Web Accessibility: is it just a "Merry-go-round"?

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ABSTRACT

While many of the issues that are being raised in relation to mobile web accessibility are similar or the same to those that have been promoted over the past few years in relation to mainstream web accessibility, that doesn't necessarily mean that we're simply going over old material. Rather, it provides a jumping off point for mobile web accessibility. In turn, the differences in emphasis which result from the specific constraints of mobile devices could be crucial in highlighting some aspects of accessibility which, until now, have been neglected.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.1.2 [**Models and Principles**]: User/ Machine Systems—*human factors, human information processing*
; H.5.4 [**Information Interfaces and Presentation**]: Hypertext/ Hypermedia—*user issues, navigation*
; K.4.2 [**Computers and Society**]: Social Issues—*assistive technologies for persons with disabilities*

General Terms

Human Factors, Standardisation, Design

Keywords

Accessibility, Usability, Universal Usability, Universal Access.

1. WEB ACCESSIBILITY: IS IT JUST A "MERRY-GO-ROUND?"

The issues[1] that are being raised in relation to making the mobile web accessible and easily usable for all users do tend to create a feeling of deja vu for those who have been

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[1] **"Merry-go-round"** = carousel; circular fairground ride with wooden horses, etc, which go round and round, covering the same route all the time.

involved in campaigning for and promoting accessible web design for some years. There are many areas where "traditional" accessibility (designed to facilitate access to the web for those with a disability) and mobile web accessibility overlap.

However, I don't believe we're simply treading old ground here. For one thing, the development of best practice recommendations and techniques for improving the user's experience of the Web via a mobile device is able to build on the extensive work already carried out over the past few years in developing principles for accessible and usable web design. And the technologies available to implement these principles have improved hugely too, so the "starting point" options available to content designers are both more diverse and more powerful than was the case a few years ago.

It is also interesting to see that, while the best practice recommendations that are emerging for mobile web accessibility encompass many of the basic established web accessibility principles, they place a new focus and emphasis on issues which, because they sit in that slightly uneasy "grey area" between accessibility and usability or because they haven't been seen as having a significant impact on more than a very few users, have been overshadowed and somewhat ignored. This bodes well for those users whose needs have, in general, been overlooked until now. There is a very good likelihood that the explosive growth in the use of mobile devices, and the economic incentives that provides (particularly in the commercial sector which, with a few notable exceptions, has tended to drag its heels in this area) to encourage the implementation of more accessible and usable website design, will push accessibility forward faster than ever before.

One of the key areas where there is a risk of the mobile web rehashing old problems is that of consistency across different devices and user agents. There was a period some years ago when the web was at serious risk of fragmenting because of the massive differences in how different browsers interpreted HTML, and one could argue that there is a risk of the same thing happening with regard to the mobile web, because of the even greater range and variety of devices and software agents in general use, with more being developed every year. But the very fact that the web went through that period of risk means that these risks are known and are much more clearly understood. That means that they can be minimised from a much earlier stage in the technological development of mobile devices and software for accessing the web than was the case first time round.

General awareness of the need for accessibility is another

area where, although there might be some overlap in the work that needs to be done, it is less than would be required if so much work had not already gone into publicising and raising awareness of accessibility from a disability perspective. Many web designers are already aware of accessibility and usability as important aspects of web design, and a growing number of designers are becoming skilled in implementing accessibility without compromising on visual interest or functionality. Incorporating additional techniques to further enhance the accessibility of websites should not present the same steep learning curve that these designers faced when first trying to learn or develop the accessibility techniques they now use all the time. That's an important difference, since the web design world very much progresses as a result of many learning from a few, and as those with the knowledge and skills to develop new design techniques increase in number, there will be more examples of good, innovative design for other designers to copy and adapt.

In short - I don't think we're on a merry-go-round at all. Rather, it feels to me like a spiral staircase. There are times when one has a feeling of "haven't we been here before?". But each time that comes round, we're actually at a higher level than we were when we last tackled that particular issue. And while, like revising for exams, we might go back over some of the fundamentals, we also add new insights and thoughts and techniques to what was there before.