Podcast with Francis Zinke, employee at the ZIM at the University of Potsdam

Intro: A warm welcome to all listeners! Our podcast aims to introduce you to students, teachers, as well as employees from the administration at the University of Potsdam. We interviewed people with and without disabilities. We wanted to hear from them, just how inclusive the University of Potsdam is as a place of study, and as an employer.

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Mirjam Labrenz: Hello and a wonderful day to you. My name is Mirjam Labrenz and today we'll talk about digital accessibility. For that, I have Francis Zinke as a guest with me. Francis, could you introduce yourself briefly and talk about your area of work?

Francis Zinke: Yes, hello, I'm Francis, I work at the ZIM in tech support at the University of Potsdam, and here I also try to support students with disabilities, but for them it's much further reaching, so I try to highlight the existing problems on our platforms while searching for solutions on how to improve them.

Mirjam Labrenz: Why do you think the topic of digital accessibility of websites, apps, videos and other formats only finds so little attention?

Francis Zinke: Oh well, that's a difficult question. I mean, naturally, many themes aren't necessarily focused on and many of these aspects aren't taught by many people. Especially now, whenever accessibility is considered during design processes or user interfaces of applications are built, it's never considered from the beginning on, meaning it's not part of the thought process, although it benefits all user groups whenever an application is easier manageable. It benefits everyone and not just people with disabilities, like it's now being brought into connection with accessibility. In actuality, it's many different user groups, including international students who benefit from it, or people, who are temporarily impaired and can't fully use websites or apps, and if you're under time pressure you just don't function very well anymore, and if an application is easier manageable, it's much easier to navigate all that and everyone benefits. Why it doesn't get a lot of attention is, is because it's just not in the back of everyone's minds all the time. Although it'd actually affect them.

Mirjam Labrenz: Well, maybe it'd be good if you could briefly explain what digital accessibility actually is, maybe a few examples, just to get an idea what falls into this categorie and what, for you personally, digital accessibility means and is.

Francis Zinke: Digital accessibility means that a website is accessible for all user groups. Meaning, if for example a blind person wants to operate a website or wants to have it read out loud, it should be possible to be read easily. If there are a bunch of or many ads on it, then they would potentially cause a problem. Or if the website operates with a lot of graphics that basically just contain text. Because there is no alternative description for these graphics a blind person wouldn't be able to work with this website, if these graphics contained important information about the website. That's a typical example but in actuality it affects all user groups. If I have an overloaded website and I just want to log in, and I can't even find the log-in for said platform, then that's disadvantage for everyone. That's basically what's digital accessibility encompasses, it's usable for all user groups. That's how I see it, that digital accessibility helps further everyone. Or different example, I said the user group were blind people, but oftentimes it's also the older generation. Many older people don't necessarily learn how to navigate the Internet and there are many reasons for it. Okay, I have to learn something new, but that's not even the point. Many websites aren't easily usable for older people and you get confused very quickly as an older person and that's what I mean when I say especially for the older people. We're all going to age that's why we need to take many aspects into consideration, even for international students. And if some of that information is hard to find or hard to see then for me personally I don't think it's accessible, digitally accessible.

Mirjam Labrenz: That means it's actually about usability or user friendliness, which doesn't necessarily mean it's exclusively for people with disabilities who have trouble hearing or seeing like a lot of people always think. But instead, as you've said already, especially for older people or the general public, as you said earlier, to navigate these websites easily. And usability just means to see the website and to immediately find what you're looking for. Is that what digital accessibility means?

Francis Zinke: At the end of the day that's the goal, technically a byproduct resulting from it. I personally want to diminish this pigeonholing. Accessibility means a bigger workload because you have to abide by all these guidelines. But if we follow it through everyone benefits from it in the end. For example if a user wanted to do something in this online interface and couldn't do it they had to contact support. And they had to help the user navigate this task or the system and that's also a bigger workload. On top of the website not being user friendly and accessible.

Mirjam Labrenz: What do you think, where do most of the technical barriers and their implementation lie?

Francis Zinke: That's hard to say, accessibility hasn't always been considered from the early stages of developing digital systems. I think this is gonna change though, because there are laws in place now that have to be implemented. For example there is the European Accessibility Act and starting in 2025, companies have to start providing accessible digital proposals according to this act. Obviously, it's possible this will change again, but I hope this is an aspect that will establish this consciousness for all user groups. At the moment this is explicitly the case in Europe, specifically Germany. And according to this regulation institutions have to offer accessible websites.

Mirjam Labrenz: That means, the standard and regulations are already in place but you think they ought to be enforced more strictly?

Francis Zinke: Yes, well the problem is there is this law in place to enforce accessibility, but the requirements needed do not exist for most platforms. I think of education platforms like Moodle and Ilias. There are a lot of things that ought to be done regarding accessibility, but that don't really exist as extensions or additions from these platforms to enable accessibility, to my knowledge. I could also be wrong about that. And then there's the question: how do we enact this digital accessibility if these platforms don't exist in the first place and another obstacle is, that some of these aspects contradict with the governmental laws in regard to data security. If, for example, subtitles needed to be created, one would have to get permission from the speakers, and if it's done via automated resources then most of them aren't available in European countries yet and again, you'd encounter data security issues, meaning there aren't any viable solutions, or everything's created by hand, written text would have to be translated and that would mean additional costs again. So, there are a lot of problems that cannot be conclusively resolved. In my opinion, the goal is to first establish this general consciousness. Okay, let's think about accessibility and to change the situation to improve usability for all users. That's a continuous process, it doesn't happen from one day to the other.

Mirjam Labrenz: Is there a current, I don't know, institution or contact point at agencies where you can turn to whenever you're on a website or an app and think to yourself: "This isn't accessible, this and that ought to be done still" where you can turn to a designated office and tell them it'd be good to upgrade these features?

Francis Zinke: Yes, there are. The agencies should always provide an explanation to their accessibility on their websites. And there should always be a contact person listed to write or mail to. And there would also be hints like: Okay, I saw these problems and in order for me to use your website properly I'd like to ask you to improve them. Or a specific explanation of the exact problem.

Mirjam Labrenz: Okay. What do you think, how digitally accessible is the University of Potsdam currently with all its faculties?

Francis Zinke: It's a process and it doesn't happen from one day to the other, but there are a lot of improvements to be made still. And then, of course, it is also important that the people who are responsible for the individual platforms are open with the developers or supervisors, and then the people who are actually responsible and, of course, also the users on the platforms, so that they can deposit their materials directly on the platforms in an accessible way if they wish. I can't say to what extent the individual faculties are already really accessible, because the University of Potsdam has so many different websites and web platforms that an individual test would have to be made for each platform in order to carry out this adaptation, which is a multi-step process that can take several years. It depends on it, because either this cannot be done by the University of Potsdam itself or I must be done by a provider or a new platform would have to be established and then. Therefore, it is always relevant to keep this in mind, even when developing new platforms or using new ones, that accessibility is also taken into account.

Mirjam Labrenz: It sounds like the University of Potsdam is already doing a lot in terms of digital accessibility. But not everything is fully developed yet, even if every faculty has its own website. What do you think, would it be possible in your opinion for the University of Potsdam to become completely digitally accessible within a short period of time, for example within a year, or would that be rather unrealistic?

Francis Zinke: So if it's purely about the websites, it's quite good if this Typo 3 system is used, because it's exactly this Typo 3 web system that is being worked on from the highest level so that it's completely barrier-free and if the faculties also always use this Typo 3 web system. If there are additional application requests, it is so that there are not always necessarily platforms that are already really accessible. So this question I can not really answer now. Some platforms are being worked on at the University of Potsdam to make them barrier-free, while others are constantly encountering new problems, or it's also the case that new systems are becoming established in

society over time. For example, Zoom, which was used frequently during the pandemic. If these systems take accessibility into account right from the start, then that's a big advantage. Unfortunately, this is not the case with some other systems.

Mirjam Labrenz: Do you encounter a lot of obstacles in your digital day-to-day activities regarding digital accessibility, that hinder or impair you?

Francis Zinke: Personally, I don't have that much of a problem, because I'm a computer scientist and I can deal with it, but it's just that when there are so many overloaded websites, it simply steals time. And that annoys me, or when I'm looking for information or want to make an appointment with some authority and then can't find the actual link online to make the appointment. That annoys me, and in my opinion that's also part of accessibility, this usability.

Mirjam Labrenz: Yes, then we are slowly coming to the end and to the last question: What tips can you give to the teachers when planning their next courses. Above all, maybe there is a new digital, whole or half, hybrid semester coming up, maybe you can give the teachers a few tips along the way?

Francis Zinke: Yes, so there is of course the tip that at the beginning, even before the start of the course, the participants should be asked whether they have any wishes in the direction of digital accessibility or requirements and that these can then be sent directly to the teacher, possibly also anonymously and the teacher can then comment on it, so that would be one of my wishes. In part, this implementation of actually creating accessible documents requires a little more work. If now however with the students not at all the requirements exist necessarily then only for me personally the question is whether then completely these barrier liberties with to be fulfilled needs or must or should. It should it, in particular, if now these teaching materials are accessible permanently in the net for everyone or should be then it is in such a way that evenly these materials must be always barrier-free. It is always this weighing ok, which requirements actually exist? And exactly that should be asked at the beginning of the semester with the students and just in between then again and explicitly before the implementation of the exams. And in the case of examinations, if they are now also online-based examinations, the students should really be given the opportunity to take a sample examination online so that it is possible to look directly at whether the students could solve everything on a purely technical basis. And also again from the aspect of accessibility to answer the questions, yes. That is my hint, but I have to give further hints on the website of the University of Potsdam digital accessibility. Yes, so there is of course the tip that at the beginning, already before

the start of the course, the participants should be asked if they have any wishes in the direction of digital accessibility or requirements and that these can then be sent directly to the teacher, possibly also anonymously and the teacher can then comment on it, so that would be one of my wishes. In part, this implementation of actually creating accessible documents requires a little more work. If now however with the students not at all the requirements exist necessarily then only for me personally the question is whether then completely these barrier liberties with to be fulfilled needs or must or should. It should it, in particular, if now these teaching materials are accessible permanently in the net for everyone or should be then it is in such a way that evenly these materials must be always barrier-free. It is always this weighing ok, which requirements actually exist? And exactly that should be asked at the beginning of the semester with the students and just in between then again and explicitly before the implementation of the exams. And in the case of examinations, if they are now also online-based examinations, the students should really be given the opportunity to take a sample examination online so that it is possible to look directly at whether the students could solve everything on a purely technical basis. And also again from the aspect of accessibility to answer the questions, yes. That is my advice, but I have to give further adviceon the website of the University of Potsdam digital accessibility.

Mirjam Labrenz: That's exactly what I wanted to say again. On the website of the University of Potsdam, for example, there is also a guide on how to create digitally accessible documents and teachers are of course welcome to turn to it, if you know of another place where teachers can turn to, if they now have to meet any specific requirements for people with disabilities and do not know more, could you still say something about it?

Francis Zinke: Yes, for students there's the commissioner for students with disabilities and chronic illnesses, and also for employees. They are Robert Meile and Mrs. Guzmann is also responsible, if I remember correctly.

Mirjam Labrenz: Yes, and at the ZIM, where you work, especially regarding videos and such, are there any guides or such to help?

Francis Zinke: Well, if questions arise directly at ZIM about the aspect of digital accessibility, then it makes sense to contact me and then I would then, if it is now explicitly about digital accessibility, then pass on to the appropriate contact person for the different platforms or look for

solutions with them if something has to be changed in the system, or if it is really only about application questions ok, how can't I do that now? Then I assume that I can also answer that.

Mirjam Labrenz: Okay, I think the lecturers have enough resources they should make use of to make it work, I hope. Thank you very much and lots of success for your future endeavours.

Francis Zinke: Thank you.