

## **A sea of kites: pushing access to archives with progressive enhancement**

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Open access to archives enriches our knowledge of human society, promotes democracy, protects citizens' rights and enhances the quality of life. (UNESCO *Universal Declaration on Archives*)<sup>1</sup>

Access to information is about power. Accessibility describes an evolving power relationship between those holding information and those seeking it.

In any project there are types of access we want to deny. Privacy is an access issue. On the other hand, access to the records of government programs provides citizens the power to hold them accountable. Open access to public records empowers citizens to enact participatory democracy. Secrecy is a key tenet of tyrannical governments, as is the systematic destruction of citizens' privacy.

The UNESCO *Universal Declaration on Archives* lays out what is at stake in the accessibility of archival content. There are other arguments for deep accessibility.

Preservation is a question of access: can we access the record? An inaccessible record is lost. To say 'we will preserve it' is a prediction; we can only say 'we have preserved access to this date' with certainty.

The format or medium of all records must eventually be refreshed, and finite resources allocated to slow disintegration. At its core, preservation is a social challenge: someone must know and value something to preserve it. In a positive feedback loop, access is crucial to preservation.<sup>2</sup>

The more accessible we can make a record, the more empowering the information contained can be and the better chance it has of serving us into the future.

### **Only accessible by foot**

Accessibility is not a solid condition. Access is provided or denied within a constantly changing technological and social context.

Often 'accessible' is used as a conclusive description – as if something is either universally accessible or inaccessible. If I publish a Word document online is that content accessible? What if it's titled 'JSC(11)' without a file extension? What if the website provides no description or title and discourages indexing by search engines? If it can't be found is it accessible? What if the document is in English and the user speaks Tamil? Is it accessible *to them*?

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To merely say that something ‘is accessible’ means very little. Just as preservation is proven by whether you can access a record, accessibility can be measured by whether a specific task (such as comprehension) can be performed on an object in a specific situation.

If something is *more accessible*, it returns essential information to more methods of access. The least accessible content can only be accessed via one method.

Universal accessibility cannot be claimed as you can never know all the ways in which access might be sought. Somewhere, someone is inventing new ways to interact with your content. Pushing accessibility as wide as possible means being responsive to the changing potential for access.

The benefits of wide accessibility in empowering people and aiding preservation are so great that we should push access as far as possible. We should strive for universal accessibility and provide access by default.

### **Layers of access**

Accessibility is a key advantage of digital systems. Digital files are made out of layers of information that users interact with. There is often a visual layer that you look at and read. There may be a layer of animated elements that respond to input. Below the visual surface there are many layers rich with data: semantic information that tells us what different elements within the file are, metadata providing context, relationship information directing us to connected files and much, much more.

Most of the time machines interact with the subterranean layers on our behalf. A search engine looks at the semantic information to understand the structure of a document; someone with dyslexia might use a software tool to look past the visual layer and generate an alternative experience suited to their needs, reading text aloud.

There are layers of accessibility, and porous layers within layers. People and machines feel their way forward to connect in ways suited to their requirements.

How can we envision a digital archive? It is not a site that people visit, registering and entering at the front door (or sneaking in via the fire escape).

The digital archive is distributed through the nest of tubes. Individual records are orbiting, packages of data and metadata, covered in a moss of symbiotic software, mashing together. Clustering long-lines reach out and hook into their cells, scraping off streams of bits to be cast on into the network.

This deep accessibility does not come free with digital. It’s not hard to make a PDF as accessible as a paper document. You have to thoughtfully embed information throughout the layers of a digital file to make it ‘machine readable’. You have to care as much about what’s beneath the visual surface as above it. Many records are born digital, but not many are born accessible.

No one has the resources to do everything. You need to know (with evidence not assumptions) the main ways in which people could access your content. Support the common paths and then push outwards.

Whose responsibility is accessibility? Every decision affects accessibility, accessibility is everyone’s responsibility. A fundamental, decentralised approach is the easiest way to make wide accessibility happen.

If you can even slightly increase accessibility across many aspects of a system, the marginal gains will aggregate into a much more accessible system overall.

### Progressive enhancement

Design is a series of choices, each one shaping the whole. In each decision, every potential choice sits on a spectrum from most accessible to least accessible.

When striving for universal accessibility, we should make the most accessible end of the spectrum our default position every time. We can then move along and limit access if there is a strong case to do so.

Every project has constraints. We can only choose options within our resources and knowledge. In some cases it takes fewer resources to be more accessible, in others it takes more.

We can use this simple framework to make all kinds of decisions:

- At how many locations should a record be available?
- Should we provide a link to the .mp3 or embed a Flash player?
- What typefaces and colours should we use?
- How should we name files?
- What languages should documentation be in?

It's important to innovate new, novel ways to engage with archives. Often these systems make content less accessible to many people. This is not a problem – just layer these novel, ‘enhanced’ alternatives on top of your highly accessible default. The beauty of digital systems is that we can add layers of novel interactivity on top of a robust, accessible base. If someone isn't suited to your fancy new interface, they can fall back on a method that works for them. In the web design profession this approach is called Progressive Enhancement.<sup>3</sup>

### Legal accessibility

Copyright, a monopoly over distribution, is explicitly a block to access. Allowing greater legal freedom to use records means more people can engage in more ways. Allowing people to make copies allows them to make backups.

Copyright licensing decisions are in the hands of copyright holders, archivists have little say. These decisions can be extremely emotional because they can relate to a individual's or institution's financial stability. In any case there can be strong arguments for and against restrictive copyright.

Thankfully there are *many* options between the public domain (most accessible choice) and ‘all rights reserved’ (least accessible choice). Choosing a license has been made simpler by projects such as Creative Commons that provide a range of easy-to-use options along the spectrum.<sup>4</sup>

If you want material to be as accessible as possible, you need to be accessible by default. The default legal position is at the other end. It is the responsibility of people who care about preservation and diverse accessibility to educate copyright holders that these decisions aren't ‘all or nothing’ and to explain the benefits of open access.

### Explanation and translation

The door may be open but can anyone find it? If they do, will they understand what it is and why they might be interested? To connect with a diversity of people, archives need to provide context and explanation.

Many collections, particularly those of institutional records, are full of abbreviations, jargon and localisms. Providing a plainly written, linked glossary provides a way for people entering the subject area to build their knowledge.

There are countless people in the community with deep knowledge of information systems gained over decades of experience. When considering the potential range of engagement with your project, reach out to these people and provide a framework for them to interpret and share what they find.

Most people in the world speak languages other than English. Translation is one way to make huge bounds towards wide accessibility. Is your work relevant to people in East Timor, Zimbabwe, Japan, Cambodia, Turkey, Montenegro? For smaller collections it is not expensive to produce a few priority translations.

Start from a smart default that is as accessible as possible and progressively enhance engagement to target people who will help widen access even more.

### **Inclusive and accessible**

It is intimidating to enter a conversation with people who have decades of experience and formal education on the topic. But pushing access as far as possible requires a cross-disciplinary approach. As basic brainstorming techniques work by producing *then* considering a quantity of diverse ideas, pulling lessons from other disciplines is an important path to innovation as the world shifts around us.<sup>5</sup>

I am a web designer. Web design is a craft made up of many disciplines: information management, software development, typography, graphic design, publishing and so on. I became interested in archives when I was studying Australian film and became aware of the thousands of lost films. I became interested in accessibility working on journalism projects, trying to overcome access denied for the public right to know. Diverse perspectives can be connected by common goals.

The aspects of accessibility covered here are some of the angles I am familiar with. You have different experiences and a different perspective.

You might like to contribute thoughts to a project I have started, to develop basic starter principles for independent archive projects (see <<http://equivalentideas.com/journal/approaching-principles-for-independent-archives/>>). One of the suggested principles is ‘Strive for universal accessibility, be accessible by default’.<sup>6</sup>

We are all affected by the way knowledge is distributed in our societies. Forums for discussing accessibility should be as accessible as possible themselves. Where potential contributors are locked out, their unique ideas become inaccessible to us.

### **Endnotes**

1. UNESCO, *Universal Declaration on Archives*, adopted by the 36th Session of the General Conference of UNESCO on 10th November 2011, available at <<http://icarchives.webbler.co.uk/13343/universal-declaration-on-archives/universal-declaration-on-archives.html>>, accessed 1 February 2014.
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3. Aaron Gustafson, ‘Understanding Progressive Enhancement’, *A List Apart*, October 2008, available at <<http://alistapart.com/article/understandingprogressiveenhancement>>, accessed 10 March 2014.
4. Creative Commons, <<http://creativecommons.org/>>.
5. Victor Papanek, *Design for the Real World*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1985.
6. ‘Strive for Universal Accessibility, Be Accessible by Default’, Principles for Independent Archives, available at <<https://github.com/equivalentideas/independent-archive-principles/blob/master/independent-archive-principles.md#strive-for-universal-accessibility-be-accessible-by-default>>, accessed 5 March 2014.