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eEurope 2002: Accessibility of Public Web Sites and their Content

European Parliament resolution on the Commission communication eEurope 2002: Accessibility of Public Web Sites and their Content (COM(2001) 529 – C5-0074/2002 – 2002/2032(COS))

The European Parliament,

–   having regard to the Commission communication (COM(2001) 529 – C5-0074/2002),

–   having regard to the Conclusion of the European Council of Feira of 19 and 20 June 2000 (SN 200/1/2000),

–   having regard to the Conclusions of the European Council of Nice of 7-8-9 December 2000 (SN 400/2000),

–   having regard to Rule 47(1) of its Rules of Procedure,

–   having regard to the report of the Committee on Industry, External Trade, Research and Energy (A5-0147/2002),

A.   whereas in June 2000 the European Council of Feira adopted the Action Plan "eEurope 2002" aiming to open the Information Society to all European citizens and recognised that "special attention should be given to disabled people and the fight against info-exclusion",

B.   whereas, in December 2000, the Nice European Council agreed on the need to fight against all forms of exclusion, including those linked to disabilities and age,

C.   whereas the internet as a part of society is an instrument for society as a whole, so it is fundamental that technologically neutral access to public information is offered for all groups in society,

D.   whereas governments, due to their public responsibility, have to give an example to other public institutions as well as to the rest of society as, on one hand, they can influence the market as "launching customers" by buying websites that respond to the needs of disabled and elderly people and, on the other hand, they can act as employers by hiring disabled people amongst their employees,

E.   whereas access of disabled and elderly people to public websites and their contents is an opportunity to improve their participation in society,

F.   whereas IT skills are less present among elderly people than among other age categories and acquiring these skills demands a considerably bigger effort for elderly than for younger people,

G.   whereas it is not a person's disability that prevents them from using the web, but lack of awareness of the potential benefits and availability of the appropriate technology, training and support to allow them to exploit online services,

H.   whereas a real need to participate in the information society has been expressed in the last decade by the organisations representing disabled and elderly people,

I.   whereas specific problems associated with access to web content exist for people with problems in reading or understanding text and therefore require not only alternative presentations, but also a change of the text content into simple, easy-to-understand language,

J.   whereas buying a computer implies an expenditure that constitutes a considerable financial effort for lower income groups; disabled people quite often belong to lower income groups; moreover, the outlay necessary for disabled people to access the internet is also high in absolute terms as a result of the special apparatus they need; this is an even more pressing issue since most public internet facilities are unaccessible to them,

K.   whereas the world wide web consortium set up the web accessibility initiative (WAI) and the latter has developed the web content accessibility guidelines version 1.0 called "the guidelines" which are nowadays considered to be the global standard for the designing of accessible websites; furthermore the W3C / WAI has developed a set of guidelines called authoring tools accessibility guidelines (ATAG) 1.0 for software developers, which explain how to make a variety of authoring tools support the production of accessible web content, and also how to make the software itself accessible,

L.   whereas a W3C-authorized text is available in English only and no authorised translations are available for other Member States; whereas there is a risk of differences in interpretation in unauthorised translations resulting in differences in implementation in Member States,

M.   whereas, besides the pure standards like (X)HTML and XML, some producers put some non-standard elements in their software, or use formats like DHTML (that contains scripts that cannot be handled by some screen readers) or several formats used for improvements in graphical quality and in particular dynamic depiction thus leading to difficulties of accessibility for people who, because of their accessibility needs, use software which only can cope with the standards,

N.   whereas the EU has already financed and promoted initiatives in order to facilitate the use of new technologies by disabled and elderly people,

O.   whereas producer-dependent solutions, for example, if access to a web site requires a specific producer to install a browser, give rise to concerns regarding competition and could make accessibility more difficult,

P.   whereas differences exist among Member States in the promotion of accessibility for disabled people and elderly people to public web sites and their contents,

Q.   whereas the eEurope action plan 2002 specifies that "public sector web sites and their content in Member States and in the European institutions must be designed to be

accessible to ensure that citizens with disabilities can access information and take full advantage of the potential for e-government" (COM(2000) 330),

R.   whereas the future Member States have taken steps to promote an information society for all, thus enabling public access to governmental information and participation of disabled and elderly, as they are vulnerable groups in a period of transition and reform,

S.   whereas the EU and the Member States were called upon to attain this objective by adopting the WAI guidelines for public web sites by the end of 2001,

T.   whereas the EU and the Member States were called upon to review relevant legislation and standards to ensure conformity with accessibility principles at the end of 2002 and to ensure by then the establishment and networking of national centres of excellence in "design for all" and draw up recommendations for an European curriculum in "design for all" for designers and engineers,

U.   whereas complying with "the guidelines" will result in very little cost, or none at all, for web designers,

V.   whereas the Commission also proposes to achieve the accessibility of private web sites in 2003, starting with web sites that receive public funding,

1.   Welcomes the Commission communication on the accessibility of public web sites and their content;

2.   Reiterates the need to avoid any form of exclusion from society and therefore from the information society, and calls for the integration of disabled and elderly people in particular;

3.   Recognises that efficient initiatives have been promoted and financed at European level to promote the access of disadvantaged categories of citizens to the information society, such as TIDE, and in the framework of the Fourth and the Fifth framework research and technological development programmes;

4.   Considers that the WAI initiative, which is voluntary in nature, should be strengthened to require, on a mandatory basis, all public websites of the EU institutions and the Member States to be fully accessible to disabled persons by 2003, which is the European Year of Disabled people; furthermore, calls on the EU institutions and the Member States to comply with the authoring tools accessibility guidelines (ATAG) 1.0 by 2003 as well, in order to ensure that disabled people can read webpages and also to enable them to manage the content of the webpages (content management);

5.   Considers that translations authorised by the W3C should be made available in the languages of all Member States as soon as possible (coordinated by W3C, possibly with the help of the translation services of the EU and experts from different Member States);

6.   Agrees with the Commission that regional and local administrations should also follow "the guidelines" for the designing of their web sites;

7. Invites the Commission and the Member States to promote dialogue with the representatives of disabled and elderly people in order to enable them to overcome the barriers that hinder them from fully integrating into society, such as a lack of access to new technologies;

8. Welcomes the cooperation between the EU and the candidate countries and the adoption of the eEurope+ 2003 action plan and recalls that the latter considers "accessibility to ICT and on-line information and services, taking particularly into account the needs of people with disabilities, as a precondition for ensuring an information society open to all";

9. Asks the Commission to verify the cost-benefits achieved by compliance with "the guidelines" for web site designers and web site providers; notes that incorporating accessibility criteria in the product-development phase is more cost-effective than re-designing web sites and related technology afterwards; emphasises that compliance with the Guidelines could have positive commercial benefits as the service will thereby be accessible to a wider audience.

10. Looks forward to initiatives to improve the relative position of elderly people in terms of IT skills and calls on the Member States and the Commission to exchange best practice in this field;

11. Points at the opportunity that access to web sites might offer to disabled persons to reintegrate into the labour market and participate in society and stresses that these matters are of vital importance especially in many candidate countries of the ex-communist bloc, since access to social services is complicated by the transition period in which public facilities are subject to ongoing reform;

12. Asks for an active exchange of best practice and a benchmarking process incorporating the needs of the candidate countries;

13. Recalls that the availability of the special hard- and software and the compatibility of information with the hard- and software (accessibility requirements) are not the only conditions for access for the disabled and elderly: the skills of the user are of vital importance; therefore the information should be structured in such a way as to be user-friendly, particularly for those who are not familiar with IT; information on social services for disabled children could, for example, be broken down by age category; emphasises the desirability of training for people who offer information to people with cognitive disabilities, in order to enable them to deal with the characteristics of the internet and what it can do and what it cannot;

14. Calls on the European institutions and governments to promote the principles of accessible design of all types of equipment that can be used to access the internet; this can be achieved through awareness-raising campaigns on accessible design and measures such as the standardisation of equipment;

15. Asks the Commission and the Member States to work in partnership with manufacturers to encourage the development and marketing of equipment that facilitates simple and cheap home internet access for people with disabilities;

16. Calls on the Commission to place specific emphasis on the implementation of guideline 14 of the web content accessibility guidelines that requires documents to be clear and simple and therefore easy to understand in order to counter the further exclusion of people with reading problems or intellectual disability from e-government and the web;

17. Stresses the role that social and human relations play for disabled and elderly people in order to enable them to participate into society and considers that the accessibility of public web sites is an opportunity for them, but should not be the only way of getting access to public sector information;

18. Considers that compliance with the current accessibility "guidelines" is a step forward, but underlines the importance of further developing, adopting and implementing the new improvements (or new versions) of "the guidelines" since the Internet sector is changing very rapidly;

19. Notes that producer-dependent solutions in specific cases can lead to accessibility problems; the public content should be saved and made available on a universally accessible data format; i.e. (X)HTML and XML; as other 'standards', - such as DHTML, - are only acceptable if a web site is available in at least these formats in their pure form, like (X)HTML or XML as such;

20. Suggests that web sites should be designed to support multiple browsers and browser versions to enable people using assistive technology to access these sites;

21. Asks Member States to set up an "information point" to suggest which actions should and could be taken in case of complaints on the lack of compliance with "the guidelines";

22. Gives its full support to further studies aimed at drawing up measurable criteria with a view to achieving compliance with 'the guidelines' and implementing complaints procedures in accordance with the web accessibility initiative;

23. Calls on governments to make more effort to make disabled people aware of the benefits of getting online, and to encourage higher take-up of the internet amongst people with disabilities by making grants available for technology, training and support;

24. Gives its full support to further research in accordance with the web accessibility initiative and stresses the importance of research and development for special apparatus to serve people with functional handicaps;

25. Notes that regarding private websites, products and tools, the promotion of accessibility guidelines for the private sector should start as soon as possible and that commerical web sites should be the priority, followed by websites with a social function;

26. Proposes that both Member States and the Commission request from projects, activities and organisations that receive public funding involving the design of websites, compliance with "the guidelines"; furthermore, calls on the Member States and the Commission to strongly recommend the application of "the guidelines" to projects, activities and organisations that receive public funding and which do not involve the design of web sites;

27. Recalls that European institutions and the governments in the Member States have a public responsibility and calls on them to make their web sites accessible to elderly and disabled people and to buy accessible software only, thus giving an example to all other public institutions and the rest of society;

28. Notes that the Member States and other public bodies can specify compliance with accessibility guidelines in tenders for products or services;

29. Considers that promotion of the quality rating and benchmarking system for web accessibility would stimulate early improvements in design and technology; requests the Commission to strengthen its coordination role, while developing and enhancing these standards; also confirms that accessibility performance should be highlighted in eEurope benchmarking reports;

30. Considers that the public procurement policies of the EU must make accessibility for persons with disabilities mandatory, as this would have a major influence on promoting accessible information communication technology;

31. Stresses the fact that, for websites to be accessible, it is essential that they are double-A compliant, that priority 2 of the WAI guidelines must be fully implemented;

32. Notes that government initiatives that raise awareness of web accessibility and that incorporate web accessibility in the training available for web designers are possible ways to encourage the private sector to make web sites accessible;

33. Calls on the Commission to inform the European Parliament about the progress made by the Member States and European institutions in applying "the guidelines" by the end of 2002;

34. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the Court of Justice, the Court of Auditors, the Committee of the Regions, the Economic and Social Committee, the governments and parliaments of the Member States and the governments and parliaments of the candidate countries.