

Position Statement
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There are many important topics related to Human-Computer Interaction and public policy, including privacy issues, voting usability, copyright issues, and accessibility. This position statement will focus on accessibility of computer interfaces for people with disabilities.

I am someone who strongly believes in connecting academia and the real-world of industry, government, and non-profit organizations. However, I believe that there is a disconnect between our current research knowledge in HCI, and how that research has been applied in real-world projects. For me, it's frustrating to see how poorly designed most interfaces are, knowing that the knowledge already exists to make them much better. No place is this more true, than in the area of accessible interfaces for people with disabilities.

Guidelines have existed for a number of years, on how to build interfaces that are accessible for people with various perceptual and motor impairments, and guidelines for people with cognitive impairments are beginning to appear in the research literature. These guidelines come from both non-governmental organizations (e.g. the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines from W3C), and governmental organizations (e.g. the US Government's Section 508 guidelines). While these guidelines do not make an interface 100% usable for all people with all disabilities, they do ensure that most people with disabilities can have at least technical access to the interface.

A current major challenge of HCI is to convince (or compel) developers and designers to move towards following these guidelines. Current policy requires that most governmental web sites be accessible in the USA, Portugal, Canada, Australia, and many other countries. In addition, much of the technology purchased by government funds must be accessible. However, most of these policies do not cover private web sites or computers. And the current mix of rules and case law covering private web sites can be unclear. For instance, the Attorney General of New York State has indicated that all private travel-related web sites operating in New York

State must be accessible. At the national level, a US Federal court ruled that Southwest Airlines was not legally required to make their site accessible. However, the US Department of Transportation has proposed new rules requiring that airline web sites be required to be accessible. When it comes to web site accessibility for private companies, there really is no clear guidance on when accessibility is legally required.

My efforts are directed at determining how SIGCHI can help interact with, inform, and inspire governments to help them develop stronger and clearer policies relating to computer interface accessibility for people with disabilities. I believe that if grassroots efforts are not successful in getting developers to make more interfaces accessible, then we need to have stronger government policies to ensure that users with disabilities have access to a much larger number of interfaces.

Dr. Jonathan Lazar is an Associate Professor in the Department of Computer and Information Sciences, in the Fisher College of Science and Mathematics at Towson University, where he founded and directs the Universal Usability Laboratory. He is also an affiliate professor in the Center for Applied Information Technology and currently serves as director of the Computer Information Systems undergraduate program. Dr. Lazar has served on program committees for a number of CHI-sponsored conferences, and he is a founding member of the SIGCHI US Public Policy Committee. His newest book, titled "Web Usability: A User-Centered Design Approach," was published by Addison-Wesley Publishers in 2006.