

The Transforming Potential of Technology - A Blind Person's Perspective

Robin Christopherson, head of Accessibility, AbilityNet – 3 November 2009

Robin, himself blind, first demonstrated how he can efficiently and effectively use screen reading software (in this case jaws) to use a computer. With his speech rate set to his usual 300 words per minute, he showed how he could visit the BBC website, follow the link to the weather centre, search for his postcode and then look up the weather for a day coming up on which is has a (fictional) meeting.

He then went to Excel and opened a spreadsheet with fictional sales data from the last two quarters. He created a 3D bar chart from some data he had selected in the spreadsheet, reviewed the chart and then selected it and copied it to the clipboard.

He then went to Outlook, opened an email, and sent a dummy message to a colleague which included a chart he had copied from the spreadsheet.

The whole presentation was done very speedily using keyboard shortcuts and not the mouse (understandably as Robin cannot see).

He then contrasted the facility of using accessible applications and websites with a look at Facebook. This site presents significant challenges for screen reader users – with an illogical reading order (items shifted to the bottom of the page using styles appear at the top – and do not work when activated by the keyboard) and a number of unlabelled images (often with very long, incomprehensible urls or filenames spoken instead) and links that did not make sense out of context (when pulled up into a screen readers 'links list' facility).

He then showed m.facebook.com which is much simpler and more accessible. It is designed for the mobile user but nevertheless proves very useful given the inaccessibility of the main site.

Unfortunately, however, it does not include all the functionality of the main site – meaning that users still have to grapple with inaccessibility to perform certain key functions.

He then showed how, when a site uses stylesheets to govern page layout and presentation, it can offer a much simplified version for mobile viewers – making that simplified content available as an option to screen reader users too. This approach means that a second site does not have to be developed.

Where a site has not got this flexibility, however, a mobile-friendly version can be relatively easily implemented using technology such as that offered by Siruna (www.siruna.com), such as the New Scientist website. Their standard site (www.newscientist.com) has around 76 headings and 140 links – making it very 'busy' and lengthy to navigate for a blind user. The mobile version using this technology has only 23 headings and 36 links and is far easier to navigate (<http://newscientist.siruna.com>) including a very nice feature where the main navigation is one drop-down box.

Robin then showed the difficulties in accessing Youtube videos. This is because the Flash player has numerous unlabelled videos, and the fact that it autoplays videos on page-load means that (for loud clips) the speech is all but inaudible. Without autoplay a screen reader user is able to locate the play/pause button first and then start/stop play at will.

He then showed a video as an example of audio description. The underwater wildlife was described by a voiceover which was meant specifically for those who could not see the action.

Lastly he showed another VoiceOver – this time a video of the iPhone 3G S which comes bundled with a fully-featured screen reader of this name. Now touch screen iPhones, iTouch and Nanos are fully accessible. Macs have also come with VoiceOver included for some time now – leading the way in inclusivity.