

Disabled technologies pave the way for next generation mobile Web

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Dr. Simon Harper with mobile phone. Credit: University of Manchester

Scientists at The University of Manchester have launched a new project which seeks to combine web accessibility with cutting-edge mobile phone technologies.

The aim of the three-year project is to develop a host of new software with the potential to make the mobile web as simple to use as the internet.

Currently, websites have to be re-designed to work on mobile phones. This is due to the fact that many conventional websites can't be displayed on small screens. Consequently, both the content and the choice of websites available on the mobile web are limited.

The RIAM project will draw on the experiences of blind and visually impaired users and the technologies they use to surf the internet, such as screenreaders, in a bid to simplify the content of conventional websites so that they can be accessed via the mobile web.

Dr Simon Harper from the University's School of Computer Science will lead the £205k project, funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, alongside semantic web expert Professor Ian Horrocks and web accessibility expert Yeliz Yesilada.

Dr Harper said: "Mobile web users are handicapped not by physiology but technology. Not only is the screen on the majority of phones very small, limiting the user's vision, but the information displayed is difficult to navigate and read.

"Add to this the fact that the content displayed is determined by a service provider and not the user and you have a web which is not very accessible or user friendly. Our aim is to change this by enabling web accessibility and mobile technologies to interoperate."

A core part of the project will be the development of a validation engine which will screen websites to ensure they are accessible and mobile web compatible.

The validation engine will work in tandem with a transcoding programme which will de-clutter web pages and reorder them into a web mobile friendly format. Once transcoded the aim is to let the user determine how the pages are displayed on their mobile phone.

Dr Harper added: "Screenreaders used by blind or visually impaired web users are very good at stripping web pages down into text only formats but what we want to achieve are content rich formats which are just as accessible."

Source: University of Manchester

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