Accessibility as a prerequisite for library web services

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Accessibility as a challenge for the information society

Everyone has the right to get information, to take part in societal activities and make an impact. The information society is a society of networks, where accessible web pages are a necessity. Accessibility may be enhanced by different ways, for example by following Design for All principles, accessibility guidelines and recommendations as well as by legislation.

Accessibility has been promoted worldwide by the work of W3C and by WAI Guidelines (namely Web Content Accessibility Guidelines). In Europe, most countries have approved the eEurope programs. Although Finland is among the countries with no strict legislation on web accessibility, there are nevertheless guidelines and testing for public web services. There is also some research, training and open discussion on accessibility.

Libraries for the visually impaired as pioneers

Libraries for the visually impaired have been pioneers of accessibility everywhere, even so in Finland. The first Finnish guidelines for accessible web pages were drawn up at Celia Library in 1997. Since then Celia has offered help and training especially for libraries and cultural workers.

Awakening the public consciousness has been a slow process, but results have been reached gradually.

During the past couple of years, Celia Library has put a great deal of effort and resources into developing its web pages and services. Firstly, there has been a clear increase in the use of the Internet among print disabled patrons. Therefore, Celia's web pages needed to be designed both for the visually impaired users as well as for the general public. Secondly, the library wished to provide its patrons with an independent service channel to the library. In order to succeed, creating and designing an accessible catalogue (OPAC) as well as web services became a necessity. Today, Celia's web service Celianet is used by over 10% of Celia's active patrons or their next of kin. During the building process, even the provider of the library system software became aware of the importance of accessibility and has since incorporated it into many aspects and modules of the library software they market to public libraries.

When developing its new web pages and services, Celia followed three main design principles: accessibility, usability and DfA. Accessibility, in short, means that people with disabilities are able to use the Web. Here, the library followed the Web Accessibility Guidelines, the recommendations given by The Finnish Advisory Committee on Information Management in Public Administration and well as the different evaluation instructions given by Finnish organisations for the visually impaired. For example, one must be able to browse the web pages with different devices and browsers and to enlarge them. Usability, or user-centered design basically means the degree to which something is easy to use and a good fit for the people who use it. The Celianet web service is available in different languages, 23 hours a day, free of charge. It is easy to register and to receive a password and user support is available every working day. The purpose of DfA, or Design for All, is to simplify life for everyone by making products, communications, physical architecture etc. more usable by as many people as possible at little or no extra cost. Celianet, for example, makes use of a clear and simple layout and language.

New services are offered through the Internet

Well on its way towards its goal of a digital library, Celia makes use of Daisy talking books, which are distributed to patrons by on demand. However, digital collections and their accompanying distribution methods are not enough. To fulfil the service needs of the ever-growing number of patrons, Celia needed to think of new types of services. Celia's patrons are quite heterogeneous: the library serves infants with multiple disabilities, independent print disabled adults as well as elderly patrons with low vision and no next of kin for assistance. The idea was to create a multitude of service channels and types to cater to different needs: the Internet competent often prefer to help themselves and make use of the Celianet web service to borrow books and to monitor the selection on book club titles and new arrivals. Many patrons are happy to receive a certain number of books of their liking per month with little extra effort involved. For them, book clubs with different themes and book titles each month offer a carefree and easy access to literature with new talking books arriving regularly and automatically. In addition to book clubs there are theme packages as well as favourite book titles chosen by the personnel and library patrons. Some patrons have more articulated preferences or need more staff assistance in selecting books. With the help of the new monthly services more resources may be spent on this important individual lending service.

The newest services also entail distribution via a network. At the moment this means electronic books containing text only, but in the near future even digital talking books will be distributed this way.