

Alan Harnum, Inclusive Design

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Announcer 2: Okay, let's get on it.

Speaker: Nothing about us without us, that is our call in the disabled community.

Speaker: Persons with disability, you know, the expectations are low to none.

Speaker: We have to get ourselves out there and get ourselves known.

Speaker: Being disabled does not mean being powerless.

Speaker: The possibilities are limitless, quality of life, opportunities in employment and education, I mean it's boundless.

Speaker: The values are no longer on the person, the values for participation are actually on the environment, on the attitudes and how the system is designed.

Speaker: I look forward to the day when advocacy for persons with disabilities is not needed anymore because it's understood.

Mike: That promotion piece from the International Committee of the Red Cross was created to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. An important outcome of that convention has been the mainstream of the idea of inclusive design. The Inclusive Design Research Centre, otherwise known as the IDRC, is part of OCAD University in Toronto and it has been a leading innovator in this field for 25 years.

Alan: This is our formal mission statement from our home page.

Mike: That's Alan Harnum, more about him in a minute.

Alan: It's an international community of open source developers, designers, researchers, advocates and volunteers work together to ensure that emerging information technology and practices are designed inclusively.

Mike: I'm Mike Ridley, a PhD student at the Faculty of Information and Media Studies at Western University. Recently I spoke with Alan Harnum about

the IDRC, about the work they do, and equally important, how they do that work. In the course of the conversation, we touched on a number of ideas and issues about software design.

Alan: My name is Alan Harnum and I am a Senior Inclusive Developer at the Inclusive Design Research Centre at OCAD University. Prior to that, I worked for Toronto Public Library for a decade, starting out as a public service librarian, and then moving for the last six years into working for the library's web services group.

I have worked at the Inclusive Design Research Centre for just over three years now and primarily what my job description says I do is that I am a software developer, day to day I do a lot of things alongside that as you tend to do in small research groups. I have been developing software for about 20 years now in terms of when somebody first paid me money to do software development, and I've been developing software with an eye on accessibility for just about as long as that.

Mike: Initially I asked Alan about the 25-year history of the centre. What accounts for the longevity and success of the IDRC?

Alan: I mean I guess first of all, I mean, we do really good work. That I think is – like we've made substantial contributions in those 25 years – and I'm using kind of the collective we here, I haven't been involved in all of these things or really the vast majority of them, but as kind of a research group we've made significant contributions to web standards around accessibility.

The ideas that we've disseminated and the software that we've disseminated and the fact that we've disseminated them to be open, with very liberal, open licensing has meant that they could be adopted and influential in various contexts, like Microsoft has done a big pivot in the last couple of years in its design work towards inclusive design, which is explicitly acknowledged to be influenced by ideas that we have propagated. The other thing I think we've been able to do in 25 years is we have evolved.

We started out doing work that was focused on accessibility and accessible technology, which is a very big area, and as kind of our thinking as a research group driven primarily by Jutta, but also obviously influenced by everyone she was working with, our thinking has evolved into this inclusive design field of practice that takes a lot of inspiration and philosophy from accessible technology and disability studies, but broadens the perspective in various ways and looks at kind of like other dimensions of inclusivity and inequality.

Mike: It seems clear from the IDRC mission and philosophy that it is focused on what we've come to call community engaged scholarship. I asked Alan if this was indeed the case.

Alan: People with disabilities are one of many demographic groups that historically speaking are constantly having solutions imposed upon them by people who think they know what's best for them, in practice this has usually meant more about what makes non-disabled people feel comfortable about their spaces, their lives and their societies.

So, I think it's important to work with people directly, to give first consideration to their lived experience and to work towards a state of affairs where approaches and solutions, those are really generic terms, but I don't have better ones, are designed together rather than being imposed by an expert class.

And I think on a personal note of that, as a technologist and a software developer who's interested in kind of like humane deployment of technology, for lack of a better way to put it, which is the opposite of how most technology is deployed these days, it's very important to me that the work that I do is rooted in a consideration of the needs and lives of the people who will use the software.

Mike: Clearly a central component of the IDRC is the co-design philosophy.

Alan: The definition of co-design that you get depends a little bit on what you're talking to. One of the terms that got used previously in talking about this is participatory design, which has a pretty decent entry on Wikipedia.

But like historically speaking there was a lot of it in Scandinavia in the sixties and the seventies, and that I'm particularly interested in this part historically because in the seventies there was a lot of research in user participation in systems development in Scandinavia and in a way that's kind of like very forward thinking for the time, and that involved things sometimes like working directly with labour unions in the design of software that was going to be used in the workplace.

Which is, you know, you say that in terms of thinking about if you've been in a workplace where technology decisions are made, there's a very familiar pattern of how it gets done which is it's made by a small group with like maybe an employee representative, who is there often in kind of just a token form, and then there's a bunch of training later on and everybody now has to use the new system, which in my opinion we see the outcomes that that leads to with things like the Phoenix payroll system.

How it would play out in an ideal is to have people who would use the software as fully empowered members of the team that make it, and I've only heard of that actually kind of being the case, you know, in a small number of projects.

How it often plays out day to day in the work that we do is sometimes it's thinking about things in terms of culture change, like we run things that are – you know, for projects we'll run things that are workshops, workshop style things but we try and run them from a flattened perspective, or facilitate them in a certain way, and gather resources and

have what we sometimes describe as like a feet forward process where we take the things that we learned from doing co-design exercises and put them forward into the system, create issues based on them and then bring them back to the people who raised the ideas and work through an iterative process like that.

Some of what we're starting to experiment with are ways of doing co-design practice that are distributed in nature, that aren't kind of facilitator oriented. We're doing that on the Inclusive Cities project right now, it's very early stage work but we're thinking about how do you kind of give people the minimum – the minimum amount of kind of like guidance to let them do their own co-design exercises and let them, and I think this is very important, feel that they can do that, that they're the experts of their own lives rather than a designer in the room or a software developer in the room.

The plague of expertise is arrogance and believing that you know people's lives better than them and know what's good for them, and all kinds of horrible anti-patterns in software development have come out of that, out of the arrogance of software developers who believe – who because they believe that they're good at simple manipulation and abstract thinking can apply that to people's lives.

Mike: What seems to link community engagement and the co-design philosophy is an activist perspective on the research. I asked Alan if he viewed the work of the IDRC as activism.

Alan: I would agree that the work that we do is explicitly activist, and part of that is that we live in a world that's really dominated by inequality in a lot of different senses. So, it isn't possible to do the kind of work that we do, that's focused on inclusive design and inclusive practice and increasing the amount of inclusion in the world without having some activist mentality.

I think that activist has become something of a dirtier, problematic word and I think this has happened as part of a campaign, I call it a deliberate campaign and it may be more complicated by that, by various forces around maintaining status quo, so I have a problem personally with that being applied to us. I don't believe that a neutral position is possible, achievable or desirable in most circumstances, so no problem with the word activist.

That said, I think that one of – you know, going back to that question about how have we survived 25 years, I think one of the things we do a really good job of as a research group is being fair in our work, which I think, you know, is a different thing from being neutral.

We're generally willing to open conversations with anyone who's honestly interested in our work and our perspective, we're quite pragmatically inclined and we're interested in both immediate improvements and long-term change and it can certainly present complications sometimes in the kind of projects we can do. We have to exercise some amount of care in

the contracts we sign with our funders. One of the guiding aspects of that is that we don't, except under very unusual circumstances, do work that requires us not to work in the open in terms of licensing of source code or other work products.

We've rejected funding offers in the past that required us to do work for hire or produce work that would be kept confidential, and that kind of pattern of very deliberate working in the open in terms of like our primary organizing point for all of our work is our Wiki, which is public, our meetings are public. That's one of the things that kind of keeps us honest.

Mike: Given the longevity of the IDRC, I was curious about the state of art in inclusive design and their contributions to it. Alan demurred but described a fundamental contribution through the Global Public Inclusive Infrastructure project, the GPII.

Alan: I'm not going to be so arrogant to describe our own work as state of the art. A lot of what we're looking at right now is adaptability and reconfigurability of systems to people's needs, so one of the projects that I would say has kind of the longest amount of history that we're involved with is the GPII project, the Global Public Inclusive Infrastructure. I describe it sometimes as kind of like a TCP/IP stack for accessibility, which is to provide like a base layer of services and vocabularies for personalization of systems to people's particular needs.

Mike: So let's leave off where we started.

Alan: When we talk about the disability community, that's not a homogenous body, that's not kind of a group that you can say it's like this or it isn't like this, which is where the, "Nothing about us without us" quote is so important to me because if you are building something with someone, it's really, really important that they be genuinely involved in the process and that their lived experience be valued.

One of the things we talk about sometimes as the ideal in inclusive design, if not the thing that is always 100% achievable, is what we call one to one design or one to one customization which is this idea that particularly with digital products, because digital products can be built flexibly, they can be changed, they can be modified by their end users. In the ideal world everyone would kind of get a solution that they could customize to their particular needs in terms of how it behaves.

Mike: For more information about the Inclusive Design Research Centre check out their website, they're at idrc.ocadu.ca, and follow them on Twitter, @idrc_ocadu. In a future episode, Alan will talk about two specific projects at the IDRC, the Social Justice Repair Kit and the Inclusive Cities project, which involves Sidewalk Labs.

Announcer 2: This has been another episode of So What?.

Announcer 1: The podcast about library and information science research and why it matters.

Announcer 2: So What? is created and produced by students at the faculty of information and media studies at Western University in London, Ontario.

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