

United Nations Global Audit of Web Accessibility

Executive Summary

The United Nations Department of Social and Economic Affairs commissioned Nomensa to conduct this audit to determine how accessible the Internet is for persons with disabilities. The audit, the first of its kind, investigated the accessibility of 100 leading websites from 20 countries from around the world.

The aim of the survey, which was not intended to be exhaustive, was to obtain an indication concerning the existing status of accessibility of websites that people with disabilities might access as part of their daily lives.

This snapshot produced stark results: most of the leading websites around the world do not meet Defacto international standards for accessibility. Many of the sites investigated could be easily upgraded to remove the obstacles that prevent many people with disabilities from using the sites. However, the majority of sites need considerable work.

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Produced By

nomensa
humanising technology

W www.nomensa.com

E info@nomensa.com

Bristol:

T +44 (0)117 929 7333

F +44 (0)117 929 7543

London:

T +44 (0)207 872 5715

F +44 (0)207 753 2848

Methodology

A list of 20 countries with relatively developed Internet infrastructure was drawn up by the UN, including nations from almost every continent:

Argentina	China	Kenya	South Africa
Australia	France	Mexico	Spain
Brazil	Germany	Morocco	United Arab Emirates
Canada	India	Russia	United Kingdom
Chile	Japan	Singapore	United States

Table 1: the 20 countries included in the web accessibility audit.

Focusing on Articles 21(c) and 9(g) of the Draft Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities¹, five sectors were chosen. Each sector was intended to reflect a key area of interaction for people online:

- Travel (airlines);
- Finance (banking);
- Media (newspapers);
- Politics (central government representative);
- Retail (shops).

A website was chosen to represent each sector of the 20 countries, forming a matrix of 100 websites to be included in the audit. The homepage of each website was measured against the globally recognised benchmark for web accessibility: The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines version 1.0 (WCAG 1.0)².

The guidelines divide web accessibility into three levels of achievement: Single-A (basic accessibility), Double-A (intermediate accessibility) and Triple-A (high accessibility). Each homepage was measured to the highest level possible.

The guidelines consist of 65 individual checkpoints, which were tested with a combination of manual and automated techniques.

¹ <http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/>

² <http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG10/>

Each checkpoint is assigned a priority level. Websites that satisfy all Priority 1 checkpoints achieve Single-A accessibility, websites that satisfy all Priority 1 and 2 checkpoints achieves Double-A accessibility and those websites that satisfy all Priority 1, 2 and 3 checkpoints achieves Triple-A accessibility. Priority 1 checkpoints must be fulfilled, otherwise one or more user groups will find it impossible to access information. If all Priority 2 checkpoints are not met, one or more user groups will find it difficult to access information online, whilst fulfilling all Priority 3 checkpoints will ensure a further improvement in web accessibility.

Key Findings

Of the 100 homepages evaluated during the audit, only three achieved Single-A accessibility—the basic accessibility rating:

- German Chancellor’s site (<http://www.bundestkanzlerin.de>);
- Spanish Government’s site (<http://www.la-moncloa.es/default.htm>);
- British Prime Minister’s site (<http://www.primeminister.gov.uk/>).

The performance across different sectors was varied, with central government, retail and banking offering the strongest (or joint strongest) accessibility performance across all countries.

Levels of web accessibility across the 20 countries were lower than anticipated, given the presence of disability legislation in some countries and the fact that the WCAG have been in existence for over half a decade. Apart from the three sites that achieved Single-A accessibility, there is a global failure to provide the most basic level of web accessibility for people with disabilities:

- 93% did not provide adequate text descriptions for graphical content, causing problems for visually impaired people;
- 73% relied on JavaScript for important functionality, making it impossible for an estimated 10% of internet users³ using the Internet to access key information;
- 78% used foreground and background colour combinations with poor contrast, making it difficult for people with mild visual conditions such as colour blindness to read information;

³ <http://www.thecounter.com/stats/2006/October/javas.php>

- 98% did not follow industry web standards for the programming code, providing poor foundations for web accessibility;
- 97% used fixed units of measurement, preventing people from altering the size of text or comfortably resizing the page so that content can be easily scaled;
- 89% failed to use the correct technique for conveying document structure through the use of headings, making page navigation awkward for many visually impaired people;
- 87% caused pop-up windows to appear without warning the user, causing disorientation problems for people using screen magnification software;
- 97% used link text that did not clearly indicate the destination of the link, causing confusion for people with learning difficulties;
- 92% did not provide a keyboard shortcut allowing people to bypass large blocks of content, causing difficulty and frustration for people with physical impairments.

Despite the overwhelming figures, many websites are within grasping distance of Single-A accessibility, with eight sites encountering only one Priority 1 issue. Twenty five others were not far behind, with two Priority 1 issues each.

Many of the most basic issues, for example the provision of alternative text descriptions for graphical content, can be easily fixed. Many Priority 1 issues are straightforward to resolve and should form part of any short term web accessibility strategy. Priority 2 and 3 issues require a fuller understanding of accessible web development techniques, meaning they should form part of a medium to long term strategy.

The simple truth is that the leading websites around the world are not accessible to many persons with disabilities. Only three achieved Single-A and some are close to providing the first level of accessibility. However, the majority need considerable work to attain the Defacto international standard. It is imperative for each website to take the initiative and invest effort into ensuring their site audiences encompass everybody. Greater awareness and increased web accessibility education is needed to make sure that persons with disabilities are able to benefit from the internet.

In identifying the characteristic problems facing website owners across the world, this report provides a signpost to guide the way to a more accessible Internet.