Improving Federal Policy on Website Accessibility

ABSTRACT

This paper provides an abstract for a proposed poster. The poster will present preliminary findings of research conducted as part of a doctoral dissertation effort.

This paper conducts a policy analysis of the current United States federal policy on website accessibility. Website accessibility means “making the web useable by everyone whatever their ability or disability” [1]. Previously, web accessibility meant the providing of equal access and equal opportunity to the Internet for people with disabilities. 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.

The problem this study addresses is to determine how well federal health care websites comply with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 U.S.C. §794d.). The purpose of this research study is to improve accessibility of federal (United States government) healthcare websites. The intent of this study is to develop a better understanding of the accessibility of federal health care websites and to determine what information policy barriers may prevent attaining full accessibility.

Research Questions:
- Are federal health care websites compliant with existing legislation on website accessibility?
- Do current laws articulate a clear and consistent federal policy on web accessibility?

This study is a multi-method approach which includes a literature review plus two methods of policy analysis. The first method is a case study of a distinct category of federal websites. This examination provides an indication as to the degree of success attained by the legislative acts that intended to establish website accessibility.

The second method of evaluation is a classical policy analysis approach that performed a side-by-side analysis of the two legislative acts that most closely relate to federal web accessibility policy. The information policies examined are the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended by Section 508 in 1990.

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) has been used extensively in information technology related areas, and has been successfully used to as a conceptual framework supporting web accessibility research [2][3]. The TAM provides a framework for understanding how users adopt and use new technologies [3][4]. TAM lends itself to the study of web accessibility as it captures its innate complexity, as it is a topic that contains aspects of policy issues, technical considerations, and integrates issues that are user centric [2]. Jaeger studied federal website accessibility, selecting a modified TAM model as the most relevant model to explore as an appropriate conceptual framework for this type of investigation. Jaeger offered observations about the value to the modified TAM as a conceptual framework for web accessibility applications. Jaeger’s study indicated the possible need to incorporate four more factors or influences into the modified TAM framework. Those factors were: user feedback; education and training; monitoring and enforcement; and political climate. The research performed in this study will determine the appropriateness of including those factors in the TAM model for application to web accessibility research. This study could extend the TAM framework by addressing three of the four areas identified by Jaeger’s work: education and training; monitoring and enforcement; and political climate. This study will assess the value of those areas towards the incorporation of those three factors into the modified TAM conceptual framework, with an intended outcome of further developing and improving the TAM model for use in conducting theory based web accessibility research.

The case study of a distinct category of federal websites provided an indication as to the degree of success attained by the legislative acts that intended to establish website accessibility. The case study examined all the healthcare related websites provided by the official federal government portal website (WWW.HEALTHCARE.GOV). Of the 35 website homepages examined, 8 had accessibility errors. The finding is that 23% of these websites failed to be fully accessible as mandated by current web accessibility legislation. This evaluation indicates that the intent of federal web accessibility policy has not been fully achieved.

The side-by-side analysis of the legislative acts (Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973) revealed significant differences in the ways these acts attempt to eliminate discrimination against individuals with disabilities. The most significant difference was in how these acts portrayed the intended recipient of these civil protections. The Rehabilitation Act perspective was that of accommodating an “individual with a handicap,” versus the ADA perspective of providing universal accessibility to “individuals with a disability.” This evaluative comparison helped to reveal the strengths and weaknesses of each act, and provided indication for improving these legislative efforts towards attaining web
accessibility.

The interim findings from this study led to the development of five policy options that could serve to significantly improve the effectiveness of the federal information policy regarding website accessibility. Assessing the merits of these options involved the use of several evaluative criteria: effectiveness, feasibility, cost, and political impacts.

That evaluation produced a recommendation for pursuing two interrelated options:

- Requiring all federal website managers to receive mandatory training leading a certification in web accessibility.
- Committing to ongoing research efforts to determine the impediments to attaining web accessibility and to identify the best practices that promote attaining web accessibility.

These options are interrelated as the knowledge gained from the ongoing research effort would serve to as feedback loop into the certification training programs. This feedback provides for continuous improvement in the skills, knowledge, and abilities of the federal web managers. These recommended policy options would help the federal government to better comply with the intent of the existing legislation and to assure fully accessible federal government websites. While the federal government has been progressing toward equal participation in its government for individuals with disabilities for 3 decades, the federal government must now focus on assuring that all individuals can have fair and equal participation in the new frontier of cyberspace.

A significant value of this research lies in its uniqueness. This study explores a relative uncharted area, being the accessibility of health care websites provided by the United Stated federal government. In the United States, federal websites are required to be accessible as defined by the criteria identified in Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Therefore, the accessibility of government provided health care websites is mandated by this legislation. The expectation of the law is to assure that a large segment of society (those individuals with disabilities) are not effectively excluded from the benefits, services, and products offered by these websites [5]. An inaccessible federal health care website would effectively deny persons with disabilities the chance to use the information and services in a fair and equal manner [2].

From a policy perspective, this research is important in its potential to contribute to improving the policies and legislation that attempt to attain the social goals of equity and fairness for all citizens of this nation. By examining the key policies that relate to federal health care websites, this research may reveal areas of conflict or inconsistencies that act as impediments. This study looks for those inconsistencies or issues by examining the key legislative documents using a classical policy analysis approach, and will be looking for policy issues by surveying federal web site managers. By searching for policy conflicts and issues from these two approaches, it is expected that a richer and fuller understanding will be achieved. This type of analysis can help inform the legislative process, and may indicate whether the social goals of providing an accessible federal government are being realized in the manner prescribed by existing legislation.

This research will likely be of greatest importance and of direct value to the over 54 million Americans with disabilities, as it may improve their ability to access the information and services that are provided by federal health care websites [6]. The intent of this research effort is to facilitate increased accessibility of federal health care websites. In doing so, individuals with disabilities will be better able to use, comprehend, and interact with the content, services and products that are offered to the American public through these federal websites.

The growing importance of providing information using Internet based systems serves to support the need to study this area. The intended outcome of this research is to improve accessibility levels and assure that equal access exists for all individuals as a matter of social justice. Assuring web site accessibility serves to guarantee that individuals with disabilities will have a level of use that is equal to the use enjoyed by those individuals that do not have such disabilities.

General Terms
Legal Aspects.

Keywords
Website accessibility, information policy, Section 508.

REFERENCES


