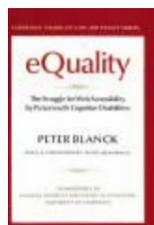


“eQuality” as a standard to make the web an accessible and inclusive place

In his book “eQuality: The Struggle for Web Accessibility by Persons with Cognitive Disabilities” Dr. Peter Blanck explores how to make web content accessible to all.



“eQuality – The struggle for web accessibility by persons with cognitive disabilities” by Peter Blanck (2014, Cambridge University Press)

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Nowadays, the World Wide Web is a tool that constantly accompanies us in our daily life, and which has important implications for the construction of a person’s socioeconomic, political and cultural capital. However, access to the web for people with cognitive and other disabilities is far from being achieved. People with disabilities often face significant obstacles that prevent them from fully accessing web content, especially without backing from a robust framework of laws and policies. However, access to the web should be a priority at the global level, since it opens the door for all people to enjoy their human and civil rights (e.g., freedom of expression, freedom of association, and active citizen participation). In this sense, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) play essential roles in advocating for the right to equal opportunity to participate on the web for persons with disabilities. Indeed, the ADA and the CRPD (cf. Article 9, Accessibility) consider that the right to enjoy digital knowledge and the social capital gained from it are deeply linked to the right of non-discrimination on the basis of disability.

One of the main problems is that web interfaces are complex to use, and the user rarely benefits from alternatives means of accessing content. To address this issue, Dr. Blanck refers to eQuality as a key concept to ensure that: first, equality and justice under the law are assured for web users with disabilities; and second, that the web meets adequate standards of accessibility and quality. For instance, offering alternative content on the web is essential, as it “removes reliance on any one mode and cognitive mechanisms for comprehension”. In this way, “text can be heard instead of seen, audio can be read instead of heard, images are described instead of seen, and so on”. Other ways to adapt to the individual needs of the user is through what is called cloud computing. Cloud computing has significant benefits for people with visual, auditory and cognitive disabilities. Through the cloud, users can easily access support technologies such as audio subtitling, voice recognition, and more. Interestingly, people who use the cloud can easily access information and services that have been previously configured according to their preferences and individual needs, and which can be used to access the web in an adapted way, from any site and with almost any device.

There is still progress to be made, but the gains already achieved would not have been possible without the efforts of defenders. The stories of advocates and individuals who have risen to defend the rights of people with disabilities to web access are an essential part of this book. Some of these efforts address the adaptability of online content. For example, persons with cognitive, visual and hearing impairments have asked large companies such as CNN, Netflix and Sony to adapt their interfaces by either captioning and/or adequately adapting the content delivery so that it can be accessible to all. Unfortunately, many of these stories demonstrate how the needs of people with disabilities remain largely ignored: “Jennifer and Edward are deaf, and along with the Greater Los Angeles Agency on Deafness (GLAD), challenged CNN to caption CNN.com that they may have the opportunity to learn of the world’s news as did millions of others. CNN responded that if it was forced to caption CNN.com’s video clips it would violate the company’s right to freedom of speech.” The book also studies in detail how people with cognitive disabilities (e.g., persons with autism) can experience discrimination on the web when it is not

adequately adapted to their needs. The structure of a web page, its cognitive load and its navigability can significantly affect access by this group of people. A very large cognitive load on the content of a web page can inhibit the memorization process and attention capacities, making comprehension of the website and its content difficult. For this reason, web page designers should aspire to a “universal design” model, aiming at reducing the complexity and cognitive load of the web, as well as offering alternative channels of communication for the delivery of information.

In order to achieve eQuality, we must focus not only on strengthening laws and policies, but also on favoring the greater inclusion and participation of people with disabilities in the conception of a web that is adaptable and accessible to all. Advocating for the right of these people to fully participate in the web does not have to be seen as a matter of giving “advantages” to a population, but rather as an opportunity to build stronger and inclusive societies where knowledge can be shared among everyone. ■



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