June 11, 2001
New York Times Technology Section, Arts Online

Arts Online: Making Federal Web Sites Friendly to Disabled Users

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Not that anyone thought this was possible, but the Web sites of the federal government are about to become less interesting. And from at least one perspective, that may be good.

The catalyst for this change is a new set of standards intended to make the government's Internet sites more accessible to people with disabilities. The 16 guidelines take effect on June 21 and cover everything from making sure that a Web page's colorful hyperlinks can be read by colorblind users to supply in captions to accompany audio and video clips for hearing-impaired people.

The goal of improved accessibility is beyond dispute. Yet as federal Webmasters re-examine what they put online to meet the requirements, they are likely to suppress their appetite for the attention-grabbing visuals known as eye candy and multimedia treats like animated graphics.

"In the short run, there'll be a degree of conservatism," said Walt Houser, Webmaster for the Department of Veterans Affairs, meaning that the government's 30 million pages may start to recall the Web sites of 1994, when text and graphics were nearly all that could be found online.

Web design is still a young form of graphic art. Its practitioners are struggling to create an Internet that is more than a huge volume of booklike pages on the computer screen.

Making the Internet accessible to people who cannot see, hear or touch it adds a new dimension to the challenge. Web pages with text and a few properly labeled images are relatively easy to make accessible. Software for the blind that converts text into synthesized speech, for instance, generally can read these pages without a hitch.

But the Internet's interactive and multimedia elements are not as readily adaptable for people with disabilities. Adding captions to video clips, for example, can take a lot of time, effort and money.

So, to avoid legal disputes and limit costs, federal Webmasters will scale back the amount of multimedia materials they use. Will anyone notice? Probably not, especially because most government sites are designed to deliver information, not entertainment. Installing razzle-dazzle animation on the Internal Revenue Service site would be akin to sticking tail fins on a truck.

Does this just-the-facts approach to accessibility doom a site to drabness? Judy Brewer, director of the accessibility initiative for the World Wide Web Consortium, an industry
group, said, "There are so many myths in the area of Web accessibility, and one of them is that an accessible Web page has to be dull and boring."

Webmasters who spoke last week said the guidelines would not affect the aesthetic impact of their sites or limit their creative freedom. That may be because, with their emphasis on substance over style, the sites are already pretty much indistinguishable from one another. If you've seen one vertical menu bar with big buttons, you've seen them all. The Webmasters should seize upon the guidelines as a chance to add a dash of style to their sites.

No one expects federal agencies to produce sites with truly cutting-edge designs. But there is a reason for them to push the envelope a bit. In adopting the accessibility standards, the government has become involved in a test case that has far-reaching implications for multimedia design.

The guidelines, put in place by recent amendments to Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, primarily address federal sites. Another antidiscrimination law, the Americans With Disabilities Act, may apply more broadly to the Internet.

If the government can adjust to the standards, the thinking goes, it may pave the way for extending them to other areas of cyberspace. And the prospect of appealing to a mammoth customer like the federal government may prompt software developers to work harder to include accessibility features in their Web-building tools and perhaps develop creative ways to do it.

This is an important factor. While the Internet continues to evolve, Web designers are trying to create more compelling sites that convey information in effective and exciting ways. Making sites useful to people with disabilities has been an elusive goal, largely because the software tools do not make it easy.

Look, for example, at the Web site of the National Museum of American History, at americanhistory.si.edu. As part of the Smithsonian Institution, the museum is committed to making its site accessible, although it is not required to adhere to the federal-agency standards.

For the site "Within These Walls," which chronicles the lives of five families that lived in a single house over 200 years, the museum built on its Web site a virtual exhibition with sliding windows and other animated devices that encourage online visitors to peer into nooks and touch every artifact.

"What we were really after was a sense of exploration, so the whole idea of interactivity was very important," said Donna Tramontozzi, a founder of New Tilt, the Somerset, Mass., company that created the site.

But the designers could not find software that would allow them to provide an accessible version of the same experience. They fell back on building an alternative site that is
generic in appearance and offers fewer interactive opportunities. It is indeed drab.
(Advocates for people with disabilities are not fond of alternative sites; they prefer
including accessible features in the primary project.)

Can the experience of online interactivity be conveyed fully to people with certain
disabilities? "No one's been able to do it," Ms. Tramontozzi said. "People can deal with
graphics. Motion's really the thing. And it's not so much motion as meaningful motion."

Mike Paciello, author of "Web Accessibility for People With Disabilities" (CMP Books,
2000), is optimistic that a future version of the Internet might allow, say, a blind person
to experience a site through touch or smell.

"Art, in its purest form, appeals to all the senses," Mr. Paciello said. "Even though
Beethoven could not hear, he could still write music because he experienced it in a
different way. The Web may very well be pushing the envelope of the visual paradigm,
but that doesn't mean it can't be designed to a fuller, perhaps more complete expression of
art."

Until then, some federal Webmasters are taking a more philosophical approach to making
their sites accessible.

David Low, Webmaster for the National Endowment for the Arts, is planning to revamp
his site in the coming months. Like an artist told he can paint only with blue and green,
he welcomes the creative challenge presented by the accessibility standards.

"I don't find myself extremely brokenhearted by whatever restraints may be placed on us
because I do think less is more," Mr. Low said. "In kind of a Zen way, some of these
parameters force us to do something elegant that's relatively simple. And that's what we'd
want."