

# The Coloniality of Accessibility Links

## From Universal Design to a Decolonial Model of (Dis)ability

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**Abstract**—Accessibility links are an established tool for the digital inclusion of users with disabilities. In this paper, the theoretical lens of coloniality is employed to problematise the role of accessibility links as potentially contributing to entrenching offline classifications and hierarchies, leading to a separate and sometimes inferior user experience. Practical examples are used to highlight three key issues. In conclusion, there is an argument for the need for a decolonial model, to be developed in a dedicated future publication.

**Keywords**- coloniality; (dis)ability; accessibility links; universal design; digital inclusion.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Within decolonial scholarship, the term coloniality refers to the persistent legacy of marginalisation, oppression and exploitation of former colonial subjects long after the end of historical colonialism. Originally coined by Peruvian Sociologist Annibal Quijano to problematise global power relationships [1], uses of the term have been extended to explore issues of race [2], gender [3], citizenship [4] and others, including disability [5][6]. It should be noted that, unlike other terms, the latter does not refer to a dimension of diversity encompassing both privileged and disadvantaged categories (e.g., males and females with regard to gender), but rather signal a deviation from the "norm" [7]. For this reason, wordings such as (dis)ability are preferable. In this paper, I reflect on accessibility links to highlight how coloniality of (dis)ability is reproduced in the online domain. While extensive literature in the field of Human-Computer Interactions exists concerning the inclusion of people with disabilities [8], questions remain as to *how* such users are included. In advancing a decolonial perspective, I highlight the persistent legacy of accessibility as an afterthought, best effort and accommodation rather than truly empowering and liberating. In this paper, I discuss the link between accessibility and coloniality and highlight three key issues.

### II. ACCESSIBILITY LINKS AND COLONIALITY

Accessibility links are links, often found at the very top of a Web page, which redirect a user with a disability to a specific section, to additional information or to a more accessible version of the page. If not explicitly mandated,

they are strongly recommended as an expression of adherence to sound and inclusive design principles [8]. Accessibility links reflect established theoretical understandings of disability [9]. In terms of the medical model, they can be understood as a remedial strategy to provide impaired users with a minimal level of functionality. In terms of the social model, they can be understood as an attempt to remove barriers to access and enable digital inclusion. The latter approach is informed by the principle of universal access by design, i.e., as is the case with new buildings in many western countries [10], Web pages should be conceptualised keeping the needs of a wide range of diverse users in mind and avoid reproducing social forms of discrimination. Both models fail to tackle the existence of (dis)ability as a discrete category or, for that matter, a hierarchical relationship between able and (dis)abled persons, key concerns in decolonial scholarship [11]. Consistent with a critique of the rights-based approach as a form of coloniality [12], formal compliance with accessibility principles does not ensure and may in fact hamper an equitable user experience. Accessibility links represent an example of how artefacts often designed by and for able bodies remain the product of oversimplifications based on formalised users and use scenarios which cannot capture the complexity and nuances of the disability experience in real life. Focusing on a set of purposively selected Web pages, I advocate for a decolonial model of disability by highlighting three issues inherent to current approaches.

### III. ISSUES WITH ACCESSIBILITY

The first issue explored in this study is that accessibility links do not always work. Whether this is due to technical problems (e.g., browser compatibility) or human factors (e.g., oversight or non-implementation), accessibility solutions need to be reliable in order to be effective. Taking [13] as an example, even an association with a progressive and inclusive digital media focus can feature a broken "skip to main content" link as tested with Firefox on Ubuntu Linux 20.04.

The second issue concerns quality of experience. Reduced functionality or lack of some key features seems to be considered an acceptable trade-off in the case of users

with disabilities. While the provision of alternative and simplified versions of inaccessible webpages seems somewhat dated [14][15], even a health-focused website such as [16] admits to some parts of its site being inaccessible.

The third issue is that accessibility features often entail additional work on the part of the user, e.g., familiarising oneself with page or service-specific features like shortcuts, screen readers, navigation strategies etc., or providing feedback and suggestions for improvement. The most popular website in the world, Google.com, provides an example. Apart from a (functioning) "skip to main content", the other two accessibility links point to separate "accessibility help" and "accessibility feedback" pages. A very rough but conservative estimate based on the number of unique users and percentage of screen reader users in the US, Walsh and Steele [17][18] suggest that potential users could spend a combined 3 million hours or more just to read the help page. Waste of time is recognised as one of the main sources of frustration for screen reader users [19]. While Fuchs [20] recognises free digital labour as a form of capitalist exploitation, Couldry and Mejias [21] highlight the asymmetric and coercive character of digital power relationships as a new form of colonialism.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In summary, though no doubt useful and informed by noble intentions, in some cases, accessibility links reflect power relationships and world views shaped by coloniality in three fundamental ways. Firstly, decisions remain firmly in the hands of people without disabilities with relatively little recourse. Secondly, inclusion is achieved through a separate and often inferior experience. Thirdly, an additional burden in terms of limited features, frustration and extra learning is normalised for people with disabilities. While an exhaustive articulation of a decolonial model of digital inclusion goes beyond the scope of the present paper, it is important to problematise accessibility links as potential contributors to users with disabilities' permanent state of dependency, ghettoisation and suffering, which are the hallmarks of the Global South as a shared subaltern condition rather than a geographical entity.

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