Research Articles and Essays

Beyond Words: Reception of Audio Description in Public Places Complicated by External Factors

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Abstract

Audio Description (AD) studies mostly focus on compositional concerns in audience-reception matters, such as comparing a description's length, point of view, or word choices. This paper expands those boundaries, from the words of audience members, into broader disconnects caused by delivery approaches, environmental noises, or listening contexts that can constrain or fully disrupt public experiences.

Keywords: Audio Description, DeafBlind, Barriers, Blind, Low Vision, Constraints, Preferences

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An earnest, engaged, and growing group of researchers in recent years has taken on the challenges of audience-reception studies in Audio Description (AD), which generally focus on descriptions theoretically provided to listeners in public places. These studies have addressed what listeners think about in terms of the qualities of a description's length, content, style, completeness, and even aspects of the vocal performances that separate synthetic and human voices delivering the descriptions, among other nuances. But because of the highly controlled and laboratory-like settings of many of these studies, researchers inherently are taking an abstracted leap of faith that these messages are getting through to the people who need them in the ways that they expect and want. Along the way, audience-reception researchers are making significant untested assumptions about the descriptions and how they pass from creator to listener, including about inextricable issues related to the user experience (UX), encompassing varied compositional concerns as well as issues related to usability, interaction design, accessibility, etc., of the descriptions but also of the interfaces that deliver them. In short, if the description does not get heard or heard clearly because of some reception issue unrelated to the compositional choices made by the AD writer, we contend that this is also a foundational reception issue, too, provoking a scholarly turn toward UX as a primary area of interest for audience-reception studies as well.

The intent of this paper, therefore, is to suggest that AD reception studies explicitly expand current boundaries to fully address and include UX issues as primary research problems within this academic area, not relegating those to external or unrelated statuses. As a step toward a deeper understanding of AD in practice, we feel compelled in this paper to complicate audience-reception approaches by bringing contextual UX concerns to the

surface, as a way to create a more holistic understanding of what happens when AD is used in real-life use-case scenarios. Through repeated prompting by audience members, we were sensitized to these intertwined audience-reception and UX issues during a series of focus groups that we conducted with the initial aim of learning more about how to describe people (Conway et al., 2022). Yet our research participants kept wanting to discuss issues outside of compositional choices, which clearly also affected their impressions of a high-quality description of a person.

Our findings suggest that audiences perceive much unintended noise in AD delivery ecosystems that muddies the signals intended as the core content for reception. Research attention in this area, therefore, should be expanded to acknowledge and address disruptive external factors, outside of the descriptive texts themselves, and those issues include misunderstanding the amount of time that a person *wants* to spend hearing a description, inconsistencies and unreliabilities of the various delivery systems, and misaligned subject matter expertise causing content to be either too complicated or too simplistic.

Yet the situation with AD reception is not quite the same as concerns with other media forms, either. If an audience-reception study were conducted on a television program, for example, any researcher would generally know what TV is like, as a medium, and how people typically use it. Anyone who wants to access TV as content can easily do so with few obstacles in the way in terms of hardware and orientation. A researcher would be hard pressed to find a representative audience member in a first-world country who did not know what a TV is, or what a TV program is, or what the experience of watching TV is supposed to be like. The same can be said of radio programs heard in cars or movies watched in a theater, and many other examples of domesticated media sources.

AD, though, does not have such a well-defined use history or use context as a

backstory. Most people do not have a direct personal or professional connection to this academic area or know much about related media-accessibility issues. Members of the general public, especially people who are not blind or have low vision, often do not even know what AD is, as a formal term, let alone how it should be best produced and shared or what it should sound like, considering its best practices. Even AD researchers, who come from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, might have widely varying understandings and beliefs about this nascent area of study. For better and worse, that's because AD has grown across disciplinary boundaries and into a broadly flexible label that can represent a composed product (a piece of AD writing or audio) as well as a useful and pliable process, also called AD, designed for audibilizing visual information contained in static imagery, such as photographs, or in moving forms, such as video, or even in live events in physical environments, including dance, theater, and sporting events. With all of those diverse forms and formats of verbalizing what can be seen — primarily for the benefit of people who cannot see or cannot see well — AD exists in many shapes and sizes and gets studied from countless angles and through diverse approaches. Understandably, researchers trying to cut through the Gordian knot of such wild complexity have aimed their interests on final AD products and how those products are received by audience members.

Yet nothing in the study of AD is really that simple or straightforward. The primary audiences for it are people who are blind, DeafBlind, or who have low-vision or print dyslexia, but this inclusive medium is also useful to audio-oriented learners of all types, as well as to family members and friends of anyone who might benefit from AD as a way for people to process public media together through ears rather than eyes. Potential AD audience members, such as elderly people who are gradually losing their sight, for example, might not be familiar with it at all or even self-identify as low-vision. Nor does AD have a typical

venue or setting for use, or a particular technology stack used for audio transfer. Sometimes AD is expressed in human voice, for example, which can be created ad-hoc and in the moment by a friend or family member; AD also can be formally scripted and performed by a nearby stranger; sometimes those words are shared via synthetic voice, via recordings, in open or closed manners; sometimes there is no human performer at all, such as when audio files are generated by the audience member on the spot via specialized screen-reader software; but also, sometimes AD is not audible at all, such as when a person reads it in braille, possibly through an electronic braille display device connected to a smartphone.

With such complexity in use cases and audience preferences, a lot of variables have to align for AD to make sense, with the listener in the right place, with the right working tech, and in the right state of mind to reach the moment where the content can actually start flowing, and evaluation of that content is warranted. As our focus group participants expressed, a lot can happen in between . That sentiment became a theme of our findings. Our participants not only identified actual or possible obstacles to AD reception, but they also identified subterranean concerns, rarely articulated in AD reception studies. This paper thereby not only aims to complicate understandings of AD and AD delivery systems, through audience member voices, in ways that enrich and strengthen research happening within audience-reception studies, but it also is intended to raise flags about what our laboratory-like reviews of AD really can tell us, with what certainty, and where they also might be leading us astray by the severe constraints of the perspective. We also hope this approach opens new paths of inquiry in this area.

Literature Review

People who are blind or who have low-vision have been an integrated part of diverse societies throughout world history, including throughout American history (Miles, 2003; Nielsen, 2012; Tikao et al., 2009). About 1 billion people worldwide have visual impairments (WHO, 2025), including about 12 million in the United States (CDC, 2025), and as media in global societies has become much more visually oriented, a robust response has been necessary to avoid further excluding people from public discourse and societal concerns, based only on a person's visual acuity. AD has become the primary response, and demand for it is high, with 99 percent of respondents to an international World Blind Union / American Council of the Blind survey (2018) saying that they think AD should be more widely available in public places and public forums throughout the world. Yet that does not mean AD audiences will doggedly overcome any obstacle, no matter how daunting, to hear it. In fact, the opposite argument might be a more probable hypothesis, based on our focus group discussions and other AD research experiences we've had during the past decade: Audiences will listen to AD in public places, if everything goes right, but if any significant hurdle appears, the whole system can be shut down in frustrating ways for everyone involved.

While AD has been used as a method of verbalizing the visual, researchers theorize, since the first blind person in ancient times turned to a friend and asked, "What's happening now?" (Snyder, 2020), academic interest in AD — both the processes and the products — is relatively new. The first known academic work appeared in the 1970s, spurred by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 in the United States, and then others, mostly practitioners, started to experiment with AD in the 1980s. Only in the early 2000s, though, did a sizable community of scholars finally start to gather around this area of interest (Fryer, 2016; Koirala & Oppegaard, 2022; Maszerowska et al., 2014; Matamala & Orero, 2016; Perego, 2018).

Since then, AD research has grown rapidly around the world, especially in Europe, and these studies have diverged into many paths of inquiry. Scholars, for example, have clustered concerns around historical developments of AD, policy and legal issues, definitional debates, modes of description (i.e. static vs. dynamic), contexts of description (i.e., theater, dance, museum, national park, sports), subgenres of description (i.e., in movies, horror vs. comedy vs. romance), types of description (i.e., describing people, objects, maps), behind-the-scenes production techniques, performance styles, machine voice vs. human voice, technical skills (writing, organization, labeling), screen-reader software, screen-reader speeds, objectivity vs. subjectivity, and so on. (Fryer, 2016; Koirala & Oppegaard, 2022; Maszerowska et al., 2014; Matamala & Orero, 2016; Snyder, 2020). As a popular academic paradigm, audience-reception studies have become a matter of interest that crosses into multiple scholarly territories and typically involve experiments gauging description metrics, such as overall length of a description (Is it too long? Or too short?), as well as measures of what content is included and excluded (Fresno et al., 2014). What seems often overlooked in these common approaches to this type of study, and what also needs further attention, is whether a listener is *ready* to engage with such description, for how long, and with what effects, and if any obstacles will disrupt such engagement.

In this study's context, descriptions are chiefly envisioned as being shared at a public attraction, such as at a national park (i.e., Parker et al., 2025). The intent of these descriptions is to provide an equivalent informational exchange to an otherwise inaccessible activity for a blind person, such as when a paper brochure is handed to a sighted park visitor, and an audio-described version of that same brochure is provided to a blind person as a way to share the same basic information, including the remediation of photos, maps, and charts (Hartley & Oppegaard, 2024). In other words, we positioned the focus group and interview questions as

if the participant had already become "travel active," as Packer et al. (2007) describe the state of mind. In this scenario, the participant had encountered a description of a piece of public media and was providing feedback about that description. But even in our focus group scenario, our participants had difficulty maintaining that "travel active" mindset, emphasizing its importance in terms of engagement, and instead kept returning to barriers to travel described by the model named after Packer et al. (2007), but also developed by Small et al. (2012) and Yau et al. (2004). The focus group members never explicitly said something like they were not "travel active" yet, and our focus group moderator did not immediately recognize and address that state-of-mind concern, leading to responses about descriptions that have roots in contextual dissonance rather than actually reflecting on the qualities of the descriptions, which were only clear afterward during review and analysis of the transcripts. Instead of considering these off-topic comments as outliers, in hindsight, this push by participants seemed to be the point they were trying to make to anyone who would listen.

Method

In terms of positionality, the authors of this paper have a mix of insider/outsider use of AD, research experience, and visual acuity: One author is DeafBlind; one is blind; one has corrective glasses for reading, and another has corrective glasses for everyday use. Two of the authors have been studying AD professionally for longer than a decade, and two of the authors are graduate students, relatively new to the nuances of this research field.

Participants for this study were recruited through postings on listservs catering to DeafBlind people as well as through outreach via the Blinded Veterans Association and the American Council of the Blind. In total, 15 people who are DeafBlind or blind took part in this research via a total of five small in-person or Zoom-facilitated focus groups and two face-to-face individual interviews, all based on individual audience member needs and

preferences (Conway et al., 2023). These groups and interviews were preceded by a pilot study with DeafBlind and blind Helen Keller Services staff members as a way to hone and test the research questions before introducing them to this group. The same questions were used in each context, whether it was a focus group or an individual interview.

For this convenience sample, the researchers received initial responses from 25 people who were interested in participating in the study. But over the course of scheduling and conducting the sessions, 10 of those people did not end up participating for various reasons. Each participant was asked to complete an IRB-approved demographic survey and screening survey, and from there, the individual was assigned to either a focus group or an individual interview, based on communication needs, skills, and available technologies. Individual interviews were conducted, for example, with participants who had significant obstacles to joining a focus group over Zoom.

In terms of the demographics of the sample, the participants reported themselves as nine males, five females, and one non-binary participant; 10 self-identified as White, two as Black, and one of each in the following three categories: 1. American Indian, Alaskan Native, or Indigenous; 2. Hispanic, Latino/a/x, or Spanish origin; and 3. Multiracial or Multiethnic. In terms of age, two participants were aged 26-35, three 36-45, four 46-55, four 56-65, and two 66-75. All participants in this study were legally blind; nine of them also identified themselves as DeafBlind.

The focus groups/interviews were conducted by one of the paper's authors, who is DeafBlind, with support from a research assistant. Each session lasted about 90 minutes. ASL interpreters were provided for some participants whose first language was ASL. With our plan to focus on a national park scenario, during which participants received an AD of a park brochure, the participants were initially asked about preferences when people were being

described to them, including their concerns for describing gender, age, and race/ethnicity. But our grounded-theory findings instead clustered under surprising themes about other topics of concern, too. The focus group and interviews were transcribed, and each transcript individually was analyzed by at least two researchers on the project who did not lead the group discussions or interviews, identifying thought units via open coding, then organizing those thought units via axial coding, and then clustering emergent themes of thought units based on multiple rounds of discussion and analysis based on those axial codes.

Limitations

Participants were recruited through disability-focused organizations using a convenience sampling approach. While this strategy was appropriate for an exploratory qualitative study, it limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized across the broader and highly heterogeneous populations of people who are blind, DeafBlind, or who have low-vision. Participants who self-selected into the study may have had greater familiarity with and interest in accessibility discourse, AD, or advocacy contexts than individuals who did not participate.

Data were collected primarily through multiple focus groups and two individual interviews. Focus groups allowed participants to articulate shared concerns and identify systemic issues, but group dynamics may have influenced which topics were emphasized, and some individual perspectives may have been underrepresented. The two interviews provided opportunities for more personalized reflection, yet their small number limits the extent to which these perspectives can counterbalance group-level effects.

Although the study originally foregrounded descriptions of people, the analysis shifted toward broader contextual and institutional factors affecting the reception and usefulness of AD. This shift emerged naturally from participants' discussions and reflects

their stated priorities. However, it also means that some dimensions of AD, such as specific delivery techniques or stylistic preferences, were explored in less depth than would be possible in a study explicitly designed around those elements.

This study included participants who identified as blind, DeafBlind, or having low vision, which are distinct populations with differing sensory experiences, communication practices, and access needs. Due to sample size and the exploratory nature of the research, the analysis did not disaggregate findings by disability group. As a result, the reported themes may obscure important differences in how blind and DeafBlind participants experience and conceptualize AD. Future research would benefit from disability-specific analyses that more fully account for these distinctions.

Data collection relied on spoken communication and interpreter-mediated exchanges, particularly for DeafBlind participants. This reliance may have shaped how experiences were expressed and interpreted, potentially underrepresenting nuances related to tactile communication, pacing, or co-presence that are central to DeafBlind experiences of accessibility.

Findings

While the original intent of the study was to focus on findings that related to best practices for making descriptions of people, in general, the interviews and the focus groups kept sprouting lively discussions about obstacles in the way of description audiences that occurred before the descriptions of people could do their work. Participants stated their description preferences in response to the study's questions, but then they also packaged those responses with suggestions displaying awareness of the contextual constraints that might inhibit or otherwise shape those preferences. Instead of suppressing those discussions or constantly changing the subject back specifically to the scope of people descriptions, we

allowed those side conversations to continue and to grow to some extent as a way to enrich our understanding of the entire cycle of an AD activity, within its context, from initial interest in a description to the reception of the description to the memory-building moments after hearing the description, as a way to better understand the complexities of the reception process in a larger context.

In this process of coding and clustering thought units, we found a surprising grouping of ideas at the top of mind for our participants that transcended descriptions of people and addressed AD reception in a more general sense. Those transcendent clusters focused on three topics that we think deserve further attention in AD research in terms of grounding and contextualizing the reception process: 1. Time on task matters (but not necessarily related to a description's length), 2. Delivery methods matter, and 3. Subject matter expertise. While other evidence of themes also could have been teased out of this data and expanded upon, each of these three examples of contextual issues provides expansion of audience-reception issues and should be considered as evidence of what potential for expansion in this area is out there in the wild, not the totality or the extent of the possible subtopics.

In this vein, researchers need to better understand how factors outside of the description itself can affect the listener, setting up situations in which the same description can be heard and interpreted and evaluated differently, even by the same person, when the timing and context have changed, even in subtle ways. For example, a person might be eager and open to hearing a long storytelling-style description if that person is in a quiet and passive moment, during which family and friends also are taking in the various media around them. But that same person, in that same place, with the same interests, might be frustrated and impatient with that style of description if a family member or friend in the group is ready and eager to move on to the next spot. In that case, the person might want a more direct

description approach to get the information while the opportunity is available. In addition, these findings are situated within specific cultural and institutional contexts, particularly national parks in the United States. Access infrastructures, staffing practices, and disability norms vary widely across countries and institutional environments; therefore, the transferability of these findings to other contexts may be limited. Together, these limitations point to the need for future research that combines qualitative audience perspectives with disability-specific analyses, alternative communication modalities, and field-based methods in a wider range of cultural and institutional settings.

Time on Task Matters

Everyone has a different agenda, different interests, and different needs when it comes to AD. But rarely acknowledged is the idea that even the same person will have different needs for a description at different times, so researchers need to become more inclusive of the idea that there is no one-description-fits-all and at all times probabilities. Even the same person in a different moment might have different needs. So instead of researchers asking how long the description should be, maybe the better question for the audience member is: How much time do you have right now for this description, and in what compositional style do you want it?

Responses, therefore, should be considered as fluid and provisional in nature, like a snapshot in time, and based on a time context, rather than as an enduring and universal response. We know that is not what researchers want to hear, but that is what audience members wanted to express. On many occasions in our study, when a factor was mentioned that might affect a participant's description preference, it was strongly linked to time, usually related to the time available for the description to be heard in a useful place. A low-vision non-binary participant, 36- to 45-years-old, for example, said of having paintings featuring

multiple people described, “if there are 20 people, you know, you don't have the time to describe everything of that 20 people.”

In terms of being ‘travel active,’ time is a resource that needs to be accounted for, and the projected experience will invariably be time-based when it is realized. In other words, when preparing a description for an audience member, one of the first and most important aspects to understand about the listener is how much time they want to put into it. If someone comes to a public place, when passing through town, on the way to somewhere else, and they might have 30 minutes to explore the entire place, they probably are not going to want a 5-minute description of the visitor center sign. On the other hand, if a visitor is making the trip to the place as a day-long commitment, and is fully engaged and interested in learning as much as possible, the more descriptions and the longer the descriptions, the better. During one of our focus groups, for example, a blind male, 66- to 75-years-old, and a DeafBlind female, 36- to 45-years-old, had an exchange about such contextual constraints and how time relates to description quality:

Male: “Describing a picture to me is in no way, shape, or form, anywhere near like seeing it. It's just not.”

Female: “That's interesting to know, actually.”

Male: “It's not. How can it be?”

Female: “That actually mystifies me, actually, in a way, like, I mean, if you had like an infinite amount of time, and you could describe every detail, I think you could come pretty close.”

Male: “But the impact wouldn't be the same. One's more intellectual. The other one's emotional. If you see something that's a beautiful painting, you feel the beauty, you can describe it to me, but that's something different.”

In another focus group, a non-binary DeafBlind participant, 36- to 45-years-old, explicitly linked time elements to a description preference by saying:

> "The thing that impacts the number of descriptions and stuff is how much time do you have to provide this description? If you have it in a still thing, on the wall, you probably are going to have a lot more time to describe something and can go into more detail… There are things that I would like more description of, more detail, like a focus more into the specific aspects, like they didn't describe exactly where something is, the focus of the eyes, or (where) the hands are, or the (tilt of the) head, is the artist's point?"

A DeafBlind male, 36- to 45-years-old, interjected:

> "…And also, you know, we have to be particularly, when it comes to film, careful about what details are missing, because, like, let's say you don't think the person having blonde hair is relevant. Well, somebody else may find it relevant. And that's, I think the major challenge is, you only have so much time to sit there and describe it, particularly in the films, you know, You can't prolong the film for description."

Sometimes, in these discussions, the time element was linked to other factors as well, such as the moment of delivery. A DeafBlind female, 36- to 45-years-old, for example, commented on the description delivery choices made, and when, during television coverage of an athletic tournament, when describers were available to the audience but so were the regular broadcast commentators, creating friction among her and her fellow listeners:

> I think a lot of us would say that, you know, the athlete having red hair and wearing this and that, except for maybe figure skating, it's not relevant. And you're just taking up time, and you're talking over the commentator. So please, you know, unless it's

> absolutely relevant, use your breaks wisely. Don't talk over the commentators and don't describe every little detail of what a person's wearing. It's just not relevant to these, all of these sports, you know, and I got a lot of pushbacks.

The idea of time being constrained — whether by the live nature of the performance, or moving image, or by, say, the schedule or budget of the describer or audience member — and how to handle such a variable constraint, was at times anticipated by participants. One theme that occurred in the study's discussions was that of time shifting through the use of supplemental materials that might be consulted before or after a performance, rather than crammed into the middle of it. A DeafBlind male, 36- to 45-years-old, said, as an example:

> So, I actually, now that I'm thinking about it, as like a supplemental file or a supplemental something, you know in whatever format you guys go with, would be good because I can read that ahead of time and then follow the whatever it is, whether it be a play or a movie or whatever with all of that information ahead of time. If that's what I want to do.

A blind female, 56- to 65-years-old, suggested that such supplemental material can also be provided live, or in a combination of media. Referencing a recent live performance she attended, she said:

> So, if they're not doing it on the fly, and they do a script, so there's a pre-show, and the pre-show basically talks about the play in general, the era, things like that. And then it gives a better picture in my mind when I'm listening to what's going on, like 'Hamilton.' It was phenomenal having that audio-described. And if anybody's seen it, they pretty much rap the entire time. So there really isn't a whole lot of time to do a lot of audio description. So that show, we had a really big pre-show and then intermission descriptions.

Awareness of time available was also evident in some comments favoring the inclusion of description that would not take more than moments but might be beneficial to the listener. A blind male, 46- to 55-years-old, was another participant who suggested that there is potentially helpful technology that exists but that has not yet been applied to AD and related services. He said of the description of paintings, such as portraits, from this perspective:

> "I think you have to get as detailed as possible. That includes background, but I wish we could use some of the technology we have today and have kind of layers of detail because sometimes I just want to hear an overview, and if I'm not interested, I don't want to hear about all the detail, you know?

Delivery Methods Matter

Participants also repeatedly recognized in hypermediate ways how a describer's predefined role and the delivery tools and methods might strongly influence what that person did or did not say in a description. For example, many support service providers are trained not to interpret what they describe at all, even if the interpretation seems a safe one, but instead to just describe it plainly. What isn't said, from that perspective, could be just as important as what is said. Some audiences for AD know about this type of training and therefore are left to read between the lines, as a blind female, 56- to 65-years-old, for example, said:

> It can be hard because, as an audio describer, you want to say what you see, not interpret the paintings, and I know that can be difficult … As an audio describer, you really are taught to say what you see and
>
> try not to do the interpretations and all of that.

Along those lines, a DeafBlind female, 56- to 65-years-old, added:

> Even when we train support service providers, they can't even say,

> ‘You know, Ryan looks really mad because his face is red…’ And so, she's there for me to make up my own mind. And for me to decide if I want to go hug somebody, or if I want to go, ‘I'm sorry, but I noticed you were wiping your face. Are you okay?’ You know, for me to interact.

A DeafBlind female, 56- to 65-years-old, also talked about situations in which a describer uses the same script for a mix of listeners who are blind congenitally (from birth, or soon after birth) and adventitiously (with sight loss coming later in life). The woman then said: “If you've been able to see before, to me, that will also make a big difference, but there's no way that the narrator or the describer is going to know, you know, who's had vision and who hasn't.” She added that the inclusion or exclusion of color words is a common point of divergence in those audiences, for example, as congenitally blind participants tend to care less about colors, and adventitiously blind people, who lost sight later in life but still remember colors, tend to want to hear more about the colors.

Not only do people have to make tough decisions about what to include and what not to include in the descriptions, but assistive technology does as well, with many examples raised in our study about the choices being made, as well as the limits of existing software and hardware to fully satisfy the audiences. A non-binary DeafBlind participant, 36- to 45-years-old, for example, said: “Apple accessibility features does not do a good job in describing people, animals, and middle of pictures.” A DeafBlind male, 36- to 45-years-old, quickly added that AD was not ready to be outsourced fully to computers: “AI,” he said, “it's just not there yet. So please don't go down that road.”

Some participants spoke about linguistic features of AD, compared to the use of other languages, as possible limitations. A non-binary DeafBlind participant, 36- to 45-years-old, said, for example:

> You can describe things in ASL more easily than you can in English in many ways. It's more direct. You don't do English from English verbal descriptions to ASL. It should not be done. It should be done directly from the visual.

A DeafBlind male, 46- to 55-years-old, added, "With English words, we don't really have a lot of words for feelings of things. But when you're doing a pro-tactile, you can do those things."

Another delivery-related complication in the appreciation of AD comes from friends and family members, who want to ensure that their loved one is getting what is needed and having a good time, but not to get a disruptive experience themselves. A blind male, 66- to 75-years-old, for example, said that his wife's enjoyment of a movie used to be marred by her concern that he wasn't following the movie, but that "now that I can hear the dialogue and the description. She enjoys her time far more." Some other delivery-related constraints were suggested by a DeafBlind non-binary participant who is 36- to 45-years-old. They expressed the challenges of describers having a strong accent; using idioms peculiar to their version of English, and of how even the aspect of their body could determine whether or not they could pick up on a sound in the environment at hand, i.e., "if someone's listening to a bird. Is their head tilted toward the sound?"

Subject Matter Expertise

Another description-adjacent concern recurring in our dataset was the level of relevant knowledge or formal education of the describer on the topic being described, and, reciprocally, the level of subject matter expertise of the listener. This is a complex dynamic that deserves far greater attention and detail, but just generally speaking, our discussions indicated that a listener with more subject matter expertise might want to know more detailed and technical information from a description, while a listener with less subject matter

expertise might be content with, or even prefer, less technical and detailed descriptions, as a way to get to know the subject more gradually. A DeafBlind female, 56- to 65-years-old, for example, said that before she completed a master's degree course on the topic, she felt ignorant about many physical and clothing characteristics that could otherwise have been informative about a given individual's ethnicity or culture:

> I think it's education and knowledge, and that's what I really like about it. And, you know, all I ask my support service provider is that we go out, and if we're, uh, I don't know, doing a presentation and whatever, and, and I'll just say, you know, how many blacks, how many whites, or you know, uh, whatever. She did kind of describe again, but a couple of dark-skinned a couple of them have, you know, the scarves on their head, and she just describes what she sees.

A DeafBlind female, 56- to 65-years-old, added:

> One of my coworkers black, and we were like joined at the hips, and what we did, and she was black. And I got to really do a lot of really good talk with her, educating me. I didn't even know there was a different section in the store for, um, black, different hair.

Those comments raised the idea that it might not even just be subject matter expertise at play in these situations, but also observational skills, cultural competencies, or cultural sensitivities that are lacking, or describers might have a hesitation to label people through descriptions that assign such identity cues as race, gender, and age. An adventitiously blind male, 46- to 55-years-old, said of describers whose work he'd experienced: "It's almost like they're terrified to say 'Hey, this is a white person doing this,' or 'This is a black person doing this.'"

Similar to race or ethnicity labeling, difficulties arose around describing disabilities as

well. For example, a DeafBlind male, 46- to 55-years-old, said, “Some disabilities are not noticeable, but if you're blind, you know, people say, oh, he's blind. You know, he’s got a cane every day.” But a DeafBlind female, 56- to 65-years-old, responded, “ I like to know as much as possible, but if nothing is visible, then there's nothing to describe. Unless something becomes visible, then that's the only time that it can be described.” Sometimes what seems to be lacking is not a sensible quality but an accurate explanation for such a quality or behavior, she said, adding:

> I did a presentation yesterday for a group of 130 high school students. And one of the students had a syndrome. So I was very glad that the teacher had told me that earlier, because different sounds or, um, things can be said or done (out of) their control. Well, with me not being able to see or to hear very well, I was very glad that the teacher mentioned that. So that way I was aware that if I did hear anything, which I did, that I already was informed, and that was from the teacher who knew it.

Inclusion or exclusion of other types of details can be similarly tricky for describers to decide whether to use. A blind female, 46- to 55-years-old, for example, talked about a describer’s wider engagement in terms of proactively asking (or not asking) questions about the object of the description:

> And I just remember years back, we were watching a show. It was a cop show, and they were always making these derogatory remarks to this one cop. After about three episodes, I finally said to someone, well, (why?)...They said, ‘Oh, he's Native, and that's why those criminals are always being rotten,’ and I said, ‘Oh, well, I didn't know that.’ Now I get why they were so tough to this guy.

Discussion

The original aim of this research project was to examine preferred characteristics of

AD in various contexts and specifically with regard to markers of identity, such as race and ethnicity, disability, gender, and age. What emerged from those discussions, though, was broader, leading to the argument of the current paper. Participants revealed opinions and insights into barriers and constraints of AD more generally, hearkening back to comments we have heard for the past decade in other studies as well. This time, though, we are not parsing those broader findings into an outlier pile. Our participants expressed that the greater context of AD should not be ignored. It should be studied further, and our hope is that this paper provides an entry point for further expansion of the academic area.

From these findings, a clearly important aspect of AD reception — that is rarely a focus of a study — is the larger personal and professional contexts. This scholarly leap is akin to those conducting an experiment in a lab and then projecting that the same study will also work out the same in the field. It might. But it might not, and the only way to tell for sure is to do the field research. We therefore hypothesize that descriptions will change in the minds of the listeners in the wilds of the activity and in the experiences at a public attraction in ways that are worthy of further consideration, beyond just studying the words conveyed to the listener in a vacuum.

Such data is perhaps more than participants merely demonstrating that they are pragmatic and considerate. Their declarations can be seen as ventures into what their primary and raw experience of, say, an artwork might provisionally be, in the moment. Each description choice will shape that moment. A rough equivalent might be that of a sighted person who states a preference for gallery lighting conditions and wall colors before that person even knows what works will be on display; in doing so, the person is staking a claim on a likely experience, not responding to a specific experience. And what that person might like in general just might not fit the moment. Or it might. This complex dynamic is one of the

reasons why voluntary comments about descriptions focusing on aspects aside from the words chosen are significant. Extrinsic nuances can shape and color the description and its relationships to the subject matter being described.

This point serves as a cautionary tale about tunnel vision in research or unexamined sight-centered views of the data. A DeafBlind female, 36- to 45-years-old, in our study, contended that sighted individuals "don't see, like, it's so strange to me that they miss stuff," raising an edifying probability. It is a reminder to researchers that too much focus on legal or epistemological ideals of a "complete" description might presume too much about the comprehensiveness of a describer's perceptions. That there might be holes in, for example, their vigilance, viewing angle, or subject matter expertise. Listeners can be fickle, too, like anyone, and might not know exactly what they want and when, until they get it.

The findings also suggest emergent opportunities for technology professionals and for more adaptable, technologically nimble forms of AD. For instance, there were multiple mentions in our focus groups of the potential in materials that supplement AD and that might enhance it and make it more responsive to the in-situ needs of the listener. The trajectory of Generative AI raises hopes of a future system of descriptions that caters to the individual listener, based on experiences that have been registered in previous experiences, cataloged, and sorted by audience reception metrics. In preparation for such a socio-technological support system, this research aims to cast a critical gaze at a much larger contextual web of potential causes that both complicate understandings about AD but also help to make responses to it more comprehensible. The power of AD as a mass medium is affected by a broader context, over time, from initial interest in an AD experience to the memory-building process that happens afterward. AD researchers, including those focused on audience-reception issues, could benefit from taking a wider view, which includes such context. Words

are important and worthy of intense study in AD, but they do not work in a vacuum, and AD research would benefit from more attention being paid to those external forces, too.

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