Inclusive Design

BRING WEB ACCESSIBILITY TO YOUR NONPROFIT

INTRODUCTION

MACARTHUR'S MISSION is building a more just, verdant, and peaceful world. Our mission leads with justice because we believe that justice is the essential condition for universal human dignity, equitable opportunity, and shared prosperity.

We live our mission through the [Just Imperative](#), which is grounded in the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The Just Imperative requires that we interrogate our decisions, actions, and practices to ensure that they are not reinforcing an unjust status quo or producing unjust outcomes. With this principle in mind, one of the areas we focused on was increasing access and participation for people with disabilities. This includes the built environment and the digital environment. Many interactions take place online and when digital content contains barriers that prevent and limit people with disabilities from interacting with it, we unintentionally exclude a large portion of our audience.

John Palfrey
President, MacArthur Foundation

So, in 2016, we committed to meeting Level AA Website Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0 established by the [World Wide Web Consortium.](#) We subsequently conducted an accessibility assessment and redesigned our website. We have implemented systems to better enable access for people with a range of disabilities, such as people who are vision impaired, who are deaf or hard of hearing, or who have fine motor or neurologic issues. As we continue this work, we want to make sure other organizations have the opportunity to do the same. We engaged WebAIM to provide tangible steps and clear guidance to make websites more accessible. We hope this guide will be a valuable resource to help grantees and nonprofits establish more inclusive digital environments.

INCLUSIVE DESIGN—
BRING WEB ACCESSIBILITY TO YOUR NONPROFIT

"Web accessibility is the inclusive practice of ensuring there are no barriers that prevent interaction with, or access to, websites on the World Wide Web by people with disabilities. When sites are correctly designed, developed and edited, generally all users have equal access to information and functionality."[1]

Typically, a significant amount of effort and/or expense is applied to your website. It is often your most important vehicle for connecting with the communities you serve, not to mention your donor base. But what would you do if you learned that your website was inadvertently excluding a portion of your target audience?
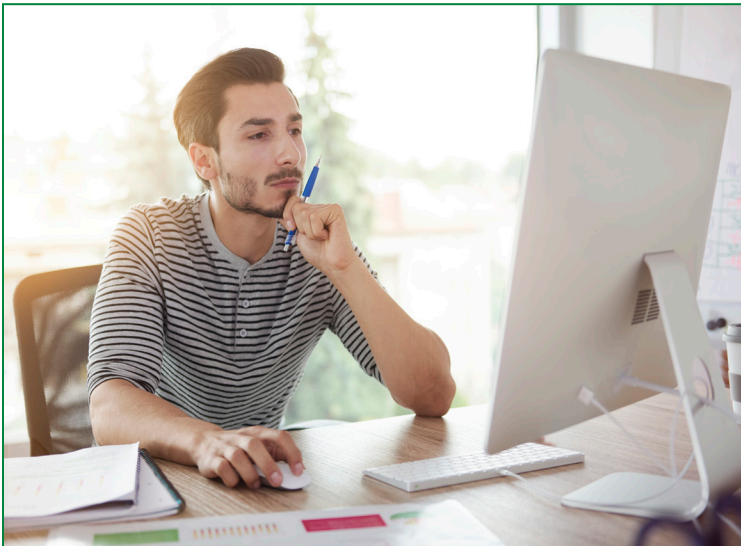
The issue at hand is making sure that your website is accessible. Nearly 28 million people in the U.S.[2] with disabilities cannot engage with web content unless their needs are considered during the period of design and content creation. These individuals include some who are blind, color blind, or have low vision; some who are deaf or hard of hearing; some with fine motor or neurologic issues prohibiting the use of a keyboard or mouse; some with photosensitive epilepsy; as well as some with cognitive issues such as learning or developmental disabilities, dementia, and traumatic head injury.[3] These categories include people who are aging, who have life-long disabilities, and who are veterans. It is likely that this is happening with content on your website, but there are direct actions that you can take to benefit your entire audience. In fact, many of them are simple. This document will provide concrete information to help you take some of those actions.

We understand you have limitations of time, money, staffing, and training. But we also know that you directly benefit by choosing accessibility. Benefits include, but are not limited to, connecting to your full donor base, supporting your mission, meeting legal requirements, and reaching new patrons/visitors/clients. This brief guide is here to help you do just that.

Let us help you succeed.

THE IMPACT OF INACCESSIBLE CONTENT

For those new to the concept of web accessibility it may be helpful to understand the impact it has on the user. In the following examples you can see the effect of inaccessibility. You can also imagine how your action to change the outcomes in these vignettes is an opportunity to attract and include people who may benefit from and provide a benefit to your organization.

Sophia is blind. She uses screen reader technology that "reads" the internet to her. It actually is reading what is behind the visual page. She is a proficient screen reader user. She wants to learn more about the needs of refugees in her local community. She is also interested in applying to be a volunteer English tutor for refugees. She goes to several nonprofit websites in her area that address refugee issues. The majority of these websites are inaccessible to her because they do not contain information her screen reader needs to make sense of the content or interact with the forms. She is unable to access complete information about programs, and she is unable to complete an online form intended to start the process to volunteer. Feeling frustrated, she chooses not to pursue it.

Lucas is a returned veteran with quadriplegia. He is interested in learning more about groups that work with veterans and veteran issues. He is unable to use a mouse, but uses a sip and puff switch that emulates a keyboard. He finds two groups in particular that are of interest to him but when he tries to get information about location, dates, and times of gatherings, the websites have several interactions that are not keyboard accessible. This prevents him from accessing critical information needed to participate. Rather than calling, Lucas moves on to something else where he is successful.

Jada has obscured vision in her primary field of view. She uses custom styles to change the color of the text, browser resizing, and screen magnification software to improve online readability. She is looking to sign up for a recurring donation to an arts program that benefits young children. Yet when she gets to the website donation forms the text and inputs are too small for her to read and interact with, and are presented with very low contrast. Her attempts at resizing and customizing the content on the web page result in form fields disappearing from the page. These fields are required and she cannot complete her donation until they are filled in. Rather than call the organization, she gives up and starts looking for a new arts organization where she can exercise her philanthropic desires, independently and securely.

Winston Hern calls out these types of exclusion in his poignant article, Perpetuating Harm. "The web industry has collectively exercised its power to state that disabled persons do not belong here."[4] Yet we know that they do. This should certainly be true in the nonprofit world where inclusion and values that uphold diversity proliferate. Still the discrepancy between websites that are and are not accessible is a front line in the battle for social justice for many with disabilities. As your organization responds to social justice, you should know that accessibility benefits everyone. It improves experiences most of us have with technology daily. Examples include the use of a smart phone to access web content, or interactions with digital personal assistants (e.g., Siri, Alexa,

Cortana). Captioned videos are another perfect example of a universal accessibility benefit. Captions were created for those who are deaf or hard of hearing, but many choose to view video captions because they are viewing in a quiet or noisy place, or to be certain of the words used. In the same way that ramps in the physical environment help everyone digital accessibility facilitates inclusive experiences on the web for all while at the same time providing social justice in the digital space for those who need access.

IF YOUR NONPROFIT IS INACCESSIBLE, YOU HAVE COMPANY

Research conducted in 2019 on 100 homepages from the "TopNonprofits.com" website revealed that 98 of these organizations contained accessibility issues that software could easily detect.[5] Similarly, research[6] conducted in 2018 on a sample of 48 nonprofit websites revealed that every page contained accessibility problems. If these nonprofits are not accessible, how many other nonprofits, many smaller in size with fewer resources, maybe yours, are also inaccessible? Web inaccessibility in the nonprofit world appears to be endemic.

This status quo marginalizes people with disabilities and limits the work and reach of the nonprofits. Inaccessible web content is an issue of social justice[7] as persons with disabilities are broadly afforded the human right of equal access to information and services. If your website is inaccessible, you are limiting access to your information and services. For many, you are also violating civil rights laws.

The unfortunate reality is that nonprofit organizations experience roadblocks of resources, competing priorities, and lack of information on what to do. The first step to changing conditions of inaccessibility and exclusion is to commit to change. This guide is a call to action. It is also an offer of support and tangible, immediately actionable resources.

KEY ARGUMENTS FOR WEB ACCESSIBILITY

▶▶Web Accessibility Is the ETHICAL Choice.

> *"The web is not a barrier to people with disabilities, it is the solution. The web has the potential to revolutionize the day-to-day lives of millions of people with disabilities by increasing their ability to independently access information…and other aspects of life that most people take for granted."*[8]

This moral and ethical argument trumps many others as the motivation to make web sites and web content accessible. From an organizational standpoint it underscores your commitment to diversity and inclusion.

1. **It is likely that your vision and mission statements are already aligned with an accessible web presence.** For many nonprofits, there is good support for accessibility, just by reading their vision or mission statements. This was how the MacArthur Foundation began its journey. Take a minute and read your mission statement. Do you see a connection? Perhaps your organization values diversity? Is it important to include "all" constituents in your work? If you do not see this immediately, think about the deleterious effect of being viewed as discriminating against a class of persons. It is difficult to communicate important principles of your organization if others view your website as excluding those with disabilities, even if this is not your intention.

2. **It is right to communicate social responsibility as you engage with your community.** Your organization's web presence is a manifestation of your values. When it is accessible it promotes you as not only socially responsible but engaged with the needs of the broader community you serve and with which you connect. By aligning your values and sense of social justice to your website, your organization is doing the ethical thing treating others equally.

▶▶Web Accessibility Is the SMART Choice.

The utility of the web to spread your organization's message and impact is no longer debatable. Donorbox[9] went so far as to include "if you are not online, you don't exist" as one of 6 hard truths the nonprofit world must face. There are many reasons that web accessibility is the smart thing to do. Here are a few of them:

1. **It is smart to reach a wider audience.** Many prospects join your organization because of your website. It can be used to help engage your constituents via polls, calendars, event registration, and upcoming campaigns, and it can help you accomplish your work. It can perform the important function of educating others on your topics. It is also a primary mechanism to connect to a donor base and execute fundraising. Online giving in 2017 was up 23 percent from 2016 and 15 percent from 2015.[10] Organizations invest significant finances, effort, and marketing resources to get even slight increases in web traffic. Why exclude 8.5 percent from the pool of potential members, donors, volunteers and partners? Moreover, those people have family and friends who hear about inaccessible experiences from their loved ones and may shun your organization in solidarity.

2. **It is smart to be visible to search engines.** Search results help others find you. For example, if your organization promotes education on climate change, people may search for this term hoping to connect with others doing the work. Finding your website can be the result. But what if you are not easily found? Search engines like Google locate content that is behind what we see on a webpage (i.e., the HTML code). Content that is more accessible is also more machine readable. Search engines can then gather more information that can be indexed and searched. If this content matches a searcher's query and you are listed higher on the search results, you stand to receive more traffic. Industry insiders have acknowledged for years that accessibility is an ingredient of the secret sauce that comprise search engine algorithms. Ultimately, if your site is accessible you will appear higher in searches than if it is not.[11]

3. **It is smart to be compatible with both mobile and emerging technologies.** While accessibility does not make your site fully available to all smartphones on its own, it does reduce the work to make it render beautifully and download more quickly on that new smart phone or tablet. Pew researchers found that 93 percent of millennials, 90 percent of Gen Xers, 68 percent of baby boomers, and even 40 percent of the silent generation own and use smartphones, so this is a technology that must be considered.[12] As other new and emerging technologies and web browsers develop and are deployed, it is most likely that they will conform to industry standards. Because accessibility is part of the technology guidelines of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), your accessible website will have a greater chance of integration with future technologies.

4. **Accessibility is a smart economic decision.** There are many ways that accessibility work provides a return on investment. One example of this is a 2019 report that details potential lost revenue to Indiegogo Campaigns caused by inaccessible labels on its payment form. That loss may have been worth $18 million.[13] If your fundraising campaign is not as accessible as it could be, you are likely leaving resources on the table.

▶▶Web Accessibility Is the LEGAL Choice

There are many laws, in the U.S. and worldwide, that prohibit discrimination based on disability. When web content is not accessible, it can be seen as a form of discrimination from a legal stand-point. It is important to consider the reach and work of your nonprofit. While specifics of laws vary regionally, the central kernel of access to your web and digital infrastructure is common. Under-standing that nonprofits are at legal risk is an important key argument that may affect your decision to engage in the work.[14]

1. **It is federal law in the United States.** In the U.S. five federal laws are relevant to an accessible web.[15] These include sections of the Rehabilitation Act as well as titles within the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Laws have also been adopted at state and local levels.[16] If you are a nonprofit that receives even a dollar of U.S. federal funding, you have a clear directive to ensure your web content does not discriminate:

   "No otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States shall, solely by reason of her or his disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance." [17]

2. **It is law in many other countries where you may operate.** Many other countries[18] have laws protecting people with disabilities from discrimination on the web. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) is in part driving new laws worldwide on accessibility.[19] The fact that there are currently 162 signatories to the Convention (meaning countries will align their national laws to the UNCRPD), indicates that legal requirements for accessibility will only strengthen worldwide. For example, while the European Union has the EU Web Accessibility Directive[20] in March 2019 they strengthened broader accessibility issues to align with provisions of the UNCRPD in the landmark European Accessibility Act.[21]

3. **It can be painful to be out of alignment with state, federal, or international law.** The consequences for being out of alignment with laws can tax your resources and limit your impact. In the U.S., litigation stemming from website inaccessibility is exploding. The numbers of ADA title III complaints filed in federal court in 2018 tripled in one year to 2,258.[22] Settlements typically include bringing the site into conformance with WCAG in short order, paying legal fees that can hover around six figures, and more recently have included damages to the plaintiff. It may also take years to recover from the public relations crisis and public shaming that can accompany discrimination litigation of your organization.

RESOURCES FOR ADDRESSING ACCESSIBILITY

Good resources can make a difference in your organization's accessibility success, so we have curated resources for you in specific areas we believe will be helpful to your efforts.

These resources are organized in three main areas. Each area reflects what we believe is vital for your nonprofit to attain and sustain an accessible web presence. You can access the resources for this guide by going to www.macfound.org/accessibility

▶▶Section 1: Start with Yourself

To begin addressing accessibility, each member of your organization will need to start by adopting practices that will positively influence your organization's accessible web presence. No matter the staff, if they have any responsibility or tasks that affects your website, they will need information and skills they can use. A good start is to take an inventory of who does what in your nonprofit to make your website happen. Someone probably funds, selects, creates, develops, approves, adds, and changes aspects of your website over time. Because many personnel are responsible for what becomes the organization's web presence, many need to understand how accessibility impacts their role and how their role impacts accessibility. Examples include purchasing the template or approving the design you will use for your website, selecting an image that will be placed on the site, creating a Word or PDF document that will make its way onto the site, identifying a video posted on your site, or for the more technical staff, writing the HTML code that becomes the website. The set of resources found in this section will help different individuals identify the ways in which they affect the accessibility of the website and provide directions to hone accessibility skills.

▶▶Section 2: Include Your Organization

Bringing accessibility into the fabric and culture of your group takes many steps; it is a systemwide transformation over time. In this resource section we will share content across many challenges that an organization can face, for example, motivating others towards accessibility and getting everyone on the same page. Setting up expectations via a policy or a guidance document is an important organizational action. That should include making sure that there is a process in place to ensure that software you license or purchase is accessible. Think of the impact of licensing a web template only to find out that it was not accessible. What about buying a platform to support donations only to find out that it is not accessible either? Sadly, additional funds and effort would likely be needed to fix these problems. However, with the right organizational strategies, you can mitigate the risk. Other organizational elements include training and supporting staff and volunteers in their accessibility work, collecting data, and making periodic evaluations of how you are doing on accessibility, and making adjustments. These organizational items help bring a culture of accessibility to your nonprofit, and over time help you achieve and maintain accessibility.

▶▶Section 3: Inform Your Community

As a community of nonprofits within other communities of your shared interests and topics, it is important to stay connected with the accessibility work that others accomplish. Information others share will help your journey, and your information will help others. Do your best to share your work transparently with your communities–both successes and continuing challenges. In this part of the Resources section we will present content to help you connect to others doing the work of accessibility.

Use the following citation when referencing this work: Whiting, J., Rowland, C., & Northup, J. (2019) Inclusive Design: Bring web accessibility to your nonprofit. Retrieved from www.macfound. org/accessibility

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[17] Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974, 29 U.S.C Section 794

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