

Views and Feelings

Image, image: image image image.

My father is getting old. And along with all the other things that usually accompany getting old, such as diminished health, lack of strength, lack of energy, he is slowly going blind.

His day used to be filled with reading his newspaper, doing the crossword, and watching TV. Now the print is too small for him to read the newspaper, and the TV screen is too far away, so he has to make do with large-print books from the library, and listening to the radio. Of course, the selection of large print books is small, so he doesn't have much choice (I don't

know how I would survive with the choice he has).

A pity, it struck me, that he wasn't born a little later. With electronic books the page design won't be frozen. You will be able to select a font size that suits your eyes, and the pages will reflow. He could read any old book he liked then; he would still be able to read his newspaper. He could even carry on doing the crossword.

But before that happens, designers of electronic publications, including websites, are going to have to learn some lessons, and let go of some control. If you look at the current generation of websites, it is clear that a lot of them have been designed by graphics designers retrained from the world of paper, who are used to defining exactly how a page should look, and are struggling to keep that control.

In the future hopefully it will get better, as new generations of designers emerge from new media courses, where they will have been trained to be proud of designs that scale well over platforms and users, and they won't be wedded to pixel-precise positioning.

But for now, it is not an option any more to force a font size on the user of your website. Nor, by the way, a screen-size. Or a resolution: I have a machine with a screen resolution of 111 dpi, and I'm often tripping over websites where they make an assumption about how many pixels are needed to hold text of a certain point-size that doesn't work for my screen. And screen resolutions are only going to increase. So, not only are people's differences great, so are their computers'.

Now is also the time to stop using GIFs to represent text or headlines too, not only for the reasons I mentioned above, but also because when people start using 300 dpi screens, the text will be reduced to a tiny size, and if you're sight-impaired now, you will be from trying to read it.

The situation is even worse for people who are completely blind.

Try this: in the options of your web browser, turn off the down-loading of images, and then start browsing some sites. This is what sight-impaired people get when they browse sites. Chunks of text represented with GIFs, with no indication of what is in them; rows of images with no more information than the word "IMAGE"; server-side image maps with no indication of what they are and where they go.

It is important we get this mindset into the heads of designers of web sites and other electronic publications, for the people now who need to use them, and can't, and for ourselves: we're all going to need those larger font sizes sooner or later.

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Contributions to Views and Feelings are welcomed. They should be around 800 words long.