ADAPTIVE TRANSCRIPT
EPISODE 1: INVESTIGATING ABILILTY

Michelle Macklem: So we're going to start by talking about something a lot of people wear everyday…

Person 1: Glasses.
Person 2: Glasses.
Person 3: Eyeglasses.
Person 4: Glasses.
Person 5: Eyeglasses.
Person 6: Glasses.
All together: GLASSES.

MM: Do you wear glasses?

P3: I wear glasses.
P1: No, I don't.
P6: I have two pairs.
P5: The ones I'm wearing now, they're sort of like a red frame.
P6: They're kind of round; I call them my Foucault glasses.
P4: I have about 15 pairs of glasses.
P5: It's necessary, but it's a fashion statement now.

P2: When I was younger I always wanted to have glasses, especially in elementary school because I thought wow it means to be grown up and you look so much smarter when you have glasses.
P6: I would not be functional without them; I could not get by in my day to day.
P3: It's like having a cane, a walker.

MM: But are glasses like having a cane or a walker? We do view glasses as different from those things. So why have glasses become so normal to use?

[THEME MUSIC]

MM: You're listening to ADAPTIVE and I'm Michelle Macklem.

Adaptive is a series about how humans interact with technology. Why do we assume that it's easier than ever for everyone to get around because of technology? This series explores how people with different and diverse abilities use tools and technology to adapt to the environment around them.

{PART 1: WHAT ARE ADAPTATIONS?}

MM: So why glasses? How have glasses become a normal, everyday tool for so many people?

[music: upbeat, inquiz]

GP: I think that glasses - eyeglasses, spectacles - are very interesting, they're a very interesting starting point in terms of discussing technologies. I guess that one symptom of their success, if I could call it that is that we rarely think of them as medical appliances anymore, whereas, you don't have to go back too far in time to reach an age when they definitely were thought of as in those terms, in the terms that we think of hearing aids and mobility aids today still. My name's Graham Pullin and I'm a researcher and a lecturer at DJCAD which is an art collage at the University of Dundee in Scotland

MM: In 2009 Graham wrote a booked called "Design Meets Disability" which proposes that disability can provoke new directions in design fields, like how glasses have been a point of innovation in our culture.

GP: Eyeglasses have achieved that ubiquity and you know very ambiguous role, they're still corrective, but in some ways their aspirational and fashionable at the same time and actually their role depends on who you are and the culture you're living with

MM: Now that they're less stigmatized, glasses have become something that many people actually want to wear. Again,

<FX Person 2: When I was younger I always wanted to have glasses>

MM: Designers and artists like Sara Hendren a professor at Olin college of engineering are also investigating ability through their work.

SH: I teach design and disability studies and socially engaged design practices for young engineers in training. So I think eyeglasses are the most common prosthetic that people don't think of as prosthetics and so its really important to keep talking about the assimilation of eyeglasses in the culture as medical tools that at some point crossed over to become modes of fashion accessories and modes of identity and style and performing self. Eye glasses are a great way to get introduced to notions of disability studies, because once they understand, oh that's entirely culturally created what people decide is a medical tool and is giving some poor, unfortunate person a lot of help, versus a kind of lifestyle choice. I mean witness fake eyeglasses people don to appear smarter or whatever it is. Once you see that's culturally continent, then you start to see the other prosthetics that are around in the culture and go, huh that's not just biology and medical story at work, that's also, that stuffs contingent too.

MM: And Sara has been bringing attention to the idea that all technology is actually assistive, not just the ones that disabled people or people with different abilities use.

SH: If you look at all bodies as getting all kinds of assistance then really what you're talking about is again is a much flatting of the hierarchy about who has more needs and whose bodies are more abnormal or normal. What about hearing aids and what about things like walkers, these things that have for a number of years had so little design attention.

[music]

{PART 3: Aimee's Story}

Aimee Louw: I'm Aimee Louw, I'm a writer and media producer.

MM: Aimee has a prominent blog and zine series called "the Underwater City project" where she discusses issues of accessibility through talking about her own experiences.

AL: I started using a cane maybe sometime in my 20s. And so that was like definitely more surprising for someone my age to have a cane than for someone my age to have glasses.

My cane is a peppermint blue, uh like, walking stick that has kind of an ornate handle but it's also really lightweight which is nice. And it's got an elaborate design with illustrated cats and kittens on it. So I call it my kitty cane.

Historically, canes have not always been solely associated with disability. If you think of any Charles Dickens protagonist of an upper class in England, they always had like a walking stick and like a top hat and it didn't always be a symbol specifically of disability, it was also an accessory or like a symbol of status - social status.

The way that we see symbols and that meaning the different objects have shifts over time depending on a lot of different cultural factors, different objects and tools have different meanings too. Like for example, my cat cane, people are like, when they see it people are like 'oh swag cane' if they're more in the disability community. Whereas perhaps those outside of that community would just be like, 'oh that woman has a cane'.

MM: Aimee uses a variety of tools, like a scooter, cane, shoes and rides from friends to get around. But she didn't consider herself as disabled until others really placed that identity on her.

AL: I grew up with a really supportive family and an awesome group of friends. And I had like surgeries when I was younger and then I didn't have surgeries. And then I had like my own ways of doing things. And I was like 'oh cool, I'm unique.' And I didn't like identify as having a disability until like my 20s cause that's when I started being discriminated against quite heavily <laughs> and then I was like oh then that definition was implanted on me, it was placed upon me. It wasn't something that I was like, oh, like it came from personal struggle based on discrimination. So now the definition is a political one for me, where it's a way of forming community and recognizing collective struggles that we have based on discrimination or based on ableism.

MM: Aimee doesn't talk about what her medical diagnosis is, it's a personal choice for her to focus her energy on talking about wider issues of accessibility instead of her experience of disability.

AL: There's often a social pressure to explain yourself, basically. In order for people to understand you or to be able to accept you in any sort of way, they kind of demand to know what this difference is, what the identifying element about you is. And that's a lot of pressure. And that's not something we ask someone that doesn't appear to have a disability. It's kind of similar to like, when someone who doesn't have white skin is constantly asked, 'oh where are you from?'

AL: When I started using I scooter I was like 'oh wow.' I noticed a really uh really stark difference between how people were interacting with me vs. just when I was walking around with a cane. The scooter made everything, well, the scooter made getting around easier obviously because I'm driving but then the other side was that it made interacting with people, and I'm speaking generally, but just people that I interact with on the sidewalk or downtown or whatever, it made it more challenging because people, there's more stigma. I'm more stigmatized when I'm driving either a wheelchair or a scooter. Like that's just, its kind of straightforward for me. But I felt bad though especially when I started I was like oh what's the difference, obviously I'm still the same person I'm just sitting and moving as opposed to standing and moving so yeah, when you break it down I think that its kind of funny when people are so taken aback. Like oh god this twenty-something is driving what I perceive as something that my grandpa should be driving, or whatever you know?

There was this one guy in the elevator when I was in Vancouver in 2014 and I was just like going on the skytrain. And he was like hello and he held the elevator door and then he was like, 'you know your, what are you doing in that wheelchair? You're like way too pretty to be in a wheelchair. And that's another one that a lot of femme feminine people get, like too bad you're sitting in a wheelchair in that wheeled device as opposed to standing otherwise I would objectify you sexually <laughs> to bad for you! Where its like, okay, I'm actually

good without your weird sexual approval/ harassment <laughs> I mean you got to laugh right?

It's not like the person in the wheelchair deciding whether or not people view their wheelchair as a either an adaptive tool or just as part of their daily life, its really coming from the outside. It's coming from our culture, so its kind of an interesting thing to think about when we think about glasses and wheelchairs.

[music]

To me that divide between quote unquote regular people technology and accessible technology and disabled people's technology really comes from that distinction that's pretty pervasive in a lot of different aspects of our society. Say you're a jogger and you're like, oh I'm going to go for a run today well, you're going to put on your good running shoes if you have them so you can adapt to the terrain that you're going to be running on.

All of these things help people. All of these things are assistive you know? It's a lot easier to run with good shoes than bare feet.

So in that way I see that as blurring that distinction a little bit. I think its because certain types of like technological and scientific advancements are valued more than others. We can send people to outer space, technology is amazing right? So why are these very basic constructions, even concrete ramps as opposed to stairs. That's some basic, basic technology.

It comes down to certain people are valued more than others. I don't like to say that because it's painful and it sounds bad, but it's the truth like. You know even simple things like people assume that certain disabled people can't work or can't contribute anything not even necessarily related to paid employment but just that they're not adding to the social life of our society and so for them to get around and for them to have access to the appropriate home care or other tools like the right kind of equipment is seen as kind of not that important because their lives aren't valued that much. And that's really- messed up.

{PART 4: Investigating Normal}

MM: If technology and scientific advancements are failing to address a diversity of bodies in everyday life, designers and engineers like Sara and Graham who we heard from earlier are actively working on projects that are asking questions and solving problems about human capacity. Here's Sara again,

SH: I teach in a design for disability in a class called investigating normal: adaptive and assistive technologies and the class really is meant to take an investigate disposition and approach to thinking about disability. Last year we

built a piece of adaptive furniture for a woman that has a form of dwarfism and who professionally gives talks and speeches all over the place. And so she needed a lectern that was her scale and her size. So my students built for her a carbon fiber lightweight super strong assemble-able, quickly collapsible and easy to assemble podium that she can travel with.

MM: Sara calls this project the "alterpodium" and it's a perfectly descriptive name. As she describes it:

SH: It's a separate podium, It's a separate podium. It's a freestanding object all on its own. So imagine almost like a cardboard box, unfolds to become a volume, that's what happens here. So there's kind of a three-layer flat object that collapses totally flat against itself and then you unfold one part to get the legs and then you unfold the top to get the top surface and its magnetized on the inside.

MM: It looks like a small folding table.

SH: So its sort of in 1-2-3 moves it becomes an assembled podium that's got legs and a surface for her laptop and everything. And then in those reverse moves it packs down flat to this surface that she can then hoist and carry.

So typically she would've gone, you know in the past she's gone to these, to an event and she'll have to stand on steps on something from behind so she's elevating her body to adapt to the kind of what's been standardized as typical scale, but what's great is that now in real time while somebody introduces her or reads her bio she can come to the stage and instead of taking that typical podium, stand beside it and create a kind of alternate space for herself 1-2-3 assemble this podium, give her talk and she doesn't even have to say anything about it, its just made this very pointed moment in the event. Even if disability is not the subject of her talk is becomes the kind of text in the room, in a really beautiful way. So we've had a lot of really nice response to that.

For me that's another sweet spot of both a functional object that does a kind of critical and performative work too. What does it mean for that podium to come to her body rather than her body come to the typical architecture of a room? That's where I'm happiest, when those things are actually really blurry, what's functional and what's expressive.

[music]

PART 5: ADAPTATION

MM: If the alterpodium adapts the to the user's body rather than her body having to adapt to the standard or normal sized podium, how can other

technologies be adapted to specific bodies? I think normal can become this dangerous way of looking at "average" that makes people with atypical bodies conform to the standard. And remember, the concept normal changes for everyone as get older and go through different stages in life so I think that starting to consider our definitions of normal as fluid and changing, or dare I say 'adaptive' can be really beneficial…

Here's Graham again,

GP: I rather like the ambiguity of the word adaptive because I'm not sure what it means either. I'd want to hear more if anyone used that phrase to know what they meant by it. I mean I can think of lots of different connotations. So, there's something quite nice about the fact that its not quite clear what's adapting to whom. But I think its quite nice to think, what, in that complex relationship between people and other people, and environments and objects, who's adapting to whom.

SH: The way that technologies are engineered and designed tell us something about adapting the body for the built environment and also for education and transportation and so on. But also they tell us something about the meaning that we make of those atypical bodies.

Assistive technology is a really telling redundancy; it means a kind of designation for people who have disabilities or what's thought of as broken bodies in special need of special assistance therefore assistive technologies are designated for them. And again this is named in disability studies as a kind of telling bit of discourse in the culture about what cultures decide are normal bodies or broken bodies in need of fixing and in need of rehabilitation and so on. I don't shun the word assistive technologies full stop, but I do think the language of adaptation is a far more rich and generative and accurate one.

GP: There has been some really interesting discussion within the field of disability studies recently about disability objects and the way that objects, many objects are tools, they let us do things that we couldn't otherwise do. But objects also tell stories, they also tell us stories about who we are, they tell other people stories about who we are. They have, they have a role between people and across societies.

MM: And that's what we'll be continuing to explore on adaptive; how the technologies and objects we use tell stories about people and our culture. So join us, because there are many more stories to tell.

PART 6: Credits

MM: This episode was written and produced by Michelle Macklem with editorial advisement from Aimee Louw.

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If you're interested in seeing the "alterpodium" that we talked about in this episode visit Sara's website: abler dot org.

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