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Mastering Accessibility and Legal Compliance: What Academic Publishing Managers Must Know

Introduction

Today, with research papers, textbooks, and academic articles just a click away, accessibility isn't just a bonus, it's essential. For managers of academic publishers, especially smaller or mid-sized presses, this is a critical moment. Overlooking accessibility can lead to losing important users, damaging relationships with institutions, or even facing lawsuits and legal issues. But by prioritizing accessibility, you open up new opportunities, strengthen your reputation, and position your organization as a forward-thinking leader in the field.



Today's publishing managers need more than just checking boxes for compliance. Success means being proactive, getting everyone on board, and seeing accessibility as a key part of your strategy, not just a legal requirement. In this guide, we'll clear up the confusion around digital accessibility and legal rules, giving you the practical knowledge and tools to stay ahead of the game.

1. Accessibility's Impact: Raising the Bar in Academic Publishing

Too often, accessibility is viewed as just another regulatory headache. In reality, accessible content is one of the most powerful differentiators available to academic publishers, with direct benefits that reach far beyond compliance.

Here's a key point: about 15% of the world's population has some kind of disability. For publishers, that's millions of students, teachers, and researchers who need accessible content to participate fully. Making sure your digital journals, e-books, and learning tools are usable by everyone shows you're serious about inclusion — and it's the right thing to do.

Today's institutions care a lot about diversity, equity, and inclusion. Universities and libraries want their publishing partners to support these values. When your content is accessible, you show you're

committed to fairness and inclusion, which helps build trust and long-term relationships.

Your reputation is also at stake. In academic publishing, where quality matters most, showing your dedication to serving all members of the community can make a big difference. More and more, institutions look at a publisher's ethics, and investing in accessibility can give you an edge.

2. Demystifying the Legal Landscape

The regulatory environment governing digital accessibility grows more complex every year. For academic publishers, staying up to speed isn't just prudent—it's essential for business continuity.

In the United States, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits discrimination based on disability, and courts progressively interpret this to cover digital content and websites. Meanwhile, Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act mandates that any electronic and information technology created or used by federal agencies—and, by extension, their contractors—must be accessible.

Europe takes an equally robust approach. EN 301 549 sets accessibility benchmarks for ICT products and services, affecting any publisher serving European institutions or competing for government contracts. And on a global scale, the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), currently in version 2.2, provide a widely recognized technical framework.

Ignoring these standards is risky business. In recent years, educational publishers have been hit with a growing number of lawsuits, often resulting in expensive settlements, mandated content fixes, and even court-imposed oversight. Regulatory authorities are increasingly clear: publishers must not only achieve a baseline of accessibility, but also demonstrate ongoing efforts through regular audits, staff training, and documented remediation plans.

Leaders in publishing can't wait and react later. Being proactive now is the best way to protect your business from legal trouble, money problems, and damage to your reputation.

3. What Accessibility Looks Like in Practice: Beyond the Basics

So what does it really mean for academic content to be accessible? Many assume it begins and ends with readable text, but true accessibility covers a much broader, and more intricate spectrum.

A solid foundation begins with ensuring text content is navigable by screen readers, with clear structure: logical headings, lists, and labeled sections. However, academic publishing often involves complex elements—images, graphs, data visualizations, book covers, that must include descriptive alternative text (alt text), so that users who cannot see the images aren't left behind.

STEM content poses additional challenges. Equations, symbolic notation, dense tables, and charts all need to be appropriately tagged or marked up for assistive technologies to parse and vocalize. For example, an inaccessible statistical table with dozens of columns becomes a brick wall for someone relying on assistive tech, whereas accessible markup allows seamless understanding of the entire dataset.

Multimedia content brings its own requirements: videos need accurate captions, audio recordings require transcripts, and interactive resources, such as quizzes or simulations, must be operable via keyboard and offer alternative formats. These are not just "nice-to-haves," but necessities in

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producing content for a broad academic audience.

Metadata and tagging are often overlooked but are vital for discoverability and usability. Well-tagged documents not only help users with disabilities navigate your material, but also benefit institutional partners relying on digital archives, catalogs, and discovery tools.

Accessibility is holistic, it's about every touchpoint, every user interaction, and every format. It's not a box to check; it's a lens through which to view your entire publishing operation.

4. Making Accessibility Happen: A Roadmap for Publishing Managers

Changing how your company handles accessibility isn't just about enthusiasm. It needs real change across your whole organization and clear responsibilities.

Begin with a detailed check-up of your digital content; your website, e-books, online tools, and how you produce them. Find the biggest issues first and focus on fixes that will help users the most.

Once you know what to fix, make accessibility part of every step. Teach your editors how to write helpful alt text and simple summaries. Help designers choose colours and layouts that are easy to read. Use tools that support creating accessible content.

Regular training for everyone is a must. Whether they're editors, designers, IT staff, or customer service, all team members need current, role-specific guidance. Create checklists, update your style guide with accessibility rules, and include these standards in your meetings.

Finally, build in ways for users to report accessibility issues and establish a clear process for addressing their feedback. This not only solves real-world problems, it reinforces your commitment and helps guide future improvements.

5. Choosing Technology Partners That Support Your Mission

No publisher is an island. Your success in achieving accessibility rests heavily on the capabilities of your technology partners—whether it's your CMS vendor, e-book converter, or SaaS platform provider.

When assessing technology solutions, look for providers who demonstrate their commitment to accessibility through formal certifications like WCAG 2.1 AA, Section 508, or EN 301 549. Do more than take their word for it: ask to see third-party audit results, accessibility statements, and concrete plans for ongoing compliance and feature upgrades.

Don't shy away from tough questions. What is their process for responding to accessibility bugs? How do they support new compliance requirements as standards evolve? Are their products designed with accessibility in mind from the outset? Demand documentation, and assess their ability to provide reliable, ongoing support.

Future-proof your partnerships by choosing platforms and file formats that support flexibility and interoperability. As new global standards emerge, your technology stack needs to adapt without requiring costly retooling.

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6. Weighing the Costs—and Uncovering the Business Upside

There's no avoiding the fact that raising your accessibility game costs time and money. Upgrading workflows, training your staff, and retrofitting legacy content require thoughtful investment and yes, remediation is sometimes necessary when historic content falls short.

But compare this to the sky-high price of doing nothing. Regulatory fines and legal settlements can be devastating. Perhaps even more damaging are the intangible costs: loss of trust, strained partner relationships, and a tarnished brand that struggles to win new business.

Accessible content, on the other hand, delivers long-term business value. It's easier for search engines and institutional archives to index and recommend accessible materials, widening your digital footprint. You'll serve growing segments; people with disabilities, older readers, non-native speakers, that may have previously been excluded or underserved. Many procurement processes now explicitly require accessibility, so being an early mover can put you at the front of the line for lucrative contracts and funding opportunities.

In short, accessibility is not just an obligation. It's a smart investment that pays off in both reputation and revenue.

7. How to Build a Lasting Culture of Accessibility

Making accessibility stick within your organization isn't a box you tick once—it's an ongoing journey that starts at the top.

Leadership sets the example. Treat accessibility as a strategic business objective—not just a regulatory hassle—by making it a regular topic at the board level and measuring progress with clear, actionable metrics. Encourage senior managers to champion accessibility both internally and in client-facing conversations.

Set specific goals, and invite users with disabilities to share their feedback through regular engagement channels. Their insights are invaluable, providing unique perspectives that can drive product and process improvements.

Prioritize training and knowledge sharing across departments. Give different teams the skills and confidence to innovate, run accessibility experiments, and celebrate both success and learning moments. Foster collaboration between editorial, tech, sales, and marketing teams to drive organization-wide impact.

Most importantly, remember to celebrate your progress. Acknowledge individual and team achievements, and share important milestones internally and in your communications with institutional partners. Transparent commitment to accessibility demonstrates sector leadership and encourages others to follow.

8. Accessibility: The Market Differentiator That Matters

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Accessibility is no longer simply an ethical imperative or regulatory box to check—it is fundamentally changing the competitive landscape in academic publishing.

Institutions and government bodies are steadily raising the bar, with robust accessibility requirements built into their procurement processes. Without clear, verifiable accessibility credentials, bids for large contracts may not even make it through the door.

By making your backlist accessible, you reach not just existing partners, but previously untapped constituencies: international organizations, consortia, and libraries serving a truly diverse audience. Positioning your publishing house as an accessibility leader sets you apart and insulates your business from the shifting sands of institutional expectations.

Ultimately, building accessibility into your DNA delivers a lasting competitive edge. It attracts values-aligned customers, boosts brand loyalty, and positions you as a trusted partner in a sector where reputation is everything.

Call to Action

Is your publishing house ready to transform accessibility compliance from a challenge into a strategic strength? Explore our expert-led accessibility audits and consulting services, designed to help you future-proof your publishing operation while meeting the legal and institutional requirements that matter most. Reach out today and take the first step towards a more accessible, inclusive, and resilient future in academic publishing.

For digital publishing managers, mastering accessibility isn't just good housekeeping, it's a transformative growth strategy. The future of digital scholarship belongs to those who ensure it's accessible to all. The question is: will your publishing house set the pace, or struggle to keep up?

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Mail

sabineguerry@cloudpublish.co.uk

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