

The Light Bulb Went on: A Historiography-Based Approach to Disentangling Audio Description's Influential U.S. Roots From Its Common Practices

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Abstract

Introduction: American media-accessibility pioneers in the 1970s and 1980s not only sparked interest in the academic study of audio description, they also originated many practical techniques, protocols, theoretical perspectives, guidelines, and standards that persist in the fabric of this type of work decades later. In this study, we located and analyzed source documents for two oft-mentioned innovators—Gregory Frazier and Margaret Pfanstiehl—to shine light on their individual perspectives through a historiography of their foundational writings and associated media. **Method:** This analysis was conducted on publicly available source documents, such as Frazier's landmark thesis and also included a trove of Pfanstiehl's personal correspondence, as a way to establish particular points of theoretical and historical interest. **Results:** We found that despite the prominent place of Frazier and Pfanstiehl in audio description lore, neither actually published much writing about what they did and why they did it. Some of what they wrote has been selectively repeated, but other parts have been forgotten. In that respect, this research method could be used to more precisely trace and identify where particular practices emerged, under which theoretical perspectives, and complications. It also can help to show how these ideas were documented and tested during their emergence and domestication, as a way to gauge procedural rigor as well as validity of related findings. **Discussion:** Audio description scholarship needs theoretical anchors, but it also needs systematic testing of assumptions inherent in those theories, which this study helps to identify. **Implications for Practitioners:** Audio describers invariably will encounter the moment when an assertion of “this is the way we do it” collides with the curiosity of “why?” To promote best practices, the field has to understand where practices came from, how they developed, and as Frazier recommended, put those ideas to “objective” tests.

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Audio description—the sharing of descriptive words between a sighted person and a person who is blind or has low vision—has been conceptualized and practiced for millennia. But, only in the past decade or so, scholars in this field also have begun raising significant questions about the external validity of the field’s widespread and mostly ad-hoc practices. Books, edited collections, and academic articles about audio description (Ellis et al., 2018; Fryer, 2016; Kleege, 2016; Maszerowska et al., 2014; Matamala & Orero, 2016; Perego, 2018; Snyder, 2014), including manuscripts in this journal (Branje & Fels, 2012; Packer et al., 2015; Rockwell & Boris, 1982) have recounted its rich practitioner history, especially in the latter 20th century in the United States, when most contemporary guidelines were being conceptualized, developed, and informally codified. That era energized a flurry of like-minded initiatives establishing audio description globally in popular entertainment, including film, television, and theater.

Landmark moments have been well-documented as references to specific dates with associated names in the field’s history. Rarely have the cultural and societal influences of particular people in this field, though, been addressed, examined, and put to account, even though they have affected both practitioners and audiences around the world and continue to shape audio description as a global ideal and an international community of practice. As Jankowska (2015, p. 23) aptly described the seminal forces energized by the field’s pioneers: “The rules in force are a collection of revealed truths, anecdotic commandments, and

the so-far-applied practices,” rather than based on thorough research of the needs of the primary audiences. Contemporary scholars, in response, have been turning to various types of validation studies (Matamala & Orero, 2016).

Yet such research cannot encapsulate its contexts without a more transparent lineage illustrating how audio description reached this present stage through the tracing of key points and people in the past. Therefore, in this article, we propose more use of—and illustrate the potential of—historiography as a method for creating such critical context. This document-based analysis can serve as a way of establishing origins and untangling pervasive practice-based adaptations from those initial ideas to the practices that have been empirically tested (or not) and proven valid (or not). In that sense, this historiography approach is intended to complement, complicate, and expand the wider interrogation of audio description guidelines underway in this research community. This approach aims to help to contextualize debates and to help trace primary linkage through time for disentanglers who want to also find ways to focus on connections between modern practices and historical links. With such information, researchers could better position inquiries into those guidelines through a recognition of how they came to be, and what animates them, which, in turn, could illuminate important yet-unseen underpinnings. This type of historiography work, in other words, is not intended as the end of the argument in most cases but as an alternative starting point, or as a different vantage point, which can be rich with context and history providing insights on environments in which guidelines get planted, take hold, and grow.

As a model of this documentation-tracing approach, and to show its potential usefulness, we analyzed the published works and associated literature of two notable audio description

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pioneers: Margaret Pfanstiehl (Cronin & King, 1990; Packer et al., 1997; Piper, 1988) and Gregory Frazier (Packer et al. 1997, 2015). Pfanstiehl (initially publishing under her maiden name, Rockwell) started the Metropolitan Washington Ear in Washington, D.C., in 1974, as a radio reading service for people who are blind. In 1981, it became the world's first formalized training system for audio describing live theatre and other performing arts. Frazier, in turn, is generally credited with creating the first scholarly piece of audio description with his 1975 master's degree thesis. Their influences have been at the core of what we are labeling the "American School," an Emmy Award-winning group of audio description pioneers, led by Pfanstiehl and Frazier, based on the integration of their ideas and the inspiration of those ideas (i.e., in Grossman & Grossman, 2007) throughout the audio description community, both nationally and internationally.

Depending on perspective, either Pfanstiehl started formalizing audio description first, or Frazier. But the historical record shows that they were both experimenting with this type of work on opposite U.S. coasts (Frazier in California and Pfanstiehl in Washington, D.C.), unaware of each other, during the 1970s and early 1980s (Perego, 2018). They did meet with each other, at times, and even trained with each other during at least one important workshop in San Francisco in 1988 (Packer et al., 1997). At the pinnacle of this American School, in 1990, they earned an Emmy award together—along with fellow media-accessibility pioneers James Stovall, Barry Cronin, and Laurie Everett—which was presented by the U.S. Academy of Television Arts & Sciences. We wanted to get as close to the starting point of this School as possible, in order to identify ultimately impactful decisions in the field based on these founders. Therefore, to give this article its shape, we examined published and unpublished writings by Pfanstiehl and Frazier, classified in this case as the co-origins of the School. We also analyzed work about them, in a bounded period of history, between 1974 when Pfanstiehl started Metropolitan

Washington Ear, and 1990, when they were awarded the group Emmy (Ellis, 1991).

Situating the Subjects

Our first step in this analysis was to situate Pfanstiehl and Frazier in their broader historical context. From that perspective, and in culmination of diverse forces, which had been percolating for centuries, a variety of 20th century events—including the aftermaths of war, increased job-related injuries with the rise of the industrial age, and improved public discourse about sight-altering ailments—changed perceptions and the legal course of rights of people with disabilities. Evolving from a common belief that disability was a manifestation of a curse or sin (Dolmage, 2014), American society suddenly was facing scientific evidence that external factors, such as war injuries, could affect bodies and cause injury, including causing blindness, with no mystical connection. Instead of casting blame, Americans began to focus on ways to rehabilitate disabilities (Stiker, 2019, p. 13).

As a part of the country's entrepreneurial mindset, a design culture emerged during this period. Devices and technologies were invented and promoted to "normalize" people with disabilities. As an example of how historical context has shaped these issues in the United States, enthusiasm for prosthetic limbs after World War II led Congress to pass the largest veterans' compensation package in U.S. history, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, which then paved the way for further subsidies on customized automobiles and house renovations (Williamson, 2019, p. 18). Those initiatives opened discussions about what else should be more accessible, leading to more accessibility laws—riding waves of American Feminism and the Civil Rights Movement, and including the impactful [Rehabilitation Act of 1973](#)—that culminated in the landmark Americans With Disabilities Act, enacted in 1990. Such historical context begins to crystallize why, precisely, Pfanstiehl and Frazier began their influential work in the

United States in the mid-1970s, right after passage of the Rehabilitation Act.

This important historical period also notably included the counter-culture rise of the Social Model of Disability. That conceptual model turned attention away from medical aspects of vision loss and instead focused societal conversations on environmental barriers and cultural aspects, such as inaccessible public discourse (Shakespeare, 2010). This article, in its scope, focuses just on the era of audio description development that happened after the Rehabilitation Act, a year before Metropolitan Washington Ear was founded, and before the ADA in 1990, when pioneers such as Frazier and Pfanstiehl were laying foundations for audio description culture, in the wake of advances in closed captioning for television (National Captioning Institute, n.d.).

According to his obituary in *The New York Times* (Thomas, 1996), Frazier remarked about the origins of his work during that vibrant period of new ideas in this way: “The light bulb went on. ... It was one of the most exciting moments of my life.”

Method

Historiography is typically understood as the study of historical writing or an “arrangement of the historical record” (Scanlon, 2015; Bank & Kobiak, 2015). A historiographical approach to audio description research thereby allows for the treatment of historical writing as a type of literature (Scanlon, 2015), and historiography offers researchers an opportunity to examine the history of a chosen topic, within its context, and as a stand-alone concern. We wanted to study how specific ideas arose, converged, and diverged among the field’s pioneers through that literature, identifying gaps that exist in the record and traces of any common understandings or misunderstandings that have arisen.

To establish our corpus to review, we first sought out any scholarly or mass-mediated writings authored by Pfanstiehl and Frazier. Finding only a few, we then enlarged the scope to also include all academic literature or public

media related to audio description that was published during our chosen time period, 1974 to 1990, when this field was nascent and its culture was emerging. As a part of that search, the bibliographies and indexes of every significant book or edited collection in the field of audio description, plus scores of journal articles were searched for references and traces to Frazier or Pfanstiehl. We found surprisingly little available from either author in the public record.

Neely Oplinger, the current executive director of Metropolitan Washington Ear, which Pfanstiehl founded in 1974, said (personal correspondence, 2020) that Pfanstiehl primarily shared her theories and methods as a part of her describer workshops, teaching ephemerally through training and practice. Joel Snyder, one of Pfanstiehl’s proteges, found and shared (personal correspondence, 2020) about 100 pages of her memos and internal documents, including a few newspaper clippings about her work with us. That might be all that remains. For Frazier, we attained a copy of his landmark thesis for analysis. Yet we were unsuccessful in reaching any former staff members of AudioVision, which Frazier had founded in the mid-1970s. The organization’s website was no longer active.

During this document review, the researchers independently read the corpus material and highlighted sections that we identified as related to culture-creating best practices, mantras, and philosophical perspectives. The researchers then shared and reviewed these notes, using an inductive process to cull them and gather them into key data points of the found material.

Although various accounts of audio description’s development have been published previously, those pieces generally focus upon significant milestones as presented in a chronological order, rather than in a deep reading and analysis of related writing of a specific period. Such a chronological approach lacks details and transparency about how personal beliefs and practices of its pioneers, combined with social forces of the time, may have shaped the field in ways that persist today. The researchers selected material from this culling process that we considered most closely related

to existing or emerging research questions in the field today.

By analyzing Frazier's master's degree thesis, Pfanstiehl's archive, and related materials, we intended to add a new layer of understanding in the history of audio description that illuminated these pioneers, their thought processes and philosophies, and impacts those ideas still have in the field today. Frazier and Pfanstiehl generated their ideas within particular socio-cultural and technological contexts. This line of inquiry appears to be underdeveloped in audio description scholarship. Instead of asserting a final judgment about this data, though, we intend this paper to prompt more historical analysis of it and related material, as a way to learn where we have been in this field of audio description as well as a way to chart where we are going.

Results

Pfanstiehl Findings

In a review of her writings, Pfanstiehl gave no indication that she considered audio description as a potential academic area of interest. She focused on its benefits as a service or accommodation that could be carried out by practitioners, specifically by those who learned from her about her method. The central piece in our corpus was authored by Pfanstiehl when she was known as Margaret Rockwell (before she was married to Cody Pfanstiehl), and it was co-authored with a public-relations writer at Arena Stage (Rockwell & Boris, 1982). We pursued other examples of her writing about audio description in an effort to gather more data and triangulate our understandings.

The current director of Metropolitan Washington Ear, Oplinger (personal communication, 2020), said that Pfanstiehl was considered the foremost authority on audio description in the world during her lifetime, and she traveled broadly, spreading her ideas to many individuals and organizations. She added that Pfanstiehl never published a manual of her training techniques, although some records she has indicate that Pfanstiehl was working on one.

Complemented by the "Standards for Audio Description" (2009), her organization still trains describers in passed-down ways, Oplinger said, relying on the group's memories of the intricacies of the "Pfanstiehl approach." The writings, notes, and memos that she left behind, which were made available to us (Snyder, personal communication, 2020), similarly revolve around the refinement of audio description through the training and practice of describers via her organization's methods.

Pfanstiehl, who was born with sight but became blind due to a retinal disorder in her 30s, acknowledged being inspired by a radio reading service that existed in the early 1970s in St. Paul, MN, which she wanted to replicate in the nation's capital (Metropolitan Washington Ear, n.d.). She also wrote that she was motivated by the widespread adoption of captioning for people who are deaf and hard of hearing (Molotsky, 1988). Audio description, she lamented, did not have the same ubiquity, and it was much harder and more time-consuming to produce (Novovitch, n.d.). Attempting a metaphor for the process, she evoked a "camera" (Gabrenya, 1987), writing (Pfanstiehl, 1985) that the describer is "no more and no less than a faithful camera lens for the visually impaired listener."

In the theoretical work contained in her writings (i.e., Rockwell & Boris, 1982, p. 320), Pfanstiehl and her co-author identified critical components of theater description as "descriptions of body language, stage action, and all the dramatic elements important for the visually impaired [person] to understand what is going on." At that point, they acknowledged that the guidelines they were presenting were being created as they practiced them, since "this has never been done before, anywhere, on a regular professional basis. It is an art with no previous guidelines."

Another founding principle for Pfanstiehl, she and Boris wrote (p. 321), was that describers needed to have an innate "feel for what is important and what can be left out in the interest of time." The Metropolitan Washington Ear, under Pfanstiehl's direction at the time, published in its "Directions for Program Notes" (1990, p. 1) that the "focus must be on essential

information and descriptions of costumes and settings and should never be concerned with things as lengthy credits or long background articles about the touring company.”

In this respect, and in consideration of the rigid time constraints and description windows during live performances, Pfanstiehl’s group pushed for “well-organized, concise, and sharply focused” descriptions. The playbill, used as an example of what not to do, is “meant to be scanned visually and is often too detailed or specialized” for an audio rendition. In “Wuxtry!,” the technical notes (Wuxtry, 1987, p. 3) encourage describers to work ahead of the visuals and “talk more about what’s coming (sets, costumes, names of musical numbers, etc.) than what’s been (she had the starring role in her high school play . . .).” In that respect, she did not argue for a full and complete translation of the visual media. As another clue of this approach, one of the Metropolitan Washington Ear’s describers, Janet Dixon told *The Washington Post* (Del Sesto, 1993): “It’s all extemporaneous—only the program notes are taped beforehand.”

Pfanstiehl, in turn, has been framed historically as a proponent of this “extemporaneous” approach to audio description, as in a describer responding to a moment, and just saying what that person is seeing (Audio Description Solutions, n.d.; Del Sesto, 1993; Novovitch, n.d.). In the historical record, she did in some cases emphasize that a describer needs to be quick-witted and to be able to speak concisely (Del Sesto, 1993), “spontaneously articulate,” and to follow the mantra “what comes in the eye goes out the mouth” (Novovitch, n.d.). Pfanstiehl also looked for certain spontaneous attributes in an audio describer (Rockwell & Boris, 1982, p. 321), including “a good vocabulary,” “the ability to express oneself succinctly and effectively,” and “an exquisite sense of timing.” They had to be able to quickly develop an “emotional involvement with the play,” anticipating sight gags and dramatic moments, but also to not have “a tendency to talk too much.”

Yet the available historical documents also show that her approach was the opposite of on-

the-fly improvisation. Her “rigorous volunteer training program” (Gross, 1985), for example, included a behind-the-scenes emphasis on heavily detailed preparation and tightly scripted performances (Pfanstiehl & Pfanstiehl, 1988). In the Metropolitan Washington Ear’s “Procedures for describers of American Playhouse Television programs,” the document (n.d.) noted “This is serious stuff. Accepting an assignment for a program is a serious commitment.” This partnership between Metropolitan Washington Ear and the primary public television station in Boston, WGBH, was a landmark collaboration of its own right. It contributed to the codifying and to the spread of the description techniques of Metropolitan Washington Ear through the major amplification systems of WGBH, which also includes a popular radio station, thrusting both organizations into national and even international leadership positions in this field. Pfanstiehl, in turn, did not associate this type of ground-breaking work with luck or improvisational skill.

As a part of Metropolitan Washington Ear’s “Reviewer Log” (1987), for example, her organization outlined the extensive multi-step preparation process for describing a theatrical performance as including:

1. Listening to the soundtrack,
2. Reviewing the script,
3. Consulting on original script,
4. Reviewing first script revision,
5. Consultation on first script revision,
6. Review of second script revision,
7. Consultation on second script revision,
8. Review of subsequent revisions,
9. Consultation on subsequent revisions,
10. Consultation with (production partner) WGBH,
11. Review of first (practice) recording,
12. Consultation on first recording,
13. Review of second (practice) recording, and so on.

In other words, this was not a passive camera lens approach, for just saying what is seen in a moment, which is the way it often is construed.

Frazier Findings

In Frazier's case, despite his prominence in most audio description histories, little documentation seems to be left of his actual legacy as well. His organization, AudioVision, is no longer active, and the website domain is for sale. The college where he wrote his thesis, and later worked, San Francisco State University, did not return emails asking about him or the existence of an archive of his work. Former AudioVision collaborators did not respond to similar requests, either. Even the name of his organization had been subsumed by a high-end stereo store in the Bay area, called Audio Vision S.F., which recently celebrated its 20th anniversary. Frazier published his groundbreaking thesis more than 45 years ago, and he died in 1996, before that stereo store had even opened. Except for recognition of the publishing achievement, the Emmy acknowledgment, and a single roughly 15-minute YouTube video about his work, not much of his formalized AudioVision perspective on audio description has been digitized and made publicly available.

Packer et al. (1997) did publish an interview with Frazier in a government report, which provided some rich details about his interest in audio description, fueled by his friend from childhood, Geno, who had low vision and sparked Frazier's thesis idea when they were watching a movie together. One apparently self-published piece (Frazier & Coutinho-Johnson, 1995) occasionally appears in literature reviews, but we were unable to obtain a copy, even by reaching out to those authors who used it and enlisting the help of a reference librarian at our university. Nevertheless, there were some important discoveries in analyzing what was left, especially in his thesis.

First to be noted about that thesis—"The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman: An All-Audio Adaptation of the Teleplay for the Blind and Visually Handicapped"—is the interpretive nature of it. This thesis mostly documents the creation of a prototype, designed by a sighted person, for the ideas he had about audio describing a television show. This thesis did have

some theoretical ideas embedded within it and some assertions about what he valued in his audio description approach. About a third of the roughly 60-page main document was the proposed audio description script he created, though, and the roughly 60-page appendix was mostly the full script with those insertions in place.

Frazier acknowledged in the thesis (1975, p. III) that although his adaptation appears successful, in theory, that "the ultimate test of its validity lies in recording the drama for testing with a blind and visually handicapped audience." The test audience for his script, he wrote, included three persons, "two adult women, and a blind male adult" (p. 34).

While Frazier claimed that his script was a "unique genre," (p. 8), he also narrowly defined that genre as an "audio television adaptation for the blind." He outlined in the second chapter of his thesis the many influences he had in this effort from earlier audio technologies and productions, including The Talking Book, mid-century radio programs, radio stations that were regularly broadcasting programs of special interest to blind listeners, and even a short audio-only Disney version of "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" rereleased on a record in 1954. He also noted (p. 22) that the Star Trek Archives, a fan-based organization in San Francisco at the time, had created an all-sound adaptation of one of the science-fiction show's 79 episodes to entertain people who are blind. The audio describer of that Star Trek episode was one of the show's main characters. In Frazier's work, as one distinction between other efforts, the description was to be done by multiple cast members.

Frazier stated in his thesis that he originally had planned to experiment with touch and sound (p. 1), but the technologies to do so in an efficient way were not yet available. Theoretically, Frazier also made a few broad assertions about the nature of audio description that could be further theorized, operationalized, and studied.

First, he stated the importance of audio describing only "essential" information (Frazier, 1975, p. 31). Detailed physical descriptions of characters in scenes, for example, might be

counter-productive, he theorized. He wrote (p. 31), that Pittman's character was sufficiently developed with the existing soundtrack "aurally. The listener's imagination will conjure up a picture of her, whereas a detailed physical description may, in fact, shatter the listener's illusion." He then added, "Imagine listening to the audio portion of a television broadcast of a symphony orchestra without the picture. The music, in this case the essential information of the event, would be received by the listener. This writer believed that although images of the orchestra, the conductor and audience tend to clarify and intensify the event, they are not essential to the aural enjoyment of the event, which is primary."

Second, the audio describer should be uninformed in the creation of the media and not at first even "view the drama in the initial stages of the research" (p. 33). That person should "first listen to the drama in its entirety, noting those portions where he himself loses comprehension."

Third, three main types of information are considered necessary in an audio description of a television drama (p. 35–40): 1. Set, or where a scene is located; should emphasize the present scene and some item in the scene, 2. Character, who a character is, introducing players as being present, emphasizing a physical characteristic or costume of each player, and revealing a player's personality, background, station in life, or condition, and 3. "Continuity information" (p. 35), or what was taking place in this moment, an explanation of past or present action, or a preparation for future action.

Fourth, although two positionalities are possible for the describer, the narrator as external or as internal to the story, Frazier wrote that as a part of smooth integration, the narrator should be "an actual participant in the story."

Finally, he asserted that future study (p. 62) "would objectively test the relative comprehension levels of two study groups: A blind control group, which hears the original teleplay, and a blind test group, which hears the adaptation." No record of such a test taking place by Frazier could be found, but others since have pursued this path of inquiry, such as [Schmeidler and Kirchner \(2001\)](#).

As a testament to this legacy, [Hardy](#) (n.d., p. 2) wrote after Frazier's death, his AudioVision organization and the describers he trained "continued to uphold the standards," including the main point of "say what you see," and by being "painstaking about their note taking" and "seeing several performances when possible in order to integrate their notes into the show script before the task of describing."

Discussion

The [California Audio Describers Alliance \(2006\)](#)—10 years after Frazier's death but 3 years before Pfanstiehl's—explicitly named them both and descriptively explained how the melding of their work helped to shape the Standards for Audio Description, which serve as a model for what we are calling "the American School" today.

In those standards, the group references a long-lost document called the "Three Golden Rules of AudioVision," which was Frazier's organization, as the origin of a familiar Pfanstiehl metaphor: "You are like a 'talking camera.' Cameras and describers are objective. They do not render judgments, opinions, or interpretations."

Like with Frazier's foundational "light bulb" metaphor, associating light with knowledge and a higher awareness not available to those who cannot see the light, this "camera" metaphor that they both adopted also has not aged well or been proven to be effective as a guiding principle. As a metaphor, a camera conveys a complex set of meanings, but, most fundamentally, it is a tool for a photographer to freeze a scene and show an audience a highly restricted and personal viewpoint. In an audio description context, there is no such mediating tool between the describer's eye and the listener's ear, and the camera does not switch the information mediums, that is, from visual to audible, in that process, either. So what exactly does the camera metaphor do here? It implies that an unthinking machine is rendering a scene for the audience member, and/or, it implies that this machine is just capturing the moment, in an authentic and universal way, as it happens, without any forethought or sense of expectations.

These examples demonstrate how seemingly simple metaphors and mantras, such as “say what you see,” can be useful from one perspective but disorienting and inadequate from others, when those phrases and metaphors are more fully considered and critiqued. When in the moment—in a live theater performance, for example—and a describer is frozen by the complexities of the scene and costumes and characters and does not know what to say next, a pragmatic push with “say what you see” could be just the right advice needed to get a describer to start describing. But in retrospect, when evaluating such description as a convergence of individual knowledge and experiences, value systems, historical and societal contexts, artistic expressions, interpretive utterances, and so on, the mantra of “say what you see” leads to philosophical debate about just what any one person sees, and why, which shatters the veneer of simplicity. The complexity of audio description animates the scholarly community today, and researchers in this field are trying to locate its heaviest anchors. Historiography could help.

An emphasis on chasing ghosts such as “objectivity,” as an interpretive goal and a design principle, for example, shows how pioneers within the American School aligned on certain ideas. But such an example also illustrates consequences of such alignment, without extensive empirical scrutiny or a strong contemporaneous counter argument, potentially creating global ripples of appropriation and misappropriation. A historiography approach, in such ways, can help to identify these areas as worthy of further scrutiny in historical contexts, analyzed as in collision with contemporary practices. Such an approach can create new paths of scholarly inquiry by inspiring further investigation of where an idea came from, why, and to what effects.

Despite the relatively small corpus size of available documents, many important and foundational ideas in this area still could be teased out of these archives and traced directly to these pioneers, who cast a wide and enduring influence. This process could help to establish origin points of audio description ideas, or at

least significant points of amplification and inflection. Identifying and illuminating those points could lead to better analysis of external validities based on existing evidence.

As Frazier asserted himself (1975, p. 61), “The ultimate proof of the validity of the study, however, lies in testing the adaptation under actual listening conditions with a blind or visually handicapped audience.”

Limitations

The corpus of materials related to Pfanstiehl and Frazier that were found and analyzed for this piece represent the most comprehensive documents on public record for these pioneers of the American School, but the collection of source material gathered also appeared incomplete, with most of their specific practice techniques and training philosophies lost to time.

Before starting this paper, we worked for months trying to locate any available source material authored by Pfanstiehl and Frazier—including enlisting the help of a university reference librarian, trying to contact their organizations and former colleagues, contacting other scholars in this field, and searching several large-scale databases. The biggest breakthrough probably was the collection of Pfanstiehl documents provided by Snyder (personal communication, 2020), but even a closer analysis of those materials still showed many holes in what could be known about how Pfanstiehl viewed the complexities of audio description.

For example, we learned that Pfanstiehl was reported to have regularly conducted satisfaction surveys with her audiences of people who are blind or have low vision, yet these survey results were never publicly shared and were unavailable for our review. We were not able to determine if they even still exist. So our hope is that more source documents from this time period can be found and used to build upon the work we have done here.

Future Implications

Besides illuminating an important part of audio description history, this paper was intended to

illustrate ways in which a return to the historical record could open new paths of scholarly inquiry. A historiography of this nature could help to reduce ambiguities of large, abstract ideas by placing them chronologically as thoughts by particular people in particular times and places. By returning to those records, researchers also can examine and analyze other writings by the author to judge internal consistency in their work or a clear dedication to a particular viewpoint. This study revealed many fertile paths for inquiry just latent in the lost works of these two pioneers. Similar research on other key characters in this field—such as the three additional American School members awarded the Emmy—likely would generate more cultural connections among people practicing during this developmental stage as well as opportunities for further analysis of foundational assertions.

In the case of the prevalence of the extemporaneous “camera lens” approach that both Pfanstiehl and Frazier referenced and used as metaphors for audio description, for example, a closer examination of their writings show that neither really practiced a loose in-and-out “say what you see” philosophy. A camera does not prep or plan, it just responds. So the metaphor was flawed and not-representative of their belief systems about audio description. Nevertheless, it is still used regularly and repeated by others today. Pfanstiehl and Frazier, by all accounts, instead were detailed planners, focused on preparation as a platform for any necessary improvisations. They did not want to have surprises during the description process, but if they did, they would be ready for them. In that way, the metaphor might have been more apt if it had focused on the preproduction tasks of a photo shoot, in which the photographer checks all of the equipment, takes test shots of the environment and its lighting, makes sure the batteries in the equipment are charged, etc. The lens was only a part of this idea. Pfanstiehl, in summary of her perspective (1985, p. 92), wrote that audio description “is as old as sighted people trying to tell blind people what things look like. But doing it in a prepared scheduled way is, of course, quite another matter.”

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