Web Accessibility – A Quick Reference

Many web users have heard of web accessibility, but may not understand it. This short reference guide provides a brief overview of web accessibility, as well as resources for learning more, dealing with inaccessible web content, and producing accessible web content yourself.

What is web accessibility?

"Web accessibility" refers to the means by which web content is made usable by people with a variety of disabilities, with or without the use of assistive technology.

Examples of accessibility features include:
- Captions and video description for online videos
- Alternate text for images
- Keyboard navigation controls
- Labeled text fields
- Sufficient color contrast
- Links with text that describes their actions

How is web accessibility regulated?

In the United States, there are three federal laws that relate to web accessibility:
- **Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (as amended, 1998)**. Section 508 requires that federal government agencies and their contractors make web content accessible to their employees and the public. Additionally, many states and educational institutions have adopted elements of 508 for their own policies.
- **The 21st Century Communication and Video Accessibility Act (2010).** This law will require content aired on T.V. with captions to retain those captions online and will require mobile devices to support captions, among other measures.
- **The Americans with Disabilities Act (as amended, 2008).** The ADA requires that public entities make reasonable accommodations for disability, and that places of public accommodation ensure effective communication with people with disabilities. As of 2010, it is clear that these standards apply online. The U.S. government is currently exploring how to enforce the ADA in online contexts.

There are also voluntary guidelines for web accessibility, produced by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C):
- **Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0 (WCAG 2.0) (2008)**. The most recent set of W3C guidelines are version 2.0. These lay out a number of principles for making the web accessible, and are tied to a number of techniques that explain how to do so.
- **WCAG 2.0 is influential**. WCAG 2.0 has been used by multiple countries to establish accessibility standards, and has influenced U.S. laws. Additionally, these guidelines are often used by companies producing web content or Web 2.0 services.
- **WCAG 2.0 is voluntary.** Unlike the laws above, the guidelines produced by the W3C are recommendations, or best practices, that can not be easily enforced. This means, on most of the web, web accessibility is optional.

How can I get involved?

There are opportunities for members of the public to weigh in on both legal and W3C accessibility processes, even if you don't have a technical background!

For legal policies:
- Following the passage of a law, or the drafting of standards, there is a period of time for collecting public comments. Comment at http://regulations.gov.
- Contact your Senator or Representative to advocate for new laws, amendments, or new enforcement mechanisms, or contact a government agency with your feedback. Find contact information at http:// http://www.usa.gov/Contact.shtml.
- Work with an advocacy group, like Coalition of Organizations for Accessible Technology, National Federation of the Blind, or others.

For W3C guidelines and documents:
- There are many ways to participate with the W3C, including being part of community groups, discussing standards, giving feedback, or testing code.
- And, when new standards are developed, there are periods for public comment.

What if I find something online that isn't accessible?

If you come across web content that is not accessible to you, or that you recognize would not be accessible to someone with a particular disability, you have many options.

If it was on a federal government site…
- Contact the agency responsible for that site.
- Contact the Access Board for more information.

If it was on YouTube…
- If it was originally televised content, use YouTube's reporting feature.
- If it is user-generated content, consider contacting the user.
- Consider producing captions for it, or asking volunteers to do so, via Amara.

If it was elsewhere on the web…
- Consider contacting the organization, company, or individual responsible for it.
- You could file a report with Fix the Web, and allow their volunteers to pursue it.

What can I do to make my web content more accessible?

These are just a few resources to help you produce accessible web content.
- The W3C offers a number of resources, including a Quick Reference guide.
- WebAIM offers the WAVE toolbar for Firefox, which checks accessibility
- Glenda Watson Hyatt shows how to blog accessibly at Blog Accessibility
- Produce captions with YouTube's caption features or with Amara