



Transcription of UX Soup Episode 14: Accessibility and Digital Inclusion for People with Sight Loss (Part 2)

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00:14 Lisa Cooper: Welcome to UX Soup, our short form podcast where we go beyond the buzzwords and talk about the latest user research, technology innovation, and all things impacting user experience of personal devices and services, whether it be at home or on the go. As always, UX Soup is sponsored by Strategy Analytics, a global research and consulting firm, providing our clients all over the world with insights, analysis and expertise.

00:43 LC: Hello, my name is Lisa Cooper. Derek and Chris have the day off today. This is the second part of a two-part podcast about inclusive design and technology, and more specifically, the accessibility of products and services for people with sight loss.

01:00 LC: As part of our ongoing UX syndicated research programs, myself and Derek Viita are interviewing people within the blind community to look at accessibility challenges and needs. This is the second part of my conversation with Martin Ralfe, who is the technology services and skills lead at Guide Dogs UK. Enjoy.

01:21 LC: So let's talk about the role of smartphones to people in the blind community. I know that smartphones are used for a variety of different purposes, one example is to use it to identify something like a bus from afar by using the camera in the smartphone. I wonder if you could speak about that for a moment, and how people who have sight loss are treated by the public if they are actually seen using a smartphone for any kind of purpose.

01:49 Martin Ralfe: Yeah, genuinely. This is something I've, again, I've paid particular interest to for a while. There was a meme circulating in social media in about 2017, 2018, of a lady using a white cane and using her mobile. And so they're on the lines of, "Doesn't God work in mysterious ways?" or alluding to the fact that this lady was faking being VI. And it astounds me to this day, the time we live in that people still don't realize that technology is an enabler for people with sight loss, and I take my phone everywhere with me because of not only the ability to contact the outside world and speak to people and annoy people on TikTok and Facebook and all that fun stuff, but it's also about being able to live my life.

02:38 MR: I genuinely, genuinely, genuinely, 100% could not do what I do without a smartphone, and that is everything from work to leisure, to socializing. I couldn't do what I do without a smartphone, and that is because of the... I call them 'sight loss Swiss Army knife,' because there is so much to them. I will use my iPhone as the example. I've got large text and I have large buttons. I use voiceover occasionally when my eye starts to ache. I listen to things and also still having some limited vision, I will use the camera to look at, as you've mentioned, buses and bus numbers. And that's without even looking at the apps that exist for people with sight loss in the market and how those apps work for us.

03:23 MR: But then when you start to break that down even further and you think of the likes of Seeing AI, one of the best apps ever made by Microsoft, and you think of other apps that exist that are made by third party, indie app developers, if you wanna think of it like that, of just trying to make the world more accessible, is all done through the lens of the smartphone nowadays and yet the ridicule element is still rife of if you pick up a smartphone, you hear the comments of, "How can they be blind, they're using a smartphone?" or "Oh my God, have you seen them using a phone? They don't need that dog," and those comments happen. I just don't get why in this day and age, we still have to deal with that and people not know that this technology is more than useful, it's a lifeline to us in some cases.

04:09 MR: And one of the other benefits to the smartphone, and as we've obviously mentioned with public transport is, again, using the commuter side of it, is I can see where my train is, I can see if it's running late, I can see if I've



got a hang around on a wet platform for another 30 minutes or whether I can go and sit down somewhere and hide for 30 minutes. It's just the little things like that that make our lives just as much easier as everyone else's. We can do everything you can, and that's the important thing. We can do everything you can and everything everyone else can do, we just do it a little bit differently. We're just trying to live our lives at the end of the day, and it's those things like smartphones that really, really help us and get us on our way.

04:50 LC: To what extent can we rely on private companies to account for blind people in their design? And to what extent do we need governments to mandate accessible design? I'm curious about your opinions on that.

05:03 MR: I think the simple answer is, we can't. We can't rely on private organizations and corporates to do it. We can continue to think Apple and Microsoft will continue to think about accessibility, no one's making them. No one's making that a thing, but because they're doing it, smaller organizations are, which is brilliant. But then there was a court case a year or two ago now in the UK, where a delivery firm had been sued for £50,000 for their app not being accessible, and that was only because that person could afford to take them to court and had the support behind them of a law firm that could see something big from it. However, no legislation has passed since. The only legislation that exists in the UK is in the public health sector.

05:55 MR: Your services have gotta be accessible or you've gotta have an alternative way of people communicating with you if your services aren't accessible, that's the only space it is "policed." You move into the commercial private sectors, it's not policed by any stretch. As good as the WCAG standards are, which is the web content accessibility guidelines, as good as they are, they're not everything. So as much as a site might say, "We are compliant with the WCAG 2.2," whatever the case might be, it's not everything. Just 'cause your website is accessible, doesn't mean your services are, doesn't mean your app is, doesn't mean anything else is, but there's no one policing that. And I do think governments need to step up and take responsibility for digital inclusion and accessibility, predominantly with digital services, but for me, accessibility doesn't start at digital services and doesn't stop at digital services either. It's everything, from building design, architectures or architects have guidelines on how to make buildings accessible and where they shouldn't include steps and where they should include steps, etcetera.

07:04 LC: Definitely, yeah.

07:04 MR: Why does that not exist to a degree anywhere else? Again, that's not necessarily law, but it's guidelines that architects stick to. There definitely needs to be some form of... Like, for example, at Guide Dogs, I'm in the middle of producing an accessibility architecture to work with our service design processes so that we are always thinking about our service users and how they interact with our services as we're having to move to more digital inclusion. But again, no one ever asked me to do that, and no one ever necessarily wanted it, but it's something that I feel needs to exist with our service design. But again, it's potentially something just no one thought of as well.

07:43 MR: I really think accessibility architecture is a thing, and it has to exist in the outside world. It can't just sit within sight loss sector organizations. It has to be the responsibility of everyone, and accessibility architecture is not hard. I've managed to condense a service design accessibility architecture into about three pages. It's not something that has to be a Bible, it just needs to be very clear and needs to be understanding. Like, one of the things we've implemented with our service design is doing a technology assessment, seeing how people are using technology before they can interact with us on a digital level, and if they're not ready, hey, they then get passed to me and our technology team, and we will get them ready to interact with our digital services and train them remotely and have that conversation.

08:28 MR: But yet again, it's the sight loss sector doing the right thing when no one else is prepared to do that. So say, for example, I'll use Apple again as a great example. They have some accessibility Apple Geniuses, but they're not always in store. There's only one person responsible for that stuff or that knows that stuff inside out. My question is: Why if it's part of your product, does everyone not know about it? I bet you that person that says, "They're not in today," knows everything they need to know about the latest iPhone or the MacBook Pro. Well, everything for me includes accessibility, and that is where it just need to become part of the puzzle. If you think of the worldwide pandemic that's took hold lately, no one used to clean baskets, did they? Or trolleys at supermarkets or malls,



whatever. [chuckle] No one used to do that. We now do that, and it's no sweat off anyone, it's just the process that's changed and people have gone and done it.

09:24 MR: So why can't we take that and translate it into the world of accessibility and sight loss and say, "Actually, we just need someone to make sure we have an accessibility architecture?" But for me, I think the governments of nations, or what have you, might have to step in and create legislation. At the point where we have disability ministers in the UK and we have digital ministers, I think there's one missing. There's a digital inclusion minister that needs to exist to help implement and enforce those type of things. So for me, it is all about the digital inclusion being enforced at legislation level, because I don't think... And as much as I don't wanna admit that, I just don't think that anyone's gonna take it on on their own without the potential repercussions. There are some countries in Europe that actually have legislation, but it's not Europe-wide. And there are fines for companies that don't stick to accessibility, but why is that not a worldwide thing? So, yeah, that's my rant, I suppose. [laughter]

10:22 LC: Do you think maybe it's because when you don't have a good user-centered design process, when you don't have a good inclusive design process when it comes to all products, you don't know what you don't know? So because you're not involving all different kinds of people in your design process, then you're not going to include these things automatically, 'cause you just don't know what you don't know.

10:44 MR: 100%. And I think that's a brilliant point, I suppose 'cause you can't, as you say, UX Design at university or college or whatever, does not teach necessarily accessibility. And if you've not got the lived experience or you've not witnessed someone living that experience, you're not gonna think about it, and that's a very fair comment to make. If you don't know how it impacts people, how can you be responsible for making those design calls? But that's where person-centered, user-centered, customer-focused, whatever you wanna call the process, so whether it means engaging with those people with lived and learned experience, nine times out of 10, everyone's up for collaborating, making sure things work and move in the right way. And as I've joked about driverless cars, I'll happily engage with getting a McDonald's through a drive-through.

[laughter]

11:33 MR: But, yeah, no, I think, to answer your question, yeah, I totally agree. It's about that user-centric focus and not knowing necessarily who your user base might be, and I think that's also another thing.

11:46 LC: Yeah, I can talk to you all day, Martin. This is great.

11:50 MR: Sorry. [chuckle]

11:51 LC: No, this is great. This conversation is needed. I mean, just for myself, I didn't realize that there's only a small percentage of people with sight loss that are completely blind. Correct?

12:04 MR: Yep, totally.

12:05 LC: Do you know what those figures are?

12:07 MR: So, globally, the figure dances between about 3% and 7% of people that are legally and registered blind. In the US, you guys classify it as legally blind. In the UK, we classify it as severely sight impaired, or SSI. Those people that are registered as blind or SSI, their visual acuity is less to make detail out and things like that. So for example, for my case, I hate using percentages because I can't relate that to you, but I have 5% vision in my right eye, but what does that even mean? Well, it's hard for me to explain. I can't...

12:41 LC: It can mean something different for each person too, right? 5% in...



12:46 MR: Exactly. It's so unique. So, for example, interacting with this podcast today, I was able to look at the website and I use the terminology, I sniffed the screen, so my nose is pretty much pressed against the screen so I can get as close up to it to look at it as I possibly can, but then obviously, people will use screen readers to do that, but that also doesn't mean they're actually blind either, because they might just not wanna get eye ache and they don't wanna... So they could be visually impaired and still use a screen reader, so you also can't take those metrics of who's using what assistive tech as well, 'cause although those cookies exist to enable you to see who's using a screen reader, it's not always a gospel that someone... 'Cause someone could be testing that website for accessibility, so you're always gonna pick up that cookie... Well, even if you are tracking that cookie to pick up screen readers and accessibility. Well, yeah, everyone's visual impairment is unique, everyone is different.

13:36 MR: No one genuinely has the condition I have, I was the first case in 40 years in the UK with my condition. And there's only been one person born since with my specific condition, but again, they still won't see the same as I do, and so even two of us in the whole of the UK, with the whole set of conditions I've got, we'll see totally differently. And you think of people with a quiet sight loss condition, such as glaucoma and things like that, they will see completely differently, there'll be at different stages of their journey, and... Early onsets can hang around forever, or they could just completely take away your sight within moments. It's an interesting journey, and that's one thing I always say is, a sight loss journey is unique to that individual, and technology and everything around it is an enabler, and that's why obviously it's so important to get it right because everyone is so unique and different with it.

14:28 LC: Yeah. So Martin, you're setting up a charity, is that correct?

14:32 MR: That is totally correct, yeah. Myself and my partner, Sam, she's visually impaired as well, and has a guide dog as well. Obviously, the conversation about digital inclusion is massive for those in our household and we talk about it probably more than we talk about what we're having for dinner, surprisingly. And with that, we decided that our main focuses are gonna be on digital inclusion and campaigning for the rights of people with sight loss and digital inclusion, and making sure we can lobby parliament and things like that to talk about digital inclusion. We have got lived and learned experience as much as we've got sight loss. I do consider myself someone who knows a fair bit about assistive tech and how technology works from the mainstream.

15:09 LC: Just a little bit. Just a little bit.

15:12 MR: Yeah, hopefully. From mainstream to assistive. So we think we've, between the two of us, we were able to do that. But also with that, we wanna make easy to access training programs for people with sight loss to get to grips with technology and pick it up for the first time. Like for example, the quirk of the "Hey, Siri" feature that I mentioned with Apple and not working properly when you're trying to set it up for the first time, it's those little things like that we'd like to just demonstrate to people and say, "Hey, there's a quirk here, you might wanna skip this step and come back and set up later with someone that's sighted with you." And everything from that training and inclusion, right the way down to having people there that can talk on your level and can represent you, I think as well, is another thing, 'cause confidence is a big thing in the sight loss sector.

15:55 MR: If you've got acquired sight loss, obviously, if you've picked it up in your life, you might have been a very confident person, but your confidence can literally be stripped away from you. And the same with congenital, it takes a lot to build the confidence to do a lot of stuff, even just getting out and about, and so we just wanna be able to give people that empowerment and say, "You can do it." That's the idea of the organization, is to empower people with sight loss and also try and enforce change, particularly in the UK. Our website is currently being designed, which is blindsincebirth.com.

16:29 LC: I think as user researchers and UX designers, we need to understand more about various communities, and people with sight loss is one of them. It can be tricky to design for people with any disability, because everyone is so unique, and if you could have some sort of degenerative disease of some sort, and you're going to progress at different speed than anyone else, you're going to lose different faculties at different points, and it can be tricky, and I imagine it's similar with sight loss.



17:00 MR: Yeah, everyone's challenges are so different as well. One thing I've always said is, if you think about... If you go back to obviously the whole mouse and all that type of stuff that when Microsoft tried to introduce it, that was done brilliantly introducing the mouse and stuff, but if you've had acquired sight loss and you're used to using a mouse and touchscreens, you're then gonna move back to just using a keyboard. So everyone's journey is so different and unique that that's... One of those ways of combating that is... Obviously you can't talk to every single person with sight loss 'cause that would be impossible.

17:32 LC: But you could at least have a go. [chuckle]

17:33 MR: Yeah, God, yeah, you can try.

17:35 LC: Talking to someone with sight loss. [chuckle]

17:38 MR: Yeah, no, definitely.

17:40 LC: Yeah.

17:40 MR: It's so unique.

17:40 LC: Even just going to an organization like Guide Dogs, you can really get a lot of information just by talking to a charity that deals with this community.

17:49 MR: Well, exactly, and what I found, it's key that if an organization like Guide Dogs is always learning, research will probably never stop.

17:57 LC: Well, unfortunately, I have to close our episode. I want to thank you so much, Martin, for joining us today. You've really opened our eyes to the issues that people with sight loss are facing, and I'm so grateful for that, so thank you.

18:12 MR: No worries, thank you again for having me.

18:17 LC: That concludes part two of this podcast on accessibility. If you want to know more about our research on accessibility and people with sight loss here at Strategy Analytics dedicated research, please feel free to email us at uxsoup@strategyanalytics.com. That's all for now, thank you for listening. Check out our latest user-focused insights on strategyanalytics.com. You can also follow us on LinkedIn or Twitter, or by visiting our show page at ux-soup.com. Please remember to subscribe to UX Soup on your favorite platform where you can review and rate our show. See you next time. Bye for now.

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