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Policy issues regarding electronic government and Web accessibility in Japan

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Abstract

The Japanese government has been developing infrastructures and services for electronic government since 2001. One of the challenges identified in this regard is to ensure “accessibility” or to enable everyone, including the elderly and those with disabilities, to access the infrastructures and services of an electronic government.

In 2004, the JIS (Japan Industrial Standard) X 8341-3 was issued as a Web accessibility standard in Japan. It is expected to function as a basis to ensure the Web accessibility of the electronic government in the central and local governments in Japan. Recently, however, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications found a widespread lack of understanding of and respect toward the JIS X 8341-3 among the local governments in

Japan. In December 2005, a study group under this ministry proposed “Operational Models to Improve Accessibility of Public Web sites” in order to supplement the JIS X 8341-3.

Thus, this paper reviews the standards and policy initiatives for improving the Web accessibility of the electronic government in Japan and discusses the challenges faced by libraries to ensure the provision of access to government information in terms of Web accessibility and electronic government.

1. Issues involved in electronic government and Web accessibility

In Japan, as in other countries, the central and local governments are taking initial steps to establish what is referred to as an “electronic government” or “e-government.” The establishment of an electronic government can be defined as the “use of technology, particularly Web-based Internet applications, to enhance the access to and delivery of government information and service to citizens, business partners, employees, and other agencies, and entities.”¹ Without doubt, a Web site is the most important platform for electronic government, because it functions as an interface between the government and citizens. This paper deals with the issues of how government Web sites can be useful for anyone, especially those who have difficulties in using the Web and the Internet.

Although the theme of this session is “Technology Strategies and Tools for Dynamic Information Delivery,” this paper discusses “Web accessibility.” This is because the concept of “Web accessibility” is closely related to this theme, and it is more definitive to the issue of access to government information, especially for elderly people and those with disabilities.

According to Jaeger², accessibility is defined as “[t]he physical and intellectual access to an object.” He points out that, “[a]ccessibility allows individuals with disabilities to be able to have use of information and services that is equal or equivalent to the use enjoyed by everyone else.” Several products such as household devices and transportation equipments can be dealt in the name of accessibility. However, “Web accessibility” is increasing in importance in terms of the access to information; this is because, presently, more and more kinds and amounts of information, including government information, are provided through Web sites. In this sense, as Jaeger states, “E-government has great potential to allow citizens to become more involved in government,” if the e-government ensures its accessibility.

In fact, the Web is so flexible that it contributes significantly to accessibility for people with disabilities. The existing media of government information, such as publications and TV and radio programs, prohibit access to information for the disadvantaged people. However, the Web is a more accessible medium. First, the Web is available via networks for those who are unable to go away from home. Second, Web contents can be easily processed for the use of the disadvantaged. Such processing includes enlarging and reading texts through various facilities provided by Web browsers. The abovementioned usefulness and importance of the Web is applicable to elderly people as well as those with temporary disabilities due to illness and/or injuries. The Japanese government, as well as its Korean counterpart, is faced with the issues of an “aging society.” The National Institute of Population and Social Security Research of Japan expects Japan to have a

population of 32 million elderly people (over 65 years old), one-quarter of the entire population, in the year 2015³. Therefore, developing and managing Web sites that cater to the needs of the elderly population is an inevitable step.

How can Web accessibility be ensured? One of the key issues is the technical standards that govern Web accessibility. Such standards will be powerful tool if they are implemented to electronic government web contents, through policy instruments. This practice is followed in Japan, although the policy instruments are not yet sufficiently developed to realize Web accessibility in electronic government. The aim of this paper is to discuss the issues of Web accessibility and electronic government in Japan, and to discuss the role of libraries in ensuring access to government information in terms of Web accessibility.

2. Standard for Web accessibility in Japan: JIS X 8341

2.1 The structure of the standards for Web accessibility in Japan

Since 2001, along with electronic government policy initiatives, which will be discussed later, the Japanese government deals with Web accessibility issues through the development of standards. This began with an international standard followed by the Japanese government, followed by a national standard—Japan Industrial Standard (JIS)⁴—specialized for Web designing and management. Such a standard is expected to affect the development of government Web sites in Japan.

In November 2001, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) jointly issued “ISO/IEC GUIDE 71: Guidelines for standards developers to address the needs of older persons and persons with disabilities.” This is the first ISO guide headed by the Japanese government, which has experienced rapid growth in the aging population. Although it is not a standard for specific products and services, this guide functions as the roadmap for all standardization procedures concerning the use of products and services by elderly persons and those with disabilities. It is localized to countries around the world; JIS Z 8071:2003 is the Japanese version of ISO/IEC GUIDE 71.

Based on ISO/IEC GUIDE 71 and JIS Z 8071, the Japanese government began the development of standards for Web accessibility. After research and discussion with an advisory group for the Japanese Standards Association, which manages JIS, ISO, and other industrial standard issues in Japan, the Association issued a series of standards for accessibility; these were known as “JIS X 8341: Guidelines for older persons and persons

with disabilities—Information and communications equipment, software and services.” Currently, five components of JIS X 8341 have been issued: Part 1 (JIS X 8341-1: 2004) “Common Guidelines” and Part 2 (JIS X 8341-2: 2004) “Information processing equipment” were issued in May 2004, while Part 3 (JIS X 8341-3: 2004) “Web content” was issued in June 2004. In addition, Part 4 (JIS X 8341-4: 2005) “Telecommunications equipment” that was issued in October 2005 and Part 5 (JIS X 8341-5: 2006) “Office equipment” that was issued in January 2006 are also available.

The structure of the standards discussed above is shown in Fig. 1. The most important standard, which governs the entire procedures and structures of accessibility standards, is ISO/IEC GUIDE 71, and its Japanese counterpart is JIS Z 8071. Further, JIS X 8341-1 functions as “middleware,” which regulates the common elements for accessibility issues. The “bottom” standards are Parts 2–5 of JIS 8341, which function as standards for industries that are involved in developing hardware, software and other equipment to ensure the accessibility of information.

2.2 The specifications of JIS X 8341-3—a Web accessibility standard

Among the series of accessibility standards defined as the JIS X 8341 series, JIS X 8341-3 defines several important specifications for Web accessibility. These specifications have been summarized below; the quotations have been taken from the English version of JIS X 8341-3, and the parentheses indicate the number of headings at the JIS standard.

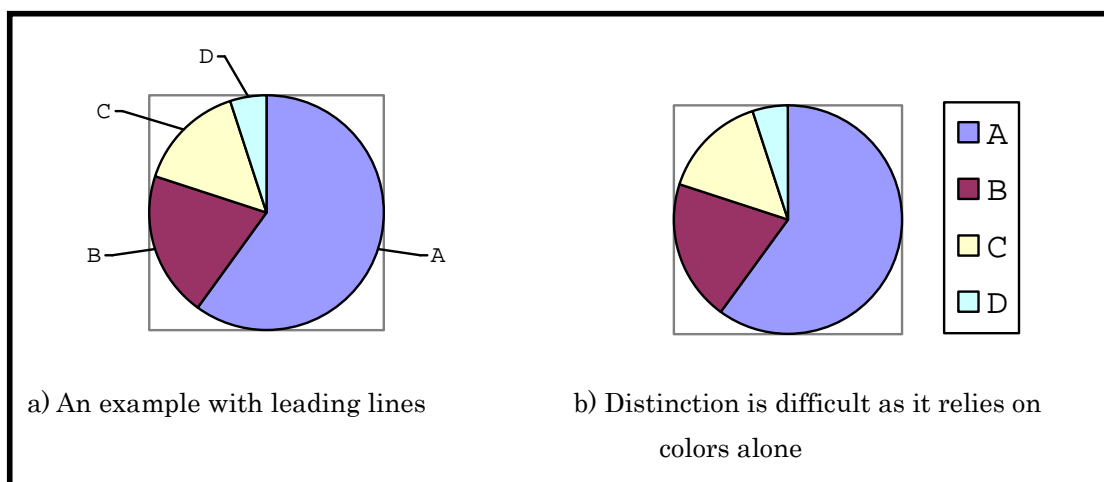
- **Document structure:** “Web content must define document structure using heading, paragraph, list, and other elements” (5.2.a). The reason why the document structure is so important is that it helps people with disabilities in understanding the Web contents; a voice browser can understand the structure and provide users with appropriate auditory information (for example, it can read headings slowly, and provide sounds at each element of a list).
- **Images:** “Images shall have alternative information such as text information so that users can appropriately understand content of the image” (5.4.a). “Alternative information such as text which describes the linked content shall be provided when an image is used as a hyperlink” (5.4.b).
- **Navigation:** “Information which indicates the structure such as the hierarchy should be provided to enable users to understand the location of current page displayed within the Web site structure” (5.2.g). “The basic operation component should be consistent in its location, display style, and notation throughout the Web site” (5.3.f).
- **Operation:** “Web content shall not assume operation with certain, single device, and at least all operations shall be possible by keyboard” (5.3.a). For example, mouse operation may be inconvenient for those who are vision-impaired, so alternative operations such as those using a keyboard are needed. In addition, the people whose arms are impaired need to use special equipment such as pointing devices using eyeshots. For these people, a Web design with visual effects using JavaScript and/or Flash tends to be really inconvenient.
- **Description of Hyperlink:** “Hyperlinks and buttons should be easy to be distinguished and operated” (5.3.g). A bad example is one that states, “Pricing information is here” and specifies “here” as link. In this case, users cannot understand which hyperlink is linked to what information. Instead, specifying “Pricing information” as linked text clearly indicates what is linked.
- **Color:** “Information required to understand and operate Web content shall not rely on color alone” (5.5.a). For example, the use of leading lines to indicate a specific area on a pie chart is recommended, as shown in Fig. 2.
- **Character and font:** “Character size and font shall be able to be adjusted by users as

needed” (5.6.a). This is necessary for older persons and those with poor vision who have difficulty in reading Web contents.

- **Language:** “Where language can be specified, language code associated with the natural language shall be specified” (5.9.a).

Fig. 2: Issues of color and chart from JIS X 8341-3

(Source: English version of JIS X 8341-3, p. 15, slightly modified.)



In addition to the technical requirements to secure Web accessibility, it is important to develop standards to ensure accessibility through the entire process of Web management. This process includes the planning stage, procurement and bidding, and the update and management of Web contents. JIS X 8341-3 covers the issues of Web site management.

2.3 Comparison with international standards

With regard to Web accessibility standards, “Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 1.0 (WCAG 1.0)” of 1999,⁶ prepared by the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), works as an international de-fact standard. Currently, WAI follows the revision of WCAG and issues WCAG 2.0 as a working draft.⁷ JIS X 8341-3 defines several important points for Web accessibility beyond WCAG 1.0 and also includes some points from the draft version of WCAG 2.0. In addition, JIS X 8341-3 adds some points that are unique to Japan in terms of the presentation of text and languages, such as Kanji and Kana characters.

The specifications of JIS X 8341-3 that differ from WCAG 1.0 are shown below:⁸

- **Page title:** “A page shall have a title which enable users to identify content of the page,”

whether such dissemination ensures “intellectual access” to government information—in other words, whether users can really see, read, and understand the contents of government information. A number of researchers and librarians in Japan and other countries suggest the evaluation standards of design and organization for government Web sites.¹⁹ The elements of such evaluation standards include the following: clear notification of Web site authority (who manages the Web site) and the aim of the Web site, correctness of the contents (including least literal errors), navigation and organization of the contents, compliance with legal issues such as privacy, and so forth. In addition to these, libraries and librarians need to focus on the elements described in Web accessibility standards such as document structure and use of color, and if possible, suggest improvements to government agencies that create and manage Web sites. Of course, the Web site of the library itself should be compliant with such standards.

- **Libraries as “archives” of government information:** Another challenge for libraries concerning electronic government and accessibility is archiving the contents of electronic government. In terms of “archives,” the role of libraries is not only to preserve the contents, but also to ensure “permanent public access” to government information, that is, to ensure the use of archived contents for the long term. In Japan, the National Diet Library has conducted the Web Archiving Project (WARP) for archiving national and local government Web sites as well as other important Web sites such as those of universities and quasi-government organizations.²⁰ In terms of accessibility, the gateway Web site for archived contents such as the WARP site needs to comply with accessibility standards. A considerably more difficult issue is how to ensure the accessibility of archived contents: on the one hand, as archives, it is necessary to preserve the “look and feel” of the archived contents, even if the contents do not comply with the accessibility standards. On the other hand, it is of no use to the users if they cannot see and read archived contents. Therefore, in the future, it may be necessary to develop systems and/or programs to modify the design and/or source language (such as HTML) of archived Web contents without altering the contents themselves. However, this will not be possible without revising important legislations such as the copyright law.²¹

