

Web accessibility and content management: When less is more

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Web accessibility and content management: When less is more

Ben Rometsch, Technical Director of [Solid State Group](#) believes that less is more when it comes down to the control of content. Allowing users to have too much control of content can lead to degrading accessibility. This can also have a detrimental impact on website usability. So can WCAG 2, Web 2.0 and content management systems improve this situation?

Many websites on the Internet focus simply on being glitzy. Good looking web designs are great, but there is often insufficient consideration about whether these sites comply with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), and the obligations of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) to make them reasonably accessible to the UK's 8-10 million registered disabled people ([a market estimated to be worth £80 billion per year](#)).

Historically accessibility has been low on the list of priorities for websites as large web projects have been very expensive to build and difficult to prove the return on investment. Accessibility usually has a limited budget and was treated as a "nice to have" rather than essential.

More recently, new technologies are allowing websites to be built much more easily. The advancements in ICT platforms like Microsoft .Net, Java technologies like Webwork, Hibernate, Spring as well as Ruby on Rails, allow websites to be constructed in less than half the time and cost. So with extra budget to play with and the government pushing the accessibility issue slightly harder, many companies are keen to upgrade their existing sites to comply with the guidelines.

The growth of the web, and the proliferation of content management systems, has led to even non-technical personnel having the ability to manage content for corporate websites, making the process much easier and faster within a controlled and managed environment. These systems can permit a significant amount of content manipulation, which could include changing the font colours, sizes and other attributes. Trenton Moss of [Webcredible](#) agrees that this can lead to degrading accessibility, he says:

"If you are going to allow people to change colour, layouts and font sizes, then yes it can. I mean really from a style point of view you shouldn't allow people to have too much control over everything. You should have to follow a pre-defined set of styles. If you give people too much, then you can lose control of accessibility."

Websites powered by content management systems are often compliant when they start life, with templates that meet the Web Accessibility Initiative's (WAI) guidelines, but as content is added the levels of compliance to accessibility can rapidly deteriorate unless it is managed properly and constantly with such considerations in mind. It is crucial to train web content managers to provide content that fully complies with the required accessibility guidelines, alternatively implement a content management system which forces accessibility whilst creating content.

There should only be one standard

[WCAG 1](#) lacked clarity in terms of what accessibility really means, and this has led to a number of very diverse interpretations of the guidelines, and indeed of the DDA. Professor Sir Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the World Wide Web as we know it today and director of the [W3C](#) since it was founded in 1994, highlights another issue that is dogging everyone's understanding of web accessibility compliance in The Register's article, '[Berners-Lee applies Web 2.0 to improve accessibility](#)', of 26th May 2006.



In the article he expresses concern about the poor state of web accessibility, and says that the W3C's guidelines should be the de facto standard for web accessibility. Yet both private and public sector organisations are creating their own versions of the guidelines:

"You can't design a site and try to make it compete with 152 different sets of guidelines from 152 different states...Keeping the standards homogenous is really important", he argues.

So less is also more when it comes to developing guidelines, and everyone should follow the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). [WCAG 1](#) was criticised for not considering the technological innovations and developments of the Internet. Berners-Lee recognises this problem and hopes the new guidelines, [WCAG 2](#), will resolve the issues of the current version. How, for example, do you caption the content of a video blogger? His solution: "What about community captioning? The video blogger posts his blog – and the web community provides the captions that help others."

This is the essence of WCAG 2.0. It aims to update the existing guidelines to take into account the web's latest developments.

WCAG 2.0: The challenges and the critic

WCAG 2 does have its critics though. Joe Clark – a Toronto-based journalist, author, and accessibility consultant who wrote the 'Building Accessible Websites' book - went as far as to say, '[To Hell with WCAG 2](#)' in his article of the 23rd May 2006 on alistapart.com:

Clark's view of the new standard seems dim and writes "If you were hoping for a wholesale improvement, you're going to be disappointed. A lot of loose ends have been tidied up, and many low-priority guidelines are now pretty solid. The problem here is that standardistas already knew what to do to cover the same territory as those low-priority guidelines."

Trenton Moss of Webcredible seems to agree and says "It is a big, big challenge to make it fully accessible. There are more than just guidelines to be considered, there is knowledge. You can rely on these new guidelines to an even lesser degree than WCAG 1.0".

The following are some examples of suggested practices, which are explained by Clark:

- Exactly what a "page" is, let alone a "site," will be a matter of dispute.
- A future website that complies with WCAG 2 won't need valid HTML—at all, ever. (More on that later.) You will, however, have to [check the DOM outputs of your site in multiple browsers](#) and prove they're identical.
- You can still use tables for layout. (And not just a table—[tables for layout, plural](#).)
- Your page, or any part of it, may [blink for up to three seconds](#). [Parts of it](#) may not however, "flash."
- You'll be able to define entire directories of your site as off-limits to accessibility (including, in WCAG 2's own example, [all of your freestanding videos](#)).
- If you wish to claim WCAG 2 compliance, you must publish a [checklist of declarations](#) more reminiscent of a forced confession than any of the accessibility policies typically found today.



How can you comply with WCAG 2.0?

Trenton Moss explains has a few tips:

“You’ve not just got to rely upon the guidelines, you’ve got to apply real-world knowledge. If the front-end is built correctly with standards compliant, accessible XHTML code, if you have a good content management system like [Solid State Group’s WebDeck](#), then your code will remain valid. The content editors must have good and relevant training on accessibility, and if they have this they will ensure that content is accessible.”

“Don’t use automated tools, because there are so many problems associated with them. They will, for example, recommend that you will do things you shouldn’t actually do. These tools will also ignore things that you should do. With the [web accessibility toolbar](#) you can perform an accessibility check incredibly quickly.”

Seven benefits of compliance

Accessibility compliance *can* increase sales conversion rates by up to 100%. With web accessibility often being met with much resistance, as it is too often perceived as being an unnecessary cost to the organisation, we have provided seven reasons why companies should look at web accessibility more seriously. The key benefits of having an accessible website, running on a content management system that enforces compliance are:

- Your website will be easier to manage (with less errors there will be less time and resources required for fixing them, saving you money);
- Your website will be compatible with new browsing technologies (e.g. Firefox has reportedly had some problems with some sites);
- Your website will rank higher in the search engines (i.e. better search engine optimisation);
- You won’t have to incur legal fees (to date there haven’t been too many cases brought in the UK, compared to the US and Australia, but this doesn’t mean it should be ignored (US example: [‘Target sued over web accessibility’](#) - OUT-LAW News);
- The download time of your website will be significantly improved, so visitors won’t give up and go elsewhere for information or services;
- The usability of your website will be enhanced, making the navigation of the site easier and faster;
- It is good PR in a climate of corporate social responsibility.

Simplicity is the key to better access

The new WCAG 2 guidelines may solve some of the issues and concerns raised about the current standards, but the sheer volume of them may be increasing the complexity. So in short, remember that the rule that less is more. Find a content management system that forces compliance through less style manipulation. Website accessibility should be measured against one set of guidelines rather than several, which will make it easier to assess whether a website produced with or without a content management system (CMS) is fully compliant.



To get you through the jungle of complexity and debate about what constitutes accessibility, it is always a good idea to hire an experienced and knowledgeable accessibility consultancy and to buy into a content management system with a proven record of compliance, which has been validated with recognised accessibility testing and monitoring tools.

About Solid State Group

Solid State Group is a content management, web applications and services consultancy, who focus on making your online presence dynamic and easy to manage, at a reasonable price. Our primary goal is to complete innovative and robust websites for our clients whilst maintaining a service second to none.

WebDeck content management system

Solid State Group's products allow you to completely control your company's brand on the internet. WebDeck is a complete content management system but it's easier to think of it as the remote control for your website.

It is accessible - WebDeck produces WACG level A, Double-A, and Triple-A websites.

It is flexible - WebDeck can work with any kind of website design.

It is multi-user - WebDeck enables teams to work securely and seamlessly on a site.

It is secure - WebDeck has been tested by Deloitte consulting for FSA accreditation.

It is sticky - WebDeck comes with interactive tools such as forums, polls, quizzes, etc.

It has management tools - WebDeck has real-time integrated web statistics.

It has marketing tools - OutReach is an email marketing plug-in for WebDeck.

It uses open standards - WebDeck uses open standards like XML, RSS, CSV, SOAP.

It is platform independent - WebDeck runs on Java with a web front end.

Bespoke build services

Solid State Group also offer bespoke systems design and development. Some websites need a little extra functionality that simply won't be available out of the box from any product. We specialise in capturing the exact requirements and translating them into a working site with stylish design.

Our special offer

We offer a free consultancy meeting to capture requirements and give a no strings attached estimate for systems design and construction. If nothing else, you will at least gain a well documented specification of your requirements, so if you are interested in our services, please do get in touch.

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