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The Digital Access Show

Season 3 Episode 24: Marisa Sposaro – Braille, Technology and Independence

Episode Overview

Narelle Wright speaks with Marisa Sposaro about braille literacy, assistive technology, independence, and the evolution of technology for people who are blind.

Introduction and Marisa's background

Narelle: Hey, welcome to an episode of The Digital Access Show. Now, last week we were looking at innovation and AI. And we've been looking at education. And what goes hand in hand with education, innovation and AI for people with disability is assistive technology. So I've actually asked Marisa Sposaro to come on and talk about her journey and the tools that she uses to communicate. Marisa has... I'll let you tell. I'll let Marisa tell you her story. So please welcome Marisa Sposaro. Thanks, Marisa.

Marisa: Thank you.

Narelle: Marisa, can you tell us a bit about yourself, please?

Marisa: I am a braille user. So I love books and I love music. And I love food.

Narelle: That's helpful, yes. Got to have food.

Marisa: And I'm classified as totally blind. And or vision impaired or whatever the terminology is.

Narelle: Yeah.

Marisa: Yeah.

Narelle: Yeah. So for you, do you mind if I asked, did you learn, if you're a braille user, you would have learnt braille at school?

Marisa: I did. And do you know, I remember it so clearly. I, I, I started learning braille at the age of five. Five and a half. And I was at the school for the blind. In Victoria. And before school, before I started school, I couldn't understand why I couldn't read the print in the books. And I used to open the book and I said, I can't

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read. What, where is, where are the letters? I used to say. So when I went to school and I learnt Braille. I loved it so much. And I, I was always reading after that.

Narelle: Yeah. And you know, it's funny, isn't it? Because I lost my... sight later in life. And I never thought about. But no, unless, you know, people of our age, I don't know what age you are, but people of my age, unless you had access to braille teachers at a very young age, there wouldn't have been any. You'd have known about books because you felt them.

Marisa: That's right. That's exactly right.

Narelle: Yeah. So, when you were going through at school, you would have used what we call a stylus?

Marisa: Aah, no.

Narelle: To do your writing. How did you do it?

Marisa: Well, I... And so for, for people that don't know about braille, it's a combination of six dots. And the way that braille comes up on the page is, back then, when I was at school, I was using a, a Perkins Brailler. So it's a combination of different dots. And that, it's like a code. And in fact, to me, learning braille was the best thing that I, that I ever did. So the way I used it, yes, there is, they did teach us how to use a stylus.

Narelle: Yes.

Marisa: And on a hand frame, but that was, that's very slow.

Narelle: A stylus is basically like a pen, but a pen that makes dots in the paper.

Marisa: Exactly. And it was actually really, really handy for jotting down numbers.

Narelle: Okay.

Marisa: Phone numbers, you know, things like addresses. things like, I used to have a little address book. And I used to jot down, jot it down. But, you can probably tell how old I am now.

Braille tools and early education

Narelle: Well, let's face it. So, you know, fast forward through and you would have started using assistive technology braille tools.

Marisa: I started using,

Narelle: Not the Perkins I'm talking more elec, electronic Braille tools.

Marisa: Electronic? I started using technology very late Narelle.

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Narelle: Oh, really?

Marisa: Absolutely. I, because when I was growing up, there were no computers. There was no internet. There was no email. No mobile phones. And so when I went to, and in high school, I had, I had all my textbooks brailled. And it was very traumatic because I was told that when I went to university, that there'd be no more braille books. So at university, I was using a braille typewriter. And I would stay up all night.

Narelle: Yeah.

Marisa: And I would, I would write up all my assignments and chapters out of books on audio. Cause I can't handle audio. Audio is very difficult. And I was told that I had to accept it and get over it. That braille was just too expensive and that I couldn't have it. And that's what I was told by a lot of educators. And so that made me very, very resistant to technology for a really long time. And for, so I, I used, I started using technology for the first time at the end of my university degree. And when I was at work, I was using Word perfect.

Narelle: Yes. Marisa] And that's actually a screen reader that it's pretty old and pretty outdated. And I was only using voice then. And I became very anxious and overwhelmed using the voice. And back then there were no braille displays.

Narelle: Oh, okay.

Marisa: Yeah, but currently I'm using a computer. I'm using JAWS. And perhaps you can define what JAWS is Narelle.

JAWS, braille displays and technology training

Narelle: Yeah, JAWS is a screen reader. JAWS stands for job access with speech. And it operates on Windows, Macs, different computers. And it actually doesn't read the screen as a person with sight would read the screen. It reads the programming in behind it. So if you're looking at, say, a Microsoft Word document, it doesn't read the words the way a person with sight would read them. It actually reads the code that makes up the document. So it, it's a, it's a really good tool. It's, I use JAWS all the time as well. Well, I use two or three different ones. But it is a very handy tool because it gives us the ability to communicate.

Narelle: And I didn't realize that for a really long time because JAWS, I, I was always very resistant to it. Because the fact that there were no braille displays. But what does it, DASAT? Is that's what it's called?

Narelle: DASAT, yep.

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Marisa: DASAT has

taught me, because I, I know, with the training and everything, it has shown me that you can use a braille display with JAWS. And because I'm a visual learner, I can now use JAWS very competently. And have the braille display along with it so I can read long reports. I can do my radio work and I'm a writer. So, I can actually write in peace and know that as well as the voice, I can actually read the braille along with it.

Narelle: And that's

what I don't think people really understand, do they? Because if we go back to when you're at Uni and you were using audio. If you wanted to go back and find a particular section in the audio, you couldn't. You would have had to listen to the whole thing again. Whereas using braille, if it was chapter by chapter, you could pretty quickly work out exactly where you needed to go with braille. Am I right?

Marisa: Absolutely.

Narelle: Yeah. So when you went

to using computers and not having the access to a braille reader or braille device, as we call it, you would have been in exactly the same boat. It's, you know, you've got to try and work out where in the document you were because you are a braille reader and you've always known that. That would have been... for you, it would have, like, been like using something in a different language.

Marisa: Oh, I cried every day. Sometimes I would, I

would have a meltdown just about every day when I was doing just the voice without, without the braille display. Because I was so overwhelmed. It was almost like having dyslexia. But not, I'm, not through my eyes though. Do you know what I mean, but through my, my hands, like I couldn't, I couldn't put my hands down to read anything. And hearing that voice going chatter, chatter, chatter. It just made me...

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I couldn't write. I, I nearly lost, lost one of my jobs out of it. But in the end, I ended up adjusting to the voice. And then I had a really long break because all the note-takers, the Android note-takers came in like the BrailleSense 6. And the BrailleSense 6 is actually an Android computer system and it's a Perkins Braille, Brailier. But computerised. But that's a closed system.

Narelle: Yeah. And, and the thing what we're really saying is that voice would have been very mechanical as well.

Marisa: Absolutely.

Narelle: So if you think of... You know what I relate it to? Did you ever hear Doctor Who?

Marisa: Yes, I did.

Narelle: The TARDIS, the voice of the TARDIS. So if people could imagine listening to that constantly all day, and that's the only way you can communicate... It's hard.

Marisa: Yeah. It was different.

Devices: eMotion, BrailleSense and keyboards

Narelle: Yeah, now it's different. So you're using the BrailleSense now, which is a device that connects to your computer. Like a keyboard.

Marisa: Sorry. The BrailleSense, I'm not using to connect to the computer. I'm actually using the eMotion.

Narelle: Oh, okay. Yep. So if you can talk us through what that is?

Marisa: The eMotion is better. The eMotion is is, is a note-taker as well, but it doesn't have the email and the internet. And that... that's... you can connect that to the Braille display through... sorry, through the computer, through USB. And it's compatible with Jaws.

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Narelle: Oh, brilliant. Yes.

Marisa: And that's the quickest way, I think. It's a really good Braille display. And I can read along with the Jaws. So, for example, it's Windows. Like it's compatible with Windows 11. And I read along with the Braille as well as listening to the voice.

Narelle: So it's taking the place of the display, the monitor.

Marisa: Correct.

Narelle: Yeah. Now, with that, you still use the keyboard as well?

Marisa: Yes. The keyboard on the computer?

Narelle: Yeah.

Marisa: Oh, ab, yeah. Yes, yes, definitely. I think it's really important as a blind person to know how to type. And when I'm actually sending emails, I don't actually use the Braille display. I will type. I'm type my emails. If I'm using... If I'm doing a radio program and I need to edit something in Reaper, I, I won't use the Braille display for that. I, you can. I mean, I, I do use the Braille display just for very minor tasks. But if I'm use, doing something major, like sending emails or editing, I'll use the, the keyboard. And then I'll read along with the Braille display.

Narelle: This is really interesting. Because really we're saying you don't have to pay for a monitor at all. You don't need it.

Marisa: No.

Narelle: That must be a bugger for other people that come into your house and think, oh, I'll just have a quick check of the computer. No monitor.

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Marisa: That's true.

Narelle: Yeah. You know, and I'm heading to that stage myself. But, you know, it is what it is. Now, if we talk about the BrailleSense, can you explain what that is? It's... It's, I, it's in front of me at the moment for people that can see. And so I'll just turn the voice on. So the BrailleSense... And I, I suppose for me, I use quite a few devices in my life. It's always good to use more than one. And the, the BrailleSense has, is a, a note-taker. And it's got an Android system and it's got a file manager. It's got office tools like email and internet and Google. It's got a media player. It's actually got a recorder as well. So I actually take this with me when I'm recording... I mean, I'm recording off-site. Like if I'm recording something, a meeting or something or a forum. And it's got Excel. It's got a library. So we're able to access Bookshare on that.

Narelle: So it's like mini computer.

Marisa: Yeah. It's a mini computer.

Narelle: Okay. And it fits in your handbag and off you go.

Marisa: Yep.

Narelle: And instead of a laptop, it would do a similar to a laptop. Except, it's all done by Braille.

Marisa: Exactly. And this is why I couldn't use just a BrailleSense on its own. It's impossible. And, and it took me a long time to accept. And, I think, I've had very, very fantastic trainers. from DASAT and, and other places that have offered me a lot of really amazing peer support. And helping me with the training to help me to accept that I need Jaws. That I need Jaws. And I need a Braille display as well to have an open system.

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Narelle: It really has allowed you to communicate again is what you're saying.

Marisa: Yep.

Phones, communication and public understanding

Narelle: When do you need a phone then? Because I know you also use a phone.

Marisa: I use a phone but I, I'm I'm so not interested in an iPhone. That's too much for me. I've got a BlindShell.

Narelle: Yes. Oh, yes. So for those that don't know, can you explain what a BlindShell is?

Marisa: It's from America, I think. It's a, a normal phone, except that it's got audio.

Narelle: yes.

Marisa: For some reason, I don't mind the audio. I, and I've learned how to text. And, it, you know, it, it, it's all audio based. You can change, there are different voices you can use. For that, it doesn't bother me.

Narelle: I think ..

Marisa: I'd learnt to type on the keyboard, type text as well.

Narelle: Yeah. I, I think the one thing I think people... Well, what do you think about the point that people with sight that don't have the issues that we have, can't understand how we do what we do?

Marisa: Oh, it's a bit of an ethical dilemma for me. I mean, on the one hand, I, I believe in educating people when it's a good thing.

Narelle: Yes.

Marisa: But I also have learnt to set boundaries around that.

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Narelle: Yeah.

Marisa: Because sometimes it can be very draining. Well, they need to find out. Why don't they Google it, mate?

Narelle: Yeah. Yeah. And, and I...

Marisa: Go on.

Narelle: I, I, I know exactly what you mean. I, I, for me like, I've had extended family just not understand that I communicate just like everyone else.

Marisa: I admire you. I think you've got endless patience, Narelle. And I...

Narelle: Oh. Not really. Sometimes I get fed up. And I just want to say to them, well, what do you think I do? I'm here. We arranged to meet here. I got here. I use the tools. I do it my way.

Narelle's experience with sight loss and adapting

Marisa: What's your experience been like as a person who's lost their sight later on in life with technology?

Narelle: Actually, it's been really hard. It, it's My son's... My youngest son was still in primary school. I'm so lucky with my sons. They're very caring. And they switched on really quickly about what I couldn't do. At the same time, they thought they were getting away with things. Like notes and things. Because notes that come home from school and I couldn't read them. But I used to say. you've got a father. He's sitting over there, off you go. Marc, there's a note from school. And... they, Oh, okay. You know? But I think for me, the struggle was... I'd been so used to doing things one way with sight. That moving to not having sight or not having reliable sight. Because mine's degenerative. And I've been gradually down to where now it's pretty well useless. But, in one way that was good. Because I, it gave me time to learn things. And that's where I met Mark Muscat, who also happens to be your trainer. Because Mark was

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brought into... He is amazing. And he's got endless amount of patience with me. In the fact that, I'd be going really well. I'd be confident. And then bang, I'd have another sight loss. And then I'd have to relearn. And in the end, it's like, yeah, no, we're not doing this again. You're going to learn this, this way. And then I don't care how you do it. Once you know how to do it one way, you can work out the way for you. It was hard. Because things that I was so used to doing, like, I love cooking. And I can't cook the way I used to cook. I, I've just about given up cooking on a cooktop. Because my thing is, my cooktop and I had a meeting. And the consensus was I'm not to use the cooktop. Because I can't get it clean enough. And the cooktop was happy with that. In other words, I made a mess. But you can do things another way. I still cook steak. I just do it my way.

Marisa: But everyone makes messes.

Narelle: It still comes out the same. Yeah. But when you spill things on a ceramic cooktop, scratch it. And you know, there's always better ways to do things. I suppose it's what both of us are saying, isn't it?

Marisa: Oh, my God, you see my stove.

Narelle: But you think about it. With what we've both gone through, you with coming into the digital world and using Jaws. There's always another way to do something, isn't there? And that's what we're continually learning.

Marisa: It is. But, I often wondered over the years, I actually thought that it was something wrong with me. Because I couldn't, I couldn't do the audio. I just couldn't do the audio. And I was so rebellious. I mean, I still am rebellious. with new causes. But, But I was just, I just didn't want to use the audio. And it's not that I didn't want to. I couldn't. And Mark made me realize why. Because, he said to me, Marisa, he said, where, you need to buy a braille display. We're, I'm going to write you a letter. And you're going to get a braille display through the NDIS. Because he said, you

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will learn a lot faster. You're a visual learner. He said it to me. It made me feel better. It sort of, it made me almost, I gave myself permission. That it was okay not to be able to use the audio.

Narelle: Yes.

Marisa: You know, like I let go. And after I surrendered, it, it was a hurdle that I really overcame. And, it's made me so much more independent. I mean, I was independent before. I was using braille, which I'm very passionate about.

Narelle: Yes.

Marisa: But it's actually made me learn skills in technology that I never thought I could learn. And that was through having the braille display and having that there. I mean, at first, I wouldn't even know how to turn the computer on.

Narelle: Yes.

Marisa: And then, when I was first, because I started off with NVDA. And then I'm...

Narelle: NVDA, I must say, NVDA is non-visual desktop access. It's a window screen reader. Like Jaws. It's just, it's for Windows only.

Marisa: Yeah.

Narelle: And it's, it's open source. It's freeware.

Marisa: But I only wish that I had this Jaws when I was growing up. But then again, I love paper and I love books. And I love the smell of books. And I love my braille, my braille typewriter, my braille machine. I still use that. And I use it a lot.

Narelle: Yeah. See, for me, it was the... I'm like you. I love books. And I had book, I had books and books and books everywhere. I love my books. And one of the best things was Vision Australia told me I needed a daisy reader. A daisy reader is a, it's like a CD player with different controls just for people with severe vision impairments. And that made the difference

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because I learnt to listen. And I think that's one of the hardest things people don't realise. You have to learn to listen. Because everything comes down to how well you listen. Doesn't it? If you're on the bus, that you're listening for the sounds around you. For safety. For security.

Marisa: Of course. Yeah.

Narelle: And you're listening to your... Like I use my phone to tell me where I am. It tells me the streets we're coming up to and the bus stops. When I'm out walking, again, that I'm listening constantly to what's on my phone, to where I am. And again it's safety and security. Because not having your eyes. It's a different world.

Safety, independence and self-advocacy

Marisa: It is a different world. And I can only speak for my lived, my own lived experience. But it's, what you're saying is true. And, I would say to any blind and vision impaired person, study self-defense.

Narelle: Yeah, that's a good point.

Marisa: I've actually been studying quite a lot about, for many years now, I study a lot of self-defense techniques. And there's a really good book actually that you can get from the National Braille Press in America called Safe Without Sight. And there's a lot of techniques that you can use with your cane, in case some, in case one gets attacked. But it's not just even about getting attacked. It's about feeling safe, prevention. Preventing not just physical attacks, but also psychological attacks. Like for example, if someone's asking you too many questions, you don't have to answer them. Or you can get up and walk and find another seat. You don't have to answer all those questions that people ask you all the time. Yes, it's good to educate people. But it's always good to study the environment around you and work out. Okay, is this someone

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genuine or

is it someone that just wants to just ask nosy questions.

Or you being harassed? It's not about paranoia. It's, it's about prevention.

Emerging technology and accessibility

Narelle: I actually

agree there too. And, and the thing is with the technologies that are coming. Like, have you got the Meta-ray Ban glasses or any of those tools, or are you going to look at getting them?

Marisa: I don't know. I,

I'm thinking of looking at it. I do, I've been doing some orientation in my building. And, yeah, I might have a look. I mean, there's no, there's no reason why not.

Narelle: Yeah, it's

another form of technology. So meta-ray ban glasses. Can you describe them, Marisa? I actually haven't tested them yet. I've got friends that have got them and they're raving about them.

Marisa: From what

I've heard and seen, you, when you put the glasses on, it orient, I think it orientates you. They orientate you and you don't bump into things as much.

Narelle: And it will actually,

from what I understand, tell you what's coming.

Marisa: Yeah, that's right.

Narelle: Whether

you're at a street lights, if you're trying to read a menu. Oh my gosh, reading menus. They're a pain. But it will help you do the things that other people just do without thinking, that have sight.

Marisa: That's right.

But if I go to a restaurant, I'll just download the menu from the internet. There's so many menus on the internet now.

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Narelle: They are. If they're, the thing is, they've got to be accessible.

Marisa: They do.

Narelle: And oftentimes they're not. But this is where, when you think about it. Like, I'm in my 60s. I think you're younger than me. But when we were growing up, the technologies that were there then, and you've described it. You know, Braille Perkins typewriters, basically. And to what we've got now with you've got the Braille 6 Sense. You've got the eMotion. We've got phones. There's a big difference just in what, 40, 50 years, isn't it?

Marisa: Indeed. But one of the things is that you have a lot of companies, that they charge a lot of money for a lot of these products, these Braille products. And a lot of companies don't provide technical support, enough technical support for people.

Narelle: Oh really?

Marisa: If you're going to be a customer of a Braille product, you need to be able to service that customer accordingly. And provide proper repair and technical support. Don't say to, to ,to a person, "Oh, you're going to be without your Braille display for a month". Where you need to send it overseas or, you know...

Narelle: Yeah, it's the only way you communicate, isn't it?

Marisa: Yeah.

The future of assistive technology

Narelle: Yeah. What do you think is coming in the future with technology? What would you like to see?

Marisa: My vision for the future for technology would be, it would be amazing

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to be able to have a computer that's in Braille with Windows based.

Narelle: Yes.

Marisa: And then you'd be able to have everything in one.

Narelle: Yeah. Yeah. I know exactly where you're coming from, because I've got, you know, I've got similar thoughts for me. It's, like, I have my phone. And on my phone, I've got all these different apps that I have to use depending on the situation. Wouldn't it be amazing? There was just one app.

Marisa: Yeah. Rather than having... You should see, you should see how many computers I have here? All these different devices. Using one to read books, using one to store.

Narelle: Yeah. Using one to read the ingredient. you know.

Marisa: That's right.

Narelle: We, we have, the tools that we've got. If it came down to just one or two tools, wouldn't it be awesome?

Marisa: Well, AI is coming now, but I don't like where it's heading.

Narelle: I think AI, if it's done properly, and it's controlled properly, is going to be the way to go. But there's all the privacy issues. There's all of those things that we've got to consider.

Marisa: Absolutely.
Yeah, I know.

Advice for people losing sight and families

Narelle: Marisa, what's one piece of advice that you would give to any person that's losing their sight today?

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Or even a child? Or a parent of a child that has no sight?

Marisa: Whether you're born without sight or you lose your sight later on in life. It's always important to have peer support. But also to be integrated as well. So to be able to, even the child, learn technology early. Learn things early. There has to be early intervention. Really important. And particularly, if the child who's blind comes from a non-English speaking background, like I did. It, it's, it's a little bit different then. Because you don't have enough support at home. Because if, they don't know the English.

Narelle: Yeah. You had a double whammy, didn't you?

Marisa: Yeah, although I have to say that my mother was the person that really helped me to love books. She couldn't read herself. But I was very frightened of learning braille at first. Because the dots were so overwhelming. And she wouldn't grab that book and she'd put it in front of me and she'd get the print book and she'd say, "Read". And off we would go.

Closing reflections and contact

Narelle: Marisa, Thank you. Now, you've actually asked that if people want to get in contact with you and find out more. Even about your community radio work. You know, people that want to know, just a bit of support, that they can be contacting you through us.

Marisa: Yeah. That's fine.

Narelle: And thank you. Thanks so much for coming on the show. Because with everything we look at, those assistive technology tools are still the basis of everything. If we can't communicate, we can't be in, the society's not inclusive.

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Marisa: Exactly. And I suppose in conclusion, what I'd really like to say, to everybody, of course. I'm not here to judge what format people want to have. But to me, braille literacy is really important. To be able to read is a right, not a privilege.

Narelle: Yeah.

And to be able to use your punctuation and your grammar and your spelling correctly, which is what braille also gives. Thank you, Marisa. Thank you for joining us today. We really love some advice on how we can improve the show. Marisa, go for your life. And then afterwards, I'd love any advice because it's important. We can only improve if we know where we're going wrong. And we also want to learn how we can do things differently because there's always a different way. So we will see you next week on The Digital Access Show. Have a wonderful week.