Transcript for Accessibility Bites : Introduction to Web Accessibility
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NORA LOYST:
Thanks so much. Hi, everyone. Welcome to our Introduction to Web Accessibility. I'm really pleased to be here with you all. My name is Nora Loyst. I use she/her pronouns. I am an accessibility consultant with Untapped Accessibility. I am really grateful to be here today talking about web accessibility, and as we begin, I also want to acknowledge with respect the unceded territories of the W̱SÁNEĆ people and the Kosapsum and Songhees Nations of the Lekwungen Peoples that is where I'm joining today. It's also called Victoria. I am really grateful to be joining from this land by way of this virtual Zoom call, I'm also grateful to be a visitor on the lands where you are all joining from. I extend thanks, honour, and respect to my hosts.

As you know, there are a few things that we've done for accessibility during this session. The slides were shared in advance. There are auto captions enabled in this Zoom call, so you can turn those on in your Zoom bar, and you're also welcome to participate in discussion today in whatever way feels best for you, have your camera on, off, be moving around. You can ask questions in the chat or at the end, if you would like to come off mute, you're welcome to ask your questions out loud. If there's anything else we've missed, like we discussed, Untapped Accessibility is going to host the next couple sessions as well. You're welcome to send us an email if there's anything else we can do to facilitate more accessibility for you during these sessions.

So today we're talking about web accessibility. It's often one of the topics that folks have the most questions about. It's an area that comes naturally to our minds when we think about accessibility first. We'll define it. We'll talk about some of the common issues that come up for people in navigating the web. We'll talk about audience analysis and then we'll look at some extra resources and actionable items.

So first, just a few quick definitions. The first is accessibility itself. Accessibility is the work that we do to ensure that people with disabilities can participate in society on an equal basis with others. It's also important to note that this is the proactive work that we do to anticipate the needs, especially of folks with disabilities. It's best to be done proactively and it differs from something like an accommodation because it is initiated by us, the collective, and we're anticipating the needs of a broad population. We know that there is diversity within our population, we're anticipating it and we're preparing for it. On the other hand, accommodations are things that are individualized and responsive. Accessibility and accommodations are both important aspects of making sure societies are inclusive for folks with disabilities. But we have historically developed processes and systems for accommodations, but accessibility is something that's still a little bit lesser known. How do we go about this? So again, accessibility is about anticipating the needs of our populations and

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really putting systems and options in place so that everybody can participate on a more equal basis.

Digital accessibility is the work that we do to ensure folks with disabilities can engage with and contribute to the web on an equal basis with others. So a little bit further, this is we're talking about websites, digital tools, technologies, and these are all designed and developed so that people with disabilities can perceive, understand, navigate, interact, and contribute on an equal basis with non-disabled people.

And who needs web accessibility? All of us need it and it is essential for some folks, without web accessibility, they will not be able to access the information, but it's also useful to everybody. Everybody benefits from digital accessibility, but there are some folks, for whom it really is essential. This can include folks with disabilities related to auditory, cognitive, neurological, physical, speech, or visual disabilities. This can be blindness, low vision, colour blindness, deafness, hard of hearing. When it comes to motor disabilities, there are many folks who have an inability to move a mouse, slow response time, limited fine motor control. When we're thinking about cognitive disabilities that may impact somebody's ability to navigate the web, we think of learning disabilities, folks with distractibility, inability to remember large amounts of content or focus for periods of time.

We also want to define assistive technology. This can be software or hardware that people with disabilities use to improve the way that they can interact with the web. This includes common ones like screen readers. It reads the text from the web aloud for people who can't read the text. There are also screen magnifiers for some types of low vision, and there are tons and tons of other examples as well. We have accelerators, animation blockers, alternative keyboards and mice, speech recognition, eye tracking, and AI. These are just a few and it's sometimes important for us to recognize the different types of technology that folks are using to understand our audiences. But most of the time, the technical pieces of what technology folks are using and what type of web enables those is not necessarily what folks other than computer programmers really need to understand. We just need to understand that it's important to source accessible platforms and really investigate what our platforms are doing to incorporate accessibility features into their development.

Okay. Next, we're going to talk about the WCAG and common accessibility issues. I think it's important that we talk about this because web accessibility, sometimes when we engage with web accessibility, it's hard to know what are the technical aspects that are not really within my control as somebody who's not a computer programmer or in the back end of a web design. What are the technical aspects that I don't really know anything about and what are the things that I can have influence over? When we look at the WCAG and the common accessibility issues, we can really see how those pieces work together and it really requires that collective responsibility. So the WCAG stands for the Website Content Accessibility Guidelines, and this is part of the Web Accessibility Initiative, and it's an international forum for collaboration between industry, disability organizations, accessibility researchers, government, and others

interested in web accessibility. So they have produced and continue to produce the WCAG, which is an internationally recognized technical standard for web accessibility. So currently, we are operating under the WCAG 2.2, which was published in October 2023 and there is a newer draft, WCAG 3.0, which is now available for review. Each new version is backward compatible. 2.1 has all of the success criteria of 2.0 and it has an additional 17 elements.

Okay. What does this mean? The WCAG guidelines have different tiers. So there's A, AA, and AAA. And the reason you might choose different levels of accessibility is dependent on who you anticipate your audience to be and the purpose of your website. The first level, A, stands for Essential. If this isn't met, assistive technology may not be able to read, understand, or fully operate the page or view. And like it says, this is essential because anyone in any audience should anticipate that there are going to be folks that may need to use that type of software. The next level is Ideal support, AA, and this is required for government and public body websites. The slide says A 1 1 Y Project, that stands for the Accessibility Project, strives for an AA compliance. The third level is really meant for specialized support. Typically reserved for parts of websites and web apps that serve a specialized audience. This would be in particular when you understand that the folks that are using that type of websites are going to have very specific requirements. For example, maybe you are creating a website for a guide dog program and so you know that there are going to be blind users who really need a specific type of specialized in depth access with screen readers that is more technical. This also applies to medical software, that type of thing. It really is specific because the other thing to note is that with accessibility, sometimes one person's access creates another person's barrier. As we get more and more specialized, like the AAA level, it actually can create barriers for other users, but specific purposeful access for a specific group. It's worth noting that the WCAG website or the WAI website is not AAA compliant.

What are the main issues that come up on websites and what are causing the issues? 81% of the issues are caused by low-contrast text, 55% missing alt text, that's the text that is burned into the back end of images so that it's read aloud using screen readers. 49% is missing form input labels, so where you add text, there are no labels on those, a screen reader doesn't know what they're supposed to write or where that box is. 45% is empty links, 28% is empty buttons, and 17% is missing document language. So 96.4% of all errors fall into these six categories. The most common errors, these most common six categories have been the same for the last five years. So it's really clear where our efforts need to go to improve the access of folks navigating the web. You can see that the most common is low contrast text. That's what I was getting at before about where is this line between what everybody is responsible for and what is technically required. Low contrast text has to do with our brand colours. Which colours are we choosing when we make a poster? How are we putting our titles in? So there are elements that everybody can be responsible for and understanding these first six is a great place to be. You can also download some different software that will help you colour contrast test things and create alt text as well. Okay. Those are some of the main issues that come up, but it's really important when we're thinking about accessibility that it's really about the audience.

Accessibility is not a checklist and it's not a place that we get to. It's about the people. If we think back to the definition of what accessibility is, it's the work that we do to make sure people can participate on an equal basis. Every time we update our website, every time we update our content, the language changes, and there are new areas that we need to prepare for to make sure everybody can engage on an equal basis.

So we remember that accessibility is about people. The WCAG has a really great section of their website around user stories. I would really encourage everybody to read them, particularly if you are newer to accessibility, it just allows you to see a lot of different ways that people are engaging and I anticipate that it will help you see different representation of disability that you might not be expecting and the different ways that people are using technology to help them through their processes. I think that these stories are often useful for folks engaging in accessibility at any level, whether you're on the technical end or not. So like we talked about with the levels of WCAG compliance, do we want that essential level or ideal support? When we're thinking about that, it's a critical choice.

We're thinking about who is engaging with this content, and what are the things that I can do to make sure they're getting the best experience? Sometimes it's because we can't do everything necessarily. We have a limited amount of hours in the day and we as a society have spent a long time building processes and systems that don't work very well for people with disabilities. So what are we going to fix and what are we going to accessify? If we're thinking about who is accessing this content and what do I anticipate their needs to be. If you're working in a post-secondary environment, you may be able to make specific judgment calls about their ability to navigate a certain language and perhaps changing things to plain language is not necessarily the first thing that we're going to do. But at the same time, it's important to check your assumptions too. We know that the bias around disability runs incredibly deep in all of us and who we anticipate to be in our spaces is often not always true. Things that you can ask yourself around the audience analysis is what is their first language, their familiarity with the language we are collectively speaking in this space or using on the website and their literacy level. What is their background knowledge, their cultural background, and their access needs? While we're on the topic of plain language, it's important to note that plain language itself is like accessibility. There's not a one size fits all. What might be plain language to one group is not going to be plain language to another. Tailoring that to your audience is equally important and when possible, it's really great to co-create language and content with your audience.

A little bit more about inclusive language. It's important to use up-to-date language in reference to disability. There are the technical aspects of web accessibility and then there's the content of what you're saying. When we think back to that idea of who do we expect to be speaking to and who do we expect not to be speaking to, what is that like for an audience to receive? Are we talking about people with disabilities as though they're not there or that they're a secondary audience, or do we anticipate them being there and anticipate the diversity of their needs? Things that you can do are to use positive or neutral language when it comes to disability. Using the word disability rather than euphemisms like diversability, or differently

abled and accessibility statements with active offers of support can be really important when navigating the web. It's a great first step to take because it's just about adding an extra couple lines rather than really taking apart and rebuilding a website. Adding a statement around accessibility might look like something that feels authentic to why accessibility matters to you in your web content, why you want people to be accessing it, then including a feedback form, or direct contact for reporting accessibility issues. When doing this, it's really important to think about the accessibility of your feedback form and make sure the platform is compatible with different assistive technologies. Things that are more familiar to folks are better and just providing options. If you are using a feedback form and you're worried about it, including a feedback form and an email is a great option so that folks have multiple means of being able to get that feedback back to you.

Okay. Next is about user testing and design. This comes up a lot when we talk about web accessibility because there are so many, um, plug-ins and softwares and a lot of AI technology that boasts we can find all of the accessibility issues on your site. While those can be helpful as a first pass so that you're reducing the workload, it's never going to replace actual user testing because a computer is not your audience, it's people. It's really important that accessibility is considered early on in your planning process so that you can build into your timelines user testing and help with design. You can more quickly develop accessibility solutions, make informed decisions between different options and avoid wasting time guessing and limit having to go back and fix problems. I think that is all for user testing.

And that gets us right to the end of our session. We just have a couple of recommendations for actionable items.

First, you can start with reviewing the W3's Intro to Web Accessibility Principles, Bookmark the Web Accessibility for Designers infographic. They have lots of different videos, and we have a couple different options for using accessibility checkers. Like I said, that's a first step. Couple more resources for you here. The Accessibility Project, WebAIM, has a contrast checker that's really helpful. There are lots of other things to review here too if you're more interested in the technical elements. That was our very quick 30 minutes. I would really encourage everybody to think about their one thing. What's one thing that you can take away from this session to apply into your work maybe today or tomorrow, something quick and easy that you can do to improve the web accessibility starting today. Thanks, everybody for joining today.