The successful self-regulation of web designers

Helen Kennedy

abstract

In the absence of a professional body, code of ethics, or any other successful form of regulation, web designers deploy a range of strategies to self-regulate their own professional practices. These include the web standards movement and initiatives relating to web accessibility for users with disabilities. Indeed, with regard to accessibility, self-regulation has arguably been more effective than limited attempts to regulate web accessibility that have their origins outside the collective selves of web designers. The success of these selfregulatory strategies calls into question some of the negative readings of self-regulation in the growing body of literature about the cultural industries. What's more, the ethical foundations of web designers' self-regulation in relation to standards and accessibility suggest that, in this context, self-blaming (as one form of self-regulation) does not represent an absence of social critique, as has been suggested. Rather, self-blame is social critique.

Introduction

Web design has come a long way since its early anarchic days. It has undergone a process of professionalisation (Kennedy, 2010) that has seen the emergence of recognizable job titles, core skills, and standards. Web designers themselves are concerned about this process, and express this concern through debate about their own professionalism on the blogs of the industry's gurus and of lesser known web workers. This debate takes place in the absence of a professional body, a code of ethics or any other successful form of regulation. In place of external regulation, web designers deploy a range of strategies in order to *self*-regulate. These include the Web Standards Project (WaSP), a grassroots coalition fighting for standardization in web design and development, and a commitment to accessibility, or the inclusion of people with disabilities amongst website audiences. Initiatives relating to standards and accessibility in web design are the subject of this paper.

This article engages specifically with 'governmentality' approaches to cultural work, which propose that self-government, self-regulation and self-exploitation practices prevail amongst cultural workers, as a result of the immanent operation of power, which trains workers to 'reproduce *for themselves* the precise conditions of their subordination' (Banks, 2007: 42). In this context, accessibility and standards-adherence can be considered as forms of self-regulation. Web accessibility and web standards are

close companions, and often, a website built to the standards advocated by the WaSP will be more accessible than one which is not. But designing an accessible website involves more than writing standardized code, and the best measure of a website's accessibility, it is often argued, is to test it with disabled web users. An important distinction between standards and accessibility that is central to the concerns of this paper is that, whilst some efforts have been made to regulate accessibility from outside of the web industry, the standards movement has been entirely self-regulatory.

Because of the public good that results from successful self-regulatory practices – websites that are accessible to people with a range of disabilities, for example – this paper questions the negative readings of self-regulation that can be traced in some of the literature about the cultural industries, proposing instead that such self-regulatory practices as those discussed here could also be conceived as an etho-politics, to use Rose's term (Rose, 1999a). As such, these practices have not entirely negative consequences. It should be noted that the aim of the article is not to celebrate an absence of state regulation, or capitalism's stealthy absolution from social responsibility, to paraphrase McRobbie (2002a). Rather, it is to suggest that not all practices on the self-government spectrum can be read as necessarily de-politicised and corroded, as is suggested in some of the literature. Instead, we should acknowledge the good that sometimes comes of such practices. Thus the paper proposes thinking about self-regulation as, sometimes, both ethical and more effective than legislative regulation.

In this paper I draw both on the wealth of online material about web accessibility and standards, and on recent research. This includes interviews with some of the web design gurus who have been leading figures in the web standards movement, and Inclusive New Media Design (INMD)[1], a project which aimed to explore the best ways to encourage web designers and developers to build websites accessible to a very marginal, misunderstood and invisible community of web users: people with intellectual disabilities (ID)[2]. The 31 participants on INMD were all experienced web professionals from a range of backgrounds. They provided the project team with 'data' about their work and accessibility practices over an 18-month period, through questionnaires, interviews, training workshops, online files including their blogs and websites, and ongoing email exchanges about accessibility and other web design issues. The article proceeds with an overview of debates about self-regulation in cultural work, followed by a discussion of accessibility and standards-adherence as self-regulatory practices.

---

1   Inclusive New Media Design was publicly funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council as part of the joint initiative 'Designing for the 21st Century'. I am grateful to my fellow researchers on INMD, Siobhan Thomas and Simon Evans, for inspiration and collaboration.

2   People with intellectual disabilities represent a community frequently left out of discussions about web accessibility, for a number of reasons, not least the complexity of conditions that constitutes an intellectual disability, the lack of standardization in terms of assistive technologies used by these populations, and the fact that the expertise of the individuals driving the WAI and other accessibility initiatives usually lies in the fields of sensory or physical disability.

Self-regulation and cultural work

Governmentality, the set of practices and techniques through which governments produce citizens best suited to those governments' needs, achieves its ends through the immanence of governmental power – not imposed from above, but decentralized, circulating through multiple agencies and channels. Such dynamics of power operate through a range of technologies. In this model, power works on and through individual bodies and selves, individuals' desires are manipulated through the promotion of lifestyle and the subsequently felt need to shape one's own life (Rose, 1999a). Government, therefore, 'operates through subjects' (du Gay, 1996: 54).

Rose proposes that the political terrain within which such models of power operate can be characterized as a kind of etho-politics – people are considered to be essentially ethical, and governments act upon 'the ethical formation and the ethical self-management of individuals' (Rose, 1999a: 475). What follows is 'engagement in the collective destiny in the interests of economic advancement, civic stability, even justice and happiness' (1999: 475). As a result, individuals take on social responsibilities which were formerly the domain of the state, and *self*-government replaces *state* government: 'etho-politics concerns itself with the self-techniques necessary for responsible self-government' (1999: 478).

Cultural work is not exempt from such processes. In the governmentality model, cultural work promises cultural labourers all kinds of advancements and happinesses. These include the promise of pleasure in work and a range of associated freedoms – to self-determine, self-govern, self-regulate. Thus cultural workers are active (but governed) subjects, embracing the freedoms prescribed for them. This sense of freedom and autonomy is crucial to cultural workers' active participation in self-governmental mechanisms of rule.

Two narratives from Richard Sennett's *Corrosion of Character* serve as examples of self-government (Sennett, 1998). The first concerns the character Rico, who assumes individual responsibility for the unemployment he experiences as a result of company downsizing in the ICT sector. He accepts the need for companies to make operations more efficient, and does not see the point of fighting redundancy. According to Sennett, he 'treats uncertainty and risk-taking as challenges at work' (Sennett, 1998: 28). The second narrative is about a group of dismissed IBM workers and the increasingly self-blaming stories that they told themselves about the reasons for their dismissal. First, the workers talked about how the company had betrayed them; then, they came to see the company as the victim of external, globalising forces, compelled to make efficiency cuts. Finally, they assumed individual responsibility for their experiences at work, seeing their redundancy as their own doing: they could have done a better job of re-skilling, or bailed themselves out and set up as entrepreneurs.

There is an intimate relationship between self-government and the kind of individualization at work that Sennett discusses. As Banks points out, following Foucault, 'techniques of active *individualization* are central to the exercise of power relations, and… individuals are complicit in the execution of power through their own situated practices' (Banks, 2007: 46). McRobbie supports this proposition, arguing that

in the absence of permanent social relations, individual cultural workers are their own micro-structures, or enterprises, and as a result need to be self-monitoring (McRobbie, 2002a). In this context of individualisation, Banks suggests that cultural workers may be resigned to competitive individualism:

Dazzled by the promise of future fame and locked into discourses that promote the virtues of 'making it', primarily through individual effort and creative talent alone, alternative forms of (self) government appear unlikely to emerge (Banks, 2007: 65).

In her discussion of Sennett's book, McRobbie bemoans its gloomy implications (McRobbie, 2002b). She argues that, when applied to new, young workforces who only know work in fleeting, unstable and networked environments, Sennett's proposal that such workplaces corrode would seem to suggest that this young workforce is always-already corroded. But McRobbie's own work also has gloomy undertones. As the title of her 2002 article suggests – 'Clubs to Companies: notes on the decline of political culture in speeded up creative worlds' (McRobbie, 2002b) – she adopts a pessimistic tone, stating that it is more difficult to perceive radical democratic politics amongst cultural workers in 2002 than it was at the time of her earlier work on the topic in 1999. At that earlier date, McRobbie used the notion of 'craft entrepreneurialism' to talk about an approach to work that marries strategies necessary to survive in work (entrepreneurialism) with a commitment to values, standards and to what she calls 'radical social democracy' (McRobbie, 2002a: 521). Three years later, she argues that such a strategy is hard to envisage in the speeded up creative sector, where individualization and looking out for the self have become intensified. She claims that, in what she defines as second wave cultural work, there is 'little possibility of a politics of the workplace' (McRobbie, 2002a: 519), in part because there is no fixed workplace – instead there is 'network sociality' (Wittel, 2001). Workers can therefore only find individual ways of coping with structural difficulties. In these conditions, and at their worst, self-government or self-determination result in self-exploitation or self-blame. McRobbie writes: 'Self blame, where social structures are increasingly illegible or opaque, serves the interests of the new capitalism well, ensuring the absence of social critique' (McRobbie, 2002a: 521). Like Sennett's always-already-there corrosion, there is an always-already-there de-politicisation in some of what McRobbie says.

This literature does important work in problematising the working conditions in the contemporary cultural sector which are uncritically embraced by more celebratory writers like Deuze (2007), Florida (2003) and Leadbetter (1999). The hidden costs of no collar labour, to paraphrase the title of Andrew Ross's study of new media workers, need this kind of attention (Ross, 2003). And capitalism's ability to absolve itself of social responsibility and offload that responsibility onto self-governing individuals is a problem for sure. But it may not be that all practices on the self-determination/self-government/self-regulation/self-blame/self-exploitation spectrum can necessarily be read as de-politicised and corroded. The danger is that this is implied in the assertions of McRobbie, Sennett and others.

The application of governmentality approaches to work in the cultural economy raises a number of questions that are pertinent to this analysis of web designers' self-regulation. Are all practices that reflect an internalization of technologies of the self necessarily de-

politicised and devoid of social critique? Are all such practices the same? Self-blame, self-exploitation and self-regulation would appear to be three rather different things. Similarly, a fashion designer blaming herself for the failure of her business is very different from a web designer blaming herself for failing to include people with specific disabilities amongst her website's audience. Attending to the specificities of these practices will advance our understanding of them, for, as Banks (2007) warns, one of the problems with this governmentality thesis is that government is undifferentiated.

So is cultural work. Yet different kinds of cultural work have distinct characteristics, which call into question generalized claims about *all* cultural work. For example, the assertion that cultural work is increasingly individualized is challenged by arguments about the collective intelligence, hive mind and intercreativity of Net production (for example Bruns, 2008 and Benkler, 2006). The voluntary sharing of knowledge and 'open participation, communal evaluation' (Bruns, 2008) that exist amongst web producers, whether they are paid for their labour or not, are modes of collectivity which do not take on traditional, unionized contours. They form part of the ethos of the World Wide Web (WWW) as an open, creative commons, a collective space for sharing creative works and for universal access, which drives professionals, amateurs and Pro-Ams alike to 'produce culture for the digital economy' (Terranova, 2000). Web designers belong both to communities of cultural workers and communities of Net producers. Therefore both of these contradictory sets of claims apply to them – pessimistic claims about individualised self-regulation, and celebratory claims about open and collective practices. Studies of web standards-adherence and accessibility need, then, to attempt to make sense of both of these forces that, together, suggest that self-regulation can be a collective as well as individual practice.

Another problem with the governmentality thesis for Banks is that workers are powerless – occasional acts of resistance are read as minor tactics rather than significant challenges to existing structures. One example of this can be seen in Moore and Taylor's (not explicitly governmental) argument that participation in the free and open source software movement (FOSS) is a form of self-exploitation, through which subjects take responsibility for their own software and programming training, in preparation for re-entry into the marketplace through employment in companies like Microsoft or IBM (Moore and Taylor, 2009). Thus even the FOSS project is seen as serving the needs of capital, not challenging or undermining them. So it is necessary to ask whether it is possible to do cultural work outside the regimes of governmental power. Where, if anywhere, do the possibilities for critical action lie?

In order to address this question, and to make sense both of celebrations of the collective intelligence of Net production and of concerns about individualized self-regulation, it is useful to return to Rose's emphasis on the ethical dimensions of self-governance, the appeal to the 'values that guide individuals, their sense of duty, obligation, honour' (1999a: 475). Although for Rose this is a problematic politics which fails to address real inequalities, it is through this appeal to ethics that politicized cultural work is possible, and that practices like accessibility and standards-adherence can form a part of critical self-governance. Arguably, it is because accessibility has an ethical dimension that, when web designers reflect on the accessibility of their websites, self-blame *is* social critique. The ethical dimensions of self-regulation and the notion of

Net production as 'open participation, communal evaluation' do not seem so contradictory, and together they provide a useful way to make sense of practices like accessibility and standards-adherence. The next section of this article maps such practices, in order to suggest that these are spheres where critical cultural work is possible.

'The right thing to do': the practice and ethics of web standards and web accessibility

The web standards project

The Web Standards Project (WaSP) was founded in 1998 by a small group of leading web designers and developers frustrated by the incompatibility of Netscape and Microsoft's web browsers, which, at the time, each claimed around half of the browser market. The WaSP argued that the Web would 'fragment into a tower of digital Babel' (WaSP website) if these big players continued to insist on building incompatible browsers and fighting for web supremacy. Such deliberate incompatibility – with each other, and with what came to be known as 'web standards' – meant that websites appeared broken in some browsers, web developers had to build multiple versions of the same site, or they developed complicated workarounds. Both of these latter two solutions were ultimately costly to clients, not only in terms of time taken to build a site, but also because, as browser versions updated, sites quickly ceased to function and so became redundant. To avoid this 'digital Babel', the grassroots coalition that was the WaSP argued that all browser makers should support the recommendations of the World Wide Web Consortium, or W3C, a consultative, international body which develops technical specifications intended to 'lead the Web to its full potential' (W3C), with regard to scripting languages like HTML (HyperText Markup Language). Driving this campaign was a passionate commitment to Tim Berners-Lee's ideal of the web as an 'open, interoperable and accessible' medium (WaSP website), an ethical ideal which, it was felt, could not be realized without the co-operation of the big browser companies.

One example of a 'web standard' advocated by WaSP and the W3C is the separation of content from style in website development. Content should be contained in a HTML document, and the presentation of the webpage should be managed through a separate, linked Cascading Style Sheet, or CSS. Such an approach ensures interoperability across browsers and a range of access devices, including mobile phones. It also facilitates accessibility for people with disabilities who access the web with assistive devices like screenreaders, which can ignore the visual styling of a site in the CSS and go straight to its marked-up content.

Dave Shea, a Canadian web designer keen to encourage the adoption of web standards, to promote the aesthetic possibilities of CSS-based design and to defy critics of standards-based, accessible websites created css Zen Garden in 2003 (css Zen Garden). The css Zen Garden website invites web designers to submit different designs of the same standard HTML page, and then showcases the best of these, demonstrating the beauty and stylistic variety possible with CSS. Figures 1-4 below show the unstyled HTML page that all web designers were invited to style, followed by the first three

designs on the current version of the website (where 200+ of the 1000+ submitted designs have been displayed). css Zen Garden is an example of an initiative that has developed out of web designers' self-regulation of their own adherence to standards. Nobody (or no body) is making them do this. Rather, in order to promote standards, such initiatives are voluntarily undertaken.
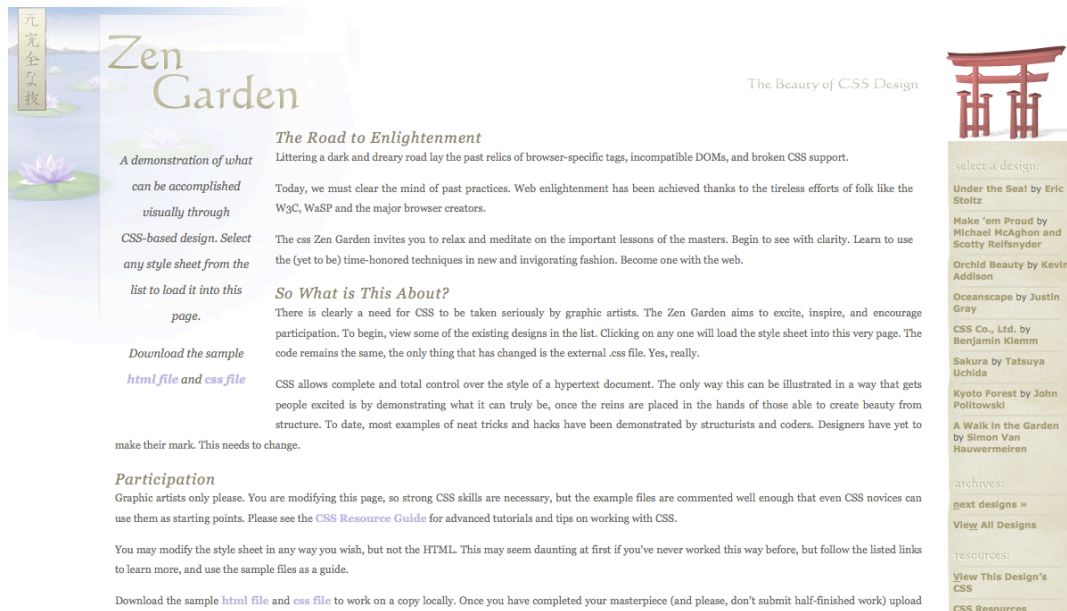

Figure 1: css Zen Garden unstyled HTML page, http://www.csszengarden.com/, by Dave Shea (published under a creative commons license)

Figure 2: Under the Sea, http://www.csszengarden.com/?cssfile=/213/213.css&page=0, by Eric Stoltz (published under a creative commons license)

Figure 3: Make 'em Proud, http://www.csszengarden.com/?cssfile=/212/212.css&page=0, by Michael McAghon and Scotty Reifsnyder (published under a creative commons license)

Figure 4: Orchid Beauty, http://www.csszengarden.com/?cssfile=/211/211.css&page=0, by Kevin Addison (published under a creative commons license)

The WaSP message was not initially well received by the browser manufacturers who found the notion that they should share the same open standards bizarre – they were, after all, vying for market share. As the WaSP website states, they were also uncomfortable with the idea that 'anyone – including the people who actually built the web – had the right to tell them what they should or should not do'. But over time, browser-makers listened, so today browsers are, on the whole, standards-compliant. This is one measure of the success of the WaSP – today, the most commonly used browsers (Internet Explorer 6, 7 and 8, Firefox, Google Chrome and Safari (w3schools)) provide support for many web standards. Thus, the WaSP website states that 'The WaSP's mission would seem to have been accomplished'.

But the degree to which web standards have been successfully implemented is contested. In one interview, British web design guru Andy Clarke, author of *Transcending CSS: the Fine Art of Web Design* (2006) and former WaSP member, described web standards techniques as 'done and dusted'. In another, Eric Meyer, web standards veteran and author of most web designers' CSS bible *CSS: The Definitive Guide* (2000), argued that as long as there is more than one browser, there is will incompatability. He said:

> every browser will do things a little bit differently, whether on purpose or not … because they have legacy behavior. The history of each browser's behavior is expressed through how it handles the web.

Former WaSP leader Molly Holzschlag agrees, arguing that 'web standards are not a done deal', not only because the technologies in question are still being specified, but more importantly, they are not sufficiently widely implemented – in her words, 'implementation trumps specification'. This would appear to be the view of the WaSP, which claims that 'most of the web remains a Balkanised mess of non-valid mark-up, unstructured documents yoked to outdated presentation hacks and incompatible code fragments' (WaSP), pointing to the need for designers and developers, not just browser manufacturers, to implement standards. But the work that still needs to be done ensuring that all websites are built to standards notwithstanding, the achievements of a handful of self-selected web professionals in persuading the powerful browser companies to support standards is a noteworthy example of web designers' successful efforts to govern themselves.

The accessibility imperative

In contrast to the grassroots origins of the Web Standards Project, the story of its close companion web accessibility begins with the establishment in 1997 of the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) by the web's governing body, the W3C. Despite their less organic roots, accessibility initiatives like the WAI have, like the WaSP, grown out of the belief expressed by WWW founder Tim Berners-Lee that 'the power of the Web is in its universality. Access by everyone regardless of disability is an essential aspect' (Berners-Lee, undated). Thus the very founding principle of web accessibility is ethical, perhaps more so than the WaSP, which was also motivated by a desire for efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

The WAI develops guidelines and technical documentation targeted at the different communities who shape how users experience the web, such as their Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) for web designers and developers. The purpose of the WCAG guidelines, now in their second version, is to outline design principles for creating accessible web content. WCAG 2.0 states that people with disabilities, who may be using assistive technologies, need to be able to perceive and understand website content and to operate websites, and those sites need to be built with web technologies which are sufficiently robust to be interpreted by the wide range of devices used to access the web, including assistive devices. Common accessibility techniques include: alternative textual descriptions of images which can be read out by a screenreader; grouping links as a list, so they can be identified easily; or including a link at the top of the page that allows a screenreader to jump over a long list of links and go straight to the page content.

There are, not surprisingly, many problems with the WCAG guidelines, which have been subject to fierce critique. The most common criticism is that adherence to them does not necessarily result in genuine accessibility. The WCAG 2.0 document acknowledges that the guidelines 'are not able to address the needs of people with all types, degrees, and combinations of disability' (WCAG); the diverse needs of people with different sensory, motor or cognitive disabilities make this a virtually impossible task. Other criticisms of the WCAG guidelines focus on their actual usefulness for their target audience – web designers and developers. They are criticized for being full of jargon; definitions are as hard to understand as terms being defined, argues Moss (2006). Our participants on Inclusive New Media Design echoed these concerns. Whilst some participants acknowledged the value of WCAG 1.0 guidelines (which were current at the time of the research), describing them as 'nice to test against' or 'very thorough documents', on the whole they were criticized for the complexity of their language, which made it difficult to implement them. 'Because of their nature as standards, the language used and because it is so comprehensive, it can be off-putting', said Tom, who was responsible for advising employees of a large telecommunications company on accessibility practices (see Clark, 2006 and Sampson-Wild, 2007 for further criticism of WCAG; both are former WAI members).

These criticisms highlight some of the imperfections of WCAG, both in terms of their usability by web designers and whether they actually lead to accessible websites. But despite these limitations, there is a wealth of evidence that testifies to a commitment to accessibility amongst web designers. Acknowledgement of this commitment is important, in order to counter studies of accessibility which simply conclude that the web is inaccessible (for example Coyne and Nielsen 2001, Kelly 2002) or that web designers systematically disable web users through what are described as 'oppressive practices' (Adam and Kreps, 2006: 204). Such a commitment can be traced in the few academic studies of accessibility from producers' perspectives. Lazar et al's study of webmaster (sic) perceptions of accessibility published in 2004, for example, found that the majority of the 175 webmasters surveyed were committed to accessibility. Likewise, a small scale survey that I carried out with web designers and developers in the north of England found that 48/49 respondents aim to produce accessible websites. Within key international events for web designers, slots are consistently given over to discussions of accessibility. To give just two examples, The Future of Web Design in London in

2009 featured Robin Christopherson from AbilityNet, and @Media 2007 in London featured Joe Clark, author of *Building Accessible Websites* (2002) and Shawn Lawton Henry, WAI member and author of *Just Ask: Integrating Accessibility Throughout Design* (2007), all talking about accessibility. Such events are attended by thousands of web designers in the megacities of the developed world, where much web design takes place. Online, there is a plethora of resources and organizations whose primary aim is to support web designers and developers in their accessibility efforts, beyond the WAI's own webpages. And there are associations such as The Guild of Accessible Web Designers promoting accessible design standards.

Legislative efforts have also been made to further the accessibility cause. In the US, Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act spells out accessibility requirements for federal website. In the UK, changes made to the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) in 2004 made it unlawful to discriminate against disabled people in the provision of services, information, education or employment. However, legislation in these countries and elsewhere is limited in its effectiveness. Section 508 applies only to federal websites, is limited in scope, and the DDA's requirement of 'reasonable adjustments' for people with disabilities can mean that an inaccessible flight booking *website* is supplemented with a *telephone service* for people who cannot access the website, rather than the website itself being made accessible. With an out-of-court settlement on a case against two unnamed companies in the UK, a settlement before a full trial by the US company Target and one legal success story in Australia, in the case of Maguire v. the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games, the legislation has not been extensively tested. What's more, the legislation targets the site owner, not the designer or developer. Consequently, legislation does not play a major role in driving web designers to accessible practices. When we asked some of our INMD participants what made them start wanting to produce accessible websites, only one mentioned the DDA, stating 'In the first instance it was client driven. A lot of our clients are bound by the DDA to make their sites accessible'. Others said that their motivation was user-driven – either an understanding of the difficulties disabled users face, or a love of the web and a commitment to the principle of access for all. Similarly, when asked why they were willing to dedicate up to seven days of their time to attend INMD workshops (which, for freelance participants, meant seven days without pay), the following were amongst the reasons given:

> I consider accessibility to be a core part of my discipline. (William, senior web developer)

> I would like to improve my practical knowledge of web accessibility to improve my professional practice generally. (Frances, lecturer and freelance web developer).

> Need to adhere to best practice, or at least try to get there. (Billie, web developer).

None of this suggests that legislative regulation is the main driver to accessibility. Instead, self-regulation – of both individual and collective selves – has been central to the spread of accessibility. Many web designers and developers choose to adopt WCAG guidance, despite its complexity and the absence of clear or routinely enforced legislation.

Further evidence of this self-regulated commitment to accessibility could be seen amongst INMD participants, both in the fact of their involvement with the project, and in what they did as a consequence of their attendance, as all participants took action to enhance accessibility for intellectually disabled web users as a result of what they learnt on INMD. This included: discussing issues at work, or joining accessibility boards or user testing sessions; using CSS for accessibility; using more supportive imagery to communicate core content; ensuring fonts are big enough and legible; using simple layouts and simple language; checking existing work for accessibility. Participants' commitment to sharing knowledge gained on INMD was evident both in the reasons that some of them participated (to meet committed peers, share knowledge, advise and encourage others) and in the extent to which they acted on this, passing on what they had learnt, either in their workplaces or by blogging about INMD. This voluntary sharing of knowledge and giving away their newfound expertise for free reflect the collective ethos of many people who are active on the web. Such activities call into question the proposal that cultural workers in the speeded up creative sector are resigned to competitive individualism (McRobbie, 2002b) and demonstrate how self-regulation can be collective, as well as individual. This is one example of an effort to collectivise, or a mode of collectivity, that does not take traditional shape.

But web designers such as our INMD participants recognize external factors that impact on their ability to self-regulate their accessibility practices. These include: clients (or equivalent decision-makers) not caring about accessibility, or wanting something inaccessible; lack of access to disabled web users and related assistive technologies in order to user test; the nature of the projects they work on or the tasks they undertake; timetables and budgets; and, in relation to intellectual disability accessibility, the lack of guidelines for this user group. In addition to these external barriers, web designers sometimes blame themselves for their failure to achieve full accessibility. For example, in the INMD workshops, some participants were highly self-critical of their own efforts to engage intellectually disabled web users in user testing:

> Planning for someone I couldn't really judge stayed a very vague thing for me and hence failed today! (Sofia, design agency director)

> Some of the answers to my questions made me realize that my questions were stupid. (Timothy, self-employed web developer)

The strong language of 'failing' and 'asking stupid questions' represents a highly critical form of self-regulation. This critical self-blaming can be read as a form of social critique, not an absence of it, as McRobbie suggests (2002b). The drive to build a more inclusive web is part of a bigger commitment to a more inclusive society, so that when individual web designers feel that they are failing to build such a web, self-critique is a form of acknowledgement that society itself is not inclusive enough.

Where does such self-regulatory commitment – to accessibility, to the voluntary sharing of knowledge – come from? My argument is that it comes from ethics, from the ethical formation of individuals, which results in their ethical self-management (Rose, 1999b). Web designers themselves debate the ethics of web accessibility, on web design sites and their gurus' blogs. For some, 'accessibility is simply the ethically/morally right thing to do' (Patrick Lauke, Opera web evangelist and member of WaSP accessibility

task force, commenting on the WaSP website in 2005). A UK-based web developer, programmer, author and speaker who goes by the name of Brothercake says on his blog: 'if you're not producing accessible content – if you're not prepared to try – then you have no business in this industry at all' (2007). Furthermore, Lazar et al (2004) concluded that, as 166/175 of their respondents said that they considered ethics when planning and updating their websites, most web professionals view accessibility as an ethical issue.

Whether such ethical practices should be regulated or self-regulated is also the subject of debate. Web design guru Andy Clarke referenced Foucault in a 2005 blog post entitled 'Accessibility and a society of control', which generated almost 50 responses (Clarke, 2005). Here Clarke argues that, because control societies rob individuals of their freedom to act responsibly, accessibility should not be subject to regulation or legislation. If it is regulated, it becomes viewed as a matter of compliance, rather than a matter of professional craft. In contrast, another guru Andy Budd writes:

> I would love to live in a world where everybody acted in a socially responsible way. However the reality is we need to have legislation to help enforce equality in the cases where social, commercial or political pressure alone aren't enough. (Budd, 2005)

But whether the self or the state should regulate accessibility, the reality is that it *is* governed by the self. In relation to accessibility (and web standards), where state-like regulation is either ineffective (or absent), self-regulation has had some success. Perhaps with greater and better state-like regulation, greater and better accessibility would be achieved. Perhaps it is the dependence on the self to regulate that results in the limited achievements of the accessibility movement, as Joe Clark suggests in his criticism of the failure of self-regulation in relation to video-captioning (Clark, 2008). But even if accessibility practices and guidance are flawed, something has been achieved. The accessibility journey is underway, and it is largely self-regulated.

Accessibility, standards and etho-political self-regulation

The range of activities, practices and debate discussed in the previous section gives an indication both of the pervasiveness of accessibility in the working lives of web designers and of the achievements of the web standards movement. The diffusion of accessibility into web design events, in discussions amongst web designers and developers about their professionalism, and in online and offline resources about web design is evidence of accessibility's pervasiveness. The success of the WaSP in persuading browser manufacturers to build standards-compliant browsers is evidence of its achievements. And whilst the WWW is neither universally accessible nor consistently built according to the standards advocated by WaSP, accessibility and web standards are core components of many web designers' everyday practices.

The accessibility practices and standards-compliance of web designers are a form of self-regulation. Occasionally clients and employers require web professionals to build accessible websites, but more often, designers and developers voluntarily engage in accessibility practices and attempt to adhere to guidance. Indeed, many INMD participants spoke of their clients' resistance to accessibility, and of their desire to share

what they learned on our projects with their clients, as well as their colleagues and committed peers. Participation in INMD itself could be seen as a kind of self-regulation – to improve professional practice, adhere to best practice, improve accessibility techniques, as some participants said.

This self-regulation is both individual and collective. The individual web designer validates her own code to ensure standards-compliance, signs up for projects like INMD, follows the blogs and Twitter updates of leading proponents of standards and accessibility for their latest views. At the same time, web designers share knowledge and expertise, and engage in ongoing dialogue and debate on blogs and microblogs, reading and commenting on each other's sites and code, and so participating in the *collective* self-regulation of standards and accessibility. The Web Standards Project itself could be seen as a supreme example of effective, collective self-regulation, with its aim of moving closer to a standardized, accessible web. In this sense, then, 'network sociality' makes possible open, sharing, collective practices in relation to accessibility. Thus web work is *not* individualized, but based on dispersed collectivities of networked individuals. Web workers are not resigned to competitive individualism; many are committed to the original ideal of the web as a collective, shared, open and accessible space, however problematic or not-yet-realised that ideal might be.

What's more, strategies of self-regulation amongst web designers have proven more successful than attempts at state-like regulation. The successes of the Web Standards Project can be seen in browsers' increasing support for standards. Thus they are more measurable than the achievements of the Web Accessibility Initiative, which may have played some role in persuading web designers and developers to build accessible websites, but which is also criticized for its complex documentation, and rarely cited as a driver to accessibility. Comparing regulation and self-regulation in an interview, Eric Meyer claimed that the self-regulatory approach of WaSP 'yielded way more than any set of legislation would have done'. If *laws* had been passed about standards, he claimed, they would have been ignored or circumvented. Instead, 'the best driver would be just making the case for why it needs to happen, making the business case, making developers aware of what they can do'. For these reasons, and because of the limited success of attempts to legislate accessibility, Meyer claims that a Web Accessibility Project, along the lines of the WaSP, is now needed.

Voluntary self-regulation derives, in part, from the ethical dimensions of accessibility and standards, and their origins in those ideals of openness and access by everyone. The WAI states that when the principles of a perceivable, operable, understandable and robust web – in other words, an accessible web – are ignored, disabled users will quite simply 'not be able to access the content'. The homepage of the WaSP states that 'The Web Standards Project is a grassroots coalition fighting for standards which ensure simple, affordable access to web technologies for all.' Implicit in these simple appeals to the 'values that guide individuals' (Rose, 1999b: 475) is an assumption that web designers and developers have ethics, and accessibility and standards initiatives subsequently act upon their ethical self-management. Thus accessibility and standards-adherence are forms of self-regulation that are not always-already corroded and depoliticized. In contrast, they are ethical practices embedded within a collective politics of inclusion. Some good comes of these self-regulatory practices – the inclusion

of otherwise excluded disabled citizens in the increasingly ubiquitous WWW; simpler and cheaper web production; and websites that will work well with future access devices. Accessibility and standards-adherence could therefore be seen as forms of commitment to what McRobbie calls 'radical social democracy' (1999). Politics, then, are not completely absent from work in the speeded up cultural industries. The possibility of doing good, of politicized and critical cultural work, exists in accessibility and standards-compliance. Arguably, the ethical inflections of such practices mean that critical self-blame (for not being accessible enough, for example) is also a form of radical social democracy, representing a desire for an inclusive web, and an inclusive society.

This article is not arguing that the web is accessible and standardised. There are too many examples of barriers and obstacles to such practices that provide evidence that this is not the case. But amongst all of the noise about the 'Balkanised mess' and inaccessibility of the web, it is important to think about where accessibility and standards-adherence do exist, as ethical practices, or as ideals, and to think about what an accessible, standards-compliant web means – for disabled web users, for people who build the web, and for cultural work. Neither is the article a celebration of the shift of control from state to self, or from employer to self, or from any other extra-bodily entity to self. But it does acknowledge that some good can sometimes come of this. Because sometimes, self-regulation can be collectively-managed, effective and ethical.

references

Adam, A. and D. Kreps (2006) 'Enabling or disabling technologies? A critical approach to web accessibility', *Information Technology and People*, 19(3): 203-218.

Banks, M. (2007) *The politics of cultural work*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Benkler, Y. (2006) *The wealth of networks: How social production transforms markets and freedom*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Berners-Lee, T. (undated) *Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) website*. [http://www.w3.org/WAI/]

Brothercake (2007) 'Technology is the last, best hope for accessibility', March 13 2007. [http://www.brothercake.com/site/resources/reference/hope/]

Bruns, A. (2008) *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life and beyond: From production to produsage*. New York: Peter Lang.

Budd, A. (2005) 'Accessibility and the law', *Blogography*, 16 June 2005. [http://www.andybudd.com/archives/2005/06/accessibility_and_the_law/]

Clark, J. (2002) *Building accessible websites*. Berkeley, CA: New Riders.

Clark, J. (2006) 'To hell with WCAG 2.0', *AListApart*, May 23 2006. [http://www.alistapart.com/articles/tohellwithwcag2]

Clark, J. (2008) 'This is how the web gets regulated', *AListApart*, 18 November 2008. [http://www.alistapart.com/articles/thisishowthewebgetsregulated]

Clarke, A. (2005) 'Accessibility and a society of control', *Stuff and Nonsense*, June 2005. [http://stuffandnonsense.co.uk/blog/about/accessibility_and_a_society_of_control/]

Clarke, A. (2006) *Transcending CSS: The fine art of web design*. Berkeley, CS: New Riders.

Coyne, K. and J. Nielsen (2001*) Beyond ALT text: Making the web easy to use for users with disabilities*. Fremont, CA: Nielsen Norman Group.

CSS Zen Garden. [http://www.csszengarden.com/]

Deuze, M. (2007) *Media work*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

du Gay, P. (1996) *Consumption and identity at work*. London: Sage.

Florida, R. (2003) *The rise of the creative class: And how it's transforming work, leisure, community and everyday life*. New York: Basic Books.

The Guild of Accessible Web Designers (GAWDS). [http://www.gawds.org/]

Kelly, B. (2002) 'An accessibility analysis Of UK university entry points.' *Ariadne*, 33. [http://www.ariadne.ac.uk/issue33/web-watch/]

Lawton Henry, S. (2007) *Just ask: Integrating accessibility throughout design*. [http://www.uiaccess.com/accessucd/]

Lazar, J., A. Dudley-Sponaugle and K.D. Greenidge (2004) 'Improving web accessibility: A study of webmaster perceptions', *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 20(2): 269-288.

Leadbetter, C. (1999) *Living on thin air: The new economy*. Harmondsworth: Viking.

McRobbie, A. (1999) *In the culture society*. London and New York: Routledge.

McRobbie, A. (2002a) 'Clubs to companies: Notes on the decline of political culture in speeded up creative worlds', *Cultural Studies* 16(4): 516-531.

McRobbie, A. (2002b) 'From Holloway to Hollywood: happiness at work in the new cultural economy?' in du Guy, P. and Pryke, M. (eds.) *Cultural economy*. London: Sage.

Meyer, E. (2000) *CSS: The definitive guide*. Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media.

Moore, P. and P.A. Taylor (2009) 'Exploitation of the self in community-based software production: Workers' freedoms or firm foundations?', *Capital and Class*, 97: 99-119.

Moss, T. (2006) 'WCAG 2.0: The new W3C accessibility guidelines evaluated', *Webcredible*, September 2006. [http://www.webcredible.co.uk/user-friendly-resources/web-accessibility/wcag-guidelines-20.shtml]

Rose, N. (1999a) *Governing the soul: The shaping of the private self*. London: Free Association.

Rose, N. (1999b) 'Inventiveness in politics', *Economy and Society*, 28(3): 467-493.

Ross, A. (2003) *No-Collar: The humane workplace and its hidden costs*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Sampson-Wild, G. (2007) 'Testability costs too much', *AListApart*, June 26 2007. [http://www.alistapart.com/articles/testability]

Sennett, R. (1998*) The corrosion of character: The personal consequences of work in the new capitalism*. New York and London; Norton & Co.

Terranova, T. (2000) 'Free labor: Producing culture for the digital economy', *Social Text*, 18(2): 33-57.

W3schools (undated) *Browser Statistics*. [http://www.w3schools.com/browsers/browsers_stats.asp]

Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) [http://www.w3.org/WAI/].

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) (2008) [http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20/].

Web Standards Group (2005) 'Ten questions for Patrick Lauke', October 11 2005. [http://webstandardsgroup.org/features/patrick-lauke.cfm]

The Web Standards Project (WaSP). [http://www.webstandards.org/]

Wittel, A. (2001) 'Toward a network sociality', *Theory, Culture and Society* 18(6): 51-76.

World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). [http://www.w3.org/]

the author

Helen Kennedy is Lecturer in New Media in the Institute of Communication Studies at the University of Leeds, UK. She has published widely on the subjects of new media and in/equality, and new media production. She is currently writing a book about the work of web designers, to be published in 2011.
E-mail: h.kennedy@leeds.ac.uk