Q&A: How social media can be better used by people with intellectual disabilities

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For Louis Kleemeyer, learning, reading and writing are more difficult because his brain was not supplied with enough oxygen at birth. Credit: Technical University Munich

A team at the TUM Think Tank is investigating how social media can be better used by people with intellectual disabilities—together with athletes from the Special Olympics World Games, which take place in Berlin from June 17 to 25. Among the project participants are Louis

Kleemeyer, for whom reading and writing is more difficult than for others, and student Lena Pöhlmann. In an interview they talk about how social media make professional life easier, why access sometimes doesn't work and how a new app could help.

Louis Kleemeyer completed training as a specialized practitioner for IT systems and is the founder of Unique United GmbH, an online platform by people with disabilities for people with disabilities. The 22-year-old also consults for companies on an inclusive working environment. He is currently a member of the Special Olympics World Games 2023 organizing team. In 2022 he was a Gold Medalist in tennis at the Special Olympics National Games. Kleemeyer has increased difficulty with learning, reading and writing since his brain received an inadequate supply of oxygen during his birth.

Lena Pöhlmann earned her bachelor's degree in public health at the University of Bremen and of social work at the Katholische Stiftungshochschule München University of Applied Sciences and studied philosophy at the Munich School of Philosophy. After several years of professional experience in rehabilitation management with the Pfennigparade Foundation, the 29-year-old is currently in the TUM Master Health Sciences program, focusing on prevention and health improvement. She is the recipient of scholarships from the Hans Böckler Foundation and the Bavarian EliteAkademie.

Louis Kleemeyer, have you used social media already today?

Kleemeyer: I was in LinkedIn, I had a look at my latest post, at who liked it and who commented on it, and I responded to the comments. And I also had a look at what the others I follow are posting, especially in my professional environment. There are a lot of people there who for

example are presenting new web pages which can help individuals with disabilities. There are certain people I always have a look at, people who could help me and the clients of my consulting firm.

So you use social media mostly in your professional life?

Kleemeyer: Of course I also watch videos on YouTube for the fun of it. But my main focus on YouTube is on learning. Which AI tools are useful for what exactly? How can you build your own business? That's always easier for me when someone explains it to me in a video, when I can see everything presented step by step instead of having to read everything and visualize it myself.

You speak very openly about your intellectual disability. Is that also the case in social media, where many people experience discrimination?

Kleemeyer: Until I was 18 years old I was reluctant to write to just anybody because I was somehow ashamed that what I write had too many spelling mistakes. Now I simply see that as a part of myself. And I've found tools that help compensate for my weaknesses, for example spell check tools that check my texts. I've only experienced mobbing on social media once up to now, and that was several years back. I think it also makes a difference how you present yourself in the internet. If you only post negative things about the disability, things can quickly move in a different direction. But when you post something that helps people without disabilities understand people with disabilities, then you don't have that kind of experience.

Lena Pöhlmann, do social media have an inclusive

effect?

Pöhlmann: Louis is well-informed, is networked, is very active and receives positive feedback. Then we also spoke with people who try to be more present in social media, but who have received negative, discriminating comments. An understandable reaction is to just make everything visible to close friends only and to avoid the negative responses. That's too bad, since one fundamental result of our project is: The majority of people with intellectual disabilities enjoy social media.

Beside the negative comments, what keeps them from using these channels more?

Pöhlmann: There are various different obstacles to access, starting with the very basic ones: Some housing facilities for people with disabilities do not have terminal devices, internet access or the users only have access to a small data volume. In addition, some caregivers are reticent—for example because it doesn't always appear to be clear to the user in question what the scope of the internet is, how far it goes, and that it quickly becomes a no longer protected space. In addition there can be difficulties with operation, for example when the navigation paths aren't clear, when buttons are very small or when icons are not used enough. For example, when there are pending updates, and it's not clear what has to be done. Or another everyday example: An assisted living group wants to set up its own social media group. The people have some vague idea that there is a function of some kind. But they don't always know the details about how something like that specifically works.

Louis Kleemeyer, what obstacles do you encounter?

Kleemeyer: For example, I often wish there was a dictation function. With longer text items that are formatted as graphics, it would be great if

the social media app would simply read them aloud. In some cases it's not even possible to copy something out of the apps. There is a solution, but it's very inconvenient: Make a screenshot, use a tool to copy the text from this graphic image, put it in an special app which then reads it aloud. That's of course an obstacle for many people who can't read or don't want to read because it's too difficult for them or takes too long. I only read long texts like that when it's really necessary.

What would you like from providers?

Kleemeyer: That they use simple language more often. Making sure that there are alternatives whenever there is a lot of text—the same way that images are enhanced with descriptive text which can be read aloud for blind people.

Pöhlmann: It would be an important first step if all the texts are available in German, since many people just don't understand English. And visual support would be better as well. An aspect which is very important for people with visual disabilities: Can the content be displayed large enough without the user being entirely lost in the navigation? It would be ideal if accessibility for those with disabilities would already be considered during the development process of a new product, something which is already more common for web pages.

You've formulated your own proposed solution in the 'Inclusive Social Media' project.

Pöhlmann: We've designed an app which could give people with intellectual disabilities with skills for using social media—in a way that serves their own interests. I would receive a very simple explanation of what the objective of the channel in question is and what possibilities I have: How can I set my status, send a photo or block a person? You

could use the app at any time to see how the internet and individual apps work—in simple language, with speech output, supporting videos and many icons.

More information: Inclusive Social Media (InSoMe) project: tumthinktank.de/project/inclusive-social-media/

Provided by Technical University Munich