



***Een blik over de grens***  
**Cultural equality of disabled people**

**Brussels, 11. December 2008**

**Marcus Weisen**

**Museums and Galleries without Barriers**

**[marcus.weisen@gmail.com](mailto:marcus.weisen@gmail.com)**



# A preliminary passage to India

“A customer is the most important visitor to our premises. He is not dependent on us. We are dependent on him. He is not an interruption on our work. He is the purpose of it. He is not an outsider on our business. He is part of it. We are not doing him a favour by serving him. He is doing us a favour by giving us opportunity to do so.”

**Mahatma Gandhi**



# Visions of Eldorado in the UK

- 100 theatres with audio description
- Hundreds of hours a month of audio description on TV
- Masses of Sign Language on TV and in West End Theatres
- Disability programmes on TV and A vibrant radio
- Vibrant disability arts scene
- [www.magicdeaf.org.uk](http://www.magicdeaf.org.uk)

Nowhere is there so much going on than in the UK.

# Let's go to Prague 1989: The Velvet Revolution



**I love truth!  
Yes.**



# Plan

1. Another look at practice in the UK: the good and the bad
2. UK policy context
3. Factors in UK dynamism
4. The international policy context
5. Key concepts for cultural equality



# Another look at practice in the UK

## Is this cultural freedom?

Recently I took overseas guests to four museums with audio guides for visually impaired people. Result:

- in one the batteries had to be charged
- in one there was no guide anymore
- in another we adults were given the guide for children
- one did not know it had a guide
- an Indian researcher tracked the guide, but the instructions were unreliable.

# Decidedly progress: access with elegance at the National Gallery



# Access with Elegance? The National Gallery before



# Decidedly progress: Trafalgar Square again



# Suffocating limitations of choice



There are only a handful of museums with BSL on the web and digital Media.

Can we call this cultural freedom?  
Cultural freedom relies on wealth of choice!

Can we call the cultural sector civilised, if it ignores large groups of the population?

Picture: Wolverhampton Arts + Museums, Jodi Award Winner 2007



# Culture change over time: museums, libraries and archives

source:

MLA Disability Surveys, [www.mla.gov.uk](http://www.mla.gov.uk)

## 2001

Not surveyed

27% had access plan

67 % had disability access  
audit

47% involved a paid disability  
consultant

## 2005

38% had access policy

43% had access plan

84% had disability access audit

64.5% involved paid disability  
consultant



## 2. UK policy context

- 1981: UN Decade of Disabled People
- 1984: Arts Council of Great Britain makes cultural funding conditional on a commitment to access for disabled people
- 1985: Attenborough report 'Arts and Disabled People'
- 1990 Broadcasting Act (TV audio description)



# UK policy context

- 1994: Arts Lottery makes disability access an essential condition for cultural funding 1995 Disability Discrimination Act
- 2001 government cultural policy requires that cultural organisations become ‘agents of social change’

**In a diverse society museums need to become barrier-free and inclusive for all**





## 3. Factors in UK dynamism

- Some people focused cultural sector professions: theatre house managers, museum (low in the hierarchy!)
- Learning through all the senses is part of the philosophy of school's curriculum
- Active campaigning disability organisations
- Local government equality policies
- Creativity of cultural sector less seen in opposition to access and equality

**Fundamental: without legislation far less would have happened and th basis for sustainability would be lacking.**

**The DDA has sometimes been called 'the law that frees the creative spirit.'**



## 4. International Policies

### *the rights that are not on our radar*

Article 30 of the new UN Convention on the Rights of Disabled Persons (2006) for the first time explicitly recognise the cultural rights of disabled people:

“States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to take part on an equal basis with others in cultural life, and shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities...”

Did you know this Convention?

Did your government tell you about it?

Are the measures taken in your country appropriate?



# International policies for systemic change

Belgium and the UK are signatory to international policies which make sense only with a commitment to progress monitoring and action programmes:

“Government institutions, leisure and cultural organisations should develop comprehensive access policies and action programmes designed to significant and lasting improvements for all people with disabilities.”

**Council of Europe Recommendation R(92) 6 (1992)**

We have no agreed indicators for measuring ‘significant and lasting improvements’. And this requires dialogue with civil society, specifically disability organisations.



# And what else do our governments hide from us?

“Member states should start with an evaluation of their existing disability policy programmes and identify in which areas progress has yet to be made .....they should set up strategies to ensure that their own co-ordinated disability policy programmes, strategies and actions are progressively advanced....”

Council of Europe Disability Action Plan (2006-2015). The Action Plan emphasises equal opportunities in culture.

**Two years on, I can find no evidence on UK government websites that this evaluation has been started. What about your government?**



## 5. Key concepts for cultural equality of disabled people

### Removing societal barriers

- lack of knowledge, prejudice, stereotyping, fear
- cultural energies: e.g. Greek canon of beauty, tyranny of sight, break-up of communal solidarity
- economic energies and professional cultures militate against accessible and inclusive design



# Removing barriers to culture

## Barriers can be:

- attitudinal
- institutional
- physical
- sensory
- intellectual
- economic
- within education system
- poverty of choice

Barriers are inter-dependent

Barriers can be fluid in a fast moving world



# Key concepts for cultural equality

- Rights not charity
- ‘social model of disability’ and not ‘medical model of disability’
- The practice is cultural freedom is possible only through vast choice, barrier free services and reliable information



# ***Paradise Lost?***

## ***Let's create a new one!***

“I always thought of paradise as a library. Others think of it as a garden, or perhaps a palace. And here I was, so to speak, in the middle of nine hundred thousand books in diverse languages. I realised I could hardly make out the titles and the spines.....we were two learned men walking through this Library of forbidden books”.

**Jorge Luis Borges, Blindness**

**The barriers faced by Borges are not a necessity.**

**Yet there remains a huge contradiction in the cultural sector that so loudly professes its humanity, but perpetuates discriminatory barriers, moral apathy and a great aversion to change Europe-wide.**

*A humble reminder inspired by Borges*  
**Access benefits everyone**

