

2018: Year of the Straw – Michelle Hewitt (mahewitt@shaw.ca)

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The plastic straw is ubiquitous, or at least it was. It comes in many different shapes and sizes, from those that are small enough to fit martini glasses to those that are wide enough for bubble tea and thick milk shakes. Transparent, white and every colour or design under the rainbow, plastic straws can be found everywhere that drinks can be found. Or at least they were.

Straws, in one form and another, have been around for thousands of years. The first commercial straw came from Marvin Stone experimenting with paper and a pencil in 1888, to find a better alternative to sip his mint julep than from using a strand of gritty rye grass. By the 1960s plastic had begun to dominate the market, and recently it was thought that 99% of the market is taken with plastic straws, with the final 1% being metal, glass and paper.

From being so ubiquitous that their use was simply part of life, plastic straws began to be under attack from environmentalists as part of a global campaign to reduce single use plastics. Campaigns were not only “kind of” factual but emotive, with images and video of a turtle with a plastic straw stuck in its nose. It’s not pleasant viewing at all, but there has been little to suggest that the issue extends beyond this turtle. Equally, the figures on pollution do not necessarily sustain the argument that banning straws will make any significant effect on the environment, as the majority of plastics in Garbage Patches, these great floating areas of plastics in our oceans, come from commercial fishing. And, on beach clean ups, plastic straws and stirrers are regularly one of the lesser found polluting plastics on a beach.

After considerable pressure from consumers and environmentalists, fast food outlets began to announce that they were moving away from their current use of plastic straws to alternatives, mostly paper. Conservation International said that “By ending its use of plastic straws, Starbucks is taking meaningful action to protect our oceans” perhaps failing to realize that there is more plastic in the new lid than in the old lid and straw combined. Cities and governments soon began to join the move to ban plastic straws, from the City of Seattle, to the City of Vancouver, to the Government of Canada. All parties appeared to be in agreement, and consensus was moving in one direction. Environmentalists identified an issue, society reacted, and the planet will be less polluted by removing plastic straws, because, as the group #strawsuck say in their Twitter campaign “Do you really need a straw?”. And everyone was happy, a job well done.

Not so fast. The campaigns against the plastic straw had failed to consider that a portion of the population that rely on plastic straws to drink – disabled people. In fact, one of the earliest adopters of the plastic straw, and particularly the bendy version, was hospitals, as it was realized that patients could drink while lying in bed by positioning the straw. For disabled people, however, it means more than an occasional hospital visit, like those the majority of the population might experience. It means independence; being able to drink independently without a carer tipping a cup to your mouth and risking spillage or, even worse, aspiration. The disabled people that use plastic straws are often less visible to the greater population, and less represented, as their disabilities may also mean that they are non-verbal or are less independent.. The tide of pro-environment sentimentality, with the now iconic image of a turtle with a straw up its nose, was so strong that it allowed no space for the voices of these disabled people to heard initially. Our voices, disabled people like me who use straws and our allies, began to breakthrough on social media and in op-ed pieces in many major newspapers in many countries in the Global North.

Articles appearing in the press began by detailing the need for disabled people to use plastic straws, with disabled people explaining the crucial part that plastic straws played in their lives. Our use of straws allows us to be spontaneous while we are out and join friends for a drink, in a dignified and respectful manner. More importantly, it means that if we forget to take plastic straws with us when we are out, hydration is still accessible and does not become a threat to our health, particularly in summer time. The arguments soon moved from here to one of frustration at the lack of respect and the constant questioning from even the most well meaning people – did you know they make straws out of metal? Bamboo? Glass? It led to the creation of a table that succinctly explained all the different options and the reasons why they were not appropriate. It has been shared widely. (Anyone wishing to receive a copy of it can contact me, and I'll share it, along with any other articles and information I have.) Disabled people, by the very nature of living in a world that is not designed with us in mind, are creative, adaptable and resourceful, and yes, had done all the research themselves before deciding that the plastic straw was indeed the best tool for the job for most of us, most of the time. Robust yet forgiving. Hygienic and disposable.

However, daring to question those that question us often led to heated exchanges. An unnecessary conflict between environmentalism and disability developed – environmental ableism, perhaps, where the need to save the planet was seen as greater than the needs of disabled people to drink. On my own Facebook page, I was told that “being disabled didn’t excuse me from my responsibility to save the planet.” Other disabled people have called out their experiences on Twitter. They’ve been asked by both servers and customers whether they really need a straw, forcing them to “out” their disability all to be able to drink. They’ve been told to bring their own straws with them, as if a straw is a specialized piece of kit that no establishment should be expected to carry. And, challenges are often heated and pointed. All to be able to drink through something that just last year was no issue at all, as the plastic straw was everywhere drinks could be found.

Ultimately, this exposed the crux of the debate. The fundamental issue plastic straws highlight is the same issue that disabled people face every day – the need to demand respect, accessibility and inclusion. This isn’t really about straws at all. It’s about disabled people and their issues being invisible, it’s about society feeling that the majority rules, even to the detriment of the health of the minority. As disability advocates, we have had our work cut out ensuring that those that seek to ban fully understand the issue.

The City of Vancouver, home to Congress this year, provides an excellent example of how this issue has played out, and the role we have been able to have as advocates. In June 2018 the city announced that plastic straws would be banned by June 2019, having done no outreach with disabled people and businesses that rely on plastic straws. Initial ideas, that servers would offer straws but not give them automatically, were rejected, as the city said that businesses and the public said that they were not strict enough, once again, ignoring the needs of disabled people. However, Vancouver employed a consulting firm to work on this for them, and make recommendations on what the new bylaw should say. I was involved in their consultations with disabled people, at a level I hadn’t been asked to be involved before – a small group of us, from disability groups here, were asked how disabled people should be consulted. It was an excellent experience, as the group accepted all of our recommendations. We asked for them to work hard to consult with people that actually have to use straws, rather than the groups that represent them. We explained the issues in putting together the consultation itself, with the need to have additional assistants to act as scribes and so on, depending on the types of activities they wanted to do, and we encouraged them to encourage disabled people to talk about their experiences with different types of

straws, so that they could learn why plastic straws were something that disabled people genuinely needed.

The outcome was wording for the bylaw that will call a straw an accessibility tool, or something similar, and that businesses that serve drinks must make them available on request. While the “on request” part is not perfect, it’s definitely better than no straws at all. As Vancouver is the biggest municipality in BC, their work on this has been watched closely by other municipalities, who want to achieve the same result without having to repeat the work Vancouver has done.

So, it’s June 2019 now. What has happened to the bylaw? Well, it’s been held up for a year. I’ve sent along some samples for you to explain why. As this issue has been getting more and more prominence, straw manufacturers have responded by producing versions of plastic straws that degrade – you have samples of both biodegradable and compostable straws, so you can see that they are just as robust as the regular plastic straws. It was thought that this would be the type of straws that business would have to supply. However, while these straws break down eventually, the fastest break down in months whereas some still take a couple of years. The current recycling and composting equipment used by waste companies cannot process them, and so they have to be sent to the landfill, where, I guess, they will eventually degrade. Vancouver has given itself a year to work on this issue, not just for plastic straws but for all kinds of single use plastic containers. The irony is, that without a solution, businesses will be told to supply disabled people with the same plastic straw that last year was going to be banned.

An article in the Atlantic, by Madrigal, on the history of the plastic straw, closed with this: open quote

The straw is the opposite of special. History has flowed around and through it, like thousands of other bits of material culture. What’s happened to the straw might not even be worth comment, and certainly not essay. But if it’s not clear by now, straws, in this story, are us, inevitable vessels of the times in which we live.

End quote

And yes, it is true. The straw does represent the inevitable vessels of the time in which we live, and in doing so, it represents the invisibility yet resilience of disabled people, forced to advocate for a product that was found everywhere such a short time ago

MANY DISABLED PEOPLE NEED PLASTIC STRAWS TO DRINK, EAT, TAKE MEDICATIONS, ETC. HERE'S HOW CURRENT ALTERNATIVE, REUSABLE OPTIONS ARE A HARM TO US.

	CHOKING HAZARD	INJURY RISK	NOT POSITIONABLE	COSTLY FOR CONSUMER	NOT HIGH-TEMP SAFE
Metal		✓	✓	✓	
Bamboo		✓	✓	✓	
Glass		✓	✓	✓	✓
Silicone			✓	✓	
Acrylic		✓	✓	✓	✓
Paper	✓		✓		✓
Pasta	✓	✓	✓		✓
Single-use					

by @sarahbreaanep

*Pressure to create bio-degradable straw options that are safe for the environment AND for all disabled people should fall upon manufacturer, NOT marginalized disabled consumers.
 *Once we accept the necessity of plastic straws, we can work together on other environmental initiatives that are effective, inclusive and accessible.



"Hey, kid. Wanna buy some straws?"
 "You got the bendy ones?"
 "Bendy with stripes, my man"

