

LIBRARY WEBSITE ACCESSIBILITY CHALLENGE

Vivienne Conway reports on the results of her research project auditing the accessibility of 29 public library websites across Western Australia with links to online catalogues. Her project was supported by the Twila Ann Jansen Herr Award for Disability Services research.

Most of us take the act of surfing the web, including navigating a library's website for granted. It has become second nature to us. We watch as the page loads and we are quickly able to process the information as it is displayed on our screens.

But for some users this is not the case and understanding a web page can be a far more complex task. Some users may have a visual impairment, others an auditory impairment, and others have cognitive limitations. Accessibility guidelines were established to provide web developers with strategies to ensure equality of access to information, irrespective of any possible impairment.

This audit used two automated website accessibility tools, HTML and CSS validation tools, a manual checklist and an evaluation of a selection of the websites with the most popular screen-reading software, JAWS. Two surveys were conducted to gain an understanding of the perspectives of the libraries, directed to reach all public library communities in Western Australia, including those with and without a library website.

The surveys were designed to ascertain the willingness, barriers and benefits to compliance perceived within the public library community. Follow-up interviews were also

offered to add still further understanding of the issues faced in achieving website accessibility compliance.

Surprisingly, it was discovered that none of the public library websites audited had complied with even the most basic Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 1.0 or 2.0). WCAG 2.0 is the level proposed in the Australian Government's Web Accessibility National Transition Strategy, released in June 2010, the purpose of which is to "set a course for improved web services, paving the way for the more accessible and usable web environment that will more fully engage with, and allow participation from, all people within our society."

While the libraries expressed a desire to have an accessible website, they cite the barriers of time and cost as the chief problems in achieving this. In addition, there is great uncertainty as to who is actually responsible within a local government for ensuring that the website meets the compliance requirements.

Within the public library community, there is a demonstrated lack of understanding of the guidelines and the necessity to comply with them. Nor are the costs of

non-compliance well understood. The surveys indicated that website sponsors did not seem to understand the business benefits that arise from having an accessible website, such as increased ease of use, increased website hits based on search engine compatibility and avoiding the hefty fines arising from complaints upheld by the Australian Human Rights Commission.

The results of this research outline the far-reaching implications non-compliance can have for any personal, government or business entity with a web presence. Creating or modifying websites, especially those with interactive elements such as web forms, involves a need to comply with WCAG 1.0 or 2.0 guidelines. Whilst some considerable time may be required to ensure compliance of websites against these guidelines the regulatory landscape within Australia, and indeed around the world, means that accessibility can no longer be considered optional.

The Web Accessibility National Transition Strategy identifies the auditing of websites as the first step in its work-plan. Any public libraries included in the study are welcome to contact Vivienne for a presentation of the audit results.

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Note: This article includes material from an article by Vivienne and edited by Bryan Garnett-Law, previously published in *Cohesion* (November 2010, Edith Cowan University).

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