Hurdles remain on Web access for disabled

By Sebastian Bronst

The Internet has no boundaries. At least that's the conventional wisdom. Nonetheless, hurdles remain for many who would like access to the Worldwide Web, especially those with disabilities. At issue are details seldom considered by Web designers, programmers and non-disabled users.

But there are solutions, for example for blind people who want to surf the Web. Screenreaders dictate website contents or print pages in Braille format.

One big step toward improving accessibility has been a recent trend toward separating Web design from content. But people in the industry say that such developments are just the first step.

Lawmakers have set some guidelines. In Germany, for example, agencies are required by law to make their Internet presences accessible to people with disabilities. But there remains a lot of catching up to do for commercial websites, says Birgit Scheer of ABI, a German group fighting for barrier-free Web access.

"Innovative" lawmaking and initiatives that have built upon those laws have already forced a lot of movement, says Christian Schmitz of Aktion Mensch, another German group that awards prizes for groups that make inroads toward easier Internet access. But much remains to be done.

"We've already done those things that are technically easy to accomplish," says Klaus Seeberger of Web designer Vitango. But interest and pressure are needed for more complicated projects.

Just making a standard website accessible is a challenge. Problems crop up if designers forget and include graphics and navigation elements that cannot be pronounced or described by reading programs. Without those steps, those programs lapse into vague announcements about 'Link 2', 'Link 3' or 'Graphic X'.

These problems often crop up during attempts to make websites more interactive. Anyone who wants to send off forms, create contact networks or send e-mails to companies is often forced, for security reasons, to type in combinations of letters.

Those characters are often generated by the website in such a way that a only a human could read them, deliberately distorted and twisted so that automatic spyware program cannot decipher them. But that security feature also stops screenreaders in their tracks, says Scheer.

Even if efforts are made to separate layout from content, there's a long way to go until a site is truly accessible. After all, accessibility doesn't mean just offering a trimmed down version of the website offered to others, says Schmitz. It's about creating an online environment where everyone can access the potential, not a separate system for the disabled.

That means setting up websites so people with mental or learning disabilities can also use them. Thus, simple concepts and understandable texts are a must. Programmers and web designers need to craft their sites with a care for how they might be used by the colour-blind or the elderly.

Navigating websites should also be possible without a mouse. Those kind of requirements show the kind of innovative potential that needs to go into creating accessible websites, say the expert.

After all, simple design and easy navigation set standards. And those will be important for the development of Web content for devices like mobile phones. — DPA