

**Integrated Access Inquiry 2017-18**

 **Abridged Report**

Amelia Cavallo

Louise Fryer

June 2018

**Background and objectives**

Extant is a national organisation that has been forging a performing arts practice made by and dedicated to visually impaired people since 1997. Extant has also developed new ways of providing integrated access to visually impaired audiences. At the same time, other companies, both disabled-led and non-disabled-led, have also been working to integrate access into their productions, not just for visually impaired people, but also for people with other access needs. Even so, there is a sense that this work is lacking research and exposure, and that those who are experimenting with these techniques are doing so in isolation, meaning that reputable resources on the topic are difficult to find. This has led us to two major questions that relate to this research: do we truly understand what visually impaired people need from access? Do the current models of integrated provision meet those needs?

To mark their 20th year, Extant commissioned Is It Working, a research inquiry into audio description and integrated access as it is being used currently throughout the UK. This research brings together feedback from visually impaired audiences with information from the creative teams charged with providing integrated access to see if it’s possible to quantify what makes effective integrated access. We extend our thanks to all who have taken part. The results of that Inquiry are presented here with a view to calling companies into action to do more, and to support said companies as they travel down this path in the future.

**The Research Team**

Two researchers were appointed to carry out this research, both of whom have direct personal experience and knowledge of audio description (AD). Dr Louise Fryer is an academic and audio describer, who teaches and practices mostly traditional AD (TAD) but who has worked with a number of companies to develop Integrated (IAD) approaches. Amelia Cavallo is currently completing her doctoral research at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. The working title for her thesis is An Eye for an I: Crip Agency for the Blind Woman Performer. Amelia is a visually impaired performer who has taken part in shows with both TAD and IAD.

**Background to Audio Description**

[Please see Glossary on p.78 for definitions of terms]

According to the RNIB over 2 million people in the UK live with sight loss. That number is predicted to double by 2050 because sight loss is linked to ageing and the UK has an ageing population. For people who are blind or partially sighted one way to access a live performance is through audio description (AD). Toby Davey is the deputy Director of VocalEyes – a nationwide UK charity that “provides opportunities for blind and partially sighted people to experience the arts at UK’s theatres, museums, galleries and heritage sites” (VocalEyes, website.) According to Toby “Audio description in a theatre is a live verbal commentary providing information on the visual elements of a production as it unfolds. It describes action that is essential to an understanding of the play's story, as well as other visual information such as the style and design of a production, facial expressions and visual jokes that a blind or partially sighted member of the audience might otherwise miss. The description is delivered in between the dialogue of a performance and is picked up by the audience member wearing a special lightweight headset.” This type of AD has been available in a growing number of UK theatres since the late 1980s (Fryer 2016).

Toby’s definition (above) refers to what this report calls traditional audio description (TAD). For live events, this involves a trained, sighted describer (or describers) writing and delivering a description, once the production (play, dance etc.) is complete. TAD may be thought of as closed (not available to the whole audience) and post hoc (written after the event). As Cavallo (2015, p.126) explains “AD is added after the piece has been created and is delivered to the blind spectators via headsets. Unless directly using the service, it is likely that those attending an audio described event will be unaware that anything different is happening.” AD, at its most traditional, adopts a “neutral” stance in terms of content and delivery in an attempt to avoid subjectivity. It aims to reflect the point of view of the audience, rather than that of the artistic team. TAD is generally delivered live at one or two performances in a run.

However, it should be stated at the outset, that there is no simple binary distinction between TAD and IAD (Integrated AD). Some shows with IAD might be closed and delivered through a headset; some TAD is produced in a creative partnership with the artistic team and delivered with non-neutral word choice and emotive vocal expression.

**What We Wanted to Know**

* What are the traditional models of access provision within theatre?
* How do these work or not work for the audience?
* What are the impairment specific and pan-impairment examples of integrated access and what has been the audience experience of these?
* Is it possible to provide integrated access that meets the needs of everyone involved - audiences, artists, companies and venues?
* How can artists and companies best be supported to provide integrated access services for visually impaired people and how should they be checking that what they are providing meets the needs of the audience?

**How We Found Out**

**Methodological approaches**

The researchers adopted a qualitative approach, because “qualitative studies aim to provide illumination and understanding of complex psychosocial issues and are most useful for answering humanistic 'why?' and 'how?' questions” (Marshall 1996, p.522). 20 respondents took part in semi-structured interviews, and a focus group was organised with 7 members of Unscene Suffolk, a community theatre company, based in Ipswich, for adults with visual impairment (Table 2). All participants provided written consent.

**Summary of key findings**

* The term integrated access means different things to different people. It refers to ways of embedding access provision so that access is thought about from the beginning and is part of the creative process. It also encapsulates a desire to enable a performance to be appreciated by as diverse an audience as possible. Some people do not like the term and prefer to talk about the aesthetics of access.
* Problems with current AD provision include technical issues around the use of headsets (poor sound quality and discomfort as well as isolation and social stigma); AD content (what is described and how) and the purpose of access (whether it should provide users with access to the story or an immersive experience comparable to that of the rest of the audience)
* Traditional AD is perceived to be inflexible and rule-bound. A range of integrated approaches has been tried with varying degrees of success. IA is perceived at times to prioritise art over access.
* The best access is tailor-made for each show. This includes casting an appropriate access professional.
* The current pool of describers is not sufficiently diverse.
* AD is still largely invisible. More needs to be done to raise public awareness.
* Integrating the AD increases its availability.
* Recording the AD also increases its availability but can bring other problems.
* There is a fear around getting access right. The important thing is to consult and to learn from mistakes.
* Access is not simply an obligation. It offers a creative challenge.

**What is Integrated Access?**

The report begins by looking at integrated access (IA) provision in general and at the way different modes of access interact before turning to the specific challenges of integrated AD. As IA is still evolving and various strategies have been tried, interviewees were asked what IA means to them. Responses fell into three categories: those who felt it was about process – how the access provision fitted into the creation of the performance; those who felt it was about making the content available to as diverse an audience as possible (reach and inclusion), and those who didn’t like or didn’t use the phrase.

**How Do Different Access Modes Relate?**

One concern of this research was to uncover how AD relates to other forms of access provision. There is a perception that AD is the Cinderella of the access services. Overall, needs are best served by avoiding pigeon-holed provision and by taking an imaginative approach. Sometimes access needs compete but provision intended to meet one type of need can also bring unintended benefits for others. This is discussed again under open Access and advocacy.

**Access for All?**

Making access provision open such that the non-disabled audience sees or hears it is one way to improve awareness of access and raise its profile. But by catering to some access needs you may be excluding others. Is it possible to create a style of access that suits everyone?

**Current AD Provision: Is it Working?**

From access provision in general, the rest of the report focuses more strongly on AD. In order to find out if current AD provision is working, respondents were asked to define good/poor AD or to recall positive and negative experiences. Several themes emerge from these comments. These can be broadly divided into concerns related to content and concerns related to the technical system. One further question these responses raise is for whom is the current provision (not) working? There are potential conflicts between different stakeholders in access. It seems obvious that the access users’ needs should come first. But the creative team also needs the access to work for them to allow audiences to access their creative vision. Many of the negative experiences relate to the use of headsets, which can be perceived as socially isolating, as well as failing to transmit the AD in a way that is pleasant or easy to listen to. For this reason, these comments have been divided into concerns over the technical transmission of AD (headsets and sound quality); the AD content (what is described and how) and the purpose of the AD - whether it is there to provide only an understanding of the story or whether the intention is to provide a more immersive experience. Some blind audiences feel that because AD is based on an occularcentric paradigm and does not represent their cultural experience, it fails to address their needs. Finally, a question is raised about the invisibility of AD – still a problem 30 years after it was introduced to the UK.

**AD Content**

Technical issues dog both TAD and IAD, although these are avoided in integrated performances where the AD is open, such as those where the describer becomes a character or where descriptive language is woven into the script or the sound track. Such strategies are outlined later. This section summarises positive and negative experiences in terms of AD content, divided into concerns over accuracy; AD density; vocal delivery and whether the AD presents an occularcentric view.

**Purpose**

Being asked to define what makes good/poor AD revealed divided opinions on its purpose. In particular, whether it aims to give users access to the story as opposed to access to the creative vision. This can be seen as the degree to which the description is immersive, engaging and enjoyable, or simply helps audiences understand the plot.

**Art versus Access**

Although a couple of the companies emphasised that having to consider access forced them to become more creative, at times the desire to integrate the access provision artistically can override its purpose of making the production accessible. This is the case for both AD and other access services such as BSL. For members of the focus group, the integration of the AD wasn’t always apparent to the visually impaired audience.

**Open Access and Advocacy**

By keeping AD “closed” it remains invisible/inaudible to venues, actors, mainstream audiences and sometimes even audiences who would benefit. A very positive response to the idea of access practices having a broader use and appeal came from Rachel Hutchinson’s research in museums.

**Enhanced AD**

Making performances accessible often goes beyond adding AD or BSL to the show itself. In 2016, Extant developed a 12-month programme offering “enhanced” AD. This included helping theatres develop simple things such as running touch tours before the performance and having braille or large print programmes available, that significantly improve the experience for visually impaired attenders. Interviewees for this report confirmed the importance of such enhancements. Both TAD and IAD provide audiences with pre-visit information from audiointroductions (a.k.a. introductory or programme notes), workshops and touch tours to making tactile objects and large print cast lists available in the foyer. These are not alternatives to full AD but supplement the through description.

**AD for every performance?**

One major benefit of IAD is that by having the description woven into the script or delivered by a character, it is available at every performance. An alternative is to record the AD, so that its presence is not dependent on the availability of describers and the associated costs. But responses reflected the compromise here: while greater availability is really appreciated, recorded AD is fixed and cannot reflect the flexibility of live theatre.

**Integrated strategies**

Respondents outlined strategies they had tried in terms of integrating the AD. What becomes apparent is that there is no single “right way” to integrate.

**Is TAD rule-bound?**

The degree of experimentation in creating an integrated approach suggests by implication that the style of TAD is fixed. Some respondents made this criticism of TAD explicit.

**Tailor-made Access**

It became clear that every aspect of the AD needs to be tailored to the specific production from the descriptive style and content, to the skills and expertise of the describer (describer profile).

**Ingredients for Integrating Access**

This next section addresses the final two research questions: How can artists and companies best be supported to provide integrated access services for visually impaired people and how should they be checking that what they are providing meets the needs of the audience? The answers to the first question can be summarised as understanding why you are doing it; building in access from the start; collaborating; funding it. The answer to the second is ask! We also found the following:

* **Making work accessible means understanding your motives**
* **Making work accessible means building it in from the start**
* **Making work accessible means budgeting for it**
* **Making work accessible means collaboration**
	+ It became apparent, that by leaving the access to the interpreters and not collaborating, companies were perceived to be abdicating certain responsibilities.
* **Making work accessible means working with venues and taking a flexible approach**
* **Making work accessible mean reaping creative benefits**
* **Making work accessible means not being afraid and not being afraid to fail**
	+ The flip side of experimenting with new approaches is that they might not always work. One message that came through very strongly was that failure is part of the process.
* **Making work accessible takes time**
* **Making work accessible isn’t only important for audiences - it is also for performers and practitioners working on a show.**
* **Making work accessible takes consultation with users**
	+ Responses show that companies take different approaches when it comes to feedback. Some feel that it is vital to consult with users at the R&D phase. Others feel that post-show feedback is also important but don’t want to over-burden their audience who, after all have gone to see the show for a good night out.

**Conclusions and recommendations**

There is a general worry about complacency. For some companies/venues simply including AD in performance is “enough” without sufficient critical thought as to how it is functioning technically or creatively. Integrated access has sought to overcome the perceived failings of traditional access provision. At its worst integrating the access artistically can override its primary purpose. At its best access becomes part of the creative process, encouraging artists to interrogate their art and offering them another creative tool while providing an immersive experience to its users. BSL is already highly visible and offers something new to the mainstream audience. AD is still largely unknown. Research in museums shows that open, multisensory AD can enhance the whole audience experience, making a visit more memorable for everyone, not only the sector(s) of the audience with specific needs. It is possible that open, multisensory AD can achieve the same for live performance.

**Glossary of Key Terms**

Some of these definitions have been arrived at over the course of this research. They are collected here for ease of reading.

 **Aesthetics of access**: (See also: creative access, integrated access) “creatively embedding a range of tools such as audio description and sign language from the very beginning of the artistic process.” (Graeae.org)

 **Audio Description:** “a means of helping blind and partially sighted people access audiovisual contents including film and theatre performances by […] provid[ing] a verbal description of the actions, scenery, body language and other relevant details” (Braun 2007,1)

 **Creative Access**: (see also: aesthetics of access, integrated access) “It’s about matching tools and techniques with the specific performance, the specific characters – building it from within to create a seamless product, stretching and enhancing the whole. This is about taking the techniques used to provide access and weaving them into the very performances they themselves support.” (Verrant 2018)

 **Integrated Audio Description (IAD):** Audio description integrated directly into a performance, often without headsets and available for every show in a performance run. This is usually implemented from the start of rehearsals and is a part of the creative make up of a piece.

 **Integrated access (IA):** (See also: Aesthetics of access, creative access) “Rather than being hidden away, the [access] will be incorporated within the world of the play.” (Love 2016)

 **Traditional Audio Description (TAD):** Audio description delivered via headsets in a “neutral” voice that is not directly related to the performance. It is often created post production and is provided once or twice a run.

**Glossary of Abbreviations**

 AD audio description

 ADA Audio Description Association

 BSL British Sign Language

 IA Integrated Access

 IAD Integrated Audio Description

 R&D Research and Development

RNIB Royal National Institute for Blind People

 TAD Traditional Audio Description

 VI Visually impaired

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**Recommendations for Companies Wishing to Integrate AD**

**Interrogate your motives: What do you want to achieve and why?**

“I think you'd definitely start from the potential of the creativity”

**Start early**: consider access provision from the start in terms of budget, time, technical and creative requirements.

**Consult widely**: with your audience; with access interpreters; with other companies that have gone down this route.

“Think about it at the start and think about who you want to work with when you have conversations with those people along the way.”

**Cast your interpreters**: Find the person/people with the right skillset for your production - don’t assume that any old interpreter will do. You might not need to bring in an external person. You may decide to give the AD/BSL to an actor/character or write the AD into the script. Whoever you choose, ensure that they have the right training and understand your requirements and the needs of your audience.

“If you start from a place of we’re going to cast a character and integrate them from the outset and you haven't learnt the basics then you're in danger of compromising the access for audiences.”

**Collaborate**: Don’t hand over the access to the interpreter, integrate your interpreter into the creative process; include the venue and your company members in the collaboration.

“Some directors never listen to AD. They go “oh yeah we’re doing it,” but they never listen to it. They’re never part of the translation process, and it’s like, if you’re not going to get your hands dirty with this stuff, don’t do it. You’re only doing it because you need to be seen to be doing it, not because you care about it or understand how it can work. So yeah, this whole bandwagon thing has me a bit worried”

**Be Fearless**: Don’t be afraid of getting it wrong. Learn from your mistakes and those of others

“Do you know what, just don't be afraid. Ask! Ask as there are people who have gone ahead before you. Don't reinvent the wheel. There are so many of us who have done it and we've learned through falling over, through making so many mistakes so we’re in this together. “

**Be Flexible:** Just because an approach worked well for one production, don’t assume it will work equally well for the next.

“There is no template that can fit over every story you want to tell that says ‘tick these boxes and then you’ve done it.’ I don’t think that’s the case if you’re talking about genuine, creative access and the imaginative use of access tools. The key word is imaginative which means it will change from show to show.”

**Share**: your experiences – the good and the bad.

“For all in those companies wanting to start integrating access, it is really exciting and it's brilliant and let’s share what we’ve discovered. That’s really important as well. I think it’s happening more but it will be nice to see it opening up even more that we can share our experiences and share what we’ve learned and share what we got wrong and because we are all kinda finding our way here and to try and do the best that we can.”

Contacts

louise@utopians.co.uk

amelia.cavallo@gmail.com

Extant

The White House,

Oval House Theatre,
52-54 Kennington Oval, London, SE11 5SW

Email: info@extant.org.uk

Company Number: 05195961

Registered Charity No. 110872