

Serving Disabled Users: Web-Site Accessibility

Speakers:

Richard Lane

The Lancet

London, United Kingdom

Gregory H Suprock

Nature Publishing Group

New York, New York

Reporter:

Barbara Gastel

Texas A&M University

College Station, Texas

Richard Lane, Web editor of *The Lancet*, opened the session by asking the audience members to close their eyes. They then heard a mechanical voice reading first some seeming gibberish and then a *New York Times* article on stem-cell research. The experience, Lane noted, offered a taste of difficulties encountered by people with disabilities who try to access content on the World Wide Web.

Gregory H Suprock, new-technology director for the Nature Publishing Group, then spoke on "Adding Value with Accessible Web Sites". He noted that increasing accessibility includes both increasing ease of use for everyone (for example, by promoting user control of page appearance and decreasing download times) and addressing needs of specific users, such as those with poor eyesight or color blindness, hearing impairments, other physical impairments, or availability of only low bandwidths. External drivers for improving accessibility, he noted, include legislation in the United States and United Kingdom, the Web Accessibility Initiative of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), and individual consumers and groups that represent them. Among reasons for investing in accessibility, he noted increased market

share, audience, goodwill, and avoidance of legal problems. He emphasized, "It's the right thing to do!"

Suprock then described how the Nature Publishing Group is making its Web sites more accessible. It is adopting standard guidelines, including those from the W3C Web Accessibility Initiative (available at www.w3.org/TR/WCAG10). Content, structure, and presentation are being developed separately, allowing users control. Among features of the Web sites are a "liquid" page layout, which permits

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content to stretch to fill the browser field; "jump" links, so that listeners need not hear long sequences of text before reaching the desired content; alternative content, such as text describing images; logical tab order; and ability to customize the site. To demonstrate the changes, Suprock showed the old and new *Nature* home pages and online articles in the old and new styles. He also described the accessibility training given to the Web designers and Web production teams at the Nature Publishing Group.

In addition, Suprock discussed auditing Web sites for accessibility. Resources he noted in this regard included the See It Right audits of the Royal National Institute of the Blind (www.rnib.org.uk/webaccesscentre), Bobby Web content accessibility testing (www.watchfire.com/products/desktop/bobby/default.aspx), and Accessible Information Solutions (www.nils.org.au/ais/index.html). He mentioned the need simply for inspection: "It's

important to involve human beings", he observed.

In answer to a question, Suprock addressed making past issues of *Nature* accessible. He anticipates going back 2 or 3 years and reworking selected content, such as abstracts. Also in the discussion, it was noted that the W3C and others have developed guidelines for creating accessible tables.

Lane, of *The Lancet*, discussed accessibility not only from the standpoint of a Web editor but from that of a consumer; he has been blind for more than a decade. He emphasized that making Web sites accessible does not require vast, complicated changes; small adjustments can be important. "This isn't about disabled people taking publishers to court", he stated.

Lane also spoke of the key role of access technologies, such as screen readers, which read text aloud. Using the screen reader JAWS for his demonstration, he contrasted a *Nature* Web page with one from *The Lancet*, which is not yet as advanced with regard to accessibility: The audience heard the content of the *Nature* page immediately but was subjected to a string of such terms as "graphic layout" before reaching the content of the *Lancet* page. Programs like JAWS, Lane noted, have features like the ability to "arrange links in a row" for scanning, facilitating navigation. In addition, the reading speed of JAWS can be adjusted; Lane typically sets it to read very fast. "The technology out there is pretty good", he said.

In closing, Lane said that "it's not about revolution" but rather about making small but important changes that allow the Internet to be accessible to all. Such measures, he observed, "make our environments rich for everyone". 