

Including Users and External Contributors in an European Research Project

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The European Internet Accessibility Observatory project (EIAO) is one of the three projects of the Web Accessibility Benchmarking cluster (WAB) with the objective of developing a methodology for evaluating accessibility of websites and services in accordance with the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) evaluation guidelines. EIAO will focus on large-scale accessibility evaluation of web content for people with disabilities using a set of Web Accessibility Metrics (WAM) based on the checkpoints developed by W3C. Results of such accessibility evaluation could be of interest to web content developers (page authors and site designers), content managers (web masters, marketing managers), software providers (content tool developers), disabled people's interest groups, policy makers and governments. The project is funded by European Commission¹ for the period of 2004-2007, and includes seven project partners, where the Agder University College is the co-ordinating partner.

The concept of inclusion is integrated in several aspects of the EIAO project, right from the inceptive goal of improving accessibility and openness of websites and the open source model of software development, to the intended final goal of a free and open observatory whose results are freely accessible to everyone:

- From users' point of view: 1) Continuous evaluation of web content accessibility will help to increase awareness on accessibility problems among web content developers, web content managers and policy makers. 2) To get relevant and constructive feedback from the users, the project has invited representatives of disabled organizations and public bodies working for inclusion to participate in a continuous evaluation of the product.
- From software developers' point of view: 1) Open source tools are selected for development and testing. In order to maximize reuse of already developed software, the project searched and found an open source tool for crawling of websites called HarvestMan developed by Anand Pillai, a Computer engineer from Bangalore, India. He was contacted and agreed to adapt HarvestMan for the EIAO project. Pillai is currently an invited contributor to EIAO. The project has also developed a policy for using and producing open source intellectual property. Other researchers are invited to participate in the development as well. The first author of this abstract participates in software engineering and quality assurance activities as co-operation with the SEVO (Software EVolution in Component-Based Software Engineering) project at NTNU. 2) To manage distributed software development, EIAO has established a website to share documents and reports, and track project progress.
- For reuse and extension of the developed software: 1) The project software is primarily being developed under the GNU General Public License (GPL), which encourages collaboration and freedom since improvements will also be freely available. In some cases the GNU Lesser General Public License or LGPL is used to allow integration with closed source software components if needed. 2) The software architecture allows integration of other accessibility tools as modules using a plug-in interface based on Web Services/SOAP.

The overall goal of EIAO is to facilitate digital inclusion by defining metrics for accessibility and continuous assessment of web content. EIAO faces many challenges because of the immature concept of accessibility metrics, and the fact that accessibility metrics are the basis of the project and also the outcome of the observatory prototype. Involving end users in assessment and co-operation with similar projects are means to face these challenges. The open source style of development encourages collaboration and opens the scene for future reuse and improvements of the observatory.

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