Sociability: Social Media for People with Disabilities – Blogging

Soci**ability**: social media for people with a disability.

A guide to blogging

WHAT IS A BLOG?

Blog, an abbreviated term for web log, is an area on a website where a user can put text, images, and links to other blogs which can be viewed and commented on by visitors to the website.

Two of the main blogging websites worldwide are: BlogSpot and Wordpress.com. It is estimated that there are one billion bloggers worldwide when factoring in online commentary for both personal and corporate use.

WHY BLOG?

Blogging is all about personal expression. People who blog generally want to share their thoughts and views with others online. The views may be general in nature or may be specifically focused on a topic or viewpoint. Blogging can be a way of sharing a first-hand account of a particular event or the promotion of a cause, and blogs can also incorporate other types of web-based information such as photos, videos and links to other websites. Blogs can also be integrated with other social media to encourage feedback on user ideas.

User feedback has indicated that people with disabilities have found blogs particularly useful as a way to reflect on disability related issues.

QUICK TOUR OF FEATURES

Here's a quick tour of the most common features in online blogging tools:

- Blog name: a unique name and web address for your blog, generally found online at blogname.blogwebsite.com where 'blogname' is your chosen name and 'blogwebsite' is the blogging tool that you are using. For example, at-techtalk.blogspot.com.
- Post: a new entry to a blog. This can be text, images or video.
- Comments: feedback posted on your blog from visitors to your website.

WHY IS THIS GUIDE NOT ABOUT A SPECIFIC BLOGGING TOOL?

User feedback has indicated that people with different disabilities have different preferences as to which blogging tool they prefer. Unlike other social media tools where users have a distinct preference for a particular tool to achieve a particular task, the primary request of bloggers has been to ensure that they can share their text, images and videos in an accessible way. As such, this guide has focused on providing support in selecting a tool and ensuring that content is accessible.

BLOGGING ACCESSIBILITY ISSUES

The Blogger tool, used to post blogs on the BlogSpot website, has undergone several revisions in recent years which have improved its accessibility. This was in part due to an opportunity to formally raise accessibility issues with Google in 2009, including unlabelled Flash content, a CAPTCHA present during sign up and missing image alternative text. While the access situation has broadly improved since then, many accessibility issues remain. According to its own forums, Wordpress.com, another blogging tool, is often viewed as being more accessible for people who are blind or vision impaired. It has also been indicated that it is difficult to insert captioned video. There are a variety of other less popular blogging tools but none appear to have a web interface that can effectively support different disability groups.

SELECTING A BLOGGING TOOL

The most popular blogging websites in the middle east are BlogSpot by Google which uses the Blogger tool, and Wordpress.com. There are, however, numerous blogging tools for users to choose from.

A tip provided through user feedback is to check if the blogging tool offers the ability to send emails that are automatically posted to your blog. Most blogging tools provide this option and can help avoid website accessibility issues.

To select a blog, users recommend trying either BlogSpot's Blogger tool or Wordpress.com as a starting point. The American Foundation for the Blind also has a useful accessibility guide to blogging. Additional information on the popular blogging tools can be found in the Blogger help and Wordpress.com forum websites respectively.

MAKING YOUR BLOG ACCESSIBLE: TIPS AND TRICKS

The research conducted by Media Access Australia and feedback from users has provided a number of accessibility tips to help you get blogging.

Provide a link to videos rather than embedding them

It is often difficult to embed a video in your blog and maintain the accessibility features of the video, such as captions. Embedded videos can also provide challenges to screen reader users who try to play videos using inaccessible controls. By providing a link to the video rather than embedding the video, users can go directly to a website that contains a potentially accessible version of the video. Examples include the accessible YouTube players and YouTube captioned video. Further information on these can be found in the YouTube section.

Describe your images using alternative text

In order to make sure that your images are accessible, add some alternative text to them. In many tools the user is prompted to enter some text about an image when an image is added, but for people using the Blogger tool in BlogSpot they will need to follow some additional instructions.

Label links

When sharing a website link in your blog, make sure that the link is labelled with a description. Text such as 'click here' can make it difficult for people using screen readers to understand the nature of the link. A full description such as 'the digital technology section on the Media Access Australia

website' will make it easier for people with disabilities visiting your blog to understand the nature of the content.

Choose a simple blog template

Most blogging tools provide a number of different templates to make your blog look unique. Consider using a template that only has one column with a simple layout. This will be helpful for people using assistive technologies to access your blog.

Choose your font carefully

There are often many different fonts to choose from. Consider using a sans-serif font like Arial and make the font a standard size. If you have the ability to choose how the font is represented in HTML code, select a font size that is variable like 'em' rather than a fixed font size like points or pixels.

Open links in the same window

A common accessibility issue faced by bloggers is making a link that opens in a new window. Bloggers often prefer this option as it opens a new website while still keeping the blog on the screen. However, for people using assistive technologies a new window opening can make it very confusing. Allow users to go to your link without opening a new window as the user can always return to your blog using the 'back' button in their web browser.

BLOGGING ACCESSIBILITY QUICK REFERENCE

- BlogSpot
- Blogger Help (BlogSpot)
- Wordpress.com
- Wordpress.com Forum
- American Foundation for the Blind blogging tips
- Accessible blogs
- Tech tips for blogging – University of Washington
- How to add alt text to your Blogger images

    Other useful reference sites
    http://www.digitalqatar.net/2010/03/17/qatar-is-blogging/ (Arabic and English)

- http://blog.iloveqatar.net/2008/11/qatars-top-5-blogs/

- http://websitesetupguide.com/basic/blog-wordpress.htm?gclid=CPrhmvCkmbICFcEc6wodm0kAzw

- http://at-techtalk.blogspot.com/ Assistive technology Blog created by Anirban Lahiri senior AT specialist, Mada.

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