

## InformED podcast transcript

### Accessible Conference Presentations: Results and insights from a study

Speakers: Mary Gaskarth & Emily Messina

**Mary Gaskarth (00:00):**

Hello and welcome to 'InformED' – a podcast series where you will hear industry experts share their thought-provoking insights and lessons in the field of medical communications. This series is brought to you by ISMPP and is generously sponsored by MedThink SciCom.”

My name is Mary Gaskarth, and I'm Head of Medical Services at CMC Affinity, part of IPG Health Med Comms, I'm delighted to be guest host for today's podcast episode with Emily Messina. Emily and her team recently won the ISMPP 2023 Annual Meeting Publication Star poster award, a prize given to the most unique or key research amongst the member submissions for work that really contributes new information to the knowledge base. Their poster was entitled *Are conference presentations accessible? Insights from an online survey to improve equity* and during their study Emily and her coauthors highlighted our colleagues with sensory, hearing, visual, processing, verbal and mobility accessibility needs and were able to make management strategy recommendations for conference presentations – and it's that research that we're going to hear about today. Emily is a medical writer with a background in teaching and research in microbiology.

**Mary Gaskarth (00:00):**

Welcome Emily. And can you tell me to start with, how and why you decided to do this research?

**Emily Messina (00:06):**

Yes, thank you. The 2022 ISMPP [Annual] meeting focused on diversity, but I was really struck by the lack of discussion on accessibility and disability. So, there were several sessions on new presentation formats, on new types of posters and talks, but there was no discussion on their accessibility.

**Mary Gaskarth (00:25):**

Okay. So, what did you do? How did you address your research question?

**Emily Messina (00:31):**

So, I talked with some internal folks here and we put together a good team, including others at IPG Health, and also, some external folks. So, Mike Morrison, and he is the guy who went viral a little bit ago with the Poster 2.0 format, and then Zen Faulkes, who's been a longtime advocate of improving posters and he has a book that he's authored called *Better Posters*.

**Emily Messina (00:53):**

And so, together, we designed an online survey, and we circulated it on social media, and we asked conference attendees about their accessibility needs or disabilities, and their experiences at conferences.

**Mary Gaskarth (01:10):**

So, why is accessibility so important for posters and for talks?

**Emily Messina (01:15):**

So, if we ignore accessibility, we're really sending a message that we don't value the input of many of our colleagues, and we are also losing their contributions. And it's important to keep in mind that between 15 and 20% of people identify as either disabled or neurodivergent.

**Mary Gaskarth (01:33):**

So, what did you find?

**Emily Messina (01:35):**

We had almost 500 professionals respond, and more than half of them reported having one or more accessibility need or disability. And although many of them were using strategies to manage their needs, about 20% of them indicated their needs were not currently met.

**Mary Gaskarth (01:53):**

Were you surprised at the findings?

**Emily Messina (01:56):**

Yes and no. I was really pleasantly surprised by the number of respondents. I was a little bit afraid at the beginning, I confess, that we'd only get 20 or 30 responses, but we got almost 500. So, that was just amazing and a wonderful surprise.

**Emily Messina (02:10):**

I did expect more variation on the opinions of posters because I know many people personally who have very, very strong opinions on the correct format of a poster. And yet, the call for less cluttered posters was pretty overwhelming. This is over 70%. And even among respondents who preferred a really detailed method section on posters, still wanted to see less cluttered posters.

**Mary Gaskarth (02:35):**

Yes, because we've talked a lot, haven't we, over the years at ISMPP meetings, about the less dense Poster 2.0 version with its kind of key result in the middle and also about TED Talks and how maybe for some people, talking without slides is more engaging. But were those formats found to be accessible in your research?

**Emily Messina (02:56):**

So, for the posters, yes. The Poster 2.0 was found to be more accessible generally-speaking, although a few points were mentioned on ways to improve them, namely the reading order. So, the one thing people really had to say that was positive about the traditional kind of 'wall of text' poster, was that people knew where to find things. You knew what order to read the poster in.

**Emily Messina (03:17):**

So, the Poster 2.0 was generally more accessible in its uncluttered format, but people would prefer to see that conclusions box to the side or to the top. So, it was more clear what order to read it in.

**Emily Messina (03:30):**

For the talks though, no. The TED style talks were much less accessible than the traditional style talks. And if you think about it, in a TED style talk, when you're presenting with few to no slides or images, just images on your slides — you're cutting off like half the information that you're presenting to people.

**Emily Messina (03:49):**

So, you've immediately lost anybody who might be hard of hearing, who might be deaf, who might be struggling with the accent or the language, or who may be neurodivergent. So, you are really reducing access for a wide swath of your audience.

**Mary Gaskarth (04:09):**

And as you're talking there, Emily, I mean, obviously, there are a multitude of different accessibility needs. So, what's the kind of biggest take-home message, I guess, for making those conference presentations more accessible? What can we do as medical communication professionals?

**Emily Messina (04:23):**

I think the biggest thing is to think about it from the beginning. So, if you're trying to take an existing presentation and just tack on some accessibility things, features at the very end, they're never going to be as meaningful or impactful as if you plan from the very beginning. It's also less expensive and easier to plan on accessibility from the beginning.

**Emily Messina (04:42):**

So, that means starting with an accessible template, including high contrast colors, large font, consider figures where you are directly labeling instead of having a separate legend. And then also consider your audience and the time in your space.

**Emily Messina (05:03):**

If you're trying to present 60 minutes of information in a little 10-minute talk, that's not going to be accessible for anyone no matter the format. Likewise, a poster is not a 20-page paper on the wall. So, try to keep things condensed to just your core messages and everything else can be in supplementary materials online.

**Mary Gaskarth (05:24):**

So, planning and some common sense. What about posters? How can we make posters more accessible?

**Emily Messina (05:31):**

So, again, start from the beginning planning with an accessible template, and decide on that core message, and consider uploading audio walkthrough, just a five-minute audio walkthrough can really improve accessibility for people who are more focused on auditory information. Or you can do a short video and upload it to YouTube.

**Emily Messina (05:50):**

Again, that can improve accessibility, and it has the bonus of it increases your reach, so more people can access your content online.

**Mary Gaskarth (06:00):**

Great. Some excellent tips there. And what about talks? Any additional suggestions how we can make those more accessible?

**Emily Messina (06:07):**

So, again, a lot of the same principles apply: start with an accessible template, use uncluttered slides and stick to your key message. But additionally, it's important to keep in mind that uncluttered does not mean only pictures or only words.

**Emily Messina (06:22):**

You really want a combination of just a few key bullet points, words so that people can follow along in addition to your visuals, and consider including something like captions. Again, some written information to really help that portion of your audience follow along.

**Mary Gaskarth (06:42):**

And presumably, there are some considerations for the stage and the room layout as well. So, I guess that might include where speakers and panel participants are positioned on the stage and relative to the screen, perhaps having sign language interpreters, live captioning, transcription, those kind of things?

**Emily Messina (07:02):**

Yes. All of those things are good things. Make sure that the screen is visible for everybody in the room. Make sure that objects aren't placed in front of the screen. If you have an interpreter, they need a clear space where they can stand, where there's enough light, where they can be seen, because there's no point in having an interpreter if the people who need the interpreter can't see the interpreter.

**Emily Messina (07:23):**

Also, if you do have an interpreter, consider giving them a script in advance so they can prep for any complicated words or jargon. Having a script in advance that people can download is also beneficial as well. And make sure that there's enough space to go down the aisleway, so people with mobility aids can walk safely.

**Mary Gaskarth (07:46):**

Yes, because we need to make sure, of course, that spaces are physically accessible too, and that applies to conference posters as well as to rooms where talks are taking place.

**Emily Messina (07:59):**

The physical space is really important, especially in poster halls where things tend to get really crowded together and people congregate or really crowded roundtable rooms. So, people need to be able to move about safely if they've got crutches or a wheelchair or what have you.

**Emily Messina (08:14):**

And as an extra bonus, if you have more space between the posters, it improves the acoustics. So, that really helps people who maybe are neurodivergent or hard of hearing, to be able to hear the conversations that they're trying to have.

**Emily Messina (08:27):**

Ample seating, so people can take nice quick breaks. Also, having seating at posters is really important. So, viewers can sit while viewing posters. If they have any sort of chronic pain or fatigue or again, mobility issues. And this is also important for presenters.

**Emily Messina (08:49):**

We had a few people comment that they couldn't actually present their own posters at conferences because they physically couldn't stand through the whole poster session. So, having some seating spread about poster halls could really improve accessibility.

**Emily Messina (09:02):**

And again, if all of these things are sort of planned in proactively, it can make it much easier. And if people know that these options are available proactively, it's easier for them because it can be exhausting to constantly have to advocate for yourself.

**Mary Gaskarth (09:18):**

Absolutely, yes. Seating, that seems to be a really simple one to address, and yet one from conferences I've been to in the past that, as you say, is not always readily available.

**Mary Gaskarth (09:27):**

And I believe as an extension of your research, you've actually compiled a checklist that can help us to think about and address accessibility when we're developing conference presentations and planning ahead like you've talked about. Is that something that our listeners can get access to, Emily?

**Emily Messina (09:44):**

Yes, we have a checklist to help people get started, which you can find in a link next to the podcast description and on the ISMPP website.

**Mary Gaskarth (09:54):**

Well, thank you, Emily. That's been extremely informative, and you've given us some really practical ideas about how we can start to address accessibility in the communications that we produce.

**Mary Gaskarth (10:03):**

Thanks for listening to InformED for medical communication professionals. Please take a minute to subscribe to the show on your favorite podcast app, tell your colleagues, and rate our show highly if you like what you've heard today.

**Mary Gaskarth (10:19):**

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