# webb's web

A few months ago, I wrote that we'd soon be seeing some renewed action on the accessibility front and although many web workers won't have noticed much sign of it so far, there's quite a bit of activity happening in some areas. Before I start though, there's just one thing I'd like to clear up. Accessibility is important, and everyone should know this. Many people in the web development game don't know it (or choose to ignore it) but if I wrote about it every week that would be counterproductive. So I don't. So now seems a good time now to give the topic (in its various aspects) a little airing.

## Why now?

The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines version 2.0 (WCAG 2.0) were published in December 2008. (See them in all their glory at **http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20/**) In this country the Australian Human Rights Commission is responsible for the Disability Discrimination Act 1992, and that requires websites to be accessible to all people. On top of that, many organisations have an internal requirement that their sites achieve a high degree of accessibility – and this is particularly true of governments at all levels. The agency leading the push is the Australian Government Information Management Office (AGIMO), which has developed a strategy (**http://tinyurl.com/2bqgvou**) that federal, state/territory and local governments have agreed on. The strategy will help those government agencies plan how to achieve the necessary compliance levels over the next four years. So that's why you might be hearing a little more about the subject just now.

## What a screen reader sounds like

In introducing people to the concept of why accessibility matters, I've found it useful to show them how a screen reader – as typically used by blind people – works, and the simplest example is one produced by the University of Washington called WebAnywhere (**http://webanywhere.cs.washington.edu**/wa.php). It's best used as an illustration of the concept rather than as a testing tool, partly because accessibility testing is quite a specialised task and is best carried out by someone familiar with a range of screen readers.

In fact, this issue is one that's been examined in some depth by the people at Accessibility NZ in a blog post (**http://tinyurl.com/24p99ol**). They make the point that it takes a person experienced in the use of screen readers to do a proper test, in much the same way that an experienced wheelchair user is best placed to test how good a building ramp is. Then there's the issue that a site should be accessible to a person just starting to use a screen reader, without much proficiency at all. It's indeed a complex matter.

Anyway, back to WebAnywhere. I've found that it highlights a whole range of issues, including pages that use both ALT text and link text (resulting in the description of the link being read out twice) and the times when the order that elements are read out is quite different from the way that they're displayed on the screen.

## Accessibility for all of us

One pleasant surprise that I found in working through the Guidelines is that several will be useful to all users, whether or not they have obvious disabilities. Take time limits as an example. One guideline is that if a time limit applies to an activity on a website, there should be a way of adjusting it or turning it off. Having recently struggled with a banking application only to have it tell me I'd exceeded the time allowed just after hitting the final submit button, I like that one. Similarly, the requirement that error messages clearly state how the user hasn't done what they should will be very welcome.

## It may be portable , but is it usable?

The most contentious part of the new regime is bound to be the rules governing how to publish PDFs. It's been recognised for a while that there are problems with this format, and although the good people at Adobe can provide useful advice on how to create your PDFs in such as way as to make them quite accessible, it's not enough – and AGIMO and the AHRC have jointly decided that their advice will be that when a document is published in PDF form it must be accompanied by an equivalent in a more accessible format such as HTML or RTF.

This is bound to raise a few hackles, especially as many organisations will not be able to lay their hands on the original documents from which the PDFs were created. But rest easy: the rule applies only to new documents and not those that have been published before July this year. The advice to government Webmasters from AGIMO is that "unimportant or unpopular" content that can't be converted to WCAG 2.0 should be archived or decommissioned, and this is where I have a problem with their stand. I think it does little for the concept of open government to take older material from a site just because it's too expensive or difficult to upgrade it. But this, along with a load of other issues is bound to be discussed at length over the next few months.

## Discussion forums

One of the best places to talk about this and other issues is on the blog that AGIMO has set up at **http://agimo.govspace.gov.au/** It's used to discuss a number of topics, but the accessibility posts are quite easy to find.

## A moderately useful post

And to finish on a different note, the ABC's Drum Unleashed is a site that's been gaining more and more fame (and notoriety) even after the election. As with all of these places, the issue of moderation is taken very seriously. One of their moderators has written an informative and witty post at **http://tinyurl.com/2bot64a** about what they do and how they do it. If you're ever fortunate enough to be given this sort of responsibility, you'll find it a good starting point.

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