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Editorial: Is the usable, accessible Web a mythical beast?

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To create a Web site with high user acceptability, the designer must consider 'usability' to cover ease of use, accessibility by people with disabilities, and accessibility by people with different versions and makes of computer and different browsers.

You'd think by now, after about 17 years of the World Wide Web, that all Web sites would be usable and accessible. Many are; however, others suffer (or we suffer) from the same old problems that usability gurus, such as Jakob Nielsen,^{1,2} have

that would only work with Internet Explorer. I'm sure you could come up with your own examples.

Broadly, you can think of Web sites as being used for entertainment, obtaining information, and carrying out transactions. For an entertainment

Google for Jakob Nielsen and you'll often find him described as a 'web design guru'.... He's also the man that some web designers love to hate.

been trying to teach Web site designers and owners to avoid for years. In recent weeks, I've experienced sites with flashing images, continually changing pictures populated by models which had nothing to do with the purpose of the organisation, lack of basic information to complete a transaction such as the price of an item I'd like to buy, and worryingly in the health field, a hospital appointment booking system

site anything goes; breaking the design rules might be intentional to create a certain effect. However, for

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information or transaction sites the rule is KISS – ‘keep it simple, stupid’.

I take a holistic view that to provide users with a good experience of a Web site you must consider ‘usability’ to cover ease of use, accessibility by people with disabilities, and accessibility by people with different versions and makes of computer and different browsers. These three aspects are interlinked and overlap. Googling definitions of usability and accessibility is quite illuminating and provides some support for my holistic interpretation.

Usability

[Google search ‘define usability’ on 5 September 2007]

- *That quality of a system that makes it easy to learn, easy to use and encourages the user to regard the system as a positive help in getting the job done.*³

- *A measure of how easy it is for a user to complete a task. In the context of Web pages this concerns how easy it is for a user to find the information they require from a given Web site.*⁴
- *Usability is a multidimensional attribute that relates to the impact a product has on its end-users. In general, it refers to the efficiency with which a customer can do their tasks with the product, and their overall satisfaction with that process. Usability should be considered from a systems perspective including the*

... for information or transaction sites the rule is KISS – ‘keep it simple, stupid’.

*hardware and software interfaces, the documentation, packaging, and any other component of the system and processes surrounding it that affects the user*⁵

- *Usability encompasses many*

*different disciplines, from cognitive psychology to graphic design.*⁶

Accessibility

[Google search ‘define accessibility’ on 5 September 2007]

- *In the context of a Web site, accessibility refers to the degree that a Web site can be accessed by people with disabilities.*⁴
- *In the age of information technology, accessibility refers to the possibility*

*for everyone, regardless of physical or technological readiness, such as people with disabilities, to access and use technology and information products.*⁷

- *The opportunity to reach jobs, services, housing, recreation, shopping, and entertainment within a reasonable time frame, and without being impeded by physical, social, or economic barriers.*⁸

But even gurus do not always follow the rules, as a recent *Guardian* interview with Jakob Nielsen shows:⁹ ‘Google for Jakob Nielsen and you’ll often find him described as a “web design guru”. He’s also the man that some web designers love to hate. In particular, they love to heap abuse on his website.’

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Subscription information

He@lth Information on the Internet (ISSN 1460-4140) is published 6 times a year in both print and electronic form by the Royal Society of Medicine Press, 1 Wimpole Street, London W1G 0AE. www.rsmjournals.co.uk Annual subscription prices for 2007 (including postage) are as follows:

Standard subscription (print+free online)

Europe £56/€83. USA \$103. Elsewhere £57.

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Members of British Healthcare Internet Association £46

Online-only subscription

£50/€75 (Europe and Rest of World) or US\$93 (USA).

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