# Transcript: Accessibility Insights with Heather Dowdy of Netflix – October 2022.

EMMA WHEELER: Hello everyone.

Welcome to today’s webinar.

It has just gone one o'clock so I'm going to give everybody a chance to

join do feel free to drop into the Q&A box and say hi.

We've disabled chat feature as we discovered it can cause problems for

some people using screen readers.

So I can see that more people are starting to arrive now.

I'm really glad you could all make it, great.

We'll make a start now.

So hi everyone.

Welcome to the second episode in series 2 of our accessibility insight

sessions where AbilityNet's head of Digital Inclusion Robin Christopherson

hosts a monthly online chat with individuals who are each working to

improve digital accessibility and Digital Inclusion.

This month he is chatting to Heather Dowdy.

Head of the product accessibility at Netflix.

I'm Emma Wheeler here at AbilityNet and I'll be running through today's

session.

A few bits of housekeeping.

We have live captions provided by MyClearText, you can turn on the

captions option by clicking the CC option.

Additional captions are available at Streamtext.

Slides are available at slideshare.net/abilitynet and on our website AbilityNet.org.

uk/Netflix-insights if you need to leave early you will receive an email in couple of days

time with a recording transcript slides.

Depending on how you joined the webinar, you’ll find a Q&A window. If you want to ask Heather or Robin any Questions, do drop those in the Q&A area for them to address. They will do after today’s session in a follow up blog on our website at abilitynet.org.uk/netflix-insights

Also, please feel free to leave feedback in the post-webinar survey

So, that’s all from me for now, so over to Robin and Heather:

ROBIN CHRISTOPHERSON: Fantastic.

Thank you so much Emma.

So Heather, welcome, thank you very much indeed, particularly as it is the

the crack of dawn where you are in America, is that right.

HEATHER DOWDY: It is pretty early

over here on the east coast of the United States.

ROBIN CHRISTOPHERSON: Thank you so

much.

Cool, first question which I always put to all my guests is have you got a

drink, beverage hot or cold to help you get through this ordeal.

HEATHER DOWDY: I do, I do I have my

favourite mug here.

It is brown and black animal print, stripes on it and typically I like a

hot beverage, I love tea, I'm not British but it is one of the things I

like to introduce about myself and I'm normally drinking a green Jasmine tea.

ROBIN CHRISTOPHERSON: Wow, yeah tea

is my favourite drinks as well. This is one of my favourite mugs, Winnie the

Pooh, I think. I get Christopher Robin a lot when people see my name written down

so that's I quite fitting I think.

Ok, cool.

First question.

This really surprised me that Netflix has been a digital first company

streaming since 2007I candy distinctly remember when DVDs were shipped in the

post so that seems like less than 15 years ago but anyway, really massive

rise of the organisation since going digital.

What role has the principal of Digital Inclusion played in the growth

of your company and do you think it has that an important role?

HEATHER DOWDY: Well first of all I'm

surprised you still remember the red envelopes with the DVDs but Digital

Inclusion has been huge for us.

When you think about Netflix being a pioneer in streaming it really you

know, speaks volumes how much our content itself and our user interface

has evolved over the years to the point that other folks have kind of borrowed

that user interface for watching content.

But what has been crucial is just as important as how we deliver, whether

it is feed or aesthetics is accessibility has been a part of our

mission there.

And that is because of the wish to entertain the world.

That global piece and thinking about how to deliver our content to people in

different places regardless of their devices, regardless of the language

they speak really speaks to thinking about inclusion early and often and

throughout our history as a company.

We're known as an inclusive story teller and honestly that is what drew

me to Netflix personally.

I remember it was a story about a

famous TikToker in the US who had gone viral for producing content on black

American sign language and Netflix had featured her, and it really caught my

eye in terms of the stories that Netflix was willing to tell and share more broadly

on and off their service so back in the summer of 2020 when there was a global

racial reckoning I really thought about where I could take my talents

and all of me in terms of my experiences in the community that I'm

connected to at the intersection of race, disability and faith and how to

really push forward in a new way.

And so I was really excited to join the Netflix team.

ROBIN CHRISTOPHERSON: Brilliant,

but they must have been making progress.

They must have been prioritising inclusion for quite a long time

because I've been able to use the platform for years and years as a

blind user so how do you, I mean are you aware of how significantly Digital

Inclusion was prioritised? How that progress was made within an

Organisation? Because it is not a given that organisations are going to

sufficiently prioritise doing things in an inclusive way and have you got any

advice for people that would want to make similar progress within their own

organisations?

HEATHER DOWDY: Well I think it is

really important to double down on what you excel at and we've come to be

known for the quality of our subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing as

well as audio description and a lot of that really is a curve cut effect.

When you think about the data that we share that over 40% of our members

watch Netflix shows and movies using subtitles and over 80% of members turn

on subtitles once a month.

40% turn them all the time.

That is more than just people with disabilities who watch our content

with subtitles on and so we understood that hey, this is an area where we're

delivering quality and we really are providing accessibility and

usability to everyone.

Recently in May we were able to double down on that investment and

announce how we were expanding the languages in which we provide

subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing and audio description to

include a lot more languages.

So currently you would be able to access

a title in the country that it was produced in, that its language that

audio description would be available in for example so if it was a title produced

in Poland, then audio descriptions would be automatically available in

Polish for our Netflix originals but by expanding this, the language to

include French and Italian and German for that same title we're recognising

that lots of affects come to Netflix watch something that they really can't

watch anywhere else and that is a title from another country and that is

because of the whole idea and the whole inclusion that we truly believe that

great stories can come from all over the world and so why not provide more

access to those stories in different languages?

So first piece of advice is double down on what you excel in to deliver

quality and make sure that you are delivering it for all of your members

including members with disabilities.

The second thing I would say is really it has been such a

great culture in the sense that there is no fear of failure and that is

really important.

I've been in tech for over 16 years and that mindset, that curiosity is

truly how we get to some of the more innovative things and I will caveat

that that don't try this at home if it is something where you are blocking

access and creating barriers to using your service but outside of those

types of things it is really important for the teams to be able to come

up with and experiment with what might be the new and latest thing.

An example of that is recently with our subtitles for the deaf and hard of

hearing on Stranger Things on recent episodes and it was a lot more descriptive and people

heard of it, some people in the Deaf Community really liked it and

others really hated it but that idea of we wanted to try something new and

were able to pivot off of that and then lastly, I think in terms of how to make

progress in an organisation along your accessibility journey there are lots more

resources than when I started, including the

different accessibility maturity and evolution models that really allow you

to measure how you are doing inside and outside company and I

would pretend to say in this industry you can't change what you don't

measure.

ROBIN CHRISTOPHERSON: Yeah, that's a

really good point.

So, we've taken the step of creating a digital accessibility maturity model

as well which people can download and self-serve, you know, can go through

and it really does shine a light on all of those areas which, you know, if you

haven't really prioritised accessibility for some time, all the

cogs and wires that allow you to produce end products.

Without all the impossible retrofitting which means that at go

live those products do go out the door with serious flaws in.

It is the only way to go forward.

That is a really, really good point so you have really been in an

organisation of significant maturity and not fearing failure, embracing innovation in this area. That is an important

message and we would they Netflix has a accessibility UI, they have exact

content.

They have stretch goals when it comes to doing things in an inclusive way and certainly.

my wife has not got an impairment but turns on subtitles at least once a

month and we're watching a particular movie where they mumble a lot.

Dialogue is not clear anymore.

Absolutely.

Brilliant.

So we've been talking about globalising content and making it

accessible for the broadest groups.

Netflix is a global organisation as well, you have got employees all

around the world?

So how do you prioritise inclusion and diversity within such a diverse

organisation as well as for customers as we've been talking about.

HEATHER DOWDY: Well within the

organisation, I mean Netflix has grown tremendously, especially over the last

3 years in terms of our workforce and so we've got folks coming from lots of

Trent places and also other companies and these folks are coming in the door

and asking what are we doing about accessibility here at Netflix and I

think that is great and I think that is just the testament to the fact that

more and more companies are on an accessibility journey and so employees

are used to asking that of their employer.

And so I've been amazed each and every month with the folks that I get

to work with and meet with at all levels and roles.

They are super passionate about what we're doing, internally and externally

but also really skilled in their area and they are willing to learn and take

that back to their teams and lead in accessibility so that is great and

then we also have an accessibility ERG made up of employees with disabilities

as well as Allies and we've been having some really

great conversations, not only about holding Netflix accountable on our

journey but also what is happening in regard to disability inclusion within

our, in all our industry technology and entertainment so I always find that

really fascinating when you are able to look in signed also glean from others

and other best practices externally.

ROBIN CHRISTOPHERSON: Brilliant

so has Netflix historically been quite a flexible employer or has the

pandemic had a big impact or were you working in a flexible way prior to

everything going very very weird for couple of years?

HEATHER DOWDY: Like a lot of

employers there has been a shift with the pandemic and I've certainly

benefited from that.

I joined Netflix as a remote only employee, and it has been great for me

in terms of having that flexibility to work remotely and that is flexibility

that not only myself but obviously we know the disability community has been

requesting for years.

So it is great to see companies like Netflix embrace that.

There is definitely a hybrid model for folks that are located within a

Netflix headquarters within the headquarters or Netflix location other

but there is still a lot of flexibility, I think the flexibility

was all there but I think it is certainly increased with pandemic and

more folks like myself who are only remote.

I'm also 3 hours ahead of many of teams that I work with so it has

benefited me in the sense that I get to make sure that I'm present with my

family, especially my kids, seeing them off to school in the morning,

fitting in a work out when I can before I log on

which has been super crucial for my own mental health and my own journey and

then when I do travel, which I do so often for work, I feel like it is a

lot more meaningful because you know that you are going in in person to

really deepen the relationship that have been maintained online.

ROBIN CHRISTOPHERSON: Yeah, I'm a

huge advocate of remote working so it is Hollywood where the main

headquarters is?

HEATHER DOWDY: Yeah.

ROBIN CHRISTOPHERSON: No I'm of the

sure I would like to work there.

I like remote, it’s good.

HEATHER DOWDY: You are the first to say that it

Everyone is else is like sign me up.

ROBIN CHRISTOPHERSON: I've been to

Vegas 3 times.

The first time I was like oh it is amazing and the second time I thought this is a bit OTT

and then yeah, the third time I was I'm done now.

I can imagine Hollywood would be like that.

Can you put your finger on the key benefits and changes Netflix has gone

through or has remote working always benefited the organisation and worked

smoothly?

HEATHER DOWDY: I think it sparked

some innovation in the sense that thinking through how we do what we do

so an example of that is this past summer we host, several accessibility

movie screenings and we have opened subtitles for the deaf and hard of

hearing and open audio descriptions and we work with the disability community

and organisations but, you know, with Covid spiking somewhat there were lots

of scheduled changes but it was also really interesting in the different

ways that we had to come up with in order to put on these events that

happened in London, New York and in Los Angeles because we were very

intentional that the audience and the fans that had disabilities that were

coming out to these events could also be compromised and so how do you put

this event with all these folks coming together but in a safe way.

It was a bit stressful for a couple of those months but our events and

communications team learned a lot and quite honestly it was such a vibe

a it was so well worth it to have and to be with the disability community

for those events and I think that there was no better reason to bring folks

together.

I love connecting folks but it was all for the sake of joy, and so

figuring out how to deliver and delight folks.

How to deliver joy and delight folks in a new way continued to be, I think,

a benefit to how we're working within the pandemic.

On a personal level in terms of the challenges with the pandemic and new

ways of working is just the whole phrase transitioning too new normal.

There is certainly change fatigue, whether that is over, whether you are

working remotely, hybrid, or whatever, and the ideas that what is normal?

Because the pandemic has impacted all of us in so many different ways,

whether that has been through healthcare, racial injustice or

educational in equities, especially in the marginalised communities that I'm

connected to the bleak Deaf Community as well at the

youth with disability so I think we continue to grapple with how best to

move forward but in a way that honours every one of those different

places and so I hope that the grace that we found for each other and that

we're all in this together during the pandemic, I would hope that some of

that would remain.

ROBIN CHRISTOPHERSON: Yeah,

definitely.

Big changes, but I think it has shown organisations to the senior teams

within organisations that change can happen and it is not a disaster and in

fact it really can provide many opportunities as well. So talking about

screening parties, if I was invited to a swanky posh first viewing screening party as a blind person

I would like to have the option of a audio description.

For people that don't know his is extra voice over.

Extra narration which tells you this person is kissing that person.

That person just shot that person, that sort of thing which means you can

follow the action and the visuals on screen you can't see them at all.

I would want to have those in my ears as opposed to everybody in the room

being subjected to them because it is not for everyone.

Similarly at home when I'm watching TV with my wife I like to put my ears

in having the AD on an additional track and that is a technological

request on my wish list but when it comes to furthering areas of

inclusion for your customers have you got anything on the radar along those

lines that can further improve, I guess watch parties and stuff like that

could offer that capability, what have you got on your to do list going

forward?

HEATHER DOWDY: Well it is funny

because I hear that feedback and that feature suggestion quite a bit from

blind and low vision members about wanting to have sort of a private

channel for audio description.

For the public event it was great that it was open because there were so

many different people with disability some of which hadn't heard of audio

description or experienced it before and so I love the fact that we were

all able to enjoy it together.

But on a broader scale I think that type of feature just makes me think of

community and the fact that when we watch content, we normally watch it in

a mixed ability community whether that is with you family or friends and so how

do we really cater to that?

I think it really helps though when we think about more people using these

accessibility features.

We had a Wall Street Journal article that chronicled recording audio

description for Bridgerton and talked about how steamy it was.

ROBIN CHRISTOPHERSON: Yeah, we get very

watered down version of a lot of those scenes in AD. Sorry.

Carry on.

HEATHER DOWDY: Yes, and what a lot of

people were surprised by was that there are lots more people that are starting

to watch audio descriptions that don't have a visual disability because they

love the juiciness of the quality all the audio description or because

that is how they process information so we continue to see this curve cut

effect.

We continue to see that more and more people are using it makes for a

stronger case for the different ways in which we can deliver this and the

different modalities and devices on which we can deliver this experience.

But I think that there is a huge opportunity for us as technology and

entertainment company to really start to look at some of the other

disabilities, particularly cognitive and mental health disabilities,

obviously there has been a great focus on hearing and vision with subtitles

and audio description but I truly believe that there is more that we

could learn that could help us with our user interface by really

learning from other type of disabilities.

And I also, what is top of line for me in this role is also thinking about

how we provide more opportunities for disabled talent in front of and behind

the camera.

We believe that stories can come from anywhere and we're starting to see

some pockets of stories with characters and story lines focused on disability

and I truly believe that there is an opportunity to do more, too more there

and so whenever the wherever we can we do show case the collection of stories

that we have but more recently we partnered with an organisation called the

Respect Ability to create a children's TV disabled creator's platform that

would allow an opportunity for folks to really get the training and enter the

pipeline with their own stories so all of that matters as much as the

features that we're producing on service.

Also the content.

ROBIN CHRISTOPHERSON: Fantastic, I’m afraid we’re running out of time.

So a couple of brief ones if possible.

The future. What does the future hold for any changes in how you

deliver your services?

Obviously there has been huge developments over the last 15 years

already so yeah, any future plans for how you deliver your services and is

there any implications in there for accessibility or Digital Inclusion?

HEATHER DOWDY: Oh I love talking

about the future, having previously worked in AI or accessibility that was

the goal, to think about the future of accessibility.

I think that the trans and personalisation will continue to be

huge.

There is a need for it when we talk about accessibility. When we talk

about really using technology to meet people where they are instead of the

way round.

I would love to really think about how we take the features that members

use today and make sure that it is always on and seamless regardless of

the device they choose.

Or as you mentioned earlier the context in which they are watching in, how do

we leverage technology to do that understanding that they are watching with their family or that

they typically like audio descriptions and how do we service more content to

them that they like so personalisation.

ROBIN CHRISTOPHERSON: Fantastic. Now a couple of questions, we have

a different speaker each month and last month's

was Hector Minto of Microsoft which is an organisation that you know really well because you

were at Microsoft at he was an ex-colleague of yours.

Director of accessibility there.

He asked you a question. You have lots of people that supply content to

your platform.

To what extent are you able to embrace accessibility in what they are

doing and empower them to prioritise it as Netflix does so that you are not

having to own the whole picture yourself?

HEATHER DOWDY: What a great question

from my former teammate, Hector at Microsoft.

It is a good questions us because the nuance of the eco-system

we're influence signed it is important when we think about how to bring

others along, the journey with us at Netflix, one it goes without saying

but we have to make sure that accessibility is part of the business

case for winning.

For winning more members.

For winning in terms of the content that people choose to watch because

without being part of the business case it looks like accessibility is more

[inaudible] so as part of winning we continue to be the best that we can

in our market at that by default allows us to inform the suppliers and

talent that we work with because everybody wants to be part of a

winning team and we're able to have more conversations or at least they

are open to more conversations on what our operational guidelines

are for success and excellence so it is important to be really clear about

what the non-negotiables are.

and I think the quality of our subtitles and audio

description or the non-negotiables around training and also then to be

clear on where partners and suppliers have more creative freedom which is

around the content that they create so being able to be really clear about

those things has been really beneficial for us and, you know, it goes without

saying that it allows to make sure that we deliver quality and that others

follow.

And that is how you get to like really influencing and entertaining

the world together.

ROBIN CHRISTOPHERSON: Wow, yeah,

absolutely and it will help them all progress as long that journey that

we're all on towards really mature inclusive processes within our

organisations.

Fantastic so a final thing then is pass on a question to our next month's

guest which is Natalie Tucker.

A senior, well she is senior accessibility lead at Spotify, an

organisation that has become a very notable streaming organisation just

like Netflix but obviously in a slightly different field but yes what

would you like to pass on, either a question or a comment to Natalie next

month?

HEATHER DOWDY: Well Natalie and I share our

heart for teaching others about accessibility so I love that about

Natalie and my question would be when building an accessibility programme

how should companies approach training at scale, especially with innovation,

innovative cultures like at Spotify where teams could be working on

something that there are no accessibility guidelines for out right

and so how do you really bring those folks along the journey and how do you

train them at scale?

ROBIN CHRISTOPHERSON: Wow brilliant

question.

Really, really good.

We'll put that to Natalie next month.

Heather, thank you so much.

Brilliant discussion.

Really, really enjoyed it, I'll let you start your day.

HEATHER DOWDY: Thank you so much for

having me.

ROBIN CHRISTOPHERSON: Brilliant

thank you so much again and we'll pass back to Emma just to finish off.

Thanks Emma.

EMMA WHEELER: Thanks so much Heather and Robin – there are lots of questions that we hope to answer online in the next few days and you’ll receive an email with the link to access them.

 Finally, just a bit more information that might be of interest for you:

 We also run online training sessions on digital accessibility. We have a special code to use on our training courses for webinar attendees – use the code AbilityNetWebinar10 to save 10% on all our courses.

Book now: abilitynet.org.uk/training

Some course coming up are:

Embedding accessibility at every stage of your project

Accessibility testing in mobile apps

Accessibility for developers

We also have the TechShare Pro conference coming up in November, which is your chance to join Europe's largest gathering of accessibility and inclusion professionals and their allies. Please visit techsharepro.com, where you can find out some highlights and buy tickets.

 You can also sign up to our eNewsletter on our website at abilitynet.org.uk/newsletter

And, finally don’t forget about our next webinars which you can access at abilitynet.org.uk/webinars

We have two webinars coming up. Join us on 18 October for our Don’t Disable Me: How Organisational Culture and Equipment enables inclusion and on the 1 November for our – Accessibility Insights with Natalie Tucker from Spotify.

So, thank you again Heather and Robin and everyone who’s joined us. Please do complete the feedback form you’ll be directed to, and we will be in touch with you soon. Bye everyone.