

Article 19 – All About Alt Text

Speakers: Marty Molloy, Kristen Witucki, Wally Zielinski, Liza Grant

Marty:

Hello, and welcome to Article 19. My name is Marty Molloy, president of Tamman and I'm our host for our conversation today. My cohost for this episode, and many more to come, is my colleague Kristen Witucki—author, educator, mentor, and just fantastic conversationalist. Kristen, it is so good to spend an afternoon with you recording the podcast.

Kristen:

Yeah, the rain is outside, but we are here to talk about alt text, which—it can't get better than that.

Marty:

Here, here. It can't get better than that, and we've got some fantastic guests. But before we get to our guests, could you give the listeners a brief introduction to what "alt text" is? What do we mean when we say alternative text, what has it done for you, what work do we still have to do to get it where it is powerful and effective? Why is it important for all of us, and especially developers, designers, those of us that are building in a web technology space? Why is it important for us to think about?

Kristen:

Alt text, to put it very simply, is text that enables people who can't see pictures or graphics to understand them. So it's a description, but not to get too sentimental, it's actually also a gateway to understanding an emotion and really share experiences. Just a quick story. So in high school English class, eleventh grade, we were reading "The Learned Astronomer," which is a Walt Whitman poem, and our teacher was explaining the contrast between the scientist in the poem who dissects everything quantifiable about the heavens, and the poet, who is appreciating this miracle of existence and his own relative insignificance by looking at the sky, and I realized that the entire class, who could all see, shared something that I didn't understand at all—which is looking at the stars. So I know what stars are. I know the shapes of the stars. I know what they mean. But what are the stars? Of course, being a human, I complained to one of my friends instead of actually talking to the teacher, and she recommended that I actually just ask him to explain what I didn't understand. So a couple classes later, I just walked up to him at the end of class and I was like, "Hey, what are the stars like?" I'm not really sure you're expecting that question between classes, so to say he was stunned is probably an understatement, but he really got how much it mattered to me and how weird I felt asking, because I was a teenager, and he just said he didn't have an answer. He'd have to think about it and get back to me, and he did. And the way he eventually explained it was comparing it to this outdoor concert he heard in Philadelphia, where the musician actually played a duet with his echo and kind of caught that musical moment.

00:03:03

Kristen:

In that moment, as a kid, I could appreciate the stars, and I've thought about that a lot now as an adult, and I realized that awe and wonder come from a lot of different sources, and in some ways, this teacher was validating my own ways of experiencing that feeling. So now I have the Whitman-esque experience of the stars, but what about the "Learned Astronomer" experience? In 2021, NASA finally launched the James Webb Space Telescope, which has communicated the most complex and far flung imagery of space the world has ever known, and the Space Telescope Science Institute has made it its mission to communicate the wonder of these images to people who are blind or have low vision. So here's an example. "A star field is speckled across the image. The stars range from small, faint points of light, to larger, closer, brighter, and more fully resolved stars with eight-point diffraction spikes. The upper right portion of the image has wispy, translucent, cloud-like streaks rising from the nebula." So basically, this alt text gives me something that I can't get through touch, because there's no way to touch images through the screen yet, and with these descriptions, I can begin to imagine what some of these shapes of light are actually like, but alt text, for all its benefits, is far from universal. For instance, I've looked up "How to send messages about X difficult topic"—because yes, I look these things up—and the article might describe the techniques, but then the alt description of the photo says, "photo of sample message." So I know that people who can see can read the text of the message, but like the drama-filled pause on television in which you know something happened, I just missed something. Alt text can also let you in on a joke. For instance, one person, his store, posted on Facebook some kind of photo. The caption says, "packing assistant." Well, what was the packing assistant? Who was it? Was it a kid, an animal, an inanimate object? I know there was a joke, but what was the punchline? At the time, can alt text ruin the joke for people who can see? So we are going to delve into all of these questions and many more with our two esteemed guests. And, Marty, could you introduce them for us?

Marty:

Yeah, I definitely could—and Kristen, as is usually the case when we're chatting in the office and just talking to each other over Zoom or whatnot—I learn, and I grow, and I appreciate that. You know, I think it speaks to the poetry—not just the Walt Whitman-esque poetry that you teacher really adeptly described—good on yourself, good job, teacher for kind of comparing it to the music and the echo—but also the James Webb folks are doing a tremendous job, because even in their very accurate description, it was poetry, and I think that that's really, really amazing. Let's let our guests do some of this talking and opinion-giving, as well. Today, we have two of my favorite humans on the planet. Both of them are returning to Article 19. We have Liza Grant. Liza, this is your—I'm gonna guess fifth time back on our pod?

00:06:05

Liza:

I'll take it.

Marty:

Yeah? Sounds about right? Liza is our PDF remediation training and education expert, as well as all-around accessibility guru. We very much appreciate everything she does.

Liza:

You'd better appreciate it. I'll derail this podcast so hard.

Marty:

Joining us, as well, is another accessibility expert, another person who is a returner to the podcast, and in fact, Wally, I think—I'd have to go back and double check—but you were our very first guest on Article 19 way, way, way back when.

Wally:

That's an honor. I can't believe that, still.

Marty:

Yeah, and for anybody who is impressed with him today, who wants to go back and listen, it was about radical empathy, that we were talking about, which was very good, but at that time, you were not a member of the Tamman team, and now [audio cuts out] as our senior web accessibility engineer, we appreciate both of you and everything that you bring to Tamman every day in our work, and taking a little bit of time out of your days to spend some time with us on the podcast. With that, Kristen, let's get into some hard questions for Wally and Liza.

Kristen:

Let's do it. Can you explain what alt text is, why it's important for accessibility?

Wally:

I mean, I feel like you covered that pretty well already, but I'll give a maybe more technical explanation, as the engineer, I guess? Alt text is a means of describing an image for someone who cannot perceive it. It's typically short snippets to kind of like tweet-length in text message that explains why an image might be on the page, what is in the image, what context it's providing. For example, if it's a portrait, what type of portrait is, who the portrait is of, what materials were used, if it's a painting or photograph. It could also describe something like a graphic if it says a particular word. It might describe what those words are because those words might be in a fancy font or something that automated tools that are still kind of coming around aren't able to even remotely describe to a person who can't see the image. It's also useful for someone who's got slow internet, because the alt text wills how while that image is loading, so it will give some helpful context for that person, as well.

Marty:

That's really interesting. I never really thought about it from a usability—I mean, accessibility and usability go hand in hand all the time, but that's very fascinating. If you were on—I mean, I guess back in the day with DSL or something, and you're just kind of waiting for something to render, it'll give you the alt text first.

Wally:

Yeah, the alt text comes through immediately, basically. I mean, as quickly as the code can get loaded in—it's just an attribute in the HTML, so it can render that for a user before the image gets loaded because it's much, much heavier than the code itself.

Liza:

I can jump in and add that a similar thing happens in certain email programs. If you have certain security settings set up, you'll receive emails that don't have the pictures downloaded, for security reasons. If they have alt text, you'll be able to see the alt text in the corner that briefly describes the image, so if you don't feel like downloading them or you have a legitimate security concern, you kind of get a preview of what the images are without having to actually download them.

00:09:06

Kristen:

That's so cool.

Marty:

You know what, I think I've seen that now that you say it, but it never really registered with me and I certainly appreciate that. Kristen, let's keep digging here with Liza and Wally.

Kristen:

How does alt text actually work? Where is it inserted? How do you use it when you're creating it?

Liza:

I can talk about this first from a primarily document standpoint, which is where I have most of my focus. What we do with it is you basically embed it into whatever element you have, and it will read that element. Your screen reader, your program that you're using to perceive the web, will read that alt text to you instead of whatever that element is. When you're using a screen reader to access whatever the property is digitally, it's not gonna read the name of the photo or it's not gonna read the URL in your link. It's gonna read the alt text that you provided instead. It's sort of giving a friendly name—or, basically, a textual name—to something that doesn't have a textual description, currently, and that's how we basically make it accessible for every disability, because any screen reader can read that type of text. It's truly an alternate. It doesn't read the link and then the alt text. It reads instead of it.

Marty:

So can I ask a clarifying question before we get over to Wally for some sort of more web side of things?

Liza:

Sure.

Marty:

Liza, when you say—I understand it from an image standpoint pretty well, I think we’ve covered that—but when you say a “complex graphic” or something like that, do you mean like if someone has inserted something, and there’s multiple axes—there’s a Y-axis, an X-axis, there’s data points along the way—that the alt text ought to really try to explain to a level of detail what exactly is in that graphic?

Liza:

Yes, for the most part. I will say a lot of times with alt text, there is a “depends” in there. If you have a graph and it’s simple enough that you can cover all of the txt and all of the ideas, sort of, that it’s explaining in a rather short bit of alt text, that works fine. Say if you have like three bars in a bar graph, they each have a category and a percentage, you can read a category and a percentage three times and that can be a nice little chunk of content, but if you have a larger graph that maybe has 20 different bars or a bunch of data that’s kind of showing a trend, that would be too much content for alt text. You don’t really want it to be more than a couple sentences for the most. In that case, you would go for more of a general description, because you really have too many data points to describe the whole thing in detail, and that’s also not really the way that your reader would read a chart like that. You’re kind of describing to them what you hope they’re getting from this graph. It might not be every datapoint for the past 20 years. It may just be the trend.

Marty:

Right, you can skip the eighties and the seventies completely and just give the summary of what you really want the reader to get.

Liza:

Yes, how it changed in the past decade.

Marty:

Got it.

00:12:00

Liza:

Or what these new tax laws are going to predict for the future, something like that. Other—.

Marty:

Yeah. I really just wanted to pick on the seventies and the eighties there. Thank you for letting me do that.

Liza:

Always support you in that. There are certain decades that are good, people, and some aren't, and it's time we came to that agreement as a society.

Marty:

Here, here.

Liza:

I mentioned the “depends” a little earlier, and there are some times when you have a large chart or an infographic, and you do want to describe most of that to your reader and you want them to get detailed information about it. What you would want to do is to write out that information as text on the page. You would write a couple paragraphs, maybe a paragraph, about the description, the different parts and how they relate as a whole. Then you're sort of using your chart, your graphic, as a visual aid. You're sort of saying, “All the text and the ideas are here,” in whatever language text your document is in, but we're also saying, “Here's a visual aid if you want it, but we're not depending solely on that visual aid to describe all that detailed information.”

Marty:

That's amazing. So what I hear you saying is, not thinking about alt text merely as an add-on or as something “just in case” there's someone who has visual impairments or is blind and can't get to it, you're actually thinking about it from a comprehensive view of the document. You're saying, “What's the best way for me to get all of this information?” and not just tacking on the accessibility at the end. Is that fair to say?

Liza:

Exactly. Yes. And it fits in with the whole sort of shifting-left thought process where the more you think about it and do that work when you're authoring it, it's going to be a breeze to sort of check it and remediate it later on, because you just set yourself up to have a really easy time.

Marty:

Awesome. Wally, differences when it comes to the web from what Liza was describing in documents, you know, from a coding perspective, or pretty much similar?

Wally:

Largely the same. As with everything in accessibility, it's all about context, so you're really trying to make sure that, if you're providing alt text, you're providing meaningful alt text that makes sense within the larger scope of the whole page, not just like one image. One thing that comes up a lot in web dev, specifically, and in design stuff, is you might have one image—it's the same image—but it shows up in multiple different places on a particular website. For example, let's say a user profile image. It could be a selfie of them or something, or just like an icon, but it could show up in context of their username, it could show up as a button that opens account navigation menu of some kind. There's lots of ways that that same image could mean different things in different contexts, so there's a challenge of how do you write alt text for an image in all those different ways? That's a challenge we come up against in web is, a lot of times, you

want to have your nice database with your image title, your image caption, all this stuff with your image, but depending on where you put that image, the alt text might change. In context of a username, it might make sense for the alt text to describe who that person is, what they look like. Because it's paired with their name, you have an idea of, "OK, this person matches with this name," but when you're using it as a button to open a navigation or something else, that becomes a different context and it's no longer relevant what that person looks like in that little button, in a circular profile. It's more important what is going to happen when that button is activated.

00:15:05

Kristen:

That's really fascinating, about just imaging how someone's picture can change depending on its function. How do search engines and social media platforms utilize alt text and how could it improve the optimization?

Wally:

That's a good question. I think that comes up a lot, because I'll say back in the day, SEO used to be heavily influenced by alt text, so what people SEO people used to do is they would place a lot of SEO buzzwords and keywords in alt fields on their imagery and other parts of their website to influence their ranking in something like Google or Bing or whatever. You might imagine a website where maybe they're selling a certain product, and all the images—no matter what the image is of—it's got keywords like dog leash, dog collar, dog barking, dog, pets, dog grooming. All those keywords are showing up in alt text because the way that those search engines used to run is that they were capturing all of that data, and the more times you said that keyword, the more ranking you got in the search results. That's not the case anymore, but there's still a lot of misinformation about that, and so search engines like Google are much more interested now in the context that you're providing and how meaningful it finds your content to be. So if someone, for example, is going to a particular website and they're quoting a certain segment a lot, it might tell Google's algorithm that A) something about this content is actually resonating with someone, people are finding it useful, they're getting to that part of the page after searching for something and they're getting something out of it, something that's big enough for them to keep and search and—or share later. It actually now dings you if you try to use those practices these days, because Google is analyzing your site for practices like that. It's sort of trying to weed out the sites that are trying to claw their way to the top and instead, try to service things that are organically useful based on how people behave when they reach that website. So alt text now, as it relates to SEO, it's better to think about alt text in terms of accessibility instead of SEO, because it actually helps you more when it's more contextual to the website. It helps the algorithm understand what your page is. The same way that it helps someone who can't see the image understand what that image is of and why it's important on that site, it's doing the same thing for the algorithm. The algorithm has more context to understand what's going on on this page, and it paints a better picture for that algorithm to accurately assess what type of content it is to better arrange it in search results and stuff like that.

Marty:

So what about social media, though? We're talking a lot about search engine optimization, SEO, and web, but there's definitely been growth and improvement in social media—but what have you found, Liza? I know you're active in terms of pointing out when there is terrible alt text, but what are you finding on social media? I understand it can be anecdotal.

00:18:00

Liza:

Sure. I will say there's a lot of mix out there as accessibility in a digital world, I would say, gets a little bit more of a highlight. It's hard to tell if I hear about it more because I'm working in it or if it actually is being brought up a little bit more, but you definitely will see on alt text, a lot of people do a really good job on social media and a lot of people are not sure how to, or they are trying. They're putting text there, but it's not quite exactly how you would expect to have it formatted or presented. A lot of people are limited by the tool itself. There are some platforms that don't have an alt text area, so you just have to put it somewhere else, like in the caption, or there are some programs that have an alt text section, but certain screen reading programs can't access that attribute, so people can't hear it if they're using a certain device to perceive it. You sort of had certain things where people would add an image description or an image ID. This is what I see on Instagram, which is where I am the most, and usually, that's a more descriptive, detailed version of what the image is, mainly because it is an image-based platform. You're mainly sharing an image on there, first and foremost. A lot of content authors are interested in making their posts and their online content accessible, but some of the limitations exist in the tools themselves, in Facebook, or within Instagram, whatever you're working with. There are some places where you can add alt text, which is great. We're adding accessibility. Sometimes those attributes in certain posts can't be accessed by all screen reader types. There are a few different ones. There are certain issues with robustness, as you would say, where sometimes you have it work for one screen reader and another one might not be as popular, or for some reason, it doesn't work the same. There are a lot of times when people, you'll see on Instagram, they have alt text on their image, but they'll also put an image ID or description at the bottom of the captions, and that's just for covering both of their bases. If people can access that alt text attribute, they'll be able to hear what the image is about. If not, they can always read it at the bottom of the content there. A lot of people are doing a really great job, I would say. I'm following certain accounts that I normally wouldn't follow and it's just because they have really good alt text. Some of them, it would be like a popular culture magazine and they're using a lot of popular slang in the alt text and it's really informal feeling and you can tell that they wrote it with the same voice that they do for their normal magazine and their other online publications. It's really interesting to see what people are doing. A lot of people are really receptive if you ask them to provide a description and they're not sure, they'll sometimes ask for a little definition of what it is and how they can make it happen if they're not sure. It's always worth checking on your social media apps to see what features they have. I will say, we use Slack for work, and whenever there's an update, I'm always in there—there's usually always one update about accessibility, so it's going in the right direction. I will plug, totally out

of my mind and not prompted in any way, that there is an article on our website called “Social Media and the Spectrum of Human Ability,” and it will go a little bit into that and give some examples of people you can follow if you’re interested in growing your social media content base.

00:21:00

Marty:

Liza, you bring up something that I need a little clarity around, and that’s captions. I kind of have a two-part question. One is, if I put captions in, can I ignore alt text, and/or if I do alt text well, should I also do captions? What’s the deal with captions and alt text? How do they interrelate?

Liza:

I can say that it depends what media you’re captioning or you’re alt-texting. A lot of times, if you’re talking about closed captioning, that would be with timed media, like a video or a song, something that has audio in a certain time frame with video. In that case, you would need captions. You might add alt text to a link taking people to that timed media and there, you would say, “Watch a video about accessibility,” or something, but you would also need captions. Captions are covering what’s going on in the media, and it’s a different type of information. Also, you can just put a caption underneath an image, underneath a chart. Things like that. I’ll say, in the PDF world, you can have a caption and alt text. Sometimes your caption will just say something like, “Figure 1,” and then you really don’t know what’s on Figure 1 unless you add alt text. Now, sometimes—there’s a “depends” in here, as well—sometimes you’ll have a very simple image. Maybe it’s of a sunflower, and you have a caption and it says, “Figure 1. A sunflower,” you can probably skip alt text for that image because it’s not really going to add any context or meaning or relevance. It’s sort of just there as a visual aid and it would be a little bit redundant to say, “a sunflower,” and then have “sunflower” again as a graphic. We’re kind of thinking of it, again, as a whole piece. The context is really important.

Kristen:

Do you think it’s better to overdo it rather than underdo it, in general, if you’re not sure where to start? Because I’ve also had the experience as a listener, or reader, of people saying, “I did describe that,” or “I did do it,” and then I didn’t hear it because I guess they only described it in one spot and not both.

Liza:

Oh, definitely. Covering your bases is great. there are a lot of people that have different types of disabilities, and some have multiple disabilities, and so you’re kind of giving people multiple ways to access something. That sort of goes exactly to what you said, where if there are multiple places where you can put an accessible description, it’s kind of on the safe side, is to over alt instead of under alt, just because redundancy is something that can be kind of annoying, but if you’re missing out on information, that’s where it becomes a rights issue.

Wally:

This is something that comes up a lot in the engineering space, sometimes we're like—we have a lot of information that we have to convey, and maybe we found a way to do it but it's kind of verbose. We really try to limit the verbosity of stuff, but I'm curious about—Kristen, your experience on the web—would you prefer it if it's like the screen reader is reading you the same thing a lot, but it's at least accessible to you, or is it also OK sometimes where maybe it is easier to miss something if it's only mentioned in one particular spot, but it's easier to use or easier to navigate for the screen reader, or less verbosity from the screen reader? Do you have an opinion about that?

Kristen:

That's so interesting, and you know, as we were talking about through the whole thing, it just—it definitely depends on context. I think you're right, that if it's something where you need to take an action, then listening to an entire paragraph is pretty annoying and it's better to have a really short title, but if otherwise, I think I'd rather "over alt" than "under alt," as Liza was saying.

00:24:10

Wally:

That's great. Context is king.

Marty:

Context, and "It depends," I think, is also what we're learning. Over alt, rather than under alt, but it depends. Are you going to ask me to do something? Then maybe we under alt in that case—which, I think we've just coined "under" and "over alt," I just wanna—that's going to be trademarked by Tamman, thank you.

Wally:

You're such an over-alt-chiever.

Marty:

That's great.

Wally:

That was for Bill.

Marty:

I don't know what's going on in this podcast today. This is great. I've thoroughly enjoyed myself. For the listeners, we are having a lot of fun and if it sounds like there is laughter in our voices, it is because we are recording today when it is raining.

Kristen:

Again.

Marty:

Pretty hard where many of us are.

Kristen:

Again. Raining again and again and again, raining.

Marty:

It seems to affect the recording line, and so we have to keep stopping and starting again. Nevertheless, thank you for bearing with us. We're having fun. I hope you are, too. OK. Kristen, what other questions do we have for Wally and Liza?

Kristen:

I think it's just so cool to realize and to reiterate that alt text benefits everybody. It's not just something that benefits a very tiny number of people. It really helps to take down the walls between people when we realize that it can help everyone to appreciate images in so many different ways. So, it may sound intimidating about over alt and under alt and all these new trademark terms that we're going to make money on someday, so can you explain some simple tricks to making alt text good or at least adequate, and some mistakes to avoid when implementing it?

Liza:

Sure. I'll start. I would say the biggest tip or helpful place where I usually start if I need to do alt text for something is I, again, think about the context of the whole piece. Is it just a blog post and I have a logo that says "Tamman" at the end? I'm just gonna give it short alt text that says "Tamman logo" or "Tamman," because when you're reading that piece, I'm really gonna expect people to spend two seconds or less looking at that element, that image. So basically, think about how much time you expect the user to spend on some piece of whatever you're putting out. On the other end of that—used this in my example, the James Webb Telescope, so I won't use it now, but sort of in the same vein—if we were putting out a post that was introducing the new, improved Tamman logo, we would probably have the logo look a little larger on the page, and we would then expect people to spend more time looking at it than they traditionally would just a logo that is in our footer or next to our signature or something. In that case, you would wanna write a little bit longer, more detailed alt text, because you want them to spend time on it. That's kind of the weight that it carries, the priority that it has in the piece. That's sort of my overall tip, is think of how long you want someone to spend on it, regardless of how they're perceiving it, and sort of make your alt text that sort of length and that amount of detail. If it's just a headshot, you can say "headshot of Wally Zielinski," but if I did a really neat painting or if I took a cool photo of Wally and I was showing it in a magazine, I would probably go into depth about what he was wearing and what he looked like, because that is the content, that's where I want people to spend their time getting the information.

00:27:18

Wally:

I'll tag onto that, that's one of the areas that I find people get confused a lot, is how much detail to give? For example, a lot of times, we are working with content that has—maybe it's a blog post or an article of some kind. That comes with a big masthead image at the top of the page, and it's mainly there to look pretty. Maybe it's a listicle about "15 Best Kitchen Knives" or something like that, and the article image is just someone chopping a piece of lettuce with a knife. It's not the most crucial image for the rest of the content. It's not actually describing what's important about the content. It's just there to look pretty. That's one of the big things I see on the web is people putting a little bit too much emphasis on describing every aspect of that image, of like "person with a knife holding a piece of lettuce and trying to cut it and doing all this," when it's like, that's not the content. It's a decorative image. Don't overthink it. That's one of the things I find a lot.

Kristen:

That sounds like something I would do, honestly, if I was alt texting. I would completely get sidetracked, so thank you for the reminder.

Marty:

Quick question. Did we go over a key part alt text that I learned, which is you don't need to say, "image of" or "picture of?" I'm doing some background tasks.

Liza:

Yes, that is a great point. One of the mistakes that is really easy to avoid when you're writing alt text is—something that can help you avoid a little bit of redundancy or verbosity, as Wally was mentioning earlier, is if you have an image and you're giving it alt text, you don't need to include—and you, in fact, should leave out any words like "image of," "figure of," "graphic of," because the screen reader itself is going to read something like that to the listener to let them know, "Here's what this element is." It's gonna say "graphic" or it'll say "figure." Then you kind of say what comes after that. It sort of saves you a little bit of typing time and it stops it from sounding like, "Graphic showing this and this and that." It sort of just helps it be a little bit better of an experience there, and the same thing, we do that with links and URLs. You don't need to say, "Link to the Wildlife Conservancy Fund." The screen reader software will read "link" out and the person will know it's a link, and you'll just have to say what link is that, where is that link gonna take me, what's the title of the article that that link is going to? It gives you a little bit more condensed alt text.

Marty:

Liza, and to bring Wally into this, as well, I'm stuck on something in all of this, and I think it's really important. We've been sort of dancing around it throughout the entire episode so far, which is around this idea of voice. There's a lot of responsibility in alt text, because Liza, to use your example, if I didn't like the World Wildlife Fund, I could write "Link to the Commie Pinko World Wildlife Fund," and you could really manipulate things—and in a more serious tone, you know, thinking about—I was often wondering why there wasn't alt text with iStock photos or

Getty photos and things like that. Why didn't you give me what it is ahead of time? But there's sort of this thing of well, if you use it and the image has a woman and she is of color and that is important to the context and the reason why you're using it, you might want to accentuate that, but if it's not, then you might just say, "Person with a knife." I think it's really fascinating—I'm starting to feel a little bit heavy in terms of thinking about the responsibility that can come with alt text and how it can be abused.

00:30:35

Liza:

Yes. I'll start on that, and I'm sure Wally will have a lot to add, but there is a lot of talk in accessibility about inclusive language and also sort of removing certain biases in whatever you're doing, if it's a study, if you're putting out content. Anything you're doing, you sort of try to take any assumptions out of it because you don't want to lead anyone down a certain path. Some things could be considered a "dark pattern" if you're proposing them in certain ways that have a little attitude associated with them.

Marty:

If folks haven't had the chance to read our series on our blog about dark patterns—really quickly, what's a dark pattern?

Liza:

A dark pattern is usually a design that you implement in order to sort of lead someone a certain way, whether it be "Are you sure you want to cancel?" things like that where it tries to get with your emotion or it makes the certain option easier to see and a certain option more difficult to see, and the one that's more difficult to see is you saying, "No, thank you, I don't want to pay you. I don't want to download your product." It's sort of designed with kind of a malicious intent, a little bit. You see it a lot. You probably see it every day somewhere. We're sort of in that place with alt text, as well, where depending on—maybe it's your social media, and it's photos of your friends and you know how they identify and you can accurately describe them—I do a lot of work with stock photography, like you said, where I can make assumptions based on what I see, but I do not know that person and I'm not really sure where they're from. I might not know their age. If I'm doing, like you said, a piece about aging or a piece on the wage gap between different genders, things like that, different races, that will be important. You'll want to mention that in your alt text, but a lot of times, you don't want to add anything that's not really part of it, because you're also sort of normalizing what's on there and you may be just perceiving it in that way. We see a lot of alt text where it'll be like, "Two men holding a baby," and you're like, "This is probably a couple, holding their child." That's much more helpful alt text when you're talking about preparing for your family's future than just being like, "Two men holding a baby." It's not wrong, it's describing the image, but that's why having sort of built-in alt text doesn't really work. You might get alt text with a stock image, but it will end up being stock alt text, where it might enable you to check off a line in your web accessibility checklist, but it's not going to give the emotions, the information that you're trying to convey with the rest of the pieces.

Marty:

Yeah, that's fantastic. Wally, let me bring you in.

00:32:56

Wally:

It's all about the context, as we keep going back to, and that's where it gets to be very kind of murky and it depends on what you're trying to say. If the article is about marriage equality, you probably should mention that it's a gay couple holding a baby, not just say two men holding a baby—but this is the other side of it, too, that I was gonna talk through, which is less about how you might spin something, or dark patterns, but just missed opportunity that I see a lot in the web space or in accessibility where there's a missed opportunity. When you're thinking about your branding, when we have these big-budget commercials for something like Sprite, and they're thinking about, "What color green should I use, because that evokes a certain emotion," and "How should I present this bottle, should it be wet, should it be a little condensation, how does that change how my specific demographic is going to consume this?" That stuff doesn't always get translated to alt text, or even just like how you're communicating on the web. I think there's a miscommunication in terms of what voice you use. If you're thinking about your voice and you have a marketing page that's explaining the "mouth watering taste of Sprite," or whatever, and then you just have plain alt text or generic alt text that just says, "Sprite can," you're missing an opportunity there to continue to push your brand and push your voice, put all of that sort of emotive context into the things that are going to be accessible to someone who can't see them.

Kristen:

I love that. It used to make me think that I was great at avoiding advertising, but really it's just unemotional descriptions that people don't know how to write. I think that's great.

Wally:

It's very real.

Kristen:

Well, yeah, do we make the ads accessible? Do we think of people with disabilities as actual customers instead of an afterthought? It's a good question.

Liza:

Right, and I would say ask your boss. Ask their boss. Ask their boss's boss. I would say they probably want the ads to be accessible, or else a number of people won't get marketed to—so exactly. Anything you want anyone quote/unquote "see" or "know" or "understanding, you want to put it on there, because that's [inaudible 00:34:51]. That just resonates with me a lot, as well.

Kristen:

Can we talk about something that just makes me laugh a little bit, but also somewhat ironically, which is automatic alt text generation? I remember the ads, maybe a year or two or three ago, when Facebook, I think, came out with its artificial intelligence interpreting photos, and people thought this was the greatest thing ever, the ad was amazing, and then you get to these automatically generated image descriptions. One of my favorite ones lately, was that—one of my sisters went to Italy, which I'm very jealous of, but she put up a picture of a sunrise and she described it, but then the alt text automatically generated was that it was a picture of twilight, which I just thought was hilarious because it was sort of right, but completely wrong. And then some of these descriptions of "two people," and I'm like—great, two people. What are we doing? What's happening? Can we talk about that?

Wally:

We absolutely can. It's interesting, because it's a double edged sword, because on the one hand, you have automated AI things like, Seeing Eye, which is an application on your phone that you can point things at and it'll read you what it can see. It might be able to read a menu or hours that are posted outside of a business. It might be able to read a street sign to you, it'll tell you if someone's 20 feet away from you, 10 feet away from you, stuff like that. On the one hand, some of that automatically generated quote/unquote "alt text" is really powerful stuff in certain situations, and then in another situations like this one that you're describing, where it's badly generated alt text, so it can be really frustrating for those people when you get the bad alt text. It's just one of those things where future tech, it's a lot of double-edged swords right now. It's really, really useful in certain contexts, and in other ones, it gets in the way. As much as you can, I try to tell people, AI can be useful for a starting point if you really need the boost, but otherwise, you're mostly better off trying to do it yourself where you can.

00:36:50

Liza:

I kind of have to agree. It's similar to a thing I kind of said before, where it's like, if you get anything automatically generated by the internet, sometimes it's going to be cool and fun, but a lot of the times, you're gonna be like, "I wouldn't put that on my own website, I wouldn't wanna publish something like that because it's not what I would say." There is a lot of—if you have a certain voice you're trying to use, the automatically generated alt text would just really frustrates you because you'd have to go back and edit everything to be in the correct tense and sort of—it'd be more work— [inaudible 00:37:17] say more work remediating it, rather than just writing how you would like it to sound in the beginning.

Wally:

Not to mention, also, but if you're trying to be inclusive, as I think most companies and people are trying to be more inclusive of what they do—AI still has a big stumbling block with inclusivity. You know, people like to think that AI is neutral or it's like, "Well, I ran it through a generator and I got this thing, it's a neutral thing because it's just what the computers had to say," but it's forgetting that humans created the AI in the first place and humans trained that AI on a certain set of data, so lots of these AI are not trained on a diverse set of data, so when it

gets shown pictures of, let's say, people with darker skin tone, maybe it can't differentiate their features as well. These companies are running up against this with their AI algorithms where they're trying to describe people or they're trying to adjust things like the camera aperture and things like where it's taking a photo of somebody, based on their skin tone, and trying to make those pictures as good as possible, but if that data set did not include people with darker skin, it may not do a good job at taking a photo of that person. That same rule applies to anything that you AI generate, things like AI generated text. There's a whole lot of lack of diversity in those things because there's a lack of diversity in tech, in general, so that's another tradeoff that you're making when you are doing AI-generated anything, is that you're not getting a diverse perspective.

Marty:

There's the text side of it, since we are talking about alt text—and it's a great point, Wally—is. ChatGPT, which listeners of the pod will know I'm a giant fan of, but when the New York Times asked it to tell it a love story—and it came up with a love story and it was perfectly fine, except for that it automatically defaulted to a male and a female. It's not because of anything other than the fact that the vast volume of information that it's pulling from is heteronormative rather than being diverse. So the prompts could then say, "I'd like this to be a same sex couple" and blah blah blah, and it can adapt and change to the human ended, but the default is going to be biased. That's, again, context. It depends. We're spinning around these ideas that both of you have been bringing up and I think it's really important to discuss. Kristen, we've been chatting for a long time here on alt text. I'm curious, are there any other burning questions we had for Wally and Liza?

00:39:38

[pause]

Marty:

That's a hard "No" from Kristen.

Kristen:

No, sorry, I was listening to the chat, and I was like, "Uh oh [inaudible 00:39:51]."

Marty:

I think that's actually a really good point to make, and I hope we leave that in the pod, is that it's impossible to multitask and here you are leading a conversation but also listening to the chat, from our associate producer, Harper—giving really good information, by the way, Harper, thank you, who's helping us with the pod. Just a note that for the listeners, that's what's going on. Kristen, anything else that we want to bring up?

Kristen:

I hope that people and companies feel empowered by this and ready to jump on the alt text train, and so I hate this question, in a way, but how can we all ensure that alt text is in

compliance with laws, like the Americans with Disabilities Act or IDEA? You know, how can we ensure that all of us are doing a good job with that?

Wally:

I'll start. I don't know if I have a perfect answer. I think that's something that everyone is still sort of figuring out, is how do we do this stuff as a scale, how do we make sure that we have processes that support making things accessible? I think that's a large challenge for a lot of accessibility orgs, or accessibility teams within organizations, is how do we make this work? I think the first step, really, is you have to educate people, and people have to know that the problem exists. If they don't know that it's there, they don't know that it's part of their job, they don't understand that it's impacting people, they're not going to care if you put out an email that's like, "Hey, please put alt text on all of your stuff." They're going to ignore that because they don't know what that means. I feel that education is the first place to start, and if you are listening to this, then you are working—maybe you don't have anything to touch with accessibility, but you put content out on the internet, it's something you should talk with your team about and make sure that you're having that conversation, first and foremost.

Liza:

I can jump in with also a not-perfect answer, because it's a difficult question, but at least from an individual standpoint, one of the things that I suggest is just to know your content. If you're just one person or if you're a large agency, some sort of group or governmental organization, it'll be hard to kind of get everyone onboard at the same time, but whoever is putting the content together, whoever is responsible for it, definitely get to know it. You wanna know the context of the content as a whole, so feel comfortable with your content, because that way, you'll write the best alt text if you know it the best. The second thing would just be to listen to your documents, or what you're putting out. If it's a webpage or an app or a post on social media, give it a listen. You'll get a close experience to what people using screen readers will hear, so if you're listening and it sounds confusing or incorrect or there's a typo in it or something, you can go right back and fix it, relisten, and sort of make sure that the experience that people who are looking at it or people who aren't using a screen reader are getting the same experience as people who are. So know your content, and do a little testing, and hear your content. Some of the things seem right when you add alt text, and then when you listen in the full context, you're like, "Oh, I said equal sign, but really, I just want it to say equals," or something. You'll kind of hear, "That's a little clunky, I'll change it to be better." It seems a little intimidating. It's like, "What? Don't make me describe a photo, I just put the photo there," but usually, just close your eyes and do your best, and you'll at least be on the right path.

00:42:57

Kristen:

And it's so easy to listen to things with a screen reader. All the screen reader manufacturers—I mean, on the Mac, it's built in. With the best PC screen readers, you can download a demo version and you know, just take it for a test. It's really, really easy.

Liza:

I'll add one thing that I heard from just an older gentleman who I help his computer sometimes. He recently started writing articles on Medium, and he says he loves it. He listens to the articles before he posts them because it finds all of the typos, and I had to say, "I concur, sir," because that frequently happens to me. It'll look totally fine when I'm reading through it and I'll hear it and say, "That has a completely wrong letter in it," or they're mixed up. It's very easy to hear, where I would just skim over it with my eyes.

Kristen:

Yeah.

Liza:

That kind of falls under the category, which I also had a little bit to add to before we wrap up, of just various uses to people who aren't using a screen reader and still would benefit from alt text, and that's sort of the screen reader version of it. The main thing that alt text helps me with is in our work Slack, our chat program at work, because I am no longer a spring chicken. I'm out of touch, y'all. I don't really know what's going on and we have some hip people at Tamman, I'll tell you. They're posting memes. A lot of meme lords. I wanna enjoy. I want to feel hip. I have no idea what's going on. If they're on the ball, they'll put alt text on it and it will describe what the image is, why the text makes sense, what movie from the eighties it's about if we want to continue to kind of crap on the eighties, and then it's like, hey—I get to be included where, if we're talking about the web content accessibility guidelines, and P-O-U-R, the POUR method, it's where I can perceive it. I don't need the alt text to perceive it, but to understand it, I do need it. I can see the image fine, but I don't know what it means, why it's relevant. Like you said, "What's the joke?" Tell me the joke, I would like to also laugh. It sort of makes it accessible for the people in your life who work too much and don't stay current on social events and what's going on in the world.

Marty:

Liza, I think using the word "hip" automatically makes you hip. I think that's the rule. Yeah.

Kristen:

Me, too. I was thinking that, too.

Marty:

You're in good company.

Liza:

Thank you, both.

Marty:

We're also old and not hip, so I dunno if you should listen to us.

Kristen:

Yeah, that's true. That's true.

Marty:

By way of wrapping up—and both of you have been on the podcast before, if folks want to learn what their original answers to our three questions were, you can go back and listen to any of their episodes—but today, with the help of our producer Harper, we have a new final question for both of you, which is, if Tamman owned a billboard in Time Square, and you could put any message on it you wanted for an entire day, for all to see, what would it say?

00:45:20

Liza:

Thank the Lord I looked at the run-up show a little bit early for this, because this is a difficult question, and I thought about it for a little while and a lot of it was about alt text, and then I decided to not be as on the nose, to try and switch it up on y'all, and there's a phrase that I've been enjoying, that I saw I think on Instagram a couple years ago—it was on a T-shirt that they were selling for some sort of campaign—and it said "Care, don't stare." If I'm out in the world, or even if I'm watching something on TV and I see something that's unusual, I might have a first instinct to be maybe a little bit alarmed or try to figure something out, analyze it in some way, and it's really just—what the world needs more of, I realized, is just people caring instead of staring. You understand that it's someone else's life and they're living it just like you're living yours, and it's just sort of a better eye to have as someone who's very analytical and always picking things apart. I've used that line on my parents a few times, too, if anyone has baby boomers in your lives who sometimes lean more to a certain judgmental side in certain things, like the fashion of people these days. It's just a good reminder to be like, "Hey, the world's big out there and there's a lot of different people in things, and enjoy them in wonder." I think that's what I'd put.

Marty:

That's awesome. Truthfully, kids today and these blue jeans. I don't know what they're doing.

Liza:

You could fit another kid in that leg with you. How do they walk?

Marty:

Wally, how about you? What's on your billboard for a day?

Wally:

Yeah, I think I answered this in the devs podcast.

Marty:

You did. What did you answer? Do you remember?

Wally:

I think the answer I said was “Underline your [inaudible 00:46:46] links.”

Liza:

Hey, a little inside joke.

Kristen:

I love it.

Liza:

Accessibility joke for y’all.

Wally:

Very important, and I still stand by that, but if I have to have a different one for today, I would say—it’s not really related to this stuff. It’s sort of tangential to what Liza was saying. There’s a phrase that I’m trying to use in my personal relationships more, which is “turn towards,” meaning like if someone is—it happens a lot in my close romantic relationship, where it’s hard to make your partner feel appreciated or like you hear them, sometimes, especially when they’re talking about something that you don’t care about that much, but there’s this idea of like—there’s turning away, which is where, if someone shows you, says, “Look at this cool picture that I saw,” and you’d just be like, “Yeah, whatever, cool, I don’t really care about that, but that’s cool for you.” Then there’s turning towards, which is where you respond more like, “Oh, hi, that’s so cool, I’m so glad you showed me that.” I’m trying to practice that in my everyday life, is doing more turning towards. That can also be about turning towards problems that you see in the world, like if you “see something, say something.” If you are seeing someone struggling, offer to help. Things like that. “Turn towards.”

Liza:

Great examples of the accessibility mindset, helping you deal with people you’re close to in your life.

Marty:

Yeah, absolutely. Both of you went very philosophical and deep on this, and I really appreciate that for a billboard. Well, thank you for spending time with us. I love working with all of you. I appreciate your expertise. You are two people at Tamman who are often called upon to share your expertise, and I don’t know where we’d be without both of you, so thank you—and thank you for sharing it now with the listening world on Article 19.

00:48:17

Kristen:

Thank you for preaching the alt text message. I feel like it can always be appreciated more, and I appreciate you spreading the word.

Marty:

Here, here. Here, here.

Liza:
Rock on.

Wally:
[inaudible 00:48:27]

Marty:
If you would like to spread the gospel of alt text and evangelize with us, leave us a rating and review wherever you are listening to Article 19. It really does help. If you'd like to engage with us on anything that you heard—and why not? Because you know we're gonna be fun—please, don't feel like you can't engage with us on social media. You can find us on all of the major platforms, @TammanInc. You can also hear this podcast and check out all of our blogs, like the one Liza referenced earlier, or some of the other information that we have out there, on our website, TammanInc.com. That's T-A-M-M-A-N-I-N-C, dot-com. You can also reach out to the whole Tamman team there. We would love to hear from you and talk more about all things digital accessibility. Thank you so much. I really appreciate folks listening. We had a lot of fun recording this podcast today. I hope you had fun listening to it. We'll keep that conversation going in the future.