# Using Facebook when you can't see the faces

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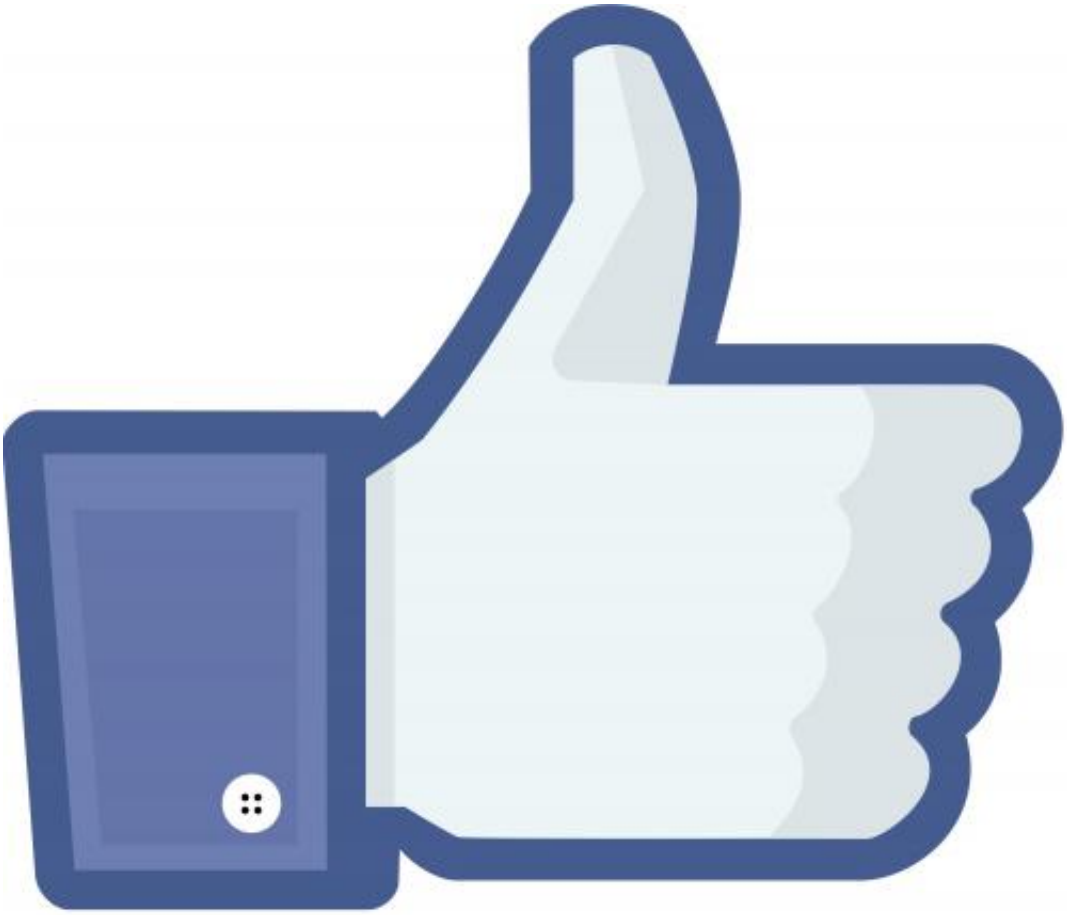

As its name implies, a lot of Facebook is about faces: Users upload 350 million photos a day, making visual content a big part of the platform's experience. But this presents challenges to visually impaired users, according to a study by Cornell information science researchers, who

suggest that the technology used on Facebook and other social media sites should be adapted to improve accessibility.

"There needs to be a discussion to find a sweet spot between people who want new ways of interacting online and the need to make content accessible to everyone," said Gilly Leshed, senior lecturer in information science. "How do you create a Web in which any user is aware of making it accessible?"

Working with the National Federation for the Blind, the researchers recruited 60 blind people to participate in a survey and telephone interviews about their experiences using Facebook and especially about interacting with visual content. The results will be presented at the 2016 ACM Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing Feb. 27-March 2 in San Francisco.

Blind people typically interact with computers using screen readers, software that converts text to speech and reads it aloud. But screen readers cannot interpret visual materials such as photos and videos, and navigation based on visual elements of a page can be difficult: How do you decide which button to click when all the buttons just say "OK"?

Blind users have developed a number of strategies to work around these problems, the researchers found. For the most part they rely on text that the person posting added to the photo. They also glean information from what other people comment, the number of "likes" the photo received, and geo-tags that indicate where the photo was taken. Sometimes they rely on friends and family to interpret visual content or to post their own photos. Although blind users upload fewer photos, in general they receive more feedback on their posts.

Some switch to the "mobile" version of a site (a trimmed-down version for phones and tablets that is less visually complex), but this usually

means losing some of the features.

The goal of the study is not to offer specific solutions but to encourage and contribute to a discussion of accessibility issues in social media, the researchers said.

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