

Developing an Accessible and Inclusive Social Media Presence

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Abstract: For many libraries, social media is a key part of an effective marketing strategy. However, the outreach materials shared on social media sites can be inaccessible to patrons with disabilities if accessibility is not a part of the content creation workflow. This excludes an important segment of the library's community from a major avenue of communication. This article considers best practices and tools for designing content that will be accessible across social media sites. It also explains key accessibility features and considerations for specific popular social media sites, such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and more.

Keywords: social media, accessibility, marketing, outreach

Introduction

Social media remains an important part of the way that people communicate with one another and find information. A recent survey by the Pew Research Center found that "some 88% of 18- to 29-year-olds indicate that they use any form of social media. That share falls to 78% among those ages 30 to 49, to 64% among those ages 50 to 64 and to 37% among Americans 65 and older" (Smith & Anderson, 2018, p. 4). Given these statistics, it is hardly surprising that many libraries maintain active social media presences that are important to their overall marketing strategies and goals. Unfortunately, in many cases the content that libraries share on these platforms is not accessible to patrons with disabilities who may use assistive devices to navigate online spaces. This article will explain how libraries can make the content that they post on social media more accessible and inclusive by following best practices, as well as detail specific advice for popular social media sites.

Tips for Designing Accessible and Inclusive Social Media Content

Though there are many elements of accessibility that are specific to individual social media sites, the first step in inclusive outreach is to design accessible content regardless of where it is posted. These best practices apply to marketing content designed for social media sites:

1. **Test color contrast.** When designing any visual marketing content, it is important to remember that some members of any target audience may be color blind or have low vision. Though there are many types of color blindness, accessibility can be improved for all users with color blindness by carefully considering the colors used and how they are applied. All information that is conveyed by color, such as using red and green to indicate yes and no, should also be conveyed in another format, such as pattern or through text. Colors should enhance communication but should not be the exclusive means of conveying an idea. Similarly, for those with low vision, maximizing color contrast will make content more readable. There are a number of free online tools to check both color combinations and contrast levels, such as [WebAIM's Color Contrast Checker](#).
2. **Keep it simple.** Whether designing graphics or writing text for social media, keeping it simple will improve accessibility. Avoid combining too many fonts, patterns, and other design features in a single graphic and try to replace jargon, acronyms, and complicated language with terms that are straightforward and easy to understand. This will benefit individuals with cognitive disabilities, those for whom English is not their primary language, and those who are tired, stressed, or otherwise distracted.
3. **Feature information on accessibility.** In addition to ensuring that the text and graphics created for social media are accessible, be sure to also consider inclusiveness. Weave in content that will be of interest to those with disabilities, such as information on event or space accessibility, tools that may be of use to them, and information about large print and audio content that the library offers for circulation.
4. **Include captions, transcripts, and audio description.** If you are posting video or audio content on the library's social media accounts, build the process of captioning, transcribing, or adding audio description to that content into the creation workflow. There are many tools to help with this process, such as the features built into YouTube, but it can be time-consuming so it is important to allow time and resources for this process.
5. **Watch out for epilepsy triggers.** Videos and animations that include rapid flashes or quick transitions between light and dark can, in some cases, cause seizures in viewers with certain types of epilepsy. Fortunately, tools such as the [Trace Center's Photosensitive Epilepsy Analysis Tool](#) are available to test content before it is posted.
6. **Watch links.** Any links shared on social media accounts can be made more accessible and user-friendly by using a link shortener to avoid sharing lengthy URLs that are difficult to read. Additionally, it can be helpful to indicate what sort of content is being linked to in brackets after the link, such as [VIDEO], particularly since the limited length of social media posts may limit how much context the links have. Be sure to also consider whether the content being linked to is itself accessible. If it is not, consider alternatives or, at a minimum, indicate that the site may be inaccessible to some users.
7. **Check settings and help documentation.** As existing social media sites continue to change and new ones emerge, libraries are continually evaluating new options for

keeping in touch with their communities. This can be an overwhelming process, but one of the key steps in the evaluation process for any new or changed social media site should be an accessibility check. Many sites have accessibility features that can be enabled in the account settings and additional accessibility advice and instructions in the help documentation, so it is important to look for this information during the planning stages before the launch of any new social media initiative.

Best Practices for Specific Social Media Sites

Though some best practices apply across all platforms, and indeed extend to other areas of web content creation, each social media site also has its own unique accessibility features and challenges. The suggestions below will help you to ensure that your content is optimized for accessibility no matter where it is posted.

Facebook

Despite recent controversies, Facebook remains a very popular social network. According to the Pew Research Center, 68% of U.S. adults use Facebook, making it second only to YouTube in popularity (Smith & Anderson, 2018, p. 2). Fortunately, Facebook has some built-in features to help users make their content more accessible.

- **Know Facebook's built-in features.** In recent years, Facebook has created tools that aim to automate improved accessibility. With the important role that images play on Facebook, it is not surprising that many of these tools are focused on improving image accessibility. Approximately three years ago, Facebook released an automatic alt text tool "that uses object recognition technology to create a description of a photo for the blind and vision-loss community" (Facebook Help Center, n.d.-a). At the end of 2017, they released another tool that uses artificial intelligence (AI) to recognize faces in photographs and identify them (Facebook Accessibility, 2017). Though they do not yet offer perfect results, these tools offer a way for visually impaired Facebook users to navigate through photos that are shared on the site even if those who post them do not add alt text.
- **Edit your alt text.** Though Facebook's automated image description tools are useful, the user experience can be improved by editing the resulting descriptions or writing custom original descriptions from the start. Unfortunately, alt text in Facebook accounts can only be edited on a computer currently, not on a mobile device. To get started with the editing process, click on "Edit photo" and then on "Alt text." At this point, Facebook will automatically generate text, which can then be replaced by clicking on the "Override generated alt text" option. Alt text can still be edited after posting an image, though in that case, one must select "Options" and then "Change alt text." From whichever step is the starting point, the final step will be saving the new text, which will now replace the automatic text (Facebook Help Center, n.d.-b).

- **Caption video content.** As mentioned above, captions are an important part of video creation no matter where the videos will be posted, but in the case of Facebook, it is important to realize that there are two options. If captions have already been added to the video on another platform, it can be posted to Facebook without further steps. However, there is also the option to add captions within Facebook by editing the video to upload an .srt caption file.
- **Keep up-to-date with Facebook Accessibility.** The best way to learn about new accessibility features as they are released is to follow the Facebook Accessibility page. This page not only explains new features that might be useful but also includes other content about Facebook services and tools for individuals with disabilities.

Twitter

Twitter remains a popular marketing tool for many libraries, but because it can accommodate multimedia content, it is important to consider accessibility when using it.

- **Include image descriptions.** Twitter is a popular place to post photos and other graphics. Fortunately, it has a feature that make it simple to add descriptions to these images that can be read by assistive technologies such as screen readers. The first step to using this feature is to turn it on in the Twitter account. To do this, go to the Accessibility section of account settings and check the box labelled “Compose image descriptions.” From then on, when posting an image, Twitter will provide an option at the bottom of the image that says, “Add description.” By clicking on this, an editor will be able to add a brief description of the photo or graphic, much as one would add alt text on a web page (see Figure 1). While this feature is available when logged into Twitter, not all third-party account management tools offer the option to add descriptions to images, so take this into consideration when selecting tools and planning workflows.

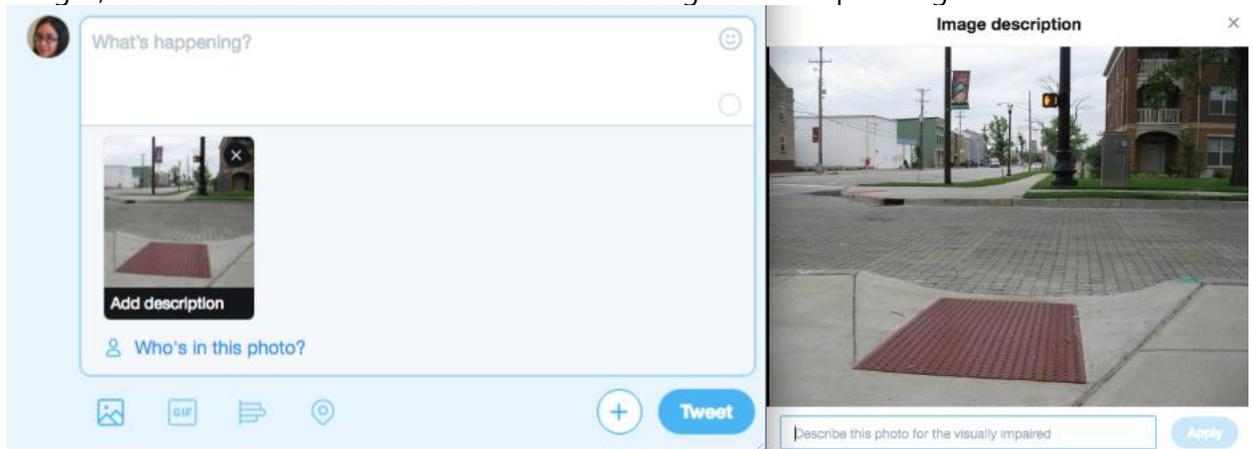


Figure 1: Adding an image description to a Tweet.

- **Create accessible hashtags.** Using hashtags, such as #NationalPoetryMonth or #bannedbookweek, is common practice in Twitter. Though many Twitter users would see the format of these hashtags as interchangeable, there is an important difference: one has each word capitalized (sometimes referred to as “camel case”) and one does not. For

screen readers and similar tools, this is a very important distinction. If each word is capitalized, the screen reader will recognize and read it as an individual word within the hashtag. But if it is not capitalized, it may run together with the other words in a way that makes the hashtag very difficult to understand.

- **Do not use spacing and formatting to convey meaning.** A recent popular meme saw Twitter users formatting their tweets to include text over side-by-side photos. Each line included words that went with each photo, which was indicated by the spacing. However, anyone who was using a screen-reading tool with this Twitter content would find it impossible to know which words went with each photo. For this reason, it is important to not use spacing and formatting as the only methods of conveying information in tweets.

Instagram

With its focus on visual content, Instagram is a great way for libraries to share images of collections, activities, spaces, and more. However, because the content is focused on photos and short videos, it can also be inaccessible, making it important to develop a strategy for ensuring accessibility.

- **Use captions strategically.** Instagram does not offer an option to add alt text to photos or captioning to videos. Instead, captions stand in for this information. Develop caption text that will make sense both to those who can see the additional context of the image or video and those who have access to only the text.
- **Use camel-case hashtags.** As in Twitter, Instagram allows hashtags in posts to help users navigate by topic more quickly. As mentioned above, use camel-case hashtags—where each word in the hashtag is capitalized—to guarantee that the hashtag's words are read clearly by screen readers.

Snapchat

Snapchat is another social media platform that is very focused on multimedia content, which can make it difficult to ensure that messages are accessible. Many of the general best practices for accessibility are helpful on Snapchat, but a few are particularly important.

- **Plan each message carefully.** Because Snapchat does not offer as many accessibility features, it is important to plan out content that can be made accessible via the limited options available. Focus on clear, brief messages and remember that overly complicated or convoluted content may exclude those with cognitive disabilities and those with divided attention.
- **Less is more.** Snapchat offers the option to add many different types of animations, edits, and captions to photos and videos, but including too many may make posts confusing or unreadable for those with visual impairments or cognitive disabilities. To improve accessibility, limit the type and number of features added to snaps.
- **Share content on other platforms.** Snapchat content can be saved to the Memories section of the app and then exported, which offers the option to reshare this content on

another platform with added accessibility features. This is also a good option to keep records of the content shared on Snapchat.

YouTube

Libraries that regularly create and share video content will likely have a YouTube channel. Though there are other video sharing sites, YouTube remains dominant in this area and, fortunately, it also offers ways to improve accessibility of videos even if also shared on other platforms.

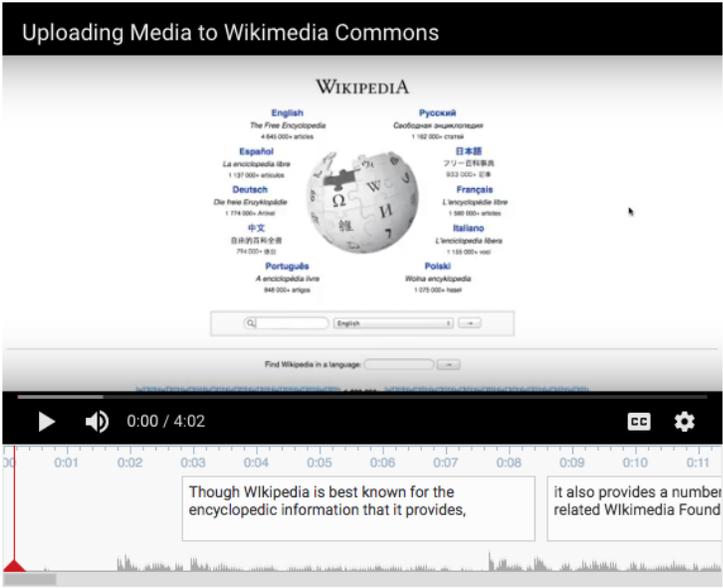
- **Take advantage of YouTube's captioning options.** YouTube offers multiple options for creating captions for video content, including automatically generated captions. Though these automatic captions are a helpful feature, they often have numerous errors, so do not plan to rely solely on these captions. To get started creating (or improving) captions, go to YouTube's Creator Studio area and select the option to edit the video. Above the video at the far right is an option labelled "Subtitles/CC." Selecting this option will open a page for selecting the language of the video if a default language is not associated with the account. There will be three options for creating captions. If the video has a script, or if the library has already created a transcript for other purposes, simply upload a file with the text and YouTube will determine the appropriate timing to line the captions up with the audio. Alternatively, YouTube can accept uploads of a number of file formats for timed subtitle or caption files, which offers greater control over the exact time at which the captions appear on the screen. Finally, YouTube also offers a tool to transcribe videos while watching them, with the video automatically pausing each time typing is started. Any of these options will result in a captioned video that can be not only watched on YouTube but also shared and embedded on other social media sites. (See Figure 2.)
- **Add audio descriptions.** If creating a video that has a lot of visual content that is not reflected in the audio, such as a library tour, consider creating audio descriptions. Audio description is defined as "commentary and narration which guides the listener through the presentation with concise, objective descriptions of new scenes, settings, costumes, body language, and 'sight gags,' all slipped in between portions of dialogue or songs" (The Audio Description Project, n.d.). Though YouTube does not have a built-in tool for creating audio descriptions, they can be added to a video with tools such as [CADET](#) before uploading to YouTube to ensure that the video is accessible to the broadest possible audience.

Actions ▾

Type subtitle here then press Enter Keyboard shortcuts | Help

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0:02.8 0:08.4	Though Wikipedia is best known for the encyclopedic information that it provides,
0:08.6 0:14.0	it also provides a number of other projects in the related Wikimedia Foundation.
0:14.0 0:14.5	If you scroll down to the bottom of the
0:14.5 0:15.8	homepage for Wikipedia
0:15.8 0:18.4	you'll see that there are links to many of these different projects
0:18.4 0:19.2	at the bottom.



Pause video while typing

Figure 2: Adding captions to a YouTube video.

- **Indicate if there is no sound in a video.** Sometimes a library might share a video with no sound or only background music. In this case, be sure to indicate this either in the captions or in the metadata for the video so that users know that they are not missing the audio part of the viewing experience.
- **Take advantage of opportunities to be inclusive.** Video content offers options to get creative with both the types of library work featured and the way they are presented. Sometimes this can create an opportunity for inclusion. Examples like the Smithsonian American Art Museum's Art Signs program—which shares videos of museum art talks presented in American Sign Language by d/Deaf gallery guides (Art Signs, 2010)—can inspire ideas for unique ways to be inclusive through video content.

Conclusion

Social media can be a valuable tool for connecting with library patrons, but it can also exclude patrons with disabilities if accessibility is overlooked. As social media strategies, policies, and procedures, are developed, it is important to actively look for ways to improve accessibility and inclusion at all points in the process. By applying design best practices and taking advantage of the accessibility options offered by social media sites, it is possible to build a social media presence that offers improved accessibility and greater inclusion for patrons with disabilities.

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