# designability | dispATches

The latest in the world of **Assistive Technology**

**Written by: Clive Gilbert, Freelance Research Consultant and Writer**

## Hello from Clive

### ATIA 2021 captures a sector in flux

Few fixtures in the assistive technology sector's calendar enjoy the international reputation of the the Assistive Technology Industry Association (ATIA) Conference in the United States. Every year the American assistive technology sector and representatives of companies, trade bodies and professionals from other countries flock to Florida for a week of seminars and exhibitions.

Due to the strictures imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, this year's gathering took place entirely online. I was offered an opportunity to attend as a part of the 24-strong delegation funded by British Assistive Technology Scholarship, an initiative established by Inclusive Technology founder Martin Littler to allow a selection of professionals to sample one of the world's premier assistive technology conferences.

Over 5,500 virtual attendees consumed a pick and mix programme of about 190 live and recorded fully subtitled sessions structured along a handful of key strands such as augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), education and physical access. Despite having to decamp from Orlando to Zoom, the conference nonetheless provided a vivid snapshot of a changing assistive technology scene made more complex by the pandemic.

### Making change

Some of the most insightful sessions of ATIA 2021 were hosted by people who use assistive technology. Take, for example, the presentation delivered by Bradley Heaven and his aide Dan O'Connor.

Bradley – who was born with cerebral palsy and is unable to verbally communicate – and Dan charted their relationship with technology and each other, explaining the dynamics of an inspiring decade-old friendship that has seen the duo become vocal advocates for assistive technology through their product reviews on YouTube and All Access Life website.

Bradley described his progression from symbol-based communication to controlling a tablet computer with adaptive switches and, most recently, eye gaze technology. The onset of the pandemic and social distancing has compelled the pair to devise new ways of working together over Zoom, with Dan learning how to troubleshoot Bradley's technology remotely.

The conference reflected the extent to which improvisation and individual ingenuity remains a hallmark of the sector. This fact of life was embodied by a session entitled 'AT Home Makers' wherein delegates demonstrated their engineering prowess and creativity in cobbling together everything from accessible Covid-19 masks to Zimmer frame cup holders and undroppable touchscreen styluses.

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**A transitional moment**

Succeeding in the face of manifold technical challenges was also a theme of Ohio University's PhD student Christina Corso's discussion of her study exploring the impact of smart home technology on the independence of people who use AAC. Christina's project involved equipping a number of individuals with a variety of Amazon Alexa-enabled smart home products and services and training them and their electronic communication aids to take advantage of the newfound independence that such goodies seem to promise disabled people.

The study highlighted the versatility that can be unlocked by combining AAC with smart home technology, giving users control over their environment at relatively low cost. But not without significant obstacles such as a technically onerous set up process; Christina described the tedious trial and error of getting Alexa to understand the synthesized voice output of some communication devices.

The blending of specialist and mainstream technologies was also represented at this year's conference by the strong presence of companies such as Microsoft and Google, both of whom had dedicated virtual zones boasting hours of content.  For example, the Microsoft Experience included a presentation by designer Bryce Johnson about the creation of the [Xbox Adaptive Controller](#), while Google took the opportunity to show off its customisable shortcut building Android smart phone app designed for people with learning disabilities [Action Blocks](#).

Despite the backdrop of the pandemic, ATIA 2021 has shown that the assistive technology sector remains as energised as ever – bustling with fresh ideas and animated by a commitment to make things better.

*You can read more about the British Assistive Technology Scholarship on the [AT Scholar website](#).*


**University regulator advocates for accessible remote learning experiences**

A [new report](#) from the Office for Students on the lessons of remote learning during the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of digital inclusion. Produced to help universities improve their online provision, the report recommends they assess individual students' digital access and review the accessibility of their online teaching practices.

**New trade strategy aims to boost UK educational assistive technology exports**

The government's [updated International Education Strategy](#) has pledged to support exports of the UK's expertise in special educational needs, including in technology.  Designed to promote UK educational products and services to the rest of the world, the strategy commits the government to identifying 'high value export opportunities for UK SEND providers'.

**World Health Organisation online workshop promotes assistive technology service planning**

The World Health Organisation has held [an online workshop](#) to support a global initiative to encourage countries to carry out national surveys to measure levels of demand for assistive technology products and services.

**Microsoft gaming guidelines push for greater accessibility**

Microsoft has published a set of [Xbox Accessibility Guidelines (XAGs)](#) to encourage video games publishers to make their titles accessible for disabled people. The company has also

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established an accessibility testing programme to verify whether games meet the guidelines' recommendations.

## 2. Technological Developments and Innovations

**Microsoft Word set to be updated with new word prediction feature**

Microsoft Word is expected to introduce a [new word prediction feature](#) in an update that will reach all users in March. The feature will generate greyed-out suggestions as the user types, which can be accepted by pressing the Tab key or rejected by selecting Escape.

**AAC app seeks to adapt to changing needs**

A start-up company has created an augmentative and alternative communication app designed to adapt to changes in its users' needs. [Linggo](#) offers a host of features to encourage users to develop their communication skills including an algorithm that allows symbols-b to be gradually phased out of their communication systems in favour of words.

**Micromobility service launches adaptive solutions for disabled travellers**

The mircomobility app Lime - which provides a bicycle and electric scooter hire service - has announced plans to [launch a range of seven adaptive solutions](#) designed to meet the needs of disabled people. These include an add-on that turns a manual wheelchair into a power vehicle.

**Smart watch promises touch-free control of phone calls and apps**

A wearable technology company has designed a touch-free smart watch that can be controlled through simple gestures.  Built on Apple Watch technology, the [Mudra Band](#) is capable of detecting neural signals in the wearer's arm, allowing them to make phone calls, write text messages and use apps with simple finger and wrist movements.

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## 3. Training and Professional Development Opportunities

Event: [Innovation and Technology in Dementia Care](#)

Date: Tuesday 23rd March

Venue: Online

A panel discussion examining how emerging technologies can enhance the experience of ageing both during the pandemic and beyond

Event: [Innovations in Hearing Technology and Care](#)

Date: Thursday 15th April

Venue: Online

An update on approaches to supporting people experiencing hearing loss from academics, industry and healthcare perspectives

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Event: Creating a Digitally Accessible Learning Environment

Date: Tuesday 27th April

Venue: Online

This event will explore how universities can use their websites, mobile apps, digital documents and other tools to support disabled students

## 4. Funding News

**Government launches Digital Lifeline Fund for people with learning disabilities**

The government has set up a £2.5 million Digital Lifeline Fund to provide people with learning disabilities with tablet computers, free internet access and tech support. Further information on how the fund will work is available here.

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### About dispATches

This monthly bulletin sprang into being from a research project undertaken in 2013 by group of UK charities comprised of social care organisations and funders. They had come together to explore how the power of modern technology might be harnessed more effectively within their services to help disabled and older people to lead more fulfilling and independent lives.

The project's key finding was that a combination of a diverse marketplace of products and the rapid rate at which new technologies were surfacing made it extremely difficult to make sense of the range equipment, software and services that were available. In response to the research, the charities commissioned a monthly bulletin to stay up-to-date with the latest technologies, government policies and campaigns, and training and funding opportunities.

In May 2016, Designability began to host and publish the bulletin through its website to make it available to anyone in the UK and beyond with the mission of helping more disabled and older people access life-enriching technologies.

The bulletin is compiled by Clive Gilbert, a freelance research consultant and writer specialising in public policy, social affairs and technology. Clive has been the author of this bulletin since its launch.

Having been born with cerebral palsy, Clive is an extensive user of assistive technology and has first-hand experience of the transformative potential that technology can bring to the lives of disabled people.

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