Inaccessible Websites: Time to Act!

Introduction

We live in an increasingly digitized world, where people need access to the Internet for independence and inclusion. Essential information is increasingly only accessible on the Internet. While new technologies and the Internet offer unprecedented opportunities to widen access to the information society, inaccessible websites mean that access to information remains a major challenge for many disabled and older people.

As more and more services are delivered online, because it is cost effective to do so, inaccessible websites contribute to increase the 'digital divide'. Meanwhile, those who need assistive technology or other help to access websites continue to be denied access to public services and basic services provided online such as education, health, social protection, employment, transport, banking, housing, and so on.

This is unacceptable discrimination - **it is time to act!**

What is the problem?

Many disabled people need assistive technology or other help to access the Internet: a blind person can access websites using text-to-speech screen reader software; a deaf person needs sign language interpretation or subtitles to access video content and a person with cognitive disabilities needs a simplified version of text content. For this to work effectively, people with disabilities rely on websites being designed in an accessible manner, according to recognised web accessibility standards. Unfortunately, the vast majority of websites, including public sector websites, do not meet these voluntary standards so the information they contain is therefore inaccessible to a large portion of the population.

The European Commission has studied the exclusion of disabled people from the digital world sufficiently to understand its seriousness. In 2008 it published a study highlighting that only 2.6% of key public and commercial websites in Member States were accessible, while only 5.3% of government websites were accessible. **This is evidence that non-binding instruments have failed to deliver accessible websites.**

The EU population is ageing, and the likelihood of experiencing a disability increases with age. This means that the number of people living with a disability will increase. According to the European Commission, 25 % of the EU population will be over the age of 60 by 2020 and currently 21% of persons over 50 experience severe vision, hearing or dexterity impairments. This percentage increases with age, therefore more and more people will need accessible websites.

A rights issue

The 2006 Riga EU Ministerial Declaration on "an inclusive information society" included a commitment to make all public websites accessible by 2010. Ministers also committed to deliver standards in public procurement for ICT products and services, with a view to making these mandatory by 2010 – **These targets have not been met.**

The EU ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which came into force on 22 January 2011. Equal access to information is a right now enshrined in articles 9 and 21 of the UNCRPD.

Even in EU countries where there is a well established framework of rights, disabled people face **consistent disadvantage**: compared to non-disabled people they are more likely to live in poverty, more likely to be out of work, and more likely to have no qualifications. Older people and people with disabilities are also more likely to have mobility problems and more likely to make use of public services. **It is therefore particularly important that they have full and equal access to public websites and websites delivering basic services of public interest.**

A business issue

There is now growing evidence that divergent policy approaches to web accessibility in Member States are fragmenting the digital internal market. An increasing number of EU Member States are taking action to improve web accessibility, including through national legal obligations. This is leading to increased fragmentation in the internal market, with different requirements and different certification standards for economic operators who work across borders. This incurs additional costs for businesses and creates barriers to trade, impeding growth in the digital internal market.

This lack of harmonisation also impedes the free movement of ICT goods and services within the internal market and is not conducive to innovation. Therefore EU action is necessary to tackle legal uncertainty, particularly for technology providers, and to make it easier for consumers with disabilities to use online services freely across Europe.

The EU must make the Digital Agenda a reality for All

The Digital Agenda for Europe states that the European Commission will, *"based on a review of options, make proposals by 2011 that will make sure that public sector websites (and websites providing basic services to citizens) are fully accessible by 2015."*

We welcome this announcement but we believe that there have been enough studies, declarations, resolutions and communications addressing the issue of web-accessibility and e-accessibility over the last 10 years.

Time to act!

It is now time to deliver legislation because disabled and older consumers continue to face great difficulties accessing websites. Standards on web accessibility exist, and designing websites accessibly from the outset does not necessarily cost more, yet voluntary compliance has failed to deliver accessible websites both in the private and public sectors and market fragmentation is becoming an issue.

➢ **It is now time to recognise that voluntary compliance with standards has failed.**

➢ **It is now time to deliver the outcomes promised in Riga and in the Digital Agenda for Europe.**

➢ **It is now time for the EU and Member States to move from word to deeds, and make all public websites accessible.**

The United States are considering legislation to update the American with Disabilities Act in order to address these issues - It is now time for the European Union to act too.

So we are urgently calling for:

➢ **The European Commission to review our proposal for a legal act on accessible websites.**

➢ **The European Commission to propose binding EU legislation to ensure that public websites and websites delivering basic services of public interest are made accessible as soon as possible.**

For more information

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