An inclusive Internet

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Abstract

An inclusive Internet as part of the Set of Internet Governance Principles means not only accommodating diversity in language, culture, economic levels but people with disability. People with disability form the world's largest minority as according to the World Health Organisation there are one billion people with disability and 80% live in developing countries. An inclusive Internet will empower people with disability to participate equitably in education, employment and in the community as a whole.

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Introduction

The Internet offers an opportunity for inclusiveness – to view the global community of its users as one while recognising its rich diversity. Internet technologies have the potential to give persons with disabilities the means to live on a more equitable basis within the global community in a manner that previously was not possible.

Key drivers are:

- Persons with disabilities form the world's largest minority according to the United Nations. One billion people are estimated by the World Health Organisation to have a disability with 80% living in developing countries. Persons with disabilities can equally participate in society and make substantial contributions to the economy if the appropriate Internet tools are available.
- Over 100 Governments have signed and ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Obligations include implementing measures to design, develop, produce and distribute accessible ICT at an early stage, so these become accessible at minimum cost for persons with disabilities.
- W3C's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) are increasingly mandated by governments and used by industry to make websites more accessible for people with disabilities.
- More governments are starting to incorporate accessibility criteria in their public procurement policies.

What is accessibility?

For persons with disabilities, accessibility means being able to use a product or service as effectively as a person without a disability. This means using inclusive design principles to make products and services usable by a wider section of the population. In some cases, this is not possible, and assistive technologies may be called upon to fill the gap. If so, mainstream technologies should enable the software or hardware connection of the assistive device seamlessly, in terms of both interoperability and data portability.

Changing peoples' attitudes to disability is fundamental to achieving greater accessibility. The traditional view of disability is through the medical model, that is, attempting to “fix” or rehabilitate a person to society's norms. The social model of disability aims to dismantle barriers so that a person with a disability can fully participate in the community. This more contemporary model emphasises a person's abilities rather than disabilities and encourages a person's independence and capacity by decreasing environmental barriers.

Persons with disabilities face as many different barriers as there are types and degrees of disability. For example, people with a visual impairment who use screen-reading software may be confronted by websites that have confusing navigation, or that lack descriptions of images; while people with a hearing impairment may be unable to participate in online conferencing because it lacks captioning.

Through removing barriers, persons with disabilities will be better able to use and contribute to the richness of the Internet by participating independently in the communities of their choice. While making websites accessible is vital, solutions for accessibility are needed to deliver any product or service over the Internet and to accept content or services created by persons with disabilities regardless of the equipment or medium of input. This includes websites, databases, browsers, multimedia applications, mobile phones, computers and their auxiliary equipment.

Apart from accessibility, other barriers need to be overcome so that persons with disabilities can gain benefit from the Internet and contribute value to the Internet. These are:

Affordability

Many persons with disabilities have low incomes and limited educational opportunities. This applies in developed countries and even more in developing countries. Using the Internet is expensive especially in developing countries. When assistive technologies are required, the barrier can be even higher.

Cultural

Persons with disabilities are perceived with pity or shame in many countries. They may be restrictively “protected” by family for any of a number of rationales, ranging from a lack of suitable educational facilities to a lack of appropriate government services.

Availability

In isolated areas, there may be limited availability of the Internet. Encouraging and meeting the needs of persons with disabilities may be a relatively low priority under such conditions.

Lack of awareness by community at large

People in the broader community have limited understanding of how persons with disabilities use technology and of the significant benefits the Internet can bring. Making products and services accessible can therefore mistakenly be considered difficult and costly.

International actions

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states that access to information and communications technologies and systems is one element that will enable persons with disabilities to participate more fully in all aspects of life. The Convention stipulates that governments take appropriate measures for this to occur. Over 100 countries have signed and ratified the Convention, which brings responsibilities, amongst other obligations, to improve accessibility to the Internet for persons with disabilities. The Convention also states that international cooperation and sharing of resources be done by facilitating access to and sharing of accessible and assistive technologies and through the transfer of technologies. Under the Optional Protocol, there are remedies available to persons with disabilities to file complaints under the UN Convention.

The concluding document from the United Nations World Summit on the Information Society, the Tunis Agenda for the Information Society, states that for equitable access to occur, attention should be given to universal design and promotion of assistive technologies. Universal design or Design for All is the concept of designing products and services for a wider section of the community based on seven key principles. It has the benefit that products incorporating these principles may be more accessible for persons with disabilities. It also means that devices do not have to be retrofitted for accessibility but take that into consideration as part of their original design.

The Internet Governance Forum (IGF) recognises accessibility to the Internet as a key issue and through its Dynamic Coalition on Accessibility and Disability has highlighted

steps towards an inclusive society. A simple form of inclusion adopted by the IGF itself is the use of real-time captions for its workshop and conference sessions, including online sessions. This is beneficial for persons from non-English speaking backgrounds but vital for persons with hearing impairment.

The standards arm of the International Telecommunication Union, the ITU-T, places significant emphasis on accessibility with regard to particular Study Groups, Questions and Recommendations. In 2008, Resolution 70 was accepted at the World Telecommunications Standardization Assembly, highlighting many accessibility standardisation activities including mechanisms intended to ensure that the needs of persons with disabilities are taken into account when developing all ITU standards and guidelines.

Conclusion

Regardless of the challenges they may face, persons with disabilities can contribute to society like any other member of the community when barriers are removed. Increasing accessibility to the Internet can help to make that happen.

Explicitly incorporating inclusion to the Internet for people with disability in the Set of Internet Governance Principles is an important step in moving forwards.

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http://www.internetsociety.org/doc/internet-accessibility-internet-use-persons-disabilities-moving-forward