Could Audio-Described Films Benefit from Audio Introductions? An Audience Response Study

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Structured abstract: *Introduction:* Time constraints limit the quantity and type of information conveyed in audio description (AD) for films, in particular the cinematic aspects. Inspired by introductory notes for theatre AD, this study developed audio introductions (AIs) for *Slumdog Millionaire* and *Man on Wire*. Each AI comprised 10 minutes of continuous description incorporating information about the film's visual style, fuller descriptions of characters and settings, a brief synopsis, and cast and production details. The AIs were tested with participants who are blind and have low vision. *Method:* Twenty-four visually impaired volunteers listened to the AIs before or after watching the films with AD, and gave feedback about their experience, either at sessions organized at the University of Roehampton, United Kingdom, or at home. *Results:* This was a small-scale, exploratory study that showed a positive response to the concept of AIs for film. Most participants felt the AIs helped bring the films to life and made them easier to follow. The majority of participants wanted AIs for other films. *Discussion:* AD guidelines discourage describers from mentioning camera work, yet most participants reported that this information in the AI was not too technical, and that the proportion of the AI devoted to visual style was about right (14 of 20 for *Slumdog Millionaire*, 14 of 16 for *Man on Wire*). Only a minority felt that the AIs "told me things I could find out for myself." This suggests that access to screen media for people with a visual impairment can be enhanced by additional cinematic and other visual information. *Implications for practitioners:* Given the limited time available for description during the film itself, AD providers should consider the use of AIs as a complement to standard film AD. These audio introductions could be stand-alone or accessed from a website.

Audio description (AD) is a spoken commentary conveying visual information for those who are unable to perceive it themselves (Whitehead, 2005). Also known as video description or descriptive video, AD has been shown to improve comprehension, add to enjoyment, and aid social inclusion (see, for example, Pettitt, Sharpe, & Cooper, 1996; Schmeidler & Kirchner, 2001). As such, it has become an accepted way of providing access to visual and audiovisual media for people with visual impairments (that is, those who are blind or have low vision) (Fels, Udo, Diamond, & Diamond,

2006; Snyder, 2007). In the United Kingdom, provision of AD for television is a legal requirement (Communications Act, 2003). Under the Equality Act (2010), AD is considered a reasonable accommodation that providers such as theaters, cinemas, and museums can offer to make their services accessible. In the United States, the Twenty-first Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act (2010) has created a legal framework for the provision of AD for television (From the Field, 2010). Screen Australia encourages producers to include provisions for audio descriptions when budgeting for films (Media Access Australia, n.d.). Along with the proliferation of AD, there has been a proliferation of AD guidelines, some of which are contradictory (see Rai, Greening, & Petre, 2010, for a review). Gerber is concerned that so-called "best practices" in AD "have been designed without much formal input by blind consumers" (2007, p. 3). Most guidelines focus on user comprehension (the *what*) rather than on visual style (the *how*). The study presented here explores user responses to audio introductions (AIs) for film that, as complements to AD, are designed to convey the *how* of cinematic storytelling.

Audio description for film

For dynamic media, such as film and television, AD is threaded through the soundscape (Ofcom, 2008), which leads to major constraints. Descriptive utterances should only be inserted where they will not obscure dialogue or important sound effects, lyrics, and music, which limits the quantity of descriptive information that can be conveyed (Braun, 2008) and, by extension, affects the content of that description. Since it is impossible to describe everything the eye can see, guidelines in the United Kingdom, the United States, Spain, Germany, and Greece, for example, agree that the greatest challenge is how to choose "what not to describe" (Rai et al., 2010, p. 71). The consensus is that priority should be given to describing the action, which leaves out other important visual elements such as style. In the United Kingdom, the Independent Television Commission (ITC) *Guidance* (2000, p. 8), which was developed for pilot television services rather than film, justifies this on the grounds that "to many [AD users], expressions like: 'in close-up,' 'pan across,' 'mid-shot,' 'crane-shot,' etc. may not mean anything. . . ." In contrast, guidelines on AD for visual art such as the Audio Description Project standards in the United States (American Council of the Blind, 2009, p. 31) do encourage describers to focus on style, defined in this case as "the cumulative result of many characteristics, including brushwork, use of tone and color, choice of different motifs, and the treatment of the subject." It would seem important to include similar stylistic elements in AD for film, especially given that our understanding of the action is affected "not only by the events we watch, but to some extent also by the way those events are presented on the screen" (Izod, 1984, p. 6). Yet the above-mentioned time constraints and the widespread recommendation not to use technical terms (such as camera angles or editing techniques) have severely limited the inclusion of visual style in film description.

Audio introductions

Time constraints also operate in live settings that benefit from AD, such as opera

or theatrical performances. Since the early days of AD, the solution for providing AD during a live performance has been to offer an audio introduction (AI) before the show begins. An AI—also known as introductory notes, show notes, or even program notes (York, 2007)—is a piece of continuous prose, spoken by a single voice or a combination of voices and lasting between 5 and 15 minutes. It may include musical extracts or interviews with members of the cast (Vocaleyes, n.d.) and provides relevant information from the printed program, including running time, cast and production credits, as well as detailed descriptions of the set, costumes, and characters. It may also describe the director's input in terms of the nature of the production—for example, whether the acting is naturalistic or stylized and whether scene changes are marked by a lowered curtain or flow seamlessly from one to the next. Such AIs may be recorded on compact discs (CDs) and sent out to audience members in advance of the performance, or may be available to download as an audio or text file from a website. They are also delivered live in the venue before the curtain rises.

Cinematic AD

The comprehension of technical filmic terms by people with visual impairments was tested in a recent study by Fryer and Freeman (2012a; 2012b). For the film *Brief Encounter* (Coward & Lean, 1945), they developed an AD style incorporating cinematic terminology where possible; for example, "Cut to the library. Close-up of Laura staring into space. She blinks, gradually refocusing. The camera pulls slowly back as she leans against the floral-patterned cushions of her armchair, her gaze distant, eyes sad." A seven-minute clip from the film was presented with no AD, with standard AD, and with cinematic AD. Thirty-six participants with visual impairments (of whom 18 were blind and 18 had low vision) watched the clip in all three conditions, with the order counterbalanced across the sample. Twenty-four (67%) preferred the cinematic AD. Thirty-one (86%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "I found the AD confusing." One participant with congenital blindness stated that he was not interested in camera angles, in much the same way that he had no interest in color. Unlike filmic terms, however, the inclusion of color is positively encouraged in AD guidelines (ITC, 2000). Fryer and Freeman's study suggests the same may be true for details of camera shots and editing. However, the time constraints mentioned above remain an obstacle to the inclusion of stylistic elements in AD for film. Realizing this, 47% of those in the *Brief Encounter* experiment agreed or strongly agreed that they "would like a separate AI to the director's style (e.g., camera shots and angles, editing style, etc.)." Seventy percent agreed or strongly agreed that they would like a separate audio introduction to other visual elements pertaining to characters, costumes, and locations. Such details have traditionally been absent from AD for film and television, and yet are requested by users, as noted in other projects such as Audetel (Pettitt et al., 1996).

Developing AIs for film

For the present study, AIs were developed for *Slumdog Millionaire* (Colson, Boyle, & Tandan, 2008) and *Man on Wire* (Chinn &

Marsh, 2008). *Slumdog Millionaire* is a feature film that won Academy Awards for best cinematography and best editing. It was widely praised for its visual style. *Man on Wire*, also an Academy Award winner, is a documentary combining present-day interviews, archival footage, and re-creations made in the style of heist films such as *Ocean's Eleven* (Weintraub & Soderbergh, 2001). Both films had existing AD written by the in-house team at International Broadcast Facilities (IBF) in London. The AI for each film was written by the second author, a professional audio describer, in collaboration with the first author and an advisor who was a film enthusiast with low vision. Included were descriptions of locations, characters, and cinematic style, and cast and production credits. The descriptive information was generally woven into a narrative loosely following the course of the action, but without giving away crucial elements of the plot. The AIs were recorded by the second author, produced on CD, and also uploaded to a website developed for the project: <www.audiointros.org>. The AI for *Slumdog* had a running time of 12 minutes, 30 seconds, including a 30-second summary of the cinematic style of the film. The AI for *Man on Wire* was slightly shorter (10 minutes, 35 seconds) including approximately 2 minutes of cinematic information.

The study

Participants

The AIs were tested with 20 volunteers aged 36–68 (mean age = 51 years, SD = 10.41; male = 12). Twelve participants were blind (2 congenital, 10 acquired) with little or no light perception. Eight participants had low vision and, although they had some residual vision, were not able to make out detailed images on screen. All participants gave written consent. Ethical approval for the study was given by the University of Roehampton, London.

Measures

A questionnaire was devised for the study. Sections A and B asked about the thoroughness, length, structure, and technicality of the information provided in the AI; Section C asked three open-ended questions about the film: What can you recall about the visual style of the film? What can you recall about the characters? and What can you recall about the locations? Section D asked whether the AI brought the film to life, made it easier to follow, made participants more eager to watch it, or provided redundant information. Participants were also invited to provide any other comments. Sections A and D used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree and 5 = strongly agree). Section B used a 3-point scale (1 = too little/too short, 2 = about right, 3 = too much/too long).

Procedure

Participants either attended a session at the University of Roehampton (N = 12) or took part at home (N = 8). Of those at Roehampton, Group 1 (N = 4) listened to the AI for *Slumdog Millionaire* prior to watching the film with AD. After a lunch break, they watched *Man on Wire* with AD, and then listened to the AI. Group 2 (N = 8) listened to the AI for *Man on Wire* prior to watching the film with AD. After lunch they watched *Slumdog*

Table 1
Responses to Sections A and B for *Slumdog Millionaire* (all participants: $N = 20$).

Questions	Hearing the AI for *Slumdog Millionaire*	Agree/strongly agree
A1	. . . I felt overwhelmed by information.	30%
A2	. . . there were more things I wanted to know.	25%
A3	. . . the information was in the right order.	95%
A4	. . . the information about the camera work was too technical.	25%
A5	. . . the audio intro gave away too much information.	20%
A6	. . . I was interested in details of cast and crew.	70%
A7	. . . I would like audio intros to other films.	75%
A8	. . . I would like to be able to download them.	90%
B9	. . . the duration of the audio intro was about right.	85%
B10	. . . the amount of information about visual style was about right.	70%
B11	. . . the amount of information about the plot was about right.	75%
B12	. . . the amount of information about the characters was about right.	90%
B13	. . . the amount of information about the locations was about right.	85%

Millionaire with AD and then listened to the AI. Questionnaires were administered, one-to-one, by students at the University of Roehampton who had been briefed to read them as neutrally as possible, and to notate responses. Sections A and B were completed after each AI. Sections C and D were completed after each film. Group 3 ($N = 8$), taking part at home, listened to the AI before watching the relevant film with AD. These participants answered the questionnaires via a series of phone interviews, answering Sections A and B after listening to the AI, and Sections C and D after the film.

Note on analyses

Results for Sections A, B, and D of the questionnaire were quantitative. Responses to Section C were qualitative, and as they combined responses about the AI and the AD they are not reported here. The sample size was small, so group comparisons (AI pre-viewing versus AI post-viewing) were made using nonparametric tests.

Results

For *Slumdog Millionaire*, Mann-Whitney U-tests showed no significant between-group differences for responses in Sections A or B, so responses from all groups have been combined. These were overwhelmingly positive. They are reported in Table 1.

There were significant between-groups differences for three of the questions in Section D (the AI made me more eager to watch the film; the AI made the film easier to follow; the AI helped bring the film to life). Since these questions were not relevant to those who heard the AI after watching the film, only results from those who heard the AI first (Groups 1 and 3) have been reported (see Table 2).

Results for *Man on Wire* are reported in Tables 3 and 4. Data from Group 3 (those listening at home) were incomplete for this film and have been excluded. It is important to note that results, expressed in percentages, cannot be directly compared between the two films. Nonparametric tests comparing responses of blind

Table 2
Responses to Section D for *Slumdog Millionaire* ($N = 12$).

Questions	Hearing the AI for *Slumdog Millionaire*	Agree/strongly agree
D17	. . . made me more eager to watch the film.	83%
D18	. . . made the film easier to follow.	92%
D19	. . . told me things I could find out for myself.	33%
D20	. . . helped bring the film to life.	100%

participants and those with low vision showed no significant differences for any of the questions.

Discussion

The study shows a positive response to AIs for film among people with visual impairments. Participants who listened to the AI before watching the film unanimously agreed that the AI "helped bring the film to life" and almost all reported that the AI "made the film easier to follow" (*Slumdog,* 92%; *Man on Wire,* 87.5%). Tony, who is blind, said, "What a superb introduction! Tremendously informative. It gave me the kind of information that I wouldn't get in the AD for the film. It made me very eager to watch the film and really enhanced the viewing, as I was able to relate what I heard in the AI to the film as I watched it with AD." *Slumdog* posed particular problems, as the film juxtaposes flashbacks and flashforwards. Mark, who has low vision, commented, "The AI was great. It helped a lot. The switching between past and present in the film would have been difficult to follow had I not listened to the AI first." Most felt the amount of information about visual style was about right (*Slumdog,* 70%; *Man on Wire*, 87.5%) and only a minority found information about camerawork too technical (*Slumdog*, 25%; *Man on Wire*, 12.5%). Since Kate, who is congenitally blind, put it, "Although I know very little

Table 3
Responses to Sections A and B for *Man on Wire* ($N = 16$).

Questions	Hearing the AI for *Man on Wire*	Agree/strongly agree
A1	. . . I felt overwhelmed by information.	44%
A2	. . . there were more things I wanted to know.	12.5%
A3	. . . the information was in the right order.	62.5%
A4	. . . the information about the camera work was too technical.	12.5%
A5	. . . the audio intro gave away too much information.	25%
A6	. . . I was interested in details of cast and crew.	81%
A7	. . . I would like audio intros to other films.	81%
A8	. . . I would like to be able to download them.	81%
B9	. . . the duration of the audio intro was about right.	56.3%
B10	. . . the amount of information about visual style was about right.	87.5%
B11	. . . the amount of information about the plot was about right.	81.3%
B12	. . . the amount of information about the characters was about right.	56.3%
B13	. . . the amount of information about the locations was about right.	75%

Table 4
Responses to Section D for *Man on Wire* ($N = 8$).

Questions	Hearing the AI for *Man on Wire*	Agree/strongly agree
D17	. . . made me more eager to watch the film.	87.5%
D18	. . . made the film easier to follow.	87.5%
D19	. . . told me things I could find out for myself.	25%
D20	. . . helped bring the film to life.	87.5%

about terminology to do with camera techniques, I found it interesting in this description as it was backed up by other relevant visual information."

The amount of information provided in the AI was problematic for Hazel, an older woman who was blind, who said, "I am not going to remember the details when watching the movie. I would prefer to have this information throughout the film rather than before." However, Stephen, who has low vision, proposed a solution: "I would have loved to listen to the AI a couple of times before watching the film. It should definitely be available to download." For *Slumdog*, 17 of 20 respondents found the length and suitability of the sections devoted to plot, characters and locations, and total duration "about right." This dropped to 9 of 16 for *Man on Wire*, with 5 of 16 participants stating this AI was too long. Since it was in fact two minutes shorter than the AI to *Slumdog Millionaire*, these responses reflect user perception. Alan, who has considerable residual vision, said, "I found this AI tedious, just like those they provide in the theatre." In particular, the section of the AI for *Man on Wire* devoted to the characters was highlighted as the area at fault. In the AI to *Slumdog*, information about the characters was largely woven into a brief outline of the plot; for *Man on Wire*, the AI describes the characters in a list at the end. It may be that this format is inherently less interesting. Alternatively, the responses may reflect differences between characters in a feature film, in which physical appearance may relate directly to the plot, and a documentary in which one "talking head" is very like another.

Although the AIs were designed to be listened to before watching the film, some participants enjoyed the opportunity to listen afterwards. For *Man on Wire*, Michael, who became blind later in life, reported, "I liked the film, but after watching it, I was under the impression that the filming was conventional. Listening to the AI helped me realize this wasn't the case. It all makes much more sense now. The AI puts the frame in so you can see the picture better. I feel now that I could actually see the film, as the AI added the color." In all, the majority of participants (*Slumdog*, 15 of 20; *Man on Wire*, 13 of 16) agreed or strongly agreed that they would like to have AIs to other films.

These initial results suggest that AIs can complement the existing AD of a film. Further research is clearly needed, testing AIs for a range of films and comparing different types of AI content. Both films used in this study included passages of foreign-language dialogue that was captioned. These captions were verbalized in the AD, possibly reducing the time

available for visual description. The AI for a film with less dialogue and more time for visual description may require less information. It is also important to find a viable model for the provision of AIs. It would be possible to include them as an optional track on the DVD. Alternatively, AIs could be hosted on an independent website such as the one developed for this study. They would then be readily available to individuals whether they were watching a film on DVD or on television.

Limitations

This study was small in scale and exploratory. Participants listened to the AI in a variety of settings. Those taking part at Roehampton faced a long day watching two complete feature films as well as listening to two AIs and answering questionnaires. By the afternoon, people may have been experiencing fatigue. It may have been better to present the films on different days. However, independent travel can be demanding for people with visual impairments. The sessions were designed to minimize the number of journeys undertaken by the participants, which was also the reason that some participants took part at home. With hindsight, the pre-post design was problematic and would need to be reconsidered in future research. It might be more useful to compare responses from participants watching the film with or without the AI.

Conclusion

Engaging with screen media is considered "as vital a part of the cultural and social interactions of visually impaired audiences as it is for sighted viewers" (Evans & Pearson, 2009, p. 374). In cinema, visual style (including elements such as camera work and editing techniques) is a major element of the film-watching experience. Since time constraints make it difficult to include much of that cinematic information in the AD, AIs can provide a useful complement to improve access to screen media for people with visual impairments. This study shows that AIs, which are already in common use in theater, also have the potential to be effective for film.

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