Guest Blog: Surfing for All

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Recently, I went to a steakhouse for dinner with my family. I did not need to look at the menu while at the restaurant. With the convenience of the internet, I was able to look at the menu on its website long before we left our house. This allowed me the decision-making time I needed, as well as an easier time reading the menu (since I can zoom in with the web browser). In short, having access to the restaurant website helped me have a more relaxing experience inside.

I believe it is vital that those with disabilities have equal access to the internet. In fact, some of us may use the internet more. While my brothers were out riding their bikes and playing in the yard with neighbors, I chose to be on the computer because I could use it independently. Internet search engines allow me to find out information without needing someone else to reach a book for me. Using the internet makes me feel independent, and I love that feeling.

Helpful features for me when using websites include adjusting the zoom to enlarge text and using some keyboard shortcuts instead of the mouse. I can use the mouse, but I appreciate having the option to use the keyboard. Keyboard shortcuts reduce my eye strain and help me maintain better posture in front of the computer screen.

Having properly coded websites is even more important for those who use screen readers to access the internet.

Without proper heading tags throughout the website, a screen reader user cannot quickly locate what they want to read. A good site uses proper semantic markup to allow individuals to non-visually understand the page structure and hierarchy. This also enables individuals to navigate to section headings and other landmarks on the page. Another tip is to write link text that clearly identifies the purpose or destination of the link and does not use ambiguous phrases such as "click here" or "read more." And, of course, any images that convey meaning should be tagged with alternative text so a person can hear an accurate description of the image.

The explosion of audiovisual content on the internet can be a mixed blessing for those with disabilities. If you can hear and you've ever turned on the automated captions on YouTube for fun, you know that they can be hilariously inaccurate at times. It's far better if recorded videos have their own internal captions. If a video isn't captioned, a written transcript is incredibly helpful, if it is accurate and complete. No one wants to feel left out because they're unable to hear web content. This is particularly valuable for radio programs and podcasts, since they are audio-only. Providing accurate transcripts allows those with hearing difficulties to appreciate the content along with the rest of the audience.

Another amazing way to access web content is through navigating by voice. Beyond specialized software like Dragon NaturallySpeaking (which I have tried in the past), intelligent virtual assistant devices like Amazon's Alexa can help you with various tasks and all you need is your voice. I ask my Alexa to stream music and tell me the current time, and I've experimented with setting alarms. You can even ask her to make phone calls for you, hands-free, no vision required.

The Web Accessibility Initiative of the World Wide Web Consortium (which sets international internet standards) has published Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). WCAG are a set of recommendations for making web content more accessible. The four guiding principles behind the WCAG are that all web content should be perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust enough that it can be interpreted reliably by assistive technologies. In many ways, the internet has become necessary in our lives. The internet is a valuable tool in today's world, so any efforts to make it more accessible to people of all abilities are needed and appreciated.

Resources

For more information about web accessibility and training for making websites and digital documents accessible, visit WebAIM. WebAIM (Web Accessibility in Mind) is part of the Institute for Disabilty Research, Policy & Practice. WebAIM also collaborated on this free guide to help nonprofits (or anybody who is interested) to build more accessible websites and digital documents.