Introduction to this Special Issue: Disability, Law and Public Policy, and the World Wide Web

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This special issue, entitled "Disability, Law and Public Policy, and the World Wide Web," is meant to highlight how information and communications technology (ICT) in general, and the Internet's World Wide Web (hereafter "web") in particular, has fundamentally changed the way in which we all, with and without disabilities, participate politically, socially, and culturally within a global network of dispersed communities. Although there is a substantial literature on the web and related law and public policy, fewer articles have examined the implications and promise of the web for persons with disabilities over the life course, and from a variety of disciplinary and internationally comparative perspectives.

This issue is especially timely, given ongoing debates in academic, legal, and policy circles about the importance of the web to democratic society and to the values of active citizenship, particularly for those individuals with disabilities who, historically, have been disenfranchised from meaningful public participation. Related questions about the full and equal enjoyment of the web are raised that consider the reach and breadth of web accessibility technical standards and performance criteria to make it available and usable to persons with disabilities.

Attempts to address such issues vary across nations and international agreements – for instance, in the definition of equal access to the web under national laws such as the U.S. Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and as conceived by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). These developments are taking place alongside dramatic and evolving digital information privacy and security considerations, intellectual property copyright and ownership issues, and global issues of free speech and censorship on the web.

In examining these matters, this special issue aims to be a starting point for discussion among academics and researchers, legal and social advocates, online service providers, educators and employers, and policymakers interested in emerging issues associated with the full and equal enjoyment of the web by persons with disabilities. The particular

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articles herein reflect a variety of conceptual, disciplinary, legal, and empirical approaches to disability, law and policy, and the web.

In the first article, "The struggle for web equality by persons with cognitive disabilities," I take the position that never before in history have the civil and human rights agendas of people with disabilities aligned so well with fast-moving developments in communications technology. Without doubt, the center of the technology and information revolution is the web. The web has opened up unprecedented opportunities for participation in democratic society, helping to ensure the inclusiveness and civil rights of people with disabilities and their families in all aspects of daily life. The article examines the journey towards disability rights by focusing on the right to web equality for people with cognitive disabilities, such as those with intellectual and developmental disabilities, autism, print-related and learning disabilities, and traumatic brain injury. The article, which is derived from my forthcoming book on the topic – *eQuality: The Struggle for Web Accessibility by Persons with Cognitive Disabilities* (Cambridge University Press, 2014) – is meant to help unearth assumptions underlying full and equal web enjoyment by people with cognitive disabilities towards a more universal understanding of web content itself. It explores how web content equality, grounded in law and policy, may help not only people with cognitive disabilities, but also those with other disabilities and life circumstances, to fully partake and flourish in the information age.

The next article by Delia Ferri and Anthony Giannoumis, "A revaluation of the cultural dimension of disability policy in the European Union: The impact of digitization and web accessibility," examines the commitments undertaken by the European Union as part of its endorsement of the CRPD and the European Disability Strategy 2010–2020 with regard to web accessibility for persons with disabilities, in particular in support of the EU's obligations for equal access to its cultural goods and services. The article explores the extent to which the EU has realized the principle of accessibility and the right to access cultural goods and services envisaged in the CRPD. Ferri and Giannoumis contribute importantly to the literature by exploring how web accessibility and information digitization further the cultural dimensions of disability policy in the European Union.

Anthony Giannoumis then continues the examination of EU member state regulatory approaches to web accessibility by focusing on how the policy traditions in the United Kingdom and Norway have influenced the legal obligations of performance standards for web content for use by persons with disabilities. In "Regulating web content: The nexus of legislation and performance standards in the United Kingdom and Norway," Giannoumis argues that national policy traditions have an impact on how governments establish legal obligations for web equality standards compliance. The comparative analysis shows how national policy traditions in regard to disability anti-discrimination legislation critically mediate legal approaches to web equality standards for people with disabilities in the United Kingdom and Norway.

In the following article, Naomi Schreuer, Ayala Keter, and Dalia Sachs empirically explore the social importance of the web and ICT to adolescents with severe disabilities. In "Accessibility to ICT for the social participation of youths with disabilities: A two-way street," the authors examine the effectiveness of accessibility to ICT and the web for youths with severe disabilities living at home. The quantitative and qualitative study involved pre- and post-assessments of computer skills and parti-cipation in social and leisure activities. The authors demonstrate the central importance of access to the digital world among youths with disabilities for academic achievements as

well as in the transition to adulthood, which involves the mastering of social activities that are critical to personal development and social identity.

Lastly, in a future-looking theoretical commentary entitled "Leveraging the web as a platform for economic inclusion," Jutta Treviranus poses the question of how the affordances of the web, and its global networks to scale the "curb-cut phenomenon," may address systemic social and economic issues such as growing wealth disparity, youth unemployment and financial exclusion. Similar to conceptions of inclusive design, the curb-cut phenomenon holds that what we design with individuals with disabilities in mind benefits everyone and elicits greater innovation. Treviranus posits a scenario in which inclusively designed web-based market platforms, and employment, training and certification systems benefit everyone and innovatively disrupt the impasse in addressing global economic challenges.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue contribute to disability rights scholarship and advocacy. They build on the ADA and CRPD principles of web content equality, which include full and equal enjoyment of digital knowledge for people with disabilities. In the U.S. and around the world, further examination is needed to benefit persons with disabilities across the life span who use the web and ICT daily to communicate, learn, work, vote, shop, and stay in touch with family, friends and their social support networks, all necessary for full and equal inclusion, and active citizenship, in our digitally connected world.