



The Paradox of Progress and Accessibility: Ableism and Neoliberalism in Iceland's Digital Transformation Policies

Author Information:

Inga Björk Margrétar Bjarnadóttir, University of Iceland, ibmb@hi.is

Ingólfur Ásgeir Jóhannesson, University of Iceland, ingo@hi.is

Laufey Elísabet Löve, University of Iceland, lel@hi.is

Plain English Summary

Introduction

Iceland is moving many government services online.
This is called digital transformation.

This paper asks: Does the government think about disabled people when planning digital transformation?

We looked at 4 documents about digital transformation from the government and local governments. These documents were written between the years 2018 and 2023.

We wanted to see what these documents say about disabled people.

Iceland has signed an important agreement called the CRPD.

CRPD stands for the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The CRPD says that disabled people must be able to use the Internet and technology, just like everyone else.

Summary of Research Approach

We read 4 government documents very carefully.

We looked for:

- Words and ideas that came up again and again.
- What the documents say is important.
- What the documents do not talk about.

We used ideas from 2 areas of study:

- **Ableism**: this means treating able bodies and minds as "normal" or "better". Ableism can happen in buildings, technology, and the way people talk.
- **Neoliberalism**: this describes a world where competition, money, and "doing things yourself" are seen as very important. This can be hard for disabled people, because it puts the responsibility on the person and not on the government.

Summary of main points of paper

The documents talk a lot about progress

The documents say moving services online is good.

They say it is the future.

They say Iceland must do this to keep up with other countries.

The documents talk about saving money and time

The documents say online services are:

- Faster.
- Cheaper for the government.
- Easier to use.

People are expected to learn digital skills on their own

The documents say citizens should learn to use computers and phones well.

This is something each person must do for themselves.

The documents do not talk about who will help people who find this hard.

Disabled people are almost never mentioned

None of the 4 documents clearly talk about disabled people.

Sometimes the documents use the word "accessibility" but they are not talking about disabled people.

Accessibility in the documents means something else like:

- People living in the countryside, not in cities.
- How easy it is to use something.

The documents do not talk about:

- What barriers disabled people face.
- What the government will do to remove those barriers.

Human rights are mentioned but without a plan

Human rights are mentioned in only 2 of the 4 documents
But there is no clear plan to protect disabled people's rights.

This does not match the real world

Research shows that many disabled people find it hard to use the internet.

Research also shows that many disabled people do not get enough help or support online.

The government documents say digital change is good for society.
This is not true for everybody because many people struggle to make sense of the changes.

Summary of main implications

For disabled people and disability groups:

- This paper suggests that the government's plans do not properly include disabled people. This finding can help disability groups ask the government to do better.
- Calling digital change "progress" can hide the fact that some people are left out.
- The people left out should not have to fix this by themselves. The government should take responsibility.

For the government and policy makers:

Future digital plans should:

- Discuss disabled people and their rights and the barriers they face.
- Say what accessibility actually means.
- Have a good plan to make sure that accessibility is good enough.

For researchers:

- We need more information about how disabled people in Iceland use the Internet.
- We also need to ask disabled people directly about their experience.

More information

To learn more about disability rights in Iceland, you can look at these disability organisations:

- Átak (Association of People with Intellectual Disabilities)

- Tabú (Feminist Disability Organisation)
- Þroskahjálpi (National Association of Intellectual Disability)
- ÖBÍ réttindasamtök (ÖBÍ Rights Association)

To read the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in an Easy-To-Read format, you can click on the following link:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/345108/easy-read-un-convention.pdf