

ADLAB PRO multiplier event summary: Audio Description – Celebrating Progress and Looking Forward

31 March 2017, London

This summary captures an afternoon of presentations and discussions convened by ADLAB PRO Project board and the UK sight loss charity RNIB with the aim of spreading awareness of the European Project on audio description. Close to 50 participants, including representatives from academia, professional audio describers, broadcasters, consultants and practitioners from the wider technology field, gathered to hear about the EU funded Project and what has been achieved so far. The plans for next few months and subsequent outcomes from the project were also discussed along with updates on recent developments in the wider audio description (AD) field.

Summary of discussions

Session 1: ADLAB PRO Project

Project aims and summary

Elisa Perego

University of Trieste

Elisa Perego, Project Lead from the University of Trieste, thanked those present for joining the multiplier event and summarised the project structure and the objectives.

ADLAB PRO is a follow-up from a previous project titled ADLAB (2011-2014) which focused on designing reliable and consistent guidelines for the practice of AD. Building on those best practice guidelines, the three-year ADLAB PRO Project (2016- 2019) aims to create a portfolio of free-to-use training materials for audio describers. Elisa confirmed that the materials shall be created as

separate independent units wherein each unit will cater to the requirements for training in specific areas including but not limited to theatres, television programmes, films, museum and live events.

The final presentation for the training material is yet to be finalised however attendees were assured that the plan is to offer it in a few different formats, for example: videos, webinars, web pages, lectures etc. The project board is keen to ensure that the materials produced are received positively by all including industry professionals and those working in academia therefore it is important to strike a neutral tone that can be easily implemented in the European credit transfer system.

The project which is financed by the European Union and Erasmus+ Programme is led by University of Trieste and has eight partners from seven European countries. In addition to the four academic partners - University of Trieste, Autonomous University of Barcelona, University of Antwerp, and University of Poznan, there are four non-academic organisations on board - Utopian Voices Ltd., Sound Focus, RTV Slovenia and the Royal National Institute of Blind People.

The deliverables of the project are divided into six intellectual outputs; these are allocated to different partners and each output lasts 5-6 months.

ADLAB PRO Project: Intellectual Output 1

Agnieszka Chmiel and Iwona Mazur

University of Poznan (Lead)

The project summary was followed by a presentation on the findings from the assessment of the existing AD training practices completed in the first intellectual output. This assessment included examining existing courses in AD offered by universities and other independent bodies. Various aspects such as their duration, area of specialisation along with their focus on approach and evaluation were taken into consideration. Close to 200 courses were appraised with an almost even split between academic and non-academic courses.

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The conclusions from quantitative and qualitative analysis offer a comprehensive view of the key practices that are common to most courses and also, identify gaps in training modules.

One of the most interesting findings that emerged from this assessment was the lack of any significant difference between the teaching practises adopted for academic and the non-academic courses (except for more emphasis placed on AD voicing in non-academic courses). However what did not necessarily come as a surprise to most was that the teachers of AD often happened to be practitioners as well.

Film AD was the most taught type of AD and audiovisual materials were very much used as part of such courses especially movie clips and television programmes with AD, which the students were asked to analyse. Theory and guidelines were introduced in PowerPoint presentations. AD was taught in a very practice-oriented way. Students in the analysed courses were usually given plenty of opportunities and assignments to practice AD drafting. When possible, students participated in real-life projects and prepared AD for real audiences or worked around a real theatre production to develop their AD drafting skills.

The team from Poznan thanked the members of the ADLAB PRO Team for their input and continued support during the course of the Intellectual Output 1.

ADLAB PRO Project: Intellectual Output 2

Elisa Perego

University of Trieste (Lead)

Next, Elisa Perego summarised the plans for Intellectual Output 2 and the work that is already underway.

Intellectual Output 2 aims to draw up a list of essential skills and competencies required in an audio describer. Methodology will

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involve drawing up a questionnaire based on the results from Intellectual Output 1, literature review of existing academic materials, and collating observations from other projects on AD. Service providers, practising audio describers and also those who use description on a regular basis will be requested to respond to this survey and feed into the final outcomes. The data assimilated and compiled here will be shared over the coming months.

Elisa Perego invited those attending to engage with this part of the project and share their feedback by completing the survey which will be available online from the end of April-beginning of May 2017.

The FRA Project: Museum AD
Elisa Perego
University of Trieste

Following this, Elisa Perego presented an overview of the FRA Project that aims to create and translate (from English into Italian and vice versa) AD for and from specific museums, based on extensive text analysis and feedback from end users. The two year national project that concludes at the end of 2017 is again led by the University of Trieste.

The presenter explained that their decision to work on museum AD was influenced by the limited research conducted so far on the description of art and the three-dimensional world of museums. The methodology has included questionnaire-based surveys, text analysis and testing with end users.

Describing art
Loretta Secchi
Director, Tactile Museum of Ancient and Modern
Painting
Bologna

Loretta Secchi drew attention to the tactile exploration of art and the significance of tactile perception – the shapes, forms, venue and time

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of narration –in the overall context of constructing an image of the art in the given space. The current research addresses the interpretation of the space and the realisation of meaning, regardless of the nature of sensory impairment. There was significant interest in the findings from this research in the audience especially on the translations of text and how that could extend the accessibility of museum exhibits.

Session 2: Industry developments

Technology partnerships in the UK

Steve Tyler

Head of Strategy and Innovation RNIB

Steve Tyler opened the second session by thanking the visiting scholars and talked about the significance RNIB puts on engaging with academia on research projects and the charity's focus on industry developments in mainstream technology.

He commented on technology as a great leveller, the access to information which has moved from Braille delivered in print to electronic Braille and now to synthetic speech. How we are able to blow up the screen to make it bigger, to make it brighter and make it high contrast: accessibility must be an integral part of all developments. He referred to RNIB's input into some of the ground breaking launches in recent times including Ivona Text-to-Speech that was developed in partnership with the UK charity with an aim of making entities like Amazon, Google, Microsoft and Apple – the platform drivers of the technologies on which we rely for work, education and leisure – accessible.

He touched briefly on the provision of AD on UK TV and the partnerships with some of the leading broadcasters and the people behind the scenes, who produce AD and the various initiatives to increase the proportion of described content across platforms in the UK. Televisions and hardware with audible menus are a reality now and being blind in no way limits people from accessing content independently.

He ended by inviting all to attend the RNIB's Techshare Europe 2017 Conference sponsored by Google, Microsoft, Samsung and many others in November 2017.

Audio description in the UK

Anna Dearden

Strategic Relationships Manager, RNIB

Anna Dearden presented on the development of AD across services in the UK and how the commitment from the sector has supported its growth over the years. Discussions today have moved on from the question of whether or not AD is required to how the viewing experience can be improved for an AD user. The key areas of discussion at Techshare Europe last year referred to the mass shift towards personalisation in the mainstream media landscape and how service providers are also using those developments to transform the delivery of AD to end users.

The requirement in the Communications Act in 2003 meant that AD has to be provided at a minimum of 10 per cent on TV channels. However in reality, most channels out of the 60 providing AD are delivering AD for at least 20 per cent of their content. Some channels broadcast 40 to 45 per cent of their content with AD in the UK.

Since 2009, there have been rapid developments in on-demand platforms offering AD: BBC iPlayer was the first service to make it available for their users, followed closely by Channels 4, 5 and ITV. Various apps on various platforms and audio devices deliver some form of AD now. Still, the hope is that it increases on all platforms and on all devices. As is often said by AD users themselves, they don't see linear and on-demand as different platforms. They expect that if they have AD on shows like Eastenders tonight then they can have it on their Sky box or the app when they catch up tomorrow night.

Aside from TV, there is AD in theatres, museums, galleries, heritage sites and also, sporting events – football stadiums, cricket grounds, rugby matches. This includes Wembley and Lord's where blind people can receive specialist commentaries on what is happening in front of them at sporting events.

In UK cinemas, AD is delivered via infrared systems to headsets that can be borrowed from the box office. It is available on a majority of English language films but there are still issues such as headsets that are not charged and people wanting to see a film that is not on the screen that has the equipment. Some of the work that RNIB is doing with the industry is looking at how apps could be used to overcome these issues.

The presentation also touched briefly on RNIB's work on the AD repository, cinema app trial, the quality of description and most importantly, the impending legislation on AD delivered on video on demand platforms.

Audio description on reality TV: ITV and Deluxe Entertainment

Jorge Saavedra

ITV

Laura Greeves

Deluxe Entertainment

Jorge Saavedra and Laura Greeves from Deluxe Entertainment jointly made a presentation on developing and adapting AD for programmes based on the reality TV format. They specifically talked about some of the shows on the new ITVBe Channel that is dedicated to lifestyle and entertainment programming from the UK and US, featuring real lives, and real people. The channel is home to some hugely successful shows such as 'The Only Way is Essex' as well as US content, such as the Real Housewives franchise.

ITV has several linear channels in addition to their online service, ITV Hub. In 2014, the network launched two new channels ITV Encore and ITVBe. ITV Encore is a drama channel so in terms of AD it is a very easy channel for them and today, they are delivering around 50 per cent of its content with AD. ITVBe on the other hand, is predominantly a reality TV channel, which is aimed at young women, young mothers, and it is specially programmed so that people can talk about it over tea and coffee.

However, the content presented ITV with a little bit of a challenge; they audio describe 20 per cent on most of their other channels but looking at the ITVBe schedule, they found that most of the programmes were either delivered late or they were on the real housewife format. Most of them with very few gaps where you would normally have an audio describer describe what's going on.

So, what ITV has done is to develop this new style which is more casual. Traditional AD focused on telling audiences factual information of what's happening on the screen in between the dialogue, it has been replaced by an enhanced description which

focuses more on the feel of what's funny and relevant in this programme.

It was featured for the first time on the launch episode of the brand new series of Real Housewives of Potomac, which aired on Sunday 28th August 2016 and subsequently on episodes of Dinner Date, Botched and Be Beautiful.

ITV said they are keen to get some feedback from AD users as they feel this is still work in progress and they are still learning.

Channel 4: Audio description on Paralympics

Graham Wilkinson

Channel 4

The featured speaker, Graham Wilkinson, Presentation & Content Manager at Channel 4, focussed on the broadcast of AD on live events from the Paralympics and making sure that the service was as accessible as the broadcaster was able to deliver.

Channel 4 set out to make its coverage of the Rio Paralympic Games the biggest event in Channel 4's history and, by doing so, take Paralympic sport to another level. The channel was not only delivering the most comprehensive and innovative coverage of the Games ever, but also bringing entertainment to the heart of the coverage which included 120 hours of live sport on TV and nearly 700 hours of online streaming.

The Games were also the most accessible Paralympics ever with subtitles available across coverage with live AD and signing on the Opening and Closing Ceremonies simulcast on 4seven, an additional TV channel. During the actual games, the audio described and signed editions of 'The Last Leg' were available each evening on 4seven soon after the live broadcast.

Accessible versions of both the Opening and Closing Ceremonies and editions of 'The Last Leg' were also available on All4, Channel 4's catch up service.

The widely appreciated Channel 4's, 'We Are the Superhumans' promotional campaign was also subtitled and audio described.

Graham explained that they began preparations with the AD team at Ericsson in early 2016 and the decisions among other things, included how it was going to work from the editorial and technical point of view. It was a multi-site operation, using headquarters of Channel 4 in London as well as Ericsson's sites in White City and Ealing. The teams involved were well aware that they needed to

apply the existing standards of BSL and AD. So on 4seven, it wasn't the commentary from Channel 4 and AD was done specifically for blind and partially sighted viewers open for all viewers on this channel. It was also the first time they had three access services live at the same time.

The simulcast of the version with AD on 4seven meant they did not have to worry about the AD clashing with the Channel 4 commentary. This also gave the describers, Mary Sweeney and Scott Joseph the room to create a commentary that stretched out beyond the confines of traditional AD, in addition to describing the visuals, they added facts and figures into the mix, providing some regular style commentary so the audience were fully informed.

The enhanced AD received considerable appreciation from the viewers.

Audio Describer: Person Spec

Veronika Hyks

BTI Studios

BTI Studios' Head of AD, Veronika Hyks, is a name that is synonymous with the art of audio description in the UK, she was the key contributor to the guidelines drafted for the production and delivery of AD almost 20 years ago and since then, has been instrumental in its development across services.

In her twenty minute presentation, Veronika talked about some of the key skills she looks for in ideal audio describer and the aspects that she feels would help professionals training in the field. A true describer is born with a keen eye for observation, good judgement and a flair for articulation. Even so, Hyks noted that it is a skill that can be taught and went on to list a few considerations that would greatly benefit new describers, including:

- The ability to convey the visual into words and construct images of things sighted people see on the screen.
- Emotional intelligence and razor sharp observational skills and the ability to look at a scene or a sequence of scenes very quickly in order to assess what's there, what's happening and what needs to be said.
- Sound effects, and the need to develop an appreciation for the atmosphere they create while fully appreciating their significance in the overall plot.
- The context, always understanding the context of the scene being described, because AD tells a story and describers are the story tellers. When we are doing a film, certainly. In the documentaries everything is a bit more factual but we are still going from A to Z.
- Appreciation of deadlines and familiarity with technology.

Veronika Hyks stressed that the media landscape is changing rapidly and today, more than ever before, there is a strong need for more discussions among practising audio describers on a wider platform on how to tackle some of the issues around piracy, changing formats,

quick turnarounds and exportable templates. She welcomed more opportunities for such interactive dialogues.

Concluding remarks

Anna Dearden conveyed her gratitude to all participants, particularly the presenters and the visiting dignitaries in her capacity as the conference moderator. She extended her thanks to the ADLAB PRO Project board, and to the RNIB organising committee for their efforts, and expressed her satisfaction with the interactive nature of the discussions while congratulating participants on the networking that had taken place in the short duration which she hoped would continue going forward.

Podcasts from the event

Fred Film Radio, the radio station of film festivals, recorded all conference sessions and they are now available to listen to at <http://www.fred.fm>

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