**Describing People and Portraits Through Audio Description: Preferences of People who are Blind, Low Vision, and DeafBlind**

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# **Introduction**

This paper describes findings from a series of focus groups and interviews conducted with blind, low vision, and DeafBlind people on their preferences for the description of portraits and people via audio description (AD). A founder of audio description, Pfanstiehl (1985, p. 92) said 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.” AD has been compared to a camera taking a snap shot of visual information (Gabrenya, 1987), but it can be much more complicated than simply providing an objective scene in complex and evolving settings such as art galleries, theaters and social events. Formal practices in AD emerged in the United States around the 1970s, shortly after the implementation of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Koirala & Oppegaard, 2022). However, the preferences of those who use AD, particularly DeafBlind users, is relatively unknown.

Early in 2022, the Helen Keller National Center (HKNC) and the University of Hawaii at Manoa (UHM) collaborated on a research project that conducted five focus groups and two interviews with blind, low vision, and DeafBlind individuals, on the topic of AD. These sessions were intended to examine preferred characteristics of AD related to various media contexts, specifically characteristics in the areas of race/ethnicity, disability, gender and age. This research was conducted to learn firsthand what blind, low vision, and DeafBlind people think is important in the delivery of AD across a variety of media, technology, and social situations.

# **Literature Review**

No studies to date have examined the experiences of DeafBlind AD users, yet similar studies have been conducted over the past decade with blind and low vision participants. Describing Diversity, a report based on findings of research by VocalEyes and Royal Holloway, London, investigated AD for theater via a survey, interviews and workshops involving a fairly even mix of blind and low vision participants, theater professionals and audio describers (Hutchinson et al., 2020). The project focused on AD of human appearance and characteristics. Among its findings were: The importance of consultation among describers, theater professionals, AD users and others involved. Along with the use of collaboration and open dialogue around language sources to help decide the use of language by describers. AD is important and impactful in its own right (e.g., politically), going “beyond its provision of visual information. “The report also featured a number of cultural-competency recommendations for describers. Bennett et al. (2021) interviewed twenty-five blind users of screen readers. Observing that while “assumed primarily visual, appearance is a socio-material phenomenon which blind people negotiate with nonvisual workarounds and understandings of visual representation, “the study concluded that:

Participants viewed descriptions of appearance and identity extremely differently and thought it essential for image describers to understand the distinction, when possible, they wanted their preferred language used to describe themselves, but they strongly recommended less politicized and more concrete description of appearance when the photographee’s identity could not be confirmed. Participants were excited about the potential for AI to increase access to image descriptions, but they had significant concerns about its accurate and ethical deployment.

Szarkowska (2013) tried the technique of auteur description, which departs from objective AD to convey directorial intent in often spirited and vivid language, to accompany an artistic film showing for the Polish Association of the Blind. Results suggested that “many people” favorably expressed that the description made the film more entertaining and easier to understand. Fryer (2018) assessed integrated AD as opposed to traditional AD, concluding that “... a describer’s skills and competences are still required even with the evolution of integrated AD”. Using LiveDescribe, Branje and Fels (2012) examined how well 12 amateurs described a 20-minute comedy show, finding that overall, most did a fair or good job. Hattich and Schweitzer (2020) studied the experiences during a comedy movie of 25 people who were blind or had low vision were matched with sighted viewers who received AD through an app called ‘Greta’, concluding that AD “... provided by an application, could be a useful tool for people with vision loss to immerse themselves and enjoy films as much as sighted people do and hence be part of social life. “In 2018, the World Blind Union and the American Council of the Blind conducted a Survey of Worldwide Audio Description Activity, receiving 104 responses from 69 countries and the Pacific Disability Forum. Among its findings were that 67% of respondents said that AD is available in the respondent’s country; cinema, television, live performing arts and DVDs lead the list of the type of AD experiences available; almost 45% said that AD is required by law, 64% of those respondents reported that it was required for broadcast television; and 99% of respondents said that they believe AD or more AD should be available (WBU & ACB, 2018).

A number of US federal laws and regulations relate to the provision of AD. Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires public accommodations, including movie theaters, to provide effective communication through the use of auxiliary aids and services. Specifically, it requires venues regulated by this part of the law to “... have and maintain the equipment necessary to provide closed movie captioning and audio description at a movie patron’s seat whenever showing a digital movie produced, distributed, or otherwise made available with these features” (ADA, 2012).Title II of the 21st Century Video Accessibility Act (VCAA) refers to AD in relation to video programming, especially television (TV) related devices, and user controls (FCC, 2021). Obligations affect certain major TV networks and providers, devices such as TV sets and device user controls such as accessibility-feature on-screen buttons. Additionally, this legislation requires content that is captioned on TV to also be captioned within an online streaming version of the same content. Sections 504 and 508 of the Rehabilitation Act concern agencies and projects that receive federal funding (504) and all information and communication technology used by a federal government agency (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2016). They are respectively aimed at preventing discrimination against, and enabling accessibility for, individuals with disabilities. AD is listed as one of the “alternative methods of providing information” required by these sections of the law.

# **Methods**

The researchers conducted five focus groups and two interviews with a total of 15 blind, low vision, and DeafBlind participants. The researchers also conducted a pilot study with 3 blind and 2 DeafBlind staff at Helen Keller Services to test and refine the research questions. Participants for the full study were recruited through postings on listservs catering to DeafBlind people, and outreach through the Blinded Veterans Association and the American Council of the Blind. The researchers received initial responses from 25 people who were interested in participating in the study but lost 10 people through attrition. Possibly due to a lack of monetary compensation for participating, that resulted in a lack of responsiveness and “no-shows.”

Participants were asked to complete an initial screening and demographic survey before being assigned to a focus group or individual interview. Individual interviews were conducted with participants who faced technology or communication barriers to participating in a focus group over Zoom. There were 15 participants. The genders of the participants were split into nine men, five women, and one non-binary participant. Ten were white, two black, and one of each were in the following three categories: American Indian; Alaskan Native, or Indigenous; Hispanic, Latino/a/x, or Spanish origin; and Multiracial or Multiethnic. Two participants were aged 26-35; three 36-45; four 46-55; four 56-65; and two 66-75. Nine identified as DeafBlind; five as not DeafBlind.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **n** | **%** |
| **Age** |  |  |
| 26-35 | **2** | **13.33** |
| 36-45 | **3** | **20** |
| 46-55 | **4** | **26.66** |
| 56-65 | **4** | **26.66** |
| 66-75 | **2** | **13.33** |
|  |  |  |
| **Race** |  |  |
| White. Anglo, Caucasian, or European origin | **10** | **66.66** |
| American Indian, Alaskan Native, or Indigenous | **1** | **6.66** |
| Hispanic, Latino/a/x, or Spanish origin | **1** | **6.66** |
| Black, African American, or African origin | **2** | **13.33** |
| Multiracial or Multiethnic | **1** | **6.66** |
|  |  |  |
| **Deafblind** |  |  |
| Yes | **9** | **60** |
| No | **6** | **40** |
|  |  |  |
| **Gender** |  |  |
| Male | **9** | **60** |
| Female | **5** | **33.33** |
| Non-binary | **1** | **6.66** |
| Total | **n =15\*** | **100** |

*Note.*\* = data for one participant was not provided,

The focus groups/interviews were conducted by the primary author, who is DeafBlind, with support from a research assistant during 90-minute online focus groups on Zoom. One interview was conducted via Zoom and one via telephone. ASL interpreters were provided for participants whose first language was ASL. Participants were asked guiding questions about their preferences for the description of people and portraits across different contexts and specifically in relation to markers of identity such as race/ethnicity, gender, age and disability. All of the focus groups and the interview that was conducted on Zoom were transcribed. The researcher took detailed notes on the interview conducted via telephone as a recording was not possible.

Two researchers who were not present during the focus groups/interviews coded the transcripts independently, then compared codes. They read through and discussed these versions side by side, establishing common and key themes. They established a codebook of 10 main codes, with suggested sub-codes, then wrote notes independently to develop themes around audio description preferences. They then wrote independent reports and submitted these to the wider team for peer review. The full team also met regularly to discuss the development of coding and themes.

# **Findings**

Three major themes emerged from the focus groups among blind, low vision, and DeafBlind participants. 1) Context around AD provision, 2) Self-identification of person being described, and 3) On-going communication between the AD provider and user. Other findings included AD user’s general acceptance of the real-world limitations that can somewhat dictate AD, such as time available (e.g., during a live performance). Aspects of these and other findings are also discussed. A separate paper will address findings specifically from DeafBlind participants. There are limitations to the generalizability of the findings based on the small sample size. However, findings are in line with previous research that suggests there is no “one size fits all” approach to audio description. Findings also lay the foundation for further research on representations of diversity in audio description. Note that participants’ names have been changed to protect their identity.

## ***Context around AD provision***

Context around AD provision was mentioned many times. Perhaps most commonly, this was to make a point about how the content of AD is, or should be governed by whether a particular unit of content is relevant given the context in which it might be described. For example, participant Scout, when asked about what he would like in a description a person or a portrait said:

…when it comes to film… let's say you don't think the person having blonde hair is relevant… maybe I'm doing a research project and I want to find out that people with blonde hair in movies are portrayed as more stupid than people with brunette hair. So, in that context it would be relevant, but in most contexts it probably isn't relevant.

An example of how context can be linked to a specific topic that might be described came from Jai, who asked whether the context changed whether or not they wanted disability described, “But again, it's, to me it's like race, does it matter? Or why do I need to know this person is in a wheelchair. Does it enhance whatever I'm looking at or listening to or watching? If it doesn't, I don't care.” Whereas Charles said: “... Now, if it's important information to the context, then sure. If I'm socializing and just everyday kind of sense, then I don't need to know. If they're, you know, are they Asian? Are they Spanish? Are they both? I, I don't need to know. They're both humans.” In another group, Janice mentioned: “...using Hamilton [as an example], because that was an unbelievable breakthrough, if you will, and a new thing it was very important that the audience knew the race of the people in the play.” Participants expressed the importance on context in relation to AD. For example, one element of context is the interest or intent of the AD user across different settings. Such considerations indicate a close link between context and other areas addressed, such as self-identification.

## ***Self-Identification of Person Being Described***

The term self-identification was coined in reference to many participants’ opinions that topics such as race and gender identity should reflect whether and how the individual who is being described self identifies. Jai, on being asked whether they were interested in having gender described and why, and what about when gender is not known, said:

I would like to know how the person identifies, because I could be looking at a person and I think that they are X, but they identify as Y so… I don't want to go under the assumption that oh, okay. So, I'm thinking X and they're thinking Y. I want to know what they identify as, and that would be what's important to me.

Bruce, on being asked how he would want a describer to handle letting him know about a person's race, said: “... not to label people, but to use the vocabulary or the term that the person themselves would. To use the vocabulary, they would like to use to identify themselves”. Bruce displayed interviewees’ general view that areas such as identity bring challenges for describers that are forgivably complex to resolve, especially in the moment: “...if there's a lot of information visually happening, it'd be hard for the interpreter or for the support service provider (SSP) to be able to catch up and just catch everything at once. So, they have to choose the most important information…”

The wisdom of a describer trying to be specific about someone’s ethnicity, was questioned by, for instance, Ridley: “You know, people within the blind community have mistaken me as a Caucasian person because I may not have their skin complexion, so they don't have full vision. So, they're imagining me to look a certain way…” He thinks that describing one’s skin color is safer than, basically, hazarding a race/ethnicity label. Jai said, similarly: “...I went to a science museum. Minnesota had a thing on race exhibit and they had one person was one totally like not, he was just, he was, um, mixed, you know, multi-racial and, um, he was, he was getting labels from all over the place, but he was none of those at all.”

The general respect accorded by participants to self-identification has implications for the describer. For instance, it can help the describer focus on objective description of, say, someone’s appearance, without feeling undue pressure to identify that person in a particular way. If time allows, the describer can ask the individual how they self-identify in order to relay more accurate information. However, if that is not possible, the AD users in this study understood the complexity of identity along a tacit recognition that a describer often has limited time and resources at their disposal. There were suggestions that there exists an imperfect space of good intention that might better be filled with ongoing conversation between describer and user, about describer realities and client expectations, than by flawless execution in the moment.

## ***On-Going Communication between Describer and AD User***

On-going communication between describer and AD user is essential for the optimal AD experience. This can include the type of information that is most important to the user, how to address sensitive topics such as race, gender, and disability identity of unknown persons, as well as mutual expectations. Support Service Providers (SSPs): individuals who serve as a connection between someone who has dual sensory loss and the surrounding environment. SSPs often play the role of real time audio describers in social settings. Areas to discuss as partners include the nature of any boundary between description and interpretation, whether the knowledge and experience levels of the describer are in line with the users’ expectations and needs, and how much information is ideal. Along with possible collaborations between artist, describer, and user for creative projects or exhibits to prepare ahead of time. Sam’s comment, “regular aides can’t see the importance of describing things, “suggest that communicating levels of knowledge, AD experience, and users’ preferences ahead of time can be beneficial. Do keep in mind that there are no set rules for real-time AD in social settings as it can vary per person and context, so best to ask the individual user for their preferences prior to, during and after providing AD for future reference.

# **Implications for Practice**

Equivalence to the sighted person’s experience is the ideal form of AD. The findings of this study indicate that persons who are blind, low vision, or DeafBlind value 1) Context around AD provision, 2) Self-identificationof person being described and 3) On-going communication between the AD provider and user. Takeaways for describers are to engage in on-going communication around AD preferences as well as how preferences can change across context. This can include self-identification in different settings with the goal of describing rather than making assumptions around race, gender, or other associations. Again, adequacy is firmly linked to the goal of that AD session and to the limitations of that session in terms of factors such as time available; it does not imply an over-emphasis on perfection. After all, participant responses suggest two ‘bookends’ of participant thought. At one end is their awareness of the importance of knowledge: at the other, a similar awareness of the inevitability of limits (e.g., the describer's level of knowledge) to the actual execution of AD. When possible, collaboration and preparation with artists, film makers, and the like can create a more fruitful AD experience.

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