**Progressive Governance and Section 508:**

**Interdisciplinary Initiative Towards Cultural Action**Eleanor E. Thompson, PhD[[1]](#footnote-1)
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 Attaining organizational compliance of Section 508 in the E-Government environment of 2021 is complicated. A progressive governance approach that includes interdisciplinary initiatives should be further explored and pursued. Accessibility interdisciplinary initiatives may in turn inspire *cultural action*. Many federal Section 508 program managers are in organizational positions of responsibility to ensure that web accessibility created and maintained by their respective organizations is compliant with standards and guidelines directed by the United States Access Board because of the final rule of January 18, 2017; rules issued under Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Action and Section 255 of the Communications Act[[2]](#footnote-2). This is both a truly meaningful purpose and a daunting task of bureaucratic challenge, in part due to the massive amount of electronic organizational content created by thousands of computer writers each day within their large-scale government organizations. This daily created content is typically outside the direct span of control of the respective Section 508 program manager. Yet, the responsibility remains to improve organizational compliance, and not doing so is not an option.

**The Identity of the Electronic Content Writer and Publisher**

An organizational writer who generates electronic content may be positioned at any level in the organizational hierarchy (entry to senior levels) across multiple disciplines and may not inherently identify as being a writer. Even though within their position and job function, the employee conceptualizes, creates, and finalizes writing products on a routine basis (for example electronic letters, notifications, plans, drawings, and reports). Without self-identification as a writer of electronic content, it may be presumed that it is difficult to also expect that the employee will consider themselves as a communicator, creator, publisher, or maintainer of electronic content. This lack of identity is a barrier to understanding that their content, although approved is not final publication ready must be made or confirmed Section 508 accessible.
 It is a paradigm shift of content ownership and responsibility that must progress in the workplace. While a progressive approach is to write policy into organizational correspondence[[3]](#footnote-3) guidelines for all employees, additional interdisciplinary initiatives are needed. For example, the role of human resources and Section 508 compliance might be strengthened in the recruitment, indoctrination, and retention of employees. With the right tools and training, an interdisciplinary human resource effort might shift the perspective of the employee to better understanding their role and identity as a writer and publisher – regardless of the position for which they are hired. The paradigm shift could make Section 508 compliance into the consideration of a core function of written communications in the hiring process. Incorporating Section 508 assessment into yearly evaluations reports may drive additional attention to this accessibility compliance requirement by employees, supervisors, and all leaders of the organization. Researcher Van Zomeren[[4]](#footnote-4) (2019) describes that for cultural action to happen and as part of a “cultural psychology of collective action” core motivations for this collective action “should matter for most people, most of the time” (p.4). Creating a paradigm shift of core job function could drive most employees to assess how their electronic writing content products are to be used, and how to ensure accessibility compliance. This is an illustrative example on the realm of possible for interdisciplinary initiative.

**Casting the Accessibility Community Net Further**

While I expect most federal government organizations have integrated Section 508 standards (as they apply to computer hardware, software, websites, multimedia and that these standards are part of the Federal Acquisition Regulation and require access for both members of the public and federal employees such as technologies when developed, procured, maintained or used by federal agencies) the connection to individual accountability across the organizational enterprise is likely less understood, where individuals may remain indifferent. The socialization and shift towards a core competency of accessibility, and individual accountability of writing content and publishing must be made. More content writers must learn how to make their content accessible; it is a start to refer employees to open-source digital guidance at the Government Services Agency[[5]](#footnote-5). Electronic content for which Section 508 program managers must oversee compliance is created by thousands upon thousands of organizational writers on their computer, daily. While not all communications are final, nor posted externally, even the posting of one artifact on an external facing website can mean thousands of users will access or attempt to access the artifact. Without proper web accessibility, members of the organization and the public will not be able to properly access this content through their accessible screen readers and/or alternative text features.
 Employees must understand and apply the term Information, Communications, and Technology (ICT) and understand their personal responsibility so that those people with physical, sensory, and cognitive disabilities have access. Organizational employee focus groups could be useful to assemble to assess the current understanding of Section 508 and create initiatives for further outreach and growth efforts towards compliance. The collaboration net must be cast further to identify interdisciplinary connections, and champions for not only employee identity and acceptance of accessibility as a core value, but also for other potential initiatives towards cultural action.

**Technological Progression of Hardware and Software Accessibility**

Hardware and software acquisitions are increasingly compliant through ensuring the procurement of accessible technology, and this means an increasing availability of accessibility options. Even so, this does not guarantee a high-level compliance as accessibility features may be turned off, ignored, or remain unused. Authors may cut and paste from multiple artifacts with multiple authors on the same artifact, and out of habit create many unnecessary decorative items without proper tagging or alternative text of images. Additional technology features may be optional, but without proper controls being placed to offer accessible solutions for the user.

**Awareness, Outreach, Education and Social Media**

Educational technology systems, especially during 2020 during the Covid-19 shift from in person learning to virtual learning where education systems were suddenly faced with the reality of a lot of electronic content accessibility challenges. Many parents or caregivers reading this paper will have experienced that. The digital divide was more evident than ever, and the business need for accessibility more in focus not just on desktop computers, but on mobile devices of all kinds.
 Social media platform accessibility needs to be considered by the organizations that use third party services, to ensure equal access. Researcher Sonnenberg[[6]](#footnote-6) (2020) conducted a study on E-Government and social media and the impact on accessibility, specifically to “understand the scope of Section 508 compliance issues regarding social media” (p.189). Importantly, Sonnenberg notes that while a particular agency controls their in-house websites that social media technology is from non-federal sources and that these third parties are not held to the same standards (p.182). He further discusses problems surrounding mobile devices and presents his 2017 research findings on compliance issues for “common social media platforms” based on Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0- level AA (p. 186).
 Many federal government agencies use social media as a means of communications. Section 508 program managers, if they have not already, will need to raise levels of awareness of requirements, and assess their current business model. To ensure compliance is met, education and training for those who are responsible for making decisions of what to release and where is needed. This is an excellent area to engage in interdisciplinary initiatives as the future trend of social media expansion is likely to continue.

**Conclusion**

 Interdisciplinary initiatives towards cultural action can shift thinking. Build upon a collective culture to further the access and equality of individuals with disabilities. Do the right thing because it is the right thing to do. Conformance by progressive governance and cultural thought lead towards an inherent core organizational motivation for increasing compliance of Section 508. Compliance for the sake of accessibility itself and not an afterthought to achieve compliance, we need to get there. Cultural action because accessibility matters, equal access matters.
 This paper is intended to create an opportunity for critical thinking and discussion among those individuals responsible for Accessible Systems and Technology Program; Section 508 compliance within their organizations. It is an opportunity for reflection and pause to consider the realm of the possible for the creation of new and expanded interdisciplinary initiatives that will ideally lead organizations towards culture action. While this paper does not fully cover the acquisition process of ICT, it is intended to discuss electronic content creation in general and to suggest interdisciplinary collaboration for all compliance requirements. A shifting of how Section 508 Program Managers create an environment of progressive governance that will inspire interdisciplinary initiative towards the totality of cultural action.

1. United States Coast Guard (2021). Paper to accompany speaker for DHS-OAST, Accessibility Day. Section 508 Correspondence: Section.508@uscg.mil [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. United States Access Board. (2021). Information and Communications Technology. <https://www.access-board.gov/ict.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. United States Coast Guard. (2020, July). The Coast Guard Correspondence Manual, COMDTINST M5216.4D, Chapter 1A, para 12. https://media.defense.gov/2020/Jul/14/2002456226/-1/-1/0/CIM\_5216\_4D.PDF [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Van Zomeren, M. (2019). Toward a cultural psychology of collective action: Just how “core” are the core motivations for collective action. Journal of Pacific Rim Psychology, 13(Pt 2), 1-7. https://doi.org/10.1017/prp.2019.7 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. United States Government Services Agency. (2021). [How to] Create Accessible Digital Products. GSA Government-wide IT Accessibility Program. http://www.section508.gov/create [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Sonnenberg, C. (2020). E-Government and Social Media; The Impact on Accessibility. Journal of Disability Policy Studies, 31(3), 181-191. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1044207320906521> . [↑](#footnote-ref-6)