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Audio Description and Audio Subtitling: Who Needs It?

AD user personas

Audio Description (AD) and Audio Subtitling (AS) provide access to audiovisual media to people who may otherwise be excluded. What is striking about the audience for these services is its sheer diversity. To illustrate this, here are 12 'personas'. None of these people are real. They are composite characters, based on research interviews with actual users of AD and AS in the UK. They are representative of the potential audience across EU member states.

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CURRENT AD USERS

Persona 1: John, age 34, customer service adviser.

John lives in West London, in a one-bedroom flat in sheltered accommodation. John is very independent. He's a guide dog owner and travels to work in central London by tube. Some evenings John might stay in and watch TV, or DVDs. More often he meets friends after work and goes to the cinema or the theatre. John has been blind since birth. He uses AD whenever possible and finds it crucial for following the plot. John has no visual memory and is not interested in some of the details audio describers include, such as style of dress, but he accepts other AD users ("women!") might want to know about this. He is keen to know about the physical appearance of a character or location but only if it is relevant to the storyline. His favourite kinds of programmes include crime thrillers and American drama serials such as Lost. John finds AD 'particularly helpful in the spaces where there is very little dialogue. Films can be boring and I give up if there are lots of spaces. The main fault of a lot of AD is that they don't explain enough who's speaking. It can take me half an hour to recognise a voice'

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Persona 2: Peggy, age 72, retired.

Peggy lives with her (sighted) husband. They do not go out to the theatre or the cinema much, but they often watch TV. Peggy was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa 8 years ago and her sight has been gradually getting worse. Her favourite programmes include soap operas and quiz programmes. Soaps she was able to watch before she had access to AD because the characters and locations were familiar, but she finds AD gives an added extra. In Coronation Street, Sophie and Sian are due to get married and Peggy is looking forward to hearing a description of their wedding dresses. Before AD she was reliant on her husband telling her what was happening. Peggy says 'He's not very keen on Corrie. The big bonus with AD is that I can just listen to it without having to nudge him to ask what's going on'.

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Persona 3: Sandy, age 41, teacher.

Sandy is a primary school teacher. She lives in a village in Hertfordshire and walks to work. Sandy has nystagmus and her vision can be very variable, depending on lighting conditions and how stressed or tired she is. For much of the time, Sandy doesn't always bother using AD. She likes news and current affairs programmes (which are rarely described). She also enjoys documentaries. As her biggest difficulty is reading text on screen, AD comes in handy when a person is speaking in a foreign language, as the describer voices the subtitled speech. Sandy says she also uses AD for certain programmes, such as dramas with atmospheric lighting. She says 'I can be really lost without AD especially if it's, say, a film set in Victorian times and very dark, backlit. Horrible! Then I find myself enjoying other bits of the description, such as facial expression. I realise how much I'm missing'.

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Persona 4 & 5: Michael, 28, musician and Hanna, 27, full-time Mum.

Michael and Hanna are both partially sighted. They met at the Royal National College for the Blind, where they were at school. These days they live on the outskirts of Bristol. They have a daughter, Lily, aged 6, who is sighted and attends the local primary school. Michael used to play rugby. He goes to matches when he can, or watches them on TV. Sports programmes only rarely have AD, so Michael relies on the radio commentary instead, which is more descriptive than the TV commentary. The family keep the AD switched on all the time so they don't miss anything with description. Michael watches medical dramas like Casualty, which has its drawbacks. 'If you're eating tea and there's a gory operation going on, sighted people can shut their eyes. If I shut my eyes, I still hear about the blood and stuff from the AD!' Hanna says 'When Lily was little, we would sit down and watch kids' programmes like Peppa Pig[1] together. It was really important for me to know what was happening so we could talk about it. Sometimes Lily complains about the AD but mostly she's used to it. She's coming with me to the pantomime. It's being audio described and Lily asked if it was going to be "one of mummy's special shows".'

[1] Peppa Pig is a British animated television series created directed and produced by Astley Baker Davies and distributed by eOne Entertainment. To date, three series have been aired. It has been shown in 180 territories.

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Persona 6: Bob, aged 79, retired engineer.

Since suffering a stroke, 3 years ago, Bob has lived with his son, Phil, Phil's wife Erica and their 3 teenaged children. The stroke caused Bob to lose his sight completely. He finds AD allows him to watch TV with the family, so they can all sit in the same room in the evenings. Bob listens through headphones, so the others don't have to hear the AD. Bob finds AD 'fills in the gaps', so 'I can follow what's happening'. He finds AD of comedy programmes especially useful so he doesn't have to ask what the others are laughing at. It can be particularly embarrassing if the comedy is a bit risqué. 'When the describer for Shameless talked about "a couple at it on the pan,"' Bob said, 'I was in stitches. It was great that we could all laugh together, without my grandsons having to explain the joke. If we're watching a serial, sometimes Phil asks if we've seen such-and-such a character before, and I can say "yes, it's Lord Haversham" because they've told me in the audio description'.

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Persona 7: Kieran, aged 4.

Kieran was born with anophthalmia. His parents, Bill and Alison, devote a lot of time to a charity working with families of children who are born blind. Such children can be slow to develop language skills compared to their sighted peers. Bill and Alison feel that watching children's TV with AD helps Kieran pick up new words and phrases. Alison says, "Kieran loves watching the Octonauts[2], and sometimes pretends he's one of the characters. If I'm in the kitchen getting his tea ready, he'll tell me what's happening in the latest episode. And it means he can join in, when his friends pretend to be Octonauts at playgroup."

[2] The Octonauts preschool animated series (produced by Silvergate Media / Brown Bag Films) is currently airing on CBeebies (UK) and in many other territories across the globe.

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POTENTIAL AD USERS

In the UK, research into AD use has tended to focus on its potential for people (and the families of people) with sight problems. However AD and AS may have broader appeal. The following personas may be best thought of as potential users of AD and AS.

Persona 8: Jake, aged 11 (attention deficit disorder)

Jake was cross when he came home from school, because his teacher had been mean to him. She told Jake off for fidgeting when the class was watching a cartoon about the human body and the circulation of the blood. Jake couldn't answer the questions the teacher asked at the end of the cartoon. Jake has difficulty concentrating and gets bored easily. He says there are so many things to look at, how's he supposed to know what's important? With AD, Jake's attention is directed to the key events on screen, and strange names ("corpuscles" "capillaries") are repeated by the describer, making them easier to remember.

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Persona 9: Sonali, aged 24 (English as a 2nd language)

Sonali came to England with her husband Nikhil, 6 months ago. Sonali sees a lot of Nikhil's family with whom she can speak her native language. Sonali, who thinks of herself as a very confident person, was hesitant about going out in case she did not know what people were saying. Her cousin told her about AD. Sonali finds AD is helping her pick up more English words and phrases. Watching the pictures makes it easier to understand the description. AD also helps with English idioms used in the dialogue. Sonali says "On Eastenders, Phil asked if he could "take a butcher's". The describer said 'Phil looks at the photos' and I knew that this must be a funny way of asking to have a look at something! Sometimes I watch Bollywood movies with audio description. The describer reads out the English subtitles, so I can see the written words and hear how you're supposed to say them.'

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Persona 10: Alice, aged 83 (early stages of Alzheimer's)

Heather has been looking after her mother, Alice, for the past 6 months. Alice is starting to have difficulties with her short-term memory and her hearing is not as good as it used to be. Heather works full time but she lives just around the corner, and calls in every morning to help Alice get washed and dressed and have breakfast. Heather calls in again after work to prepare her mother's supper and to get her ready for bed. Friends sometimes drop by during the day, but Heather was worried that her mother wasn't getting enough mental stimulation. 'Sometimes we would watch TV together in the evening and Mum would just drift off into her own world or talk about something completely unrelated, something that had happened to her years ago. With AD, she doesn't get so muddled and can follow the programme through to the end. We can even have a chat about it afterwards. 'With AD' Alice says, 'it feels as though the characters are talking more slowly so I can take in what they're saying. And I find it easier to follow the story.'

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Persona 11: Ella, aged 3 (early years language acquisition)

Ella is nearly 3 years old. Ella is sighted but when she plays with the TV remote, sometimes she accidentally turns on the AD. Ella does not usually notice, but Ella's mum, Rachel, knows when it has happened. ''Ella's a real parrot' Rachel says. 'She'd been watching Charlie and Lola on CBeebies and they went to the zoo. Ella told me 'Lola saw an elephant. It was big, grey and wrinkly, with smooth, white tusks.' I thought 'how does she know words like 'wrinkly' and 'tusks' and I realised she must have copied them from the audio description.'

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Persona 12: Sam, aged 17 (media student)

Sam is at Sixth Form College. His favourite subject is Media & Film Studies. Sam has started watching films with AD. He says 'the description points out things I haven't noticed. Sometimes there are special ADs that mention the cinematic elements of film - the different cuts and dissolves, and whether it's a close shot or a zoom or a tracking shot. That's really brilliant. The describer deconstructs the film for me and I can work out how the director's manipulating the audience by using visual effects. And now I've got used to listening to the AD, I can go and get myself a drink, or something, and still hear what's going on, so I don't miss anything.'

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Persona 13 Jacob, 43, psychologist

Jacob is a highly qualified, well respected psychologist. Recently, following a stroke, he has developed problems recognising faces, even those of his wife and daughter. He has also ceased to recognise what were once familiar landmarks, although he has no difficulty once they have been identified by name. Similarly, Jacob can recognise his family by the sounds of their voices and by familiarity of the way they move. Jacob is not severely debilitated by his condition, which is called prosopagnosia or 'face-blindness', but it can lead to acquaintances thinking him rude for 'pretending' he has never met them before. Prosopagnosia also makes it hard to follow a drama or a film. Jacob says "by supplying the verbal labels that are part of my daily coping strategy, AD is extremely useful. Prosopagnosia often goes unrecognised, but is thought to affect between 1 – 2.5% of the population. If more prosopagnosics knew about AD, I'm sure they too would find it beneficial'.