The "Visually Impaired" Website: Representing Disability on the World Wide Web

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Introduction

- Web Accessibility : a hot topic
- Social barriers apparent on the World Wide Web
- Theoretical perspective : performative thing-actant
- Research perspective : examples of bad practice

Theoretical perspective

- Performativity
- Actor Network Theory (ANT)
- Performative actants

Performativity

- Erving Goffman
- Judith Butler
- "the performative utterance which … enacts or produces that to which it refers"
- Something only exists in the 'doing' of it

Performativity….

- further than constructionism
- repetition
- restored behaviour
- working consensus
- citation
- serious speech act

Performativity....

- distinct isolated objects in an atomised world

- a door-closer

- web page as activity, not artefact

- web page as social actor

Actor Network Theory

- heterogeneous network of relations
- "If human beings form a social network it is not because they interact with other human beings. It is because they interact with human beings *and* endless other materials too" John Law

Actor Network Theory….

- virtual expression of otherwise entirely social processes
- encoded iteration of social codes of behaviour
- Business processes "frozen in silicon"

Performativity and ANT: Performative Actants

- contextualise the technical within the social
- software applications - an integral part of the networks of the social
- "what counts as a person is an effect generated by a network of heterogeneous, interacting, materials" (Law, 1992).

Performative Thing-Actants…

- software applications citing what they perform
- discriminatory web-page: carries with it an artefactual politics of exclusion.
- accessible webpage: cites cultural codes of inclusivity.
- Performative thing-actants - nowhere more apparent, perhaps, than in the world of disability

Research Perspective:
So how does a web page discriminate?

- Old, deprecated, inaccessible HTML
- whizzy Flash
- unable to use a computer mouse?
- meaningless ALT text
- link to the 'Visually Impaired' website
- "Design for all"
- cultural codes of exclusion

So what is Web Accessibility?

- Web Content Accessibility Guidelines,
- Authoring Tool Accessibility Guidelines
- User Agent Accessibility Guidelines
- Level A, Level AA and Level AAA
- eEurope Action Plan

UK legislation

- Disability Discrimination Act 1995
- websites - covered by the Act
- Implementing Electronic Government
- IEG3 requirement : Level AA.
- SENDA 2001
- Disability Tribunal website

What does it all mean in practice?

- The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines
  - extraordinarily complex, and open to interpretation
  - disjunction between these and other guidelines
- DRC / W3C spat
- EuroAccessibility

So how do you make a website accessible?

- Relatively easy to get Level A
- Fundamental leap from A to AA
- Style Sheets
- Fluid design
- Mouseless navigation

Software Tools for Achieving Web Accessibility

- Bobby – much misunderstood
- Meaningless alt text
- Bobby only WAI Level A
- Bobby icon - citing the cultural code of exclusion?
- Bobby Approved the performative thing-actant
- Lip-service to inclusivity

Authoring Tools

- Microsoft Front Page
- Macromedia Dreamweaver
- Macromedia and HTML

Browsers

- Internet Explorer 6
- User Style Sheets
- Opera
- IBM HomePage Reader

So what are the statistics on Accessible websites?

○ DRC Report "The Web: Access and Inclusion for Disabled People - A formal investigation"

- 81% of 1000 failed to comply with Level A

Conclusion: So what is the problem?

- Why, 5 yrs since W3C Guidelines published, only 19% even begin to comply?
- ANT focus on particular misses grim socio-political reality
- Ethical carrot, moral case, business incentive, but no real stick, and no case law

Conclusion

- Cultural problem – net nerds?
- Little training in accessible web design
- Anecdotally – many web developers very keen
- Lack of official accreditation / kite mark
- Lack of real penalties – only fear of litigation

Conclusion

- a webpage can carry with it and enact the politics of exclusion.
- thing-actants in this sector of society at least often get the upper hand.