

Online-Zugang zu Kultur und Bildung für behinderte Menschen: eine internationale Herausforderung

Online access to cultural and educational resources for disabled people: an international challenge

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Equal access for disabled citizen: an urgent need

2003 is European Year of People with a Disability. Funding invested in e-learning and online culture is set to grow exponentially. Access to these new resources will increase dramatically over the next few years for a majority of people, but does this include the 40,000,000 EU citizens who are disabled?

This talk shows:

1. large numbers of disabled people face substantial access barriers to online culture and e-learning
2. disabled people have a right to access web sites and
3. initiatives at policy making, funding and strategic level and in the cultural and educational sectors are needed to achieve significant progress

and gives resources; links with examples of good practice.

Resource, the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries is a strategic UK government funded body established in 2000. It promotes good practice and standards in museums, archives and libraries and acts as an advocate for the sectors; undertakes research and initiates strategic developments and acts as an adviser to government. Public access has become a high priority. In February 2002, Resource appointed a Disability Development Officer, who is part of Resource's Learning and Access Team, which has a staff of six. This talk is the result of a coming together of areas of expertise, which all too frequently remain separate: ICT, museum education and disability access. It distills this brief inter-disciplinary experience and passionately affirms the need for a socially and culturally inclusive online culture.

1. Barriers to access

This talk calls for a **person centered definition of online access for all**. A definition for a cultural or educational resource does not yet seem to be in place; hence this proposal:

- it is purpose designed for range of target audiences
- complies with web accessibility standards
- allows for independent access and use
- it communicates meanings (and thus text, digital images and interpretive commentary) in a way which is meaningful to target audiences
- it engages target audiences
- it provides both inclusive and specific resources

This definition, susceptible of being fine-tuned, needs to be linked to the development of a framework for the evaluation of online cultural and educational resources, which would incorporate

existing standards, management processes, approaches to content creation and user involvement. Resource is currently piloting “Inspiring Learning” – a framework for the evaluation of learning and access in museums, archives and libraries, which could be extended to web resources. The development of this framework, which included consultation with over 400 stakeholders so far, will take some two years to complete.

Using the above definition, it becomes clear that only a very small number of museum and heritage websites have built in a level of online access for one or several groups of disabled people. The amount of collections online presented in an accessible manner is highly limited, represents a fraction of all resources available and seldom exceeds a dozen or two dozen objects. No portal exists which provides easy access to these scarce resources; as a result they remain under-used. Currently, every new online cultural resource risks widening the exclusion-zone and unwittingly contributes to install a new form of cultural apartheid, which must be energetically dismantled; or, to put it in other words, **barrier-free resources need to be built on a large scale.**

What are the barriers faced by disabled people? These require a systematic audit, which covers technical standards, as well as the presentation and interpretation of digital collections from an audience centered perspective. This kind of analysis is but one of the pressing needs today. However, compelling examples of barriers, seen from a person centered perspective, are easy to provide:

- a blind person can surf the web endlessly before finding an online museum or heritage collection with (audio / text) descriptions of digital images. To her or him, such cultural materials will remain an arid abstraction in the absence of description. If technical web accessibility standards have been ignored, the navigation of the website will be a tortuous, if not a hopeless task.
- a Deaf person who does not read – and many don't; will find little joy with cultural websites. Whilst he or she will see the digital images and perhaps analyse them visually, their meaning cannot be fully decoded, because the necessary information has been denied them in sign language – which may soon become recognised as a minority language by the Council of Europe.
- to a person with a learning difficulty and very limited literacy, navigation is likely to present serious issues – because it fails to engage her or him with the quality of immediacy; and what's the point: all this information in scholarly and curatorial language on the museum website is of no relevance whatsoever!
- Society, especially disabled people and teachers, pays a high price for these barriers. Teachers in special schools and teachers working with disabled pupils and students spent vast amounts of time individually crafting educational and cultural materials, again and again, which could be made available with the right expertise on the web for many more people. Cost efficiency has been a buzz word for a long time, but somehow it has not entered our mindsets that this principle could be used strategically to the benefit of disabled people and cultural access.

Solutions.

The challenge to overcome access barriers is manifold and requires an interdisciplinary approach:

- web designers need to engage with web architectures that provide smooth access to diverse audiences of disabled people
- content providers and writers need to learn to write for new audiences, commission free-lancers and work with communities
- managers need to build accessibility for disabled people into web design contracts and budget for it!
- all need to develop a knowledge of their audience; community participation is a pre-requisite

Ways of providing access include:

- technical webaccessibility standards
- descriptions of images for visually impaired people. These will allow blind people to form a mental image of an object and to make sense of interpretive commentary. They will enable all people who have some sight to see images better.
- image magnification, heightened tone/colour contrast, detail against contrasted background, visual analysis of art works will interest all people who have some sight
- text and subtitles for people with a hearing impairment
- outline drawings can be downloaded and copied as raised images in schools with young visually impaired people
- sign language for Deaf people
- images as a communication support for people learning difficulties and plain English. Featuring situations, beings and objects with which people with learning difficulties engage
- audio for people with dyslexia
- the cultural access needs of people with mental health issues are little documented, but a friendly and welcoming design and style could prove beneficial for everyone.

The challenge for all involved with online cultural and educational resources is to meet new communities, to learn from them and involve them and to translate this into accessible websites. There is much expertise among teachers, disability organisations, sub-titlers, sign language interpreters, audio describers for TV, film and theatre (e.g. in Germany, Greece, Finland, Italy, France, Spain, Sweden, Japan, UK, US), etc. It's a whole new way of thinking! It's a time for adding layers of richness, expressiveness and heightened communication to our cultural lives. It's a time to lay apartheid to rest.

2. Access is a right

"Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community"

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 27.1

Cultural rights and policies. In the nineties, a number of countries have started developing policies to put in place the implementation of the cultural rights of disabled people. One example is the UK Arts Lottery, a distributor of £300,000,000 annually, which makes access for disabled people an essential criterion for cultural funding. Similar policies are needed for new national e-learning and online cultural resources infrastructure, content creation and funding programmes. This is a fundamental requirement, if Council of Europe Recommendation R(92)6 is to be implemented:

"Government institutions, leisure and cultural organisations should develop comprehensive access policies and action programmes designed to bring significant and lasting access improvements for all disabled people".

Disability rights and policies. The Treaty of the European Union commits the EU and member countries to combat disability discrimination and EU funding programmes to be eligible for disability projects. The EC DG XIII TIDE (Telematics Initiative for Disabled and Elderly People) has promoted inclusive design principles for a decade. The European Disability Forum proposes an EU anti discrimination directive for 2003, which would create a right to access to goods and services; which exists in anti discrimination legislation in e.g. the US, Australia and the UK. Sooner or later, anti discrimination legislation will be passed.

The e-Europe Action Plan, agreed by all Member States, says **Public sector web sites** and their content in Member States and in the European Institutions **must be designed to be accessible** to ensure that citizens with disabilities can access information and take full advantage of the potential for e-government. In relation to 'designing-in' accessibility to all information society technologies,

training for designers in this area is relatively new and therefore fragmented across Europe. There remains much scope for **mutual learning between centres of excellence** to build a co-ordinated and high quality approach.

What is an online cultural resource?

In terms of US, Australian and UK anti discrimination legislation they are a service, like all publicly available websites. In the UK, service providers need to make reasonable adjustments and provide “auxiliary aids and services” under the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) which make a service more accessible to disabled people. Thus, the UK e-Government “Quality Framework for Government Websites” states that “websites must be accessible to disabled people”. The Quality Framework strongly emphasises usability, user centered design and consultation and is mandatory in the UK public sector.

Museum and heritage education programmes (on-site) are currently more responsive to providing access to cultural resources for disabled people than are online cultural sites and e-learning resources. There are three main reasons to this discrepancy: a) public and education services in museums and heritage sites have a longer tradition of awareness of cultural access policies and disability policies. They have experienced this development over a decade and have generated organisational and creative responses, as well as invaluable expertise. b) Online cultural resources are a very new service, and it is probably a fair comment that they have been more ICT driven – which brings with it a lesser focus on cultural policies and practices. c) even where awareness of (technical) web accessibility standards is high, these have often been seen as the answer, whilst they simply are a starting-point for of cultural access. In addition to legal obligations, it also takes human, intellectual and experiential engagement with the ways in which disabled people use or are barred from using the web.

This analysis suggests that rapid progress can be made, if online cultural resources are being seen by all stake holders as:

- services, to which disabled people have a right of access
- being part of the broad family of cultural services, and thus assimilate their traditions and experiences of cultural access policies and practices

Then ICT can transform, like a sleeping (but rather useless) beauty, into actualised potential and be activated for access.

3. Strategy and implementation for online access to cultural and educational resources for disabled people: an international perspective

To make online access to cultural and educational resources a reality, a number of measures are needed. Here are some suggestions for solutions, whose combined effect should be designed to set the foundations for the significant and lasting improvements called for Council of Europe Recommendation R92(6):

strategic

- build (technical) web accessibility standards into funding agreements
- build content accessibility into funding agreements
- make these an essential funding criterion for large scale strategic projects
- foster a critical mass of accessible resources, e.g. promoting new innovative schemes and up-grading existing e-learning resources
- research existing good practice, develop evaluation tools, develop good practice guidance
- develop capacity, harness existing and yet under-used skill, develop new skills and make them available to cultural and educational organisations

- develop training
- provide easy access to accessible resources, via portals to cultural websites and educational resources
- foster good and innovative practice in design, content development and consultation, possibly via award schemes
- develop information on resource requirements; human, technical and financial and project management for cultural organisations

cultural and heritage organisations; software industry

- develop disability access policies and plans, to include websites
- ensure that websites are designed to enable access

Resource in England is committed to giving high priority to online access for all to cultural and educational resources, including for disabled people. We will develop a strategic plan for Resource during 2003, European Year of People with a Disability. This will incorporate some of the above suggestions and apply them to online access for all. Our intention is to link this work to the development of the "Inspiring Learning Framework" (see: chapter 1). We believe that major improvements, nationally and internationally, can result from the collaborative and integrated strategies of policy makers and strategic and funding bodies.

4. Resources and links

web accessibility standards and guidance

www.w3.org
www.abilitynet.co.uk

Access All Areas:disability, technology and learning; editors: Lawrie Phipps,Allan Sutherland,Jane Searle; Association for Learning Technology,JISC,Techdis; July 2002.
www.alt.ac.uk; www.jisc.ac.uk; www.techdis.ac.uk

Online access to cultural and educational resources for disabled people

<http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/nof/support/help/papers/writing-web>

Special educational needs and the internet – issues for the inclusive classroom; editor: Chris Abbott; Routledge Falmer, London/New York, 2002
www.routledgefalmer.com

a few web resources

www.tate.org.uk/imap
www.fng.fi/hugo
www.louvre.edu
www.24hourmuseum.org.uk/nwh/ART13481/html
www.americanhistory.si.edu/disabilityrights/welcome/html
www.thebritishmuseum.ca.uk/compass

thank you for sending good practice examples (all languages) to marcus.weisen@resource.gov.uk

access to museums and heritage collections

'Making collections accessible to blind and partially sighted people' and
 'Describing museums objects and paintings to blind and partially sighted people' (information packs), RNIB Recreation and Lifestyles Services, London, 2002
www.rnib.org.uk/leisure