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Column: Access for people with disabilities needed on websites

By Trip Rems • Aug. 19, 2020

Website accessibility for people with disabilities — long one of the most important and least understood needs of the information age — is coming into sharp focus as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) turned 30 last month.

Businesses and organizations that provide a wide variety of products and services are discovering new markets and audiences that were previously inaccessible. There are a number of reasons for this trend.

With the click of a mouse or the swipe of a screen, the digital revolution has brought so much of daily life within our easy reach: shopping, finances, education, communication, health, etc. Yet for some 61 million Americans living with a disability, the promise of universal access to goods and services online remains elusive.

People with limited dexterity, poor eyesight or poor hearing cannot fully participate in the information revolution we take for granted because inaccessible websites can be difficult or impossible for assistive technology users to access. A recent survey by Web-AIM found that 98.1% of website home pages had detectable accessibility barriers. Websites with inaccessible content or accessibility barriers exclude one or more groups of people with disabilities from accessing content on the web.

Some common website accessibility barriers for people with disabilities include:

- >> Video missing synchronized captions.
- >> Videos with content that is not presented in the audio track missing audio description.
- >> Websites that do not work with a keyboard only.
- >> Images and graphics that do not include alternate text.
- >> Color contrast that is below the threshold required for readability.

To address these issues, an accessible website is fully compatible with assistive technology devices including screen readers, braille displays and screen magnifiers. Creating content that is accessible ensures that the greatest number of people can access and use it. This means a more inclusive world where people (regardless of ability) can access goods and services, and general information that supports education and individual health and welfare. For businesses, it means expanded markets that were previously inaccessible, as well as reduced exposure to liability due to increasing numbers of lawsuits demanding accessibility for people with disabilities.

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Despite the promise of the ADA to make universal public accommodation for people with disabilities, there are still many obstacles to accessing goods and services. Online services, which are not explicitly covered by ADA Title III, are often difficult or impossible to access with assistive technology devices.

To make matters worse, the U.S. Department of Justice recently punted on the issue of online accessibility — as it tabled rulemaking on website accessibility. This essentially leaves the important issue of website accessibility up to the courts to decide.

Access to online services is a fundamental right — indeed a need — of people with disabilities. The Department of Justice should revisit the issue of online accessibility, and work to codify accessibility guidelines (i.e., the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) into law under ADA Title III.

The stakes could not be higher, as access to the web, and the inclusion of people with disabilities in every aspect of life, is a basic right that should be honored with equal access.

Trip Rems is president/owner of Aurora Design and Consulting in Honolulu.



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