Review: Web Accessibility, practical advice for the library and information professional. Jenny Craven (ed). Facet, 2008. 168pp.

In a presentation to the United States House of Representatives in March 2007, Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the World Wide Web, spoke of his desire to maintain and expand the inclusive nature of Web technologies:

> "So how do we plan for a better future, better for society? We ensure that both technological protocols and social conventions respect basic values. That the Web remains a universal platform: independent of any specific hardware device, software platform, language, culture, or disability."

Berners-Lee's original implementation of his invention, Hyper Text Markup Language (HTML), ensured that most early webpages were simple, text based documents. However, as the technologies underpinning the creation and display of webpages became increasingly sophisticated, many webpages became difficult to read on differing platforms, under different technologies, and no longer met the needs of many users of the web. Today, information resources are increasingly provided in an electronic format, via the world wide web. Considering how to make such resources accessible to as wide an audience as possible as part of the design process makes good sense, as a return on the temporal and financial investment it takes to develop online content. Web accessibility, once a niche concern, is becoming increasingly important to library and information professionals, as we understand both the legal and moral duty in constructing web based content which can be accessed by as wide a potential audience as possible.

To date, there has been an abundance of advice and guidelines on web accessibility published by a variety of organisations, including Tim Berners-Lee's World Wide Web Consortium, and their Web Accessibility Initiative (www.w3.org/wai), The UK's Disability Rights Commission "Guide to Good Practice in Commissioning Accessible Websites" (2006). "Web Accessibility, practical advice for the library and information professional" aims to provide an overview of the subject of web accessibility and usability, featuring chapters written by a range of practitioners to provide practical, immediate advice to those in the library and information sector. As such, it plugs a much needed gap in the literature: setting out clear guidance of how to tackle the myriad of available advice on accessibility, encouraging engagement with accessibility issues by those designing, procuring, developing, editing, testing, and using websites.

One of the strengths of the book is its overarching approach to the definition of accessibility, referring to the "application of technical solutions to the design of a website in order to render it more accessible to users" (p. 2). A mistake often made is that "accessible" design only applies to users with disabilities, whereas in fact, creating websites that meet design standards allows any user, with any chosen device, to access online content more easily and efficiently. It has been demonstrated that this can have economic benefits for the website host – as well as accessible sites being easier to use, they are easier to maintain, are delivered faster to users, and have a wider potential audience. Throughout each chapter, the text carefully reinforces the notion that accessibility is an area that all web developers should be aware of for the widest of practical reasons, whilst at the same time creating resources that allow users

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who depend on assistive and enabling technologies, such as screen readers, to access websites efficiently. Access is therefore for all, rather than an extra bolt-on technology for the disabled audience.

The text has nine major chapters, providing a variety of practical overviews. The tools which can be used to widen access to the web are explained, including functions already built in to user's operating systems, such as mouse, keyboard and sound settings, and enabling and assistive technologies such as Braille translators, and screen readers. Designers are encouraged to think of accessibility as an inclusionist process, where the different needs and characteristics of a likely audience should be made explicit. The importance of accessible web design is explained, whilst barriers to accessibility are identified (such as fears of the loss of creative design, and a lack of legislative clarity), and possible solutions are presented to help eliminate these barriers. The correct application of properly validated HTML or XHTML code is demonstrated. Available methods for evaluating and assessing the accessibility of websites are identified and presented. In the final chapters, it is considered how accessibility issues direct relate to library and information professionals, and a strategy is explained to encourage serious consideration of accessibility when designing information resources. The current state of education for library and information professionals in accessibility is discussed, giving recommendations regarding the need for web accessibility training to become part of the library and information studies curriculum. Finally, examples of good practice are provided, and it is considered how web accessibility guidelines and assessment techniques may develop, and indeed improve.

The book, therefore, provides a clear overview of the major areas which an information professional needs to engage with to understand the many aspects that accessible design entails. All chapters outline established sources of advice and guidance on accessibility, and point to many examples of good (and sometimes bad) practice to reinforce the practical nature of the text: this is a book to be used as an entry point to accessible web design. Many chapters function well as stand alone expositions of the benefits and application of accessibility. I will in future, for example, be using David Sloan's excellent chapter on "Accessibility evaluation and assessment" as required reading in my own Internet Technologies and Web Publishing courses taught in UCL's Department of Information Studies, as it reinforces and expands what can be covered in the three hour teaching session devoted to the topic of accessibility within these courses. The one fault of the text, though, is that in allowing each author to discuss many of the main areas (such as how best to define accessibility) some topics repeatedly crop up throughout the chapters, and there is occasionally a sense of repetition. This can be mitigated by the fact that accessibility is increasingly becoming a multi-faceted topic, and the text does well to pin down its various necessary aspects.

"Web Accessibility, practical advice for the library and information professional" is therefore a welcome addition to the growing list of publications tackling accessibility and web design. By providing useful, practical, hands on advice as to how best to proceed when designing, testing, and evaluating websites, this text can potentially benefit both the information professional and the wider web design community,

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encouraging the development of the web as a "universal platform" that transcends issues of technological devices, languages, cultures and disabilities.

Melissa Terras
Senior Lecturer in Electronic Communication
University College London

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