



Speech Can Help Integrate the Disabled

The technology exists to allow the disabled to live independently

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Brown v. Board of Education*, rejected the notion of “separate but equal,” holding that education facilities segregated based on race were inherently unequal. Although not the first case of its kind, this seminal decision has often been considered among the most significant judicial turning points in American history.

In 1999, in *Olmstead v. L.C.*, the Supreme Court again held that unjustified segregation constitutes discrimination, this time in regard to people with disabilities. Basing its opinion on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the court held that people with mental disabilities must be allowed to live outside institutionalized settings if they choose to and placement is appropriate. The decision has been interpreted to extend to all people with disabilities.

In so holding, *Olmstead* mandates the same magnitude of change as did *Brown*. But, more than 10 years after the decision, many disabled people believe not enough has been done to implement *Olmstead*.

“The basic task of states in implementing *Olmstead* is to support people receiving services in the most integrated setting, most [similar to the way] people without disabilities live,” says Ira Burnim, legal director of the Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law. This is accomplished by enabling individuals to live in their own homes, in diverse neighborhoods, and allowing them to pursue the same dreams everyone has: having a job, a family. “You don’t see able-bodied people waiting in line to get into nursing homes,” Burnim says.

Burnim believes states have not been aggressive about implementing aspects of the ADA as mandated by *Olmstead* because of a general prejudice against the disabled.

Additionally, some state officials are not familiar with ways in which technology can be used to transition people into and support people living in community settings. Speech technology can be used to address issues related to blindness and vision impairment; print disabilities; mobility/motor skills issues like spinal cord injuries, Lou Gehrig’s disease, and cerebral palsy; traumatic brain injuries; and developmental disabilities.

All Sorts of Uses

For example, in addition to enabling users to compose and send letters, email, and other information, desktop dictation programs can be used to find recipes on the Internet or to conduct banking business online. And text-to-speech

(TTS), whether on a traditional computer or a smartphone or other device, enables people to hear what is going on on-screen. This means someone who is blind can use speed dial on a phone and someone who cannot read text can still hear a book or Web page being read to him.

Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices give voices to individuals who are nonverbal, including those with disabilities ranging from Down syndrome to Lou Gehrig’s disease.

I.d. mate, an omnidirectional scanner that users can take into markets, department stores, and the like, uses TTS to speak the name of the item that was scanned. If it’s a CD, the information might include the names of song tracks. Groceries labels might also contain nutritional information

or recipes. Products like over-the-counter medications could include warnings. Users can also record information on blank labels, affixing the labels onto credit cards, clothing, or other items they already own. In this way, someone who is blind or print-disabled can choose which credit card she wants to use and she can wear

the black skirt with the white striped blouse, without assistance from someone who is sighted.

ScripTalk uses similar technology to read labels on prescription bottles, an obvious benefit for people who are blind, visually impaired, or dyslexic. But users also include people who have full vision and cannot read.

Wellness check programs (WCP) like Guardian Calling can also be powerful tools in the mainstreaming process. With WCPs, enrollees receive a computerized phone call at set intervals, sometimes more than once a day. TTS is used to ask the user questions. If the user does not answer correctly, assistance is sent to his home.

We have the mandate: integrate people with disabilities into the community. We have the technology, including speech recognition, TTS, and IVR. We have the opportunity to enable millions of Americans to live with the dignity and freedom we all want for ourselves and our children. As Randy Brackett, the father of a Down syndrome son who uses AAC, said, it’s time to “[make the investment] in people so they can be nourished as humans and...grow and develop to their full potential[s].” ☒

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