Chapter II

Failing the Disabled Community:
The Continuing Problem of Web Accessibility

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Abstract

The focus of this chapter is Web accessibility for disabled people, given that much of the Web remains inaccessible or difficult to access. The topic of disabled people's Web access is introduced through a consideration of disability discrimination legislation and a description of how the law applies to Web accessibility. There is a tension between the active burdens the legislation demands and the relative passivity of approaches towards disability discrimination that still prevail. This is exacerbated by the widespread acquiescence to automatic software checking. The history of the development of the World Wide Web in terms of accessibility is briefly described. This reveals the familiar tension between a "free market" approach and regulation that does not readily support social inclusion through accessibility. A table of detailed points showing where automatic tools cannot perform an adequate check against the W3C standards is presented followed by a narrative expanding our claim for the poverty of automatic approaches.

Introduction

...most Web sites are inaccessible to many disabled people and fail to satisfy even the most basic standards for accessibility recommended by the World Wide Web Consortium. It is also clear that compliance with the guidelines and the use of automated tests are only the first steps towards accessibility: there can be no substitute for involving disabled people themselves in design and testing... (DRC, 2004)

The words of Bert Massie, chairman of the UK's Disability Rights Commission, represent an indictment of the continued problems of Web accessibility, automatic tools, and the exclusion of disabled people from design, signalling a continuing digital divide between the disabled community and the rest of society.

The concept of the digital divide has become something of a mantra for those concerned with the accessibility of ICTs. As studies are undertaken on accessibility in terms of gender, class, age, disability, and so forth, our understanding of the ways in which accessibility to new ICTs is much more than just having technology available becomes increasingly sophisticated. At the same time, the use of the World Wide Web for the provision of goods, services, information, and education has grown exponentially in the last 10 years. It seems incontrovertible that access to the Web could be immensely beneficial for disabled users, over a wide range of applications, especially those whose impairment affects vision or mobility.

In this chapter, we consider the issue of Web accessibility for disabled people. We argue that much of the Web remains inaccessible resulting from the interplay of a number of factors. In the following section, the topic of disabled people's Web access is introduced through a consideration of disability discrimination legislation, and how the law applies to Web accessibility.

This issue is exacerbated by the widespread acquiescence to automatic software checking, where it is assumed that software can do everything necessary to pass all the appropriate accessibility checks. Our analysis continues in the next section, which describes the history of the development of the World Wide Web in terms of the development of HTML and XML. Although the absence of regulation of the Internet has permitted an incredible explosion of creativity, the "free market" of Internet expansion and Web usage does not promote an active programme for social inclusion. Despite this, the active attempts of Berners-Lee and the W3C has resulted in a set of Web accessibility standards that have been accepted by the European Parliament. The next section details a table of detailed points showing where automatic tools cannot perform an adequate check on the accessibility of a Web site, and the narrative following this expands our claim for the poverty of automatic approaches. We close by suggesting ways forward from the current impasse.

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