State of the eNation Reports – a summary

The AbilityNet State of the eNation Reports are a quarterly review of the top ten (by search engine ranking) websites in a particular industry sector.

This report concerns on-line newspaper websites. The next report will review banking websites.

The idea of this report isn't to 'name and shame', but rather to highlight the current state of play – what level of access can the many millions of potential visitors who have a disability, dyslexia, or who simply can't use a mouse very well expect when visiting a website?

Web Accessibility – why it's important

Today many services are only available, or offered at a discounted rate, on the Internet. If a website doesn't meet a base level of accessibility then it will be impossible for the vast majority of disabled visitors to use it. Many others with some sort of limiting condition will also have great difficulty.

It is illegal to bar disabled visitors from on-line services offered to the general public. No organisation would purposefully do this but many are either not aware of the problem, or don't know what to do to address it. In the UK there are estimated to be 1.6 million registered blind people and a further 3.4 million people who are IT disabled. The total spending power of this group is now estimated at £50 - £60 billion a year

A Commitment to Accessibility

All the newspaper companies reviewed were contacted a month before publication of this report and asked to make a public commitment to accessibility. To date only Guardian Unlimited have done this:

"Guardian Unlimited is committed to providing equal access for everyone to its network of websites. However, like many popular websites, we do fall short of recent W3C markup and accessibility standards. To this end we are currently working on a redesign that will bring the sites up to date, and increase their accessibility."

Prepared by the AbilityNet Web Accessibility Team

AbilityNet is a registered charity, No. 1067673. Telephone 0800 269 545 – Email: enquiries@abilitynet.org.uk – Web: www.abilitynet.org.uk

Online newspaper websites – in summary

A 5 star scale was used: *   = Very inaccessible
                                        ***   = Satisfies a base level of accessibility
                                        ***** = Very accessible.

10 sites were reviewed: 2 sites had a ** ranking
                                        8 sites had a * rating
                                        No sites met a base level of accessibility

Website Audit – The findings

All sites were audited for accessibility and usability with the aid of the enterprise version of Watchfire's Bobby accessibility testing solution 'AccessibilityXM' and a range of manual checks. The full Bobby report is available on request.

www.ft.com

Ranking: *

www.ft.com does not meet a base level of accessibility for reasons including:

Often a "tooltip" appears when you put the mouse over a picture. Blind visitors rely on the presence of tooltips as a spoken description of the picture. Without them the picture is meaningless. Some of the pictures on this site, and more importantly pictures that are also links, have no tool tip associated with them. This makes it very difficult for a blind person to find their way around a website – imagine trying to complete a journey where signposts at every roundabout have been left blank!

The site also includes moving pictures and numerous unlabelled invisible images used to govern page layout – both of which are annoying to visually impaired visitors.

This site is also reliant on mini programs built into the page called JavaScript to display stock information and advertisements. Many older browsers, and some special browsers used by those with visionl impairments, do not support JavaScript. Also many organisations disable JavaScript for security reasons.

There are many repeated links on the site which say "Read". A blind visitor using speech output software can extract all available links on a page to quickly find the desired link. Thus it's very important that a link makes sense out of context.

The text size on every page has been "hard-coded" so that a user cannot easily make it larger – so vital for many visitors who have a vision impairment or who are viewing the site on a small screen (a laptop, for example).

www.guardian.co.uk

Ranking: **

This website is the best of those tested – although it also does not meet a base level of accessibility:

Every page includes numerous "in-line frames" (a way of sectioning the page) that include picture adverts that do not have tooltips. Both in-line frames and unlabelled images cause problems for text-only browsers and speaking browsers used by blind visitors.

Most images on this site do, however, have tooltips, although some images are animated which can cause difficulties for visitors with a vision impairment. Pages are also somewhat cluttered.

Whilst most of the text can be easily resized by the user (except, significantly, menu text), some pictures of text have been used instead of actual text – this means that the user cannot resize it or change its colour.

Again this site uses those mini programs called JavaScript – although the site mainly works when JavaScript isn't supported.

www.independent.co.uk

Ranking: *

The Independent website also does not meet a base level of accessibility for reasons including:

Most pictures, and more importantly pictures that are also links, do not have tooltips thus excluding blind and text browser users.

The text size on every page has been "hard-coded" so that a user cannot easily make it larger – so vital for many visitors who have a vision impairment.

This site is also reliant on those mini programs called JavaScript to display certain features which, although not critical to the functionality of the site as a whole, still excludes many users from this content.

Pop-up windows are also an added complication for blind visitors who don't appreciate they are not still looking at the main website.

www.mirror.co.uk

Ranking: *

Mirror.co.uk also has significant accessibility issues:

Most pictures, and more importantly pictures that are also links, do not have tooltips thus excluding blind and text browser users.

Most of the text on every page has had its size "hard-coded" so that a user cannot easily make it larger – so vital for many visitors who have a vision impairment.

Pages are also cluttered with moving images and colour combinations that will cause difficulties for many visitors. This site is also reliant on those mini programs called JavaScript for the layout of the page.

This site causes screen reading software 'Jaws', used by blind visitors, to crash.

www.newsoftheworld.co.uk

Ranking: *

This site includes several of the most significant obstacles to accessibility including:

Most pictures, and more importantly pictures that are also links, do not have tooltips thus excluding blind and text browser users

Pictures of text have been used instead of actual text – this means that the user cannot resize it or change its colour. These images also do not have tooltips - not allowing screen reader users to read the content.

The text on every page has had its size "hard-coded" so that a user cannot easily make it larger – so vital for many visitors who have a vision impairment.

The page uses drop-down menus to access the site's sub-categories – these require the use of a mouse and are reliant on those mini programs called JavaScript. There is no alternative way of getting to these areas of the site.

Persistent pop-up windows are also an added complication for blind visitors who don't appreciate they are not still looking at the main website.

www.telegraph.co.uk

Ranking: *

This site also does not meet a base level of accessibility for reasons including:

Most pictures, and more importantly pictures that are also links, do not have tooltips thus excluding blind and text browser users.

Pictures of text have been used instead of actual text – this means that the user cannot resize it or change its colour. These images also do not have tooltips - not allowing screen reader users to read the content.

The text on every page has had its size "hard-coded" so that a user cannot easily make it larger – so vital for many visitors who have a vision impairment.

Pages are cluttered with many moving images – confusing for vision impaired visitors or those with cognitive difficulties.

This site uses a mini program called a Java Applet to display the breaking news headlines. There is no alternative offered for blind visitors, or for those whose browsers do not support them.

www.thesun.co.uk

Ranking: *

The Sun Newspaper Online also has some of the most serious accessibility issues:

Most pictures, and more importantly pictures that are also links, do not have tooltips thus excluding blind and text browser users.

Pictures of text have been used instead of actual text – this means that the user cannot resize it or change its colour. These images also do not have tooltips - not allowing screen reader users to read the content.

The text on every page has had its size "hard-coded" so that a user cannot easily make it larger – so vital for many visitors who have a vision impairment.

This site is also reliant on those mini programs called JavaScript to display certain features such as a search facility and news tickers. There is no alternative offered for blind visitors, or for those whose browsers do not support them.

Numerous pop-up windows are also an added complication for blind visitors who don't appreciate they are not still looking at the main website.

www.timesonline.co.uk

Ranking: *

The Times Online also has significant issues that mean it does not reach a base level of accessibility:

Whilst all pictures technically have tooltips, these tooltips are blank thus excluding blind visitors from, for example, information in the pictures relating to news items.

Some links on the page are reliant on those mini programs called JavaScript to redirect the user to a new page. Some blind and text-only browser users are thus not able to go to those parts of the site. If you are able to access these links they open a new window without informing the user that this is going to take place.

The text on every page has had its size "hard-coded" so that a user cannot easily make it larger – so vital for many visitors who have a vision impairment.

Whilst the page has good use of white space (assisting those with a vision impairment, dyslexia and cognitive difficulties) it forces horizontal scrolling at lower screen resolutions.

The tab order of the page is not logical when using a keyboard. The menu items are the last items on the page to tab to which can be frustrating for a keyboard user trying to navigate quickly.

www.express.co.uk

Ranking: **

The Daily and Sunday Express website also does not meet a base level of accessibility:

Every page includes a number of "in-line frames" (sections of the page) that include interactive "Flash" presentations. Both in-line frames and Flash presentations cause problems for text-only browsers and speaking browsers used by blind visitors.

Most pictures, and more importantly pictures that are also links, do not have tooltips thus excluding blind and text browser users.

The text allows a user to easily choose their preferred size and the page is generally simple in its design. However there is no link to the home page which is useful if someone enters the site from a link on another site.

Pop-up windows are used extensively and are an added complication for blind visitors who don't appreciate they are not still looking at the main website.

www.dailymail.co.uk

Ranking: *

This site also includes some significant accessibility issues:

Every page includes numerous "in-line frames" (sections of the page) that include adverts. Both the in-line frames and the way these adverts have been coded cause problems for text-only browsers and speaking browsers used by blind visitors.

Most pictures, and more importantly pictures that are also links, do not have tooltips thus excluding blind and text browser users.

The text on every page has had its size "hard-coded" so that a user cannot easily make it larger – so vital for many visitors who have a vision impairment.

There are many repeated links on the site which say "More". A blind visitor using speech output software can extract all available links on a page to quickly find the desired link. Thus it's very important that a link makes sense out of context.

Website Audit - how the websites reviewed were chosen

The websites were chosen using Google and search terms such as "uk newspaper", "online newspaper" and "on-line newspaper".

Further sources of Advice and Support

- www.abilitynet.org.uk

  AbilityNet is able to offer information, advice and a range of services to help make a website accessible and usable for everyone – including accessible web templates, a Key Info Pack, web audits and consultancy.

  For further details please call Robin on 01926 312847 or email enquiries@abilitynet.org.uk

Other sources of help and information include:

- www.w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT

  The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) is the body at the forefront of the development of standards in good design on the world wide web (including accessibility). The W3C's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) form the basis of all other standards.

- www.w3.org/WAI/wcag-curric

  This link will take you to a subsite of the W3C website which tries to explain in plainer terms, with examples of good and bad code, the W3C guidelines checkpoint by checkpoint.

- www.e-envoy.gov.uk/oee/oee.nsf/sections/guidelines-top/$file/guidelines_index.htm

  The UK government Office of the e-Envoy has guidelines on web accessibility (based upon the W3C guidelines). These can be viewed on-line or downloaded as an illustrated Word document.

- www.drc.org.uk/drc/InformationAndLegislation/Page331a.asp

  Organisations are legally obliged to provide websites that are accessible to disabled people. This site includes information on the DDA and the new code of practice.