

Special Issue: Introduction

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We often hear design researchers say about inclusive design research “a lot has been done” and it is certainly an established, multidisciplinary area of research with many examples of distinct and impactful research and practice. However, we’re still a long way off from an inclusive world and accessibility is of increasing priority for twenty-first century societies with aging populations. There also seem to be many more studies of inclusive design for the built environment and product design than there are for visual communication.

When Mike Zender and I wrote the Visible Language call for papers that might broaden discussions of inclusive design in visual communication and explore the complexities and subtleties of designing for diverse user needs, I did not anticipate how varied the responses would be. In hindsight, the diversity of the literature, methods and approaches in the received responses highlights how much scope there is for visual communication research to contribute to inclusive design practice and research. Within this issue, we are publishing a few of the submissions we received and hope a few more will be shared with Visible Language readers in forthcoming issues.

The first three articles presented in this issue respectively explore the role of braille and digital technologies for people who are blind and/or have visual impairments, the evolution of manual syllabaries in Japan for the deaf community, and how drawing on teachers’ experiences informed the design of a typeface intended to make learning resources more accessible for learners with Autism. These studies help provide insight into the reading needs, preferences and experiences of individuals with particular disabilities and the associated implications for visual communication. Together, they also highlight how people’s lived experiences of traditional and emerging media can be profoundly shaped by education, policy and other historical and contextual factors.

Publishing these articles alongside other studies of information design, reading, technology and typography, and the commentary on the intersection of culture and technology for the Persian script, is a considered editorial decision. Inclusive design is not about designing for disabilities but about supporting people's independence through respectfully anticipating and considering a range of possible user needs and contexts. We hope that the juxtaposition of 'inclusive' and 'regular' articles encourages reflection about two themes. First, how our everyday design decisions and exploration of new genres and technological affordances might have implications for different individuals and contexts of use. Second, how the kinds of methods and materials we use in research might shape what we find out and how these findings can be translated to practice.

Research into reading and visual and material communication variables occurs across many disciplines. Studies that demonstrate generalizability and robust controls to isolate effects are more likely to be published across a range of disciplinary journals. Yet, for communication design research to effectively inform inclusive practices, it seems that more awareness of the range of readers rather than 'the average reader' experiences and projects might be helpful in our discipline.

Thank you to Mike Zender and all guest reviewers who contributed to the editorial process and provided invaluable feedback on the inclusive design articles included in this issue (and those which we hope to publish in forthcoming issues).

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