How do blind people surf the web?

Apart from the computer itself, one of the first things required is the right software, such as Screen Reader, Jaws, and Apple VoiceOver. This software will present visual information audibly to the user. Without this software it would be an extremely hard task to even think of beginning to use the Internet if blind.

Another item that is commonly used is a brail keyboard. Although not completely necessary, it does make typing and using shortcuts/hot keys a lot easier.

Most of the current and up-to-date browsers are compatible with a vast majority of software used by the blind to surf the web. If the browser is not completely compatible then the user will have a varied experience and will more than likely encounter problems with navigating websites.

Most websites have similar a layout of their content but with differing designs, this is of course extremely beneficial to blind users as they can systematically work their way through the content. For example, the header usually contains a one word summary, or title, of what the page is going to contain or be about.

One of the issues facing the creators of websites and the users of them is how the page is constructed. Using the tab key, you can systematically cycle through most, if not all, of the pages content. If the page is designed badly the tab button may just jump you around the page. This is a minor irritation for users with adequate sight but this can make the page nearly inaccessible for blind users.

When a blind person views a webpage they read from top to bottom. Typically when a sighted user views a page they can scan and jump around the page at will, looking for something that catches their eye or for a specific item. For example, when looking for a link on a page we can usually find it because it is identifiable from the rest of the page – bold text, underlined, different color, etc. When a blind user comes across the link the screen reader will inform them what they are on as well as reading it out to them. The screen reader will announce it like this, “link, how to find us”.

As you can imagine this process can be time consuming. Most software will assist users with hot keys that can help find links, tables, buttons, etc. This helps the user greatly when trying to search for a specific item and stops the user having to read the entire page to find one item they wanted.