



Inclusive New Media Design

including people with intellectual disabilities in the WWW

In a context in which there is growing awareness of the need for the WWW to be accessible to all of the world's citizens, why do people with intellectual disabilities remain excluded? Why have web designers been so slow to take steps to include this particular community of disabled web users? What can be done to make the web inclusive for people with intellectual disabilities? Who is going to make this happen? How can research help? This report describes innovative research undertaken on Inclusive New Media Design, the first project of its kind to address these questions.

Inclusive New Media Design (INMD) aimed to contribute to the social inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities (ID) in the WWW, by identifying the best ways of encouraging web designers to build websites which are accessible to people with ID. This group has historically been marginal to web accessibility efforts. INMD aimed to examine the effectiveness of the WAI's WCAG guidance as a means of achieving such inclusion, and to identify the factors that affect the take up of the accessibility ethos in the work of web designers and developers.

On INMD we ran nine ID accessibility training workshops with 28 web designers and developers; three more participated in interviews with us, but were unable to attend the workshops due to other commitments. Participants were all experienced web professionals, with a range of accessibility experience. People with ID participated in four of the nine workshops as user testers. We also gathered data about the work and accessibility practices of web professionals through feedback forms, interviews and observation.

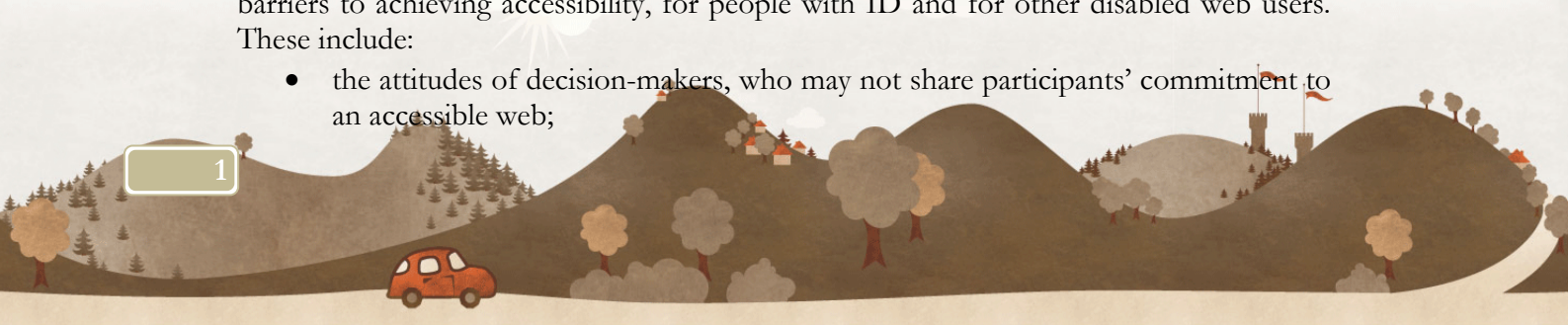
As a result of engaging in INMD, all participants took action in relation to ID inclusion, passed on what they had learnt to others, or planned future action. The kinds of action taken include:

- adapting use of imagery to support text;
- using large fonts and simple text;
- re-checking previous work for ID accessibility;
- passing on information at work, or through blogs.

Thus INMD succeeded in contributing to the inclusion of people with ID in the WWW, but mainly for people at the mild end of the ID spectrum. Participants recognized that adaptations for this audience – such as simple text, nice graphics, simple choices and a clear message – could widen and benefit all audiences. In contrast, accessibility measures for people with severe or profound ID may be intrusive to non-disabled audiences. Consequently, participants acknowledged that it would be less likely that they would attend to these audiences' needs in their future work.

Reception of existing WCAG guidelines was mixed, as participants acknowledged both their value and their limitations. They were widely seen to be complex to understand and implement. It was feared that they may lead to a tick-box culture, and not to genuine accessibility. But despite the limitations of WCAG, most INMD participants displayed a passionate commitment to an open and accessible web. However, they also identified barriers to achieving accessibility, for people with ID and for other disabled web users. These include:

- the attitudes of decision-makers, who may not share participants' commitment to an accessible web;



- the nature of the projects they work on;
- an absence of understanding of the accessibility needs of ID audiences;
- an absence of guidance about how to address these needs, for example within the WCAG guidelines.

The diversity of impairments experienced by people with ID, and their subsequent diverse, complex and non-standardised accessibility requirements, communication systems and assistive technologies account for such absences, as does the historical lack of expertise about ID amongst WCAG working groups. This means that:

- WCAG guidance needs to be exceeded to address ID accessibility needs
- information about how to do this, and on ID accessibility, needs to be made widely available, for example through the development of an online resource.

Key decision-makers in the web design process – clients, line managers, copy writers, editors – play an important role in ensuring maximum accessibility. In order to achieve inclusive new media design and ID accessibility, it is necessary to engage with these stakeholders of web design in future action research.

The recommendations regarding how to encourage or achieve ID accessible design emerging from INMD are:

1. **Develop an online resource about ID accessibility:** including tips, how-to videos, examples of good practice and of user interaction; information about how to exceed WCAG guidelines; and the facility to build a community of web professionals committed to ID accessibility.
2. **Engage with intellectually disabled web users:** most participants cited user testing as the most beneficial aspect of our workshops. User testing put a human face on the issues discussed with participants, and addressed their lack of understanding about ID audiences and their accessibility needs.
3. **Engage a diverse range of stakeholders:** decision-makers affect accessibility practice. Further research needs to engage with a more diverse range of stakeholders – line managers, copy writers, policy makers – in order to make ID accessibility happen.
4. **Develop research with people at the severe/profound end of the ID spectrum:** people at the severe or profound end of the ID spectrum are more likely to be left out of the web, because accessibility measures which address their needs are more intrusive to non-disabled audiences than measures which address mild ID, or sensory or physical impairment. Therefore further action research is needed to attempt to achieve their digital inclusion.

Helen Kennedy, Siobhan Thomas, Simon Evans, Pippa Sweeney, Pat Staples.
October 2009.

www.inclusivenewmedia.org
info@inclusivenewmedia.org

