

What a tangled web – if you are disabled

Helen Monks grapples with access to the net

THE INTERNET is a vital medium for communication, information-gathering and services for millions, and especially for Britain's estimated 8.6 million disabled people.

But despite there being laws to help ensure the net is open to all, research indicates that huge numbers of companies and organisations are failing their disabled customers.

The Disability Rights Com-

mission tested 1,000 websites last April and found that more than 80 per cent could not be used by disabled people. Activities such as managing a bank account online, searching for credit card deals or booking holidays were difficult or impossible.

The problems most commonly encountered were cluttered web pages, confusing navigation of sites, failure to describe images for the benefit of blind customers using screen reading software and poor contrast between background and text – which can make life difficult for dyslexic and visually impaired users.

One of the reasons a high proportion of sites fall short may be the confusion over exactly what companies must do to stay within the law. The Disability Discrimination Act is a civil law, so it

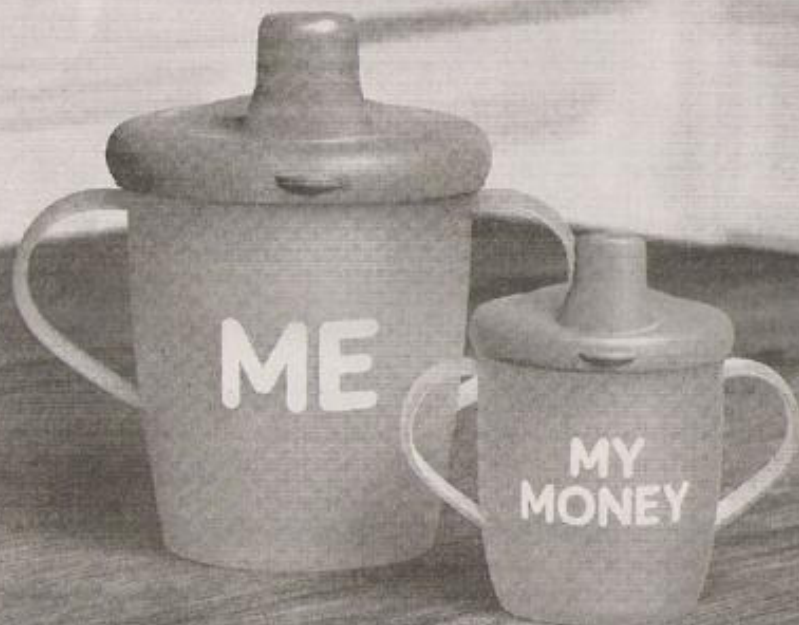
is down to individuals or organisations to bring cases. Only when the courts have heard a number of cases will there be a clear idea of what the law means in practice.

Broadly speaking, the Disability Discrimination Act in Britain makes it unlawful to discriminate against disabled people in the way you recruit and employ people, and the way you provide services or education.

Discrimination can involve treating a disabled person less favourably, or failing to make 'reasonable adjustments' so that they can participate in employment and education or use a service. Websites may be covered under employment provisions – they may be a means of advertising jobs or there may be an intranet (internal network) which staff need to use – but what apply most

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Net loss: websites brimming with visual clutter can be difficult or impossible to use.
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commonly are the provision of service or education rules.

However, if disabled users are offered access to the same services through an alternative means – for example 24-hour telephone banking – it is possible to argue discrimination has not taken place.

There are many ways in which inconsiderate design can render websites, particularly financial websites that involve tapping in numbers, useless to disabled people.

John Rack, head of assessment services and evaluation at the Dyslexia Institute, says: 'Some websites are poorly designed and present a real barrier to the dyslexic user by containing too much text, too many flashing sections, and text that is too small or over a complicated background, which increases the risk of reading mistakes.'

The greater difficulties, however, come with typing in words and sequences of numbers. Many dyslexic people have poor short-term memory and many make sequencing mistakes, so typing in long strings of numbers is hazardous. Also, many dyslexic people need more time to enter information and need to go back and check. Some web systems are terrible in this respect:

you are asked to confirm something that isn't in front of you to check.'

Trenton Moss, director of web usability and accessibility consultancy Webcredible, says that for blind or visually impaired users it is vital that websites be structured in such a way that screen-reading software works with it: 'Images need to be accurately described – so users know when something is a heading, for example – otherwise the page will read like a nightmare of words.'

Skipton Building Society recently redesigned its group website to enhance accessibility and usability for disabled customers. Updates include the ability to change font colours and

'Visually impaired users need sites screen-reading software works with'

enlarge the font size. The site has also been kept uncomplicated for people with physical disabilities such as motor neurone disease, by ensuring links are not too close together for easy selection.

Web consultants say many companies are continually trying to improve access to sites. Moss says he expects that disabled users will benefit from better facilities within the next three years.

Arguably, the pressure to improve accessibility should impact financial services before many other sectors: 'Companies such as banks communicate vital information and offer important services to customers, so they have a far higher level of duty to provide this to all their customers without discriminating than many other kinds of companies.'

Next week: We ask four disabled web users to road-test money websites and get expert verdicts on their accessibility.

Where to take your complaint

- Check that the company does not offer an equivalent service, a free 24-hour helpline, for example. If you can access the same info and services via a different route, you may not have grounds to take your complaint much further.
- Make your complaint directly to the company first. It should reply initially to acknowledge your response, then outline its action plan and a reasonable timetable in which to expect any changes.
- If you are dissatisfied with the response, contact either the Disability Rights Commission or charities with legal advocacy teams, such as the RNIB, in order to investigate legal action. The RNIB has been involved in two cases which were both settled before reaching court.
- Alternatively, charities such as the RNIB can offer businesses consultancy services to help them end any discriminatory practices involving their website.

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