

What are the advantages and disadvantages of audio description (AD) as a method?

The first advantage is that at the minute, it is the only accessibility method for visually impaired people wanting to access film and television. And that of course means, we need to make sure it continues being produced, and what's more, it shouldn't just be 20% of the programming, it should be much more than that. It should be, in my opinion, 100% of the programming.

The other interesting thing about AD is that previous research has shown that people that use AD find TV programmes more enjoyable, entertaining and they also have an increase in self-esteem and confidence.

Now, what are the problems with AD in my opinion? The first one is, that it is a method that is completely outside the creative process of filmmaking. So a film gets completed, ready for release and then it goes to an AD company, that writes the script of AD and it records it. Filmmakers have never contacted the audio describing team and the audio describers probably never met the filmmakers. And that could mean that what we are actually getting in AD is someone's interpretation of the film.

Another thing challenging about AD is that it has focused very much on providing an experience that is equally informative as received by a sighted person. But I often wonder, is information really what we should be focusing on? Providing the same amount of information doesn't necessarily equal the same amount of entertainment. Something that also came about in your comments was lack of intelligibility and this comes up quite a lot in surveys and research. Users, in general, don't have a way of controlling the balance between soundtrack and AD. Which means that in many cases, maybe you can't understand the AD or you can't understand the original soundtrack. Or maybe something like the music overtakes and you are not sure what is happening in the rest of it.

Another difficulty, in my opinion, is that because AD is the only method available, it means we are assuming that everybody likes the same thing. So AD really doesn't cater for differences, it assumes everybody is the same and wants the same.

Now, I was very fortunate a few months ago to find out that Gavin and I were awarded an Arts and Humanities Research Council grant for a project that very much takes a lot of methods from other industries, just as audio games and immersive theatre on board and applies it to film and television. We want to provide something that is truly cinematic, so we are going to be thinking about types of shots and high camera and low camera angles. So how to translate those into sound. So it is quite challenging but we are looking forward to trying it out. All the things, such as colours, body language, gestures, we are going to convey through first person narration. We also believe, that there should be options. That we should not just be restricted to have one form of accessibility because someone decided it was the right one.

Disabilities should never be an excuse for the industries to limit possibilities and we should all be working to expand the horizons.

Thank you very much.

Audio material:
<http://enhancingaudiodescription.com>