Four Ways to Talk about Accessibility

BRINGING ACCESSIBILITY TO THE FORE OF OUR COLLECTIVE ATTENTION WILL REQUIRE BEING ABLE TO HIGHLIGHT THE LOGIC OF IT, THE BUSINESS CASE FOR IT, AND THE TECHNOLOGICAL INEVITABILITY OF IT.

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When thinking about the user experience of a product or service or designing for a specific user, accessibility is often seen as something that affects only a small subset of potential users, not as a service directly related to the user experience of everyone. I’d like to reframe that perception. While I certainly do not want to exclude concepts of civil rights and equity from a discussion about accessibility, I want to bring accessibility into the center of our collective attention by highlighting the logic of it, the business case for it, and the technological inevitability of it.

First, let’s define the word. For decades, the term accessibility has been used to describe a quality of access to physical spaces and specifically access for people with disabilities. In recent years, it’s grown to encompass the digital world, including the Internet. It’s in this world that our society finds itself rapidly transforming. The word accessibility now includes digital and online accessibility and comes with its own set of standards, such as Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), which are actively integrated into federal laws.

Digital and online accessibility means ensuring that PDF documents are readable and usable by a screen-reader, videos are captioned, and webpages are navigable without the use of a mouse. I spend a lot of time making documents accessible, so I am well aware that it is a time-consuming process that can be difficult to implement. It takes a lot of effort and patience. In some cases, it requires a complete redesign or a different way of thinking.

This different way of thinking necessitates a shift from designing for the human eye to designing for both the human eye and the machine eye. Designing for the machine eye requires an understanding of how assistive technologies (such as screen readers) navigate through content. For instance, common screen-reading software like JAWS and NVDA always begin at the top left of the screen and read left to right, top to bottom. To design for accessibility, we must learn to “see” the page differently, from its layout to word choices and placement to the use of images or color to convey meaning and even to the HTML tags.

In my role as a multimedia designer for a higher education company, I have been researching accessibility and accessible design over the past year to better understand how to incorporate them into every product and service designed for multiple user groups. Through this work, I have identified four ways to talk to anyone about accessibility and how it relates to them: (1) technologically, (2) compassionately, (3) legally, and (4) egocentrically.

‘Siri, How Do You Understand What I Ask You?’

As digital citizens, we understand the role the Internet plays in our daily lives.
Our entire digital world depends on machines that navigate through content in a top-left to bottom-right direction. This is true of assistive screen-reading technologies as well. In fact, as of 2017, the third most popular screen-reading software is a voice narrator, Apple VoiceOver, which is built into iPhones and other Apple devices.

Telecommunication devices such as mobile phones have, for decades, been required by law to include audio navigation options. Mobile screen-readers such as Apple VoiceOver increasingly facilitate the use and navigation of the online world for those with visual impairments. Additionally, with the popular adoption of voice-activated services such as Siri and Alexa, mobile user interfaces are transitioning away from a more tactile navigation approach (using buttons and swipes) to voice-activated and voice-directed interactions. We are increasingly talking to our machines, and our machines are responding to us in the same manner.

Major tech companies have embraced the idea of accessible design, both because it is good public relations and because it is good business. The idea of universal design, of which accessible design is a part, means designing a product or service with everyone in mind so that everyone can be a potential customer. It is simply a smart business decision to design your products and services so they appeal to, and are useful to, everyone.

My 70-year-old father was really excited to talk with me about how Microsoft’s Edge browser was capable of reading everything to him. “Pretty soon it will be able to read to me in Chinese, too!” he exclaimed. He’s not disabled; he’s merely getting older. He’s looking forward to things like self-driving cars to make his life easier. From his point of view, an Internet browser that reads to him is a great development. He doesn’t define it in terms of accessibility—for him, it’s simply a matter of usability.

I have a friend who has been blind since she was a child. She grew up using JAWS on her computer, but now relies almost completely on her phone and VoiceOver. Navigating through apps that provide remote access to household devices—smart thermostats, for example, and smart TVs—enables her to access and use them more easily and helps her be more self-sufficient. Accessible applications on her voice-controlled phone offer her the opportunity to participate more fully in life, both online and off.

Accessible design, then, is about usable design. It’s about improving the design of products and services so that everyone can access them and participate in our online society.

We don’t need to understand the details of how the Internet works, or how machines process information and learn. It is enough to know that they do this, and that if we design them to do this effectively, we will make life easier for everyone while also providing access and opportunity for a population...
that depends on accessible design and accessible products.

The Social Justice Perspective

In the land of librarians and liberals, accessibility is often about social activism. It’s one step along that long moral arc of history that bends toward justice. It exists comfortably in the land of diversity caucuses and corporate trainings on inclusion.

The compassionate perspective points out that the college graduation rate of people with visual or hearing impairments is less than half that of the population without disabilities. It advocates for equal access to education, information, and full digital citizenship. One would think it would be glaringly obvious that accessibility is vitally important to a fair and equal society, but, unfortunately, the emotional argument is not terribly effective in the land of profit and ROI.

A few months ago, I was discussing accessibility with someone from the University of Washington, an institution considered a leader in the area of accessible design and accessible technology. She told me that she never presents accessibility as the right thing to do; instead, she focuses on compliance with the law. It’s about equal access, and equal access is required by law.

This is similar to my tactic of highlighting and embracing the technological benefits of accessible design. It’s an attempt to speak to people where it matters to them and to reach the widest audience. Not everyone is motivated by concepts like equality and inclusion.

Personally, I find this a particularly compelling reason. While the world we live in is by no means a just society, I like to imagine what such a society would look like. I think that if I can imagine such a society, I can begin to understand how to design for it.

Comply or Be Punished

No institution wants to be sued. While eyes may glaze over when the legal details of accessibility are being discussed, everyone intuitively understands the concept of avoiding lawsuits. The fear of negative legal consequences can provide positive motivation to ensure access.

While there is currently no law specific to website accessibility, there is ample legal precedent to conclude that it falls under the purview of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), especially Title II (public entities) and Title III (public accommodation). The landmark 2011 case National Association for the Deaf (NAD) v. Netflix established websites as public places of accommodation, subject to Title III of the ADA. This ruling continues to influence online commerce and media companies and acknowledges the importance of the Internet in our daily lives.

Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act, which emerged from the Civil Rights era, established civil rights for individuals with disabilities. This law affects organizations that are federally owned or funded or those wishing to do business with such entities, so it covers a large and diverse group of organizations.

Section 508 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act requires accessible technology for disabled individuals. The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, WCAG 2.0 (currently transitioning to 2.1), are international standards that have been adopted by the Section 508 Refresh of the Rehabilitation Act, which went into effect in January 2018.

There are hundreds of legal cases each year on the topic of web accessibility, spanning all industries. If your institution has a public-facing website and it is not accessible, you are vulnerable to a lawsuit. From a business perspective, it makes sense to spend money on web accessibility, not on court cases.

We All Grow Old

For those who will not be convinced by any of the above arguments, the best approach may be to describe how it will benefit them personally. Their physical body will age. Their vision will deteriorate, and they may become hard of hearing. What technologies do they want in place to make their later years more comfortable and permit them to remain full participants in our digital society?

Accessible design is about ease of use for everyone. To some, it is also vitally important. One day, we will all find ourselves in that “some” category. There is no “other” in the big picture of things.

By designing for accessibility, by ensuring accessibility in our digital documents and digital communications, we are actively creating our future digital society. We are learning a structure, a way of thinking, talking, and visualizing, that is more inclusive and more usable.

Right now it’s a little clunky, but that gives us the opportunity to see how it can be made better.

Companies are realizing it takes a lot more time and money to retroactively make products accessible and have begun designing their products and services with accessibility in mind from the very beginning. We are moving closer to a digital society that includes accessibility as part of the status quo.

What can you do right now? Talk about accessibility and advocate for it, and bring this topic to your friends’ and colleagues’ attention. Identify a small thing you can do, such as alt-texting images or clearly describing linked content in your email messages, and then do it.

Call it usability, if you like. Call it user design or universal design or some other buzzword that is more cool or more catchy than accessibility. By any other name, it will still improve access and ease of use for everyone.

For more resources and practical tips, please visit the online course I created especially for Special Libraries Association members at https://tinyurl.com/sla2018-accessibility.