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New event promotes accessibility: For people with disabilities, the Internet offers a world of challenges

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Many online difficulties happen simply because designers aren't aware of the needs of the impaired, says Jennison Asuncion, the Toronto organizer of Global Accessibility Awareness Day.

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For many, the Internet is the fastest and easiest way to access information. But for the visually impaired and those with hearing, mobility, or cognitive issues, navigating the online world can present its own set of challenges.

Overcoming these challenges is the inspiration behind the first [Global Accessibility Awareness Day](#) on May 9.

Launched by Los Angeles web developer Joe Devon, the day is meant to



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educate technology designers and developers about making the web more user-friendly for those with disabilities.

“Universal access to information is something the Internet promises and proclaims loudly from the rooftops. But the fact is it is not universally accessible to those who use keyboard or assisted technologies,” says John Lalley, manager of digital accessibility consulting at the CNIB.

Lalley says common problems can occur if web designers haven’t followed certain structures while keeping accessibility in mind.

For instance, people with impairments often aren’t able to skim an article to get the information they need, or their text screen magnifiers will show blanks if specific page design frameworks aren’t followed, he says.

By using colour contrasts and tagging visual images properly, web designers can especially help to make a page easier to navigate.

Many online difficulties happen simply because designers aren’t aware of the needs of the impaired, says Jennison Asuncion, the Toronto organizer of Global Accessibility Awareness Day.

Legally blind since he was one, Asuncion — an IT accessibility professional now in his mid-30s — says he often gets stuck on a page while using fast moving tools such as Facebook applications.

“For me, an issue is a message will appear onscreen that I’m unaware of. Or my screen will change at a moment’s notice and I’ll be thrown to a different part of the screen and don’t know it.”

Asuncion says problems often occur because the web designer has tried to make the page more visually pleasing or flashy.

“It’s done deliberately for folks who can see,” he says.

On Global Accessibility Awareness Day, Asuncion will demonstrate to a room of Toronto web designers and developers how he uses a screen reader – a device that reads text out loud – and he’ll talk to them about the difficulties he has experienced as a user.

“They never have seen an actual blind user navigate the web with specialized software,” he says.

Similar events are scheduled in other cities around the world, including Los Angeles, Washington, Sydney, Australia and Mumbai, India.

People around the globe are encouraged to get involved by unplugging their mouse for an hour, since many visually impaired people can only use their keyboards to surf the web or by using specialized screen reading software.

Martin Courcelles, an accessible technology consultant at CNIB who has been legally blind since early childhood, says the day can help advance the progress that has already been made in digital accessibility.

“A lot of web pages are up there that are not as accessible as they should be,” he says. But, he adds, the evolution of technology keeps him optimistic. He uses an iPhone with a built-in screen reader and text magnifier on which he can also access braille.

"The fact that Apple has built-in accessibility to products has raised the bar, so instead of having to fight for accessibility we expect it."

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