1. Introduction

Audio description (AD) is the use of words to translate the visual to the verbal. It provides a verbal version of the visual: the visual is made verbal and aural and oral (Snyder, 2014: 11). Using words that are succinct, vivid and imaginative, we convey the visual image that is not fully accessible to a segment of the population – estimates by the American Foundation for the Blind now put that number at over 32 million Americans alone who are blind or have difficulty seeing even with correction – and not fully realised by the sighted population, who see but may not observe. AD is also useful for anyone who wants to truly notice and appreciate a fuller perspective on any visual event but it is especially helpful as an access tool for people who are blind or have low vision. In the United States, this author, for example, has provided audio description at myriad arts events but also at weddings, parades, rodeos, circuses, sports events, on cruise ships and even at funerals.

For a discipline within the audiovisual translation field that is no more than 40 years old, audio description can be seen as rooted in the ancient Greek concept of “ekphrasis” (Benecke, 2016): “a literary figure that provides the graphic and often dramatic description of a painting, a relief or other work of art” or “the verbal presentation of a visual object inside a literary work”. It derives from an ancient saying credited to Simonides: “painting is mute poetry, poetry a speaking picture” and the Greek word “kairos”: “saying the right thing in the right way in the right amount of time” (Snyder, 2014: 1).

People often cite “radio theatre” as a precursor to formal audio description techniques. They are both aural conveyances of narrative material. The essential difference, though, is that radio theatre assumes all listeners have no access to the visual. Consequently, “visual” elements are conveyed principally by sound effects created by a “foley man” or sound technician. Television, on the other hand, assumes that all patrons can see. Audio description fills in that gap – the gap created when the “default” audience member is an individual with five senses.

Audio description is best compared to the “play by play” offered by sports announcers on radio broadcasts. Here the assumption is that all listeners are “blind” and while the sound of the game may be in the background, the commentator will describe visual elements in order to make them accessible to his listeners.
The chapter will now move to a US-based account.

2. Historical perspective

In the 1940s, the mayor of New York City, Fiorello LaGuardia, practiced description – although he may not have realised he was doing so. A newspaper strike was of great concern to New York residents. LaGuardia, a shrewd mayor, refused to side with the striking news workers or the owners of the papers. He took the side of the people, taking to the radio on WNYC (the New York public radio) to give the people what they were missing: the comics! He read the comics on the radio and, of course, interrupted the text with colourful descriptions of the cartoon images.

Early in his career, former President Ronald Reagan was a sports announcer, offering play-by-play of Chicago Cubs baseball games via telegraph. During one game in 1934 between the Cubs and their arch rivals, the St. Louis Cardinals, that was tied 0–0 in the ninth inning, the telegraph went dead: an often-repeated tale of Reagan’s radio days recounts how he delivered “play-by-play broadcasts” of Chicago Cubs baseball games he had never seen. His flawless recitations were based solely on telegraph accounts of games in progress. Reagan smoothly improvised a fictional play-by-play (in which hitters on both teams gained a superhuman ability to foul off pitches) until the wire was restored. Reagan says:

> There were several other stations broadcasting that game and I knew I’d lose my audience if I told them we’d lost our telegraph connections so I took a chance. I had (Billy) Jurges hit another foul. Then I had him foul one that only missed being a homerun by a foot. I had him foul one back in the stands and took up some time describing the two lads that got in a fight over the ball. I kept on having him foul balls until I was setting a record for a ballplayer hitting successive foul balls and I was getting more than a little scared. Just then my operator started typing. When he passed me the paper I started to giggle – it said: ‘Jurges popped out on the first ball pitched’.

Using only his imagination, Reagan managed to “describe” what was not happening. Obviously, describers must be faithful to what can be seen, but the difference between a narrative that will conjure images and one that does not is often the imagination employed by the describer.

In the 1960s, Chet Avery, a blind theatre-lover, now retired from the Department of Education, conceived of audio description as a formal process that could convey the visual images of theatre performances to people who are blind or have low vision. He shared his experience with the concept of audio description in an interview in July 2011. Avery was born in Sanford, Maine in 1937 and by the age of 17, he had lost all vision due to a detached retina. He notes that he had had some vision as a teenager but once he had lost all vision, he felt a sense of relief – he no longer had to “spend my life concerned about my eyes”. He was very keen on films: it was 1954 and “everyone had great voices and there was a lot more storyline than today’s films, but they’re a visual experience principally”. Avery recalls that he used talking books with earphones and live readers and soon graduated from high school with honours, pursuing a college education at Harvard. Ultimately, he received a master’s degree from Harvard in education and guidance counseling, taught at private schools and moved to Washington, DC in 1964 to accept a grants management position at what was then the United States Office of Education. It was a time of increased government focus on domestic programmes. The area that managed statistical information and grants for “special education” (programmes
for children with disabilities) was close to Avery’s office. Part of the special education division office responsibilities involved support for captioning programmes for educational video. Avery knew the head of that division at the time – John Goss – and Avery proposed “audio captions” on film for blind people. That was in 1964. (Avery recalls that a non-government worker – Spencer Tracy’s wife, Louise Treadwell – was the moving force behind getting captions developed for film. 35mm films were sent to schools with the captions burned in, as was done with silent movies.)

Nothing came of Avery’s proposal – his plea fell on the proverbial “deaf ears”. Even among other blind people, the notion, according to Avery, seemed “like cheating. Blind people should be as independent as possible, getting along with Braille, tactile techniques and service animals or the white cane” (Interview with Chet Avery, 2013). One of Avery’s colleagues, Josephine Taylor, a project officer and branch chief with Special Education Services, was a strong advocate for educational services for blind and multiple-handicapped children and supported teacher training programmes for those specialised populations. Taylor, however, believed that

a parent who describes is not helping. [Blind children] should learn to think with their ears. [Using description] is cheating! The visual doesn’t exist for that person so you need to orient the child to the world around them using their own capabilities.

(Interview with Chet Avery, 2013)

In 1967 a new administrator, Dr Morland Woods, appointed Avery director of the Office for the Disadvantaged and Handicapped. Over the next decade, Avery made links with what was then the Arts Programme in the Department of Education and worked actively with Washington, DC-based arts entities on access provisions. Title 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 provided that any organisation receiving federal dollars must be accessible:

No otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States . . . shall, solely by reason of his or her disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any programme or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.

In 1998, Title 508 was included in the law requiring government agencies to abide by the following, mentioning audio description specifically:

All training and informational video and multimedia productions which support the agency’s mission, regardless of format, that contain visual information necessary for the comprehension of the content, shall be audio described.

As a part of Avery’s activity locally, he helped Wayne White, house manager at Arena Stage in Washington, DC, create an access committee to advise Arena on ways to make theatre accessible. (Arena Stage is a leading regional theatre producer in the United States.) Much of the focus was on access for people who use wheelchairs as well as the use of a new electronic development: an assistive listening system designed to boost sound for people who are hard-of-hearing. Once again, Avery wondered aloud whether the “audio caption” idea could be employed using the same equipment – except with an individual voicing descriptions during the pauses between lines of dialogue and critical sound elements. This time, Avery was among a receptive audience, including fellow committee members Margaret Rockwell, a blind
woman with a PhD in Education and her future husband Cody Pfanstiehl, an expert in media and public relations. Rockwell had founded The Metropolitan Washington Ear, a closed-circuit radio reading service for people who are blind or for those who do not otherwise have access to print. Avery served on its original board of directors. The Ear had dozens of volunteers with excellent language and speech skills. Dr Pfanstiehl realised that she had the capacity to develop an audio description service that could realise Avery’s “audio caption” concept (Interview with Chet Avery, 2013).

At the Arena committee’s last meeting, White recited the list of access features that the group had recommended, emphasising the recent installation of an “assistive listening system” to boost sound for the benefit of theatre-goers who had difficulty hearing. Those using the system would don earphones and listen to theatre dialogue and music amplified by microphones placed on stage. White asked: “is there anything else”? Avery replied: “there’s one more thing! Could we have the plays described, perhaps using the same listening system?” Rockwell noted that her radio-reading service had recording equipment (for recording pre-show material) and a core of talented readers who might serve as describers. That was in 1980. The Pfanstiehls gathered about five or six volunteers that they hand-selected. This author was a part of that small group which began to define and develop what was to become the world’s first ongoing audio description service.

From there, in 1981, the Washington Ear’s Audio Description programme was developed. This author was a professional voice talent/actor and English teacher and already a volunteer reader at The Ear, where, starting from 1972, one of his assignments was The Washington Post on Sundays – and just like Mayor LaGuardia – he became a describer of “the funnies”, thus becoming one of the first audio describers in The Ear’s. The Ear’s service premiered on April 1st 1981 at an Arena Stage performance of George Bernard Shaw’s Major Barbara. By the end of the 1980s, over 50 theatres throughout the United States were producing described performances. Over the next two decades, audio description accompanied a wide range of arts events.

3. Gregory Frazier

On the west coast, Gregory Frazier, a professor at San Francisco State University, formally developed the concepts behind audio description and general guidelines for its use. His work was being developed in the 1970s, unknown to Avery and Pfanstiehl on the east coast. In its 1996 obituary of Gregory T. Frazier, the New York Times called him:

a San Francisco visionary who hit on the idea of providing simultaneous electronic audio descriptions for the blind so they could enjoy more than the dialogue of movies, television and theatre performances.

In the early 1970s, Frazier was relaxing at his home with a friend who happened to be blind. The evening’s entertainment was the film High Noon with Gary Cooper, playing on television. The New York Times article relates that:

At the friend’s request, Frazier, speaking rapidly between the lines of dialogue, provided terse descriptions of the scenes and actions. The friend was so appreciative that by the time Gary Cooper had shot Frank Miller dead, ripped the star off his own chest and thrown it to the ground before climbing into a carriage and driving off with Grace Kelly, Frazier . . . was a changed man.
Frazier realised that the concise descriptions he provided for his friend extemporaneously could be thought-through, edited, recorded and played through FM radio receivers at cinemas, or carried over secondary audio channels on television. Frazier, a graduate of San Francisco State University, returned to college to obtain a master’s degree in broadcast journalism, developing a thesis – “television for the blind” – that explored the use of description to enhance the 1974 television production of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. Over the next ten years, Frazier worked in communication arts at the university, ultimately founding the non-profit corporation AudioVision SF in 1991 to provide description for the performing arts in San Francisco-area venues. Late in Frazier’s tenure at San Francisco State University, August Coppola, the head of the communication department at the university, became an enthusiastic supporter of the concept Frazier continued to nurture. Coppola’s brother, the director Francis Ford Coppola, and Frazier established the Audio Vision Institute and Coppola agreed to incorporate audio description for his 1988 movie, *Tucker*. AudioVision SF still exists, providing description on a regular basis for theatre performances throughout the Bay Area. In 2010, Audio Vision SF and Gregory Frazier posthumously received the Barry Levine Memorial Lifetime Achievement Award in Audio Description, presented by the American Council of the Blind’s Audio Description Project.

### 4. The media

Between 1982 and 1985, The Ear experimented with offering description for television, including an unsuccessful attempt to “simul-sync” description delivered over FM radio with television broadcasts. Eventually, Dr Barry Cronin and Laurie Everett of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) station WGBH in Boston, MA approached the Pfanstiehls about developing audio description scripts that could be recorded on a secondary audio track. This alternative audio track would be transmitted over the “SAP” (Secondary Audio Programme – also known as “MTS” or Multichannel Television Sound) channel that was available on most stereo televisions in the United States. In 1984, the Secondary Audio Programme or Multichannel Television Sound standard was established in the United States by the National Television Systems Committee (NTSC) as part of an auxiliary audio channel for analogue television. Initially, the primary broadcasting application of SAP was for the voluntary transmission of a secondary language programme dialogue audio track, such as the Spanish translation of an English language programme. With the realisation that SAP could also be used for the delivery of other programme-related audio services, audio description for broadcast and cable television was born.

On January 18, 1988, the first national television broadcast was made available with audio description – a programme in the PBS series American Playhouse – Eugene O’Neill’s *Strange Interlude*. (This author wrote and voiced the audio description for the American Playhouse productions of *Native Son*, *Rocket to the Moon* and *The Diaries of Adam and Eve.*) The PBS effort, led by the WGBH Educational Foundation, became a year-long nationally broadcast test of what would, in 1990, become the Descriptive Video Service, as a part of the WGBH Educational Foundation. For the first time, synchronised, pre-recorded audio description was broadcast for the season’s 26 American Playhouse productions.

The first film screening with audio description (and closed captions) was *The Jackal*, exhibited at a California cinema in 1997. *The Jackal*’s release was followed by the release of *Titanic* – the first major studio direct-release of a movie with audio description (and closed captions). In 1992, WGBH began its Motion Picture (MoPix) Access project providing “closed” audio description (via headsets) for first-run films in selected theatres nationwide (in conjunction
with its Rear Window System for displaying captions). \textit{Forrest Gump}, with “open” audio description, was screened on December 28, 1994 at the Cineplex Odeon/Fairfax Theatre in Los Angeles, California, sponsored by TheatreVision, a subsidiary of Retinitis Pigmentosa International.

Description for broadcast television continued with funding from the US Department of Education and other providers joined WGBH. In 1988, James Stovall of Tulsa, Oklahoma, a blind man, produced audio description of classic TV shows and films for home videos, and one year later Stovall founded the Narrative Television Network to offer description for films on cable television. In 2009, James Stovall and the Narrative Television Network received the Barry Levine Memorial Lifetime Achievement Award in Audio Description, presented by the American Council of the Blind’s Audio Description Project (https://adp.acb.org – July 2009).

In 1990, The Metropolitan Washington Ear created the first audio description soundtrack for an IMAX film, \textit{To Fly!}, premiering at the Smithsonian Institution’s Air and Space Museum. It was soon followed by other IMAX films with description – including \textit{Blue Planet} – and the audio description for the Air & Space Museum’s Planetarium show \textit{And A Star To Steer Her By}.

Also in 1990, the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences acknowledged the burgeoning audio description efforts for television by awarding special “Emmys” to four organisations that brought audio description to television: AudioVision Institute (Gregory Frazier), the Metropolitan Washington Ear (Margaret Pfanstiehl), the Narrative Television Network (James Stovall) and PBS/WGBH (Barry Cronin and Laurie Everett). In 2009, following the death of Margaret Pfanstiehl, the American Council of the Blind’s Audio Description Project (created and directed by Joel Snyder) established its Dr. Margaret Pfanstiehl Memorial Research and Development Award in Audio Description.

In 1997, the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB), published the seminal work \textit{Who’s Watching? A Profile of the Blind and Visually Impaired Audience for Television and Video}, by Jaclyn Packer and Corinne Kirchner. Based on a survey of blind and visually impaired people, this publication provided detailed demographic information about the experience with and interest in audio description as well as viewing habits and preferences among this population (see also data from ADLAB (2012) and ADLAB PRO (2017) relating to the EU situation). The survey found that blind and visually impaired individuals watch television at comparable rates to the general population. The report also addressed the real life consequences of lack of full access to television programmes.

In 1999, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) also acknowledged how audio description can enhance popular culture for people who are blind or have low vision. The agency issued its Notice of Proposed Rulemaking for phased-in audio description for television and in 2000 the FCC implemented the rules requiring major broadcast networks and cable companies in the top 25 television markets to provide 50 hours of described programming per quarter to be effective from April 2002. Unfortunately, late in 2002, the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia reversed the FCC ruling, finding that the FCC had acted beyond the scope of its authority in adopting those rules. CBS and PBS continue to provide approximately the same 50 or more hours of described programming per quarter. Other broadcast and cable networks also continue to provide varying amounts of described programming.

Essentially, an act of Congress would be required that authorises the FCC to mandate description on broadcast television. In 2003, Representative Ed Markey, now Senator Ed Markey from the state of Massachusetts, introduced a bill to update the FCC’s authority to adopt audio (video) description rules; the bill did not pass. In 2005, Senator John McCain introduced a bill to update the FCC’s authority to adopt audio (video) description rules; the bill did not pass. Largely in response to these events, the Coalition of Organisations for Accessible
Audio description in the United States

Technology (COAT) was formed. COAT is a national advocacy organisation of almost 300 national, regional, state and community-based disability rights organisations to advocate for legislative and regulatory safeguards that will ensure full communication and video programming access, including the re-establishment of the FCC’s 2000 rules regarding description on broadcast television.

It would not be until a new administration and a new Congress was convened before the mandate would be put in place as part of a far-reaching access rights bill – The 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act of 2010 (CVAA). The CVAA was signed into law by President Obama on 8th October 2010 (see photo in the appendix). The bill – and its mandate for about four hours of description per week by the top nine broadcasters in the nation’s top 25 markets – went into effect on 1st July 2012. Since that time, the number of hours per week has grown to seven and markets covered under the legislation now number 60. Further, digital television makes it possible to transmit many secondary signals like that employed for audio description. Unfortunately, while it is technically possible, broadcasters are reluctant to use bandwidth for additional audio signals, preserving their capacity for bandwidth-devouring video quality. It is helpful to highlight how President Barack Obama’s administration contributed to the development of audio description in the United States. Indeed, President Obama’s administration saw several important developments for AD:

– both of President Obama’s inauguration national television broadcasts were accompanied by live audio description courtesy of the American Council of the Blind’s Audio Description Project (the inaugural parades were also described live and on-site for parade attendees);

• White House ceremonies and Department of Justice events were accompanied by live audio description;
• the development of an audio described tour of The White House; for the first time, visitors who are blind could have meaningful access to the White House self-guided tour of the mansion’s public areas (the tour was discontinued during President Trump’s administration);
• most importantly, in 2010 President Obama signed the 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act (CVAA) which mandated by law, for the first time, audio description for television broadcasts.

5. Museums

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the first audio described tours of museum exhibits and National Park Service exhibits were developed. In 1986, The Metropolitan Washington Ear created the first audio described exhibit tours – recorded on audio cassettes – for the Statue of Liberty and Castle Clinton in New York State. Others soon followed, such as an audio cassette-based tour of the Clark County Heritage Museum in Henderson, Nevada chronicling the development of gaming and the area around Las Vegas. Certain agencies, like the National Park Service, created audio description projects at highly visible parks; for example, a description for the Death Valley National Park, Philadelphia’s Independence Hall and the Star-Spangled Banner exhibit for the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History were. Indeed, museums were able to use audio description techniques to translate the visual to a sense form that was accessible. Using these techniques for the description of static images and exhibitions, museum guides found that they developed better use of language and more expressive, vivid and imaginative museum tours, greatly appreciated by all visitors. In this way, guide-led tours were more appropriate for the low vision visitor and guides found that...
their regular tours were enhanced. Some museum administrators were interested in having a recorded tour specifically geared to people with low vision. Combined with directional information, these recorded tours on audiocassettes enabled visitors who are blind to use a simple hand-held audio player to tour at least a portion of the museum independently and with new access to the visual elements of exhibitions. Other curators were interested in having certain videos within an exhibit or a special film described. Another important resource for developing accessibility in a museum or visitor centre was and still is the organisation Art Beyond Sight (formerly Art Education for the Blind. More information is available at: www.artbeyondsight.wordpress.com).

6. Theatre

In live theatre, Rod Lathim, the Artistic Director of Access Theatre, developed the first audio description script for the company’s touring production of *Storm Reading*: this allowed any performance to be audio described as opposed to the usual practice of providing audio description only at selected performances. Audio description was growing and growing up – its consumers and practitioners began to gather to discuss common concerns. A passionate advocate for and practitioner of audio description, Rod Lathim brought together a small group of people involved with description at a pre-conference meeting of the Association for Theatre and Accessibility – that was in 1994. Access Theatre produced a video, *Theatre Without Limits*, which provides an excellent overview of assistive technology for live performing arts events.

About thirty states in the United States have audio description in live theatre and in museums via live description, audio tours or trained guides. In a live theatre setting, at designated performances (depending on the availability of the service and how it is administered), people desiring audio description are provided headsets/earplugs attached to small receivers, about the size of a small pocket calculator. Often, before the show, a taped or live version of the programme notes plays through the headsets, after which a trained describer narrates the performance from another part of the theatre via an FM radio or infrared transmitter. The narrator guides the audience through the production with concise, objective descriptions of new scenes, settings, costumes and action, all slipped in between portions of dialogue or songs. Often, the designated performance is accompanied by a touch-tour, allowing audio description consumers to touch costumes, props, set pieces – even the performers themselves – during a pre- or post-show gathering backstage.

7. Current situation

In 1995, audio describers and description consumers from across the United States and Canada gathered for the establishment of Audio Description International, a meeting hosted by the National Endowment for the Arts and The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC. This author was the Chair of the Founding Steering Committee, and Alan Woods of Ohio State University became the President of Audio Description International, the organisation incorporated in Washington, DC in 1998. A second gathering was held at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in 2002; Barry Levine was elected President of Audio Description International.

Audio description continued to grow in performing arts settings, principally staffed by volunteer describers using notes gathered at one or two viewings of a performance. Description on broadcast television was also still available, largely due to the ongoing funding from the Department of Education. Leading entities providing description with this support included
WGBH/Media Access Group, the Narrative Television Network, Caption Max, Closed Caption Latina (now DiCapta) and the National Captioning Institute. Children’s programming was enhanced with the addition of audio description tracks; as the Director of Described Media for the National Captioning Institute for over five years, this author coordinated the production of description for shows like Sesame Street including Sesame Street DVDs as well as the Spanish-language version of the show, Plaza Sesamo. NCI also became the only other entity beside WGBH to provide description for first-run feature films – highlights included Wallace & Gromit and the Curse of the Were-Rabbit, Flags of our Fathers, Dreamgirls and Shrek III.

The availability of description and captioning on educational media gave rise to the Described and Captioned Media Programme (DCMP), administered by the National Association of the Deaf. DCMP exists “to promote and provide equal access to communication and learning for students who are blind, visually impaired, deaf, hard of hearing, or deaf-blind”. The DCMP media library has over 4,000 free-loan described and captioned media titles available to its members who can watch media online or order a DVD copy to be shipped to them. Furthermore, with the support of the Department of Education and the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB), DCMP developed a Description Key. The Key began as recommendations, suggestions and best practices culled from an extensive literature search and meta-analysis in 2006. AFB assembled an expert panel in media description and education for children with visual impairments to help evaluate media description strategies for educational material. Meanwhile, the Federal Government was taking note of the value of adding audio description to federally-produced or financed media. In 1998, Congress amended the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 by adding Section 508 to require Federal agencies to make their electronic and information technology accessible to people with disabilities. All film, video, multimedia and information technology produced or procured by Federal agencies must include audio description.

In 2009, the American Council of the Blind launched its Audio Description Project to promote and produce description via a range of initiatives. When Barry Levine died, the Audio Description Project took over the Audio Description International website and listserve and built various programmes: description training; description conferences including awards for leading describers and young audio description consumers who write reviews of described video (the “Young Described Film Critic” contest, now known as the BADIE-Benefits of Audio Description in Education, sponsored in collaboration with the Described and Captioned Media Programme); a greatly expanded website (https://adp.acb.org) with listings of describers and description programmes and services worldwide (but principally in the United States); and the production of description for the ABC broadcast of President Obama’s inauguration. Several specific projects include: description of the DVD of The Miracle Worker, the HBO broadcast of Monica and David and the development of a self-guided, audio described tour of The White House, put in place in January 2013. Most critically, the Audio Description Project has established national, consumer-focused guidelines or best practices for the production of description in a variety of formats, hopefully leading to the development of a certification programme for professional describers in the United States.

In the United States, audio description is emphasised as an access technique, principally for people who are blind – that is how it was developed back in Washington, DC. But it should be noted that in many countries, particularly where English is not the dominant language spoken or native tongue, description is not studied as a form of access, per se, as part of a disability studies programme at a university. It is considered a kind of translation – it is a part of audiovisual translation programmes in language and interpretation departments as a kind of subtitling (Snyder, 2014: 112). Indeed, unlike most “light dependent” people, people who are
blind or have low vision speak a language that is not dependent on the visual. Consequently, audio description has been embraced as a new field of study in academic programmes that encourages the exploration of audiovisual translation (Snyder, 2014: 112). Universities in the following nations now offer Masters and even doctoral programmes where one can focus on audio description: the UK, Canada, Spain, Portugal, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, South Africa, Germany and Australia. Audio description has been practiced on every continent. It can no longer be considered in its infancy – perhaps it is in its adolescence – and new techniques are being developed (Orero in this volume), broadening access to new media for increased numbers of people who are blind or have low vision. Audio description is as old as humanity itself but quite new as an assistive technology. A workshop was recently conducted in New Haven, Connecticut in the United States with day care workers and reading teachers on what represents a new application for audio description – literacy (Snyder, 2011). Participants experimented with developing more descriptive language to use when working with children and picture books. These books rely on pictures to tell the story. However, the teacher trained in audio description techniques would never simply hold up a picture of a red ball and read the text: “see the ball”. He or she might for instance add: “the ball is red – just like a fire engine. I think that ball is as large as one of you! It’s as round as the sun – a bright red circle or sphere”. The teacher has introduced new vocabulary, invited comparisons and used metaphor or simile – with toddlers! By using audio description, you make these books accessible to children who have low vision or are blind, and help develop more sophisticated language skills for all children. A picture is worth 1000 words? Perhaps. But the audio describer might say that a few well-chosen words can conjure vivid and lasting images.

A special note: after leading several days of audio description training in Moscow (see Borschevsky and Kozulyaev in this volume), this author came home with a new insight into the arts and access. My colleagues there taught me that audio description, access to the arts, must be a part of any democracy. In the United States, a prosperous, democratic nation, accessibility generally is not yet viewed as a right, as a reflection of the principles upon which our nation was founded. People in Russia were wrestling with economic circumstances attendant to a shift in government that accommodates democratic elements, yet to them incorporating democracy means access for everyone.

8. Future developments

From the perspective of the United States, two projects, in particular, are on the horizon:

1. audio description as an aesthetic innovation: how does one incorporate accessibility – audio description, in particular – as an aesthetic innovation? The theory of inclusive design describes one common approach to accessibility. The main tenets are: 1) the designers consider as many different human abilities, limitations and needs as possible and 2) these factors should be included from the beginning of the design process. While audio description may benefit a wide audience, it is rarely considered from the beginning of the process. As a post-production activity (similar to other localisation accommodations like subtitling or dubbing) many filmmakers have limited awareness of the existence of audio description and even less understanding of the latest research which suggests how the access technique can be incorporated within the development of a film. It is then not an “add-on” but an aesthetic innovation and an organic part of the work that can benefit all people.
When this author coordinated funding from the Interdisciplinary Arts Projects category of the National Endowment for the Arts, he wrote guidelines that read in part:

This category encourages experimentation in the area of accessibility as an aesthetic innovation, e.g., interdisciplinary work with sound elements that are visually accessible through the use of computer-graphic technology; visual elements that are tactile or aural; innovative use of signing or audio description; movement involving older or disabled people, etc.

*(National Endowment for the Arts, Inter-Arts Guidelines, 1986: 22)*

Professor Deborah Fels of Ryerson University in Canada posits that

Video description and closed captioning (can be) an integral part of the creative process. Normally this work is done by a third party after the film is complete. We are working with the creative team to write these tracks at the same time they put together the show.

*(Fels et al., 2006: 302)*

For instance, in every episode of CTV’s *Odd Job Jack* there is an extra track narrated by one of the characters.

To illustrate this inclusive approach, several recent video projects which have included access as a part of the whole following the tenets of inclusive design can be cited; members of these creative teams took responsibility for accessibility as part of the production process eliminating the need to add a separate layer after the fact. The production then became accessible to a wider audience. This notion allows filmmakers to meet an obligation for inclusion while incorporating innovative techniques thus increasing the production’s aesthetic viability. These following examples demonstrate how video can incorporate alternative audio description from the perspective of inclusive design as well as its use as a novel media production technique.

- Hamlet “Ballroom” (audio file): https://drive.google.com/file/d/15c0RovDZROgDGuG4ulPQ_kldvPHzE0D/view
- Stevie Wonder’s “So What The Fuss”: https://vimeo.com/328707872

2. the smartphone: currently there are several smartphone applications around the world that can deliver simultaneous, synchronised foreign language audio and audio description tracks (in multiple languages) at any cinema or at home. They target hundreds of millions of filmgoers worldwide who are not fluent in the local language and exclude films from their leisure activities. But it also represents a major development in how audio description is delivered to consumers. The app downloads an encrypted language or audio description soundtrack to the device. In the United States, two of these app-based, smartphone technologies show particular promise: Spectrum Access and SoundFi. Both of these new apps are designed to run on hundreds of millions of devices operating under iOS (iPhone, iPad and Touch), Android and Microsoft platforms. As these apps are introduced more widely, the app and audio description tracks will be available for free while users pay a small fee per downloaded language soundtrack.
9. Conclusion

As of this writing, the United States government is transitioning to a new administration. I noted earlier the several significant advances with respect to audio description that occurred during the administration of President Obama and Vice President Biden. With the incoming administration of President-elect Biden, we expect to see renewed outreach to and focus on people with disabilities, including an updated 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act (CVAA 2.0) which may increase the percentage of television broadcasts that must include audio description, as well as a reinstatement of the audio described tour of The White House.

A familiar story, possibly apocryphal, recounts that a blind man visiting an American museum with some friends was once asked: “Excuse me, but what are you doing in a museum? You can’t see any of the exhibits”. His response? “I’m here for the same reason anyone goes to a museum. I want to learn, I want to know and be a part of our culture”. His inability to see should not deny him access to culture and it is the responsibility of our arts institutions to be as inclusive as possible. Access to culture is everyone’s right. There simply is no good reason why a person with a particular disability must also be culturally disadvantaged. Over time, hopefully all countries will better understand the power of audio description to change lives.

In the United States, findings from the 2018 National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) data release has established that an estimated 32.2 million adult Americans (or about 13% of all adult Americans) reported they either “have trouble” seeing, even when wearing glasses or contact lenses, or that they are blind or unable to see at all. That group is the principal constituency for audio description, of course, and it is sobering to note that people who are blind have an unemployment rate of about 70%. I am certain that with more meaningful access to our culture and its resources, people become more informed, more engaged with society and more engaging individuals – thus, more employable. With the greater development of audio description worldwide, we will have an opportunity to appreciate the value for everyone of building access for all.

10. Further reading


11. References


12. Appendix

![Image of President Barack Obama signing the 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act of 2010]

*Figure 33.1* President Barack Obama finishes signing the 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act of 2010 during a ceremony in the East Room of the White House in Washington, Friday, 8th October 2010.