

Editorial

Nigel Newbutt

As I write this editorial (October 2020), we are in a world quite different to the one we left in March 2020 (Ghebreyesus, 2020). Of course, I am referencing the pandemic (COVID-19) and the various ways countries across the globe have responded. I specifically wanted to pick up on this, as it relates to people with a range of challenges and disabilities. There have been suggestions that:

[...] making adjustments to routines, like, experiencing closure of schools and day care centers, social distancing and/or confinement to home can prove to be a real struggle for children [and adults] with physical and mental disabilities (Patel, 2020, p.1; Bartlett *et al.*, 2020).

This tends to suggest that the range of measures taken to tackle COVID-19, in almost every country around the world, could have placed particular strain on underserved populations. Therefore, I wanted to highlight the potentially important role that technologies can play in this space. In particular, providing for, delivering to, and education of, a range of underserved people. This of course has immediate implications but should also be considered across the coming months and years ahead as it relates to possible financial burdens and inevitable cut-backs for vital services that many people receive. The ways that technologies can be considered and used to help tackle the many issues facing us now (and after COVID-19) could be more vital for some people than ever.

Technology, and research in this field, has shown us over many years before now, just how important it can be for the many who experience differences and difficulties in their lives. During and after the pandemic, some urgent and timely issues and questions will need approaching. Will services that support people with disabilities adapt and modify using technologies? Will access to technologies that enable people be freely available? Will financial support and resources be available to enable marginalised groups during and after the pandemic? We do not have answers to these important questions yet, but as we steer our way through the pandemic and monitor the closure and cut-back in some services that stand to impact some disabled groups, people involved in enabling technology sectors (researchers, practitioners, investors, companies, etc...) can all play a role more than ever. Especially as we seek to explore ways to bridge services, provide access to support and continue in a different way to enable the people we work with. I would argue this is a vital time for research and development (with robust evaluation) to stand tall and ensure we are ready to address the almost certain gaps in services and provision we are likely to see across many regions of the world as we exit the pandemic – for years to come. Let us ensure we are ready to address these concerns, in some cases using technology, to support disadvantaged groups and to help empower them to achieve their maximum potential. Placing *their* voices central to this will be key to addressing these concerns.

In relation to COVID-19 and the above preamble, this issue starts with an opinion piece offered by myself, as Editor, and colleagues from the USA (Schmidt and Schmidt) and Italy (Riva). In this article, *The possibility and importance of immersive technologies during COVID-19 for autistic people*, we have taken the backdrop of COVID-19 and thought about some simple and quick, yet effective ways, that technology could be deployed in a range of settings to support autistic groups. This is a specific group that stand to be impacted in some (and maybe large) way by the pandemic. Lack of, and changes to, routine, for example, might provide issues for some autistic people. Returning to a socially distancing world might

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prove to be anxiety inducing. Being cut off from essential services and supports could also represent a problem (during lockdowns). Therefore, we turn to innovative immersive technology and ways this has been shown to help in the past and ways it could be applied here. We look at education, access to services and issues of anxiety. While we are not reporting on data collected or analysed, we are drawing on our many years' experience (and previous work) and offering insights and possibilities for this specific group using technology in an enabling way.

Following this, and beyond the scope of COVID-19, work by Pampoulou and Fuller discusses the role of graphic symbols used in the field of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC). Their article, *Exploring AAC graphic symbol choices: a preliminary study*, investigate the factors speech-language pathologists (SPLs) consider when choosing corpuses of graphic symbols for their clients. Through an online survey (administered in Cyprus and Texas) their preliminary results suggest that "training [of SPLs] should focus primarily on characteristics of graphic symbols and how they are interrelated". They also found that there is value and increasing importance on the way materials are presented to clinicians in comprehending symbol characteristics as they match them with their clients. The findings in this article also conclude, importantly, that "features of technology play an important role when it comes to decisions SLPs make, with the most predominant factor being the availability of ready-made resources". This provides some helpful insights to the role technology can play in the adoption of graphic symbols but also a possible constraint to using them at all.

We then have another article from Pampoulou, this time co-authored with Diamanti both from Cyprus University of Technology. This article, *Graphic symbol preferences of adults with disabilities in one non-profit foundation in Greece*, seeks to place "the preferences of people with disabilities in terms of which type of graphic symbol they prefer to use for their communication interactions". Placing the users at the centre of this work represents a welcomed change to the paradigm that so often places emphasis on the design or outcomes of using such symbols. Working with users to elicit perspectives is of huge value to the field. The authors looked at preferences related to colour of symbols, types of symbols and considered both adults and children. Findings indicated a preference for coloured symbols and photographs. The authors go on to conclude, usefully, that:

[...] the findings presented in this paper could be useful to other groups of professionals, beyond speech and language therapists, who work only with people with severe disabilities. In particular, these types of symbols are widely used in educational settings.

An important insight when considering how findings like these might be transferable across settings to support wider user groups in this field.

Next there is work from Holliday and colleagues who investigate and assess the usability and acceptability of FallCheck, a "Web app that allows users to complete home-hazard assessments within their own home, with a group of people at risk of falling and their carers". In this article, *Web-based home-hazard modification app for falls prevention: the views of those at risk of falling and their carers*, we learn details of a mixed methods approach and the results from questionnaires ($n = 33$) and telephone interviews ($n = 30$), representing a mix of carers and people at risk of falling. Findings revealed that FallCheck was:

[...] easy to use with few usability issues and the Web app was deemed appropriate to use by people at risk of falling (young or old) or by carers if appropriate.

The depth of knowledge provision and breadth of content was acceptable, and many participants reported subsequently making changes to their home environment to reduce their risk of falling. "Overall, the majority of participants reported feelings of improved confidence and safety with an increased awareness of fall risks and a reduction in fear of falling at home". Taken together, this provides a positive picture and overarching set of data that could provide beneficial for people at risk of falling.

In sum, and taken together, the four articles in this issue all seek to establish technology application for the improvement of people's lives. The work in this issue also considers a range of users and seeks to place *their* (the users) views central to knowledge creation – looking to explore *how* and *why* questions to help inform the ways we might design and build innovative technology for people who can benefit from it. Finally, I would like to thank all the authors for choosing *JoET* to disseminate their work.

Briefly returning to COVID-19, *JoET* is pleased to announce a special issue dedicated to reporting new and innovative research in the field of technologies for underserved groups, and specifically how the application, adaptation, evaluation and deployment of enabling technologies can be best applied during and after COVID-19. Importantly, we welcome perspectives from people with disabilities and how *you* might be using and adapting technologies to support you during the pandemic. Please see the call for papers link (deadline for submissions is December 2020): www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/journal/jet/value-and-potential-enabling-technologies-people-disabilities-during-covid-19-debates

References

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