Accessibility ABCs

A practical toolkit for the global civic tech community
Why This Guide?

This guide is meant to be a resource to support the global civic tech community to make their work more accessible. Accessibility can be an intimidating subject, with this guide, we look to provide the ABCs and initiate the audience to the subject while staying practical and action-oriented. This guide is in no way exhaustive but is a starting point for a larger conversation.

First, we will start by explaining some concepts and principles. The guide then presents best practices by examining case studies. After each case study, the guide highlights a few potential challenges and best practices to encounter them.

At the end of this guide, additional points are presented along with a list of resources for further reading.
Understanding Your Audience
People using your services and products come with different backgrounds and intersecting identities. A number of those users may have some form of disability.

The World Health Organization’s Disability and health factsheet states that “Over a billion people, about 15% of the world’s population, have some form of disability”, and “Between 110 million and 190 million adults have significant difficulties in functioning.”

Keep in mind that disability is an umbrella term that refers to a wide spectrum of impairments that may be physical or mental. It can also be permanent, temporary or situational.

“Disability is part of the human condition. Almost everyone will be temporarily or permanently impaired at some point in life, and those who survive to old age will experience increasing difficulties in functioning.”

What do we mean by accessibility?

Different references may use different definitions. In this guide, our scope is simple:

Accessibility means that people can do what they need to do in a similar amount of time and effort as someone that does not have a disability.

A digital service is accessible when as many people as possible regardless of disability, device, locale, or other differentiating factors can use all its features and content.
Get started with accessibility
The Four Principles

There are several guides, checklists and documentation on accessibility, but for the purpose of this guide, we are starting with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). These guidelines were developed by the Worldwide Web Consortium (W3C), the governing body of the web, and are based on four principles:

- **Perceivable information**: Information that users need must be available to one of their senses.

- **Understandable information**: Content should be clear and comprehensible to limit confusion and ambiguity.

- **Operable service**: Users should be able to interact with all controls and interactive elements using either the mouse, keyboard, or an assistive device.

- **Robust service**: Content must be robust enough that it can be interpreted reliably by a wide range of technologies including old and new user agents and assistive technologies.
Three questions to start

Ask yourself:

✦ Does my service respond to the four principles?

**Hint:** Ask the same question for each page of your website or application. Keep both your content and design in mind as well.

✦ When did my team start incorporating accessibility?

**Hint:** It is never too early for accessibility to be in your focus.

✦ Did you test your service? How?

**Hint:** What your test group looks like?
Best Practices applied to Case Studies
Use Case 1: Accessible Multimedia for an engaging learning experience
Transparency in elections is a new educational platform for local elections observers. The platform provides educational videos to explain the electoral process, common irregularities and more. The videos are either animations or of a trainer explaining the content. Once the learner completes the course, they can present their certificate to the local organisation, attend a final live webinar and get their credentials to observe on voting day.
What to consider?

Videos can make your online learning experience more engaging. However, they can also erect barriers unless delivered with accessibility in mind. An accessible video includes captions, a transcript, and an audio description and is delivered in an accessible media player.
Captions:
People from the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community cannot follow along with audio in uncaptioned video content (live or otherwise). While sign language should be considered, remember that it may or may not be their first language. When creating captions for videos make sure to keep enough room on the screen and not to cover faces or other important content.

Audio description:
If your video format is in the form of animations with only music, blind and visually impaired people won’t have access to your content. Audio description is a separate narration track that provides access to any important information that’s otherwise presented only visually. The need for audio description can be avoided by ensuring all important visual information is communicated verbally. In a live presentation, speakers need to introduce themselves and describe the content of their slides.

Transcripts:
Transcripts are text versions of the video content, provided as an alternative to watching the video. They should include both audio content and descriptions of important visual information. This benefits people who are deaf-blind, accessing the web using a Braille device; as well as people with slow Internet connections or other technical issues that prevent media from playing. users.
Accessible media players:
Accessible media players are those that support accessibility features such as captions and audio descriptions. For example, an accessible player can be operated with the keyboard alone, has sufficient contrast, and has controls that are properly labelled for assistive technology users.

Content:
Making online learning resources and events accessible involves more than technical issues; there are pedagogical considerations as well. When developing your content, consider using plain language. This eliminates understanding barriers for all users, particularly for people who have cognitive disabilities, low reading literacy, and people for whom the content is about an unknown topic or is written in an unfamiliar language.

Remember:

Accessibility benefits everyone. For instance, providing transcripts, captions and descriptions would also be helpful for people in a distracting environment, or with slow internet.
Use Case 2:
Participatory platforms should be inclusive
Samira and their team developed a platform to report harassment incidents in public places. The platform requires inputs from the victims or witnesses. The current version only allows text as input in the submission form. If the respondent does not fill one of the fields, it is highlighted in red.
What to consider?

**Content:**

From the beginning, clearly state what the form is about and how many questions there are. In the end, provide information on how users can contact you in case of difficulties.

**Input type:**

Allowing users to switch between multiple types of input allows contributions from people with a diversity of different disabilities. Make sure readers can also use the tab key to move between questions and between answers.

**Feedback Messages:**

The current version of the platform relies solely on colours to alert the user. Any validation errors should be communicated in an apparent and accessible manner with informative feedback messages. Don’t forget to make sure the completion or thank you page is also accessible.
Use Case 3:
People use a variety of tools
Maria developed a social network mobile application for the local community to report on breaking news stories and fact-check them. The homepage of the application involves visuals, such as screenshots.
What to consider?

Screenshots and visual content can be great to communicate context and information. But those images need alt text. Alt text is a short description of the non-text content, added in such a way that is typically invisible to people who can see the image but is exposed to people who are using assistive technologies, such as screen readers or Braille displays.

Complex images such as infographics, or diagrams, may contain too much information to be effectively described using alt text. Instead, detailed descriptions of these images should be provided elsewhere.

Remember:

Adding alt text and description also benefits people with a slow internet connection as browsers will display alt text visibly if an image fails to load.
Moving Beyond Technical Accessibility

Just because your service is technically accessible, doesn’t mean it is inclusive. Techniques and guidelines are important because they represent a consensus, or at least a majority opinion, about best practices and methods for achieving digital accessibility. But accessibility is most easily achieved when people are at the centre of the process. Remember that user experiences can be affected by the presence of multiple intersecting identities and environmental factors.

Plus, accessibility does not end with your product or service. Think of how you are communicating your services, your social media presence, your recruitment process and team diversity.
Accessibility is a team effort

Accessibility can’t be the work of one team or person within the organization. Organizational leaders need to demonstrate a commitment to digital accessibility. Everyone in an organization needs to know and be committed to best practices.

Don’t assume, ask.

Keep an open door for criticism and feedback. It is always best to proactively ensure all digital resources are accessible from the onset. But, there is a lot that we can learn and there may always be room for improvement. Seek constructive feedback, fix when you can and look for advice when needed. This will benefit all your users.
Additional Resources

To nurture the mindset:

Stories of Web Users By World Wide Web Consortium
World report on disability By World Health Organization and the World Bank
Disability and health factsheet by World Health Organization
“Giving A Damn About Accessibility” by Sheri Byrne-Haber
Inclusion Not Just an Addon guide by Pollicy

For Content creators:

20 Tips for Teaching an Accessible Online Course By the University of Washington
Accessibility of online meetings By the University of Washington

For designers and developers:

Access Guide, a friendly introduction to digital accessibility based on WCAG 2.1
Web Accessibility for Designers by webAim
Essentials for Developers by Harvard University
Case Study: Implementing Accessible Data Charts for the Khan Academy 2018 Annual Report by Sara Soueidan
For civic tech services to reach their full potential for people with disabilities, practitioners must commit to always designing and implementing with accessibility in mind. Failure to do so excludes a segment of the population that stands to gain the most from the provided service. As you become aware of and implement accessibility, you can do your part to ensure civic technologies can be accessed by a broader population. We hope that you will find this guide useful in your conversations, and your civic tech projects.

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