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Internet Architecture and Disability

Blake E. Reid

The Internet is essential for education, employment, information, and cultural and democratic participation. For tens of millions of people with disabilities in the United States, barriers to accessing the Internet—including the visual presentation of information to people who are blind or visually impaired, the aural presentation of information to people who are deaf or hard of hearing, and the persistence of Internet technology, interfaces, and content without regard to prohibitive cognitive load for people with cognitive and intellectual disabilities—collectively pose one of the most significant civil rights issues of the information age. Yet disability law lacks a comprehensive theoretical approach for fully facilitating Internet accessibility. The prevailing doctrinal approach to Internet accessibility seeks to treat websites as metaphorical “places” subject to Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which requires places of public accommodations to be accessible to people with disabilities. While this place-centric approach to Title III has succeeded to a significant degree in making websites accessible over the last two decades, large swaths of the Internet—more broadly construed to include Internet technologies beyond websites—remain inaccessible to millions of people with a variety of disabilities.

As limitations of a place-based approach to Title III become clearer, a new framework for disability law is needed in an increasingly intermediated Internet. Leveraging the Internet-law literature on perspectives, this article recognizes the place-centric approach to Title III as normatively and doctrinally “internal,” in the terminology of Internet-law scholars. It offers a framework for supplementing this internal approach with an external approach that contemplates the layered architecture of the Internet, including its constituent content, web and non-web applications, access networks operated by Internet service providers, and devices and the role of disability and other bodies of law, particularly including

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telecommunications law and attendant policy issues, such as net neutrality, in making them accessible.

INTRODUCTION

The nearly fifty-million Americans who are deaf or hard of hearing, many of whom have speech disabilities, face limited outlets for real-time communication, a glut of Internet-delivered video programming with missing or poor-quality captions, and an increasingly large array of devices with inaccessible voice-operated interfaces.\(^1\) The more than seven million Americans who are blind or visually impaired have witnessed the revolution of web and mobile applications pass with inconsistent, broken, or missing support for screen readers and a dearth of video content with audio descriptions.\(^2\) The estimated two-and-a-half million to nearly twelve-million Americans with intellectual and cognitive disabilities routinely face complex user interfaces designed without considering cognitive load and a dearth of content delivered in plain language.\(^3\) And millions more have motor and physical disabilities that prevent them from interacting with a variety of Internet-enabled devices and applications, including the “smart” vehicles, homes, and clothing that constitute the “Internet of Things.” Making the Internet accessible to people with disabilities is one of the most pressing civil rights challenges of the twenty-first century, with unique and complex legal, technical, architectural, and political dimensions.

More generally, the United Nations estimates that a billion people—fifteen percent of the world’s population—live with a disability, making people with disabilities “the world’s largest minority.”\(^4\) Yet the Internet—the gateway to the economic, social, cultural, and participatory fruits of the information age—has remained inaccessible,\(^5\) in a variety of ways, to this significant population.

These are not trivial concerns of luxury or convenience. People with disabilities have faced historical barriers to societal institutions that are, in many cases, exacerbated by Internet-enabled technological disruptions that render social change without accessibility in mind. Access to the Internet is a primary driver of education, employment, civic participation, cultural engagement, and more. The denial of equal access to the Internet is tantamount to “second-class citizenship” and inhibits the social integration mandate of the ADA.\(^6\) The Internet likewise promises to serve the ADA’s integration mandate as much or more than any other technological

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development, and “promotes democratic engagement and human fulfillment by fostering understanding and communication among people with and without disabilities across the economic spectrum.” Against this backdrop, shortcomings in Internet accessibility threaten to deny millions of Americans access to the economic, educational, cultural, and democratic life of the twenty-first century.

This Article starts from the premise that full access to the Internet for people with disabilities is normatively important and that to achieve Internet accessibility for people with disabilities, “anti-discrimination measures and positive actions are sometimes needed.” While many anti-discrimination movements begin with a fight to overcome overt animus, the movement toward Internet accessibility has, from its inception, dealt more directly with questions of how to overcome omissive failures to incorporate accessibility into the design of technological systems by the proprietors, vendors, and users of Internet-enabled technology.

In other words, Internet accessibility is situated squarely in what Samuel Bagenstos has deemed in the context of employment law a “structural turn” in the broader movement to fight discrimination against people with disabilities. The questions Internet accessibility poses are not matters of preventing conscious animus toward people with disabilities, but matters of constructing and remediating

7. BLANCK, supra note 5, at 40, 44.
9. The term “equal access” is often used as well, though it elides that accessibility often entails customization tailored to the particular aspects of a person’s disability.
10. This Article uses “person-first” language—e.g., “people with disabilities” throughout primarily as a matter of consistency, and not as an intentional endorsement of person-first language over identity-first language—e.g., “disabled people.”—or an attempt to stake a position in the debate over the appropriate language to use. While I interact with many accessibility advocates in my clinical work who prefer “person-first” language, others prefer identity-first language. See, e.g., Lydia X. Z. Brown, The Significance of Semantics: Person-First Language: Why It Matters (Aug. 4, 2011), https://www.autistichoya.com/2011/08/significance-of-semantics-person-first.html (arguing for the use of identity-first language). Also, this Article does not contend in depth with the debate over the scope of disabilities that should be swept into the right to equal access. See infra Section III.E.
11. BLANCK, supra note 5, at 45.
12. This is not to suggest that the accessibility requirements on the Internet have been or will be uncontroversial. For example, Eric Goldman has argued that applying the ADA to the Internet will “potentially rip[ ] open a huge hole in Internet law” and enable “jobless recent law school grads” to make “buckets of money . . . in ADA litigation against Internet companies.” Eric Goldman, Will the Americans With Disabilities Act Tear a Hole in Internet Law?, ARS TECHNICA (June 27, 2012, 9:30 AM), https://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2012/06/will-the-americans-with-disabilities-act-tear-a-hole-in-internet-law/ (arguing for the treatment of disability issues by Internet law scholars is beyond the scope of this Article, some of the economic concerns that Goldman and others raise are addressed in the context of this Article’s discussion on undue economic burden. See supra Section III.C.
architecture and content to make it accessible and usable; the answers are not merely barring discriminatory conduct, but identifying specifically who must do what, and when, and how, to ensure that people with disabilities can fully use the Internet. These questions and answers are no less important from the perspective of antidiscrimination theory than those of animus, but they require a structural set of doctrinal accessibility mandates to fulfill the normative vision of antidiscrimination.

This Article aims to grapple, then, with the question of how, exactly, the goal of Internet accessibility can be achieved, and provide disability-law scholars and advocates with a lens for more comprehensively understanding that set of problems that “Internet accessibility,” broadly construed, should be concerned with solving.

Part I of this Article observes that the use of Title III of the ADA as the wellspring for Internet accessibility has led to a prevailing doctrinal approach to Internet accessibility that is rooted in a place-centric conception of the civil rights of people with disabilities. This approach advocates treating the Internet as a metaphorical “place” subject to Title III of the ADA, which requires places of public accommodations to be accessible to people with disabilities. As a result, much of the attention to Internet accessibility is centered on Internet-enabled technology that is easily amenable to Title III’s “place” metaphor. The technology most amenable to that metaphor is the websites that comprise the World Wide Web (colloquially, “the web”), which users “visit” or “go to” using their computer’s web browser. In disability scholarship, Internet accessibility has become implicitly synonymous with web accessibility.

Part II introduces the Internet-law literature of “perspectives” to Internet accessibility. Applying the perspectives literature reveals that the prevailing place- and website-centric approach to Title III is properly understood as what Internet-law scholars call an “internal” perspective, rooted in the user’s experience of the Internet.


16. 42 U.S.C. § 12182(a) (2012). Place-centrism is uncommon in disability laws outside of Title III of the ADA; Title I focuses on employment, 42 U.S.C. ch. 126, subch. I (2012); Title II focuses on state and local government services, 42 U.S.C. ch. 126, subch. II (2012); and Title IV focuses on telecommunications relay services, 47 U.S.C. § 225 (2012). Sections 504 and 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1976, 29 U.S.C. §§ 794, 794(d) (2012), and state laws such as California’s Unruh Civil Rights Act, CAL. CIV. CODE § 51 (West 2007) and Disabled Persons Act, CAL. CIV. CODE §§ 54–55.2 (West 2007), have different substantive scopes that do not necessarily focus on places. Though a full exploration of these laws is beyond the scope of this article, these laws potentially play an important role in Internet accessibility. See infra Sections III.C, III.D, and III.E.
While I explain why such a perspective is both doctrinally and normatively justified, I also describe the shortcomings of the internal perspective as a framework for addressing Internet accessibility beyond the application of Title III to websites. By augmenting the internal perspective on Title III with a countervailing “external” perspective, I sketch a broader framework for addressing Internet accessibility informed not only by the experience of using the Internet, but by the Internet’s layered architecture.

In Part III, I color in the external sketch by illustrating with examples what a more comprehensive realization of the goal of Internet accessibility would require. I first disentangle the application and content layers of both the web and the diverse array of modern Internet applications, including those delivered by dominant platform companies that host the content of their users. I close with a discussion of underexplored accessibility considerations specific to the Internet’s building blocks—the network and physical layers—and the class of devices that comprise the so-called “Internet of Things,” in which issues such as the accessibility dimensions of network neutrality and voice assistants arise. Throughout, I consider the role that other substantive bodies of law—in particular, telecommunications law—may play in facilitating a more comprehensive approach to Internet accessibility.


As a doctrinal matter, the conceptions of Title III as applied to the Internet most favorable to people with disabilities treat the Internet as the web and websites as places—as in Title III’s “places of public accommodation.” This is partially a result of the ADA’s inception in a pre-Internet society, where the goal of an accessible world necessarily took root in physical places. But it has also proved facile in the context of the Internet; Title III has the capacity to win accessibility cases primarily focused on websites, because websites are easy to understand as metaphorical places. This Part begins with a short history of Title III and its website- and place-centrism, and how it has driven disability-law scholars to theorize about the Internet as the Web and websites as places.

Enacted in 1990, the ADA was intended as a comprehensive and unqualified civil rights remedy for discrimination against people with disabilities. The ADA’s preamble makes explicit that the purpose of the ADA is “to provide a clear and comprehensive national mandate for the elimination of discrimination against individuals with disabilities.” 17 In signing it into law, President George H.W. Bush declared that the ADA “signal[ed] the end to the unjustified segregation and exclusion of persons with disabilities from the mainstream of American life.” 18

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If the anti-discrimination goal of the ADA was broadly scoped, its implementation was drawn at least rhetorically with the physical, built world of the late 1980s and early 1990s in mind. Title III, the portion of the ADA intended to deal with the accessibility of private businesses, explicitly prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in “any place of public accommodation.” Title III likewise defines public accommodations extensively in terms of places—places of lodging, places of exhibition or entertainment, places of public gathering, places of public display or collection, places of recreation, and places of exercise. Moreover, it illustrates them in terms of traditionally physical buildings—hotels and motels, restaurants and bars, theaters and concert halls, stores and shopping centers, laundromats and banks, museums and libraries, parks and zoos, daycare centers and homeless shelters, and gyms and bowling alleys.

Of course, the legislative history of the ADA makes clear that it was not intended to exclude future technology, noting that “the types of accommodation and services provided to individuals with disabilities, under all of the titles of [the ADA], should keep pace with the rapidly changing technology of the times.” But however Congress might have intended the ADA to apply to the Internet is obscured by the fact that the commercial Internet was essentially nonexistent when the ADA was signed into law in July of 1990. In fact, it was not until five months later that Tim Berners-Lee hosted the first website, five years later that the Federal Networking Council resolved to officially recognize “the Internet” in the form that it more or less...


21. Id. § 12181(7)(B).

22. Id. § 12181(7)(D).

23. Id. § 12181(7)(H).

24. Id. § 12181(7)(I).

25. Id. § 12181(7)(L).

26. Id. § 12181(7)(A).

27. Id. § 12181(7)(B).

28. Id. § 12181(7)(C).

29. Id. § 12181(7)(E).

30. Id. § 12181(7)(F).

31. Id. § 12181(7)(H).

32. Id. § 12181(7)(I).

33. Id. § 12181(7)(K).

34. Id. § 12181(7)(L).


36. E.g., LazoR ET AL., supra note 6, at 89.

exists today, and nearly ten years later than advocates and policymakers first began to debate the applicability of the ADA to the Internet.

A congressional hearing in 2000 previewed the two defining features of the emerging debate over the ADA’s applicability to the Internet. First, the debate would center specifically on the web and websites. The use of websites by private businesses predominated usage of the early Internet, and so the question of website accessibility appeared exhaustive of the question of Internet accessibility. Nearly every witness, whether in support of the ADA’s applicability or against, spoke of the Internet, the web, and websites interchangeably.

Second, the debate would turn on whether the Internet could be conceived of as a physical “place” in the statute’s terms. Some witnesses argued that “[t]he Internet has become a place of public accommodation,” while others argued that “cyberspace isn’t a physical place” as contemplated by Title III’s list of “places.” Nearly two decades of litigation have calcified these features of the debate. First, Internet accessibility under Title III has hinged on whether websites can be properly conceived as places of public accommodation even though they do not occupy a physical space. Nearly all Title III Internet-related litigation has been focused on websites, and primarily on compatibility with screen readers for blind people.

As to the second, even before the Internet became a concern, the federal courts had split over whether Title III was limited to physical places. The leading set of cases split over whether the content of insurance policies, and not simply the physical structure of insurance company offices, were covered by Title III.


39. See BLANCK, supra note 5, at 81–82 (discussing the early days of the debate over the ADA’s applicability to the Internet in the late 1990s and early 2000s).

40. See Applicability of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to Private Internet Sites: Hearing Before the Subcomm. on the Constitution of the H. Comm. on the Judiciary, 106th Cong. 1–2 (2000) (testimony of Chairman Charles Canady) (referring interchangeably to “greater handicapped accessibility of the Web,” the applicability of the ADA to “private Internet Web sites,” and “the impact of the ADA on the Internet”); id. at 6 (testimony of Gary Wunder) (“[L]et’s lower [the bar for accessibility] for Web sites and the Internet.”); id. at 19, 21 (testimony of Judy Brewer) (framing the hearing in terms of “Web accessibility” and referring interchangeably to the “Web industry” and the “Internet industry”); id. at 25 (testimony of Susyn Conway) (referring interchangeably to the “World Wide Web” and the “Internet”).

41. See id.

42. Id. at 10 (Testimony of Dr. Steven Lucas).

43. Id. at 38 (Testimony of Elizabeth K. Dorminey).

44. See, e.g., BLANCK, supra note 5, at 82; LAZAR ET AL., supra note 6, at 89.

45. See infra notes 47–51 and accompanying text.

46. Compare Pallozzi v. Allstate Life Ins., 198 F.3d 28, 32 (2d Cir. 1999) (subsequent history omitted) (extending Title III to insurance policies sold in insurance offices and noting that Title III “was meant to guarantee them more than mere physical access”), and Carparts Distribution Ctr., Inc. v. Auto. Wholesaler’s Ass’n, 37 F.3d 12, 20 (1st Cir. 1994) (extending Title III to the administration of a health benefit plan and noting that Title III “make[s] no
That split has continued into the era of Title III Internet litigation along three lines:

1. Nexus-Between-Website-and-Place: One line of cases, followed by courts in the Ninth and Eleventh Circuits, concludes that websites alone are not public accommodations but can be the subject of a Title III claim to the extent they have a sufficient nexus to a physical place of public accommodation—often found, for example, with websites for retail establishments.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{47} E.g., \textit{Gomez v. Bang & Olufsen Am., Inc.}, No. 1:16-CV-23801-LENARD, 2017 WL 1957182, at *3 (S.D. Fla. Feb. 2, 2017) ("[A] website that is wholly unconnected to a physical location is generally not a place of public accommodation under [Title III]," but "if a plaintiff alleges that a website’s inaccessibility impedes the plaintiff’s ‘access to a specific, physical, concrete space[,]’ and establishes some nexus between the website and the physical place of public accommodation, the plaintiff’s ADA claim can survive a motion to dismiss."). Compare \textit{Earll v. eBay, Inc.}, 599 F. App’x 695, 696 (9th Cir. 2015) (concluding that eBay’s website was not connected to any “actual physical place” and thus not subject to Title III (quoting \textit{Weyer}, 198 F.3d at 1114)), \textit{Jancik v. Redbox Automated Retail, LLC}, No. SACV 13-1387-DOC (RNBx), 2014 WL 1920751, at *9 (C.D. Cal. May 14, 2014) (rejecting that Redbox’s instant video delivery website was sufficiently integrated with its physical kiosks to support a Title III claim), \textit{Cullen v. Netflix, Inc.}, 880 F. Supp. 2d 1017, 1024 (N.D. Cal. 2012) (concluding that Netflix’s website was not an “actual physical place” and therefore not a place under Title III) (quoting \textit{Weyer}, 198 F.3d at 1114)), \textit{Young v. Facebook, Inc.}, 790 F. Supp. 2d 1110, 1115–16 (N.D. Cal. 2011) (rejecting that the sale of gift cards at retail outlets formed a sufficient nexus to treat the Facebook’s website as a “place” under Title III), \textit{Ouellette v. Viacom, No. CV 10-133-M-DWM-JCL}, 2011 WL 1882780, at *1, *4–5 (D. Mont. Mar. 31, 2011) (concluding that various websites including Google, YouTube, and Myspace lacked a sufficient nexus to a physical location to support a Title III claim), \textit{Sw. Airlines Co.}, 227 F. Supp. 2d 1312, 1318 (S.D. Fla. 2002) (rejecting that Southwest Airlines’ website had a sufficient connection with a physical location to be a place of public accommodation under Title III, \textit{aff’d on other grounds}, 385 F.3d 1324 (11th Cir. 2004), \textit{with} \textit{Robles v. Domino’s Pizza, LLC}, 913 F.3d 898, 905 (9th Cir. 2019), \textit{cert. denied}, 140 S. Ct. 122 (2019) (concluding that Domino’s Pizza’s website had a sufficient nexus to brick-and-mortar Domino’s Pizza franchises to support the place element of a Title III claim), \textit{Gorecki v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc., No. CV 17-1131-JFW(SKx)}, 2017 WL 2957736, at *3 (C.D. Cal. June 15, 2017) (recognizing a sufficient nexus between Hobby Lobby’s website and stores to sustain a Title III claim), \textit{Gil v. Winn Dixie Stores, Inc.}, 242 F. Supp. 3d 1315, 1321 (S.D. Fla. 2017) (concluding that Winn-Dixie’s website had a sufficient nexus to its physical grocery stores to uphold a Title III claim), \textit{and} \textit{Nat’l Fed’n of the Blind v. Target Corp.}, 452 F. Supp.
2. Standalone-Websites-as-Place: A second line of cases, followed by courts in the First, Second, and Seventh Circuits, concludes that even standalone websites can comfortably be considered places of public accommodation under Title III. The common thread of reasoning in these cases is that websites can be "analogous to a brick-and-mortar store or other venue that provides similar services."49

3. Physical Places Only (No Websites): A third line of cases, followed in the Third Circuit, concludes that websites cannot be treated as public accommodations even with a nexus to a physical place of public accommodation.50

As a result of this uncertainty, many Title III website cases settle prior to judicial resolution.51

2d 946, 954–55 (N.D. Cal. 2006) (accepting a Title III claim against Target’s website, which the court deemed “heavily integrated with [Target’s] brick-and-mortar stores and operating in many ways as a gateway to the stores”); compare Stern v. Sony Corp. of Am., 459 F. App’x 609, 610 (9th Cir. 2011) (rejecting a sufficient connection between the accessibility of Sony’s video games with its video game conventions and retail stores), with Rendon v. Valleycrest Prods., 294 F.3d 1279, 1285 (11th Cir. 2002) (upholding a Title III challenge to an off-site screening process for a game show).

48. E.g., Morgan v. Joint Admin. Bd., 268 F.3d 456, 459 (7th Cir. 2001) (rejecting the argument that a Title III public accommodation must “literally . . . denote[ ] a physical site, such as a store or a hotel”); Access Now, Inc. v. Blue Apron, LLC, No. 17-CV-116-JL, 2017 WL 5186354, at *4 (D.N.H. Nov. 8, 2017) (concluding that Blue Apron, the meal ingredient delivery service, is a place of public accommodation as a sort of “online ‘grocery store’”); Markett v. Five Guys Enters. LLC, No. 17-CV-788 (KBF), 2017 WL 5054568, at *2 (S.D.N.Y. July 21, 2017) (holding that Five Guys’ website was its own place of public accommodation in addition to being closely related to Five Guys’ brick-and-mortar hamburger restaurants); Andrews v. Blick Art Materials, LLC, 268 F. Supp. 3d 381, 385, 387 (E.D.N.Y. 2017) (holding that a website for the sale of art supplies was a “place” under Title III); Nat’l Fed’n of the Blind v. Scribd Inc., 97 F. Supp. 3d 565, 573 (D. Vt. 2015) (rejecting “that only physical places open to the public can be public accommodations”); Nat’l Ass’n of the Deaf v. Netflix, Inc., 869 F. Supp. 2d 196, 200 (D. Mass. 2012) (citing Carparts, 37 F.3d at 19) (noting that the application of Title III “as applying to web-based businesses is supported by [Carparts], which held that ‘places of public accommodation’ are not limited to ‘actual physical structures’

49. See Nat’l Ass’n of the Deaf, 869 F. Supp. 2d at 200.


51. See LAZAR ET AL., supra note 6, at 91 (“If the law has remained cloudy, it is in part because entities who might argue the degree to which they are subject to Title III have chosen instead to reach settlement agreements to make their web sites and services accessible.”); id.
Advocates and scholars have also become increasingly concerned with the perspective of the Department of Justice (DOJ), which is charged with administering regulations for the implementation of Title III and routinely files amicus briefs and negotiates settlements in website accessibility cases. While DOJ’s view on the applicability of Title III to standalone websites has been historically supportive, a 2010 DOJ rulemaking to implement Title III website
regulations languished⁵⁶ and then was formally withdrawn in 2017 by then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions.⁵⁷

As a result, much of the disability law literature on Internet accessibility has been dedicated to narrow arguments debating the doctrinal contours of Title III’s applicability to websites in place-centric terms.⁵⁸ Many of the articles and notes advocate for resolving the circuit split by treating standalone websites as “places” specifically endorsing several of the nexus cases and implying endorsement of the applicability of Title III to standalone websites. Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Disability; Accessibility of Web Information and Services of State and Local Government Entities and Public Accommodations, 75 Fed. Reg. 43,460, 43,463–64 (July 26, 2010) (noting that Title III’s “broad and expansive nondiscrimination mandate reaches goods and services provided by covered entities on Web sites over the Internet” and noting its “repeat[ed] affirm[ation of] the application of title III to Web sites of public accommodations”). DOJ has also filed statements of interest in Title III website cases. E.g., Statement of Interest of the United States of America in Opposition to Defendant’s Motion for Judgment on the Pleadings at 4–12, Nat’l Ass’n Deaf v. Netflix, Inc., No. 3:11-cv-30168 (D. Mass. May 15, 2012), https://www.ada.gov/briefs/netflix_SOI.pdf [https://perma.cc/7KMN-2MYG] (arguing that Netflix’s website is subject to Title III).

⁵⁶ In 2017, the administration placed the web rulemaking on its inactive list. Office of Info. & Reg. Affairs, Unified Agenda of Regulatory and Deregulatory Actions, REGINFO.GOV, https://www.reginfo.gov/public/jsp/eAgency/InactiveRINs_2017_Agenda_Update.pdf [https://perma.cc/UN8B-6Q6J].


⁵⁸ See Areheart & Stein, supra note 8, at 453 n.23 (noting that the pre-2015 “legal scholarship to address this issue consists of student notes that invoke valuable doctrine, but are in want of normative grounding or of broader implication”).
under Title III, though some have argued in favor of either requiring a nexus from a website to a physical location or limiting Title III’s application to physical sites.

While few scholars have made a broader normative case for applying the ADA to the Internet, some recent scholarship has sought to articulate a theory for Internet accessibility rooted in terms of civil and human rights, including the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.


60. E.g., Michael Goldfarb, Access Now, Inc. v. Southwest Airlines, Co.—Using the “Nexus” Approach to Determine Whether a Website Should be Governed by the Americans with Disabilities Act, 79 ST. JOHN’S L. REV. 1313, 1317 (2005) (arguing for applying the nexus approach); Richard E. Moberly, The Americans with Disabilities Act in Cyberspace: Applying the ‘Nexus’ Approach to Private Internet Websites, 55 MERCER L. REV. 963, 978–79 (2004) (same); see also Michael P. Anderson, Ensuring Equal Access to the Internet for the Elderly: The Need to Amend Title III of the ADA, 19 ELDER L.J. 159, 181 (2011) (acknowledging the nexus test but recommending amending the ADA to broaden Title III’s reach); Jonathan Bick, Americans with Disabilities Act and the Internet, 10 ALB. L.J. SCI. & TECH. 205, 225 (2000) (discussing the possibility of the nexus test); see also Samuel H. Ruddy, Websites, Apps, Accessibility, and Extraterritoriality Under Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act, 108 GEO. L. J. ONLINE 80, 101–02 (2019) (arguing that the nexus requirement should also apply to the data centers in which websites are hosted to address extraterritoriality considerations).


62. Areheart & Stein, supra note 8, at 453 n.23; see also Michael Waterstone, The Untold Story of the Rest of the Americans with Disabilities Act, 58 VAND. L. REV. 1807, 1811–12 (2005) (noting that the majority of “high-profile” disability scholarship is focused on Title I of the ADA).
on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)\textsuperscript{63} and First Amendment values of freedom of information, democratic self-governance, personal autonomy, and self-expression.\textsuperscript{64} But that theory, too, has expressly equated Internet accessibility with website accessibility.\textsuperscript{65} Bradley Areheart and Michael Stein specifically declare in \textit{Integrating the Internet} that their version of “‘Internet accessibility’ . . . is principally concerned with the opportunity to traverse and navigate the Internet, which means mediating and utilizing the Internet’s constituent websites.”\textsuperscript{66} Victoria Ekstrand acknowledges the importance of Internet accessibility in other contexts, such as devices and networks, but declares the proliferation of cases under Title III warrants a specific focus on websites.\textsuperscript{67} Peter Blanck likewise speaks primarily to the importance of making “web content” accessible.\textsuperscript{68}

Likewise, recent Internet accessibility scholarship has advocated for web accessibility in explicitly place-centric terms, even beyond those imposed by Title III itself. Areheart and Stein argue in \textit{Integrating the Internet} that the ADA should be interpreted broadly to cover the Internet by channeling disability pioneer Jacobus tenBroek’s seminal (and pre-ADA) right “to live in the world” to a right to “live in the Internet.”\textsuperscript{69} Areheart and Stein argue that “[f]or a growing number of people, the Internet is their world—a place where one can do nearly everything one needs or wants to do.”\textsuperscript{70} Ekstrand argues that “the Internet serves as another important place of public accommodation for disabled citizens,” citing the Supreme Court’s holding

\begin{quote}
63. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities art. 21, Dec. 13, 2006, 2515 U.N.T.S. 44910 (requiring member states to “take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities can exercise the right to freedom of expression and opinion, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas on an equal basis with others and through all forms of communication of their choice,” including “urging private entities” and “encouraging the mass media” to make their information and services accessible, “including through the Internet”).


66. Areheart & Stein, supra note 8, at 452 n.20 (emphasis added).

67. Ekstrand, supra note 64, at 430.

68. BLANCK, supra note 5, at 14–15.

69. Areheart & Stein, supra note 8, at 456–57 (citing tenBroek, supra note 19, at 843, 847–48).

70. \textit{Id. at 456, 458 (emphasis added) (criticizing the “digital architectural barriers [that] are springing up every day to undermine Title III’s normative social integration mandate.”). But see Burgdorf, supra note 54, at 284–85 (“From my perspective, the overemphasis on ‘place’ in Title III [web cases] is misplaced.”).}
in *Packingham v. North Carolina* that websites are “the principal sources for . . . speaking and listening in the modern public square.”  

Blanck similarly points to the Supreme Court’s description of the web as a “sprawling mall offering goods and services” in *Reno v. ACLU* as an “encouraging” metaphor for resolving Title III’s applicability to websites.  

Both litigation and academic efforts to address Internet accessibility have consistently cast the web as a proxy for the Internet and conceptualized websites as places under the meaning of Title III. In the next Part, I position Title III in the context of Internet law’s internal/external perspectives literature to unpack the consequences of disability advocates’ and scholars’ place- and website-centric approach.

II. INTERNAL/EXTERNAL PERSPECTIVES ON INTERNET ACCESSIBILITY: WEBSITE-CENTRISM VS. LAYER-CONSCIOUSNESS

The metaphysical place-ness of websites, driven by the website-centricity of prevailing approaches to Title III, has emerged as perhaps the most critical question of the ADA’s applicability to the Internet. However, the question of place is not a novel one to Internet-law scholars, who routinely confront similar questions in a variety of bodies of law. Internet-law scholars have framed questions of the Internet’s place-ness in terms of internal and external perspectives.

In this Part, I begin by introducing the perspectives literature and explaining why the prevailing place- and website-centric approach to Title III is properly understood as an internal perspective—and why such a perspective is both doctrinally and normatively justified. I turn, however, to considering what an internal perspective on Internet accessibility leaves out—namely, a framework for addressing Internet accessibility beyond websites—and use the external perspective to flesh out a broader framework for addressing Internet accessibility with a broader conception of the Internet’s layered architecture.

A. Title III’s Place- and Website-Centricity as an Internal Perspective

As Tim Wu notes, “[l]egal thinkers, no strangers to metaphor, took immediately to the idea of Cyberspace as a place” when beginning to confront Internet-law problems in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Julie Cohen explains that, as a result, Internet-law scholars have engaged in a “full-blown debate about the merits of cyberspatial reasoning and rhetoric.”

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72. Blanck, *supra* note 5, at 84 (citing *Reno v. ACLU*, 521 U.S. 844, 853 (1997)) (emphasis added) (“The Web is thus comparable, *from the readers’ viewpoint*, to both a vast library including millions of readily available and indexed publications and a sprawling mall offering goods and services.”).
Orin Kerr has framed questions of “whether we look to physical reality or virtual reality for guidance” as the problem of perspective. These questions arise in the context of examples in computer crime and the Fourth Amendment, the governance abstract, but I conceive of it as a place nonetheless. Let me be bolder: though you may have never consciously thought about the proposition, you also conceive of cyberspace as a place. Let me go further and suggest that all legislators, judges, and lawyers unconsciously think that cyberspace is a place, even though at times they may argue vehemently that it is not.\footnote{Orin S. Kerr, The Problem of Perspective in Internet Law, 91 GEO. L.J. 357, 357 (2003); see also Stephanie A. Gore, “A Rose by Any Other Name”: Judicial Use of Metaphors for New Technologies, 2003 U. ILL. J.L. TECH. & POL’Y 403, 416 (2003); Lyria Bennett Moses, Recurring Dilemmas: The Law’s Race to Keep up with Technological Change, 2007 U. ILL. J.L. TECH. & POL’Y 239, 255–56 (2007).}

of virtual worlds and virtual reality, the law of robotics, intellectual property law, privacy law, and even Internet taxation law.

Kerr’s critical insight, which has framed much of this debate, is to divide perspectives of the Internet into a dichotomy of internal and external perspectives. The internal perspective “adopts the point of view of a user who is logged on to the Internet and chooses to accept the virtual world of cyberspace as a legitimate construct,” while the external perspective “adopts the viewpoint of an outsider concerned with the functioning of the network in the physical world rather than the perceptions of a user.” From the internal perspective, “a computer connected to the Internet provides a window to a virtual world that is roughly analogous to the physical world of real space.”

Kerr concludes that the choice between the internal and external perspectives is often outcome-determinative when we apply the law to a scenario on the Internet. That is, choosing to evaluate a situation from a user’s perspective may lead to different...
legal results than evaluating the same situation from a perspective that views the Internet literally in terms of its constituent computers, wires, and so forth. 88

While the debate has never been firmly resolved by Internet-law scholars, the prevailing approaches of disability advocates and scholars to Internet accessibility have a plainly internal perspective on the Internet. The reason for the embrace of the internal perspective by pro-accessibility advocates and scholars is driven in part by Title III doctrine, where, consistent with Kerr’s thesis, perspective is outcome-determinative. Indeed, the sides of the circuit split on Title III website cases discussed in the previous Part fit neatly into the internal/external dichotomy. The cases where courts are willing to recognize standalone websites as places of public accommodation necessarily invoke an internal perspective, giving primacy to the user’s experience of the website as a metaphysical “place” subject to Title III’s requirements. 89 Conversely, the cases that require a nexus between a website and a physical place to invoke Title III, as well as those cases that reject entirely the notion that a website can be subject to Title III, necessarily invoke an external perspective, giving primacy to the fact that a website is not literally a physical place and considering it under the law only to the extent it is directly tied to a physical place, or not at all. 90

In this light, disability law advocates and scholars are justified in taking an internal, place-centric perspective at least because it has yielded positive results in cases involving standalone websites. That is, Title III’s scope—places of public accommodation—has created path determinacy, effectively requiring advocates to adopt an internal, place-centric perspective to win website accessibility cases.

Disability scholars also raise compelling normative reasons for adopting an internal, place-centric perspective on Internet accessibility. Areheart and Stein’s “right to live in the Internet” is inherently personal and focused on the lived experience of people with disabilities. 91 How the Internet works, mechanically or physically speaking, is much less important than the fact that websites are an “indispensable part of day-to-day life in the modern world” through which a person conducts all their “core life activities such as commerce, education, employment, personal relationships, and recreation.” 92 Blanck likewise argues that the application of the ADA to the Internet “[m]ore than any other means ever conceived . . . holds the promise to advance integrationalism and participation” and that, for people with disabilities, the “community enfranchisement [of Internet accessibility] constitutes tangible engagement and connection with others.” 93 Ekstrand argues for conceiving the ADA in terms of the right of “people with disabilities [to] speak, gather, organize and know each other in virtual space.” 94 And disability scholars have also identified good reasons to reject an external perspective on Internet accessibility—for example, Paul Jaeger argues for putting “more emphasis on human-focused arguments for

88. See id.
89. See supra notes 42–44, 46–51 and accompanying text.
90. See supra notes 42–44, 46–51 and accompanying text.
91. Areheart & Stein, supra note 8, at 456–58.
92. Id. Of course, how the Internet works may be outcome determinative of its accessibility.
93. BLANCK, supra note 5, at 40–41.
accessibility” because “[l]egal and technical standards are too distant and inhuman to capture the very profound personal impacts of inaccessibility on people with disabilities.”

The doctrinal contours of Title III and normative importance of focusing specifically on the lived experience of people with disabilities understandably counsel toward adopting an internal perspective and rejecting an external one. In the context of advocating for Title III’s applicability to websites, an internal perspective may be truly mutually exclusive with an external one—that is, Title III effectively forces advocates and scholars to view Internet accessibility through an internal lens, or incur substantial risk of losing Title III website cases and undervaluing the rights of people with disabilities that are at the heart of the ADA.

Thus, I agree with disability law scholars and advocates about the doctrinal need to approach the application of Title III to the Internet through an internal perspective focused on websites—and the normative need to consider an internal perspective to Internet accessibility more generally. However, as I explain in the next Section, there are good reasons for pro-accessibility advocates and scholars to augment this internal perspective with an external one.

B. Layer-Consciousness as an External Perspective

As the previous Section describes, there are compelling reasons to maintain an internal perspective in promoting Internet accessibility and doctrinally considering Title III’s application to the Internet. However, some Internet-law scholars have rejected the need to choose between internal and external perspectives. Brett Frischmann, for example, argues that both internal and external perspectives are “descriptively valid and real” and “yield important insights about the facts of the Internet and the interests at stake.” Frischmann also argues that focusing on a single perspective risks “mask[ing] important policy decisions in the rhetoric of metaphor and factual analogy.” Jonathon Penney likewise urges a less hierarchical approach to perspective that focuses on internal concerns but is also willing to consider external concerns.

In that spirit, it is worth acknowledging a key drawback of the place-centric internal perspective for Internet accessibility: it has focused much disability law jurisprudence and scholarship on the aspects of the Internet that are most readily amenable to the place metaphor—namely, websites. This is because websites can be

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96. E.g., Brett M. Frischmann, The Prospect of Reconciling Internet and Cyberspace, 35 LOY. U. CHI. L.J. 205 (2003); Penney, supra note 81. But see Cohen, supra note 74, at 226 (“[R]esistance to spatialization persists . . . largely because of misunderstandings about both the kind of spatiality that the ‘cyberspace’ metaphor expresses and the processes by which the metaphor operates.”).
97. Frischmann, supra note 96, at 207.
98. Id. at 208.
99. Penney, supra note 81, at 204.
colloquially understood even by non-tech-savvy judges and policymakers as “places” that an Internet user “visits.”

But an external perspective reveals that the Internet is much more than a collection of websites. The goal of Internet accessibility embraced by disability scholars and arguably embodied in at least the spirit of the ADA, and perhaps its letter, is to make the entirety of the content, interactions, and functionality of the Internet—not just websites—accessible to and usable by people with disabilities. In this Section, then, I use an external perspective to illuminate several contexts in which Internet-enabled technology manifests outside the bounds of websites, turning in the next Part to the implications for Internet accessibility.

As early as 1999, before the Title III website battles had begun in earnest, Tim Wu critiqued the prevailing singular, web-centric conception of the Internet as “too small to capture the dramatic diversity” of the early Internet. The World Wide Web—the collection of websites that adhere to standards developed by the World Wide Web Consortium—is only one application on the Internet, which, even in 1999, supported numerous others including e-mail, instant messaging and chat, remote administration of computers, file transfer, Usenet (a collection of discussion forums), MUDs (multiuser dungeons—early network-enabled multiplayer video games), and more. Today, Internet users can access a wide variety of Internet-enabled applications, from streaming video and audio, to elaborate massively multiplayer online games and virtual worlds, to real-time navigation, to voice and video communication, to electronic books, to virtual and augmented reality.

From an external perspective, just as the World Wide Web (and its constituent websites) is only one of the many applications enabled by the Internet, making websites accessible to people who rely on screen readers represents only one of the many challenges entailed in making the whole of the Internet accessible. While questions remain about the application of Title III to websites, a place-centric conceptualization of Title III that treats websites as places of public accommodation under the ADA leaves unanswered questions about making the whole range of Internet applications accessible—many of which might in turn be amenable to an internal, place-centric application of Title III. In this light, a framework capable of illuminating the constituent parts of the Internet in a more granular fashion is necessary.

As a starting point, it is helpful to consider the wide variety of Internet-enabled applications available today. That proliferation is no accident, but a function of the deliberate, normative goal expressed in the “end-to-end” network design argument of Internet pioneers Jerome Saltzer, David Reed, and David Clark.

100. See, e.g., Timothy Wu, Application-Centered Internet Analysis, 85 VA. L. REV. 1163, 1176 (1999) (discussing the conception that “a user actively ‘goes out and visits’ websites”).
101. Id. at 1163.
102. Id. at 1169.
103. See supra notes 47–61 and accompanying text.
104. See Wu, supra note 100, at 1164–65 (citing J. H. Saltzer, D. P. Reed & D. D. Clark, End-to-End Arguments in System Design, 2 ACM TRANSACTIONS ON COMPUTER SYSTEMS 277 (1984)).
endpoints of a network, leaving to the network itself no more than the job of carrying application data from one point to another.\textsuperscript{105}

As a result, the modern Internet uses a layered design where, in oversimplified terms, arbitrary applications can ride atop a set of common basic data transmission protocols (most famously, the Internet Protocol (IP)) which in turn, can be used to encapsulate data for transmission across any number of arbitrary, interconnected physical networks—whether coaxial cable networks, the copper telephone network, fiber-optic cable networks, or terrestrial or satellite wireless networks.\textsuperscript{106} In other words, the Internet Protocol, administered by Internet access service, backbone, and other providers, serves as a digital common language for any user on the Internet to use any application—whether sending an e-mail, requesting the contents of a website, or downloading a file—to communicate with any other user on the Internet, with both users having the flexibility to use any Internet access provider with the comfort of knowing that the “network of networks” will ultimately convey the communication from one endpoint to the other. This layered architecture has resulted in what Jonathan Zittrain has termed “generativity”—the Internet’s “capacity to produce unanticipated change through unfiltered contributions from broad and varied audiences.”\textsuperscript{107} These contributions materialize in the aforementioned proliferation of applications.\textsuperscript{108}

Multiple generations of Internet-law scholars have advocated for addressing societal problems on the Internet with a nuanced understanding of this layered architecture.\textsuperscript{109} Though the full implications of the layered model (and the conception

\textsuperscript{105} See Saltzer et al., supra note 104.


\textsuperscript{107} JONATHAN ZITTRAIN, THE FUTURE OF THE INTERNET—AND HOW TO STOP IT 70–71 (2007); see also James Grimmelmann & Paul Ohm, Dr. Generative Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the iPhone, 69 Md. L. REV. 910, 926 (2010) (noting the importance of generativity on computers connected to the Internet).

\textsuperscript{108} See ZITTRAIN, supra note 107, at 70–71.

of the layers themselves) are hotly debated and beyond the scope of this Article, three insights are worth noting for the purposes of accessibility law: the principles of layer separation, minimizing layer crossing, and application-centered analysis.

First, as Larry Solum and Minn Chung have emphasized, the layered architecture of the Internet is not merely a description of the Internet, but a normative manifestation of the end-to-end principle—that is, the Internet not only is layered, but was designed to be and should remain so.\textsuperscript{110} Second, as a result, Solum and Chung argue, regulatory regimes governing the Internet should, where possible, respect and maintain the layered architecture of the Internet by targeting regulations directly at the layers where problems occur—what Solum and Chung call the principle of layer separation.\textsuperscript{111} Where that is impossible, regulatory regimes should target regulations as proximately as possible to those problems—what Solum and Chung call the principle of minimizing layer crossing.\textsuperscript{112} As I explain in the next Part, these principles are important considerations for Internet accessibility because they counsel toward both ensuring a full accounting of accessibility problems across the full scope of the Internet and strive to ensure that people with disabilities can access Internet technologies of their own choosing on their own terms rather than being relegated to an isolated “accessible” subset of the Internet—though they are challenged by the economics of making applications and content accessible at scale.\textsuperscript{113}

Third, Wu and others make clear that the panoply of Internet-enabled applications vary widely in terms of their social salience and attendant problems.\textsuperscript{114} As a result, different applications require different analytical frames and the problems those frames reveal require different interventions—what Wu terms “application-centered analysis.”\textsuperscript{115} As I explain in the next Part, accessibility issues manifest in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{110} Solum & Chung, supra note 109, at 849–51.
\item \textsuperscript{111} Id. at 851.
\item \textsuperscript{113} See infra Part. III
\item \textsuperscript{114} See Jack M. Balkin, \textit{The Path of Robotics Law}, 6 CALIF. L. REV. CIRCUIT 45, 46 (2015) ("When we consider how a new technology affects law, our focus should not be on what is essential about the technology but on what features of social life the technology makes newly salient."); Wu, supra note 100, at 1164.
\item \textsuperscript{115} Wu, supra note 100; \textit{see also} Lessig, supra note 109, at 519.
\end{itemize}
significantly different ways across different applications that warrant different interventions.

The principles of layer separation, minimizing layer crossing, and application-centered analysis demand a more concrete account of the relevant layers. Though more specific models describe in detail how traffic flows over the Internet, Internet-law scholars have frequently invoked a simplified model with four distinct layers, visualized vertically and adjacent in a “stack” format (the “layer stack”), which are worth contemplating for the purpose of Internet accessibility:

1. The distinct **content layer** articulated by Yochai Benkler and others,\(^\text{118}\) which disentangles the individual pieces of content transmitted within each application—the individual websites (content) comprising the World Wide Web (application), the individual articles (content) comprising Wikipedia (application), the individual messages (content) sent via e-mail (application), the individual videos (content) served up via a streaming video service (application), and so on.

2. The **application layer** emphasized by Wu, encapsulating the various applications that facilitate the delivery of content to and from users—streaming video, e-mail, instant messaging, VoIP, etc.—with which users interact.

3. The **network (protocol) layer**, primarily encapsulating the Internet Protocol and related protocols that structure the underlying transmissions required to operate the applications, which are administered by Internet access service, backbone, and other network providers.


\(^{117}\) But see Werbach, *supra* note 109, at 59 (arguing for the importance of the logical and interface layers for policy).

\(^{118}\) Benkler, *supra* note 109, at 561–63.
4. The **physical layer**, encapsulating the various types of wired and wireless Internet access services, such as coaxial cable and cable modem technology, digital subscriber line (DSL) for copper telephone wires, and cellular telephone networks, which carry the signals logically described at the network layer and which are deployed and maintained by various types of Internet service providers.

Finally, I posit the important role of **devices**, such as desktop and laptop PCs, smartphones and tablets, speakers with embedded virtual assistants like Amazon’s Echo, wearable “smart” clothing, and more—typically referred to as the “Internet of Things.”

Though generally considered adjacent to the Internet layer stack as a formal matter (and, from a computer organization perspective, often possessing a distinctively layered architecture themselves), Internet-enabled devices play a critical role in physically connecting their users to the Internet and enabling them to operate applications and engage with content.

Important accessibility issues arise in and across each of these contexts, which I illustrate in the next Part.

### III. A LAYER-CONSCIOUS APPROACH TO INTERNET ACCESSIBILITY

The primary instrumental objective of applying disability law in any context is to address discrimination against people with disabilities by way of accessibility mandates—and the details of those mandates are critical. As Alex Geisinger and Michael Stein have described, the “ambit of protection” of disability law depends on the extent to which the “attendant [regulatory scheme] details precisely what . . . must be altered and how.”

With the previous Part’s insights into questions of perspective in mind, I turn in this Part to augmenting the internal, place- and website-centric perspective of Internet accessibility with an external, layer-conscious view that contemplates what is necessary to ensure accessibility at and across each of the constituent layers of the Internet. This approach is consonant with the approach of Robin Malloy who, borrowing from the Internet-law concept of “network goods,” has argued for approaching inclusive design in the context of land use planning with

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120. See, e.g., Zittrain, *supra* note 107, at 69–71; Grimmelmann & Ohm, *supra* note 107, at 926.

121. Alex C. Geisinger & Michael Ashley Stein, *Expressive Law and the Americans with Disabilities Act*, 114 Mich. L. Rev. 1061, 1073–74 (2016). Scholars have observed, however, that scholars and courts spent much of the first two decades of the ADA’s existence debating the scope of disabilities covered under the ADA, and the subsequent enactment of the ADA Amendments Act, which expanded the range of people who are protected by the ADA. Blanck, *supra* note 5; Mark C. Weber, *Unreasonable Accommodation and Due Hardship*, 62 Fla. L. Rev. 1119, 1122 (2010). The appropriate scope of disability coverage is beyond the scope of this Article, though the broad view of Internet accessibility discussed in this Article naturally implies support for accessibility requirements across at least the full range of disabilities covered by the ADA and ADAAA.
an understanding of the network goods, services, businesses, housing, neighborhoods, and civil and cultural activities of cities.\(^{122}\)

As the foregoing sections of this Article imply, Geisinger and Stein’s question of “what”—i.e., the relevant scope of Internet-enabled technology that is or must be covered by disability law—predominates this layer-conscious analysis. As this Part notes throughout, questions of the ultimate scope of Title III arise and must also be augmented by consideration of the role of other titles of the ADA, other disability laws, and other consumer protection laws,\(^{123}\) particularly the provisions of telecommunications law administered by the Federal Communications Commission.

Geisinger and Stein’s question of “how”—the technical details of the changes that accessibility requires, from screen reader compatibility to closed captions to audio description to intermediated relay services to plain-language versions of content—also enters the discussion to some degree,\(^{124}\) though their technical complexity leaves a complete exploration beyond the scope of this Article. While the Title III cases discussed above are primarily focused on the basic issue of screen reader compatibility with websites, what is required to make the whole Internet accessible to people with a range of disabilities raises a broader set of questions about how to address the accessibility of the wide variety of content, applications, networks, and devices that comprise the Internet. Each of these details—and their causal relationship with enabling people with disabilities to use the corresponding “place of public accommodation,” or not—fit neatly in what technology law scholars call “affordances” and “disaffordances” (i.e., how the relationship between a technology and its user facilitates or inhibits particular actions or behaviors by the user).\(^{125}\)

Most importantly, though, this Part adds to the usual questions of “what” and “how” a significant focus the question of “who”—i.e., which people or entities bear the responsibility for accessibility mandates. While disability scholars and advocates often discuss accessibility in terms of a right for people with disabilities, to whom

\(^{122}\) ROBIN PAUL MALLOY, LAND USE LAW AND DISABILITY 197–200 (Peter Blanck & Robin Paul Malloy eds., 2015).


\(^{124}\) Geisinger and Stein note by way of example that “in the context of a medical provider’s examination room, [Title III regulations] mandate[] exact details as to the height of examination tables, the amount of floor space (including wheelchair turning space), the width of doors, and appropriate examination tables, scales, radiographic equipment, lifts and gurneys, and the extent of staff training.” Geisinger & Stein, supra note 121.

the corresponding duty belongs is a critical question. While the answer is often the easily identified corporate proprietor of a website in Title III cases, the layered nature of the Internet means that the internal perspective of using an application or experiencing content may obscure that there are multiple actors involved in its provision. Because the question of who bears responsibility for accessibility—whether from a legal, normative, or architectural perspective—is perhaps the most sweeping addition to the usual set of disability law questions, this Part considers the Internet’s layers in terms of the categorical actors most likely to be responsible for, and thus able to effectuate accessibility at, each layer of the stack.

Accordingly, this Part aims to disentangle the application and content layers, which are often conflated in Title III scholarship and litigation, by first exploring the distinction between individual websites and the broader World Wide Web. It then turns to the underappreciated role of web hosting applications in making website content accessible. Moving beyond the web, it turns to the set of dominant platforms that intermediate the provision of content in a variety of applications beyond the web. This Part closes with a discussion of accessibility considerations specific to Internet service providers at the network and physical layers and devices that comprise the so-called Internet of Things.

A. Disentangling Content and Application: Website vs. Web Accessibility

Superficially, Title III website cases are relatively simple matters of imposing straightforward regulations on easy-to-identify entities operating discrete, self-contained applications. Most cases that successfully overcome Title III’s websites-as-places barrier require the sole proprietor of a self-contained website, such as a restaurant chain providing menu information or the ability to place delivery orders

126. Jurisprudence scholars discuss these types of corresponding rights and duties as Hohfeldian “correlatives.” See Wesley N. Hohfeld, Fundamental Legal Conceptions as Applied in Judicial Reasoning, Yale Fac. Scholarship Series 710, 717 (1917), https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5383&context=fss_papers [https://perma.cc/UCL5-VP68]. See generally Nikolai Lazarev, Hohfeld’s Analysis of Rights: An Essential Approach to a Conceptual and Practical Understanding of the Nature of Rights, 2005 MUR U.E.J.L., http://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/MurUEJL/2005/9.html#Right_T [https://perma.cc/7G86-JUFH] (“To say that X has a legal claim-right means that he is legally protected . . . against Y’s withholding of assistance with respect to X’s project Z. Conversely, Y, who is . . . required to provide assistance in connection with X’s project Z, is under a correlative duty to do so. The correlativity stipulation commands that if X has a claim-right against Y, this entails Y owing a duty to X . . . . He who has the right must be able to pinpoint another person with a correlative duty . . . in terms of . . . assistance.”); Pierre Schlag, How to Do Things with Hohfeld, 78 LAW & CONTEMP. PROBS. 185, 200 (2015) (describing the relations of jural correlatives).

127. Jacqueline Lipton has described these actors as “Internet intermediaries” who intermediate and facilitate essentially all online experiences. Lipton, supra note 74, at 1342–43.

online, an online retail store selling goods, or a brick-and-mortar retail store providing a complementary website for its in-store services, to remediate a website’s structure to be compatible with screen reader software for users who are blind or visually impaired. The what, who, and how seem on first blush to be relatively simple for these websites—Title III compels their proprietors to make them accessible to blind people.

But even for sole-proprietor websites, the questions of who and how are more complex, viewed from an external perspective, than they might initially appear from an internal perspective of the user's experience. While individual websites can be conceptualized as discrete applications, they can also be conceptualized collectively as the constituent content of the World Wide Web as an application. While the web is decentralized in the sense that there is no single proprietor of every website, the web is centralized in the sense that websites use a common set of technologies, specified in standards developed by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) and other standards-setting organizations. These standards include Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) and Cascading Style Sheets (CSS), which enable the design of the universal web browsers we use to view websites without the need for specialized software specific to individual websites.

The accessibility of individual websites, then, is dependent not only on the architecture implemented by their proprietors, but on the centralized development of standards that facilitate accessibility. The W3C has developed voluntary guidelines for web accessibility, called the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG),

which generally specify how websites can be developed in a way that is accessible
to people with disabilities.\(^{135}\) The WCAG standards\(^ {136}\) require that websites be:

1. \textit{Perceivable} by users with disabilities\(^ {137}\)—for example, by providing
text alternatives for images for users who are blind or visually impaired\(^ {138}\) or avoiding the use of color contrasts that cannot be viewed by users who are colorblind;\(^ {139}\)

2. \textit{Operable} by users with disabilities\(^ {140}\)—for example, by structuring the site to allow navigation with a keyboard so that users who are blind or visually impaired need not use a graphical input mechanism like a mouse\(^ {141}\) and avoiding the use of flashing graphics that might cause seizures for users with epilepsy;\(^ {142}\)

3. \textit{Understandable} by users with disabilities\(^ {143}\)—for example, by providing a mechanism for identifying definitions of unusual idioms and jargon that may pose difficulty to users with cognitive or intellectual disabilities;\(^ {144}\) and

4. \textit{Robust} in their compatibility with different assistive technologies.\(^ {145}\)

The standards are divided into three levels of “conformance”—A, AA, and AAA—which include increasingly rigorous requirements.\(^ {146}\)

At the outset, WCAG’s governance raises an important disconnect: while the duty of website accessibility under U.S. law at least arguably falls on the proprietors of websites \textit{qua} places under Title III, the meaning of accessibility across the entire web is primarily set, if at all, by an international standards-setting organization that

\(^{135}\) See generally LAZAR ET AL., supra note 6, at 60–65; Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) Overview, W3C, https://www.w3.org/WAI/standards-guidelines/wcag/ [https://perma.cc/YL4W-MUG3]. Though their details are beyond the scope of this Article, the W3C has also developed additional guidelines for User Agents (UAAG) and Accessible Rich Internet Applications (ARIA).

\(^{136}\) For the most recent version of WCAG, see Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1, W3C (June 5, 2018), https://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG21/ [https://perma.cc/9LUJ-36MD], though many website accessibility cases refer to the previous version of the standard, Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0, W3C (Dec. 11, 2008), https://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20/ [https://perma.cc/7CR2-QMT2].


\(^{138}\) Id. § 1.1.
\(^{139}\) Id. § 1.4.
\(^{140}\) Id. § 2.
\(^{141}\) Id. § 2.1.
\(^{142}\) Id. § 2.3.
\(^{143}\) Id. § 3.
\(^{144}\) Id. § 3.1.3.
\(^{145}\) Id. § 4.
\(^{146}\) Id. § 5.2.1.
is not subject to Title III. That is, the accessibility obligations of websites at the content layer are dependent on standards independently developed for the web at the application layer by an entity, the W3C, which is never a party to Title III website accessibility litigation.147

The role of the WCAG standards has raised nontrivial concerns about what exactly is required to make a website legally accessible. For example, the Central District of Florida in Robles recently dismissed a complaint against Domino’s Pizza on due process grounds because of the lack of clarity on what standards would suffice for web accessibility.148—though the holding was reversed149 and other courts have reached the opposite conclusion.150 The Robles district court cited the lack of resolution in the DOJ’s now-withdrawn rulemaking for website standards,151 which specifically raised (but did not resolve) the question of whether and which level of WCAG standards should be formally incorporated into the DOJ’s Title III regulations for websites.152 While advocates have cheered the reversal of Robles, the lack of clarity about the extent of WCAG’s applicability has hindered the viability and longevity of other Title III victories when questions arise about the standard of conduct that Title III imposes on websites—highly technical questions which generalist federal court judges seem poorly equipped to answer.153

Even if WCAG is ultimately able to be incorporated into DOJ’s rules and administered by federal courts, questions remain about its suitability. Peter Blanck has criticized reliance on WCAG and other standards alone as insufficient to serve the underlying goal of web “equality” for all people with disabilities, noting in particular that the approach of evaluating website compliance with WCAG standards emphasizes accessibility of website content for people with sensory disabilities at the expense of website usability for people with cognitive and intellectual disabilities.154 And WCAG has substantive accessibility shortcomings in the area of media accessibility; for example, its standards for the quality of closed captions are substantially less detailed than those of the FCC’s detailed regulations for closed captions on television programming.155

147. No Title III cases to date have involved standards-setting bodies as defendants or intervenors, nor is it clear the circumstances under which such a case might arise.
149. Domino’s Pizza, 913 F.3d at 902.
154. See BLANCK, supra note 5, at 45–52.
155. Compare Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.1 Recommendation § 1.2, W3C
While a full grappling with the governance and substantive advantages and disadvantages of WCAG is beyond the scope of this Article, it suffices to note that in terms of allocating responsibility, focusing Title III and its attendant legal institutions, including the federal courts and the DOJ in a rulemaking and settlement capacity, on the content layer of the web may leave significant shortcomings in the contours of the accessibility of the web as an application. At most, Title III has supported the importation of WCAG into the ADA—but neither the courts nor DOJ have demonstrated a significant ability to interrogate the suitability of WCAG in serving Title III’s goals, to alter and augment the content of WCAG to serve the goal of website accessibility, or to provide sophisticated and muscular enforcement of its terms. However well a place-centric approach to Title III can establish that websites must be accessible, the external perspective of websites as content and the web as an application raises questions about the ability for that approach to address the substance of accessibility requirements at the application layer.

B. Allocating Responsibility on a Platform-Based Web

Setting aside the desire for robust and consistent substantive requirements for accessibility across the web as an application, the internal perspective fostered by Title III’s place centricity maintains a temptation to insist on holding individual websites wholly accountable for their accessibility failures. In terms of antidiscrimination theory, that website proprietors may be ignorant about what must be done to make their websites accessible is no less an economically driven choice—and a morally repugnant one—than a choice to knowingly and deliberately exclude people with disabilities from websites.

But the layered architecture of the Internet—and the corresponding involvement of multiple entities in sculpting the user experience—will continue to raise questions about how, as a practical matter, to allocate responsibility and liability among these entities, even if the user is not actively aware that some of them exist and are playing a key role in intermediating the user’s experience. These questions are underscored by the reality that the majority of websites are not built from scratch by their...
proprietors, but instead by customizing elaborate commercial and open-source content management platforms like WordPress, Joomla, Drupal, Squarespace, and Shopify that abstract much of the underlying architecture to allow nontechnical proprietors to develop the content with limited or no knowledge of the code that is generated.\footnote{Of the top ten million websites, nearly fifty-five percent use a content management system. Usage of Content Management Systems, W3TECHS, \url{https://w3techs.com/technologies/overview/content_management/all} [https://perma.cc/D6MW-K5U3].} If the web can be said to have any centralized points of operational responsibility at the application layer, they are the platforms that serve the majority of the world’s websites.

While some accessibility issues with websites hosted by these platforms are dependent on the code and content developed by their proprietors, such as adding alternate text tags to images for use by blind users or captions and other nonaural substitutes to audio content for users who are deaf or hard of hearing, many accessibility issues are rooted in the structure of the platforms themselves, the templates they provide users, and the tools they provide to author website content. The importance of authoring tools is so significant that W3C has developed a separate set of Authoring Tool Accessibility Guidelines (ATAG) aimed at platforms and other authoring tools.\footnote{Authoring Tool Accessibility Guidelines (ATAG) 2, W3C (Sept. 25, 2015) [hereinafter ATAG], \url{https://www.w3.org/TR/ATAG20/} [https://perma.cc/3AQS-B76S].} ATAG requires platforms to support the production of accessible content by:\footnote{Id. §§ B.2.1–B.2.3.}

1. Providing authors with behavioral nudges and facilities to make the content of their websites accessible from the outset\footnote{Id. § B.3.} and remediate accessibility problems on existing websites.\footnote{Id. §§ B.2.4–B.2.5.}

2. Making website templates and reusable content, such as stock photos, accessible by default.\footnote{Id. § B.1.}

3. Ensuring that automatic authoring processes spit out accessible website code and preserve accessibility information, such as alternate text for images.\footnote{Id. § B.2.6.}

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159. Of the top ten million websites, nearly fifty-five percent use a content management system. Usage of Content Management Systems, W3TECHS, https://w3techs.com/technologies/overview/content_management/all [https://perma.cc/D6MW-K5U3].


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162. Id. §§ B.2.1–B.2.3.

163. Id. § B.3.

164. Id. §§ B.2.4–B.2.5.

165. Id. § B.1.
4. Making authoring tools accessible by authors with disabilities—a key step in related efforts to stop the proliferation of the false dichotomy between authors and people with disabilities.167

5. Promote the availability of accessibility features.168

Despite the development of ATAG, accessibility issues with website hosting platforms remain significant. For example, in 2018, the lead accessibility designer of WordPress, which hosts more than a third of the world’s ten million most popular websites,169 publicly resigned in protest because there were “so many accessibility issues” in Gutenberg, a newly developed version of WordPress’s website editor, that “most testers [examining accessibility and usability issues] refused to look at [it] again.”170 And other leading platforms include in their support documents explicit disclaimers of compliance with website accessibility laws like Title III—effectively seeking to leverage contract law to shift the responsibility for accessibility, at least in a legal sense, to the proprietors of websites that use the platforms.

Though the accessibility on a majority of the world’s most popular websites is dependent in significant part on accessibility support of just half a dozen or fewer web hosting platforms, no significant litigation or settlement agreements have yet addressed website platforms. This is the case even though Title III litigation has undoubtedly targeted websites hosted on these platforms, rooted in problems caused by the platforms rather than the platform user/website proprietor.172

166. Id. §A.
168. See ATAG, supra note 161, § B.4.1.
169. Id.
The lack of lawsuits against website hosting platforms likely is a dual function of Title III’s doctrinal focus on places and the associated internal perspective on the user experience that focus demands. That is, it is unclear to an ordinary user that a website’s inaccessibility stems from failures in the codebase of an underlying platform—a platform whose very existence may be unknown to the user. It may well be that Title III will be able to target website platforms as a doctrinal matter, but doing so will require a conception of Title III that goes beyond “places” and addresses the accessibility dimensions of the Internet’s infrastructure.\footnote{173}

C. Application Accessibility Beyond the Web

Allocating responsibility among website proprietors and hosting platforms previews the broader challenge of addressing responsibility for accessibility across the diversity of non-web Internet applications. Since even the early days of the commercial Internet when the web dominated Internet use, the Internet has supported a significant quantity of non-web applications.\footnote{174} Today, the most popular of these applications include video streaming, gaming, social media, shopping, file sharing, and instant messaging,\footnote{175} the provision of which has come to be dominated by large “platform” companies such as Facebook, Google, Twitter, Netflix, and Amazon.\footnote{176}


174. See supra Section II.B.


176. I use the terms “platforms” and “intermediaries” interchangeably here simply to refer to Internet-enabled applications that intermediate access to content. But Internet law scholars have explored in much more significant depth the definitions of the terms “platform,” “intermediary,” and related terms. E.g., Julie E. Cohen, Law for the Platform Economy, 51 U.C. DAVIS L. REV. 133, 143 (2017) (describing platforms as “represent[ing] infrastructure-based strategies for introducing friction into networks”); Tarleton Gillespie, Platforms Are Not Intermediaries, 2 GEO. L. TECH. REV. 198, 201 (2018) (describing the essential quality of platforms as offering moderation of content); Tarleton Gillespie, The Politics of ‘Platforms’, 12 NEW MEDIA & SOC’Y 347 (2010) (examining discourse around the term “platform”); Lipton, supra note 74, at 1343–44 (defining an “Internet intermediary” as “any service provider that enables online interaction through either paid subscription or general availability to the public”); Frank Pasquale, Tech Platforms and the Knowledge Problem, II AM. AFFAIRS 3, 8 (2018) (characterizing the “largest, most successful firms” as “platforms [that] ran[k] and rat[e] other entities rather than directly providing goods and services”); Philip J. Weiser, Law and Information Platforms, 1 J. ON TELECOMM. & HIGH TECH. L. 1, 3–4 (2002) (defining “information platforms” in terms of “network standards around which complementary products must be developed”); see also Ben Thompson, Defining Aggregators, STRATECHERY (Sept. 26, 2017), https://stratechery.com/2017/defining-aggregators/ [https://perma.cc/4YPG-
For accessibility purposes, a critical distinction between the web and these other applications is that the user interacts with the platform as an application, which in turn intermediates access to the platform’s content. That is, a user accessing a restaurant’s website may have no idea that the website is hosted on WordPress or Squarespace, and a user watching a video on Netflix or YouTube might not know the identity of the entity or person responsible for creating the video. And even where a user knows the identity of the person responsible for creating content—for example, the person posting personal photos to a social media platform such as Facebook or Instagram—accessibility problems are likely to pervade classes of media across millions or billions of users on a platform. From an internal perspective, then, the logical target of a Title III lawsuit might likely be the platform operating the application rather than the entity or person responsible for creating the content.

Of course, a threshold issue for holding these platforms directly accountable for accessibility is whether they can be subject to Title III in the first instance. The limited litigation targeting platforms under Title III has led to mixed results, with some courts dismissing cases on the predictable grounds that platforms do not constitute physical places. Even cases where courts have extended Title III liability to platform operators have focused on the portions of those applications accessible via their operators’ websites, and it remains unclear whether Title III will be sufficiently flexible to extend to the components of platform applications provided via native smartphone, tablet, and television/set-top box applications not so easily amenable to Title III’s place metaphor. It is unclear the extent to which other applications, such as video games, will fit within Title III or regulations promulgated by the FCC.

Questions of substance also abound. Just as legal requirements for making a website accessible to a user who is blind or visually impaired have been hashed out in significant depth, the FCC has grappled with the contours of making video...
programming and communications applications accessible to people with different disabilities. Moreover, as Peter Blanck has suggested, making the broad array of Internet applications accessible to people with cognitive and intellectual disabilities is substantially underexplored and remains a significant academic challenge in the area of Human-Computer Interface (HCI) design. Whether particular accessibility requirements ultimately will be sustained is not a given, either; the ADA’s fundamental alteration doctrine, which excludes from accessibility mandates requirements that would “fundamentally alter” the nature of the covered public accommodation, raises questions about what accessibility efforts might in fact be required by Title III.

But setting aside these threshold questions of what and how leaves the perhaps more significant question of who—that is, how should disability law allocate responsibility between platform companies and the entities responsible for creating


184. See generally 47 C.F.R. pt. 14.1(a) (2018). The FCC’s advanced communications services rules are discussed in further depth, see infra Sections III.D & III.E.


186. 42 U.S.C. § 12182(b)(2)(A)(iii) (2012); see also PGA Tour, Inc. v. Martin, 532 U.S. 661 (2001) (the leading fundamental alteration case, concluding that allowing a golfer with a disability to use a golf cart did not fundamentally alter the game of golf); BLANCK, supra note 5, at 131–36 (discussing in detail the intersection of Martin and fundamental alteration with web accessibility). Similar challenges have arisen in the context of the First Amendment, but many have been rejected by the courts. Compare, e.g., Greater L.A. Agency on Deafness, Inc. v. CNN, 742 F.3d 414, 430–32 (9th Cir. 2014) (rejecting First Amendment challenges to a closed captioning mandate, including that the mandate unlawfully compelled speech, constituted a prior restraint, and should be subject to strict scrutiny), Closed Captioning of Internet Protocol-Delivered Video Programming, Report and Order, 27 FCC Rcd. 787, 803–04, (2012) [hereinafter IP Closed Captioning Order] (rejecting First Amendment challenges to the FCC’s closed captioning rules), and id. at 897 (statement of Commissioner Mignon L. Clyburn) (“[T]he promise of this rulemaking is much more than closed captioning for Internet-delivered content. Its true aim is equal access for all Americans to the video programming that forms the lifeblood of our civil discourse and the marketplace of ideas embodied in the First Amendment.”) (Jan. 13, 2012), with Motion Picture Ass’n of Am., Inc. v. FCC, 309 F.3d 796, 801–06 (D.C. Cir. 2002) (rejecting the FCC’s implementation of video (audio) description rules on the grounds that the First Amendment implications required a narrow interpretation of the FCC’s authority under the Communications Act). See also Gottfried v. FCC, 655 F.2d 297, 311 n.54 (D.C. Cir. 1981) (rejecting in dicta arguments that the First Amendment either compels the addition of or bars the requirement of closed captions by television broadcasters); cf. Lawrence O. Gostin, The Americans with Disabilities Act and the Corpus of Anti-Discrimination Law: A Force for Change in the Future of Public Health Regulation, 3 HEALTH MATRIX 89, 97–103 (1993) (noting in the context of health law the role of the ADA in augmenting the First Amendment rights of people with disabilities against overreach by public health authorities).

187. Of course, robots may play an increasing role in the improvement of accessibility.
content hosted by the platforms across a diverse array of arrangements? Platforms such as Netflix, which purchases the rights to movies, television shows, and other video programming via sophisticated commercial transactions, pose a different set of challenges than platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, eBay, Craigslist, and Wikipedia, which allow any user to submit content for intermediation at no direct cost.

Even platforms that exercise a high degree of control over the content they distribute raise non-trivial questions of responsibility for accessibility. By way of example, Netflix is subject to extensive closed captioning requirements to provide equal access to people who are deaf or hard of hearing under a number of legal regimes. First, the FCC’s apparatus regulations require Netflix’s website and applications to support the display of closed captions provided with video programming on its website and mobile and set-top box applications. Second, the FCC’s IP closed captioning regulations require Netflix to provide closed captions themselves for any television programming with captions, which are required by the FCC for most television programming. And even Netflix’s original programming that has never been shown on television is subject to captioning obligations under a 2012 settlement agreement of Title III litigation with the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) that requires Netflix to caption all its content.

Notwithstanding the array of closed captioning requirements facing Netflix, problems still arise with closed captions, including most recently a social media firestorm over the censorship in captions of curse words that were not bleeped out from the audio track in Netflix’s reboot of the series Queer Eye for the Straight Guy. This is because Netflix, in many cases, does not create the closed captions for its programming, but relies on the providers of the video programming it distributes to provide closed captions. Netflix publicly describes an antagonistic relationship with these providers and threatens rejection of videos submitted with inferior or problematic closed captions.

188. Paul Ohm and I have categorized these questions in terms of the difference between “Platform/User” regulations that hold users responsible for content they place on a platform, and “Platform/Platform” regulations that regulate platforms directly. Paul Ohm & Blake Reid, Regulating Software When Everything Has Software, 84 GEO. WASH. L. REV. 1672, 1692 (2016).
190. Id. § 79.4(a)(1)–(2), (b).
191. See id. § 79.1.
195. See id. Netflix even raised as a defense in the underlying litigation with NAD that it could not add captions to many of the videos that it distributed out of fear that doing so would
Addressing the allocation of responsibility among even sophisticated commercial providers and distributors of video programming is not a new issue for disability law outside the realm of Title III. For example, the FCC has struggled for more than two decades to apportion responsibility for the provision and quality of captions between the providers and distributors of video programming. The FCC’s initial rules adopted in the late 1990s placed all responsibility for captioning on video distributors on the thinking that distributors would leverage their contractual relationships to force video providers to include high-quality closed captions.196 But in 2016, the FCC reassigned responsibility for some parts of its captioning regulations to the providers of video programming, concluding that relying on contractual relationships had been ineffective and frequently resulted in missing or poor-quality captions that were primarily the fault of video programming providers.197

The sheer scale, economic configuration, and legal status of the largest Internet platforms, which are constructed to facilitate ordinary people sharing content at little or no cost, are almost certain to exacerbate these challenges for allocating responsibility. For example, Facebook, the leading social media platform, is used by more than two billion people each month,198 who collectively post almost two billion images to Facebook each day.199 More than a billion auctions are hosted on eBay at a given moment,200 and more than eighty million ads a month are posted to

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196. Closed Captioning & Video Description of Video Programming, Report and Order, 13 FCC Rcd. 3272, 3286 (1997) (“Although we are placing the ultimate responsibility [for closed captioning] on program distributors, we expect that distributors will incorporate closed captioning requirements into their contracts with producers and owners, and that parties will negotiate for an efficient allocation of captioning responsibilities.”).

197. Closed Captioning of Video Programming, Second Report and Order, 31 FCC Rcd. 1469, 1480 (2016) (“[T]he responsibilities imposed by the contractual arrangements between [video distributors, producers, and owners] will not be as effective or efficient as direct responsibility on the part of video programmers to achieve compliance with the Commission's new closed captioning quality obligations.”).


Craigslist. Users of YouTube, the leading video platform, now upload more than four hundred hours of video every minute. Wikipedia’s volunteer editors have posted more than 5.9 million articles, including multiple terabytes of images, video, and other media.

As a result, disability law must grapple with how to allocate responsibility for accessibility between platforms and their users. The aforementioned principles of layer integrity and layer crossing minimization suggest targeting regulations at the layer of the stack where problems occur. These principles suggest that, at a minimum, disability law should intervene at the application layer to require platforms to make their interfaces accessible and to require the provision of authoring tools to enable users to make their content accessible.

Some of these problems are solved in principle by the FCC’s video player regulations, which require televisions, computers, laptops, set-top boxes, tablets, smartphones, and other devices to display closed captions and play back audio description and accessible emergency information. Others are similarly addressed by the FCC’s advanced communications service (ACS) regulations, which require

[https://perma.cc/7TZC-E8HP].


204. See supra Section II.B.


207. Id. §§ 79.105–79.106.

Voice over IP (VoIP), text messaging, and video conferencing\textsuperscript{209} services\textsuperscript{210} and equipment\textsuperscript{211} to be accessible.\textsuperscript{212} Others might be solved by interpreting the ADA to apply WCAG or similar standards to the interfaces of the applications and Authoring Tool Accessibility Guidelines (ATAG) or similar standards to the authoring and hosting mechanisms provided by platforms.\textsuperscript{213}

But what, then, about the accessibility of content itself—for example, the provision of closed captions and audio descriptions for video, alternate text tags for images, transcripts for audio files such as podcasts, and plain-language versions of textual articles? Layer integrity and crossing minimization would suggest that these are problems that manifest at the content layer, and thus should be solved there by requiring platform users to make their content accessible to people with disabilities.

This insight is also supported by the prospect that platforms will invoke Section 230 of the Communications Act, which exempts platforms from being treated as the publisher or speaker of content they host for the purpose of defamation and other laws,\textsuperscript{214} as a defense against Title III claims that would make them responsible for the accessibility of content posted by their users, although Congress and Internet-law scholars have increasingly begun to debate the extent to which Section 230 should serve as a shield for platforms facilitating discrimination through the hosting of content.\textsuperscript{215} The Department of Justice has also unhelpfully set regulations that excuse public accommodations from “alter[ing] [their] inventory to include accessible or special goods,” including “Brailled versions of books, books on audio cassettes, [or]”

\textsuperscript{211} Id. § 14.20(a)(1) (requiring accessibility and usability for equipment).
\textsuperscript{212} Id. § 14.21(b) (defining accessibility in terms of accessibility for people with various types of disabilities); see id. § 14.21(c) (defining usability). Where accessibility or usability is not achievable, vendors can alternatively provide compatibility with users’ devices, including TTY’s, through a “bring your own device”-style provision. Id. § 14.20(a)(3) (allowing compatibility where accessibility or usability is not achievable); see also id. at § 14.21(d) (defining compatibility). In 2016, the FCC updated the TTY compatibility rules to allow vendors to substitute for TTY the use of Real-Time Text (RTT) technology. Id. at § 14.21(d)(5). See generally Transition from TTY to Real-Time Text Technology, Report and Order and Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, 31 FCC Rcd. 13568 (2016).
\textsuperscript{213} The DOJ’s withdrawn Title III website rulemaking, Accessibility of Web Information and Services of State and Local Government Entities and Public Accommodations, 75 Fed. Reg. 43,460 (July 26, 2010), did not address WTAG. See supra Part I & notes 55–57. Some platforms have begun to address the provision of authoring tools for accessible content more robustly, but problems persist. See Antkers et al., supra note 160.
\textsuperscript{215} Though a full treatment of the Section 230 literature is beyond the scope of this article, one exemplary criticism of Section 230 comes from Danielle Keats Citron and Benjamin Wittes, who argue that the goal of Section 230 “was not to give [private actors] immunity from liability for helping third parties abuse each other.” Danielle Keats Citron & Benjamin Wittes, The Problem Isn’t Just Backpage: Revising Section 230 Immunity, 2 Geo. Tech. L. Rev. 453, 456–57 (2018).
closed-captioned video tapes, though courts have alternatively accepted and rejected the application of this regulation in the context of technology accessibility cases.

However, Title III contains a barrier to mandating accessibility at the content layer itself. The undue burden limitation relieves places of public accommodation from accessibility mandates where compliance would result in an undue economic burden. Parallel to the fundamental alteration doctrine, undue burden is rooted in the notion that disability law should not achieve equal access to a public accommodation by forcing it out of existence and therefore leaving people with and without disabilities equally unable to access it.

Undue burden features prominently in content accessibility primarily because adding accessibility features to content, including closed captions, video descriptions, text tags, and transcripts, can be nontrivially expensive relative to the cost of using a platform, access to which is often provided at no cost. While some platform users are sophisticated commercial entities who can easily afford to make their content accessible—and in some cases are required to do so under FCC regulations—many are ordinary people uploading pictures and videos of pets and children, selling household items, and writing articles and posting media about areas of personal interest—all relatively frictionless and effectively transactions on modern platforms. Though the issue has not been litigated in the context of Title III, some platform users may argue that the imposition of a requirement that they caption or describe a personal video at some cost, which they would otherwise upload at no cost, would impose an undue burden.

216. 28 C.F.R. § 36.307(a), (c) (2018).
217. Compare Report and Recommendation Regarding Defendants’ Motion to Stay or Dismiss, No. 3:15-cv-30023-MGM, 2016 WL 3561622, at *11 (D. Mass. Feb. 9, 2016) (rejecting in a case under Title III of the ADA Harvard University’s invocation of Rule 36.307(a) and (c) as an excuse for leaving inaccessible content on its website), with Order Granting Defendant’s Motion to Dismiss, No. SACV 13-1387-DOC (RNBx), 2014 WL 1920751, at *10 (C.D. Cal. May 14, 2014) (rejecting the application of Title III to Redbox’s streaming and physical video services by reference in part to Rule 36.307(a)), and Court Order, No. CV 09-7710 PA (FFMx), 2010 WL 8022226, at *3 (C.D. Cal. Feb. 8, 2010) (citing Rule 36.307(a) as an alternate basis for denying a Title III claim against Sony over the production of inaccessible video games).
221. See, e.g., 47 C.F.R. § 79.4(b) (2018).
222. The FCC has dealt for more than two decades with a significant proliferation of undue burden waiver petitions filed by producers of broadcast television programming. E.g., Anglers
The question returns, then, to whether platforms might be compelled to make the content they host accessible. The question of undue burden aside, automation may provide a solution. Platforms and academic researchers are developing advanced algorithms to automatically generate captions for videos, alternate text descriptions for pictures, and even preliminary audio descriptions for video and dynamically generated plain-language versions of websites accessible to people with intellectual and cognitive disabilities, though significant quality problems persist with many of these techniques. Relatedly, significant advances in recognizing both statutory exceptions and limitations in copyright law and recognition by the


223. On the flip side, the dynamic of at-scale accessibility raises the prospects of positive externalities, such as the use of closed captions for search engine optimization and ad targeting. While the familiar examples of closed captions in loud bars and quiet hospitals are widely known, the battle to capture the value of positive externalities of accessibility features is often contentious. See, e.g., Fox News Network, LLC v. TVEyes, Inc., 883 F.3d 169, 173–74, 181 (2d Cir. 2018) (concluding that a media-monitoring service that indexed and enabled search of television clips at scale using closed-captioned text copied from broadcasts constituted copyright infringement).

224. In proposing this solution, I acknowledge that I risk violating “Felten’s Third Law”: “Given a difficult technology policy problem, lawyers will tend to seek technology solutions and technologists will tend to seek legal solutions,” rejecting “non-solutions in [their] own area[s]” in the hope that “there must be a solution lurking somewhere in the unexplored wilderness of the other area.” Ed Felten, A Free Internet, if We Can Keep It, FREEDOM TO TINKER (Jan. 28, 2010), https://freedom-to-tinker.com/2010/01/28/free-Internet-if-we-can-keep-it/ [https://perma.cc/2YAQ-B2D3].


226. See Wu et al., supra note 199.


229. For example, YouTube notes that “automatic captions might misrepresent the spoken content due to mispronunciations, accents, dialects, or background noise” and instructs users to “always review automatic captions and [manually] edit any parts that haven’t been properly transcribed.” See YouTube Help: Use Automatic Captioning, GOOGLE, https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/6373554?hl=en [https://perma.cc/ST4J-NKZ7].

230. See 17 U.S.C. §§ 121–121A (2012 & Supp. 2019) (the Chafee Amendment to the Copyright Act, providing for the remediation of texts for people with print disabilities, amended to be consistent with the Marrakesh Treaty to Facilitate Access to Published Works for Persons Who Are Blind, Visually Impaired, or Otherwise Print Disabled).
and the U.S. Copyright Office\textsuperscript{232} of wide latitude to make copyrighted works accessible consistent with the doctrine of fair use have helped remove copyright barriers to third-party accessibility efforts,\textsuperscript{233} though questions remain about the extent to which third parties might be held responsible under the ADA or other disability laws for the creation of poor-quality remediation.\textsuperscript{234}

While it is unclear how advances in automatic content accessibility technology ultimately will evolve to address this problem, it is worth considering economic interventions to incentivize the development of tools and services that will enable making large quantities of content accessible. One example is found in Title IV of the ADA, whose provisions are codified in the telecommunications section of the U.S. Code.\textsuperscript{235} Title IV subsidizes third parties who provide relay services, which generally involve situating a human or automated communications assistant in the middle of a telephone call to interpret between a nondisabled phone caller and another caller using sign language via video, provide captions, type out text communications, or one of several other variants.\textsuperscript{236} Most importantly, the costs of providing the services are recovered from users of telephone services via their phone carriers and administered by the FCC.\textsuperscript{237}

The important insight from Title IV is that it facilitates the accessibility of an application—voice communication—by subsidizing the creation of accessible content (signed, captioned, and other adapted versions of one caller’s voice) that neither the content creator (the nondisabled caller) nor the application provider (the phone company) could ostensibly afford. It does so by requiring application providers to bake into the price of their service the cost of making it accessible, thereby spreading the cost among all users of an application. It also vests the FCC with the authority to structure the administration of the program to incentivize innovation that improves quality and drives costs down.\textsuperscript{238}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{231} Authors Guild, Inc. v. HathiTrust, 755 F.3d 87, 102 (2d Cir. 2014) (recognizing copying made in service of the Americans with Disabilities Act as a fair use).
\item \textsuperscript{232} 17 U.S.C. § 1201.
\item \textsuperscript{233} See generally \textit{R. EID}, supra note 195 (describing the post-HathiTrust viability of third-party captioning efforts in the United States).
\item \textsuperscript{234} These questions of quality circle back to the threshold questions of whether platforms can be treated as “places” under Title III of the ADA and whether the DOJ’s regulatory authority and the administration of ADA judgments and settlements by federal judges is sufficiently nuanced and granular to carefully consider issues around quality. See supra Part II.
\item \textsuperscript{237} See 47 U.S.C. § 225(d)(3)(B).
\item \textsuperscript{238} Id. § 225(d); \textit{cf.} Daniel J. Hemel & Lisa Larrimore Ouellette, \textit{Innovation Policy Pluralism}, 128 YALE L.J. 544 (2019) (discussing various innovation policy tools).
\end{itemize}
It is not clear whether such a model, or similar models such as the direct government funding of captioning or remediation of inaccessible books, would be workable for today’s dominant Internet platforms, many of which provide services at no direct cost to users and instead derive revenue through the provision of advertisements targeted using the data of their users. But these sorts of economic tweaks are one area of promise for unraveling the Gordian knot of allocating responsibility between the application and content layers of today’s platform-dominated Internet ecosystem.

D. ISPs: Internet Access and Accessibility at the Physical and Network Layers

Disentangling the application and content layers of the Internet makes clear the need to consider the role of entities at all the layers of the Internet. And a user cannot access any application or content without connecting to the Internet via an Internet service provider (ISP). ISPs intermediate access to all Internet-enabled applications through their control over the implementation of protocols at the network layer and their provision at the physical layer of the wired and wireless infrastructure that facilitates the literal connection of users to the Internet.

This Section explores the accessibility dimensions of ISPs’ gatekeeping role over access to the Internet. Recalling the admittedly imperfect metaphor of the Internet as the “information superhighway,” it is worth briefly conceptualizing the physical and network layers as the roads and sidewalks of cyberspace—the connective tissue between places of public accommodation. In the real world, this issue is often the province of federal, state, and local governments that are governed not by Title III, but by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1976, which requires federal programs to be accessible, by Title II of the ADA, which requires the same for

239. In an amicus brief I coauthored with Brian Wolfman on behalf of numerous disability organizations in the HathiTrust case, we catalogued the history of government efforts to fund the universal accessibility of content. Brief for American Association of People with Disabilities et al. as Amici Curiae Supporting Appellees, Author’s Guild, Inc. v. HathiTrust, 755 F.3d 87 (2d Cir. 2014) (No. 12-4547), 2013 WL 2702551, at *7–16; see also Strauss, supra note 235, at 205–08 (describing in detail early efforts to fund captioning through the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) (now the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)).


242. Compare Areheart & Stein, supra note 8, at 452 n.20 (“[W]ithout [website accessibility], knowing about the Internet’s opportunities and signing up with an Internet service provider would be relatively meaningless.”), with Lipton, supra note 74, at 1343 (“No one can interact online without contracting with an ISP.”). See also Ekstrand, supra note 64, at 430 (acknowledging despite a focus on website accessibility that “the question of broadband access . . . is also important”).


244. 29 U.S.C. § 701(c) (2012).
state and local government programs and services,245 and by other federal laws.246 But the provision of Internet access service is largely the province of private companies that, except in scenarios involving state or municipally provided broadband, are not subject to Title II. Instead, the accessibility dimensions of ISPs are generally governed by telecommunications law.247

Past is prologue in Internet policy, and telecommunications law’s treatment of the accessibility of networks long predates the Internet. Of course, many telecommunications networks—including radio, broadcast television, and cable and satellite television—have served as single-“application” mechanisms, in Internet-law terms, for the one-way distribution of content to people. And as the previous Section explained, the accessibility of those networks has primarily been facilitated by FCC regulations focused on remediating content—generally through the provision of captioning to make audiovisual and audio programming accessible to people who are deaf or hard of hearing and the provision of audio description to make video programming accessible to people who are blind or visually impaired—and requiring video playback devices to render accessibility features.248

But even within these integrated-networks-as-video-applications, issues of network protocol have played an important role in facilitating accessibility for people with disabilities. For example, television networks have long opposed the inclusion of open captions—captions “burned in” and enabled for all viewers, which cannot be turned off—on the grounds that hearing viewers would find them distracting.249 As a result, accessibility advocates and technologists facilitated the development of closed captions—which could be turned on or off by individual viewers—by developing standards for steganographically encoding captions into the invisible twenty-first scan line (“Line 21”) of broadcast signals, which is transmitted but not displayed on most TVs, thereby enabling the development of caption decoders to parse the invisible information and render it on-screen for viewers who are deaf or hard of hearing.250

Nowhere has the role of network protocol accessibility been more critically important than in the network that preceded and effectively enabled the development

245. 42 U.S.C. § 12131(1) (2012) (defining “public entit[ies]” in relevant part to include state and local governments and their subdivisions); id. § 12132 (prohibiting discrimination against people with disabilities by “public entit[ies]”).

246. Robin Malloy has written extensively on the intersection of disability law and accessibility considerations with land use and zoning law. See MALLOY, supra note 122; Robin Paul Malloy, A Primer on Disability for Land Use and Zoning Law, 4 J.L. PROP. & SOC’Y 1 (2018); see also Schindler, supra note 15.

247. Paul Ohm and I have described the increasing convergence of disparate regulatory regimes as software proliferates throughout various sectors of society. Ohm & Reid, supra note 188; cf. Jacqueline Lipton, A Framework for Information Law and Policy, 82 OR. L. REV. 695, 778 (2003) (“[I]t may be that legal and policy matters that have more to do with regulating communications networks than regulating information per se properly belong to other fields of law.”) (emphasis in original).

248. See supra Section III.C; STRAUSS, supra note 235, at 205–73 (describing the history of the development of the captioning system).

249. See STRAUSS, supra note 235, at 206.

250. See id. at 206–07.
of the commercial Internet—the telephone network. Of course, the telephone network, like one-way video distribution networks, was initially an integrated network designed to facilitate a single application—bidirectional voice communication.

The accessibility problems introduced by bidirectional voice communications are obvious in hindsight: an application that relies on both speech and hearing, without more, was certain to exclude people with speech and hearing disabilities. Karen Peltz Strauss has noted the cruel irony of the discriminatory nature of the telephone network, which grew out of the text-based telegraph system that Alexander Graham Bell had created specifically to help his deaf students, wife, and mother. It took deaf and hard of hearing advocates and technologists more than ninety years after Bell’s invention of the telephone network to begin the successful proliferation of the teletypewriter (TTY), which facilitates real-time, text-based communications by transmitting typed letters via audio tones over the phone line, that restored the access for deaf and hard of hearing people in the transition from the telegraph to the telephone.

Though the full history of the accessibility of the telephone-network-as-voice-communication-application is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth emphasizing that even the introduction of TTYs required overcoming discrimination against people with disabilities by AT&T, the proprietor of the phone network. Unlike the omissive failures described above, the discrimination against TTY users was overt—AT&T leveraged its dominant control over the phone system to deny its customers the ability to attach third-party devices, including TTYs, to the telephone network as illegal “foreign attachments.”

A critical step in making the phone network accessible was the FCC’s Carterfone order, which concluded that excluding third-party devices from the network was a violation of the prohibition on “unreasonable discrimination” in the Communications Act of 1934. These important but underexplored antidiscrimination threads continued into the breakup of AT&T under antitrust law and were later addressed by Congress in the requirements of Section 255 of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which requires telecommunications services and equipment to be made

254. See id. at 7–8.
255. Strauss has documented in significant detail the decades-long efforts to restore accessible communications to the telephone network. Id.
256. See supra Sections III.A–III.C.
258. Use of the Carterfone Device in Message Toll Tel. Serv., 13 F.C.C.2d 420, 423 (1968); see also Hush-A-Phone Corp. v. United States, 238 F.2d 266, 269 (D.C. Cir. 1956); Strauss, supra note 235, at 9–10.
259. See Strauss, supra note 235, at 32–55 (discussing the history of accessibility issues during the AT&T breakup).
accessible to people with disabilities.\textsuperscript{260} And as voice telephony transitioned to the Internet, the FCC extended Section 255 to VoIP applications.\textsuperscript{261} Congress eventually gave the FCC extensive authority to regulate the accessibility of VoIP services under the advanced communications services provisions of the Twenty-First Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act of 2010 (CVAA),\textsuperscript{262} and the FCC has begun to facilitate the transition from TTY services to next-generation real-time text (RTT) services.\textsuperscript{263}

The broader lesson from the evolution of the accessibility provisions governing telephony is that telecommunications law has long played an important role in overcoming discrimination against people with disabilities, since even before the introduction of the ADA. That is, telecommunications law rightfully should be considered a first-order disability law alongside the ADA, and its anti-discrimination provisions should be embraced and engaged by disability advocates and scholars.

The important role of telecommunications law as disability law is more important as the prominence of the telephone network has given way to the Internet. This is no surprise, as the telephone network has transitioned from effectively serving only as a voice application to one of the key technological bases of the commercial Internet. The telephone network facilitated the rise of the commercial Internet by affording Internet access via dial-up Internet services, which featured modems that modulated digital IP-based communications into analog audio tones, transmitted them over the phone line, and reconverted them to digital signals for transmission over the Internet.\textsuperscript{264} It has continued to do so through the use of digital subscriber line (DSL) technology, which along with cable, satellite, cellular, and various other wired and wireless services, now connects hundreds of millions of Americans to the Internet.\textsuperscript{265}

Early in the rise of the commercial Internet, Internet-law scholars recognized that discrimination was a critical threat to the future of the Internet. In 2003’s \textit{Network}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{260} 47 U.S.C. § 255 (2012); \textit{see also} STRAUSS, supra note 235, at 345–400 (discussing the enactment and implementation of Section 255).
\bibitem{261} \textit{IP-Enabled Servs.}, Report and Order, 22 FCC Rcd. 11,275 (2007) (leveraging the FCC’s “ancillary jurisdiction” under Title I of the Communications Act).
\bibitem{263} \textit{See supra} Section III.C & nn.208–212.
\bibitem{264} \textit{Amos Joel, Telecommunications and the IEEE Communications Society}, IEEE COMM. MAG., May 2002, at 6, 164, \url{https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/stamp/stamp.jsp?arnumber=1006966} (“Consumer access to data communication began in the early 1980s, before availability of the commercial Internet, with dial-up to various information services.”).
\end{thebibliography}
Neutrality, Broadband Discrimination, Tim Wu called for “a direct scrutiny of broadband discrimination,” famously coining the term “net neutrality”—the notion, broadly speaking, that ISPs should not be able to leverage their positions as gatekeepers of “terminating access monopolies” against their users to discriminate against users’ access to the applications and content of their choice.266 Considerable scholarly, regulatory, and popular attention has been devoted to the Network Neutrality half of Wu’s title and its attendant implications for the economics and governance of—and innovation and free speech on—the Internet.267

However, some scholars have taken up the important but less explored focus of Wu’s work: Broadband Discrimination—that is, the potential for noneconomic discrimination by ISPs and the possibility of antidiscrimination remedies.268 Olivier

266. Tim Wu, Network Neutrality, Broadband Discrimination, 2 J. ON TELECOMM. & HIGH TECH. L. 141, 142 (2003) (citing Hush-A-Phone Corp. v. United States, 238 F.2d 266, 269 (D.C. Cir. 1956)).


Sylvain has conceptualized ISP discrimination along lines of race, ethnicity, and income in terms similar to those of disability scholars arguing for Internet accessibility, noting that the Internet “is the premier communications platform through which public life today is shaped” and that “[t]o be excluded from all of its affordances is either an act of defiance, ignorance, or the consequence of material misfortune and disadvantage.”

The potential for discrimination problems involving people with disabilities at the network and physical layers has come to bear in the context of debates over network neutrality. People with disabilities were unexpectedly thrust into the FCC’s approach to network neutrality in 2014 when Mother Jones reported that Verizon lobbyists were urging members of Congress to spike then-pending FCC net neutrality rules on the grounds that they would hurt people with disabilities. The vague argument insinuated that it was necessary to single out the Internet traffic of people with disabilities, creating special “fast lanes” for accessible communications, to ensure their ability to use the Internet on equal terms. In effect, Verizon had argued for addressing one type of discrimination—the alleged performance shortcomings of a neutral Internet for accessible applications—with another, isolating applications used by people with disabilities for special treatment.

Verizon made the claims, however, without first consulting consumer organizations representing people with disabilities; the National Association of the Deaf (NAD), the National Federation of the Blind (NFB), and the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD) emphasized, on the record, that they had not been consulted. A coalition of disability organizations and researchers—

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272. See Eichelberger, supra note 270.
which, in the interest of full disclosure, I represented at the FCC—quickly scrambled to investigate Verizon’s claims.

The results of the coalition’s investigations, reported in filings to the FCC, revealed that the need for disability-specific treatment of applications was, at a minimum, considerably overstated, a conclusion noted in a widely shared article entitled *Deaf Advocacy Groups to Verizon: Don’t Kill Net Neutrality on Our Behalf.*273 The coalition argued that making Internet-based applications accessible “is possible on an open network and without the need for broadband providers to specifically identify traffic from accessibility applications and separate it out for special treatment.”274 The coalition noted that accessibility concerns could be addressed, along with similar concerns that would apply to broad classes of applications through the FCC’s allowance of non-discriminatory “reasonable network management” practices, and urged the Commission to reject using disability as a basis for allowing ISPs to discriminate among applications.275

The coalition argued not only that disability-specific fast lanes are unnecessary to achieve Internet accessibility, but also that affording ISPs the ability to discriminate could result in placing applications that people with disabilities relied upon in a slow lane—or blocking them altogether.276 The coalition described how ISPs had blocked the use of video conferencing services, including Apple FaceTime and Google Hangouts, which are frequently relied upon by American Sign Language users to communicate with each other.277 The coalition noted that ISP blocking and prioritization that hindered video communication by signers often occurred in places of employment and places of public accommodation, such as coffee shops and airports, arguably in violation of the ADA.278 The coalition also noted the importance of nondiscrimination in the administration of Internet access plans, explaining that the data caps imposed on many plans, while sufficient for many users, hindered the ability for deaf and hard of hearing users to engage in basic communications over video while forcing them to pay extra for voice services that they could not use.279


275. *See* Comments of TDI et al., *supra* note 274, at 5 n.13.

276. *See* id. at 4–7.

277. *Id.*

278. *See* id. at 13–15.

279. *See* id. at 15–16.
In the landmark 2015 Open Internet Order, the FCC ignored Verizon’s arguments and adopted bans on application-based blocking, throttling, and other rules, as well as specific transparency requirements aimed at ensuring that people with disabilities could evaluate the suitability of broadband plans for use with accessible applications. However, the rules were reopened following the election of Donald Trump and his appointment of Ajit Pai as the Chairman of the FCC. Chairman Pai, who dissented from the 2015 Order, immediately opened a rulemaking aimed at abolishing the rules.

Net neutrality opponents again raised the specter of disability-specific prioritization as a justification for abolishing the rules, but cited as evidence only a decade-old (and failed) experiment by the Welsh government to provide video calling to citizens with disabilities over prioritized connections. The coalition of disability advocates and researchers urged the FCC to maintain the anti-discrimination rules, noting that there was no serious evidence of a need for disability-specific prioritization and that the rules had effectively curtailed the discriminatory blocking of applications, yielding a slew of new high-bandwidth video conferencing and personal navigation applications needed by people with disabilities. The coalition again raised alarm bells over the increasing use of data caps by ISPs, which hindered the increasing usage of high-bandwidth applications.

280. Protecting and Promoting the Open Internet, Report and Order on Remand, Declaratory Ruling, and Order, 30 FCC Rcd. 5601, 5603 (Mar. 12, 2015) [hereinafter 2015 Open Internet Order].
281. Id. at 5672 (“[T]he need for enhanced transparency is bolstered by the needs of certain user groups who rely on broadband as their primary avenue for communications, such as people with disabilities.”) (citing Comments of Telecommunications for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Inc. et al., GN Docket No. 14-28, 2–4 (2017)).
282. Id. at 5921 (dissenting statement of Commissioner Ajit Pai).
286. Id. at 2–4.
287. These navigation applications allow people who are blind or visually impaired to transmit the world around them via a wearable video camera back to a service that provides real-time audio description of what is in front of them. Id. at 3–4.
288. Id. at 4–7.
by people with disabilities and emphasized the danger of ISPs building their own proprietary video conferencing and navigation systems, tying people with disabilities who relied on those applications to specific network providers and increasing the incentives for discrimination against competing applications. The FCC ignored these concerns, rescinding the blocking and throttling rules later in the 2017 Restoring Internet Freedom Order.

A full exploration of the implications of network deployment and operation policy at the physical and network layers for accessibility is beyond the scope of this article, and this article leaves unexplored, for example, important issues of broadband deployment to people with disabilities and the impact of wireless spectrum policy on hearing aids. But the net neutrality saga serves to underscore that Internet accessibility will require addressing issues of discrimination at the network and physical layers. Telecommunications law will continue to be an important complement to the ADA in the tangle of disability laws that must ultimately be applied to achieve Internet accessibility.

E. Accessible Devices and the Internet of Things

Finally, making the constituent layers of the Internet accessible will not suffice to make the whole Internet accessible if the devices that people with disabilities use to connect to the Internet and interact with Internet-enabled applications are not themselves accessible. As James Grimmelmann and Paul Ohm have explained, the value of applying non-discrimination principles to the Internet itself can be

289. Id.

290. See id. at 12–14.


significantly constrained by the failure to apply those same principles to the *devices that connect* to the Internet.\textsuperscript{294}

The desire for accessible devices dates back to at least the early nineteenth century, when Pellegrino Turri invented a typing machine and carbon paper for Countess Carolina Fantoni da Fivizzano—his friend who was blind.\textsuperscript{295} Thomas Edison likewise invented the phonograph for the express purpose of making books accessible in aural form to blind people.\textsuperscript{296} But in the Internet age, the accessibility of personal devices is becoming increasingly important as the devices constituting the so-called “Internet of Things” (IoT)—i.e., devices that connect to the Internet—proliferate at an increasing scale. The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) has noted predictions that the number of Internet-connected devices in the United States will increase from 2.3 billion to 4.1 billion between 2015 and 2020, “portend[ing] significant and in some cases revolutionary changes[] [and] offer[ing] the potential for industry, government, and individuals to reap benefits in terms of increased efficiency, safety, and convenience that were previously impossible.”\textsuperscript{297}

Though IoT devices have been described in terms of numerous and varying characteristics,\textsuperscript{298} the most salient category for the purpose of this article is the devices that people use to interact with applications on the Internet, which range from desktop and laptop computers to phones and tablets to digital televisions to devices in clothing, cars, airplanes, and household appliances.\textsuperscript{299} IoT devices enable a variety of input and output modalities, including speech and pressure-sensitive touchscreens and screen less devices that communicate with aural and/or tactile feedback.

These input and output modalities create significant potential for accessibility problems. For example, virtual assistant applications, including Amazon’s Echo, Google’s Assistant, and Apple’s Siri, are embedded into so-called “smart speaker” devices that listen for verbal instructions and questions and respond with aural feedback.\textsuperscript{300} While these devices can be a significant boon for people who are blind

\textsuperscript{294.} See Grimmelmann & Ohm, *supra* note, 107 at 926 (noting in the context of generativity and net neutrality that “[a] neutral network that connects only appliances isn’t generative; an occasionally discriminatory network that connects PCs can be”).

\textsuperscript{295.} See LAZAR ET AL., *supra* note 6, at 23.

\textsuperscript{296.} See generally id. at 23–25.


\textsuperscript{298.} E.g., Ohm & Reid, *supra* note 188, at 1676–77 (describing the proliferation of microprocessors in IoT devices). The NTIA noted in the *IoT Green Paper* that “[t]here was no consensus among commenters on a formal definition of IoT, or even on whether a common definition would be useful.” See FOSTERING THE ADVANCEMENT OF THE INTERNET OF THINGS, *supra* note 298, at 5.


or visually impaired, they can remain effectively inaccessible to people with hearing or speech disabilities who are unable to use the devices’ input and output modalities.

Internet-law scholars have raised significant concerns about the potential for discrimination in IoT devices. But few scholars have addressed the potential for IoT devices to yield discrimination against people with disabilities, largely focusing instead on discrimination rooted in the widespread collection of personal data by IoT devices and the attendant privacy, security, and economic harms resulting from the use of artificial intelligence, machine learning, and other technologies to exploit the data. That is, scholars have largely focused on the


302. Of course, some later iterations of these systems have adapted to include screens, touch input, and other modalities that may make them accessible, though this raises questions about the level of abstraction at which an ecosystem of related devices can be described as accessible—must every device in the system be accessible, or most, or many, or even one? See Ry Crist, Amazon’s Echo Show Makes Alexa More Accessible to the Deaf and Speech-Impaired, CNET (July 23, 2018, 8:00 AM), https://www.cnet.com/news/amazon-tap-to-alexa-accessibility-feature/ [https://perma.cc/WKM4-4868] (describing efforts to make smart speakers more accessible).

303. E.g., Peppet, supra note 119.


extent to which IoT devices can indirectly result in discrimination, rather than the extent to which IoT devices can be inherently discriminatory by way of inaccessibility.306

Moreover, the accessibility of these personal devices has not been significantly addressed under Title III. Title III has been applied where devices bear a significant connection to a physical place of public accommodation, such as the accessibility of an ATM at a bank or other business, a computer at an Internet café, a registration kiosk at a hotel, or a point-of-sale device at a retail store.307 Most recently, these types of cases have been brought against or contemplated in the context of so-called “sharing economy” companies such as Uber,308 Bird, and Lime309 that fail to make transportation services like cars and scooters accessible to people with disabilities.310 Title III can also apply where a device is itself contemplated as an means of accessibility for an inaccessible place of public accommodation—in Title III’s terminology, an “auxiliary aid”—such as an assistive listening device, a closed caption decoder, a telephone handset amplifier, or a screen reader or magnification software used to make the services of a place of public accommodation accessible.311

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306. However, design scholars have analyzed some of the technical and social dimensions of IoT accessibility in the context of the Universal Design literature. See, e.g., Vladimir Tomberg, Trenton Schulz, and Sebastian Kelle, Applying Universal Design Principles to Themes for Wearables, in UNIVERSAL ACCESS IN HUMAN-COMPUTER INTERACTION 550, 554–55 (2015).

307. See Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Disability by Public Accommodations and in Commercial Facilities, Final Rule, 75 Fed. Reg. 56,236, 56,315 (Sept. 15, 2010) (to be codified at 28 C.F.R. pt. 35); see also Areheart & Stein, supra note 8, at 451 (“The ADA has played a central role in compelling the accessibility of a host of software applications, cell phones, ATMs, and e-book reading devices.”).

308. E.g., Crawford v. Uber, No. 17-CV-02664-RS, 2018 WL 1116725, at *1 (N.D. Cal. Mar. 1, 2018) (allowing Title III claims to proceed against Uber’s Internet-enabled ride-sharing service for failure to provide vehicles accessible to wheelchair users).


311. See 28 C.F.R. § 36.303(b) (2018); see also Ekstrand, supra note 64, at 430 (“While the question of . . . assistive devices is also important . . . .") (emphasis added).
But Title III has not been significantly or directly applied to the accessibility of personal devices purchased by consumers. Indeed, the Department of Justice has declared that “the ADA does not apply directly to the manufacture of products,” and that it “lacks the authority to issue design requirements for equipment designed exclusively for use in private homes.” 312 And what, precisely, might be required to make devices accessible raises significant technical questions about the nature of accessible product design.

Non-ADA legal regimes have, to some degree, compensated for Title III’s perceived inability to require device accessibility. Legal mandates for the accessibility of devices and software used for person-to-person communications date back to the pre-Internet Telecommunications for the Disabled Act of 1982, which mandated rudimentary accessibility for the telephone system, including compatibility between phones and hearing aids. 313 In the Internet era, Section 255 of the Communications Act 314 and the corresponding guidelines developed by the U.S. Access Board 315 and the FCC 316 directly mandated the accessibility of equipment used for telecommunications services, such as telephones, routers, switches, set-top boxes, and home networking equipment used to connect telephone and VoIP services. 317 Likewise, Sections 102 and 104 of the CVAA 318 and the corresponding regulations developed by the FCC extended Section 255 to new advanced communications services equipment used to facilitate electronic messaging, VoIP, and video conferencing services, 319 as well as to web browsers built into mobile phones. 320

Likewise, non-ADA regimes have augmented Title III by requiring the accessibility of devices used to view video programming. These mandates date back to the Television Decoder Circuitry Act of 1990 (TDCA), which required televisions thirteen inches or larger to include closed-captioning decoders. 321 The TDCA’s

313. To Amend the Communications Act of 1934 to Provide Reasonable Access to Telephone Service for Persons with Impaired Hearing and to Enable Telephone Companies to Accommodate Persons with Other Physical Disabilities., Pub. L. No. 97–410, 96 Stat. 2043 (1983); see also STRAUSS, supra note 235, at 34–35.
314. 47 U.S.C. § 255(b) (2012); see also STRAUSS, supra note 235, at 345–84.
316. 36 C.F.R. §§ 1194.2 & App’x B.
317. Id. §§ 1194.2 & App’x B (C103.4) (defining “customer premises equipment”).
319. See supra Section III.C & nn.206–10 (detailing the ACS rules).
provisions, updated by Sections 203 and 204 of the CVAA and elaborated upon in the FCC’s corresponding rules, now require video playback devices of all sorts, including Internet-enabled video devices, to enable closed captions and video descriptions and to have accessible user interfaces.

But the Section 255 guidelines, ACS rules, and video programming rules are not universally applicable and cover only limited classes of networking equipment, communications devices and software, certain web browsers, and video playback hardware and software, and do not fully cover a significant proportion of IoT devices with functionality that goes beyond these contours. While the FCC contemplated extending its Section 255 and ACS rules further in its 2015 Open Internet Order by applying Section 255 to ostensibly all equipment connected to the Internet, the 2017 Restoring Internet Freedom Order rescinded this broad application of Section 255. The FCC has also routinely granted exemptions to its ACS and user interface rules for advanced communications services embedded in television sets and video players, video game systems, e-book readers, and cars.
Somewhat more promising in their scope are the Access Board’s guidelines implementing Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. The guidelines contain relatively comprehensive accessibility guidelines that cover all “[i]nformation and [c]ommunication[s] [t]echnology (ICT),” including devices, broadly defined—and even software, applications, websites, and content. However, Section 508’s coverage is severely limited to ICT procured by federal government agencies, meaning that it requires accessibility of devices only indirectly where vendors sell devices to the government.

In short, there exists no legal regime that comprehensively mandates accessibility for IoT devices. While industry and disability organization representatives on the FCC’s Disability Advisory Committee (of which I am a member) acknowledged the serious shortcomings of accessibility on IoT devices and recommended that the FCC conduct a sweeping study on IoT accessibility, little action has been taken toward this end, and it remains to be seen what legal regimes will develop to address IoT accessibility—a critical component of a comprehensive approach to Internet accessibility.

**Conclusion**

At this point, some readers may expect a Part IV that lays out a series of solutions for how to navigate the accessibility challenges across the layers of the Internet stack. But I hope that this article has established, if nothing else, that these challenges are dramatically broader and deeper than a single article might address. While this article has sketched a framework for addressing the sufficiency of existing legal rudiments at the content, application, network, and physical layers, among devices that connect to the Internet, concerted future research, advocacy, policymaking, and technological development will be needed to apply, extend, and augment these rudiments to ensure the civil and human rights of people with disabilities to access the Internet on equal terms.

Disability scholars have already laid an important foundation for Internet accessibility, and Title III of the ADA, the disability provisions of telecommunications law, and other statutes and regulatory regimes provide helpful doctrinal bases for achieving it. But to fully understand what making the Internet accessible will entail, disability scholars and advocates will have to navigate the

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335. § 794d(a)(1)(A).
336. See LAZAR ET AL., supra note 6, at 93–95. This approach of accessibility via procurement has also been utilized in cases under Title II of the ADA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act against universities. See id. at 85–88.
puzzles of perspective that have confounded Internet-law scholars for the past two decades.

Augmenting disability law’s traditional internal perspective with an external view reveals new angles and challenges hidden within the Internet’s layered architecture for accessibility. Considering disability law through the lens of perspectives also helps illuminate the important role that an internal perspective, like the one taken by disability scholars, can provide for illustrating the societal salience of the Internet and Internet-enabled technology for specific groups of people—and in turn, animating broad policy concerns that flow from their experience of the Internet—while showing that the external perspective can be helpful for designing comprehensive and granular regulatory schemes.