

Digital Accessibility Takes Flight December 12

Published on November 9, 2015

As a frequent traveler who happens to be blind, I regularly interact with any number of airline websites using my screen reading software with varying levels of success. In some cases, I need to guess what a button does or what to fill into a text field because these are unlabeled in the code. In extreme cases I cannot purchase tickets with certain airlines' sites at all because the ability to search for flights cannot be completed using just the keyboard alone (i.e., you can only interact by using a mouse).

Recently, I was attempting to pick a seat from an inaccessible seat map, again by guessing my way around, knowing a bit about how the aircraft's seating was set up. It turned out, I unknowingly chose one of those paid economy seats, which I would have known, if there would have been some form of indication on the seat selector button that this was in fact a paid economy seat. Ironically, this airlines' seat map was more accessible prior to them recently launching a redesigned site. I did get refunded by the airline in question.

I consider myself to be a fairly savvy screen reader user, so I can only imagine how frustrating it would be for an average user with a disability to do something that we all take for granted, shopping for and buying a plane ticket online, blind or otherwise. This is why I am especially pleased that as of December 12, all U.S. airlines, and foreign airlines doing business in the U.S. must have seven core online transaction paths conform to the World Wide Web Consortium's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines at Level AA. This is thanks to the Air Carrier Access Act. The transactions identified include: booking/changing a reservation, checking flight status, and accessing a frequent flyer account. The regulation also states that the rest of the website must conform by December 12, 2016. The regulation also touches airlines' airport kiosks, in that 25% of those installed after December 12, 2016 must be accessible. Now if only the regulation extended to directing airlines to make their on-board wifi portals and seat-back entertainment systems, as well as their mobile apps accessible, but this is a good place to start. I'm also pleased that foreign airlines are subject to this regulation, because it has likely introduced web accessibility for the first time to airlines whose home countries may have weak to no digital accessibility requirements on the books.

Of course the true test of the Air Carrier Access Act will be to see which airlines, U.S. or otherwise, meet the December 12 deadline, and which file for some sort of exemption/extension or do nothing at all. SSB BART Group, an accessibility firm, has a nice summary of the regulation

<http://www.ssbartgroup.com/reference/laws-and-standards/air-carrier-access-act/>

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James Tracy
Interoperability API Lead at Azalea Health

I guess this means that you will not be able to use a certain airliner's website as your primary exemplar of bad accessibility for too much longer!

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elianna james
Senior Accessibility Consultant

Thanks for the article and pointing us to SSB BART in depth description of the settlement. Looking forward to deadline and what we can expect. Maybe we should start a pool to see how many airlines will be ready and how many will ask for extensions. Anyone know who will be doing the testing?

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Christopher Carpenter
Discover the power of AI and machine assisted decision making without a PhD in Data Science

I am pleased to see this important first step towards equality for the visually impaired by the airline industry! Why should people with visual impairment not have access to the same information sighted individuals have? Agreed, the SSB BARTGroup has a great summary on the subject.

Like Reply



Albert J. Rizzi
founder and CEO of My Blind Spot, Inc.

Jennison could not have said it better myself. Have been trying to engage SouthWest on this very issue. My Blind Spot is also speaking with Doug Mullen of Airlines for America to address these issues universally in their capacity as the barometer for the industry. I am also curious how many just do nothing. [Peace](#)

Like Reply



Jonathan Cohn
Expert in Accessibility for Section 508 compliance (JAWS/WindowEyes)

Too bad Amtrack does not have flight booking in addition to train booking

Like Reply



Jennison Asuncion

Digital Accessibility Leader Connecting The High-Tech, Digital Accessibility, & Users With Disabilities Communities

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