Standards for accessibility of digital information for disabled citizens

Introduction

Given the widespread adoption of ICT within the publishing industries, there is a general interest in the creation and provision of well-formatted digital documents. For those people who are dependent on accessible information, this interest is of central importance, and it is this convergence of interests that offers exciting opportunities for these different stakeholders.
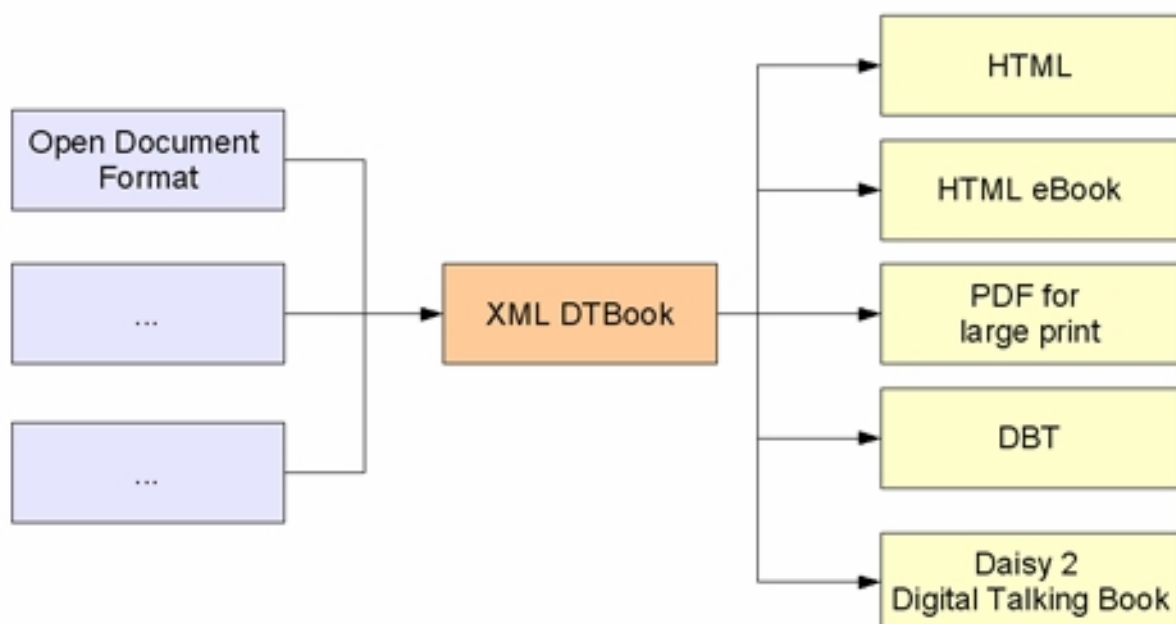
EUAIN, the European Accessibility Information Network focuses on improving the accessibility of digital information for disabled citizens. In this respect, it relies on the existence and the promotion of accessibility standards to prove that accessibility can be built into digital information from the first stage of production, and that 'Design For All' can be applied to emerging standards, so that all the features needed to grant accessibility to the final product are built into the system right from the beginning, instead of the traditional approach of adding those features later.

Standardization challenges

Standards are needed for many reasons, but probably the most relevant one is that they tell manufacturers how to make their products accessible in a detailed, coherent way. However, the existence of standards though does not imply that accessibility will always be implemented in the same way and within the same standard, not all features may be considered equally essential. As a result of this, the application of the same standard can lead to a wide range of accessibility levels for the same product, making it fully accessible for some users and just slightly accessible for others. In addition, different standards may be developed for the same purpose and though they deliver the same level of accessibility they may not be compatible, leading to confusion among manufacturers and users.

The challenge therefore was to determine whether and how new standards and technologies for the provision of information in formats that are more accessible for everyone, could be created. Moreover, this process should not exclusively address the industrial requirements on accessibility, but also involve end-users and representative organisations. In addition, it was recognized that it would be important not to draft formal standardization documentation that lacks a connection with the real world. One of the challenges in the process therefore was to integrate practical implementations and business opportunities (i.e. the industry aspects) with a description and specification of community requirements in the area of document processing for ac-

cessibility (end-user aspects).

In conjunction with its standards activity, the EUAIN project aimed to provide an integrative accessibility framework in the form of a web portal with personalised interfaces, which will implement the findings of the standardization processes.

Standardization path

In order to achieve its standardization goals, EUAIN initiated a Workshop in CEN/ISSS on Accessible Document Processing (CEN/ISS WS/DPA). This workshop, that is a key activity for the EUAIN network, has three prime objectives:

1. To bring together all the players in the information provision and e-publishing chain in order to achieve the critical mass significantly to enhance the provision of accessible information at a European level

2. To provide guidelines on integrating accessibility components within the document management and publishing process rather than as just a specialised, additional service.

3. To raise awareness and stimulate the adoption at local, regional, national and European levels of the emerging formats and standards for the provision of accessible information and to find ways of ensuring that technological protection measures do not inadvertently impede legitimate access to information by people with print impairments

Taking into account these objectives, the more detailed targets are:

- delivering a systemic overview of standards for document processing for accessibility, and carry out a gap-analysis;

- providing reference documentation on accessible document processing, including Digital Rights Management, production and distribution,, from industrial requirements, end-users and representative organisations and provide a corresponding set of standards for this area;

- providing an overview of relevant European organisations, relevant best practices, and relevant scenarios;

- seek wider involvement and consensus of stakeholder communities;

- install a network of interested parties for ongoing support and further development.

The Workshop, that will work towards a CEN Workshop Agreement (CWA) was open to all interested parties and will therefore increase the validation of the document as well as preparing a specification which is upwardly compatible to formal standardization either at European or International level.

Moreover, next to the development of requirements, specifications and possible standards, their integration into society was identified as an important aspect as well. This meant that the main stakeholders had to underwrite the importance of the activity and had to participate in the process, which essentially could be guaranteed through a CEN Workshop.

When holding the results of the Workshop so far against these objectives, and seeing that the level of participation went considerably beyond the membership of the EUAIN consortium itself, it should be concluded that the project well managed to achieve its goals, also demonstrating the success of the CEN Workshop approach.

Some 85 experts have registered as a Workshop participant. Workshop participants receive regular updates on the progress made and can comment on the drafts, either electronically and/or through participating in one of the Workshop's physical meetings.

Moreover, during the Workshop's lifespan, 6 Workshop meetings will be organized. This will guarantee optimization of the feed-back possibilities for all participants and stakeholder groups involved in the process. Workshop meetings were well attended with more than 20 participants on average during 2005 and 2006 and EUAIN's input has been instrumental in achieving agreement on the CWA and for expending the network of experts, which was one of the Workshop's goals. Moreover, EUAIN consortium members delivered a substantial part of CWA.

Key Learning Points

The following conclusions can be drawn from the cooperation between EUAIN and the CEN/ISSS WS/DPA:

- The combination of a research project with a CEN Workshop has been a productive approach.

- It is nevertheless the case that while some Workshop participants are very enthusiastic and productive at meetings, it often proves to be difficult to obtain extended written contributions on a voluntary basis

- Embedding the standardization targets with related financial and human resources into the project's work plan seems necessary to ensure the drafting of the standardization deliverables.