Equal Access for All?

Library Conference Websites, Accessibility, and the Failure to Launch

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Introduction

Accessibility-related initiatives, programs, and requirements have gained traction across libraries as institutions–and the profession–work to become more inclusive. At our library, we worked hard to create practical, low-stakes steps to integrating accessibility into our web presence for our research guides, focusing heavily on visual accessibility. As a result of this work, we presented a poster ACRL 2023; this poster emphasized taking small, achievable steps to work towards accessibility as it is often overwhelming for understaffed and overworked librarians to tackle. To create this poster, we were required to use the ACRL guidelines for accessibility. These guidelines were lengthy and included a section focusing on visual accessibility, including basics like font size and textual color contrast. As we finished the final touches on our poster, we began using the ACRL conference scheduler to plan sessions we wanted to attend. Due to our recent research guides accessibility work and creating a poster with specific visual accessibility requirements, we were primed to notice a curious thing: the ACRL conference website failed to meet basic visual accessibility requirements.

The juxtaposition of ACRL's visual accessibility requirements for presenters versus their failure to meet visual accessibility guidelines on their own conference website was startling and sparked an ongoing conversation about the movement towards more accessible electronic and physical content at library conferences. There appeared to be a marked difference between "talking the talk and walking the walk" for ACRL and we began asking ourselves questions such as, "If ACRL, one of the premier conferences, isn't adhering to its own standards and guidelines, what can we expect to see from other organizations?" and "Is such a juxtaposition common for library conferences or is our experience with ACRL unique?" We felt compelled to research the answers to these questions by initiating a project focusing on investigating visual accessibility non-compliance for conference websites.

Visual accessibility is not just a checkmark task to demonstrate inclusiveness or to meet ADA expectations; it is a very real need for many of us. According to The Vision Council, an

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optical industry association, approximately 197.6 million adult Americans have corrected vision.[1] That is approximately 76% of US adults! Additionally, the CDC reports that in the United States, approximately 12 million people over 40 have blindness (1M) or vision impairment–that is, difficulty seeing despite use of glasses or contact lenses.[2] Further, the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness reports that 1.1 billion people worldwide live with some sort of vision loss.[3] For those with vision impairment or blindness, visual accessibility of webpages is of paramount importance. Research by Schmutz, et al., further suggests that non-visually impaired individuals also benefit from compliance with WCAG 2.0 AA (for those with visual impairments) guidelines, significantly benefitting both task completion rate and task completion time; some subjective measures are also improved including perceived usability, workload, and trustworthiness.[4]

As we moved forward with our investigation on visual accessibility of conference websites, we developed two main research questions.

- What is the extent to which library conferences provide an accessible website to potential attendees and presenters?
- Do conferences that require accessibility adherence from presenters in turn provide an accessible website?

Literature Review

Web Accessibility

Web accessibility is the degree to which the design and technical capacity of websites and web interfaces allow for people with disabilities to perceive, understand, navigate, interact with, and contribute to the web.[5] The way people approach improving web accessibility often reflects their views on disability. The medical lens frames disability as a set of biological or physiological limitations, as something to be addressed so that the person can be part of the regular population.[6] Web accessibility through the medical lens focuses on removing barriers that prevent a person with disability from fully participating on the web. A secondary effect of this framing has often been to segregate people with disabilities from the non-disabled population.[7] This may manifest through specialized workstations for the use of screen readers and other assistive devices.

Web accessibility under universal design principles reframes this work and intentionally designs web content for all users. Universal design more closely mirrors the social model of disability, where disability is considered a form of functional diversity that requires customized pathways to allow for the full participation of all individuals. This perspective is apparent in the way accessibility guidelines have been written. Instead of describing barriers, guidelines begin by prescribing the activities a person should be able to do on the web. Secondly, they not only specify a wide array of disabilities, they also discuss temporary changes in ability or the environment that can affect access to the web.[8]

Guidelines for Compliance

The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) is an international group that develops guidelines for the web. In 1996 a subgroup spun off and formed the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) to develop strategies, guidelines, and resources to make the web accessible to people with disabilities.[9] This group first drafted the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) to provide a single set of technical standards for developers to use to operationalize these principles.

Currently, WCAG is on version 2.2 which has 13 guidelines under four principles (perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust).[10] Perceivable requires that users must be able to perceive the information being presented. Operable requires that users must be able to operate the interface. Understandable requires that users understand the information on the page, as well as how to use the user interface. Finally, robust requires the

content to be responsive to improvements in assistive technology and remain accessible as technology advances. Each of these guidelines includes a set of testable success criteria at three levels: A, AA, and AAA.[11]

Conformance to the standard generally requires that no web content violates the success criteria. The levels of conformance are cumulative, with Level A representing the minimum level of conformance and Level AAA representing the highest level of conformance that is not always possible to achieve.[12] If web content fails to pass all Level A criteria, the content fails even if it may satisfy some of the Level AA or Level AAA criteria. Most of the criteria for Level A is intended to support blind users whereas Level AA criteria improve the support for users with impaired eyesight.[13] Research recommends achieving higher levels of conformance to WCAG 2.0 (i.e., Level AA) because it yields better performance, usability, and faster task completion while addressing the needs of users with and without disabilities.[14]

Compliance Enforcement

In the United States, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 requires access to activities funded by Federal Agencies be accessible. The Act established the Access Board which is responsible for ensuring compliance by federal agencies. Section 508 of the Act (last updated in 2017) charges the Access Board with ensuring compliance with the designated accessibility requirements for information and communication technology. While the US Department of Justice considered but did not formally adopt WCAG guidelines as the standard for web accessibility under titles II and II of the Americans with Disabilities Act, there is a reference to the 2.0 standards in Section 506.[15] Countries outside of the US and in the EU use the WCAG standards (or specific substandards).

Even without formal adoption in the US, WCAG 2 serves as the de facto standard for compliance as they are used by web accessibility evaluation tools, including WAVE - the tool we employed in this study, to identify failing content on web pages.[16] These evaluation tools are the primary way web developers and web authors test their web content for accessibility compliance. Unfortunately, web accessibility conformance may not be a simple determination, and many ways of automating content checking still require human judgment. Additionally, improving accessibility may not be easily solved by web developers working on their own. This work requires organizations to make decisions on resource allocation and prioritization as web accessibility (especially for major conversion projects) may be extremely cost-prohibitive to do preemptively.[17]

Evaluation tools like WAVE select the most "relevant and impactful" WCAG Level A and Level AA success criteria to form the basis for errors, alerts, or warnings. These include non-text content that does not have a text alternate for screen readers, interactive elements like buttons and forms that do not have text explanations for what they do, headings that are missing and impede page navigation, and text that is too small or uses low-contrast colors that hinders reading by people with impaired vision.[18]

Libraries' Commitment to Accessibility

Federal laws, including Section 508, apply to federal agencies and federally-funded activities. States may have their own statutes governing web accessibility, which do not always reference Section 508 or W3C standards. Publicly funded libraries may not be legally compelled to comply with specific web accessibility standards depending on where they are located. In a 2011 study, Camilla Fulton investigated common perceptions of libraries' obligation to provide accessible websites.[19] She found that only four states (Arkansas, California, Kentucky, and Montana) require all libraries receiving state funds to maintain an accessible website.

There have been many studies over the last two decades researching the degree to which library websites conform to W3C standards. A comprehensive review of the literature is beyond the scope of this paper; however a selection of studies demonstrates that while web accessibility continues to be a stated priority for libraries, there is no evidence that compliance rates for library websites have meaningfully improved.[20] Libraries also rely extensively on hosted systems they cannot directly improve, including commercial databases, single sign-on

tools, institutional repositories, etc., whose products also fail to pass accessibility criteria.[21]

Libraries' commitment to web accessibility is predominantly driven by professional ethics. Ensuring equitable access to information and services is a core value of the American Library Association (ALA), and the ALA policy manual specifically advocates for serving people regardless of physical ability.[22] Furthermore, more attention has been paid to making library conferences more inclusive and welcoming spaces in the past ten years, especially at the national level. Changes in this vein include developing codes of conduct for attendees, adding services and spaces for attendees who are neurodiverse, gender diverse, parents or caregivers, and specifying accessibility expectations for spaces, technology, and presenter materials.[23]

Yet as worthwhile as these changes are, the execution has been imperfect. For web accessibility in particular, the gap between policy and reality is quite noticeable. Many conferences now ask speakers to ensure their materials are accessible, and virtual conferences offer tips and best practices for making presentations with accessibility in mind.[24] An example of this type of juxtaposition can be seen on the ALA's Reference and User Services Association's virtual accessibility webpage.[25] They offer recommendations for fonts, the use of alt tags for images, avoiding text styles that can affect screen readers, and other criteria that follow W3C standards. Yet, when this page is evaluated with the WAVE accessibility web tool, the report identifies five errors, two contrast errors, and 62 alerts.

Methods

Identifying Conferences

We began by identifying conferences hosted by state, regional, and national library organizations in the United States as well as those library conferences not affiliated with or hosted by professional organizations (e.g., ER&L). At the time of our assessment, our starting list identified 77 active library conferences; however, several conferences we identified were between conference cycles, meaning the information for the most recent past conference was no longer available, and information for the upcoming conference was not yet made available. We eliminated those conferences and ultimately evaluated 55 conference websites.

Selecting an Accessibility Validation Tool

After finalizing our conference list, we investigated web accessibility evaluation tools to determine the appropriate tool for our research. We consulted several sources including W3C, WebAIM, and various web developers for credible information about web accessibility validation tools. For our project, we wanted a free tool suitable for novice users, so no-cost tools like Google Lighthouse, geared more to web developers, were eliminated from consideration. We considered three tools: ANDI, Siteimprove, and WAVE. While all three offered free options and browser extensions, Siteimprove and WAVE generated accessibility evaluation reports that included more educational content. These reports flagged non-compliant elements and explained (a) why elements were flagged, (b) the impact of errors on website users, and (c) how to fix identified errors. We ultimately selected WAVE as it met our needs for the project, was developed by one of the leading organizations in web accessibility (WebAIM) and was already in use in our library.

Evaluating Accessibility

PROCESS

For each conference, we evaluated websites using the WAVE tool, which assesses webpage compliance with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2 criteria. At the time of our assessment, WCAG 2.1 was the most current set of criteria; since our assessment, WCAG 2.2 criteria have been adopted. Rather than evaluating the

entire conference website, we focused on evaluating each conference's agenda page with the WAVE tool. Additionally, if the conference provided accessibility information to attendees or accessibility guidelines to presenters, we ran those pages through WAVE. We excluded any content delivered in a Google Doc or Adobe PDF from our evaluation since they are non-traditional web formats. We also noted whether the conference had its own standalone site (i.e., not a page on the host organization's site) and whether the conference site was homegrown or hosted. If hosted, we noted the site host.

Our initial pilot evaluations revealed that WAVE results for the same page sometimes varied based on the browser used. To account for browser discrepancies, we WAVE-tested all pages in Chrome, Firefox, and Safari. There is no WAVE extension for Safari, so we relied on the accessibility checker built into the WAVE website for those evaluations. Several conference websites—ACRL's included—were incompatible with the accessibility checker on the WAVE website and returned an error message.

WAVE REPORTS

WAVE tests across six categories: errors, contrast errors, alerts, features, structural elements, and ARIA. We focused our assessment on errors, contrast errors, and alerts as these present the most egregious barriers to accessibility. Errors and contrast errors are aspects of a webpage that do not comply with WCAG 2 requirements. Errors flagged may include missing alternative text, missing or multiple form labels, or missing table headers. Contrast errors indicate insufficient contrast between text and background. Alerts flag aspects of a site that may indicate a lack of compliance with WCAG 2 requirements (e.g., skipping a heading level) or that may be in compliance but warrant further review (e.g., ensuring that linked, non-HTML content such as Word documents adheres to accessibility requirements). For each webpage we evaluated, we noted the number of errors, contrast errors, and alerts identified by the WAVE tool. In the WAVE tool report, errors are mapped to WCAG Level A guidelines; contrast errors are mapped to WCAG Level AA guidelines; and alerts may map to Level A and/or Level AA guidelines. For some alerts, no WCAG standards are provided or apply; for example, the "redundant title text" alert simply states "None" under the "Standards and Guidelines" section of the report.

RECORDKEEPING

We recorded and stored data in a shared spreadsheet. Logged data included: date of evaluation; conference modality (face-to-face, hybrid, or virtual); conference webpage hosting information (homegrown, hosted); metadata about each page evaluated, including name and URL; and counts for each WAVE category of interest (errors, contrast errors, alerts). We also included any germane notes such as unfriendly URLs or non-traditional web format notes.

Results and Analysis

We analyzed results for all categories we evaluated including determining WCAG Level A and WCAG Level AA pass/fail percentages for individual browsers, pages, conference types, modalities, host type, and host platform. We determined pass/fail rates based on the existence of errors or contrast errors as defined and flagged by the WAVE tool. For the purposes of our research, we defined "passing" for WCAG Level A as webpages that had zero errors; "failing" was defined as webpages that had one or more errors. For WCAG Level AA, we defined "passing" as webpages that had zero errors and zero contrast errors; "failing" was defined as webpages that had one or more errors and one or more contrast errors. We also recorded means and ranges for each of these categories (see Figure 1). Though we recorded alerts for all categories and browsers, we decided to exclude them from our analysis as alerts do not always indicate failure to comply with WCAG Level A or AA criteria.

Initial analysis of our results indicated a high fail rate for WCAG Level A and WCAG Level AA criteria, regardless of browser type, page type (attendee, agenda, presenter), conference type, modality, host type, or host

FIGURE 1

Example of Agenda — Error Ranges (Firefox) n=46

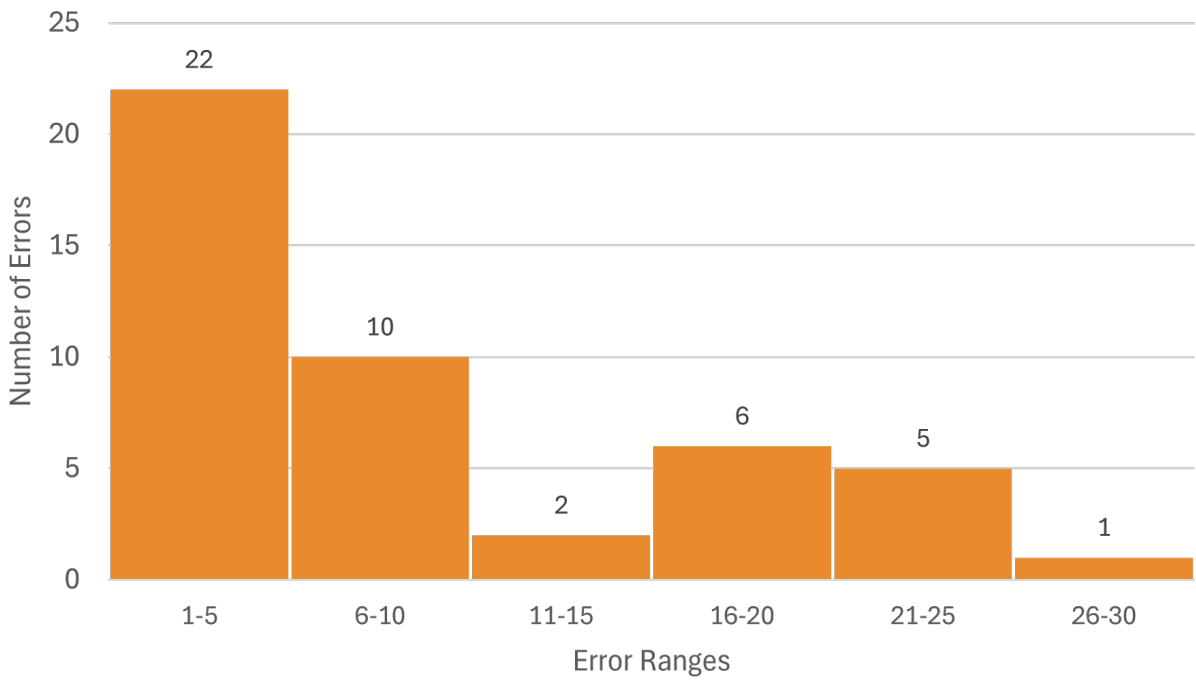


FIGURE 2

Conference Website Pass/Fail Rate WCAG Level A

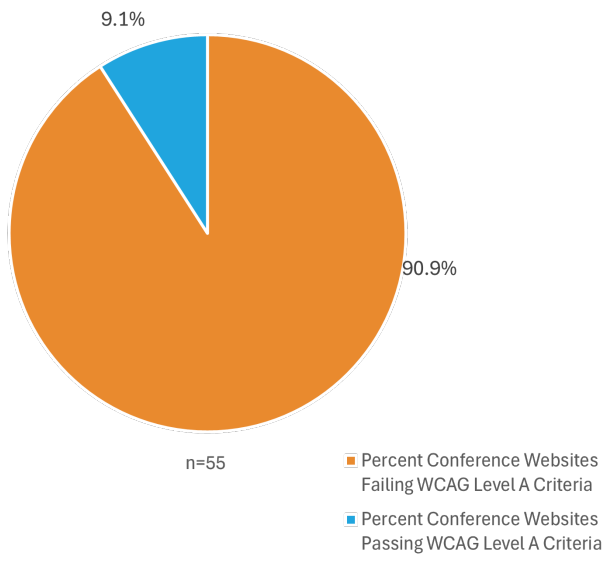
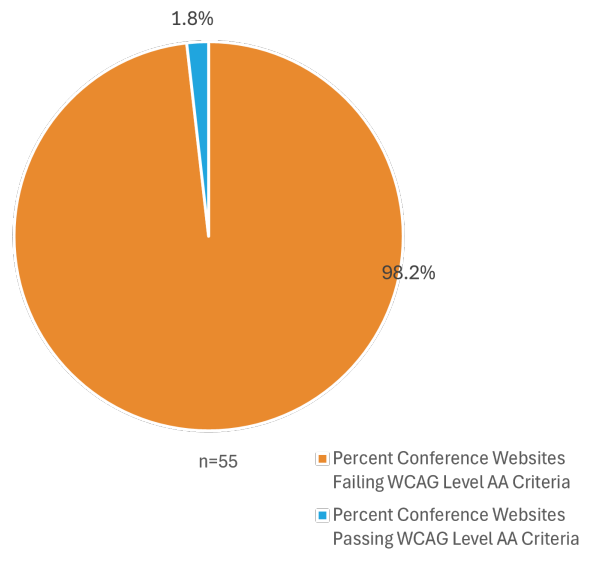


FIGURE 3

Conference Website Pass/Fail Rate WCAG Level AA



platform. When combining data for all browsers and page types, we find a Level A failure of 90.9%, meaning all but 9.1% of conference websites do not meet accessibility needs for individuals with blindness (Figure 2). Further, analysis indicates that 98.2% of these 55 conferences fail to meet Level AA criteria (Figure 3), meaning they fail accessibility recommendations for not only those who are blind but also for those who are otherwise visually impaired. We did not notice meaningful differences in numbers of errors and contrast errors flagged by WAVE between browsers.

We questioned whether modality of the event affects adherence to WCAG Level A or AA, postulating that those with hybrid or completely online formats would have a lower failure rate than those that were face-to-face. Our findings (Table 1) indicated 91.4% of face-to-face formats failed to meet Level A guidelines, and 100% of these failed Level AA guidelines. Data for hybrid formats indicate a failure rate of 88.2% for Level A and a failure rate of 94.1% for Level AA. Evaluation of virtual conference data indicated a 100% failure rate for both Level A and Level AA. Hybrid formats had the lowest failure rate for WCAG Level A and AA.

TABLE 1

Percent of Conference Websites by Modality Failing to Meet WCAG Level A and AA Criteria

Modality	n	Failed to Meet Level A Criteria	Failed to Meet Level AA Criteria
Face-to-Face	35	91.4%	100%
Hybrid	17	88.2%	94.1%
Virtual	3	100%	100%

Looking further at the data, we assessed the difference in webhost types, evaluating the difference in paid host platforms (e.g., cvent, Sched, etc.), homegrown (i.e., organization-hosted), and combination host types that included both paid hosts and homegrown webpages (Table 2). Conferences with a fully hosted web presence were fewest in number and the failure rate for both WCAG Level A and WCAG Level AA was 100%. Conferences with a homegrown web presence had a failure rate of 91.7% for Level A and 95.8% for Level AA. The majority of conferences had both paid and homegrown conference pages. The Level A failure rate for conferences with combination host types was 88% while the Level AA failure rate was 100%.

TABLE 2

Percent of Conference Websites by Webhost Type Failing to Meet WCAG Level A and AA Criteria

Webhost	n	Failed to Meet Level A Criteria	Failed to Meet Level AA Criteria
Hosted	6	100%	100%
Homegrown	24	91.7%	95.8%
Both	25	88%	100%

We also assessed conference type–that is, national/international, regional, or state–in our data analysis (Table 3). Reflecting previous findings, fail rates for WCAG Levels A and AA criteria were high: national/international had a fail rate of 92% for Level A and 96% for Level AA; regional had a fail rate of 100% for both Level A and Level AA; and state had a fail rate of 89.3% for Level A and a 100% fail rate for Level AA. We also calculated the mean number of errors by conference type (Figure 4), finding national/international had 5.3 errors and 99.2 contrast errors, regional had 6.2 errors and 0.4 contrast errors, and state had 10 errors and 22 contrast errors.

FIGURE 4

Mean Number of Errors & Contrast Errors by Conference Type

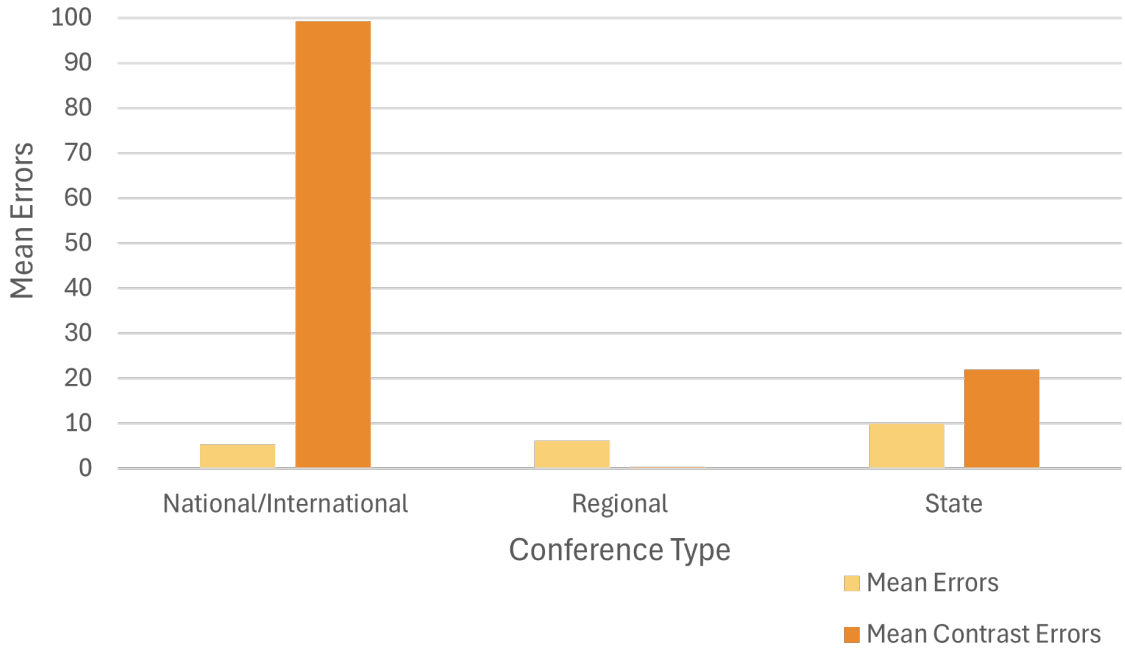


TABLE 3

Percent of Conference Websites by Conference Type Failing to Meet WCAG Level A and AA Criteria

Conference Type	n	Failed to Meet Level A Criteria	Failed to Meet Level AA Criteria
National/International	25	92%	96%
Regional	2	100%	100%
State	28	89.3%	100%

On a more granular level, we analyzed results for the eleven conferences that provided presenter pages with some level of accessibility guidelines for their presentation or poster (Figure 5). Of these eleven, ten failed WCAG Level A as well as Level AA. Only one passed both levels with no errors; this is a failure rate of 90.9% of conference websites for both Level A and AA.

If we isolate results to the presenter page only, and disregard the remaining pages (i.e., agenda and attendee pages), failure of WCAG Level A decreases to eight of eleven conferences, or 72.7%, and failure of WCAG Level AA decreases to nine of eleven conferences, or 81.8% fail WCAG Level AA (Figure 6).

Discussion and Recommendations

Research question 1: What is the extent to which library conferences provide an accessible website to potential attendees and presenters?

In answering our first research question, we found the vast majority of library conference websites fail to meet accessibility guidelines for the blind and visually impaired based on WAVE evaluation. The extent to which

FIGURE 5

Conference Website Pass/Fail Rate: Conferences Requiring Accessible Presentations — WCAG Level A

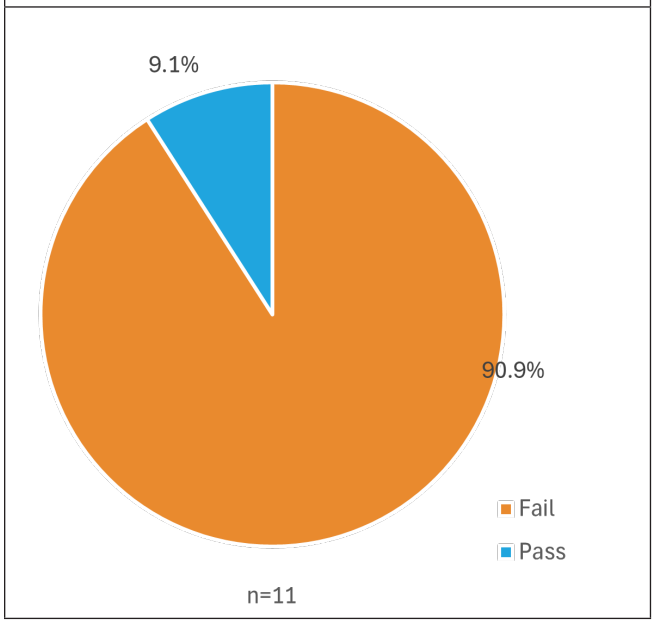
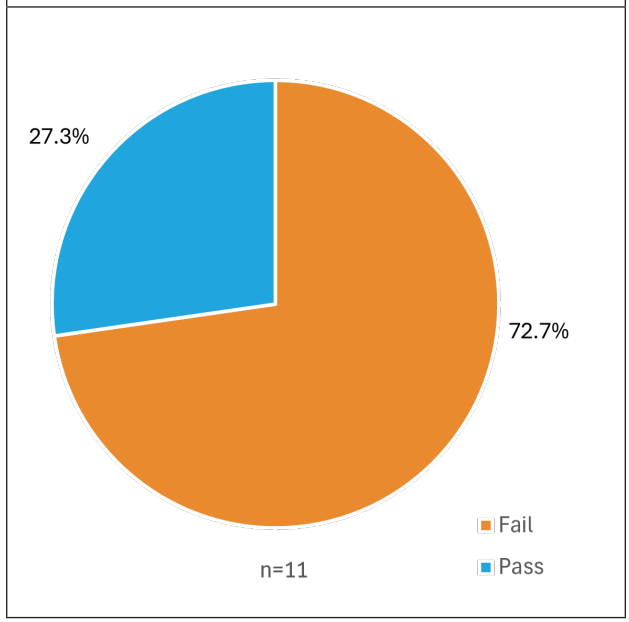


FIGURE 6

Conference Website Pass/Fail Rate: Accessibility Guideline Page WCAG Level A



conferences fail varies widely, with no discernible pattern. As illustrated in figures two and three, our results indicate that it matters little whether a conference is big and international or small and state-wide, nor does host type or modality appear to affect pass/fail rates of conference websites. With few exceptions, library conferences' websites are missing the mark when it comes to visual accessibility at both the WCAG A and AA levels.

We considered why this was happening and if there was a throughline to errors. The reality is that the WCAG Level A errors found by the WAVE tool were unique to each site. There is no silver bullet to recommend here because the errors varied so much in both type and frequency from conference website to conference website. Some had missing alt text, some had form errors, some had misused headings–the list is quite long–but not every site had every kind of error. While passing WCAG Level AA requires passing WCAG Level A criteria, it is easier to identify why failing Level AA after passing Level A is happening: color contrast errors. While there are other criteria that factor into passing WCAG Level AA, color contrast is one of the easiest to address. And yet, that simple, low bar is still too high as is evidenced by a 98% failure rate.

Based on our findings and experience with examining pages, the only way to remedy these failures is with a commitment of resources and time. The onus is on conference organizers to test each page to ensure compliance with WCAG criteria and, for those conferences with a hosted web presence, to hold vendors accountable for inaccessible conference platforms. We recognize this may be easier stated than done; small homegrown conferences may not have the resources to ensure WCAG alignment, and organizations that have hosted or partially hosted websites may be stuck with what a vendor is willing to provide after the contract is signed. Despite these difficulties, visual accessibility is still a worthy goal and one worth working towards.

Research question 2: Do conferences that require accessibility adherence from presenters in turn provide an accessible website?

As for our second research question, the simple answer to this question is, no, most organizations requiring presentation accessibility from presenters do not, in turn, provide accessible websites themselves. The overwhelm-

ing majority of library conference websites that provide some sort of specific guidance or expectations for visual accessibility from presenters do fail as represented in Figure 5. At a failure rate of over 90%, it is a classic case of "do as I say, not as I do."

For those who want to evaluate their conference website accessibility, we offer the following suggestions.

- Define your goal. Do you want to meet WCAG Level A or AA criteria? Familiarize yourself with the best practices and bare minimums for each level.
- Use multiple accessibility evaluation tools to assess your website. As our methods indicated, WAVE was less effective in Safari. Using a variety of tools can mitigate flaws or gaps in the utility of a single tool.
- Request a VPAT (voluntary product accessibility template) from vendors before signing a contract, if using a hosted platform. This will allow you to compare accessibility features across the platforms you are considering, which you can then use as a factor in your decision making.
- Be careful when using non-traditional web formats such as Google Docs or Adobe PDFs to convey information (not uncommon for presenter guidelines or downloadable schedules). Website accessibility evaluation tools may not be able to fully evaluate these formats, so it is incumbent upon conference organizers to ensure that content in these formats is designed with accessibility in mind and created using built-in accessibility features.

Conclusion

Our research is a base level examination of library conference website accessibility–assessing some of the easiest areas to address and fix–and demonstrates that errors are ubiquitous across library conference websites, even when limiting accessibility evaluation to easily addressed aspects. We recognize that building and maintaining a wholly accessible website can be complex and may require specialized skill sets and dedicated resources (people, time, money), which may be out of reach for volunteer-run or underfunded organizations. Nonetheless, not all errors are complex nor would fixing them require advanced technological skill; errors–whether simple or complex–present accessibility barriers for conference website visitors who are blind or otherwise visually impaired, and much improvement is needed. Like the errors themselves, remediation may be simple or complex, but it is necessary to provide an equitable and inclusive conference experience for presenters and attendees.

Our research revealed several avenues for future research. While we did not evaluate the content of presenter accessibility guidelines, we did notice that guidelines varied widely for those conferences that provided them. It may be beneficial to analyze the depth and quality of accessibility guidelines and the ease with which presenters are able to create accessible presentations to identify if greater support is needed for presenters. Additionally, as many conferences have a fully or partially hosted web presence, it would be useful to do a deeper look at conference hosting platforms to identify systemic issues. An evaluation of library organization websites (similar to this evaluation of conference websites) would also be beneficial. While conference websites are often ephemeral and have a limited audience, library organization websites are stable, have a broader audience, and may have more dedicated resources for management and maintenance. Are visual accessibility barriers as prevalent on organization websites as they are on conference websites? Finally, it may be useful to investigate web accessibility compliance further to determine the underlying barriers that hamper meeting WCAG Level A and Level AA criteria.

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