DIIU Podcast S3E4 Navigating the Disaster Zone: Ensuring Accessible Crisis Information in Australia

**SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

information, organisations, people, accessible, accessibility, plain english, pandemic, research, formats, disability, work, UNSW, crisis, sector, important, bushfire, different formats

**SPEAKERS**

Dr Ariella Meltzer, Professor Jackie Leach Scully

**Professor Jackie Leach Scully**

Hello and welcome. I'm Professor Jackie leach Scully, I'm director of the UNSW Disability Innovation Institute. Thank you for tuning into this podcast series. And thank you for listening to today's episode, which is about information accessibility. First of all, I'd like to pay my respects to Elder's past and present and to extend that acknowledgement to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people listening in. As we at UNSW share our knowledge and practices across our communities, we also recognise the knowledge and experience embedded within the Aboriginal custodianship of Country.

The UNSW Disability Innovation Institute is a world first initiative, focusing on disability research, education and knowledge exchange. It's team members take pride in undertaking work that's radically inclusive, and that crosses disciplinary boundaries. The Institute's approach is to see disability not as a problem to be solved, but an integral part of the human condition to be encountered and engaged with rather than feared. Now, joining us on the podcast today is Dr. Ariella Meltzer. She's a research fellow at the Centre for Social Impact UNSW, and she's also a DIIU Associate. The Centre for Social Impact is a National Research and Education Centre, whose purpose is to catalyse positive change, to help enable others to achieve social impact. The Centre does this through developing transformational research, education programs, and solutions that are rigorous and purpose driven and by working with people, communities and organisations across Australia to grow their capabilities. Ariella's own research focuses on helping organisations implement personalised, inclusive and accessible practice, which reflect what people with disabilities say they need. She was recently funded by the DIIU through our seed funding initiative to examine the experience of accessible information provider organisations of making accessible crisis information, including how to improve the circumstances of these organisations, and ultimately provide more and better quality accessible information at times, like pandemics as we've seen floods and bushfires at times when people really need it. So thank you for joining us, Ariella.

**Dr Ariella Meltzer**

Thanks so much for having me.

**Professor Jackie Leach Scully**

So, Ariella, you've just released a research report, based on some of the research that you've been doing, which was funded or part funded by from the DIIU's seed feed funding initiative, who was involved in that?

**Dr Ariella Meltzer**

Thanks so much, Jackie. It was a really exciting project. There were a whole number of people involved in that. So, I co- authored that report with two other researchers Emma Barnes from the Centre for Social Impact and Ayah Wehbe from Silent Signs, as we've heard, it was founded by the DIIU and also the Centre for Social Impact supported that research as well. The other group that was involved was IDEAS Disability Information, they were a partner organisation on the research with role of the bringing some and key insights into information accessibility as a concept right at the beginning of the research from which we springboarded off everything else in the project.

**Professor Jackie Leach Scully**

Australia seems to be a disaster prone country, there are an increasing number of natural disasters, climate change seems to be making our environment more volatile and as we witnessed during the pandemic, there are other kinds of crisis that can affect us. And what we need I think is up to date relevant information about what's going on in these situations. Is that information accessible for everyone?

**Dr Ariella Meltzer**

If we invest in making it so. The formats are out there, people know what to do, but currently, this is an area that's vastly under resourced, and that's affecting the information that's available to people.

**Professor Jackie Leach Scully**

So for people with disability in particular, what kind of accessibility do we need?

**Dr Ariella Meltzer**

So there's a whole lot of different formats that are relevant for different people. So people who are blind or have low vision, might use Braille, but they also might use screen readers or other audio formats, and particularly for screen readers documents need to be accessible to the screen reader as do websites and other electronic information and often the standard formats that are released like a standard PDF for example, isn't or information that's too image based and doesn't have an alt text description also isn't accessible to a screen reader. For the deaf community it is AUSLAN, which is really well known. And there are also other formats that support people with hearing impairment, including captions, and others. People with intellectual disability use Easy Read information, which is pictures that support simpler text. And then there are also Easy English and Plain English as well, where Easy English is very, very easy text designed to be read by a grade one to two reading level, also supported by pictures. And Plain English is kind of everyday language without any technical terms. How can those different formats support different people? It's not a one size fits all situation, which is part of what makes making accessible information available so difficult when government or councils or academia or any number of other areas want to put money into accessible information because there's so many different formats. It's hard to do it all, I think. And we haven't necessarily always got the balance right of where that money goes, which format to made in which situations and how you make those decisions.

**Professor Jackie Leach Scully**

Yeah, I mean, I, I know I'm taking on board that message there that it isn't a one size fits all situation. And I think in my experience has been sort of kind of observing what happens in situations like this, that one or two of those modes of communication are done pretty well. There's tendency to forget about the other thing, I'm thinking back now to the pandemic. And I was really surprised to see how, how frequently and how regularly there were sign language interpreters available for those press conferences, and so on. And that was really good. But I also know that there were complaints from other members of the disability community that other forms of communication were not accessible to them.

**Dr Ariella Meltzer**

That's right, I think it's really important for the information in different formats to be consistent. And that's been one of the things that has been really hard for the information accessibility sector, because there just isn't the resourcing behind the sector to make that happen. Some formats have perhaps had better advocacy behind them or more resources behind them, or legislation behind them. But one of the challenges of providing accessible information is that the legal requirements for information aren't consistent across different locations, and across different formats sometimes. So some information is better created in some locations than others. Or some formats have extra rules behind them to make that happen, which don't apply to the other formats, which means that we don't have consistency, which is a problem because people with different information requirements have the same rights as each other.

**Professor Jackie Leach Scully**

And they can have the same vulnerabilities as well and with similar level of vulnerability, I'm very aware about the disproportionate impact that all kinds of disasters and crises and catastrophes can have on people with disability, as opposed to people for whom perhaps, information is more accessible. So I know you've just released a research report can you tell us a little bit more about your research project, that the DIIU funded or part funded? What was your method? What was your aim? And what were the key highlights?

**Dr Ariella Meltzer**

Sure. So our project was about speaking to accessible information provider organisations, so the organisations who make the accessible information because our assumption was that for the right information to be accessible for people with disability, the right conditions need to be in place for those who make it. That was the assumption under which the research operated. We spoke to 17 providers of different types of information as well as one other stakeholder who is part of that systems supporting information production, but doesn't actually make it themselves. And we asked about what the experience has been of making accessible information during the pandemic in particular, and also particularly the bush fires and floods that have really quite severely affected Australia since the end of 2019. We asked what the experience of making information during those times was like, and also what it revealed about what was required going forward to better support this sector. One of the things that these emergency situations have done is really thrown the need for accessible information into the spotlight in terms of the fact that it can actually be a life and death issue. You know, accessible information has been made in Australia and other countries for a really long time. But the pandemic in particular, really threw into the limelight, this idea that, well, if you try and get the right information, you know, you might get sick, you might die, it really emphasised or re-emphasised why accessible information was important. It also re-emphasised some of the problems that have traditionally affected the sector of organisations who made that information. What we found is that making information during a crisis is really difficult for the accessible information provider organisations, there's often a really high volume of information that needs to be released. Often it's really specialised information involved, you know, think about some of those medical details of the pandemic or geographic information that's relevant in a flood or a bushfire, there's often really frequent changes to that information, which is challenging for a sector where sometimes it actually takes a bit of time to make the information into different formats. And often the speed and intensity and emotion of actually making that work is really hard. A lot of accessible information provider organisations are either disability advocacy organisations doing accessible information work on the side, often as a fee for service line of business, or their small businesses or social enterprises, designed specifically to make one particular format. And what that means is that these are businesses that are often operating on a shoestring, they're often operating on really small budgets, from grant to grant from fee for service work, from project to project, they don't have a lot of money to cover their work in between, they don't have a lot of money to make resources that aren't funded. But in a pandemic, or an emergency situation. These are the people who know how important getting information out there is and they feel a responsibility to do it, because they're the ones who have the skills to do it. And so what we found in the pandemic was that a lot of organisations were making information pro bono, there were people who spoke to us for the research who worked seven days a week for the first six months of the pandemic, making information, there were organisations who got to a 12 hour turnaround of information that they made after each Premier's announcement, but were not paid for any of it. And so the emotion and the responsibility of the work set against the under resourcing of the work is really tricky. Some organisations did get extra resources during the pandemic in particular, but not enough given the amount of information needs that the population had at that time.

**Professor Jackie Leach Scully**

Yeah, that's really interesting that point about the intensity, the stress, potential burnout, I imagine as well as not something that one readily thinks about, I think I probably imagined, like many other people that there was a whole kind of vast infrastructure of organisations, perhaps in a State or Federally funded that were producing this stuff.

**Dr Ariella Meltzer**

Well, look there were government funded resources that is relevant to this picture, but some of those took a while to come through. And some of the organisations who I spoke to knew that resources were needed before those ones got through. There's also the issue of the updating of the information. So if you think about those pandemic times, which none of us really like to think about anymore, you know, we're going from Premier's announcement to Premier's announcement every day, sometimes multiple announcements per day and having a set of resources that were released at one point in time, which has been the traditional approach to making for example, Easy Read information wasn't enough. You needed to be able to update that information really frequently. And that was work that some of the organisations I spoke to needed to do, so it wasn't that government didn't take responsibility for making information, government did take responsibility for making information, but the information needs exceeded traditional ways of making that.

**Professor Jackie Leach Scully**

Okay, so one of your conclusions, I guess we're jumping ahead a bit now, but I suppose it would be about having available, a kind of extra resourcing, but that can be speedily directed at the right places.

**Dr Ariella Meltzer**

Ongoing resourcing of the information accessibility sector is really important and that information accessibility, resourcing needs to have capacity for automatic expansion during a crisis in a predictable way. So underlying what I've just said, there's a couple of components. So one is the idea of ongoing resourcing. Currently, most accessible information work is funded from grant to grant project to project. There's no kind of sector development or capacity development funding between those projects, it's really a fee for service or a grant work situation. And the recommendation of our research is that there will always be a fee for service and grant component funding the information accessibility sector, but there also needs to be at least some stream of ongoing funding behind that, that allows the development of information accessibility organisations and businesses in between projects. The second part of that recommendation is the part about the automatic expansion during a crisis. If a crisis happens, you don't want to be scrambling around waiting to know if you've got extra funding, before you can produce the information, you want to know that it's predictably there. You want to know that what it's going to be so that, you know, kind of the cap of what you can produce before your funding runs out. So what our recommendation is, is that, you know, if they officially declared, for example, natural disaster happens, organisations who are funded under this ongoing funding stream know that they can rely on a certain amount of additional funding, whatever it's going to be to create more information, because then they can expand their workflow much more easily. And if they don't know what money is coming to them to do that.

**Professor Jackie Leach Scully**

Yeah, yeah, I'm assuming we have to know either ask that question or apply for it, and then wait for something like a Ministerial response and we know that those can sometimes particularly in the state of crisis, when there's a lot going on that can take some time. One of the things that you as you're talking is it's making me aware is that I wouldn't prior to our discussion have known exactly how to describe these organisations, you know, wouldn't have known what kind of category to put them in is, is there actually an area of work or sector that you can give a name to? Or is that one of the problems that there isn't a name?

**Dr Ariella Meltzer**

So, I have called it the information accessibility sector in my research, but no one else really calls it that it's kind of organisations doing work in this space without necessarily having an identity together. Some of the organisations are disability advocacy organisations who do accessible information production on the side, what that means is that their primary identity is as a disability advocacy organisation, and most of the funding that they receive is advocacy funding. Some of the other organisations are small businesses or social enterprises, who are dedicated to a particular format. So that might be in small businesses dedicated to AUSLAN and might be small businesses dedicated to making Easy English, there might be small businesses, dedicated to making Easy Read documents, all of the above exist, but they're just operating as small businesses and social enterprises. It's there isn't something connecting them because there's no funding stream identifying them together. When you talk to some of the people who've been in this sector for a long time, they discuss how it has been some recognition in the past that there are advocacy services, and then there are information services. And those two things are related but not the same. But I would argue that there's probably much more of an identity around advocacy servicing rather than around information servicing.

**Professor Jackie Leach Scully**

And do you think it would be a help if there were that sort of shift of identity really around an idea of there being some kind of dedicated area that looks at information provision in a variety of accessible ways?

**Dr Ariella Meltzer**

I think there would be, I'm the external researcher looking inside though, I can't talk for the sector on that, but as the external person looking inside, I think there are benefits for things like advocating for better funding, things like advocating for better articulation of the legal requirements of when accessible information is made or not. I think organisations who work on similar work can advocate for that work better, when they do it together and it's easiest to do that together when you have an identity as a sector.

**Professor Jackie Leach Scully**

I suppose one alternative or perhaps a complementary stream to having dedicated organisations would be to have a better awareness and perhaps sort of training within information provision organisations in general about accessibility. So rather than one organisation, or area producing information that handing over to somebody else to bid for it to be made accessible for there to be more maybe the information provision organisation being able to do that themselves. Do you think that would be a help? Or would it end up with a kind of mishmash of amateur-ish efforts?

**Dr Ariella Meltzer**

Good question. Particularly for information provision in disaster events. So for example, bush fires and floods, because what research found was that in that kind of crisis, it's actually harder for the accessible information providers to be involved because there isn't time for them to necessarily be involved. You know, if you have to update information about approaching bushfires or rising floodwaters, then there isn't time to stop and get an external organisation to make that information for you. So what we found in the research was that some of the accessible information providers to service as that area of information accessibility, were actually running training for other groups about baseline and core accessibility skills. So one organisation, for example, had run training with the people who send out the mass communication text messages in an emergency, the ones that tell you to evacuate, for instance, and have done training for them about how to phrase those text messages about what kind of pitch of language to use, about minimising the amount of capslock, for example, that is used in those messages, because often capslock is there to indicate danger, danger, but actually, it's not necessarily very accessible for people with low literacy. So that kind of training had been done. Similarly, there were other organisations who were advocating for, for example, news media to have a better understanding of visual accessibility requirements when doing mixed audio visual presentations like TV. So the example that they gave was in the news, news readers will often say, if you need more information, call the number on your screen without actually reading the number on the screen out for people who might actually be only accessing the audio portion of that broadcast. So definitely improving the baseline and kind of core information accessibility skills among other players who broadcast information is really important. And it's not just emergency services, or news media, those are two really important groups, but it's other groups in general. So for example, communication staff, TV, people in local councils, people in the SES, people who might be running evacuation centres, all of these groups who have a role in the system can improve the kind of baseline level of accessibility so that the less information needs to be made by the external organisations.

**Professor Jackie Leach Scully**

Yeah, that's a very good point. And it also means that the accessibility becomes more integrated into the everyday process and everyday life, which is one of the things that the DIIU is quite passionate about, it’s not hived off as being a special thing that only applies to special people but actually, it's just part of the standard way of operating on an everyday level.

**Dr Ariella Meltzer**

Absolutely. In terms of how that fits, though, with accessible information from provider organisations, they may be the ones providing the training for others to lift that level. So it's another way that their expertise in accessibility can be recognised.

**Professor Jackie Leach Scully**

Of course, that's great. The example you gave is an interesting one, I remember watching an announcement of a bushfire that wasn't affecting me at all. But I did notice that the captioning on the announcement, which wasn't just a national broadcast was done phonetically. So the address that came up on the captions was actually completely wrong. The address of the areas that were affected was completely wrong, and it was corrected eventually. But you can imagine somebody in that situation just noticing that and responding immediately and starting to evacuate in a way that might not be appropriate for them. We've been having an interesting discussion about accessibility of information during crisis and so on, I've realised, we haven't actually talked about what it means to be accessible. Was that something that was easy to define for you at the outset of your research and what happened during your research?

**Dr Ariella Meltzer**

It's a really interesting question and that's where our research actually started. So part of our research was that we partnered with IDEAS Disability Information, to do some really intensive work at the beginning of the research about the meaning of information accessibility. IDEAS Disability Information is a specialist organisation who has really focused on providing a whole range of different types of accessible information to the disability community over many, many years. And so we thought that they were a great place to start in terms of establishing that definition. So we did some really intensive work with them on what information accessibility means, which I'll talk through in a minute. But then we kind of workshoped their model with everybody else who we spoke to in the research and added to it. And so what I'll talk through now is the amalgamation of everybody's ideas. So really, when it comes to being accessible, what that means can be broken down into five Plain English questions. Those questions are: Who is the information for? How is the information made? How is the information found? How is the information used? and When is the information trusted? So in terms of who the information is for - to be accessible information needs to have a really clear audience, it really needs to know who it's for. And any blurring of the boundaries of that tends to limit the accessibility of the information for other groups who it might not meet the specific requirements for, this then goes into how it's made. So the information needs to meet the technical requirements of whoever the identified audience would be. And that might be being made in Braille, it might be being an audio format. Or it might be being at a particular reading level in terms of literacy and comprehension. The other factor about being accessible is that the information really needs to be used with co-design, and user testing processes with people with disability. People with disability are the experts in the information that they need. And we don't actually know whether it's going to be comprehensible, unless it's tested. And that's really, really important, then there's the question of how the information is found. So part of being accessible is actually getting the information to people it's not enough to make a nice, technically accessible format that never actually makes its way into the community and remains buried on a website that people aren't going to find. So thinking about how it gets out into the community, including sometimes in hard copies, which is a bit challenging in today's digital world, is really important. And that's part of accessibility itself, your information isn't accessible unless it's disseminated in a good way. There's also then the question of how information is used. So it needs to be made to be realistic and practical. So what that means is that often kind of the fluffier background is taken out. And the messaging particularly in a crisis situation, is going to really focus on the details of what people need to know. The other part of this question of how the information is used is recognising that some people will want to use the information independently and some people might use the information with the help of a supporter. And that has different implications in terms of, for example, when you're making information with easier phrasing, what language level or what pitch you give the information and making sure that there are different products out there to meet different people's requirements is really important within what I said earlier about being really practical. It's also really important to acknowledge that people don't just use information to find out news or find out facts. They also use information to learn and discuss. So this might mean that information has a role in teaching people new terminology or new ideas. But it also means that information has a role in enabling people with disability to talk about and find out about the things that they want to know. This was really important to one of the organisations we spoke to who their main business was making communication boards for people who have little to no speech. And their big takeaway in terms of the research was that information isn't just there as a one way endeavour. It's there as a basis for conversation. And that conversation is really important for people for example, being able to reassure themselves or ease up any concerns that they have and that's particularly important in a crisis situation. The final bit is when information is trusted. So we live in this time of misinformation. And actually being an information provider is a really big responsibility at the moment. Information is accessible when it's updated and verified and accurate. And when it's made by groups with appropriate expertise. But it's also important that the information is delivered with a human touch. So it's not just here's the information, there's no one to call, or here's the information that think we you want to know. But there's no response. If you want to know something, information providers are really good or really accessible, have a bit of a relationship with the community of people that they're serving, and try and respond to their needs, while it makes information accessible, and that's where you find particular information providers having a following of you know, these are the people who follow this group's information because they know that they can trust this one thing know that. So those five questions are kind of a round up of what makes accessible information, rather than just listing off different formats, when it comes to information accessibility, which I think is what a lot of people would do if they were faced with that question of what's accessible information? Or well, it's, it's captions Oh, it's easy read. it's Braille. It's AUSLAN, but it's actually a lot more than that.

**Professor Jackie Leach Scully**

That is fascinating. I think, because you're quite right, I would have I think off the top of my head thought of that list of formats. And okay, here's a crisis, let's put this in Easy Read and get the leaflet out there. I'm also aware that some organisations will have a relationship with the people that they work with. And also many people will always have questions, they want to interact with somebody to check out that they understand the information, okay. And often people for themselves might fall into a sort of category in between the official categories. And so then when sure what it is they're supposed to be doing all of that there's really good to think about this not just as information provision, but as sort of a dialogue or conversation that's accessible to for both sides. Thank you Ariella for taking the time today to talk to us about your research and your ongoing interest in this. We at the DIIU were very pleased and very happy to have been able to provide at least some support towards your work. Just in general, do you think there's a role for Institute's like the DIIU in supporting this area of work?

**Dr Ariella Meltzer**

I think the more accessible information that's out there, the better. So universities are a place where knowledge is created, where information is made. And we're not the only place where that happens, but we're one of them. The role of a group like the DIIU is encouraging whatever information is made in a university to be out there and to be accessible and to have that as an expectation of working with the Institute and helping the university to increase its capability in this everywhere. And it doesn't always have to be hard and it doesn't always have to be in every format. One of the things that came up time and time again in the research was that Plain English information has a really big role in helping accessibility across all different formats. So Plain English information is just information in everyday lay language and that you know, there is a movement towards this in academia. You see, for example, a lot of journals now have an expectation that you will have Plain English points after the summary in a paper. There's a lot more focus this year in universities on knowledge translation which is code for Plain English distribution of findings and having that Plain English information is actually a stepping stone towards so many other different kinds of accessibility. So Plain English information is easier to caption for example than very formalised academic information. Plain English information is the basis from which Easy Read and Easy English formats are made when they then make that information, you know, a few levels easier again, but it's easier to do that if it's already in Plain English. Plain English information is also really important to people who use AUSLAN as a supporting kind of information when not everything is available in AUSLAN. Often AUSLAN speakers will use plain English information or to support their information access as well. So the role of the DIIU in promoting capability among academics across all university in information accessibility doesn't have to be hard, it's there and a lot of that's about Plain English.

**Professor Jackie Leach Scully**

Thanks Ariella. And of course, I think we are aware as academics that were notoriously bad at plain non technical language and we sometimes need quite a lot of encouragement to go in and more diverse directions. Okay, so thank you again for all of your work and for being with us here today and we look forward to perhaps hearing more about progress of this in the future.

**Dr Ariella Meltzer**

Thanks so much Jackie, thanks for having me here today.