KELLY MAHONEY: We're happy to have you here today. We're excited for this presentation on accessible social media. My name is Kelly. I'm from 3Play Media. Just a brief description of myself, I am a young white woman with long brown hair pulled back, wearing a white-colored shirt.

I'm joined today by Alexa Heinrich, an award-winning social media manager in Central Florida for St. Petersburg College. She's also the creator of the website's Accessible Social Media and Social Media Tea and the author of *Accessible Social-- A Beginner's Guide to Creating Inclusive Social Media Content.*

She's a passionate advocate for creating accessible and inclusive content for social media. And she's given presentations on the subject to brands, organizations, and conferences around the world, including Harvard University, the National ADA Symposium, and the US Congressional Progressive Caucus. And with that, I'll hand it off to Alexa, who has a wonderful presentation prepared for you all.

ALEXA HEINRICH: Hello, everyone. I'm very excited to be here. A quick note on my appearance, I am a young white woman with very short, cropped, dark hair and a floral blouse.

I'm excited to talk to everyone today. I'm going to go ahead and turn my camera off, just because it gives my WiFi one less thing to do because that's the reality we live in. And then I will start sharing my screen. So let's get started here.

All right, so this is Accessible Social. I'm very excited to talk about this. So if you have any questions, make sure to drop them in the Q&A as we move along.

Now, when it comes to accessibility, many digital marketers want to know what makes it important for social media and what it means to be inclusive online. Not everyone experiences or navigates digital spaces the same way. There are millions of people with disabilities who rely on assistive technology and practices to access digital content.

There are four distinct reasons why accessibility matters. Inclusive best practices can have a direct impact on your marketing efforts and affect how many people you reach with your digital content. Like with a brick-and-mortar location or your website, you also want to make sure that your social media is meeting current accessibility guidelines.

It's also important to note that everyone, at some point or another, will be affected by disability, either through age, illness or injury. Many brands and organizations are trying to focus more on diversity, equity, and inclusion work. And disability is actually something that impacts every demographic in every area of DEI. And of course, you should just care about the experience that your followers have when they engage with your organization or brand on social media.

According to a November 2021 report from the World Health Organization, an estimated 15% of the global population has some sort of disability. This number could also be much larger because not everyone is comfortable disclosing that they have a disability. A wide range of disabilities exist in the world, including physical, cognitive, learning, spinal, psychological, and sensory. For the purposes of this presentation, I will mostly be focusing on sensory disabilities that affect a person's hearing or vision.

Disability is diverse, and it comes in different forms. Most people think of permanent states when disability is mentioned, such as vision or hearing loss that cannot be medically treated or reversed. But disability is the only diverse community that you can actually join and leave. Some individuals are born with their disability. Others become disabled later in life.

It's a full-spectrum of possibilities and scenarios. A person could have a temporary impairment due to an injury like a bruised eye or an illness such as losing your hearing from an ear infection. Someone could also have a situational impairment, which means they're affected by their environment or circumstances, like having trouble seeing a screen in different levels of lighting or hearing audio in a crowded room.

There are also episodic disabilities, which are disabilities that have no discernible pattern. They can affect you at any given time and change how you interact with the world. Examples would be migraines, vertigo, chronic pain, asthma, and some forms of mental illness like PTSD and bipolar disorder.

So all this is important to keep in mind as we talk about social media. It's not the same situation for everyone. So you can't think, why would someone be on Instagram if they're blind or on YouTube if they're deaf? That's not always a black-and-white matter.

When you don't create or publish accessible social media content, that means you're potentially excluding a huge part of your audience from your messaging and missing out on important conversions, conversations, and connections. If your social media content isn't accessible, you could also leave yourself open to legal trouble. While most digital accessibility lawsuits focus on the websites of brands and companies, it's not unrealistic to think that social media platforms and apps will soon face legal scrutiny as well.

In 2021 alone, there were more than 4,000 cases filed in the United States that focused on digital accessibility, a 15% increase from 2020. Currently, at least 23 countries have governmental policies related to web accessibility, including the United States, Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, China, and New Zealand.

It's best to be proactive when it comes to digital compliance. And marketers should reference the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, WCAG, from the World Wide Web Consortium, W3C, to make sure they're meeting current standards for digital accessibility. These are the most universal set of standards we currently have for digital accessibility around the globe.

Above all, you should be implementing accessibility best practices because you care about your audience and removing barriers on social media. Now that you know why you should be creating accessible social media content, it's time to learn how. I'm going to take us through accessible practices for copy and formatting, images of visuals, and audio and video.

Our first section will cover accessible best practices for copy and formatting. I'll talk about hashtags, post formatting, emoji, alternative characters, and ASCII art. This is probably the easiest tip I'll give you throughout the entire presentation. When it comes to social media's favorite conversation device, make sure to capitalize the first letter in each word of your compound hashtags.

This method is sometimes referred to as title case, Pascal case, and my favorite name for it, camel case. The capital letters help assistive devices denote the separate words, allowing them to pronounce compound hashtags correctly and not as one long mish-mash word.

Camel case is also easier for literally everyone to read, no matter the status of their vision. This formatting can also be applied to your Twitter handle to make that accessible. And it could save your brand from embarrassing PR moments as well. Just look up Susan Boyle hashtag fail later if you want an excellent example of why camel case is a good idea.

An often overlooked aspect of accessibility in relation to social media is formatting. For social media, this means how you lay out your posts and tweets using spaces, tabs, and hard returns. Because most social media platforms don't really offer formatting options, some users will find ways to manipulate their content to achieve the formatted look they want.

This kind of forced formatting is commonly seen in tweets where the author has used multiple spaces, tabs, and hard returns to make their content appear in two columns. My example tweet here looks like it's in two columns. However, the blue arrows I've placed between the columns shows that tabs are used to create this forced formatting.

A screen reader would follow the path of the blue arrows because there's no true gutter in the tweet that tells it to do otherwise. Therefore, the content gets read out of order. I'm going to use my phone's text-to-speech program to demonstrate what this example tweet sounds like. And I'll do this with several other examples throughout the presentation. I encourage you to close your eyes and just listen. Ready? Here we go.

SCREEN READER: This is the path of please stop formatting your screen reader follows tweets to look like this just when you force your for the sake of viral memes tweets into two columns. It's not accessible. Thanks.

ALEXA HEINRICH: Until platforms add formatting options, you should compose your social media content knowing it will be read left to right or right to left in a single column by assistive devices and programs. You should also be aware of how you use upper and lowercase letters. Some internet users will type in studly case to indicate mocking sarcasm in their content.

Studly case is when you alternate every letter between uppercase and lowercase. It's also known as varied case or SpongeBob case, due to a popular meme featuring the Nickelodeon character. The varied letter case makes it exceptionally hard for a screen reader to properly read the words and can create a confusing experience for users, as demonstrated here.

SCREEN READER: Instagram, today we are introducing face filters. Snapchat T zero day we're in TR zero do see and GF face fee el TR five.

ALEXA HEINRICH: That didn't exactly make a lot of sense because of the case that was used as well as some letters being replaced by numbers. So I do not recommend that you do this. You should type in normal case whenever possible. We're going to move on to my favorite section, emoji.

Now, everyone loves those colorful icons. But did you know that each individual emoji has its own unique description assigned to it? When an assistive device or program comes across an emoji in written content, it will use the icon's assigned description to accurately describe it to the user.

Many emoji also have descriptions and appearances that differ across platforms, devices, and browsers. This particular emoji is known as abandoned house, old house, haunted house, and derelict house. Even emoji with skin tones get additional information added to their base description to keep them unique. If a screen reader were to read this line of emoji, it would say, raised hand, raised hand-- light skin tone, raised hand-- medium-light skin tone, raised hand-- medium skin tone, raised hand-- medium-dark skin tone, and raised hand-- dark skin tone.

You should keep in mind that because a screen reader picks up on the descriptions of emoji, the excessive use of them is not advised. It's also worth noting that some assistive devices will shorten a line of emoji if only one specific icon is used, uninterrupted by other icons, characters, or spaces.

For instance, this group of emoji would probably be read as, "24 rockets" instead of a screen reader saying the word "rocket" 24 times. It's best to put emoji at the end of your content. Otherwise, you could make your message confusing, like with this example tweet that has a few emojis sprinkled throughout the content.

Once a text-to-speech program translated the emoji, the content ran into several clarity issues, as demonstrated in this short screen recording.

SCREEN READER: Accessible Social at Carl Camel Case. Having a great time on vacation in Colorado snow-capped mountain. Going to get some prime skiing in tomorrow sky are going downhill before ending the day with hot cocoa hot beverage by the fire with my BFF women with multiple skin tones holding hands.

ALEXA HEINRICH: The emoji descriptions obviously made the content a little confusing. Using emoji as bullet points is quite popular on social media as well. But unfortunately, using emoji that way could make your points confusing if the icon descriptions are competing with the content, as shown in this second example tweet.

SCREEN READER: Accessible Social at Carl Camel Case. Keys to a great keynote speech. Face with tears of joy. Don't be afraid to crack jokes world map. Going off script is OK mouth. Have confident body language.

ALEXA HEINRICH: As demonstrated, the three emoji descriptions interrupted the flow of the copy and made it a little difficult to understand. I also didn't use any periods on the end of my points, which is why the screen reader read it as one long run-on sentence. So punctuation like commas and periods does impact the flow of your copy, which is another thing to keep in mind. It tells a screen reader when to pause.

An excellent resource for digital content creators who want to use emoji in smart and strategic ways is emojipedia.org. This website lists every known emoji along with their different appearances and descriptions across platforms, devices, and browsers.

So when it comes to emoji on social media, you should use them in moderation, double-check their description before using them, place them at the end of posts and tweets to avoid clarity issues, and try to resist change in the color and customizable emoji unless a specific skin tone is necessary for context. That last tip is for when you manage social media professionally for a brand or organization. I would never presume to tell someone what emoji skin tones they should use to represent their race or ethnicity on their personal social media.

Another best practice for copyrighting is one that focuses on a trend that has become quite popular on social media in recent years. Content creators have started using external websites to generate alternative characters to make their posts appear in different weights, styles, and fonts. You'll notice that the yellow has highlighted text that's in a different font from Twitter's default font.

Unfortunately, some assistive devices cannot decipher these characters and will typically skip over them, as shown in this first example tweet. You'll notice that I used alternative characters for the first three lines of text and then Twitter's default font for the latter half of the tweet. This is how my phone's text-to-speech program handled it.

SCREEN READER: Accessible Social at Carl Camel Case. Unfortunately, not all assistive devices can read these alternative characters, making them inaccessible.

ALEXA HEINRICH: My text-to-speech program completely skipped the first three lines that read "custom fonts are so fun. They give your content extra pizzazz! And you can even bold your text." This was because they could not identify them as readable characters. Even worse are the alternative characters that assistive devices translate into indistinguishable noises or completely different languages, like in this second example tweet.

SCREEN READER: Accessible Social at Carl Camel Case, circled Latin capital letters. [JIBBERISH]

ALEXA HEINRICH: I apologize to the captioner who probably didn't know how to caption that because, what was it saying? While I only showcased a few seconds of that tweet, it actually took almost 2 and 1/2 minutes for my phone's text-to-speech program to read the entire post aloud when logically, it should only take a few seconds.

Using alternative characters can also negatively impact the engagement and searchability of your content if a platform doesn't recognize them as readable characters. In my test feed to the left, I've used five different alternative character sets to write the word "lackadaisical" five times. When I did an advanced search on Twitter a few minutes later that specifically combed my account for the word "lackadaisical," Twitter was unable to locate my test tweet, even though it was at the very top of my profile's feed. Content creators should only use the default fonts and formatting options readily available on the platforms.

Another popular trend on social media that involves the use of characters is called ASCII art. It uses letters, numbers, punctuation, and other characters to create illustrative memes. ASCII art is used more and more by major brands as they try to appear relatable and hip with their followers. However, ASCII art is not accessible for screen-reader users.

Assistive devices are programmed to read characters and punctuation marks as they originally intended. They cannot properly discern when characters are used to create illustrations. And when read aloud, ASCII art normally sounds something like this.

SCREEN READER: Bullet underscore bullet, x, bullet underscore bullet, greater than reversed not sine black square, black square, reversed not signed black square underscore black square, why.

ALEXA HEINRICH: So the art is clever. But it doesn't make much sense once a screen reader gets a hold of it. You may have also noticed that the screen doesn't actually say each character. And that's because there are common and uncommon punctuation.

So obviously, a screen reader isn't going to say every single comma, period, or apostrophe that it comes across because they're considered common, as are parentheses. Whereas, some of the other characters here like the black squares and underscores are not common, so it will say those aloud.

ASCII art formatting can also shift between different devices and browsers, meaning you could create an ASCII illustration for the desktop version of Twitter. And it may look a little different on the mobile version of Twitter or TweetDeck because the characters will have moved around.

This next section is typically the one that I get the most questions about, How to be Accessible With Images and Visuals. Images play a key part on social media. But how does someone with a serious vision disability experience a picture?

Assistive devices and programs need alt text, a descriptive physical summary of the image, in order to accurately describe it to the user. Take these two tweets for example. They are seemingly identical, except that one had alt text added to it and the other did not. Here's what the first tweet sounds like through my phone's text-to-speech program.

SCREEN READER: Accessible Social at Carl Camel Case. Alt text is incredibly important to making images accessible. Image, cluster of peachy pink flowers covered in droplets of water after a thunderstorm, 46 seconds ago.

ALEXA HEINRICH: Versus what the second tweet sounds like.

SCREEN READER: Accessible Social at Carl Camel Case. Alt text is incredibly important to making images accessible, image, 20 seconds ago.

ALEXA HEINRICH: The first tweet obviously had alt text applied to it while the second one did not, which made a noticeable difference in the text-to-speech experience. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Pinterest all allow users to write custom alt text for their uploaded images. Custom alt text is always preferred to automatic alt text that's been written by an AI system because auto-generated alt text is normally vague and not descriptive or accurate enough to be considered accessible.

The alt text field on the desktop version of Facebook can be found by clicking Edit in the upper-left corner of an image before posting it to your Facebook page, profile, or group, and typing the alt text in the appropriate field. If you're in the Facebook mobile app, you'll find the alt text function under the three dots in the upper-right corner of your uploaded image. This can be deceptive since there's also an Edit button like there is on the desktop. But alt text is not housed there on the app because Facebook is Facebook and makes interesting decisions.

You may notice a warning flash that alt text is normally less than 100 characters. Your alt text should be as long as you need it to be in order to make your image accessible. So you can ignore that warning. It's not going to do anything.

On the desktop version and mobile app of Twitter, along with TweetDeck, the alt text option appears with images as Add Description or plus Alt. You can also add alt text to GIFs on Twitter if you use their built-in GIF library on the mobile and desktop versions of the platform. For the Instagram app, when you get to the final screen before publishing your post, tap Advanced Settings. Scroll to Accessibility near the bottom. Click Write Alt Text and then add your image description in the provided field.

If you have a carousel of images, there will be a slot for each image on that final screen. Once you've written your alt text, you can click Done in the upper-right corner. The alt text feature is actually easier to find on desktop Instagram than it is on the app. You'll find a dropdown labeled Accessibility just below the caption area on the final publishing screen. Click the dropdown and the expanded view will show each of your uploaded images with a field next to them where you can write your alt text.

While Creator Studio doesn't always have an alt text option for Facebook posts, you can use it to post to Instagram using that platform's alt text field. Just make sure that your Instagram account is a creator or business account and linked to a published Facebook page. You'll find the alt text field under Advanced Settings after you upload an image to your post in Creator Studio.

LinkedIn has one of the easiest alt text fields to find. As soon as you upload an image to your post, the option to add alt text appears below your image in the Edit Your Photo window. Just be conscious of the fact that LinkedIn has a 300 character limit for its alt text.

So you'll want to be intentional about the image that you choose, lest you run out of room for describing them. But this is hopefully changing. We did log a feedback note with LinkedIn and the CEO of LinkedIn. So hopefully, they'll increase the character count to something a little bit more manageable.

Finding the alt text field for Pinterest is also quite easy to find. But it's only an option for new pins that you upload directly to your account. You cannot retroactively add alt text to someone else's pin that you want to share or repin to your own board. When you create a new pin, you'll see a button labeled Add Alt Text to the right of the image you upload.

This is a small sampling of a few third-party management sites and their alt text publishing capabilities. Unfortunately, only Sked Social can currently post to Instagram using the app's alt text field due to API restrictions. But, as mentioned previously, you can use Facebook Creator Studio to post Instagram with alt text. If you use a third-party management system other than Sked Social and want to continue using it to publish to Instagram, you can simply write your image description directly in the caption area of your post to make it accessible.

Here are a few tips for writing effective alt text along with some examples. Write in plain language. You should focus on describing the physical aspects of your chosen images. Resist the urge to be ornate or overly effusive with your descriptions.

You want to avoid having your own feelings or opinions about an image interfere with your ability to write accurate alt text. Try to be as objective as possible. For this image, I wrote, "a man and woman kiss. The man wears a tuxedo, and the woman wears a white wedding dress and a veil that swirls around them."

Focus on accuracy, not length. I normally make my alt text about the length of one tweet. But that's also dependent on the image that I choose. The more complex the image, the longer the alt text will more than likely be, especially if the image features any copy.

Writing alt text is a completely subjective exercise, no matter how objective you try to be. And it'll vary image to image and creator to creator. Just focus on making your alt text as accurate as possible and you should do just fine. For this image, I wrote, "Ferris Wheel lit up under a starry night sky at a carnival crowded with people."

Consider positional information. Think about the view that someone has when they're looking at your image. Is it a partial view of someone sitting at a table? Do you have a bird's-eye view of a snow-covered forest? Directional and positional information can add important context to your alt text. For this image, I wrote, "Worm's eye view of 10 palm trees swaying in the wind."

Exclude writing "image of" or "photo of" in your alt text. It's already assumed that your alt text will be for a photo or image. And a screen reader will more than likely say "image" before or after reading your alt text on social media.

However, if your image file is something like an illustration, a painting, or even a screenshot, you can include that in your alt text because it gives the user a better idea of how to visualize the image. For this image, I wrote, "Colorful illustration of five different doctors working on and researching an oversized kidney model."

Use proper nouns and names when appropriate. If a well-known person, place, or thing is in your image and it adds context to your content, go ahead and name it. I work for a college in Florida, and we frequently feature photos with our president, Dr. Tonjua Williams, in them. And I always name her in the alt text because she is well-known in the campus community, so it just makes sense to name her.

For my example image here, I wrote, "Mount Rushmore is shown under a hazy blue sky. The cliffside in front of it is dotted with evergreen trees." You don't need to describe every detail. If something in the image is significant to understanding the whole picture or post, describe it. If it's not, skip it and save your characters for the important stuff. Focus on describing details that are contextually important to your entire post.

For this image, I wrote, "A busy intersection in New York City is filled with cars and people at night. Bright digital billboards cover the buildings." Use personal identifiers when needed. If the race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or another identifier for a person is relevant to the overall context of the image, feel free to add it.

It also helps in this instance to think of your content as a whole. What information is included in the written part of your post? As the author, do you feel that extra identifiers in your alt text would add contextual value for the rest of your content?

So for my example image, I envisioned-- because I work for a college, we do a lot of different programs with younger students, and we do a lot of programs with young students of color. So I envisioned this for one of our programs where we specifically help young women of color get interested in STEM careers. So for my example alt text, I wrote, "Young Black girl with long curly hair sits in front of a large desktop computer while learning about different careers in technology."

If you're unsure about how the subject of an image identifies or don't want to assume how they identify, just stick to neutral terms such as "person" instead of "man" or "woman." For someone's race or ethnicity, describe the physical aspects of the person, like their skin tone or hair. Whoa, hold on a second. Sorry, my screen just flipped out here. One moment, technical difficulties.

There we go. Sorry about that folks. It's done that before. I don't know why. And then for someone's race or ethnicity, describe the physical aspects of the person like their skin tone or hair. Much like the unique descriptions of emoji with variable skin tones, you can use descriptors such as light-skinned, medium-skinned, or dark-skinned to describe people in an image.

Of course, the best way to ascertain how someone in your image identifies is to ask them if you are able to do so. Just make sure that you explain to your subject that you're trying to accurately represent them in your content. So I always default to asking the subjects of my images, when possible. And when I can't, I just keep them as neutral as possible because I feel more comfortable doing that. So it's really up to you and your comfort level when it comes to personal identifiers.

You should avoid abbreviations whenever possible. It's better to type out the full name or title of a person, place, organization, or initiative because screen readers don't always read abbreviations like acronyms and initialisms correctly. Lesser-known abbreviations also don't add a lot of context to an image.

If you use an initialism in your alt text, or any of your content for that matter, type out the full name or title first and then place spaces or periods in between each letter of the initialism so that the screen reader says it properly. An initialism is an abbreviation consisting of initial letters pronounced separately. Examples would be KPI, NYC, and FBI.

An acronym is an abbreviation formed from the initial letters of other words and pronounced as a word. Examples would be NASA, SCUBA, and FOMO. For this image, I wrote, "A group of about twenty people sit in rows of chairs at a session for the 2021 Higher Education Social Media (H.E.S.M.) Conference."

Add keywords for improved SEO. This piece of advice is more for images on websites than social media. But it's a good tip to keep in mind just in case search engines ever evolve to pick up alt texts on social media images. To my knowledge, they currently do not.

However, keywords in the alt text field on Instagram posts do supposedly affect search results within the app. Just make sure that you're prioritizing the accurate description of your image, first and foremost. Alt text should always be treated as an accessibility feature and not an SEO growth hack.

If you can logically work your keywords into your alt text, go for it. If not, that's what hashtags are for. For this image, I wrote, "Partial view of a man wearing black Chuck Taylor high-top shoes, denim shorts, and a gray t-shirt sitting on his luggage on the side of a country road while the sun sets behind him."

And avoid excessive flattened copy. If you're posting a copy-heavy graphic like an event flyer or an image that has text overlaid on it, you'll need to add alt text for all the flattened copy because the screen reader will not be able to read it. Flattened copy is text that has been turned into an object upon being exported from whatever program it was created in.

You may also hear or see it called embedded copy or outlined text. If you drag your cursor over the text on an image and it does not highlight the individual words or characters, that means the text is no longer readable. Therefore, it's also not actionable because it cannot be clicked. JPEG, PNG, and GIF files do not support readable text.

Usually, assistive devices and programs can only transcribe readable text and cannot pick up flattened copy. For this image, I wrote, "View of a man from behind. He stands atop a hill with his arms outstretched, looking over a green valley under a cloudy blue sky. Text over him reads freedom."

Now that you have a better understanding of how to write effective alt text, let's talk about what shouldn't go in your alt text. First off, emoji icons. They are typically added to social media content to give it added visual interest. So adding them to alt text makes no sense and can result in confusing alt text, depending on the icons that you use, as we discussed earlier.

Links. If you put a link in your alt text, it's not going to be clickable and a screen reader will just read it out like any other word in your alt text. Links should go in the written part of your post or tweet, not the alt text. Hashtags. Like with links, hashtags aren't clickable in alt texts and do not typically add additional context that would make your image description more accessible.

Additional symbols like those for trademark, copyright, and registered don't make an image description more accessible and will get read aloud by a screen reader, so avoid using them. And nonessential information. Details like strings of random keywords, photographer credits, promotional information, calls to action, hidden messages, or any other information that doesn't make your image description more accessible should not be included in your alt text.

In our final section, we'll go over making audio and video accessible. I know everyone is probably thinking of captions, but I want to talk about video descriptions briefly. First, there are audio descriptions, which are a form of narration used to provide info surrounding key visual elements in videos for blind and low-vision consumers.

They're an accessible option on popular streaming services like Netflix and Hulu and Disney+. As an example, I have this screenshot from my Netflix account. The audio description option, when available for a show or movie, is housed under the same menu as captions and subtitles. You'll find it to the left, when available.

An audio description adds an additional audio track to a video that can be toggled on and off by supported platforms. Unfortunately, traditional audio descriptions are not yet supported by YouTube, Vimeo, or most social media platforms because you cannot upload multiple audio tracks with a single video. However, YouTube is supposedly working on a feature that could change that for its platform soon.

Until then, an option for making accessible videos with audio descriptions for those platforms is to create two versions of your video, one with an audio description integrated with the rest of your videos audio, and one without. Now, audio descriptions are very, very difficult, not only to implement, but also just to write. There are people who have full time jobs for audio descriptions. So what I actually suggest is written descriptions, which I'm going to go over next.

This is another option for making the visual elements of your video accessible for blind and low-vision users. And you would create a written description and have it available as readable text with your video. Gucci did this for their Gucci Gift 2020 Holiday Campaign. The campaign's promotional video featured a '90s office throwing a retro '70s-themed party.

The iconic fashion brand wrote a brief visual description of the video in the caption area on their YouTube channel and Facebook page. The social media team for the show *Wheel of Time* loves to post quick video snippets on the show's Twitter account. But many of their videos include little to no dialogue. In order to make the show's digital content more accessible, the social media team will thread a written description to each tweet that features a video.

They have been commended by many of their fans and followers for creating inclusive content like this. It's also very impressive because you can't currently schedule threads unless you use some sketchy third-party extension, which I don't recommend because they're not usually that good. So the *Wheel of Time* team does all of these threaded video descriptions manually in live time, which is very impressive that they manage to do that every single time.

And finally, we're going to chat about captions. Now, no matter where a video is posted, whether it's on a website or social media, it should have captions-- sometimes called subtitles-- so that deaf and hard-of-hearing users can access and enjoy the content. Captions can also provide a better experience for a viewer with a learning disability and attention deficit or autism.

They're also helpful if you don't understand the spoken language, you're in a noisy environment, a video has poor audio, or if a speaker is talking too fast or has an accent. It's also a well-known statistic that 85% of users watch or begin watching videos with sound off, making captioning a good marketing move in addition to being an accessibility best practice.

I am personally one of those people. I have found that it's easier for me to understand information when it's in a visual format rather than audio format. So captions make video content easier for me to absorb.

Captions come in two forms, closed and open. Closed captioning can be toggled on and off, based on the preferences of the viewer. And it's typically an option on platforms like Netflix and YouTube. Open captions, on the other hand, are permanently burned onto a video and always visible. They're also known as embedded captions or burned captions.

Open captions are normally used when closed captioning isn't an option or if the content creator wants more creative freedom over the look and feel of their captions. Something else that's important to note with closed versus open captioning-- closed captions, you can typically move them around and resize them with your screen. So if you need to make them bigger, you can make them bigger. Open captioning, you cannot do that.

So the preference really is to use closed captioning. But if that's not available, you would default to open captioning. An easy way to add closed captioning to a video is to use YouTube. To do this, you're going to upload your video to your YouTube channel as unlisted so then you can work on it freely, it won't be listed on your channel, and it won't show up in search.

You're then going to allow YouTube time to generate auto-captions. You'll know when this process is done because you'll see an option in the Subtitles tab to duplicate and edit those captions. You want to click the Duplicate and Edit and then edit the actual auto-captions.

You're going to revise and publish them. So auto captions on YouTube are decent. But they don't include punctuation. They don't include capitalization. So you should always edit the auto captions and never just publish them as is.

After you've published-- after you finished editing the auto captions, click the Publish button in the upper-right of the window. You're then going to delete the auto-captions for the video so that your edited captions are the only available captions. And then allow YouTube time to process your edited captions and sync their timing with the video, which shouldn't take any time at all.

And then once YouTube has done that, you can finish by switching your video to Public, if you want it to be public. This is personally how I like to create closed captions because it's free and YouTube does a bulk of the work for me. Another perk to creating your captions on YouTube is that you can download the SRT captions file for your video and use it if you upload your video directly to any platform that supports uploading SRT files with videos.

You can also use the SRT captions file to create open captions in some video production programs. So YouTube is very convenient for this. I have a lot of videos on my YouTube that just aren't listed because I just want to use YouTube to create the SRT files for me. So love using YouTube this way.

And then open captions are the practical option when closed captions aren't readily available. There are several great and affordable captioning apps out there, including MixedCaptions, Cliopmatic, AutoCap, Kapwing, Clips, and Threads. TikTok and now Instagram also have a unique text-to-speech feature that allows you to narrate any open captions you add to your content using the text tool within the app, as demonstrated here.

SCREEN READER: Did you know TikTok has a text-to-speech feature? Type your text and then press it. You'll see a text-to-speech option that you can customize the timing of.

ALEXA HEINRICH: All right I am done bombarding everyone with information. Thank you for tuning in. We're going to head into the Q&A portion of the session now. But if you have feedback or more questions for me after we've all logged off for the day, feel free to connect with me online at accessible-social.com or find me on social media. Or you can email me.

I'm always more than happy to chat about digital accessibility. And the Accessible Social Website is packed with additional information that I couldn't even fathom to put into a single presentation, and there's more demonstrations, tips, and examples there. So please feel free to use it to your heart's content to continue your education about accessible social media content.

I always feel like I've run a marathon after I've done that presentation.

KELLY MAHONEY: That's very understandable. It was a great presentation. Thank you so much, Alexa. We've definitely gotten some questions. So I'll go ahead and start reading them off from the chat. Someone asks, "Are there screen readers or assistive devices that introduce emoji by just saying, 'emoji'?"

ALEXA HEINRICH: I think you can program some of them to do that. The text-to-speech program that I use and that you heard used throughout the presentation was just voiceover on my iPhone. So most smartphones have those built-in already. So with Android devices, I believe it's called TalkBack.

So you can toggle the preferences with how fast it goes, does it read hashtags, so on and so forth. So I'm sure there are devices that would say "emoji." But I don't think that would make your content any clearer if you suddenly heard "emoji" and then a bunch of words after it. So it just depends on the device or the program that you're using.

KELLY MAHONEY: Someone else is asking, "These are great examples of accessibility on social media. And sometimes, the way someone types their message could be hard to [INAUDIBLE] What would be your thoughts on providing two versions of a post, one that is accessible for those who may be using assistive devices and the other one that is more for [INAUDIBLE]

ALEXA HEINRICH: I feel that that's still very exclusionary. You're basically segmenting people into groups rather than including everyone in one single group. So I really-- people have asked me before, do you feel that accessibility stifles creativity when it comes to creating content? And my answer is, definitely not.

Accessibility forces you to be more creative because you have to think about your audience in a broader sense. So it's not just your lived experience that you're creating content for. You want to include everyone. It makes you more creative. It makes you think outside the box, outside of what society has deemed the status quo.

So no, I don't think that you should create two posts, one that's accessible and one that's not, because I can guarantee you, your brand will be lit up by the disabled community. They will not be pleased with that.

KELLY MAHONEY: And now we've got all this great how-to information on how to make that one post even more accessible. Someone complimented your description skills. Do you have any more resources, books or classes or websites, that people can go to to learn more about this. I know you also [INAUDIBLE] your own socials, so plug those again if you want.

ALEXA HEINRICH: So I do have a description of some alt text additional resources on the Accessible Social website. I've been trying to build a context learning. Because you can look at an image and describe it, but it's very different when you're given an image and you have written content going along with it. Because you may use the same image for two very different posts and describe it two very different ways depending on what your objectives are, what you're trying to promote.

So I've been trying to give contextual situations. So like, you're working for a men's high-fashion brand and you want to promote to Gen Z. And then I have an image that I describe based on that context. So I've been trying to do that more.

A really good way is to just look around Twitter now because we do have a visible alt text badge where you can hover or click it, depending on what device you're on, and see what someone else has written for their alt text. And I do pull some really good examples that I found around the internet onto a page on the Accessible Social website that I really liked.

NASA, the last few days, has been releasing these gorgeous images from the Webb telescope. And their image descriptions of space are basically a love letter to space exploration. And they're so detailed and beautiful. And I highly suggest everyone checking it out.

KELLY MAHONEY: Great. Thank you. Another question from the same person, "What is the best practice for links in posts." At 3Play, I think we tend to bold them so that they stand out more. But do you have any more tips and tricks on how to make them accessible?

ALEXA HEINRICH: So usually with social media, if you can't do a link preview-- so like when we post a link on Facebook, it generates a preview. That's what your screen reader is more than likely going to hit off of because it doesn't need to stay in there. You want to do a vanity URL, something short, something easy, just because a screen reader is going to spit out the whole link, more than likely.

So people ask me, why did you do accessible-social.com? And I was like, well, one, someone had already taken accessiblesocial.com. But two, I liked the idea of making my URL a little bit easier for a screen reader to access, because it does have the dash so it's not going to read it like one big word.

But really, it's a matter of making sure that you have short links or vanity links, bit.ly if possible, just to make it a little bit easier for a screen reader to spit it out. Otherwise, it's going to be long and very garbled. When it comes to hypertext, so bolding links, you can also do that. You just want to make sure that you're not doing--

This is kind of outside of social media, but I do know about it. You want to do something that's not going to open in another window or tab because that can be very jarring for someone who has vision impairments because there's no warning. So you'd have to be able to warn them, which in some cases you can.

But you usually don't want to do something like that. So links-- I had built a whole web page for links on my website because it's-- I learn more about it all the time. Most of my expertise is in social media content, but I've started learning more about web accessibility as a whole.

KELLY MAHONEY: Right, I'm sure that would come by default as a part of it.

ALEXA HEINRICH: Yeah. The curriculum to study for CPAC certification is long and daunting.

KELLY MAHONEY: Well, best of luck to you. Another question about thinking about accessibility during the content creation process, so maybe taking a step get back from the actual posting, someone asks, "Would you recommend integrated audio described videos instead of the post-production described?"

ALEXA HEINRICH: Say that one more time.

KELLY MAHONEY: Absolutely. Someone asks, "Would you recommend using integrated audio described videos instead of post production described?" I was imagining this as scripting for the audio description in your video, if possible. What's the comparison between trying to fit it in afterwards versus--

ALEXA HEINRICH: I don't know, actually. I don't have really a lot of context for doing that. So I don't know if I can intelligently answer that question, unfortunately, I will say, when it comes to videos, something to consider with any of your content really, but I see it a lot with videos, is it's very popular to do those videos that just have graphics and there's no audio, which--

What would you do then for someone who's blind or low-vision? Because they need the audio, so if you don't have a video description going with it in your post, they're not going to hear anything. So when it comes to creating videos, I always suggest to people you want the visual element along with the audio element.

So if there's text moving across the screen, there should be narration to it in some way, so working it into a script. So I see in the chat "extended audio description adds extra length to the overall video and is fit between pauses." Yes, I highly recommend going onto whatever streaming service you prefer and checking out an audio description.

It's especially interesting on action films and shows just because there's so much going on. When you do an audio description, you can't interrupt the dialogue. So they have to fit it in between dialogue. It's very interesting. One of my apps defaults to "audio descriptions on." I don't know why. So it's always like, oh, who else is talking? It's describing the Paramount Pictures' intro, and I was like, what's going on?

So yeah, it's a very interesting experience. I also suggest turning captions on for action flicks because it gives you a great idea of what goes into writing good captions. It's not just dialogue. It's an added audio context, so sound effects, music, stuff like that. So I actually find it really interesting to watch just about everything with captions because the sound effects is really interesting.

Someone said *Daredevil* on Netflix is a good one to listen to AD. You can also search it on YouTube. Yeah, *Daredevil* is a really good one. I also like *Stargirl,* I think is a DC one. Her staff makes this weird warbling noise. And that's how I described in my head. And when I turn the captions on, it says "staff warbles."

I was like, oh, good. That's how I described it. I don't know any other noise that makes that sound. But yeah, it's really interesting to read through captions and see what people write for different sounds.

KELLY MAHONEY: Yeah, absolutely. I don't know if anyone has been watching *Stranger Things,* but I think the word "squelch" was used so many times in closed caption. So if you haven't seen *Stranger Things,* that's sort of what it's about.

I do see a couple of questions actually from a few people about Instagram and Facebook stories, the accessibility of those. Could you tell us more about how that works, any knowledge that you have on that. Specifically, people are wondering about typing text on the images and whether screen readers would be compatible with stuff like this. Or how can you make it more accessible?

ALEXA HEINRICH: The stories are very difficult because-- RIP, Twitter Fleets. They were the only story feature where you could actually write alt text. You can't do that with Instagram stories, Facebook stories. To my knowledge, you can't do it with LinkedIn stories. But who uses those?

So it's really difficult because you can have captions and you can narrate a video, so you have audio and visual, but what do you do if someone is deaf-blind? They would need readable texts for their program to pick up to translate into Braille or whatever tactile system they use because they can't rely on their hearing or their sight.

So the most that you can do to make a story accessible on Instagram or Facebook is to narrate it and have it captioned. But it's not 100% accessible. That's as accessible as it gets. Even the captions sticker on Instagram doesn't make it fully accessible because once you publish that story, those are open captions.

So they're not picked up by-- I mean, they're not picked up by my system, so they're probably not picked up by anyone else's because it's just integrated into the video. So yeah, very, very difficult.

KELLY MAHONEY: Another Instagram-related question. Someone mentions that they've seen people add alt text as the first comment or as the caption of a post. Since alt text is available on the back end, so to speak, is there a reason that people might do it this way? Is that more or less accessible for people?

ALEXA HEINRICH: So the only time that I really see that is on Instagram. And the reasoning behind that-- I personally do that on Instagram. I don't teach people that because there's a lot of back and forth about whether you should do that or not. Again, take this with the caveat of I am not blind or low-vision, so I don't rely on alt text.

But some devices, for whatever reason, struggle to pick up the alt text field on Instagram. I don't know why. When I test content with my voiceover system on Instagram, it really, really struggles. And I test it on posts where I know I've added alt text. So as a precaution, I write my image description in the caption area instead, just because I'm very paranoid.

The only problem with doing that, on Facebook and Twitter and LinkedIn, a screen reader user is going to process the written information first and then the visual. On Instagram, it's reversed. So if someone doesn't have the patience to wait to read the rest your caption and find your image description, they may just think that you didn't add alt text.

But again, it's super-complicated. I wish that it wasn't this glitchy. I don't know if it's the device or if it's Instagram. My suspicion is that it's Instagram because it's Instagram. Yeah, it's really just Instagram being fickle, I feel.

So yeah, you can write it there. You don't have to. There is an alt text field. But I personally do it because I'm an accessibility expert and I feel obligated to because I'm just waiting for someone to yell at me for not having alt text on an image.

KELLY MAHONEY: Well, we've got about three minutes here. So maybe our last question, a good note to leave off on. People are asking, "Do you any tips or recommendations for convincing higher-ups that investing in accessibility is worth it?"

ALEXA HEINRICH: Sure, so those four reasons that I listed out for why accessibility is important in the beginning. There's four points. But it makes for a really great three-point argument. I've had to use it many times on leadership at my own institution as well as faculty because they like to send me a event flyers to post on Instagram. I'm like, no. One, not accessible. Two, ugly. Don't want it.

But so my three-point argument is, one, we should just care about the experience that our followers have on social media. We should just want to be good humans and make things accessible for everyone without being asked to. In an ideal world, that would be the only argument I need. But of course, we don't live in an ideal world.

So the next argument that I go to is the marketing argument. Realistically, if you make accessible content, you reach more people. As marketers, that's all we want to do. We want to reach as many people as possible with our messaging. And accessible content helps you do that.

You caption your videos and you write alt text, more people are going to engage with those because more people can access them. If that doesn't work, I reach for the scary argument, which is, hey, we could be sued. I did list that stat that more than 4,000 web accessibility ADA cases were filed in 2021.

There's probably going to be even more from 2022 because it increases every single year. So it is better to be proactive rather than reactive when it comes to creating accessible content on any platform, whether it's your website or social media or an app. So you really just don't want to be sued.

But I like reaching for compassion first and then leading up to the scary argument. So Harvard and MIT have both been sued for inaccessible content. So they're still dealing with it, and it happened years ago. So that's my three-point argument.

KELLY MAHONEY: I appreciate the levels that we've got there.

ALEXA HEINRICH: I like in the chat I saw someone say, "getting sued is my starting point." Yeah, you can go for that. Another great way to do this is to work accessibility into your social media policy and get it approved by the legal team, because no one wants to fight with lawyers except for other lawyers.

KELLY MAHONEY: Well, that's great. I think that's a great place to end it. Thank you so much, Alexa. This has been a wonderful presentation.

ALEXA HEINRICH: Thanks for having me. Bye, everyone.