Accessibility: the ever mentioned but frequently elusive goal

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Accessibility is a key point within the basic rights of personal and professional users of information technology, which is the aiming spirit of CECUA. Although what is frequently most known is web accessibility thanks to the long-term support to the concept by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) and its Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI), it is wiser to use the term eAccessibility which refers to “initiatives taken to ensure that all citizens have access to Information Society services”. In fact this is the term sometimes used by the European Commission\(^1\) to avoid referring to one single aspect of the right of access of everybody to the essential services of Information Society, i.e. to avoid giving the impression that everything related to accessibility is restricted to the websites although this is the most evident and frequent aspect perceived by the majority of users. With the publication of the long waited Directive (Eu) 2016/2102 of the European Parliament And of the Council of 26 October 2016 “on the accessibility of the websites and mobile applications of public sector bodies”, the restriction to websites is clearly overcome: web apps are part of the information society services where accessibility has to be guaranteed. Of course, this represents a challenge as the accessibility guidelines and control tools in mobile environments are not as mature as they are in the world of websites.

In the end, accessibility also connects to the concept of avoiding a digital divide in the Society, where some citizens may have access to digital advantages while economic or social inequality reasons hinder the access of others. Although the WAI says that Web accessibility “means that people with disabilities can use the Web” and more specifically Web accessibility means that people with disabilities can perceive, understand, navigate, and interact with the Web and that they can contribute to the Web\(^2\). Together with the statement that web accessibility also benefits others (including older people with changing abilities due to aging), it is frequent that most of the people relates accessibility to something for disabled and older persons, even analysing if serving to a percentage of the population (although growing) represents a good investment of expensive resources. However, this is a bit dangerous because the topic deals with good design for everybody because in the end all of us could have special needs when interacting with services in the Internet or when using digital devices. Even a young person with perfect sensorial and cognitive abilities may need special features under specific circumstances to still being able to access and use electronic services: we are not always interacting with a computer having a well-equipped desk, with proper light and relatively quiet and comfortable environment using an ergonomic keyboard and mouse. Sometimes we are using our laptop on our knees in an airport with poor light and noise and then we realize that having options to improve contrast, make fonts bigger, have subtitles for audio messages, etc. enables us

\(^{1}\) Communication from the Commission, dated 13 September 2005, on "eAccessibility" [COM(2005) 425]
to continue using in a reasonable manner the system. Although the primary motivation of almost all accessibility initiatives is reducing the risk of exclusion of the digital world of specific groups of population (namely disabled people and older population), the truth is that designing for accessibility is designing for everybody in almost all situations, i.e. a good design which is not only accessible but usable and providing the service users really wanted to receive. It is also important to remark that making accessible the content is not only something related to the format and technical aspects of its presentation. The WAI guidelines also include a frequently ignored aspect, maybe because it is not easily assessable with tools: it refers to the language of the content which should be written in such a way that people with lower secondary education can understand it: otherwise an alternative summary of the content adapted to such educational level should be provided. A good source of work for specialists in written language which are usually working in settings distant from the ICT world.

A final important observation is that accessibility is not (only) something that we should demand from experts and specialists, for example in web design. An efficient (and effective) way to promote accessibility is also involving general users in the process. How? Many organizations do not see accessibility as an opportunity to reach many more visitors or users but just as another problem distracting from their daily activity. They usually rely in specialized companies contracted to redesign websites and keep all the accessibility stuff out of the minds and worries of managers. As many websites offer documents to be downloaded (think in pdf documents, presentations, etc.), specialist have to warn managers that all documents in websites should also be accessible: the result is that managers just pay the fee of specialist to review and correct documents to be accessible. When one knows how easy is for a basic users to create accessible with the regular word processor functions or the Adobe checking tools, just after a short course, one can understand how ignorance makes accessibility perceived as a distant concept by managers and thus by general users. Although some public initiatives tend to promote the awareness and the concepts of accessibility e.g. in higher education, this is something which can be taught in secondary education while students are learning the basic use of usual applications. This way the Society would be benefited from more efficiency in the necessary promotion of accessibility while new generations (and the teachers) would directly know how to help to easily barriers which may keep out people out of basic Information Society services. It would be good that EC authorities could support this initiative before the new directive on accessibility comes into force at national level.