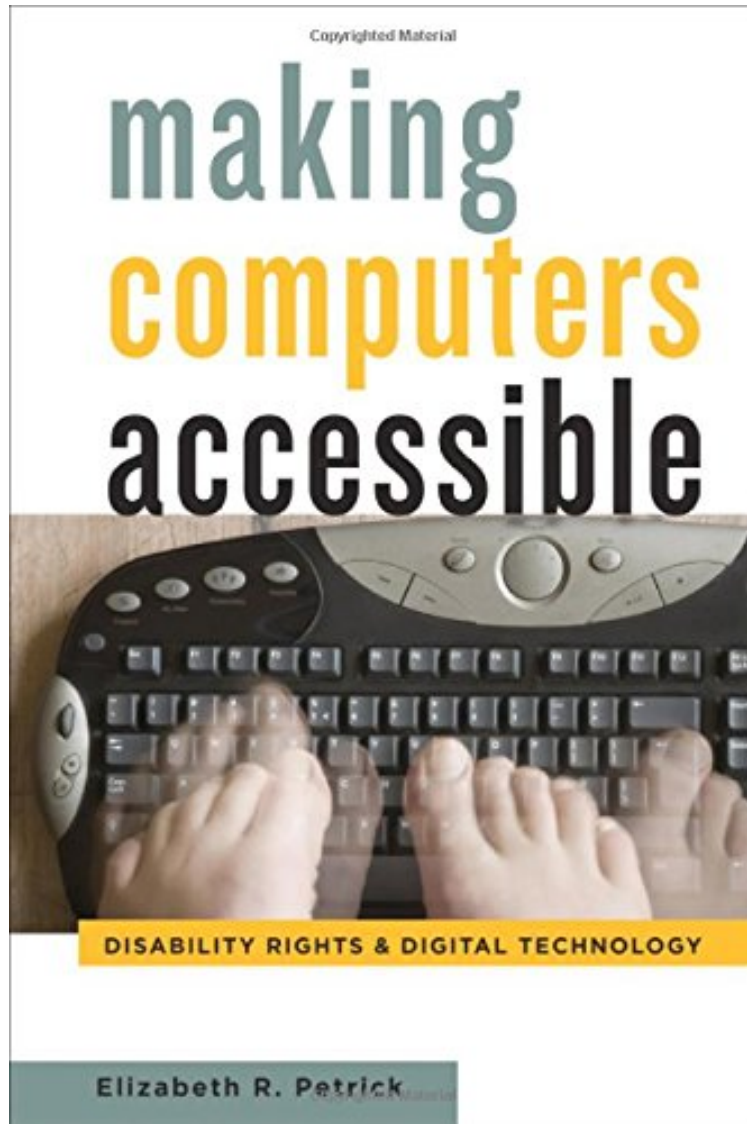


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# Making Computers Accessible: Disability Rights and Digital Technology

*Elizabeth R. Petrick*

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0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy Kathleen P.Very thoughtful and well researched.

In 1974, not long after developing the first universal optical character recognition technology, Raymond Kurzweil struck up a conversation with a blind man on a flight. Kurzweil explained that he was searching for a use for his new software. The blind man expressed interest: One of the frustrating obstacles that blind people grappled with, he said, was that no computer program could translate text into speech. Inspired by this chance meeting, Kurzweil decided that he must put his new innovation to work to "overcome this principal handicap of blindness." By 1976, he had built a working prototype, which he dubbed the Kurzweil Reading Machine. This type of innovation demonstrated the possibilities of computers to dramatically improve the lives of people living with disabilities. In *Making Computers Accessible*, Elizabeth R. Petrick tells the compelling story of how computer engineers and corporations gradually became aware of the need to make computers accessible for all people. Motivated by user feedback and prompted by legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act, which offered the promise of equal rights via technological accommodation, companies developed sophisticated computerized devices and software to bridge the accessibility gap. People with disabilities, Petrick argues, are paradigmatic computer users, demonstrating the personal computers potential to augment human abilities and provide for new forms of social, professional, and political participation. Bridging the history of technology, science and technology studies, and disability studies, this book traces the psychological, cultural, and economic evolution of a consumer culture aimed at individuals with disabilities, who increasingly rely on personal computers to make their lives richer and more interconnected.

"A deeply researched, extremely well written, and cutting-edge book. Elizabeth Petrick wisely focuses not on hardware and software but on potential and actual users; on the evolution of a consumer culture of persons with various disabilities eager for personal computers to change their lives; on major corporate players like Apple, IBM, and Microsoft; and on shifting societal values and legislation that moved from treating persons with disabilities as separate from the American mainstream to treating them as part of that mainstream. Indeed, in this first-rate history of technology, she effectively integrates developments in both hardware and software with cultural, social, economic, and psychological developments." (Howard P. Segal, University of Maine, author of *Utopias: A Brief History from Ancient Writings to Virtual Communities*) "She creatively and thoughtfully brings together three growing areas of historical scholarship: disability rights, technical developments in computing, and users of personal computers." (Choice) "By underlining, once more, how we can come to know the truth about certain claims through empirical and historical inquiries, Petrick's book represents a significant advance in answering questions related to human-machine interaction." (Metascience) About the Author Elizabeth R. Petrick is an assistant professor of history at the New Jersey Institute of Technology.