Angie Moretti

CS160

4/13/16

Writing Assignment 3: How Blind People Use the Internet

At its core, the Internet is a worldwide platform for distributing information. Those without any severe vision issues take in the all the information visually, as was the intention for the Internet. But with the right tools, a blind or visually impaired person can use the Internet; they just take in the same information either audibly or tactilely. The two most often used assistive technologies the blind use for internet browsing are screen readers and refreshable braille displays. Screen reading software does exactly what it sounds like it would do: it reads what’s on the screen line by line. It seems that screen readers are the more popular way of browsing the Internet. Refreshable braille displays are “hardware devices containing a strip of retractable braille pins, allowing braille characters to be generated on the fly” (“Section 1: What Is It like to Be a Blind Internet User”). Unlike those who browse the Internet normally by scanning and skimming, these devices can only distribute information in a linear sense, but there are ways that web designers can set up webpages to make the process less tedious and confusing.

While Screen Readers must relay the content of a webpage line by line, they are able to skip to another part of the page, but the user must be able to know where in the page they want to skip to, which they only know after the Screen Reader has relayed the information. One way web designers can account for this is by including a “skip to main content” link at the top of a page, which will jump over things like page banners, menus, and other content that comes before the main content (Section 1: What Is It like to Be a Blind Internet User). Now the user doesn’t have to wait for a screen reader to list all the preceding content.

Of course, not all of the content on the Internet is text. A staggering majority of content is purely visual, like images or videos (which are often audio but sometimes not always). Our language isn’t advanced enough to describe color, but we can still do our best describing what’s going on in an image. When a screen reader approaches an image on a page, it reads off the alt-tag for the content. If there’s no alt tag, then “the image is basically dead space” (Garling). This is why it’s more accommodating to give a real alt-tag to an image; a blind user can get an idea of what’s there and not be totally lost. That being said, not every single image needs an alt-tag. For instance, images that serve only as decoration are irrelevant to someone using a screen reader. For other embedded content on a page, a textual description is especially friendly to those using screen readers or braille displays.

Works Cited

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