

PARTICIPATION IN SOCIAL MEDIA BY THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED

ABSTRACT

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In this paper we describe the current state of the use of social media among visually impaired people in Norway. Here the term “visually impaired” or VI refers to both blind and partially sighted individuals. We present results from a telephone survey conducted with VI. The survey results are analysed in light of results from a recent qualitative study. The qualitative study gives a detailed picture of users’ viewpoints and challenges with regard to the use of social media. The outcome is a detailed description of the current level of participation in social media by visually impaired people.

Research shows that ICT often is designed in a way that makes it difficult to use for persons with disabilities, such as visual impairment [1-4]. This also applies to the design of social media [5, 6]. A telephone survey was conducted in December 2010 among 150 visually impaired people in Norway. The aim of the survey was to investigate the use of mobile phones, mobile Internet, social media and everyday technologies such as ticket machines, vending machines and queuing systems by VI users. Among the results were that that 85% of VI between 15-24 years use Facebook weekly or more often [7]. A national survey show that 89% among the general Norwegian population between 15-29 years use Facebook weekly or more often [8]. Thus, for teenagers and young adults, the Facebook usage of the VI group is not far behind that of their sighted peers

We allege that although VI still is lagging behind the general population, there has been a dramatic increase in the use of social media among visually impaired during the last couple of years. We identify some major reasons for the increased participation; namely a combination of easier access through mobile web interfaces, the proliferation of using social media among the general population and the opportunity social media offers VI users to be present and participate in the same arenas as others. Results from a recent study among disabled people highlights the challenges of using social media by visually impaired people [5]. Some of the current challenges are caused by frequent interface changes, such as is often created with the use of AJAX technology, a core component of many Web 2.0 applications. This poses technical challenges for the assistive technology applications as well as learning challenges for the users. Many visually impaired people experience difficulties maintaining an overall picture because the interfaces are complex. Among the other documented challenges are the use of Captcha and also the use of special characters such as emoticons. It seems that, despite these challenges, VI users go to great lengths in order to be able to participate in the same arenas and on an equal footing with the general population [5].

Since many VI prefers the mobile web interfaces, it seems appropriate to further develop and emphasise the combination of accessibility requirements with mobile web design guidelines for social media.

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Author biographical notes

Kristin S. Fuglerud (MSc) is a Senior Research Scientist and head of the e-Inclusion team at Norwegian Computing Center (www.nr.no). Her primary research interests are universal design in ICT, usability and accessibility, human-computer interaction and user-centred systems development. She has worked closely with various user groups, including cognitively impaired, elderly and visually impaired people. Fuglerud has managed and participated in several Norwegian and international research projects. She is also a PhD candidate in universal design at the University of Oslo.

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Mr. Morten Tollefsen (MSc) has a master degree in computer science and worked as a researcher at the University of Oslo. Tollefsen founded MediaLT in 1999. His interests are human computer interaction, assistive technology and web. Tollefsen has managed and participated in several Norwegian and international projects including: electronic picture books, ICT centre for visually impaired in Bhutan, speech recognition in multimodal user interfaces, computer games and multiple disabilities, ECDL-PD and other EU-projects.

Mr. Birkir R. Gunnarsson was born in Reykjavik, Iceland in 1977. Totally blind since age 5 he has used all manner of assistive technology for over 25 years. He holds BS degrees in Computer Science and Economics from Yale University (2002) and has 5 years of professional programming experience. Since 2008 Birkir has worked as the Web Accessibility Officer for the Iceland Association for the Blind as well as technology and educational consultant for the Iceland National Resource Center for the Blind.