

WHAT IF EVERYONE WAS DISABLED?

Presenter: Mat Fraser

Producer: Steve Urquhart

A Reduced Listening production for BBC Radio 4

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BBC R4 INTRO

Now on BBC Radio 4: the actor, writer, drummer, and rights activist Mat Fraser imagines a very different world to the one we're used to, in terms of design, technology, and attitudes. Recorded mostly before social distancing began, this is: 'WHAT IF EVERYONE WAS DISABLED?'

0'00"

[MAT SCRIPT:]

It was the year 2000.

The Disability Rights Commission had not long been established. The Disability Discrimination Act had kicked in five years ago.

Words like “cripple” and “handicapped” were – *largely* – confined to the old Millennium. For disabled people, things were changing.

CLIP: 2000 PARALYMPICS, TANNI WINS 800M GOLD

At the 2000 Paralympics, Tanni Grey-Thompson won four Golds. She became a household name.

A disabled person, a household name! This all felt like progress. It felt like hope.

CLIP: BBC SPORTS REVIEW OF THE YEAR 2000

APPLAUSE... STEVE RIDER: "The top three, in reverse order..."

Then, later that year... a short, sharp bump back down to earth.

STEVE RIDER: "...and in third place, a great Paralympian who excelled in Sydney this year – Tanni Grey-Thompson!" + APPLAUSE

MUSIC: ANASTACIA – I'M OUTTA LOVE

Tanni came third at the BBC Sports Personality of the Year awards. You won't remember seeing her on stage at TV Centre, to collect her prize... because, she couldn't get on stage, in her wheelchair. They hadn't provided a ramp.

Of course, the BBC apologised for the error. Tanni accepted it was an oversight, she was totally gracious. Much more gracious than those of us who were shouting and swearing at the telly.

MUSIC FADES

I'm Mat Fraser. I've been shouting and swearing about disability for decades.

And in case you're thinking, "well, he sounds normal"... I should explain.

1'33"

MAT: I'm disabled, I've got little arms – my impairment is I'm a thalidomide survivor, I've got short arms with inward turning hands at the elbow height, with no thumbs. It means I have to hold a lot of things with two hands, where other people might hold them with one. And therefore, the way I approach the physical world is literally very different, and mentally very different.

FX – SCHOOL / SWIMMING POOL

MAT: I think I noticed the first time I saw another disabled person. That's when I would have noticed "normality". I mean, I know I was different, I could see it in the mirror, but it didn't feel different, because I wasn't constantly reminded of it. The physical world is when you're reminded. Swimming? Sports? God, I was reminded of it then. I remember, because I was slower at getting my swimming costume on than everyone else, that I learned to start surreptitiously unbuttoning my shirt in the last 15 minutes of the lesson before swimming... so that when we made the mad dash across the playground to the changing rooms, I wouldn't be like a whole five minutes later in the pool than everyone else. But that manifested in me getting tangled in my jumper and shirt. I could hear lots of people laughing – and it was like, yeah, this has gone horribly wrong, and when it got whipped off, of course everybody was looking at me and laughing. That's normal for a disabled kid in a non-disabled environment.

2'48"

Over the past couple of decades, I've seen loads of positive changes. And loads of lessons learned.

*CLIP: BBC SPORTS PERSONALITY OF THE YEAR AWARDS 2019
CLARE BALDING: "...delighted to be joined here on stage by Tanni's family..."*

Baroness Grey-Thompson – as she became – won the lifetime achievement award last year.

*CLARE BALDING: "...to Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson!" +
APPLAUSE*

MUSIC: Hoppípolla – Sigur Rós

And yes, there was a ramp!

MUSIC STOPS

But despite the progress, the legislation, the ramps, the accessible toilets, the “reasonable adjustments”...

CLIP: HIS DARK MATERIALS

...despite people like me starring in prime-time shows like ‘His Dark Materials’...

CLIP: HIS DARK MATERIALS

or playing drums with Coldplay at the London Paralympics...

CLIP: MAT PLAYING DRUMS WITH COLDPLAY AT 2012 PARALYMPICS (“God Put A Smile Upon Your Face”)

CHRIS MARTIN: “...on drums, Mr Mat Fraser, let’s go!”

Despite all that – we’re not done yet.

Because every day – and I’m 58 now – every single day, I’m still reminded of my disability.

Yeah, I get on with it, it doesn’t stop me from doing much... but the reminders are always there. Mainly because of the way in which our world has been designed.

3’56”

MAT: Small aspects constantly hit me as a short-armed fellow. I solve the low buttons by kneeing buttons, I have precision kneeling down to a skill, I can quickly press button 5 – and not 6 or 4 – with my knee bone. Humans can adapt to anything. And I suppose what’s disappointing about most design, money has ruled the roost. So when they found a cheap way of delivering access for a majority of people – let’s face it, non-disabled people – then that’s what they’ll do. And everything else will be called an add-on, and be a kerfuffle. Whereas it needn’t have

been that way. It could have been inclusive – and it would have been, if the powerful people who designed the world in their image were all disabled.

FX – STAIRLIFT NOISE

MAT: I just can't help but feeling, if the really powerful people in the world were wheelchair users, the stairlift would never have been invented, because it wouldn't have needed to be invented.

MUSIC: Busta Rhymes – Put Your Hands Where My Eyes Could See (Instrumental)

5'00"

Now, this isn't going to be a moany old Radio 4 documentary, well, not entirely. Sure, there's plenty to moan about, but there's also plenty to celebrate. I want to think about where we are in 2020, how we got here, how far we've come... but also, to flip things around. To imagine a world in which, not the minority, but the VAST MAJORITY of people had a disability. What if EVERYONE was disabled?

FX – TV CHANNEL HOPPING

MONTAGE OF CLIPS plays quietly underneath Mat's voice:

Sandy from 'Crossroads'

"A Child Born Without Arms" (Pathé News)

EastEnders 14th April 2014 – Donna Yates's first appearance

'Ironsides' Theme – Quincy Jones

MAT: Cor, it blows my mind to think how different society would be. Imagine a world where Sandy – Sandy from Crossroads – wasn't the only disabled bloke that I saw on TV. Imagine if half the people on television were disabled. Everything would be different. Plots, newscasting, technology... catchphrases, ridicule... We, as a nation, would know how to fit a catheter. Because we'd have seen it a MILLION

times, in procedurals! In a world where everyone might be disabled, all the fiction has characters that might be disabled. And they still do their job, and save the federation, with their gammy leg, or their one eye, or whatever it is that's considered a disability.

As actors, one of the things we do is to create scenarios of the life we want our art to represent.

CLIP – LIZ CARR in 'SILENT WITNESS'

For example: in 'Silent Witness', for Liz Carr's character Clarissa Mullery, everything is accessible. She's good at her job as a forensic examiner, her disability doesn't really come into it. Hopefully, someone will see that, and they'll think – oh yeah, I need to make sure the real world's like that, not just drama.

Liz and I are old mates. She's just landed her first Hollywood role, I'm not at all jealous, you understand! She hasn't let fame go to her head, she's still speaking to me...

7'10"

MAT: OK Liz, so we're talking to each other both isolated in the midst of this global corona crisis...

LIZ CARR: Yeah...

MAT: So Liz, what if the entire world was full of disabled people... a world where disabled people have been infused into a structure of its design, and how would the world be different?

LIZ CARR: (laughs) And you want me to answer that, Mat?!

MAT: Not even a question, is it?!

LIZ CARR: (laughs) No! What's funny, I think, about imagining a different world, is – we dream about this, we dream about living in a world where we're not disabled, in the fact that everything, or so many things, would be accessible to us – the environment, the way that we live. But then when we're given that freedom, we're like – oh! I don't know what that would look like! But I think, when a lot of this really struck me, was when I went to San Francisco for the first time, in 1994. One of the highlights for me was going on a public bus! Because at that point in the UK, buses – public transport really, was not accessible to me as a wheelchair-using woman. And so I caught the bus in San Francisco! And, not only did I get on the bus – there was another wheelchair user on the bus!

MAT: Aaaah! I know that feeling!

LIZ CARR: I couldn't speak! (laughs)

MAT: Were you sort of smiling inanely at them, and they were like – what's wrong with the mad lady over there?!

LIZ CARR: Absolutely! But, that was the most liberating and freeing experience. Sometimes, my own expectations have been lowered, because you accept poor design, and poor access. And sometimes it takes someone else to have the vision and to have the ambition for you, and to go, you need to actually demand more than this, or, you deserve more than this.

9'00"

FX – LONDON UNDERGROUND – ESCALATOR

MAT: Wheelchair users and the underground system, that's got to be the toughest disability transport interface I know of. I'm sure it doesn't have to be this way...

[“STEP FREE ACCESS” ANNOUNCEMENT IN THE BACKGROUND]

MAT: We've just come down an escalator, that I'm sure could be designed to accommodate a wheelchair user. I don't know how, I'm not a designer.

[QUIETER FOOTSTEPS ATMOS]

MAT: I mean, maybe there's a button you can push, and a second step depth comes out, so it's more of a sort of platform... (FADES UNDER)

MUSIC: A Guy Called Gerald – Subscape

But, what do I know? I'm just guessing, when it comes to design. And let's face it, I've only needed to think through the short-armed stuff, haven't I?! So, I need to find some people who know what they're on about.

MAT: Right – we've just travelled from Lambeth North, er Waterloo, to Euston – we're on our way to Manchester, where I'm gonna meet a couple of experts in inclusive and universal design... much more experts in their field than I could ever be...

MUSIC UP

ATMOS CHANGES... from EUSTON STATION to MANCHESTER CENTRAL LIBRARY

MAT: ...right – what is the difference between inclusive design and universal design?

JANE SIMPSON: I don't think there is anything... but some people believe universal design means you can design something that suits everybody. And that's impossible... (FADES UNDER)

This is Jane Simpson. Jane's an architect, and an access consultant, who advises on things like BS 8-300... that's the British Standard for the design of accessible and inclusive environments.

TONY HEATON: ...I think inclusive design is about being more flexible, how do you build flexibility into things? ... (FADES UNDER)

And that's Tony Heaton. Tony's an artist, a sculptor, and a disability rights legend!

TONY: ...cos all the rest of us can't use it. When we talk about access and barriers, we always talk about the fact that it's not just wheelchair users, it's prams, shopping, luggage...

JANE: Oh yeah, yeah – I mean, toilets is the biggie.

TONY: I've just bought a new industrial building for my studio, so I have carte blanche, and I've put an accessible toilet in. And the toilet doorway is 4'6", so my head just, as a wheelchair user, 2 inches, I just clear it. I call it the public inconvenience! My mate who built it for me is 6 foot 4! But it's my little rebellion, it's my power!

MAT: Can I ask this presumably quite ignorant question? What if EVERY toilet was a private cubicle with a sink? So you could do your business, and have your wash up, and look in the mirror – would that solve it?

TONY: Well, years ago... when we designed accessible toilets years ago, and people said "unisex toilets", or whatever, non- gender specific... well, they always were! They were just a toilet cubicle, with this magical wheelchair logo stamped on the doorway, and – interestingly – braille, above where you couldn't quite reach it. And if you were blind, what do you do, walk around feeling walls just in case you come across a toilet?! But, anybody can use this. And it's really the wheelchair logo that acts as the sort of "crucifix and garlic clove" that stops all the non crips from using it.

JANE: I think it's – where they've got these what they call "superloos" with a toilet and a sink, which are great for people who've got colostomy bags and stomas, they're really good for them – people actually take longer, than having the cubicle and the sink outside, so they're looking at the numbers, cos potentially the numbers in buildings won't be sufficient,

if they start doing that everywhere. It's a big debate, there's never gonna be a right answer, you'll never have a truly accessible building, for everybody.

TONY: The old adage, that whenever you get disabled people together, they're talking about toilets within 5 minutes, has just come true yet again! (laughs)

12'52"

Tony, Jane and I pause our discussion. Not to go to the loo – well, not just yet – but to have a look around the first building we've come to, Manchester's Central Library.

TONY: It's a lovely building, it is...

JANE: I think they've done an amazing job of making something so old and so historic into a very accessible...

It's recently been refurbished, but still very grand.

TONY: What I love in old buildings, when you make them really accessible, it's just great proof to everybody who says, "oh it's a Grade I listed building – we can't do anything, mate, it's Grade I..." Well, you can.

MUSIC: Mr Scruff – He Don't (instrumental)

It dates back to 1934. It has pillars, a dome roof... it's like some kind of Roman temple.

TONY: To be fair, Manchester's been a really accessible city for many years, you know... the accessible tram system!

MAT: Accessible trams?!

FX – MANCHESTER CITY CENTRE / TRAMS

TONY: You can just dive straight on, and roll straight off, it's quite weird. And you know when you get on a bus as a wheelchair user in London or wherever, and everybody stares at you, you get on the train and everybody stares at you... nobody blinks at you when you get on the tram! And it's amazing, how many crips use it... (FADES UNDER)

We take a stroll through Manchester City Centre – from the historic Central Library, to a very new building.

MAT: Well it is the classic wet and windy day in Manchester, blustery and cold – we're in Tony Wilson Place, Tony Wilson obviously famous from Factory Records – and we're now going into this amazing looking glass-front clad building called HOME... and here we go, going in!

14'25"

GEORGE: So, HOME is like a contemporary arts centre – we've got film, theatre, visual art, we also have an engagement programme, restaurants, bars cafes, festivals... (FADES UNDER)

This is George – George Whalley, who heads the operational side of things here. George gives us the tour...

GEORGE: ...on the ground floor, there is both – there's gender specific toilets on the other side of the building as well. So you've always got a choice.

TONY: I'm just gonna use this – start an access audit! (laughter)

...and Tony Heaton wastes no time in checking on the toilets...

TONY: You can hang your hat and coat on the back of the toilet door, at wheelchair height, which is always great. Somebody with an attention to detail, has done that.

In 2017, HOME won a major award, for universal design. Jane Simpson was one of the judges.

JANE: This was the outstanding winner that year. It is a fantastic space, and I love the fact that you're actually listening to people. Any building has to keep reviewing, as they go through, and talking to disabled people! It's really really important.

But, Jane being Jane...

JANE: You could do with improving your signage!

GEORGE: Well, I think the signage...

She's not gonna let them get complacent!

GEORGE: ...it does need some improvement.

MAT: Tough, Jane!

GEORGE and JANE laugh

It's reassuring to see a building so well thought out. But weirdly, it is still unusual.

TONY: We're still building new buildings that aren't accessible, which is the thing that really makes me wanna weep.

MAT: But why isn't – I mean, isn't that against the law?

JANE: Well, yes and no, because, the equality legislation asks for equality in services. Building regulation is a minimum safety standard. So that's why buildings don't necessarily meet it. That's gonna keep happening, we need to make sure that access advisers are actually involved at a very early stage on projects. And, if you do it early on, then it doesn't cost any more!

TONY: And a lot of architects are very conservative people, they wouldn't like to admit that, but they're terribly conservative... because they'll find something that works, that they've got away with and they'll just re-package it for the next thing they build.

JANE: I have to defend architects, to a degree – as an architect myself! – because ultimately, how do you persuade the client? That's where training comes in – it's trying to ensure architects understand what their responsibilities are, understand the ethics, so that they can feed it back to the clients. But ultimately, if the client doesn't want to pay for it, you can't make them.

TONY: No – that's the argument I come across all the time – the client wants the cheapest solution.

MAT: So what I'm hearing is that, unless it's enshrined in law, it might not happen?

TONY: Yeah. And I don't think it's carrot and stick – I think it's stick. We started to wear seatbelts when we got fined and points for not wearing seatbelts, we stopped drinking when we realised the breathalyser would take away our licences, and huge fines and really expensive insurance... and I think the only way we learn, and we do the right things, is when we are forced to do so.

MUSIC: A Guy Called Gerald – Subscape

And really, that's the point. We're still talking about "minimum standards", access advisers, "reasonable adjustments", guidance, recommendations – this stuff isn't mandatory.

Back in London, I take this up with Julie Fleck. Julie's spent the past 30 years working as an access and inclusive design adviser, at local and national government level.

17'36"

JULIE FLECK: I think part of it is that people don't really think about the PEOPLE at the very beginning of the design process. If we really built in that concept of thinking about the users, and the client said "yes I want my building to be loved by people who are going to use it", then a lot of these issues might evaporate.

MAT: So, how can people see it as something really positive and necessary rather than an expensive, stressy hassle?

JULIE: It's about, it's a mindset – it's about shifting our mindsets.

MAT: Well traditionally, mindsets are not officially changed until the law forces it. So are you saying that we need these rules and regulations and standards enshrined into law, before –

JULIE: Absolutely...

MAT: – how likely is that review of the law, under our current administration, to be in the next five years?

JULIE: Well they've made lots of promises... so we'll have to see, won't we?

MAT: Were they put on the side of a bus?!

JULIE: (laughs) No! (laughs)

MAT: But, this isn't about Tory, it's not about Labour, as a disabled person I've been under several administrations, and the situations have all been roughly the same...

JULIE: I've worked for Tory administrations and Labour administrations, and they've both been very supportive... but there are still challenges. And even with the best policies, we really need the government to lead by example.

19'00"

So... money. Power. Politics. Legislation. They all play a huge part in this. But so do attitudes towards disability.

CLIP: Trump visit, BBC News coverage, 12th/13th July 2018

Now, I'm no fan of Donald Trump. But, when he came to the UK two years ago, and there were all those protests, and placards, I wrote something on Twitter, politely asking people to stop banging on about his "small hands".

CLIP: Trump visit, BBC News coverage, 12th/13th July 2018

Look, I don't blame people. I don't have a list of all the people who made small hand comments about Donald Trump, and am festering with my list... but I could see it happening and I thought – you guys aren't even thinking about this! Like, hey hey! Don't be confused, small hands is just small hands. It's what he DOES that defines him, not the shape of his body. It just warned a few people that I love off, making jokes that would have pissed me off, and made me have a row with them. Just because they hadn't been thinking.

20'00"

MAT (OUTDOORS): I loathe the winter. Especially on the bike, right? The bike means you've gotta have gloves in the winter. And in order for me to work anything to do with my bike, I have to take the gloves off, but then where do the gloves go when I'm trying to do the lock? So I try and put them under my armpit, but because my arms are so short, they get in the way of my hands a bit – and... all of this faffing just blights my life!

MAT: For a bicycle, you need a pair of gloves that can come on and off very quickly. Inching fingers into woollen-fingered gloves is not practical for me. So I realised I don't need a finger in every hole, so to speak. I

have four fingers – two above the handlebar and two below, and that gives me enough purchase to manage handlebars. Therefore, I only need a two-fingered glove. Wide fingers, admittedly – kind of like a T-Rex, if – let's go there! So I had some made. My “flittens” are made of sheepskin, because that comes on and off really quickly unless your hands are wet... I refer to my upper appendages sometimes, for fun, as flippers, not hands. And so, mittens become “flittens”.

21'05”

SAMANTA BULLOCK: This is a glove that you put on the top of a jacket, and the leather bits are what will touch the wheel...

This is Samanta Bullock.

...so it means, if this gets dirty, it just wipe cleans. This is the part that touches the wheel, the leather, so it's much easier, it makes you warm, so, there you go! (FADES UNDER)

Samanta grew up in Brazil, where an accident with her dad's shotgun almost killed her. That was nearly thirty years ago. Now based in the UK, Sam's a model who's wheeled herself on to the catwalk at London Fashion Week. She has her own accessible clothing range, and she's a huge champion of inclusive fashion.

SAMANTA: We had some comfortable clothes for disabled people but they are so functional and ugly, and medical... and I don't want to be seen as a patient. I'm woman, I'm married, I travel, I work, I have my friends, I go for drinks, I have my sense of fashion. I want my husband to see me as a woman. And I want my friends to see me for what I am, and for the things I think, and for my ideas and my feelings, not for my condition. So, I'm a wheelchair user but the wheelchair doesn't define me. It's part of me, it's fine – I accept that, it's fine – it's not that I'm saying I'm not disabled, no! I am! And, it's ok.

MUSIC: Daniel Avery – Illusion Of Time

22'38"

It's great to hear Samanta Bullock being so positive about disability. I wasn't always so positive. Nor did I kick up a fuss, with my perfectly able legs. For years, I would "deny" my own disability – I mean, deny it to myself, reject the label.

Now, it's obvious when you meet me for the first time, all but the most visually impaired people would see within about half a second that I've got short arms. But despite that, almost until my 30s, I was still hiding in the "disability closet". And I reckon school had a lot to do with that... getting changed for swimming, and so on.

This is Liz Sayce – a long-time advocate for disability rights.

23'20"

LIZ SAYCE: I'd love to see much more inclusive schools, workplaces, communities, so that everybody with any kind of experience of impairment is just automatically included. And I think we're still a way from there.

MAT: Well I've long thought inclusive education is the most important thing, you know, whenever we have these conversations – "why aren't there more disabled people in" – you know, fill in dot-dot-dot line there, it always comes back to inclusive education.

LIZ SAYCE: It's through learning together, playing together, being together, growing up together, that we all learn how to accommodate each other. If what you do is, you separate out a group of children, and teach them somewhere else... what happens instead is, you get a lot of people trying to change attitudes towards disabled people through attitude campaigns. And actually, what is far more successful, is simply being together on equal terms. So, if you have a disabled boss, disabled

colleagues, that's what makes you see everybody as equal – different, but equal.

MAT: I always said that if Grant from EastEnders – the old hard man from back in the day – had had a wheelchair using mate in the Queen Vic, the social implications of that would have been more far reaching than we can ever imagine. And so, we need more of that stuff. We need more inclusive, sustainable, aesthetically pleasing design – and it IS possible – and we need the law to back it up.

MUSIC: Busta Rhymes – Put Your Hands Where My Eyes Could See (Instrumental)

25'00"

I believe in the “social model” of disability. What that means is, people aren't disabled by their differences, or by their impairment, but they're disabled by society's barriers – attitudinal and physical – stuff like inadequate transport, or inaccessible buildings. Or, no ramp at an award ceremony.

The value of oneself is reflected by how accessed you are in a society. So, if a building isn't accessible, or there isn't a pair of gloves that works for you, you feel less valued.

Dismantling barriers that make us feel as though we're lesser beings, is absolutely vital. Otherwise... you'll shrink into a corner.

And NOBODY puts Liz Carr in a corner.

LIZ CARR: I remember, on my first year of Silent Witness – the wrap do, so, the party when you finish filming that series, after 8 or 9 months together – the wrap do wasn't accessible.

MAT: Wow – how to make you feel unwelcome...

LIZ CARR: ...and – it really hurt. It's basically saying – you're so insignificant, that we have forgotten about you, or not bothered about you, you might as well have a sign at the front, going "you're not welcome here". And that... is HARD. It's really hard. And I think it's where a lot of our humour comes from, because you have to be so incredibly strong and resilient to survive that, that knockback all the time. And I guess – you asked me at the beginning, what could this incredible world where we're included look like? And, I'm not very good at the visuals, so I'm not sure Mat, I wish I could see it. But I've been so used to a world that isn't accessible, I don't know. But I know the feeling I'd like from being there –and that is: I'd love to not feel grateful, and thankful, when something is done accessibly. Because I'd like it to just be – that's how it is. But I think that... it really tells me a lot that I feel the need to be incredibly chirpy, and thankful and grateful, that people are just allowing me into a place I should have been allowed in from the start.

MAT: You are the most bitter (LIZ LAUGHS) unbelievably selfish bitch I have ever listened to.

LIZ CARR: And that's why I love you, Mat!

BOTH LAUGH... fades out.

27'30" ends

R4 OUTRO

'WHAT IF EVERYONE WAS DISABLED?' was presented by Mat Fraser, and produced by Steve Urquhart. It was a Reduced Listening production for BBC Radio 4.