

Accessibility statements are inaccessible to older web users

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1. INTRODUCTION

“Web accessibility” in its current form is most commonly conceived of as a relationship between several actors, the primary actors being web developers, who must develop content in line with best practice in accessibility, and users, who must procure and configure the most appropriate browsing and assistive technology for their needs. We have questioned elsewhere the usefulness of this model of accessibility for older users with little technical knowledge [1]. In part to support users whose technical knowledge of accessibility options may be limited, the accessibility community has encouraged site designers to include an “accessibility statement” on their site, describing the various ways in which the site is accessible and how to use the available functionality [2,3]. Although the prevalence of accessibility statements has been explored [e.g. 4,5], the extent to which the statements are of use has not yet been examined.

Older people are more at risk than other age groups of developing impairments which interfere with ease of access to web content. However, if one becomes sufficiently “disabled” to need to use specific accessibility controls, it can be challenging to find them and to learn to use them. It is desirable that rather than being faced with such a learning process while simultaneously coming to terms with an unfamiliar impairment, users are aware of the existence of such controls throughout their web use.

2. THE STUDY

We wanted to explore the extent to which current web users over 60 are aware of accessibility options. 14 participants took part in a study of the usefulness of accessibility pages provided by a sample of Web sites. All participants had computers at home and experience of using the web, and none had significant impairments which required them to use assistive technology. We do not have space here to describe the full methodology or results, but we will summarize the central points:

The majority of participants (12) indicated that neither they nor anyone else make adjustments to their computer to change default settings. When asked what steps they might take to make screen content easier to read, several participants described environmental changes rather than changes to the computer. One participant said they would adjust the lighting around the computer, but “would not dare to do anything with the computer” and two others indicated that they already used a magnifying glass to increase text-size. Most participants did not know that it was possible to change the text size using their Web browser. An illustration of this was given by a participant who copied and pasted text from Web pages into another application in order to make the text bigger.

Following an expert review, 12 websites with accessibility statements were chosen. Participants were shown the home page of a site and asked to find information that would make the page easier to read. Participants each saw four sites, which were presented in a pseudo-randomised order. Participant performance, even when they had been told that such information was available on the website, was not encouraging. Only two of the fourteen participants successfully found the accessibility statement on their first site, four succeeded on the second site and six were successful on the third and fourth sites. To a large extent the design of the site and prominence of the accessibility statement link determined whether or not the participant was successful: ten participants found the statement on at least one of the sites visited, but four of the fourteen were unsuccessful on all the sites.

The third and final part of the study involved the facilitator navigating to the accessibility statement and asking the user to use the statements to find out either how to change text size or to navigate the site using only the keyboard. Sites had been chosen, on the results of the expert review, so that all participants encountered two “accessible” statements and two less well-presented statements (details on the criteria for these ratings is available from the authors). Given that the required information was available on the page in front of them, it was perhaps surprising that only one of the fourteen participants managed to locate the relevant information on all four of the pages, and only two managed to do so on three of the four. Seven participants located the information on two pages, three found it on one page and one participant could not find the information on any of the pages they were shown. Thus even when directly shown the accessibility statement and told that the necessary information was there, nine of the fourteen users failed to make sense of at least half of the accessibility statements they saw.

3. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The study reported above demonstrated clear problems with the accessibility of existing accessibility statements, questioning the extent to which they are known about and can be found by reasonably experienced computer users over the age of 60. On one level, some users' mental models may not include the malleability of online information: several users appeared to assume that the characteristics of online text, like those of offline text, were fixed. Lack of knowledge of the very existence of options to improve the size etc. of onscreen text means, of course, that users will not seek accessibility information in the first place. Reluctance to make alterations that may be difficult or impossible to reverse, was another reason why users did not explore menus etc. and find, or experiment with, accessibility options.

More importantly, once participants were informed that such information existed, they struggled to locate it. The link to accessibility statement information is rarely prominent: there is a tendency to offer such a link in very small text among site details at the bottom of the page; on other sites the user has to browse through several pages before the link is found. Links were often labelled "accessibility", a term that the participants described as vague and confusing.

Even when accessibility statements were presented directly to the participants, all but one encountered difficulties on at least one of the four pages presented. We believe that this reflects the confused focus of accessibility statements which often appear to be written for legal or technical reasons rather than to genuinely enable the non-specialist to use the functionality described. Issues such as references to standards conformance early in the statement, the precondition that the user must know which browser (or even operating system) they are using before they can access the accessibility information, and general use of inappropriately technical language combined to act as a barrier to accessibility, and had the additional effect of irritating and frustrating the participants who frequently complained about the use of "jargon".

These results may also reflect a rather artificial distinction between people who are "able" (for whom default web content exists) and "disabled" (for whom accessibility options are necessary). It is likely, although far from always true, that previously "able" people beginning to experience impairments, or temporarily in need of accessibility options, will be older. Considerable work needs to be done on the provision and accessibility of information to support such "accessibility novices": it is important that users can easily discover that useful alterations can be made and that information exists to tell you how to make them and, perhaps most importantly, this information should be presented in user-centred language, focused on helping the user make alterations of direct relevance to their needs. We hope that the following suggestions provide a place to begin:

- Links to accessibility information should be prominent, and labelled in user-centred language.
- Statements should also be presented in user-centred, and task-focused, language (e.g. "How to make the text larger"). If it is important to include legal and technical statements about the accessibility of the site, these should not be the first thing that the user sees, but should be presented further down the page or on a different page.
- The advice presented should be comprehensive, for example some sites gave only a list of access key combinations, rather than more fundamental advice on keyboard usage.
- If bespoke accessibility features are included, these should be mentioned in the accessibility statement.

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