The independent audio describer is dead: Long live audio description!

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Abstract

Traditional audio description (AD) is giving way to integrated audio description in which media accessibility is no longer an add-on but built in from the start in collaboration with the artistic team. As directors and producers take a greater interest in making their work accessible to audience members with a sensory impairment, how are the power dynamics altered between the stakeholders? The idea of abusive forms of translation advanced by Lewis (1985) and Nornes (1999) is reconsidered, together with the sanctity of the source text (ST). Also assessed is the impact on the role and hence the training needs of the professional audio describer. Using data from research projects developed by Extant, the UK's leading professional performing arts company of visually impaired people, and from the European research project ADLAB PRO, this paper concludes that a describer's skills and competences are still required even with the evolution of integrated AD.

Key words: media accessibility, audio description, visual impairment, blindness, describer

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1. Introduction

In an era of accessible filmmaking (AFM) and integrated audio description (IAD), is the role of an independent access interpreter outdated? In what way do a describer's skills need to change to reflect the shifting AD environment and how does that affect describer training? This article seeks to answer these questions in the context of ADLAB PRO, a three-year research project financed by the European Union under the Erasmus+ Programme Key Action 2 – Strategic Partnerships. ADLAB PRO is charged with defining the profile of the audio description professional and outlining describer competences in order to create a course and training materials for producing more of these specialists in the future. This article also draws on two research projects organised by Extant which is the UK's leading professional performing arts company of visually impaired people. Although the focus of this article is on Live AD (principally theatre), aspects of subtitling and screen AD are briefly considered.

1.1. Extant's Research Projects

The first project called Enhance was based around Extant's tour of the play *The Chairs* (Ionesco, 1958)

> The tour programme was delivered with venue partners in Manchester and Birmingham and included supported attendance and development workshops, to encourage participation by visually impaired audiences, and a series of staff development workshops, to support the delivery of an improved experience for visually impaired audiences and artists (Fortnum & Hall, 2016, p. 2).

The mainstay of the Enhance programme was support for the companies to develop and deliver audiointroductions and touch tours for six productions, reflecting multiple genres of live performance from puppetry to opera. The second project The Integrated Access Inquiry (Cavallo & Fryer, 2018) comprised qualitative interviews with 20 theatremakers representing 15 companies across the UK with experience of making their performances accessible to all, and responses from a small focus group of AD users.

2. Accessibility

Greco (2016, p. 23) defines *media accessibility* (MA) as "the research area dealing with theories, practices, technologies and instruments that provide access to media products and environments for people who cannot, or cannot properly, access content in its original form." Issue could be taken with the word "properly" as it carries with it an implication that there is but one normative interpretation. This would seem to lie at the heart of objections to AD as it is currently practiced, which Udo & Fels (2009) call *conventional* but here is termed *traditional AD* (TAD). Discussing their creative approach to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in which the director and describer

worked together to produce an AD in iambic pentameter, spoken by the character Horatio, Udo & Fels suggest "A conventional audio description would have taken a more objective, less interpretative approach, relaying factual information about the set, costumes, and characters' actions" (2009, p.8). Despite calls to the contrary (Fryer & Freeman, 2014; Ramos, 2015) it would seem that TAD is still more intent on "providing visual information than catering to the feel of the scene." (Udo & Fels, 2009, p. 8). Actor, AD user and researcher, Amelia Cavallo (2015) calls this approach *occularcentric* and it could be argued that a practice designed to be inclusive, becomes exclusive, by presenting information from a sighted viewpoint. This echoes what Hannah Thompson (2015) calls a *problematic irony* that "AD is designed to help give blind users independence, yet blind [people] are reliant on choices made by sighted describers" (2015, para 8).

2.1. Traditional AD

Traditional AD is typified by five characteristics: it is exclusive; neutral; non-auteur; third-party and post hoc. As such, TAD anchors one extreme of a theoretical spectrum with integrated AD at the other end of it and is unlikely to reflect AD as it is practiced in the real world. Instead it captures AD as it is perceived by theatre makers and by some AD users (Cavallo & Fryer, 2018; Lopez, Kearney & Hofstadter, 2018).

Addressing these characteristics in turn: TAD is exclusive in the sense that it has to be listened to via a headset and is therefore not available to the whole audience. This contravenes one of the principles of Universal Design (UD), that a product should "be useable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design" (Connell et al., 1997)[I]; TAD urges describers to adopt a neutral approach to word choice and delivery that some users find dull, as one partially sighted AD user expressed it: "Literal description is too boring. I don't like boring voices, so I need emotional connection as well" (Cavallo & Fryer, 2018, p. 21). TAD is independent in the sense that decisions about content (content selection and the choice of words to describe it) are taken by the describers in collaboration with each other, rather than with members of the artistic team (Naraine, Whitfield & Fels, 2018). When the process is explained, doubts have been raised in users' minds as to the reliability of this third-party source of information (Lopez, Kearney & Hofstadter, 2018). The use of external, independent describers has led to frustration on the part of some directors. Artistic director of UK disabled theatre company Graeae, Jenny Sealey objects to "some person coming in, watching the show, writing a script, and coming back and doing it." She asks, "Where was their real understanding of the visceral process of making that theatre?" (Cavallo & Fryer, 2018, p. 45). It is an approach that is evidently non-auteur. It is also post-hoc, created after the event. In addition, TAD is perceived to be rule bound even though guidelines largely refer to screen AD rather than the AD of live events (Whitfield & Fels, 2013). The ADLAB guidelines (Remael, Reviers & Vercauteren, 2015, 3.4.1) devote a brief section to the description of theatre, but when it comes to scripting, these largely refer to advice for screen AD. The guidelines advocate a limited amount of collaboration yet fall short of condoning AD

as an artistic process, as advocated by theatre makers such as Amanda Redvers Rowe of Liverpool's Collective Encounters who worries "about traditional modes of AD getting set in stone. It's an artistic process that needs to be interrogated." (Cavallo & Fryer, 2018, p. 38).

2.2. Integrated AD

Integrated AD (IAD) comprises the opposite characteristics (Fryer, 2018) having evolved in response to the perceived deficits of TAD outlined above. It is conceived from the start of the creative process with the full support and involvement of the artistic team (Cavallo & Fryer, 2018). Citing Cavallo, Fryer (2018) suggests that IAD should be considered less as a neutral way of conveying the source text and more as a creative tool, with the aim of "connecting both audience and performer to each other and the artistic content of a piece in a positive way" (Cavallo, 2015, p. 133).

This was the approach taken by Graeae, who describe themselves as "pioneers [of] a radical dramatic language by exploring the 'aesthetics of access', creatively embedding a range of tools such as audio description and sign language from the very beginning of the artistic process" (Graeae.org, n.d.). For example*,* Graeae's wheelchair dancing troupe, the Rhinestone Rollers features an able-bodied caller, whose character name is Studley Dudley. Like the dancers, he wears line-dancing gear, in his case denims, a rhinestone-studded belt and a Stetson. He is very much part of the act. He is also an audio describer (Willie Elliott) who like many other describers turned to description after or in tandem with a career in acting[II]. By "calling" the dance moves Studley keeps blind, as well as sighted members of the audience and indeed members of the cast, up to speed with what is going on. It is AD but in a style that is so utterly in keeping with the performance that the sighted audience is unaware that they are listening to AD.

2.3. Strategies of Integration

The describer-as-character approach, embodied by Studley Dudley, took the form of adding descriptive lines for a pre-existing character in the Canadian production of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Udo & Fels, 2009) mentioned above. This shows that IAD is neither limited to the UK nor suitable only for newly-devised performances but can also be used for pre-existing plays. This strategy was also adopted for a 2018 production by Ramps on the Moon of Timberlake Wertenbaker's play *Our Country's Good* (1998). By contrast Fingersmiths' 2018 tour of John Godber's comedy *Up 'n' Under* (1984) inserted the describer as a supplementary character (a sports commentator) in keeping with, rather than integral to the text. In this production, the AD was still *closed* so that AD users listened to it via a headset, even though the describer-as-character was in full view. Describer Willie Elliott (Cavallo & Fryer 2018, p. 35) explains the practical implications of describing from the stage:

> Because it's all about rugby there's a conceit that I'm a sports commentator so I already have a big headset with a mic taped inside it – a radio mic – and in one of my pockets I've got

a transmitter with a mute switch so that's on and off and on and off all through the show. And even at one point when I'm commentating with a handheld microphone in one hand to the whole audience I take it away and switch on my audio description in my pocket and I'm back and forth so it's quite complicated; it is a bit like patting your head and rubbing your stomach[III]. And at the end of the piece there is a rugby match. The writer John Godber was very detailed about what happens in the match, so I've been able to lift that and use it as commentary and just change little bits to make it in the present and change the style of the writing, so it becomes, you know-sports commentary rather than just stage directions. It is very detailed and the director has used that detail to choreograph the game. So for me it has just been a case of lifting it out.

Maria Oshodi, CEO of Extant outlines a range of ways AD has been integrated into their productions, some of them non-verbal:

We've integrated access and audio description into scripts, so we've worked when we've been creating drafts of scripts to have an awareness that things might need to be described.[IV] We have done it with sound designs that reflect the lighting designs, so if we have a mood that changes in the lighting we reflect that in the sound. It's not described as such, but it creates a sense of the atmosphere through the sound. We've done it through performers describing themselves, through performers describing other performers, so it's either first or second person. We've done it (through) call and response with audiences and […] enlisted the audience to join in to find ways of describing things. (Cavallo & Fryer, 2018, p. 36)

Oshodi shows that one strategy used in IAD is changing the tense of the description, abandoning the injunction to describe in the third person – a tense that gives an illusion of neutrality. Without reopening the subjective/objective debate, suffice it to point out that as Cavallo (2015) notes when describing herself in her role in the Extant show *Burlesque* "Just the simple act of putting the AD into first person speech suddenly gave it a new sense of power and control." (p. 127). A variety of tenses were used in *Moon*, a dance/circus piece for children based on a story by Hans Christian Andersen. The AD was created by the author with 2Faced Dance, a company based in Hereford, UK. In this instance the AD was written by the describer with input from the dancers from the perspective of the Moon, who swung in an aerial hoop above the performance space for most of the show. The Moon was already scripted to speak directly to the audience at the start of the work and to exchange words with the young boy he befriends, so this was continued in the description which was created towards the end of the rehearsal process. At times the Moon directs the boy, at others he reflects on the boy's actions in the form of a running commentary. As children often use this type of self-narrative, describing what they are doing as they are playing, it was considered in keeping with the piece, as well as assisting anyone in the audience who might find it difficult to observe the action directly. A short excerpt is given below (Example 1).

It includes some vocabulary options so that the dancer could choose whichever term he felt best suited either his own way of speaking or that of his character.

> Moon (live): Hello everybody. I'm the moon and I'm looking for an adventure.
>
> Moon (rec AD): Who can I see down there running around in a bedroom way below me? That little boy, still in his onesie but with a bag on his back, kicking and whirling, commando crawling – perhaps he's looking for an adventure too? As I swing in my hoop, way up here in the sky, I'm going to keep my eye on him. What's he got now? A cuddly toy dragon.
>
> Moon (rec AD): Ooh good/great/fantastic (or equivalent). He's driving a supercar.
>
> Moon (rec AD): It's very fast. Ooh – he's going to crash. He somersaults. He's being attacked. His pillow's his shield. That should protect him.
>
> Moon (rec AD): Finger to his forehead. An idea!

Example 1. Excerpt from Moon.

The AD was voiced by the dancer playing the Moon, recorded and mixed into the soundtrack. This was to improve audibility for outdoor performances and to save the breath of the dancer for his physical feats.

3. Access and Power

It is no accident that disabled-led companies such as Graeae and Fingersmiths have been leading the way in IAD, as it is in the spirit of "Nothing about us, without us" which was the rallying call of people with mental and physical disabilities in South Africa in the 1980s and 1990s (Rowland, 2004).

Jenny Sealey, who is deaf, is explicit about the desire to regain artistic control over practices that have traditionally been delegated to access professionals:

> That was the beginning of Graeae's journey of exploring how you might use AD as an artistic tool, access as well, but something that was led by the art in the same way that sign language was informed by the art. It also meant we could have more control over it. (Cavallo & Fryer, 2018, p. 45)

From a user perspective, Cavallo complains that TAD dictates the interpretation of how visual information should be perceived "regardless of where those receiving the service wish to place their focus" (2015, p. 127). She adds that TAD "tightly controls what information is considered important and what is deemed irrelevant". These concerns about control chime with the ideas of Gal & Irvine (1995, p. 995) who argue that "there is no view from nowhere, no gaze that is not positioned."

3.1. Power in Translation

Access practices such as AD, subtitling and signing have long been recognised as forms of translation (e.g., Díaz Cintas & Anderman 2008). Fawcett (1995) suggests that "translation in all its forms is frequently the site of a variety of power plays between the actors involved" (p. 177). As Szarkowska (2005, section 3) puts it "translation is often seen as a form of conquest." Access practices in the UK, and arguably latterly in Europe, grew up as a result of the supreme power, the state or super state, placing legal obligations on service providers to make reasonable adjustments to make their services accessible (European Accessibility Act, forthcoming; UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2014; UK Equality Act, 2010). The concerns about TAD and the development of IAD show that there are more stakeholders in AD from a power perspective than simply users and describers. Fryer (2019) lists eight stakeholders with respect to AD quality:

- AD users; the performance venue;
- the law;
- the venue's funders;
- the description agency;
- the describer (student or professional);
- ADLAB PRO (or any course provider);
- the source text (ST) creator(s).

For the current working practices of theatre describers, and by extension for describer training, the most significant from this list are the ST creators i.e. members of the artistic team, who as demonstrated above are taking an increasing interest in how they and/or their work is described.

3.2. Enhanced AD, Power and partiality

As stated above, one type of power that the translator wields is the ability to decide which part of a text to emphasise. Tymoczko (2000) calls this *partiality* arguing that for literary translations, this is "often demonstrable in the paratextual materials that surround translations, including introductions, footnotes, reviews, literary criticism and so forth" (Tymoczko, 2000, p. 24). Both TAD and IAD can be partial in this sense as they expand the ST by adding what Extant refers to as *enhanced AD* with the addition of audio introductions (AIs) and touch tours (ToTos) (Fortnum & Hall, 2016). Extant's research demonstrates that these are the aspects that can be provided by the company relatively cheaply, with or without direct involvement of audio describers. They are also highly appreciated by AD users (Eardley-Weaver, 2014; Fortnum & Hall, 2016). However, Honig (1997, p. 15) believes that "the more a translator explains text, the less s/he can hope for a user response which is even remotely similar to that of the ST [source text]

user." While both IAD and TAD add to the ST in this way, IAD goes further in actively altering the ST, as in the types of integration outlined above. Yet this type of interaction between the AD and the ST is not necessarily negative. For his hip hop dance company, Rationale, Nathan Geering explains how he might extend a sequence of dance moves to give the describer enough time to explain what is happening. He describes AD as "a key factor in determining our choreography" (Cavallo & Fryer, 2018, p. 35). Is this a case of the tail wagging the dog? Or is it a pragmatic response to easing the timing constraints of TAD? The answer to that depends on the status accorded the ST.

4. Abusive Translation

It might be argued that TAD evolved to avoid transforming the ST in a manner considered to be abusive (Nornes, 1999). Nornes was elaborating ideas advanced by Philip E. Lewis (1985) in his analysis of inherent differences between the languages of English and French. Lewis was frustrated by the "tendency for the translation of essayistic texts to concentrate on meaning to the exclusion of texture and materiality" (cited in Nornes 1999, p. 18). Discussing AVT (audiovisual translation) Nornes argues that subtitles are abusive because they violently transform the ST. What the user receives is not a version of the original, Nornes suggests but "an experience of translation" (1999, p.18). As there is no way around this, he suggests the best approach is to embrace it, aiming for a "strong, forceful translation that values experimentation, tampers with usage, seeks to match the polyvalencies or plurivocities or expressive stresses of the original by producing its own." (Lewis, 1985, p. 16) This is certainly the approach taken by IAD whereby access is seen "as a catalyst for creativity" (Cavallo, 2015, p. 126). Given that parts of the original can only be accessed by AD users via the translation, IAD aims to make that translation as engaging, stimulating or enjoyable as is the original for those who can access it directly. This marks a step change from regarding the original as sacred and not to be tampered with, to regarding the original as setting the standard and type of experience to be achieved.

4.1. Suppression

For subtitling, given the impossibility of reproducing every line of dialogue verbatim, Nornes sees one of its greatest abuses as suppression, whereby the translator decides words to leave out. For TAD, that same power is currently concentrated in the hands of the describers who do not "say what they see" but say what they have the vocabulary for, what they notice, or what they have time to mention. In the author's experience service providers in the form of venues and producers are increasingly monitoring (with the intention of suppressing) how the describer chooses to describe characters, especially with regards to physical characteristics including age, build, skin-colour and ethnicity. This is returned to below.

4.2. Epochs of translation

The transition from describer-led to artist-led description could be seen as inevitable; certainly it travels a well-trodden path. Nornes (1999) uses the example of Japanese subtitles to outline three eras of translation. He posits "the first era of subtitles brings the foreign text to the spectators on their own domestic terms" (p. 28). In the second era:

> The translator pretends to move toward the foreign, dwell there, and bring its wonders to the waiting crowds. This era is replete with rules designed to guarantee a translation's quality, but what this regulation accomplishes is an appropriation of the source text and its thorough domestication. The rules also enforce a territorialisation and professionalization of translation, producing stars and experts and excluding all alternatives (pp. 28-29).

The concerns of the theatre makers and AD users interviewed for the Integrated Access Inquiry (Cavallo & Fryer, 2018) show that it is in this second epoch that TAD is perceived to reside. This for Nornes, is the *corrupt* mode of translation, because

> These (translators) claim to bring their…spectators to a pleasurable experience of the foreign, but in fact they please only themselves through these impoverished translations. As for their audiences, they are kept ignorant of the conspiracy and the riches that remain hidden from the […] experience (1999, p. 29).

Nornes goes on to identify a third epoch, a golden age:

> In the third epoch … this translation does not present a foreign divested of its otherness but strives to translate from and within the place of the other by an inventive approach to language use and the steady refusal of rules (1999, p. 29).

This is where IAD is to be found with its emphasis on creative approaches developed in collaboration with the artistic team. In a reference to the traditional *benshi* whose job was to explain foreign films to Japanese audiences, Nornes cites Tatsuo (1939, p.51) about subtitling in Japan:

> Subtitlers must strive to be like the benshi, which is to say become one with the fabric of the film, so they may speak directly to their audience in the deepest sense… Above all, their subtitles should not be direct translations of foreign words, but strive for a perfect match with the Japanese soul." (Nornes, 1999, p. 27).

It could be argued that as part of the fabric of the production, integrated AD becomes one with the ST and not separate from it, such that any alteration cannot be seen as abusive. This is the attitude taken by the small companies mentioned above. Yet IAD is not limited to small

companies. The New Wolsey Theatre is a mid-scale touring venue in Ipswich, UK. Sarah Holmes, its chief executive, agrees that AD should be seen as simply another creative tool for directors to use. She exhorts directors to:

> get excited about the addition that you're getting to your… I call it the palette. A creative team has a palette to work from and they've got very good at sets and costumes and lighting and then they introduced audio visual projection. That was a new thing in the palette. When you think about [AD] as one of those – it's something else for you to work with." (Cavallo & Fryer, 2018, p. 45).

If IAD also meets the needs of people with sight loss better than TAD, it is to be welcomed as perhaps an inevitable part of the evolution of translation.

5. AD and User Needs

Qualitative interviews with artistic directors suggest that fulfilling user needs by providing access is their primary motivation (Cavallo & Fryer, 2018). For example, Sarah Holmes explains that integrated access for her company means her theatre "taking its responsibility seriously to create opportunity for everyone." (Cavallo & Fryer, 2018, p. 12). While Nathan Geering says, "Integrated access is literally just about making sure that everybody has an equal opportunity to experience our productions" (Cavallo & Fryer, 2018, p. 12). If everyone agrees about the primary purpose of AD, what remains contentious is the best way in which those needs can be met. While the perceived shortcomings of TAD have been made clear, there is a danger that integrated approaches risk prioritising art over access (Cavallo & Fryer, 2018). In other words, the access baby risks being thrown out with the artistic bathwater.

5.1. Describer Skills and Competences

In IAD, it is the role of the describer to preserve the access element using their knowledge of the needs of People with Sight Loss (PSL). Current AD teaching has been found to be inclusive in that many trainers involve PSL in the training process and the majority of courses "also focus on accessibility issues and making students aware of the needs of the visually impaired" (ADLAB PRO, 2017a, p.34). Extant's research suggests that venues and producers respect this aspect of describer expertise, together with describers' understanding of how the AD fits around the ST. One venue experimented with making the TAD available for every performance by recording it. While the arguments for and against recording AD for live events is beyond the scope of this article, they found that members of the technical crew not trained in AD found it hard to get a feel for its requirements:

David (New Wolsey Theatre): …our DSM (Deputy Stage Manager) as well as cueing lights and sound and everything else […] had to also cue the AD. And the feedback from them was […] they didn't feel a cue. They can kinda feel there's a lighting cue, they can feel when the scene changes happen [...] but for AD cues it is very strange. She almost didn't quite understand or have feeling for what was going so…

Sarah H (New Wolsey Theatre): So that's when we got our first professional AD team in (Cavallo & Fryer 2018, p. 32).

5.2. Describer Profile and Expertise

As argued above, TAD, situated in the second epoch of translation, is perceived to be rule-bound. Nornes points out that "the rules also enforce a territorialisation and professionalization of translation, producing stars and experts and excluding all alternatives" (Nornes, 1999, pp. 28-29). So who are the describers that star in TAD? Finding the answer to that question has been the focus of the second intellectual output of ADLAB PRO, the PRO being short for profile definition. According to the report put together by Elisa Perego and her team at the University of Trieste (ADLAB PRO, 2017b), up until now "little is known about who audio describers are, and there is no clear knowledge on whether and how they received training and how training is organized" (2017b, p. 1). To that end, ADLAB PRO circulated a questionnaire (IO2) that was completed by 183 participants: 65 describers, 100 AD users and 18 service providers. Perego concludes that "the majority of audio describers are professional, trained and paid workers" (ADLAB PRO, 2017b, 2.3.1) prized for their "world knowledge" as well as for their knowledge of: the target audience; AD principles, guidelines and standards; language and linguistics; media accessibility; scriptwriting; audio visual texts and multimodality (listed in order of importance) (ADLAB PRO, 2017b, 4.2).

The particular competences that the professional, trained describers could supply to the New Wolsey Theatre in the example above are referred to in the IO1 report as the "technical aspects" of AD. They comprise editing, timing and text compression and are ranked fourth in importance of specific AD competences by 86 existing teachers and trainers (ADLAB PRO, 2017a, p. 6). Top of the list was content selection i.e. "choosing the most relevant information to describe" (ADLAB PRO, 2017a, p. 6).

5.3. Accuracy, Freedom and the Describer

Scholars have noted that what is chosen will vary according to the function of the ST (e.g. Matamala & Remael, 2015). Vermeer (1989) suggests it is up to the translator to decide the function of the text but that the best translator will make that decision in consultation with the client. Compared with TAD, IAD shifts the weight of that responsibility from the translator (describer) to the ST creators. The artistic team is more likely to be the direct client in IAD,

than in TAD where the describer is likely to be employed by the venue, either directly or via an agency.

5.4. Describer Training

The current model of describer training encourages describers to see themselves as independent decision makers. For example, The ADLAB Guidelines (Remael, Reviers & Vercauteren, 2015) urge the describer to "determine" 89 times and "decide" 102 times as well as "choose" 7 times. In an era of IAD, training should make students aware that the language of their description will be created with input from the company or the ST creators, who may monitor the register of the AD so that it echoes more closely the register of the piece and reflects the sensitivities of the company's worldview i.e. the source culture. The responsibility for language choice will not lie solely on the describer's shoulders suggesting that soft skills such as teamwork, which is currently ranked 7th in terms of importance (ADLAB PRO 2017a, p.30), would benefit from a greater emphasis in training. The ADLAB guidelines currently indicate collaboration with "audio describers, voice talents or voice actors, sound technicians and users" (Remael et al., 2015, section 1). This list should be expanded to embrace members of the artistic team, in particular the director (Naraine, Whitfield & Fels, 2017). ADLAB PRO's survey of current training provision (2017a) also found that soft skills such as self-development were rated as slightly more important than teamwork. This balance should shift in future courses in recognition of AFM and IAD.

The danger posed by the prioritisation of artistic concerns over access means that the describer might need to battle for the rights of the AD users, particularly in the light of pressure for language to be made more politically correct (PC) mentioned above. Marques defines "political correctness" as the avoidance of "all expressions or actions that could possibly be perceived to exclude, marginalise or insult people who are socially disadvantaged or discriminated against" (2009, p. 257). Excluding "sensitive" details about body-shape, skin-colour, age and ethnicity risks reducing the amount of descriptive information available to PSL compared with what is visible to the sighted audience. Describers and providers were asked to rate the importance that describers be assertive in fighting for the quality of AD provision. Describers ranked it fourth in terms of importance, compared with service providers who only ranked it 8th (ADLAB PRO, 2017b, p. 30). This imbalance suggests that describers play an advocacy role that has not yet been recognised.

5.5. AD Workflow

Another impact on practice and training comes in workflow. Writing a description already takes place over a longer timespan for the AD of live events compared with screen AD. This is extended even further in IAD by involving describers in the planning stage and the rehearsal process. Thus, IAD avoids the criticism encountered by other modes of AVT as expressed by Romero-Fresco & Fryer (2018) advocating for AFM strategies. Currently, as they point out "translation and accessibility

are relegated to the distribution stage of the filmmaking process and outsourced to translators who work with tight deadlines, small remuneration and no access to the creative team" (p.12). By moving accessibility into the development stage of the process, all of this changes, as translators can influence the timeline and possibly the budget. Certainly, they can help the creative team think about these things in advance, taking on some of the role given to the Director of Accessibility and Translation that has been proposed for AFM (Branson, 2017).

Another conclusion of the IAI is that "The best access is tailor-made for each show. This includes casting an appropriate access professional." (Cavallo & Fryer, 2018, p. 10). Furthermore, there is concern that "the current pool of describers is not sufficiently diverse" (Cavallo & Fryer, 2018, p. 10). Nathan Geering clarifies that "generally audio describers seem to be in their 40s 50s and 60s" (Cavallo & Fryer, 2018, p. 39). This is likely to reflect the situation in the UK, where description has been practiced since the mid-1990s (Fryer, 2016), rather than being more broadly applicable. However, it would nonetheless suggest that initiatives such as ADLAB PRO are more necessary than ever. The training should also incorporate information about alternative ways of working. This might include being aware of the current guidelines so that describers understand what "rules" they are breaking and why.

In addition the background and existing skillset of potential candidates might need to be reconsidered. Currently ADLAB PRO (forthcoming) recommends that potential students already possess the following competencies:

- Linguistic and textual skills (this includes, for instance, a perfect use of the mother tongue, a command of style figures like metaphors and similes, the ability to use language that sparks the imagination, write a coherent text etc.).
- Vocal skills: A clear and pleasant reading voice is required for some modules;
- Transferrable skills/soft skills not specific to AD: efficient work organisation and time management, ethics, self-development, teamwork, problem solving, communicative and interpersonal skills, the ability to cope with time pressure, knowing when and being willing to call for expert or peer help, dealing with feedback and working to a deadline.
- Computer skills: database management, word processor, etc.

The evolution of IAD suggests that performance experience would be of huge benefit for students training to describe live events. This would give more companies the option of placing the describer-as-character on stage.

6. Conclusion

The title of this article suggests that while the appetite for AD is strong, the role of the describer is changing. No longer is the describer autonomous and left to their own devices, with the power to decide on the purpose and style of their translation, aiming for neutrality, taking guidelines into account. Instead, the description is one more creative aspect of the product, to be determined by the creative team with the impact on user experience uppermost in their minds. The expertise of the describer is recognised in terms of knowledge of their audience and selecting from the range of visual information available. Describer skills and competencies are still required as AD transitions into this third epoch.

Acknowledgements

Biographical note

Louise Fryer, PhD, was the BBC's describer for the pilot TV Audio Description Service (AUDETEL), the accessibility advisor for the film *Notes on Blindness (2016)* and helps develop integrated access for film and live performance. She describes for the UK's National Theatre and VocalEyes. She is a Senior Teaching Fellow at University College, London (UCL) and wrote *An Introduction to Audio Description: A Practical Guide* (2016) London: Routledge. Through her company, Utopian Voices Ltd. she is a partner in ADLAB PRO.

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[I] For a further discussion of AD and UD see Udo & Fels (2010).

[II] Of the 65 describers who responded to a questionnaire circulated by ADLAB PRO (IO1, 2017), more than 10 (15%) reported having been to acting school or included theatre studies in their educational background (multiple answers were possible).

[III] An abbreviation of an English idiomatic expression referring to two things that are hard to do simultaneously.

[IV] An ellipsis [...] has been introduced where repetition or an irrelevant word or comment has been cut from the transcription, in the manner of an edited radio interview.