Visual accessibility in graphic design: A client–designer communication failure

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It is essential that graphic design is visually clear and accessible. However, evidence suggests that a lack of consideration is given to visual accessibility in print-based graphic design. Furthermore, effective client–designer communication is a vital component in this. This paper investigates current graphic design practice, with regard to visual accessibility, specifically focussing on client–designer communication. A survey of 122 graphic designers and clients identified that these two groups may not be communicating with each other effectively with regard to visual accessibility, and that there is a need to develop inclusive design tools to assist them with this. This paper adds a novel contribution to our limited understanding of visual accessibility in the UK's graphic design industry.

Inaccessible graphic design is commonplace. From drug packaging (Swayne, 2005) to software interfaces (Keates, Clarkson, & Robinson, 2002) it makes daily tasks difficult or even dangerous. Due in part to an ageing population, it now is estimated that two million people in the UK have some form of sight loss (Access Economics, 2009) with many more being affected by milder age-related visual problems. Furthermore, the introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA, 1995), and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990), result in strong legal, social responsibility and business drivers (Waller, Bradley, Hosking, & Clarkson, 2015) to ensure that graphic design is visually accessible. However, designers report that a lack of client requests for visual accessibility limits the consideration they can give to it (Dong, Keates, & Clarkson, 2004). Clients also hold the misconception that designers will take visual accessibility into account even if it is not in the brief (Cornish, Goodman-Deane, & Clarkson, 2015). This suggests that designers and clients may not be communicating effectively. A widespread study of the graphic design industry is vital in determining what happens with regard to visual accessibility in practice.

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This paper presents the results of a survey of the graphic design industry. It investigated the factors that influence how important graphic designers and clients deem visual accessibility to be, the extent to which it is considered in practice, and the extent to which clients and designers communicate regarding visual accessibility. Inclusive design tools that aid client−designer communication could provide an important supplement to existing tools, and result in a greater uptake of inclusive design in industry. This paper provides valuable insight into graphic design practice with regard to visual accessibility. It is hoped that this work, and subsequent research, will help to develop new procedures, processes and tools, to improve client−designer communication and assist graphic designers in creating visually accessible designs.

1 Background

1.1 Graphic design

Graphic design is inextricably linked to the effective communication of visual information in society (Frascara, 1988), with some now referring to it as 'visual communication' or 'communication design' (Meggs & Purvis, 2011). This emphasis on visual communication highlights the importance of visually clear and accessible graphic design, to ensure that visual information is correctly received by the user.

This paper focuses solely on graphic design, as it has its own unique design processes (Dubberly, 2004) and therefore its own client−designer communication methods. It is important to note that in graphic design (as well as several other design disciplines) the client acts as an intermediary between the designer and the user. The client commissions the designer with a project through a brief, which the designer must fulfil, to satisfy the client and to be paid. For this reason both the client and designer must be considered when investigating the design process.

Graphic design encompasses many areas, from typography to film (Buchanan, 1992). Print-based graphic design presents particular challenges with regard to accessibility, as these designs cannot be modified by the user in the way that designs can on screen, forcing the audience to rely heavily on their visual capabilities. Print-based graphic design is also under-represented in the literature, especially when compared to the related area of web design. Therefore, this paper focuses solely on print-based graphic design.

1.2 Client−designer communication

Communication within the design process has received much attention within the academic literature (Brown, 2002; Chiu, 2002; Eckert, Cross, & Johnson, 2000). Since the seminal work by Schön (1988), it has been recognised that clients and designers occupy different design worlds, making communication challenging. Ineffective communication can lead to a misunderstanding of