Inclusivity in Online Communication Platforms
When the whole world is connected there is no longer a norm

Ava Gaiety Wroten

We are social beings. The adoption of the internet and its online communities has spread across the globe at an impressive rate. With so many beings connected, it's more important than ever to celebrate our differences in ways to make everyone feel not just included but truly welcome in the online spaces users create. Long ago are the static websites of Web 1.0 and now generations grow up fully immersed in the collaborative conversations had in the ever-evolving Web 2.0 (Whitacre & Brooks, 2017). What then does it mean when we unintentionally exclude from the conversations in these communities those with disabilities or others who identify as something not quite human? How can we intentionally consider a wider breadth of others beyond ourselves to celebrate the perspectives gained by welcoming diversity in online spaces?

Many parts of someone's identity are not chosen but are instead discovered and sometimes labeled. This author is best labeled as a transfeminine furry with minor cognitive and social disabilities. Some may code-switch in their professional environment, but this author is privileged enough to not have to and has thus embraced faer true being in the workplace. Over a decade of building websites and applications with user-generated content has distilled in femme a responsibility to do for others what fae wish was done for faer. To build a web where fae hopes others feel welcome.

Accessibility in this context provides tools and language to enable those with disabilities to equitably participate in online communities and the platforms they exist within. Disabilities most related to accessing online platforms can be physical or mental including but not limited to visual, motor, auditory and cognitive limitations (*Types of disabilities, n.d.*). What drives this author is the knowledge that writing content and engineering software for those with disabilities creates a more usable web.

> *By designing for someone with a permanent disability, someone with a situational limitation can also benefit. For example, a device designed for a person who has one arm could be used just as effectively by a person with a temporary wrist injury or a new parent holding an infant.* (Shum et al., 2016)

In practice, this can involve a deep discipline in both User Experience Design and front-end software engineering to build accessible online platforms. Design is the foundation for user interaction patterns, color contrast, and content legibility. A design's proper implementation in software is essential to the ability of an end-user to interact with and consume the software's content. Concerns in web accessibility are numerous and include the ability to easily navigate between pages or posts, consume the onscreen content, and perform all expected interactions necessary to participate in the platform such as liking or replying to posts.

Traditionally, online communities utilize mostly text; however, platforms like Twitter have seen over 50% of Tweet impressions coming from Images, Video and other media (Meeker, 2019). According to Carnegie Mellon University, “Of nine million tweets the CMU researchers examined, one million included images and, of those, just 0.1 percent included alt text.” This alternate text, or alt text, is how images are described in text form to assist users unable to download or see them visually. While tools exist to automatically generate this alternate text, the result of such tools can lose context, can be inaccurate, and are rarely adopted in the first place. New tools are being researched to make generating alternate text easier, but companies that run online platforms still need to be convinced to add the new feature and in the end they still “...would put the burden on the user.” (Young, 2020)

Similarly, videos and audio can be given captions, transcripts and audio descriptions depending on the online platform's capabilities (*Indiana University* 2021). Luckily, transcription technology has come a long way and can automatically translate spoken words in prerecorded or live videos with decent accuracy. YouTube defaults to providing automatically transcribed closed captions, but is not able to provide audio descriptions describing what is visually happening for non-sighted users. TikTok is increasing in popularity while offering auto captions and normalizing Text-to-speech (TTS) within every user's viewing experience (*TikTok Our commitment to accessibility, n.d.*).

Text descriptions of multimedia enables more individuals to participate in conversations in online communities. Discussion threads commonly contain topic responses in the form of animated gifs, emojis and meme image graphics. Without alternate text, non-sighted users may miss critical or even simply humorous portions of a topic's discussion, leading to an incomplete and at times difficult-to-follow experience. Therefore, if the shared goal is more users using online platforms and joining these online communities, it is in everyone's best interest to take the time to textually describe these multimedia responses for the inclusion of a wider variety of participants.

When we task community members with writing descriptive text, we give them the additional challenge of writing for an audience with a different set of life experiences. As unintentional as it may be, we can cause damage by poorly describing multimedia through a lens of unconscious bias. “Unconscious bias can be related to age, race, ethnicity, gender, employment, selection and promotion, health care, religion, disability, nationality, socioeconomic status, law and justice, education, etc. Unconscious bias can be followed by an unconscious tendency to try to relate information that confirms pre-existing beliefs.” (Byyny, 2017)

While these unconscious biases are difficult enough to look past for most, while this author seeks to challenge language even further. A worthy goal is to build web apps that not only deny the existing standard of asking a user's gender in a static list that may be easier to push to a database, but that are also flexible enough to welcome transgender individuals and others across or outside of the gender spectrum, including those use neopronouns (*Neopronouns Explained, n.d.*). Similar concerns in the western world revolve around online forms collecting and storing names as first name, middle name and last name. “It assumes ignorantly that everyone's name fits this mold, or imperiously that everyone's name must be forced into this mold. It would be more appropriate to design forms to ask for (a) given-names, and (b) family-names, and then (c) underline the given-name and family-name by which you wish to be known.” (Frank & Gillett-Kaufman, n.d.) Finally, astute readers may have noticed this author's intentional avoidance of terms such as “we humans” and “people”. Just as everyone's biological similarities are undeniable, so it is with identities that extend beyond such boundaries.

> *Across the western world, individuals and collectives are defying our identity as organic beings, in contrast with mechanical ones, and exploring cyborgism. Social movements of trans and disabled people started questioning what it means exactly to be an able body. The neuro-diverse and BIID (Body Integrity Identity Disorder – people who would prefer to be ‘disabled’) have followed in the same footsteps. I thought it would be worth exploring the worlds of those who clash with one central dichotomy: humanity and non-human animality. (Feijó, 2016)*

Concerns range from accessibly describing an animated gif in a tweet to not requesting a transgender individual's legal human given name. These present a daunting series of problems to overcome. Current generations of Web 2.0 users are challenging established social norms while demanding accessibility for underrepresented communities (Gonzalez, 2022). Assumptions or laws that

have driven web design requirements are being dismantled as national IDs and parents on birth certificates no longer need to fit into the gender binary. Government sites and corporate-owned online platforms are being encouraged not only to keep up with these changes, but to "...remove any questions that you do not need to ask." (*Collecting personal information from users* 2021)

The path toward addressing these concerns starts the same way; continuing to converse about these topics in the very online forums which need to change. Spreading awareness first casually, followed by academically and professionally in work places, will enable committed designers to do the research necessary to online community accessibility and inclusion. Where there are barriers either legally or from within corporations running online platforms, demands for change will continue. Educational content and improved tools must be made available to everyone sharing online spaces, to genuinely welcome those existing outside of the so-called norm. A beautiful world is one in which all users can access an important infographic that affects them personally, instead of it appearing as an impossible to consume piece of multimedia, and laugh together at a perfectly crafted response in the form of a funny meme.

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