Access to the internet for persons with disabilities and specific needs

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About ACCAN

The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) is the peak body that represents all consumers on communications issues including telecommunications, broadband and emerging new services. ACCAN provides a strong unified voice to industry and government as consumers work towards availability, accessibility and affordability of communications services for all Australians.

Consumers need ACCAN to promote better consumer protection outcomes ensuring speedy responses to complaints and issues. ACCAN aims to empower consumers so that they are well informed and can make good choices about products and services. As a peak body, ACCAN will represent the views of its broad and diverse membership base to policy makers, government and industry to get better outcomes for all communications consumers.

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**1.1 Introduction**

As for all people, circumstances of geography, education and finances play an important role in how people with disability are able to access and benefit from new and emerging technologies - specifically those technologies which utilise the connectivity of the internet to provide access to economic, social and cultural participation. Proximity to the network, availability of devices and the requisite skill set to engage with our increasingly ubiquitous online society have significant impact for all people when it comes to benefitting from connectivity to the internet.

While these factors are relevant for everyone, they can create specific difficulties for people with disability in being able to access and benefit from the internet.

Historically, access to communications technologies has been lagging for many people with disability. Telephony was universally accepted in developed countries, like Australia, long before provision was made to include people who were Deaf or hearing impaired in the telecommunications network. Similarly, television was widely adopted before access features were provided to make television meaningful for people who were Deaf or hearing impaired. Moreover, people who are blind or vision impaired are only recently getting meaningful access to television with the introduction of audio description. Audio description is only now being progressively adopted in most developed countries – however not in Australia – as television is becoming less important as a medium for news, information and entertainment. Unfortunately, access to the internet is repeating this historical trajectory of playing catch-up in providing full access for people with disability. While there has been much rhetoric about the transformative power of the internet for people with disability this potential transformation is often stymied by inadvertent barriers. Barriers such as affordability, accessibility, digital literacy are similarly experienced by people with disability as with other groups. However, poorly designed websites, incompatible devices and technologies and a lack of awareness about user need can exacerbate these common barriers for people with disability, turning what could be a life-transforming technology into another disenfranchising barrier.

Almost one in five Australians identify as having a disability[[1]](#footnote-1). Recent statistics indicate that Australians with a disability are less likely to use the internet or have an internet connection. In 2009 only 57 per cent of Australians with a disability reported using the internet[[2]](#footnote-2). The Australian Bureau of Statistics reported in 2014 that only half of those people with a disability over the age of sixty five have an internet connection[[3]](#footnote-3). Australia has adopted a number of both domestic and international instruments to promote inclusion of people with a disability. Australia has had a Disability Discrimination Act[[4]](#footnote-4) in place since 1992 to protect the rights of Australians with a disability; and there is a 10 year National Disability Strategy[[5]](#footnote-5) outlining how people with disability can be further included in Australian economic, social and community participation. The Government is currently expanding the National Disability Insurance Scheme[[6]](#footnote-6) to provide disability support funding and resources to people with disability under the age of 65, and Australia has signed and ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities[[7]](#footnote-7). Despite all these important instruments acknowledging the need to include people with disability there continues to be problems of access to much of Australia’s networked society.

**1.2 Response to Questions**

## 1.2.1 What are the different challenges facing persons with disabilities and specific needs in accessing and using the internet?

Affordability

It is broadly acknowledged that many people with disability are less likely to be employed, less likely to attain high levels of education[[8]](#footnote-8) and are more likely to live in poverty. For example, research shows that Australians who are blind or vision impaired are four times more likely to be unemployed than the general population[[9]](#footnote-9). Additionally, Australia has one of the highest levels of people with disability living in poverty across comparable OECD countries, with almost one in two people with disability living in poverty[[10]](#footnote-10).

Australia also has a relatively high cost for broadband connectivity. Additionally, with the vastness of the Australian landscape not all people have access to reliable broadband. For many people with disability the potential benefit to be gained from access to the internet is critically dependent on reliable high speed connectivity at affordable prices. For example for someone who is Deaf and who needs to use high quality video conferencing services for communication in Auslan, the internet connection needs to be reliable and capable of maintaining high quality real-time synchronised data speed. In order for someone with a physical disability who needs to telework in order to maintain ongoing employment, affordable and reliable connectivity is a pre-requisite. Children with disability living in remote parts of the country who rely on online school services require similar internet connectivity – reliable and high capacity affordable plans.

In addition, the cost of assistive equipment for people with disability is usually considerably more expensive than general consumer technology products. For example the cost of the most widely used screen reader software in Australia is approximately $1500[[11]](#footnote-11). Other assistive technologies such as computer switches used by many people with physical impairments can make access to the internet unaffordable for those people with disability living in poverty. While the Australian Government has undertaken to provide a national broadband network that will provide geographical access to high-speed internet connectivity, there has been little discussion about meeting the affordability needs of low-income consumers. There has also been no organised approach to ensuring that people with disability are able to obtain the assistive technologies that they may need to log onto the national broadband network.

Digital literacy

Again having the requisite skills to access and benefit from the internet is not solely an issue for people with disability. However, given the lower employment participation, lower levels of education and the high cost of assistive equipment, people with disability are less likely to be able to gain the necessary digital literacy skills needed to use the internet. For many people with disability, the issue is compounded by the need to be conversant in the use of specialised equipment. For example, screen reader software is considerably more difficult to use for someone who does not have a basic understanding of computer use or website navigation. Accessing the requisite training to enable a person with a disability to use their equipment and access the internet is not as readily available as general computer and internet training. While many people in the community may be able to access appropriate training from their local library or community college it is unlikely that someone with a disability and with specific training needs will be able to find appropriate training opportunities so readily available.

Information

Another barrier to internet access and use for many people with disability is the lack of available information about assistive technologies, devices and services. Whereas most people can visit any number of computer related outlets for information about available products and services which meet their needs, for many people with disability this equivalent information is not readily available. While there are increasing numbers of online services, communities and blogs providing relevant information for people with disability, a person has to already be able to access and use the internet to take advantage of these resources.

Web accessibility

For many people with disability who are able to overcome the barriers of affordability, availability of information and digital literacy, the internet can in itself create a number of difficulties and barriers specific to different impairments.

Poorly designed websites create barriers of access and navigation for people who are blind, vision impaired people who have cognitive impairments, and people who have dexterity or mobility impairments. For example, websites without text description for images make visual information inaccessible for someone using screen reader software. Security authentication such as visual-only CAPTCHA denies access to information, services and products for people who are unable to see the characters in the CAPTCHA field and complete the security test. Websites with poor colour contrast or text that cannot be enlarged create barriers for people who are colour blind or have low vision. Cluttered and poorly structured website pages provide unnecessary barriers for people who have dexterity or mobility impairments and audio visual web content without captions on video make the information inaccessible for people who are Deaf or hearing impaired.

1.2.2 What possible approaches and examples of good practice are available to address these challenges?

There is a clear need to ensure that access to the internet is affordable for all people. The ubiquitous nature of our networked society makes it essential that we are all able to participate. Increasingly those people without internet access are being further disenfranchised. In Australia, the Federal Government is progressing toward a digital first economy with the intent to provide all Government information and services online. Access to employment, education, entertainment as well as social and community participation are increasingly moving online. In order that all people are able to participate we need to ensure that access to the internet is affordable.

Additionally, awareness about the importance of universal design and usability will create more accessible web content. The W3C WAI WCAG guidelines – now an International Standard[[12]](#footnote-12) – provide the tools for accessible web design, and when implemented in the early stages of website development help to ensure greater access and usability of the web, including for people with disability. A greater focus on accessibility and usability in teaching institutions such as colleges and universities could promote greater accessibility and functionality of the internet for all people, including people with disability. Course accreditation organisations could have a greater role in promoting web and internet accessibility courses.

Organisations such as the Raising the Floor initiative[[13]](#footnote-13) (RTF) and the Global Initiative for Inclusive ICT (G3ICT)[[14]](#footnote-14) are providing best-practice solutions and research which can improve the accessibility and usability of the internet for everyone. Greater Government support for these initiatives could promote wider uptake of these resources.

## 1.2.3 What are the gaps in addressing these challenges and how can they be filled?

Affordability of access to the internet can be addressed through a number of different mechanisms. For example: social tariffs directed to broadband assistance, which cover set up costs as well as ongoing costs; more low cost internet packages specifically targeted for low-income consumers and consumers with disability; redefined Universal Service policies to provide universal access to mobile and broadband services; Governmental allocation of minimum broadband connection for low income citizens; and broadband vouchers as a form of subsidy[[15]](#footnote-15).

In many countries including Australia, the public policy focus of the internet has been on providing geographic availability and greater data capacity and speed with less focus on finding ways to ensure that all people are able to afford, utilise and access this network. There has been scant attention paid to the need to up skill many people in our communities, to understanding the specific needs of some people in gaining internet access, and in promoting web accessibility as a priority.

## 1.2.4 What is the role of Government in addressing these challenges and gaps?

Providing people with disability the skills and means to access the internet can have positive economic benefits for the whole community. There are a number of different ways in which Government can act to ensure that everyone is able to participate in our networked society. It is widely acknowledged that the benefit of the network is greater for all participants when there are more people connected; this is particularly relevant in light of the move to have all Government information and services provided online.

One of the key levers that Government can use is the implementation of public policies for the procurement of accessible ICT. The US has implemented Section 508 of the US Rehabilitation Act[[16]](#footnote-16) to promote greater accessibility of all US Government information and services. The EU has recently published the EN 301 549[[17]](#footnote-17) as a guide for European policy makers to use in the procurement of publicly funded ICT. With an international adoption of procurement policies for accessible ICT many of the barriers specific to people with disability when accessing the internet will be ameliorated.

Additionally, publicly funded promotion of the WCAG guidelines could encourage all web designers and authors to make web content more accessible and usable for all people. Governments need to be leaders in this by ensuring that all Government and publicly funded web content meets best-practice accessibility and usability guidelines. This needs to be mandated and enforced through continuous monitoring. History tells us that aspirational targets without ongoing monitoring are not adequate to ensure that web content is accessible to all. The Australian Government introduced the National Transition Strategy in 2010 which proposed all Government agency websites meet WCAG 2.0 ‘A’ conformity by the end of year 2012 and WCAG 2.0 ‘AA’ by the end of year 2014. The report of progress to end of year 2012 showed that only 302 (26 per cent) of websites were reported to meet WCAG 2.0 Level A or above[[18]](#footnote-18).

The Australian Government has initiated a number of ‘Digital Community Hubs’ – community learning centres primarily designed to promote greater adoption of the national broadband network. Increasing the number of these hubs and broadening their scope to include specific information and training for people with disability could help to facilitate greater adoption of broadband by people with disability.

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2. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2014) <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/51518390AD522456CA25796600152CE8?opendocument> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2014), ‘Personal Internet Use’, *8146.0 – Household Use of Information Technology, Australia, 2012-13*, <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/8146.0Chapter32012-13> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.comlaw.gov.au/Series/C2004A04426> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/disability-and-carers/program-services/government-international/national-disability-strategy> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <http://www.ndis.gov.au/> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <http://www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp?id=150> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011) http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4446.0main+features102009 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Vision Australia (2012) ‘Employment Report’ <http://www.visionaustralia.org/living-with-low-vision/learning-to-live-independently/employment-assistance/download-information-on-employment-services> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. OECD (2010) [www.**oecd**.org/australia/46497207.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/australia/46497207.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <https://www.quantumrlv.com.au/jaws-screen-reading-software-standard.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <http://www.w3.org/2012/07/wcag2pas-pr.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <http://www.inclusive-learning.eu/> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. <http://g3ict.com/> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Hawkins, W. and Pavlidis, K. (2015) *Affordability and 21st century telecommunications services*, ADJTE, Vol.3 No. 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. <https://www.access-board.gov/the-board/laws/rehabilitation-act-of-1973> [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. <http://www.etsi.org/news-events/news/754-new-european-standard-on-accessibility-requirements-for-public-procurement-of-ict-products-and-services> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Australian Government, Department of Finance (2013) <http://www.finance.gov.au/agimo/web-accessibility-national-transition-strategy-2012-progress.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-18)