

A Strategy to Achieve the Accessibility of Public Web Sites

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Abstract. At the European and national level, pressure has been made to invite public administrations to make their Web sites accessible to all citizens. This paper reports on the work of the BrailleNet Association together with Web designers of the French government to improve the accessibility of public Web sites. It explains the political context, actions that have been undertaken and the results of these actions. Finally, the perspectives for the future will be discussed.

1 Introduction

In many countries, a better access to Web services and Web administration is becoming an important issue. At the European level, the Council of the European Union mentioned in their resolution from March 25, 2002 [1], that: “National administrations should seek constantly to improve the accessibility of their Web pages and explore new and better ways to deliver Web content and services as new technologies and new versions of the Guidelines¹ are developed.” [2] In France, for instance, several governmental measures have been taken to encourage designers of public services to make their Web sites accessible to all citizens. For that reason, the demand for evaluations of public Web sites is growing steadily. The BrailleNet association, created in 1997, has set up actions in narrow co-operation with the French Government to promote the dissemination and application of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines in France.

This paper presents the strategy undertaken to achieve this co-operation.

2 Evaluation of 30 Public Web Sites

In October 2000, the CIRE², stated in their decision that all French public Web sites (around 2600) should be made accessible till June 2001. Following this

¹ The text means the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines WCAG 1.0.

² CIRE: Comité Interministériel pour la réforme de l’Etat, is an interministerial body responsible for state reform

decision, the BrailleNet association was asked to review 30 public Web sites to find out if they were accessible, ranging from ministries to local Web sites, academic institutions, justice court, etc. For each of these sites, 30 significant pages have been selected.

The evaluation method, developed by BrailleNet, first relies on the WCAG 1.0, and also on an analysis of the site's usability with assistive technologies. The reviewing process is carried out by people with different competencies: programming techniques, assistive technologies, and human factors. Automatic online tools such as Bobby [3], W3C's HTML validator [4] and French version of A-Prompt [5] have been used.

For each Web site, a detailed document has been provided, reporting the main accessibility problems encountered, and suggestions for solutions. A final report has been published by the Ministère de la Fonction Publique on the Web [6].

The evaluation has evidenced that none of the evaluated Web sites was completely conformant to the WCAG 1.0. Therefore, there is a clear need for information and training on the WCAG 1.0 implementation techniques [7].

3 A Guide to Help Web Designers Make Accessible Web Sites

A guide for designers of public Web sites has been published on a governmental Web site [8].

This guide intends to help webmasters find their way through the design of accessible Web sites. It is based on the accessibility problems encountered during the evaluation. It requires knowledge of HTML, of the authoring tools and of Web site design.

After giving an introduction on Web Accessibility and what accessibility means for people with disabilities, the guide explains how to handle different problems such as images, forms, frames etc. Each topic is treated separately in a pedagogic card. This card recalls the guidelines from WCAG related to the topic, links to the checkpoints and techniques, and explains how to implement them. It also gives examples of good and bad practices. At last, the guide presents some automatic evaluation tools.

4 Training

Braillenet has set up a training programme for Web designers divided into three steps:

1. Two-day workshop, in which trainees learn how to review Web sites (different tools, browser settings) in order to repair those sites with their usual authoring tools. They also have to design accessible pages by themselves.
2. Practice at home. Trainees receive pages to evaluate and repair on their own. these exercises are corrected by experts.
3. A final one-day session is organised to give feedback on the exercises, answer questions and summarise problems.

5 Conclusion

The Government's request for a review of key public Web sites results from a will to improve the access of all citizens to all the public and administrative Web sites.

This review shows that in 2001 no French public Web site conformed completely to the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines. To conclude, we suggest a few action lines to improve the situation:

- by setting up e-learning modules for Web site designers;
E-learning is an efficient way to reach a big amount of people located in different places.
- constituting groups of accessibility reviewers inside public administration;
Well trained reviewers belonging to the designing teams of public Web sites will contribute to raise awareness about the design of accessible sites.
- developing software assistants for accessibility review;
Those tools would facilitate the work of reviewers as they would reduce the time spent for evaluation in performing automatic checks.
- extending collaboration over Europe;
European projects such as WAI-DA³ [9], and the constitution of centers of excellence, as planned in the 6th framework programme from the European Commission, would strengthen the European collaboration.

References

1. The full text of the resolution of the Council of the European Union can be found in PDF format at: <http://ue.eu.int/newsroom/makeFrame.asp?MAX=1&BID=87&DID=70046&LANG=1&File=/pressData/en/trans/70046.pdf&Picture=0>
2. WAI's Web Content Accessibility guidelines WCAG 1.0, from may 1999: <http://www.w3.org/tr/wcag>
3. Bobby worldwide is an automatic evaluation tool developed by CAST: <http://www.cast.org/bobby>
4. W3C's html validator: <http://validator.w3.org>
5. A-Prompt: <http://www.aprompt.ca>
6. BrailleNet's report (October 2001) can be found in French at: <http://www.fonction-publique.gouv.fr/tic/evaluation2001-accessibilite.htm>
7. Techniques for Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 1.0: <http://www.w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT-TECHS/>
8. BrailleNet Guide, published by the DIRE (Direction Interministérielle à la réforme de l'Etat) in February 2002: http://www.fonction-publique.gouv.fr/communications/guides/guide_index.htm#dire
9. WAI-DA: <http://www.w3.org/waida>

³ Web Accessibility Initiative and Design for All (IST funded project).