Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Increased Usage of Alt Text Is Required Across Ontario Public Library Social Media Feeds to Increase the Accessibility of Content
Hill, H., & Oswald, K. (2023). "May be a picture of a dog and a book": The inaccessibility of public libraries' social media feeds. Partnership, 18(1), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v18i1.7008

Maria King

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Résumé de l'article

Objective – The research project sought to explore how accessible the social media feeds of Ontario public libraries are, particularly the use of alt text for images, by assessing the usage of alt text and by making recommendations for appropriate use within social media posts.

Design – Collection of social media posts and computer-assisted textual analysis of visual media content.

Setting – 76 public libraries and 9 public library systems in Ontario, Canada.

Subjects – Approximately 900 Ontario public library social media posts from Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Methods – A random number generator sampling of 30 libraries per platform from the relevant social media accounts from a spreadsheet created using Ontario Public Library Statistics (OPLS) data of social media usage from the included libraries was initially created capturing 76 individual libraries. Then the researchers performed targeted sampling of posts from the nine library systems serving over 250,000 residents each. Researchers identified the 10 most recent posts from each included platform feed, and then undertook textual analysis for the presence of alt text with each post using two Mozilla Firefox browser extensions that determine the presence of alt text.

Main Results – Of the 76 unique libraries chosen by the random sampling and the nine library systems that serve populations over 250,000, only two regularly used alt text and five had at least one instance of alt text. Only Toronto Public Library regularly included alt text across each of the three social media platforms analyzed by the study. The study also initially aimed to assess the quality of alt text used by public libraries in social media posts. However, due to the lack of alt text use across the sample, this was not possible at the scale initially aimed for, although a small number of examples are analyzed in the findings.
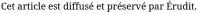
Conclusion – The initial goal of analyzing the alt text to make recommendations for improved usage could not be realized due to the surprising lack of inclusion of any alt text across the sampled posts. This lack of any alt text can prevent some disabled users from engaging with content and information, leading to an inequitable experience. Public libraries should consider how accessible their engagement with users is and seek to improve the accessibility of social media posts.

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Evidence Summary

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A Review of:

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Abstract

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Conclusion – The initial goal of analyzing the alt text to make recommendations for improved usage could not be realized due to the surprising lack of inclusion of any alt text across the sampled posts. This lack of any alt text can prevent some disabled users from engaging with content and information, leading to an inequitable experience. Public libraries should consider how accessible their engagement with users is and seek to improve the accessibility of social media posts.

Commentary

As this study notes, most research on the accessibility of library online content relates to webpage content rather than social media accounts, with Gibson et al. (2021) finding that 44.89% of research papers on LIS and disability focus on webpage accessibility. Only Brunskill and Gilbert (2023) have explored the accessibility of library social media accounts beyond Hill and Oswald's study. Research from Koulouris et al. (2020) found that libraries with social media accounts tend to be very active, reiterating the recommendations of Hill and Oswald's study that social media is an important engagement and information tool for public libraries and that the accessibility of the content needs more consideration.

This study has been critically appraised using the EBL critical appraisal checklist (Glynn, 2006), with an overall validity score of 81%. The study selected the main social media accounts used by Ontario public libraries and ensured that the initial population sample included all available social media account data. Random sampling has been used which can limit researcher selection bias. This method has reduced the number of unique libraries included in the final sample, although the researchers have attempted to offset this limitation by also including targeted sampling of the largest library systems.

In terms of the research questions, whilst the presence of alt text can be a precise answer, analysis of the quality of the alt text could be subject to researcher opinion and judgement. The researchers clearly explained the data collection methods for the presence of alt text, but there are no details on how the analysis of the text itself was to be done. Perhaps the researchers did not include this information as they were unable to conduct the analysis.

The study data on the presence of alt text is very specific to Ontario public libraries, so we cannot presume these findings correlate with other public library usage of alt text. However, it does provide useful and original case study data that other public libraries should be taking into consideration for their own use of alt text. The article also highlights important impacts of the lack of alt text or the use of poor alt text, giving useful guidance on creating alt text, which is externally valid to any library.

The article references guidance such as Kovac (2018) which staff in libraries can put into practice when creating social media content.

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