

# Chapter 9

## What Do You Mean My Website Isn't Accessible? Why Web Accessibility Matters in the Digital World

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Today's world is increasingly based on digital access to information. People conduct essential aspects of life online through their web browsers and mobile applications: education, healthcare, banking, shopping, entertainment, and even jobs are conducted through the internet. To be cut off from the digital world is to miss these essential connections; this is exactly what happens to people with disabilities when the websites and content they try to use have accessibility barriers. People and organizations creating web content need to understand the elements of accessibility, important laws and regulations that guide accessibility efforts, and ways to improve the accessibility of web content. Eliminating these barriers is an important step towards a more inclusive society.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Today, roughly 15 percent of people across the globe have been diagnosed with a disability (“33 Accessibility Statistics,” 2021). In a world that has become increasingly more connected by virtual means, it is essential to consider how accessible internet web pages, online school assignments, and other virtual information exchanges are for people with differing abilities. Presently, 90 percent of internet web pages are not fully accessible for use by those with disabilities, creating an ethical dilemma in the form of a grave disadvantage between the availability of online information compared to what is available to those who do not have a disability (“33 Accessibility Statistics,” 2021). Inaccessible digital content is

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the online equivalent of multilevel buildings without ramps or elevators. It excludes a significant portion of the population and causes unnecessary difficulties, sometimes entirely preventing them from accessing content.

Imagine these scenarios:

Rajiv has low vision and uses JAWS, a screen reader application that vocalizes the contents of a web page to the user. The website Rajiv is viewing has a lot of images; he knows this because JAWS announces each image it encounters. However, the website developers did not include alternative text content, so Rajiv has no idea what the images represent and whether they are important. Alternative text is an attribute included in the image tag in hypertext markup language (HTML) that provides details about the image to the screen reader.

Shani does not use a mouse due to limited mobility in her hands. Instead, she relies on keyboard commands, like the tab and arrow keys, to navigate. The form she is filling out jumps randomly to different fields because the tab order has not been set up correctly. Shani gets frustrated because some fields validate based on previous entries, and she must spend a lot of extra time tabbing to the correct fields.

Conner has a hearing impairment. The course they are taking has several videos, but most of them do not have closed captioning or a transcript. Course assignments are based on these videos, but Conner has no idea what the dialog in the video is saying.

These are only a few situations representing the barriers people with disabilities may encounter with inaccessible web content. Individuals without disabilities often do not notice these issues, which can present problems when they are responsible for creating and managing web content. Therefore, web content providers must understand web accessibility, their obligations, and how to recognize and address accessibility barriers. Anything less creates a barrier to full and equal access for people with disabilities.

## **OVERVIEW OF WEB ACCESSIBILITY**

Digital accessibility is not new. In 1998, Congress passed Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which requires federal agencies to make their digital and electronic content (U.S. Access Board, 2022). Since then, the rules have expanded to most organizations and agencies that serve or receive funding from the United States government. In addition, commercial websites have come under scrutiny based on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which prohibits discrimination based on an individual's disability (U. S. Department of Justice, 2016).

One of the earliest notable accessibility lawsuits, filed in 2006, alleged that Target Corporation's website was not accessible to users with blindness primarily due to the lack of alternative text for images and navigation links. Alternative text allows a screen reader program to describe non-text elements to a user. The lack of these elements excludes users with blindness or low vision from accessing the website content, putting them at an unfair disadvantage. In the Target case, the court determined that online users should have a shopping experience equal to that at the physical store location (Ozeran, 2018). This comparable access claim, or "nexus," became a test for future claims.

Later cases, most notably those against Five Guys restaurants and Blick® Art Supplies, an online retailer, in 2017, found that websites are places of public access subject to the ADA independent of the physical storefront. They also determined businesses that operate online only are still subject to accessibility requirements (Arenth, 2019; Ozeran, 2018). In both cases, the plaintiffs alleged that a visual interface that lacked commonly available accessibility features prevented users with blindness from

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