for instance, Ellcessor's 2016 book dives deeply into disabled online users' dealings with digital inaccessibility); this paper was instead oriented towards explaining what podfic fandom can offer to help other online communities structurally address and reduce ableism. Yet, these moments of fandom inaccessibility and ableism serve as a reminder that for all the disabled joy my participants and I found during the course of our conversations, the tools unearthed in this analysis have only one foot in practical deployment and the other in utopic hope. A totally accessible fandom is still a fantasy, but one well worth doing the work to imagine. Future scholarship should interrogate podfic accessibility further, exploring how podfic-as-access could be alternately understood through frameworks such as the figure of the critical killjoy (à la Ahmed, 2010 and Pande, 2018) or as a form of radical kindness. Further, this paper could only gesture to the intersections of

disability with other marginalised experiences such as race and sexuality. More work remains, such as investigating how podfic can be a learning tool for non-native English speakers, a welcoming space for older fans compared to much of fandom's youth-centrism, and an artistic community with unique aesthetic practices.

What this current study demonstrated was how the sense of trust, connection, and participation generated in podfic community creates the groundwork of care required to support the work of making and maintaining access. Within the context of this community connection, the blurring of access needs with access preferences means that fans of all kinds can benefit from podfic's accessible traits, resulting in wider community support for disability access, while not marginalising the particularly salient access needs of disabled fans. Concomitantly, access work is not the sole burden of disabled fans, but instead a shared labour undertaken across a community. This access includes affective, participatory, and communal dimensions, providing a rich and qualitatively equitable experience of fandom for variously dis/abled fans. Cultural access is always specific to its context and community, however, this study's findings are generalisable in their underlying tenets. Affective connection across diverse identities, sociality based in shared creative investment, and the power of conversation to effect change through consciousness raising and the spread of practical knowledge are all aspects of community-generated access that can be found and supported in other online spaces. This paper establishes the viability of producing imperfect yet meaningful access through online community based not just in shared identity but in shared love and care.

Biographical Note

Olivia Johnston Riley is a graduate student in Media & Cultural Studies in the Department of Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her research interests include fan and fandom studies, particularly in regard to disability and queerness as marginalized identities.

Contact: ojriley@wisc.edu

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