

PO Box 2421
Toowong QLD 4066

The Digital Access Show Transcript

Introduction

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Narelle: Welcome to The Digital Access Show. My name's Narelle Wright, and yes, I'm the host. I actually want to look at an issue that has been really interesting. It's been on the news a bit lately, where they're saying social media posting is affecting people's opinions and that's where people get the news, a lot of things like that. And I was thinking, okay, who can I get on? Because I don't know whether you realise it or not, social media has a lot of problems with it for people with disability. I've brought Laetitia Thompson from the Centre for Accessibility to come talk about it. Laetitia, thank you.

Laetitia: Thank you for having me. I'm so excited.

Narelle: Laetitia, can you tell us a bit about your work, and what the Centre for Accessibility does, please?

Centre for Accessibility Australia

Laetitia: Centre for Accessibility Australia, or CFA Australia, we're a not-for-profit. Really, our heart is for bridging the digital divide, which basically means trying to make all forms of technology accessible for people with disability. I always say it doesn't make sense that the internet isn't more accessible because it's basically the future. It's the Star Trek universe we were promised. That's my opinion anyway. We audit organisations' websites, run workshops on accessible social media and accessible technology, and keep up to date with technology news. At the heart of it, we advocate for people with disabilities to be able to use the internet, computers and technology.

Narelle: Perfect description. I will tell you, Laetitia and I are working on a couple of projects together, and that's why I wanted to ask: with social media, what's the problem with social media postings?

Social Media and Accessibility

Laetitia: I know there's a whole argument about whether social media is good or bad. My opinion is a little biased because I work in social media as well. I think social media is the way of the future. When I was younger, there wasn't really the internet as we know it today, and I had a bit of an isolated childhood living in the hills in Western Australia. I'm all for people being able to find their community online, meet up with each other and network with each other, especially people with disability. Communities online bring people together from all around Australia and the world. There are some accessibility issues, but the good news is that if you tweak a few things, you can make social media pretty accessible.

Narelle: You make a really good point about social media being the only way that a lot of people with disability can contact each other. I use social media because I know I may never get to places like the Kimberleys or Derby, but I can still be there with friends in spirit.

Laetitia: Absolutely. I've attended online webinars from museums overseas that I would never have been able to attend in person. There are issues with social media, but the benefits are exceptional.

Main Social Media Platforms

Narelle: Let's break it down. If we look at Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram and X, they're the main four, aren't they?

Laetitia: Yes. People often ask which social media platform is the most accessible. In my opinion, the main platforms are reasonably accessible in different ways. Facebook has automatic alt text generation for images, though you should always check it before publishing. LinkedIn has a professional, clear interface, which can work well for people who are blind or have low vision. Instagram is good, though adding alt text can require manual steps. Twitter/X is also strong from an accessibility point of view.

Narelle: So, you're saying the functionality is there to do it?

Laetitia: Yes. I think it comes down to education. People often do not know what digital accessibility is, so it is about continuing to explain what is needed and encouraging the major platforms and industries to make their content more accessible.

Captions, AI and Audio Description

Narelle: One of my biggest bugbears, other than alternate text, is captions. They can rely on AI-generated captioning. What is your opinion of that?

Laetitia: Captions can be an interesting kettle of fish. I once saw captions misread a name as "vodka", which made me laugh. I know AI can be a useful tool, but it needs human supervision because it is not human and it does not always understand context.

Narelle: AI will try to get punctuation and grammar correct, but it cannot always understand the context or see the image.

Laetitia: Exactly. AI can be okay sometimes for alt text or captions, but okay is not necessarily good enough. It still needs to be checked by a person.

Narelle: Automatically generated captions can be even worse. If they cannot get a name right, it makes you wonder how accurate the rest of the captions are.

Laetitia: We can only keep educating people. It is part of the work we need to keep doing.

Narelle: Another thing I do not see social media doing well is audio description, which describes what is happening in the background of a video.

Laetitia: No, not from what I have seen. That would be a really good thing to do. Accessibility benefits people with disability, but it also benefits everyone. Captions are a good example because many people now use captions on public transport or while watching videos without sound.

Audience, Representation and Marketing

Narelle: What we are saying is that social media is still digital content, and people need to consider their audience.

Laetitia: Absolutely. Representation matters too. People with disability exist outside International Day of People with Disability. It would be good to see people with disability represented in everyday social media images and posts. One in five Australians has a disability, so this is not a niche audience.

Narelle: Social media is also marketing, so accessibility matters there too.

Laetitia: Yes. If you want people to buy your products or engage with your content, make it accessible.

Fonts, Structure and Readability

Narelle: One thing I cannot change is the font types used on social media pages. Some can be hard to read, especially if letters and numbers look too similar.

Laetitia: Each platform tends to use its own font. X/Twitter uses Chirp, LinkedIn uses LinkedIn Sans, and TikTok uses TikTok Sans. Font clarity is part of accessibility, especially for people with dyslexia or other processing differences.

Narelle: LinkedIn is usable, but it is not always intuitive with a screen reader. You have to learn where things are and build up muscle memory.

Laetitia: Structure makes a real difference. Accessibility can feel overwhelming, but when you break it down it becomes more straightforward.

Narelle: I always make sure there is white space between sentences in posts. Otherwise everything can feel squashed together and overwhelming to read.

Laetitia: Exactly. I have seen what happens when text becomes one giant paragraph, and it is terrible. Little things like spacing make a big difference.

Practical Tips for Accessible Social Media

Narelle: What are three tips you can give people for reading or posting on social media?

Laetitia: First, use accessible hashtags. This means using camel case, where each word in the hashtag starts with a capital letter, such as #SocialMediaAccessibility. It helps screen readers pronounce the words correctly and makes the hashtag easier to read.

Narelle: That also helps people with visual processing difficulties because it makes it easier to see where each word starts and ends.

Laetitia: Second, avoid overusing emojis. Emojis can be used, but too many can be confusing or overwhelming for screen reader users. It is better to limit them and place them at the end of sentences rather than throughout the text.

Narelle: How many emojis would you say is reasonable in a professional post?

Laetitia: Probably two at the end of a sentence. Listening to a screen reader repeat ten smiley emojis would be frustrating.

Laetitia: Third, provide context for links. Instead of saying "click here" or only pasting a URL, describe what the link is for so people know where it will take them.

Narelle: That is important because a bare URL has no meaning. People need a description before the link, and they should test URLs before posting.

Contact Details and Closing

Narelle: How can people get in contact with the Centre for Accessibility Australia if they want to learn more about accessible social media?

Laetitia: People can visit accessibility.org.au for resources, articles and information about accessible technology. They can also email admin@accessibility.org.au or find Centre for Accessibility Australia on Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram and TikTok.

Narelle: Thank you, Laetitia. This is such an important topic because social media is marketing, communication and connection. If people cannot understand the information, it does not work.

Laetitia: Thank you so much. It is always a pleasure chatting with you.

Narelle: If you know people with stories or expertise in digital accessibility, we want to hear from them. We want to break down barriers and bridge the digital divide

through good communication. Like, subscribe and review, and find us on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and YouTube. We will see you next week. Thank you.

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