Using Social Media to Engage Communities with Research: Accessibility[1]

Kathryn A. Stofer, Kirsten Hecht, and Lisa Lundgren[2]

This EDIS document, part of a series on using social media to engage communities with research, focuses on making your social media inclusive by integrating accessibility up front for individuals with disabilities of various types. Any Extension personnel, researchers, and other public engagement and communications personnel can benefit from these strategies.

Introduction

Social media platforms may be broadly available, but if your social media content is not accessible, a large percentage of the population you hope to engage may not be able to access and make use of what you share. Everyone can work to make the world more welcoming and accessible to disabled people. Those who do not have the burden of disabilities can reduce the burden imposed on people with disabilities by working to change the larger world. For example, if a door at an office that is supposed to be available for people with physical disabilities is locked, an able-bodied person could take it upon themselves to get the door unlocked, reducing the barriers for people who need the access. Similarly, social media content creators who do not have visual or hearing impairments can make their work accessible instead of relying on people with disabilities requesting accessible content, an extra burden on those already disadvantaged by societal barriers.

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Disability

Disability crosses every identity group imaginable, and disabling occurrences can happen to anyone at any time; disabilities are not limited to those that are present at birth. Estimates suggest 54–60 million adults, or about 20%–25% of the US adult population, have disabilities (CDC, 2019a; National Center on Disability and Journalism, 2021). Disability occurs in a higher proportion of residents of the southern United States, older adults, women, and people of particular races and ethnicities (CDC, 2019a). However, these figures may be underestimating disability occurrence due to stigmas with identification as disabled. Disability may often be understood as a problem of an individual

and something to "fix" rather than a problem with the way society views people with physical, intellectual, or other bodily impairments (Oliver, 2013).

Often, changes to accommodate people with disabilities benefit far more than people with certain disabilities. A famous physical world example is the sidewalk curb cut mandated originally for people with physical disabilities. While these gradual ramps on curbs allowed people who use wheelchairs to more easily get down to street level, they also benefited people without disabilities, including bicyclists, families with strollers, and delivery persons with carts, and they are now widely popular (Blackwell, 2017). A digital example of this improvement for a broader group of users than those who strictly need the access could be captioning. While captions are designed for people who are Deaf or hard of hearing, captioning on video content can help all people focus and improve comprehension (Dukes et al., 2019). In research with students without hearing difficulties, over two-thirds used closed-captions on videos (Linder, 2016). In crowded coffee shops or quiet libraries, people can view videos without audio when captions are enabled. For visuals, proper contrast for images and text and large font allow people to focus on the meaning of your messages rather than trying to decipher the words.

Social media can make some information and events more available to people with particular disabilities at certain times, such as those who have physical disabilities or those with compromised immune systems during a global pandemic. However, consider whether social media with an extensive emphasis on visual media is the best way to reach your audience if they have other specific disabilities such as visual impairments.

Design for Digital Accessibility and Inclusion

Similar to the broader concept of *public engagement* (Stofer, 2017), universal design can be defined in many ways and include different concepts such as *inclusive design* and *universal design for learning* (Connell et al., 1997). For our purposes, we present a brief overview here to clarify our meaning in the social media and public engagement space.

Universal design emerged in the 1960s as a movement in architecture toward accessibility and barrier-free living for people with physical disabilities. The basic idea is to build in physical access from the design stage, rather than retrofitting once issues have been identified, using 7 fundamental principles. *Universal design for learning* started in the 1980s to apply the same principles to learning, both for

curriculum and for assessment (Connell et al., 1997). "At its core, UDL provides students' flexibility in the ways they access and engage with course materials and demonstrate mastery of learning objectives" (Stapleton-Corcoran, 2022, para. 2). Again, the emphasis in UDL is placed on the up-front design rather than after-the-fact accommodations. However, UDL does not preclude the need for accommodations on an as-needed basis. Universal design for learning extends and reframes certain principles from UD to include provision of multiple formats of engagement, representation, and means of action and expression (Stapleton-Corcoran, 2022).

More recently, universal design has been applied to environments and analogized to online environments. For example, in web architecture, the home page is equated to the front of a physical building. However, *inclusive design* was created specifically for digital accessibility (Morales, 2021) and is used by industry and corporations such as Microsoft and Adobe. Inclusive design is part of user-experience design for technology and "considers the whole range of human diversity with respect to ability, language, culture, gender, age, and other forms of human difference" (Inclusive Design Research Center, n.d., para. 1). Inclusive design has a three-pronged model: recognize diversity and uniqueness; employ inclusive design process and tools; and strive for broader beneficial impacts. Distinction from universal design includes the digital focus with capacity to individualize approaches.

Another framework for considering accessibility in online content is Section 508 compliance. Under US law, Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act "requires Federal agencies to make their electronic and information technology (EIT) accessible to people with disabilities" (GSA, 2022, para. 1). Essentially, people with disabilities, including both employees and broader US residents, must be given comparable information provided to other users. This includes websites, email, documents, and audiovisual materials. Chapter 282 Section 603 of Florida's state laws also reiterates the importance of this directive and instructs our state agencies to follow federal Section 508. The Section 508 website provides guides on how to make complaint electronic content, including social media considerations.

Research and practice development specifically for social media accessibility remains limited and emerging (Ellis & Goggin, 2013; Goggin et al., 2019), despite the existence of universal design during the explosion of social media in the mid-2000s. Mere compliance with Section 508, especially when incorporated as an afterthought, may only be doing the minimum rather than thoughtfully making content

following universal design principles for accessibility for all (GSA, 2022). For example, learning to use the tools of disabled users such as screen readers can also help you understand the ways users employ those tools and can improve your ability to design with accessibility at the forefront. Finally, investing in accessibility up front can save creators time and money in the long run.

"Nothing about us without us" Principle

For any particular design, the best judge of true accessibility will be users of various disabilities, such as visual and auditory, who would otherwise be excluded from use. The "nothing about us without us" principle, first applied to design or development strategy broadly for the US disability community by James Charlton (1998), can be extrapolated to social media. When creating strategy for social media, especially organization-wide strategy, include people with a variety of disabilities for maximum accessibility. The first author of this document identifies as disabled, but not with a visual or auditory disability that affects her use of social media. As an academic expert on public engagement, she recognizes the need for inclusivity and for sharing with others the principles and best practices as understood broadly in the field.

When creating content for social media, consider the following:

1. Understand Disability Etiquette.

- Relax—people with disabilities are people, first and foremost. Treat them as such and not as their disability or someone to be pitied. Talk directly to people with disabilities, not only to caregivers or other people present in the conversation.

- Focus on respectful, polite language and communication. If you make a mistake that the person corrects, or say "see you later" to a person with a visual impairment, apologize and move on rather than focusing on yourself or acting defensive.

- Do not make assumptions about abilities, desires, or preferences. Ask if someone wants or needs help, and if so, how you can help.

- Think beyond providing individual accommodations that need to be requested to creating content intentionally so it can be widely accessed. Such a frame aims to removing the burden from the individual who would need to ask to be included.

- Lead by example. The more you discuss these issues, the more others will also think about them.

2. If you cannot make something accessible, such as a social media post or event or other media, say so up front. This saves people who will not be able to access the content the time and frustration of looking for accessible versions. Budget better in the future to ensure accessibility.

3. Check your language. Person-first (*person with a disability*) or identity-first (*disabled person*) language are currently the most widely accepted ways to refer to people. Only mention people's disabilities when the disability is relevant to the work at hand. If you are referring to or conversing with someone, ask them their preference for identification.

4. Be aware that language does change and evolve over time. If you mislabel someone, acknowledge the error, apologize and move on.

5. Follow principles of universal design. Offer content in multiple formats.

- Incorporate alt text for images, including complicated data visualizations. See EDIS on data visualization (Stofer, 2014). Don't convey information with color (a.k.a. hue) alone, because color-blind people will be left out. Vary the level of alt text based on the context of the use of the images.

    - Specifically for complex and scientific images, create a short description and a longer description with more scientific information (Caprette, 2020).

- Use audio descriptions of video content as well as captions.

- Use inclusive imagery that represents people with disabilities, and preferably those with a variety of disabilities.

6. Run an accessibility checker such as the tools embedded in Adobe Acrobat Pro for PDF or in Outlook email, but do not solely rely on the tools' minimum standards. Know appropriate design principles and review your content regularly for appropriate incorporation.

7. Offer multiple ways to contact you—email and phone, and TTY for those who are Deaf or hard of hearing.

8. Capitalize each word of a hashtag, username, and URL. For example, write RespectAbility.org instead of respectability.org, which could be read as "respectability" instead of the organization's name, Respect Ability. Fans of *Saturday Night Live* might recall the problem that Darrell

Hammond's Sean Connery had when he read "S Words," that is, words that start with the letter S, as "swords," or blades with which people fight. Capitalization makes screen readers more effective when spacing is not available and makes these terms typically easier to read for everyone.

9. Live events involving audio need live captioning or ASL interpretation or clarity up front as to when and where transcripts will be available. Live events involving video need images to be described (https://www.afb.org/consulting/afb-accessibility-resources/video-description). Beware of auto-captioning, because words can be captured incorrectly. Whenever you create a video with automatic captioning, be sure to have a human double-check and correct the transcript. Names and scientific terms are frequently missed in auto-captions.

10. If you need another reason or reminder to remove jargon, do it for accessibility. Jargon, complicated sentences and multisyllabic words are especially difficult for people with cognitive or intellectual disabilities (CDC, 2019b).

11. Test your products before posting with users with a variety of disabilities (Lee et al., 2020). Listen to and incorporate feedback you get after posting content.

12. Follow and amplify the voices, especially within your discipline, of people with disabilities. Representation for future generations can help portray people with disabilities positively, such as Paralympians who show themselves playing sports and focus on capabilities (Mitchell et al., 2021).

13. Advocate for accessibility online for both online and physical spaces.

See this EDIS on advertising for events in accessible ways (Stofer, 2018). In particular, the more you can specify in advertising for events as to what accommodations are and are not available, and prominently make clear who to contact for further information, the more you are supporting disabled people in participating.

Content and Trigger Warnings

Depending on your area of research, you may be sharing posts that can provoke strong feelings, even recalling past traumatic experiences. Such triggers, when they affect people with disabilities such as mental illness and PTSD, may make it harder for those people to participate if they are not informed up front. If you fail to provide a trigger warning and someone reacts negatively, you may lose community members.

If your content could fall under these categories, you may consider posting a notice at the top of your post to alert followers of the content. "Communicating the nature of your content builds audience trust" (National Center on Disability and Journalism, 2021). Adding "CW" or "TW" at the top, and sometimes also spelling out the nature of the content, can allow people the choice of whether to view the content or to prepare themselves for potential adverse reactions. However, some people may find such warnings patronizing (National Center on Disability and Journalism, 2021), so again, understanding your community will help you navigate choices of when to use warnings and when not.

Promoting Marginalized Voices in Research through Accessibility

You can promote disabled voices through your platform as well. Some easy strategies to elevate people with disabilities are to connect with and follow them, engage with their content through likes and comments, and share their content. You can also plan "takeovers," where individuals are given access to post directly from your account so they can reach potentially different audiences. Remember that it's best to allow individuals who identify from a specific community to share their voice and explain topics rather than trying to teach about it in isolation as an outsider. We advocate for balancing sharing voices from marginalized community members with educating non-community members based on your perspective and knowledge with humility to reduce the burden on marginalized communities.

Some disability-related hashtags to use and groups to follow or amplify:

#SayTheWord

@Respect_Ability (Twitter)

@DisabledAndSTEM (Twitter)

@DisabledLatinx, http://facebook.com/disabledlatinx

https://twitter.com/ahead_usa, https://www.facebook.com/AHEAD.org/

African-American Advocacy Center for Persons with Disabilities: https://www.facebook.com/AAACPDFLA/; https://twitter.com/AAACPD

Florida Division of Blind Services @FLBlindServices

Coalition of Disabled Gators and Allies, UF

Conclusion

Just as social media is rapidly evolving, so too is accessibility for social media. Accessibility for people with disabilities is only recently starting to be centered in broader technology discussions (Goggin et al., 2019). Research on the effectiveness of universal and inclusive design is ongoing and growing. Continuing to learn and remaining open to changing habits and ways of interaction will be essential to continue to provide a social media experience that is welcoming to all and promotes inclusion for all through engagement with scientific research. Finally, thinking about and discussing the choices you make (or fail to make) more often can itself work to encourage more inclusive behavior throughout interactions.

Resources

Inclusive Design webpages: https://support.webservices.ufhealth.org/social/social-media-accessibility/what-is-digital-accessibility/

https://ics.ifas.ufl.edu/our-services/social-media/accessibility-/

National Center for Disability Journalism Language Style Guide

Hootsuite Inclusive Design for Social Media: Tips for Creating Accessible Channels: https://blog.hootsuite.com/inclusive-design-social-media/

Respect Ability Webinars on Social Media:

- https://www.respectability.org/2021/06/effective-social-media-posts-a-primer/
- https://www.respectability.org/2020/01/webinar-premium-skills-workshop-in-social-media-accessibility/
- https://www.respectability.org/2020/01/how-to-ensure-accessible-websites-social-media-and-inclusive-photos/
- https://www.respectability.org/2019/12/webinar-how-to-ensure-a-welcoming-lexicon-and-inclusive-storytelling/

Request Speakers from the Disability Speakers Bureau: https://www.respectability.org/speakers-bureau/#custom_html-3

Profiles of Persons with other marginalized identities and disabilities: https://www.respectability.org/resources/

Universal Design resources

https://www.section508.gov/develop/universal-design/

EDIS series on supporting learners with disabilities

Creating alt text for complex images such as graphs, charts, and maps:

- Web page with brief overview
- PDF file with much more detail and other examples

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