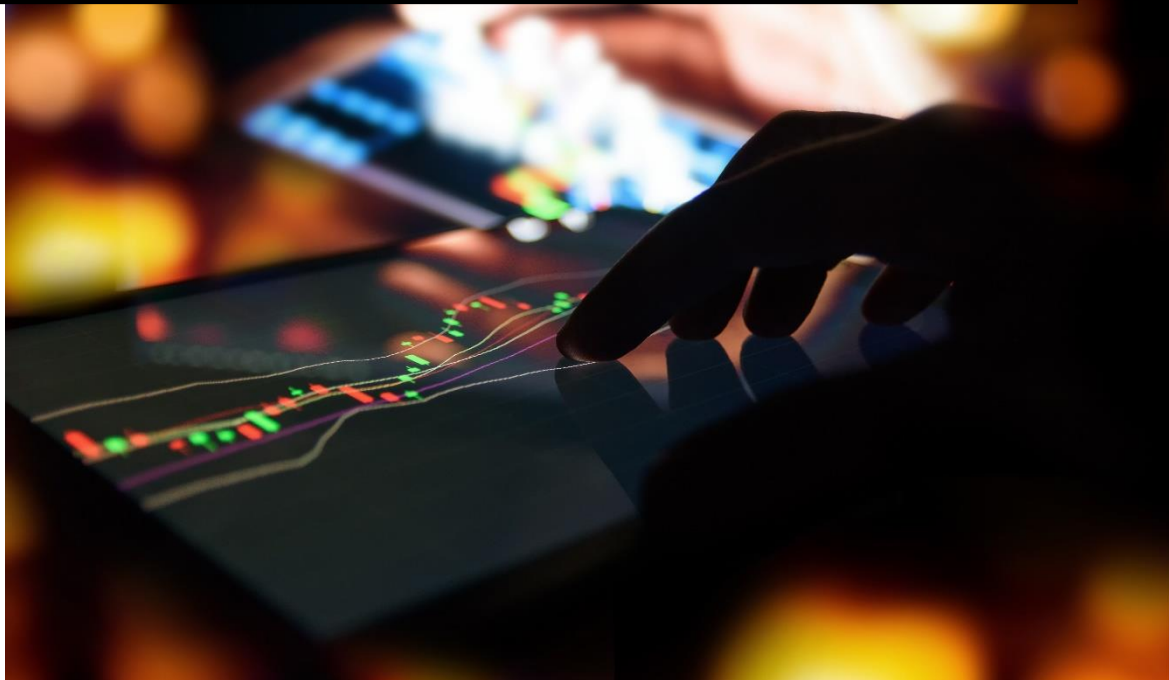# 2023

When Accessibility meets Access To

Introducing a new concept for accessibility professionals with the introduction of digital illiteracy in a fast-digitalizing world.

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CV Works

1-10-2023

Accessibility versus Access To

Introducing new concept into the international community of accessibility professionals.

Executive summary

This white paper is a follow-up on my earliest article **"Accessibility versus Access To"** shared with the accessibility community on LinkedIn under the #CPACC and #IAAP in February 2023. In this article I was first addressing the problems of merging disability and digital illiteracy together. Reacting on a situation where I found that the immense different approaches required, respectfully servicing customer with disabilities and customers facing digital illiteracy, was completely forgotten.

With 8 years' experience on accessibility in the financial sector, where I work on improving accessibility of (digital) banking services for customers with disabilities and others benefitting from accessible banking services. And another 7 as local Dutch disability advocate and disability inclusion expert. I noticed an increased attention on the topic **"access to technology for persons facing digital illiteracy,"** within the financial sector. Which is increasingly mixed up with accessibility for persons with disabilities, by new accessibility managers with limited experience in this (for them) new area. Given the fact that accessibility is a generic term, and by new joining professionals too often misunderstood. I decided to work on **a new concept towards accessibility of technology for persons facing digital illiteracy**. Creating clarity and a dedicated approaches to both important groups benefitting from accessible banking products and services. Equally mending the increased risks of unintentional stigmatizations of persons with disabilities by the explanatory approach required for persons facing digital illiteracy. With this new concept I hope to set new guidelines supporting both beneficiary groups of accessibility in the best fitting and most respectful way possible.

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Foreword

This is my 3rd paper on accessibility and disability inclusion, and the first formal paper for the International Association of Accessibility Professionals (IAAP). With almost 7 years of experience as Global Head of Accessibility at ING Bank. I recently realized that my first IAAP event was M-Enabling in Washington DC in 2017. Where I came in thinking that I knew my accessibility, leaving the event with the ambition to become a real accessibility expert, became reality in these last 7 years.

I have been working on disability inclusion and accessibility since 2009, at first only in The Netherlands and a few European assignments via my political network. The real journey to become an accessibility expert, and designing a strategic approach, governance and writing the first policy drafts date from 2016 – 2018, when I started to write ING's accessibility program and started the program in March 2017.

Since than I grew as accessibility professional and became, according to my dear accessibility friend Frances West, one of the trailblazers in accessibility. I'm grateful for all my accessibility friends, as colleagues is just not fitting the bounding I find in this great community, and this community is growing every accessibility event I attend. That is how I met Sandy Hanebrink in 2022, who together with Frances reviewed this paper and provided their valuable feedback to bring my thoughts into an understandable paper. A huge shout out to both Frances and Sandy, thanks for your support and punctuality 😊

Bianca Prins
October 2023, The Netherlands

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Introduction

Writing this paper introducing the new concept of **Access To**, took quite a while. Not because it is so hard to see the difference between the groups who benefit from accessibility and access to, it was hard to find a way to explain the need for a new concept in a simple and understandable way. Given that my first publication on this topic rose quite some questions by new accessibility managers taking up these roles in banking. The background of these new accessibility managers is rarely based on experience in accessibility such as lived experts who educated themselves becoming accessibility professionals, nor is it equal to the experience and required knowledge level of accessibility experts within the international community of IAAP and specifically CPACC and WAS experts. This conclusion is supported by the certificants list published by IAAP *(International Association).* This list showed for example in the banking sector, based on the 2023 top 15 European banks *(Yuen & Yuen, 2023),* that only Barclays the 4th, ING 13th, and NatWest Group 14th largest have respectively 4, 1, and 1 CPACC certified accessibility professionals in their ranks, looking further Barclays, ING, and NatWest Group have respectively 3, 1, and 2 WAS certified digital accessibility professionals in their ranks. This outcome surely supports the importance of increased attention of the professionalization of accessibility professionals in Europe and globally. Especially with the European Accessibility Act coming fast, and recently effective The Accessible Canada Act in mind. We are all responsible for further professionalization of accessibility assuring a high quality of professionalism in business.

Why separate both groups?

Back to the question of this paper, after a first publication by the Dutch Authority for Financial Markets *(AFM, 2023)* in January 2023, and the market response on this. It became clear a difference can and must be set between the groups, persons with disabilities and persons facing digital illiteracy, in prevention of unintended discrimination, stigmatization, and above all unrespectful approaches to both customers with disabilities and persons facing digital illiteracy. Where both target groups benefit from the generic concept of accessibility, to be respectful and supportive towards independence of both groups, a split approach is required. Especially realizing that approaching persons with disabilities the wrong way, can be perceived as ableism (stigmatization / discrimination of persons with disabilities), instead of dedicated support and communication servicing their needs using digital platforms (web and mobile applications) required by accessibility legislation, such as the EAA. As a recent new accessibility expert in training recently told "good intentions, do not bake good cookies!" I think this is exactly why we need to safeguard the accessibility profession introducing new concepts when we see things going wrong for our audience.

1. Defining the definitions moving forward with this concept

Diving into the world of accessibility beyond the dictionary definitions, as accessibility professionals use the word not generically to identify (the quality of …). Accessibility experts use accessibility functionality instead, in support of improving participation and reducing barriers for people with disabilities. Given that accessibility in the context of disability inclusion has a different meaning than **accessibility has in its generic context: the quality of being reached and entered.**

Moving forward on these definitions in relation to the new concept of *Accessibility* versus *Access To,* the first step is a deep dive into the meaning of accessibility in its generic context, cascading it to the accessibility professional's context. Continuing this deep dive into digital illiteracy and its meaning, before moving to the second part of this paper with the introduction of the concept **Access To** as a new dedicated approach towards persons facing digital illiteracy.

Accessibility, meaning

Looking at accessibility from an **accessibility at the professional level, we are looking at the functional approach taking away barriers and increasing independence of persons with disabilities**. Or as others might say: creating the environment of free movement for persons with disabilities. Still, the word accessibility is more generic than its functional use among accessibility professionals, let's embark the journey from generic to functional use by the professionals.

Starting with a few definitions of accessibility, with The Oxford Languages by Google, which defines 4 nouns for the generic word accessibility *(Accessibility Definition - Google Search, z.d.)*

- "The quality of being able to be reached or entered".
- "The quality of being easy to obtain or use".
- "The quality of being easy to understood or appreciated"
- "The quality of being easily reached, entered or used by people with a disability".

Looking at these first 3 definitions, we can conclude these are about reaching/entry (functional), obtain/use (functional and in the secure perspective of obtain this can also be about critical thinking) and understanding/appreciation (critical thinking, assessing). The fourth definition is about reaching, entering and use by persons with disabilities, which seem exclusively about functional barriers experienced by persons with disabilities.

When we look into the definition of digital accessibility, the University of Oregon *(University of Oregon, z.d.)* brings in an interesting perspective: **"**Accessible means a person with a disability is afforded the opportunity to acquire the same information, engage in the same interactions, and enjoy the same services as a person without a disability in an equally effective and equally integrated manner, with substantially equivalent ease of use." - U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights *(US Department of Education (ED), z.d.).* In extension the University of Oregon defines digital accessibility as: "Digital Accessibility is the practice and mindset of designing technology to be usable by as wide an audience as possible" (2)

Continuing our search and look at the role of accessibility from the perspective of the International Association for Accessibility Professional in their "Body of Knowledge" *(IAAP, 2020)* states:

"Accessibility benefits individuals by providing them the means to participate in society, in major life activities such as education and employment and social activities that are necessary for health and happiness. "

Traveling through the above we see that we initially started with the generic use of accessibility where "the quality of being…" a combination of functional and critical thinking. Moving on to the functional use of accessibility benefitting individual participation society, following the view of many accessibility professionals **"creating the environment where persons with disabilities can function independently"** This paper will take us forward in this way of thinking, that is why it is important to remember this new narrative for accessibility in its functional form.

## Digital Illiteracy, what does it mean?

Digital illiteracy is a complex topic, it is about how proficient people are with accessing (usability), assessing (know if ICTs are legit and safe to use), learning (how to use and improve capabilities) and communicate (use to connect to others with technology) with digital technology or ICT's.

According to UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2018) *(TVETipedia Glossary, z.d.)* Digital literacy defines as: "..the ability to access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate and create information safely and appropriately through digital technologies for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship. It includes competences that are variously referred to as computer literacy, ICT literacy, information literacy and media literacy.

Researching for an understandable framework for digital capabilities, in support of understanding digital illiteracy, the Jisc Digital Capabilities Framework stood out for its simplicity. Especially considering trying to explain the difference between the professional use of the word accessibility in relation to digital illiteracy and thus access to digital environments.

The Jisc Digital Capabilities Framework *(Beetham, 2017)* identifies 3 levels working towards the top level of ICT Proficiency.

The first is digital identity and wellbeing, which is the net holding the second level with: a) information, data and medial literacies, b) digital creation, problem solving and innovation, c) digital learning and development, d) digital communication, collaboration, and participation, which hold the level of ICT proficiency.
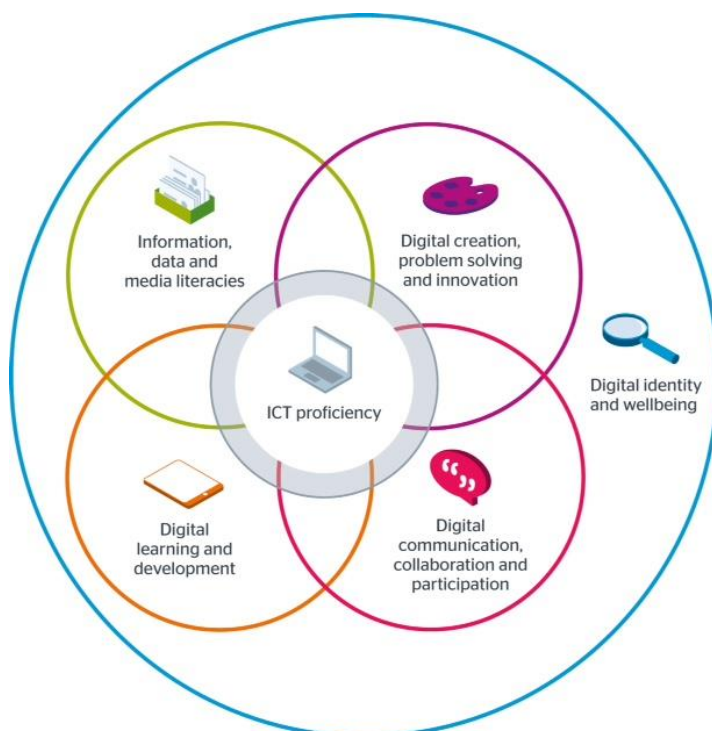
Transposing this graphic into a table assessing digital literacy, this could look as follows:

Level 1	Digital identity and wellbeing			
Level 2	information, data, and medial literacies	digital creation, problem solving and innovation,	digital learning and development	digital communication, collaboration, and participation
Level 3	ICT Proficiency			

Level 1 is the digital identity and wellbeing, which depends on level 2: the 4 dimensions in the row below, which result level 3 the ICT proficiency on the bottom row of this table. Looking at this overview it is safe to conclude that ICT proficiency is about functional capabilities to work with ICT's and critical thinking to assess the individual's wellbeing in the ICT environment = safety in the world of ICT's.

Looking at the JISK model and the capabilities defined by UNESCO digital **illiteracy is based on capabilities and the knowledge level of the ICT's users**. Functionality is part of the problem people with digital illiteracy face, mostly related to the capabilities to for example handle ICT's intuitive use and knowledge level to use ICT's safely and make sure that information is reliable and correct.

Summarizing the difference of these definitions

Connecting the UNESCO definition and the technical definition in the Jisk Digital Capabilities Framework, digital illiteracy is a combination of capabilities and knowledge level to manage, understand, learn about, and work safely with ICTs, where accessibility centres around the functionality of ICTs for persons with disabilities (using assistive technologies). Does this mean that people with disabilities cannot be digital illiterate, no it does not. If a person with a disability faces digital illiteracy and accessibility issues, this person is facing two problems instead of one, and it calls for actions for both problems. Where accessibility is about fixing functionalities for users with dedicated requirements and assistive technologies, is digital illiteracy about guiding people with limited to no capabilities and knowledge about digital platforms through the (process on the) platform.

2. Managing accessibility and digital illiteracy

With the deep dive into the definitions of accessibility and digital illiteracy in mind, it is time to move forward tackling this issue managing accessibility for person with disabilities and digital illiteracy effectively and with the upmost respect to both groups. With that in mind, I'd like to introduce the concept:

Access To

Where Accessibility is about access for persons with disabilities, **Access To is about access for persons who face digital illiteracy.** These 2 groups require and deserve a separated dedicated approach out of respect for their challenges and differences in requirements. In extension, you wouldn't wish to blame the person with a disability for not being able to access your digital platform because it is not accessible within the applicable digital accessibility standard WCAG (2.1) and Universal Design Principles, don't you agree? Equally you wish to explain to the person facing digital illiteracy how to navigate through your website as safe and secure as possible. As this reduces risks of becoming a victim of 3rd party fraud by caretakers, and other schemes by criminals which actively target people in vulnerable circumstances like digital illiteracy.

This huge difference between the problems faced by both groups needs for accessible elements versus need of explanation, call for a separate approach reaching out to these target groups. Preferably not via the same channel in prevention of ableism *(Smith, z.d.)* and unintended discrimination of persons with disabilities. When approaching a person with a disability with an explanation 'how to use your website' you are implying the person needs fixing and is not using your website accordingly. While an accessibility problem was the reason for this person to reach out in the first place and fixing this is the responsibility of the website host. Equally the person facing digital illiteracy does not benefit from 'report your accessibility issue' when they don't know how to use the website buying new shampoo for example. This person wishes to know how to complete the process, and benefits from a detailed explanation how to complete the process.

Hence, the reason to separate both groups in communications, and create separate websites for both groups. Using **accessibility** and **access to** as entry point for businesses and governmental organizations reaching out to both groups, reduced the risk that persons with disabilities and persons who face digital illiteracy experience stigmatization, ableism, discrimination, or any other form of feeling excluded.

The look and feel

In support of a human first approach respecting the different requirements by both persons with disabilities or digital illiteracy, and in prevention of a negative user experience resulting from an overload of unfitting information relating to the different requirements. Separate, dedicated communication channels for both target groups will improve user experience and reduce the risk of unintended discrimination by unfitting information (which especially applies on persons with disabilities not requiring education, instead they require functional solutions for accessibility problems). What does this look like in an URL:

example.com/accessibility

example.com/access-to

These are 2 separate webpages, dedicated to the group's requirements, and cross connected because both groups can have overlap (of which they are not always aware). As many people who face digital illiteracy are of age and benefit from accessibility, while some persons with disabilities might face digital illiteracy and require dedicated information to handle their business on your website. This approach would prevent the screen reader/braille user from an education detour explaining how to use the app or website they are visiting, bringing him/her/they to the right information points in the shortest routes possible. And equally reduce the overload of information for people who are digital illiterate, not in need of accessibility information for the various groups of disabilities, making it easier to navigate to the support they need. Reduced clutter (non-relevant information increases the need for information literacy on level 2 of the ICT Proficiency JISK model) and reduced restrain (an overload of information increases the risk a negative wellbeing experience, as shown in level 1 the ICT Proficiency JISK model), improving the user experience by large.

The approach, separated in welcoming for persons with disabilities and educational for persons with digital illiteracy in a table overview:

	example.com/accessibility	example.com/access-to
Approach	Welcoming	Educational
Type of information	- How to report accessibility issues - What updates/ accessibility issues are known and under reconstruction, including deadlines - Dedicated support/information for disability groups - Which assistive technology is used for testing accessibility - Information about accessibility audits, WCAG standards used and feedback collection	- Instruction based information to educate people using a digital channel safely and secure - How to use web applications - Ho to use mobile applications - Instruction video's
Cross connects when	Provide a link to the access to page, where customers with disabilities can find dedicated instructions how to use the digital channel safely and secure.	Provide a link to the accessibility page, supporting people with disabilities such as low vision, using the digital channel in optimal usability.

3. Summary

This white paper explained the difference between the definitions and requirements of persons with disabilities and persons facing digital illiteracy. And shows that with a human centred requirement based (separate) dedicated approach, respecting the different requirements of both groups, in prevention of stereotyping and unintended discrimination, the user experience for both persons with disabilities and persons with digital illiteracy can improve.

The key reason to write this paper, as follow-up of my original article on LinkedIn, is that my call to introduce **access to** as new concept got lost in the turbulence of social media. With this paper, and my participation in panels discussing accessibility and disability inclusion, I hope to change the narrative and improve customer experience for both persons with disabilities and digital illiteracy, reducing the risks of failures and increasing independence of both groups in the fast-digitalizing world we live in today.

The distinction between these two terminologies is of huge importance for persons with disabilities not to experience discrimination/stigmatization/stereotyping by inaccessible digital platforms they run into with an educational approach while a welcoming approach is more sufficient for the situation. And secondly, it is equally important for persons facing digital illiteracy to find the best way to use digital channels safe and secure, without an overload of information not fitting their needs which in turn leads to more confusion and misunderstandings. The JISK model supports this approach, as ICT's proficiency depends on the skills: information literacy, problem solving, learning

and development, and finally the ability to participate in the digital world and thus wellbeing of the person using ICT's.

I hope this white paper will be part of the further development of the accessibility profession to increase inclusion of persons with disabilities and persons facing digital illiteracy. As independence, wellbeing, and social inclusion increasingly depends on our digital identities and the inclusiveness of the digital environments we use in our daily lives. Leaving with this quote:

> *"We can support digital illiteracy with digital accessibility, we CONNOT assume people with disabilities are digital illiterate since digital accessibility is not the individual responsibility of people with disabilities, it is the responsibility of the business providing the platform."*

Bianca Prins, February 2023.

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