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Audio description services in Europe: an update

Nina Reviers, University of Antwerp

ABSTRACT

Audio Description for the blind and visually impaired (AD) is an access service that is rapidly gaining ground in Europe, in the industry as well as in research circles. Nevertheless, the European AD landscape is still fragmented and countries are at different stages of development. This paper provides a detailed description of AD services in selected European countries for 2012 (Italy, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Germany and Poland) based on the results of the European project "Audio Description: Lifelong Access for the Blind." The overview provided in this paper shows that AD is a media access practice still lacking critical mass in terms of terminology, practice and training, especially when considered in conjunction with the number of people in Europe that (would) benefit from this service. At the same time, the data collected indicate a rising awareness regarding accessibility. The paper demonstrates that various countries have different strengths and competences in respect of AD types. The paper concludes by underlining the importance of lobbying powers, awareness building and close collaboration between countries and between academia and the industry.

KEYWORDS

Audio description, audiovisual translation, visual impairment, media accessibility.

1. Introduction

Today, it is safe to say that Audio Description (AD) is beginning to come of age. AD — a technique that, in short, renders audio visual products accessible to blind and visually impaired patrons (B/VIP) by verbalising its relevant visual components — is rapidly gaining ground in Europe. AD services are provided in many countries in different areas from film and television to theatre, opera, museums and sports events, and it is still growing in volume, interest and awareness, both in the service sector as well as in research circles. Even though the first attempts at AD in Europe can be traced back to the 1940s when a radio commentator provided weekly descriptions for the blind in Spain, AD as a regular access service really only took off in Europe in the late 1980s. In 1987 the Spanish Association of the Blind, ONCE, launched the *Sonocine* system (which later became *Audesc*). In 1989, the *Münchner Filmbeschreibergruppe* (the Munich Film Describers Group) introduced film AD in Germany and that same year the first French film with AD was presented at the Cannes Film Festival by the French Association of the Blind *Valentin Haüy*. In 1991, the AUDETEL project advanced AD in the UK. It triggered the development of regulations in the UK and laid the foundation for the widely used ITC guidelines. The AUDETEL project, however, also kick-started the development of AD services elsewhere in Europe, especially on television. Since then, AD projects have been rolled out in countries such as Belgium, Portugal and Italy as well (Orero 2007). The 2007 European Union Audiovisual Media Services Directive was another landmark for the development of AD in Europe

(European Parliament and Council 2007). Despite this 'success story' of the past two decades, the European AD landscape is still fragmented and countries are at different stages of development. The reasons for this can be found, among other things, in divergent laws and regulations, the varying lobbying power of user associations, and different audiovisual cultures and traditions (as was demonstrated by the Pear Tree Project; see e.g. Mazur and Kruger 2012 and Orero 2012). Consequently, the challenges that Europe faces in providing AD are different in each country. Yet, ADs produced in different countries also show similarities and, under the influence of globalisation, a convergence may be occurring.

The aim of this paper is to map the current offer of AD services in a selection of European countries. This "state of the art" can help pinpoint research gaps, prioritise challenges, find convergences and opportunities for collaboration between countries and cultures. The paper is based on the first phase of the European research project "Audio Description: Lifelong Access for the Blind" (ADLAB), that envisages the creation of Pan-European AD guidelines. This phase consisted of taking a snapshot of the current situation in Europe with regard to the accessibility of audiovisual products for blind and visually impaired persons in the six countries that participated in the ADLAB project: Italy, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Germany and Poland. The study was conducted between October 2011 and March 2012 and included a questionnaire to user associations in the selected countries. The full report can be accessed on the project website (ADLAB).

This paper starts off with a discussion of the scope of the target audience for AD and then moves on to the laws and regulations in place in the studied countries. In the subsequent sections, data are presented on the amount of AD in different areas. Before rounding off with some conclusions, we provide some facts about AD training and research.

2. Blind and partially sighted audiences in Europe

It has proved difficult to obtain current, public, reliable figures about B/VIP in Europe. Table 1 provides data gathered from local associations of the blind and reputable institutions in each of the studied countries and it is as close as one can hope to get to the actual figures. However, the data provided must be analysed against the right backdrop. Firstly, blindness and sight loss are defined according to varying official parameters in each country. Since most studied countries refer to the World Health Organisation's definition of blindness and visual impairment or use definitions that are quite close to it, it seems to be an appropriate definition for the purpose of this study. Secondly, more than 80 per cent of people suffering sight loss are over 50, with a large proportion being over 65. This group of people with sight loss due to old age, are not always included in official figures in B/VIP. Furthermore, their numbers are likely to increase given the ageing of the population. Projections in the UK, for instance,

suggest that the number of B/VIP in the UK will rise to 2,250,000 by 2020 and to 4,000,000 by 2050.

Despite these reservations, the numbers in Table 1 are compelling and the potential demand for audio described products can be seen in the simple mathematics: the number of officially registered B/VIP lies between 1.5 and 3.5 per cent of the population, amounting to over 5 million Visually Impaired People (VIP) in the ADLAB countries alone. What is more, these figures take into account the primary target group for AD only, while more and more researchers are demonstrating the benefits of AD for secondary users, such as the mentally impaired, immigrants, children and those following audiovisual material while multitasking.

Country	Population	Official estimates	Other (local) sources
BE	11,000,000	13,200 Blind (WHO)	220,000 VIP
DE	81,800,000	1,200,000 VIP (WHO)	150,000 Blind 500,000 VIP
IT	60,800,000	362,000 Blind 1,500,000 VIP (ISTAT)	/
PL	38,200,000	1,400,000 VIP (State survey)	350,000-500,000 VIP
PT	10,700,000	165,000 VIP (CENSOS)	130,000 - 140,000 Blind
ES	46,200,000	47,500 Blind 750,000 VIP (Observatorio Estatal de la Discapacidad)	/
UK	56,000,000	1,138,792 mild VIP 440,268 moderate VIP 217,930 severe VIP (Access Economics)	/

Table 1. Blind and visually impaired persons in selected European countries

3. Laws, regulations and guidelines

The governments of all the studied countries have some form of official regulation with regard to the accessibility of culture or media services for the B/VIP, but these differ from country to country and have varying degrees of 'enforceability.' We can broadly distinguish three types of measures.

Firstly, there are laws at the national and/or local levels, applying to both public and private broadcasters. The first European country to implement a law including AD was the UK with the 1996 Broadcasting Act (later extended

in the 2003 Communications Act). Today, regulations with the force of law can also be found in Germany (*Rundfunkstaatsvertrag*), Poland (Polish Radio and Television Act), Portugal (2011 Television Law, which is no longer in effect), Spain (*Ley general audiovisual*) and since 2013, Flanders, Belgium (*Mediadecreet*). Other European countries that have media laws for AD are France (*Plan Handicap Visuel 2008-2011*), Ireland (The Broadcasting Act of 2009) and Sweden (Swedish Radio and Television Act). At the time of writing there were no legal provisions in other EU member states. A second type of regulation is sector-driven laws, such as specific agreements with Public Broadcasters, which are implemented in many countries in Europe. Examples are Flanders (AD and audio subtitling have been included in public broadcaster VRT's yearly management contracts since 2007) and Italy (the contract between the Italian radio and television service and the Ministry of Communications, 2007-2009). Finally, there are different types of measures that promote AD in areas other than film and television as well. Examples are Flanders, where organisations can obtain funding through the Participation Decree (*Participatiedecreet*) to render an event, such as a theatre performance or sports event, accessible to specific groups including the B/VIP. In Italy, there is an act (Act 28th August 1997, no. 284), which gives regions the autonomy to implement accessibility measures for the B/VIP. In addition to its national legislation, Spain has an officially recognised standard for best practices (Norma UNE 153.020) and a *Plan Nacional de Accesibilidad* (Ministerio de Trabajo y Asuntos Sociales 2003) promoting AD and subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing (SDH).

The above mentioned regulations mandate different volumes of AD: some include actual quotas (such as the UK and Poland with 10 per cent) others (such as Flanders) only stipulate that AD has to be provided. In some countries, regional laws apply and, as a result, certain regions make a bigger effort than others (e.g. the Flemish region of Belgium and the state of Bavaria in Germany). This may be one of the reasons why the AD landscape in Europe is still diverse, especially since there are few Pan-European initiatives to streamline the situation. To conclude this section, a quick comparison with the laws on SDH might shed some light on the problem. Legislation on the provision of SDH is somewhat more demanding, compared to AD legislation, across Europe. Furthermore, some European countries that have no or very limited regulations enforcing the provision of AD, do impose quotas for such accessibility services as SDH (100 per cent SDH in the Netherlands for instance, 95 per cent in Flanders, and 70 per cent in the Czech Republic for public broadcasters). This highlights the urgent need for more awareness-building and lobbying for access services for B/VIP, since there are fewer provision in place for them than for the deaf and hard-of-hearing.

Country	AD law (federal and/or regional)
BE	Regional (Flanders)
DE	National and regional
IT	/
PL	National
PT	National (not in effect)
ES	National
UK	National

Table 2: AD laws and regulations in selected European countries (2012)

Besides regulations on media accessibility, many countries also have AD guidelines that describe the standards and best practices that should be applied for quality AD services. As mentioned in the introduction, the ITC guidelines, developed by the UK media regulator Ofcom, were one of the first AD guidelines to be issued in Europe. These ITC guidelines date back to May 2000 and are still the most widely used guidelines in Europe today. Nevertheless, several countries have started to develop their own national guidelines, adapted to their local needs and situation. Most of the guidelines have been drawn up for film and television, but some mention other forms of entertainment as well, such as theatre and opera or other live events. Table 3 below gives an overview of existing guidelines in Europe.

Country	Date	Title	Author	Application
Belgium	2008	Vademecum de l'audiodescription [Audio Description Handbook]	Association Bruxelloise et Brabançonne des Compagnies Dramatiques asbl	Theatre AD. Developed by a non-profit organisation as a guide for in-house training.
Belgium	2011	Basisprincipes voor audiobeschrijving voor televisie en film [Basics of audio description for television and film]	Aline Remael and Gert Vercauteren	Film and TV AD. Developed for (academic) training purposes.
France	2008	La Charte de l'audiodescription [The French Audio Description Charter]	Laure Morisset and Frédéric Gonant	Theatre AD.
Germany	2004	Wenn aus Bildern Worte werden	Bernd Benecke and Elmar Dosch	Film and TV AD. Developed by Broadcaster Bayerische Rundfunk.
Greece	2008	Audio Description Guidelines for Greek: a working document	Yota Georgakopoulou	Film and TV AD. Developed for the European Captioning Institution.
Italy	2011	Manuale per aspiranti audio descrittori di audiofilm per non vedenti [Tutorial for aspiring audio describers of sound movies for the sight impaired]	Eraldo Busarello and Fabio Sordo	Film AD. Developed by a non-profit organisation as a tutorial for in-house training.
Poland	2010	Standardy tworzenia audiodeskrypcji do produkcji audiowizualnych [Standards for creating audio description to audiovisual productions]	Barbara Szymańska and Tomasz Strzyński	Film AD. Developed by a user association as guidance for professionals.
Poland	2012	"Audiodeskrypcja - zasady tworzenia". Warszawa: Fundacja Kultury bez Barrier [Audio description - principles of creation]	Izabela Künstler, Urszula Butkiewicz and Robert Więckowski	Film and theatre AD. Developed by a user association as guidance for professionals.
Portugal	2011	Guia de Audiodescriçao: images que se ouvem [Audio Description Guide: listening to images]	Joselia Neves	Different types of AD. Guidelines developed in academia.
Spain	2005	Norma Española UNE 153020	AENOR	Different types of AD. Official guidelines.
United Kingdom	2000	ITC guidance on standards for Audio Description	Ofcom	Film and TV AD. Official guidelines.
United Kingdom	2003	Museums, galleries and heritage sites: improving access for blind and partially sighted people. The Talking Images Guide	RNIB	Visual Arts AD. Developed by a user association as a guide for potential describers.
United Kingdom	Last updated 2008	An Introduction to Audio Description in the Theatre	RNIB	Theatre AD. Developed by a user association for potential describers and theatre management.

Table 3: AD guidelines in Europe (2012)

4. Audio description services in Europe

4.1 Television

Television is probably the most important area for AD today. The ADLAB project conducted a survey with user associations in all studied countries between October 2011 and February 2012. This revealed that television is seen to be the most popular option for AD, possibly because many areas converge on television (entertainment, news, sports, etc.) and because older people in particular (those more likely to have visual impairments) prefer to stay in the comfort of their homes to be entertained. Therefore, increased television accessibility must be the number one priority in Europe. Table 4 summarises the AD offer on television in the ADLAB countries. Two aspects stand out.

Firstly, it appears that it is most often the public broadcasters who provide AD services, while the commercial channels seem to be more reticent. Financial reasons may lie at the bottom of this, but there is also a direct link with the laws and regulations, which only apply to public broadcasters in some countries or are more stringent for this sector. Secondly, the volume of televised minutes with AD differs greatly in each country and, clearly, some countries provide substantially more than others. Germany, Spain and the UK lead the field. Again, the presence or absence of laws plays a role in this, but other issues have to be kept in mind as well. For instance, the studied countries have different audiovisual translation (AVT) traditions. Dubbing is prevalent in Spain, Italy and Germany, voice-over in Poland, and subtitling in Portugal and Flanders. For the subtitling group, AD poses the additional challenge of having to include audio subtitling (AST) (for more on audio subtitling see Remael 2012 and Braun & Orero 2010). As a consequence, these countries focus on locally produced broadcasts, limiting the potential amount of AD offered. Finally, in some countries the volumes mentioned in the table below include reruns (e.g. in Spain), which must be taken into account when comparing figures across countries.

Country	AD on TV since	Public Broadcasters	Commercial Broadcasters	Minutes of AD on TV
BE (FL)	2012	VRT	/	780 mins/year
DE	1993	BR, Arte, NDR, WDR, MDR, ZDF, 3Sat, HR, RBB, SWR	/	93,600 - 140,400 mins/year
IT	1997	RAI 1,2,3	/	218,400 mins/year
PL	2011	TVP	TVN	15,000 mins/year
PT		RTP	/	3120 mins/year
ES	1995	RTVE, Televisión Pública, Andalucía, TP de Catalunya	Disney Channel, Antena 3 Televisión	/
UK	1996	BBC	BSkyB, Channel 4,	+/- 72,000

Table 4: AD on television in selected European countries (2012)

In conclusion, advances are being made in all the studied ADLAB countries with regard to television accessibility for B/VIP, but bigger efforts are still required, especially in the smaller countries. Tighter government regulations and the digital switchover may help to promote AD on television. The digital switchover is a reality in all European countries, but the technologies used for airing AD on television still differ at present and not all countries have gone digital yet. For example, in Italy and Portugal, ADs are sometimes broadcast using an interactive radio channel. Some countries, like Poland, sometimes use online streaming and in Flanders, broadcasts are aired both with open and closed AD at different times, to cater for the digital as well as the analogue viewers.

4.2 Films on DVD and in cinemas

Table 5 provides an overview of the number of DVDs and Blu-Rays that are available with AD in the studied countries. The table shows that the number of DVDs and Blu-Rays available with AD is disappointing in most countries. It also demonstrates that in some countries special institutions (such as ONCE in Spain and *Senza Barriere* in Italy) have become providers of AD services to compensate for the lack of initiative from distributors, but their ADs can be accessed only by members. Finally, an idiosyncrasy is evident on existing DVDs with AD in that few of them have accessible or spoken menus.

Two countries clearly stand out in Table 5: the UK, with over 500 DVDs available with AD and, to a certain extent, Germany with over 130 DVDs with AD. One can wonder why AD on DVDs is so prevalent in the UK, but not elsewhere? A few possible answers come to mind. First of all, English is an international language and the fact that there are vastly more English speakers than say, Dutch speakers, might explain why the interest for AD,

especially on formats such as DVD, is more easily sparked in countries like the UK. Moreover, countries such as Portugal and Belgium have to provide AST when describing foreign films, an additional linguistic and technological challenge. Thirdly, in the UK, AD on DVDs seems to be part of a suite of post-production services, including subtitling and SDH, which makes its provision more attractive to the industry. Finally and most importantly, the UK has a powerful user association, the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB), which actively promotes AD and was involved in the development of the ITC guidelines and the 1996 Broadcasting Act. The ADLAB questionnaire distributed to user associations in 2011 indeed indicated that more lobbying is necessary in all countries at all levels--authorities, broadcasters, production companies, distributors, organisers of media events--and that public funding should be made available for AD.

Country	Commercial DVDs and Blu-Rays	Special DVDs (not for general public)
BE(FL)	18	/
DE	130	/
IT	7	388
PL	21	/
PT	3	/
ES	37	>500
UK	>500	/
FR	70	/

Table 5: Number of DVDs and Blu-Rays available in Europe

To round up this section, some data on the accessibility of cinemas must be provided. In none of the studied countries is there a cinema offering AD on a regular basis, a state of affairs that stands in stark contrast to the situation in the UK, where more than 300 cinemas have facilities to screen films with AD. Although special screenings with AD, e.g. at festivals or for annual events, are welcome, an ideal situation would see the blind and visually impaired attending local cinemas together with their sighted friends in a fully integrated manner. The studied country closest to achieving this goal is Spain, where *Cine Accesible*, for instance, has been providing monthly AD screenings in various cinemas across Spain since 2007. Other countries, such as Poland and Germany, do organise special screenings with AD on a regular basis, but in most countries it is in an early stage of development. In the Netherlands, for example, several cinemas are equipped to offer AD or are prepared to do so, but the limited number of Dutch films available with AD (see Table 5) makes regular screenings impossible. Even though user associations and cinemas in some countries (such as Flanders, Poland and Germany) deliver open AD, AD in the cinema generally remains anecdotal. The technological demands for accessible

cinema may lie at the bottom of the disappointing offer in European cinemas, together with the lack of legislative provisions. Possibly, the rise of digital cinema may speed the process along in the future.

4.3. The performing arts, museums and other live events

When discussing AD for the performing arts, museums and other live events, a few important issues have to be kept in mind. Firstly, it constitutes quite a small part of the market as compared to mainstream film and television - even if theatre in particular was cited as an important area by user associations in the ADLAB survey. Secondly, AD in this domain seems to have developed at a slower pace than AD for film and television, and in many countries it is still a new service that is rarely professionalised. This is also reflected in the guidelines that focus on film AD and treat AD for live performances and museums only in passing (see Table 3). However, things seem to be changing: in all studied countries audio described live performances (opera and theatre) and special initiatives for the B/VIP in museums are starting to appear, even though the kinds of services provided differ considerably from one country to another (in number and in the way they are organised) and services are seldom provided on a regular basis, but rather as one-offs or local initiatives.

4.3.1 Museums

AD in museums perhaps shows the greatest percentage of increase, as shown in the data of the ADLAB project. This type of AD, however, stands apart from AD for film, television and the live performing arts, and its specificities have to be kept in mind when comparing data between countries. Firstly, museum ADs are usually made as an original text, with extra-textual references and with time constraints of a different nature. It seldom has to 'fit in' with a pre-existing audiovisual text. Next, there is a range of different types of AD currently on offer in museums in Europe, and they are prepared according to varying parameters.

Firstly, there is live scripted or unscripted AD, when a curator or museum worker describes an exhibit (freely or with a pre-written script) for the benefit of a group of B/VIP. This is the most common way to make exhibitions or museums accessible in, for instance, Flanders, Spain and Germany. These guided tours can be offered regularly, can be provided on demand or they are organised ad hoc whenever a blind patron comes to the venue. Secondly, there are forms of recorded AD for museum accessibility. Two examples of this type are the *Museu Nacional do Azulejo* and the *Museu da Comunidade Concelhia da Batalha* in Portugal. These offer technology-based recorded audio guides to the general public, which already include AD. In Poland, on the other hand, several foundations provide recorded audio guides as well, but specifically designed for B/VIP only (one example is the project "Beyond Silence and Darkness," organised by *Fundacja*

Dzieciom "Zdążyć z Pomocą"). Finally, several museums in the six countries participating in the ADLAB study are trying to increase the accessibility of their venues and exhibitions, without actually providing AD. In Italy, for instance, museums sometimes provide signs and guides in Braille, reproductions of works of art, tactile paths, relief maps, etc. In Flanders, guided tours for B/VIP often include touch tours or even smell and music guidance. Some of the studied countries even have museums specifically designed for the benefit of B/VIP (such as the Arts and History Museum in Brussels, or the *Museu Tiflogico* in Madrid).

We can conclude that the situation in museums seems positive on the whole; a reasonable amount of AD is offered and some museums are fully accessible. What is more, apart from offering actual AD, museums often provide other services that can be accessed by the blind. This way, museums are striving to create an overall accessible experience that is not limited to descriptions of the artwork and exhibited pieces.

4.3.2 Opera, theatre and other live events

With regard to AD for opera and theatre performances, Spain appears to be ahead of the other countries, with eight theatres offering AD for theatre plays and one theatre offering permanent opera performances for its blind and visually impaired audiences. However, this is still a limited offer compared to the UK, where more than one hundred theatres offer AD. In the other ADLAB countries, one-off AD performances are provided, most often for theatre performances. However, this offer is sporadic and covers only a fraction of the type and number of performances open to the general public. Performances are initiated by theatre houses (e.g. *Toneelhuis* in Flanders or *L'Ente Teatro* in Italy), user associations or foundations (such as *Fundacja Dzieciom "Zdążyć z Pomocą"* or *Fundacja Kultury Bez Barrier* in Poland) or by specialised organisations (such as *Hörfilm e.V* in Germany or *Associazione Arena Sferisterio* or *Teatro No-Limits* in Italy). Italy also seems specialised in opera performances with AD, which are offered permanently at three venues (Messina, Napoli, and every year at the Macerata Opera Festival). However, generally speaking, blind and visually impaired audiences in the studied countries have very limited choice when it comes to the performing arts.

As in museums, the actual description during a performance is often complemented with other measures, such as audio introductions (AI), delivered before the start of the performance or made available online or on CD, touch tours of the stage and set, an introduction by the actors, or Braille sheets with extra information. In Germany, AIs for the theatre sometimes even include information about the venue and directions to move around the venue, prices of drinks in the venue cafe or bar and the like.

To conclude, the ADLAB survey revealed that, apart from the live performances referred to above, AD is slowly starting to be introduced in other areas as well, such as at religious events, sports events (e.g. the 2012 Olympic Games in the UK or Euro 2012), ceremonies, dance and ballet performances, concerts, parades and processions (such as the *Virga Jesse feesten* in Flanders). The Polish foundation for the promotion of AD *Fundacja Katarynka*, for instance, focuses on AD for such live events. Although it is too early to obtain meaningful data on this novel area, it is worthwhile noting that AD is broadening its scope beyond traditional cultural events and mainstream media.

5. AD research and training in Europe

With regard to research on AD, which still remains rather limited overall, in most countries it is the universities that are involved. Most research is done in translation, linguistics and/or cognitive psychology departments. Several universities in the studied countries are involved in AD research: the University of Antwerp (Flanders), the University of Macerata, the University of Trieste and the Università degli Studi di Roma 'La Sapienza' (Italy), Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, the University of Warsaw and Jagiellonian University in Kraków (Poland), the Universidade de Porto, the Universidade de Aveiro and Polytechnic Institute of Leiria (Portugal), the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Spain). Several of these universities are also members of research groups dealing specifically with accessibility and AD: Inclusion and Accessibility in Action (Polytechnic Institute of Leiria), Centre d'Accessibilitat i Intel·ligència Ambiental de Catalunya and Transmedia Catalonia (UAB Spain), Transmedia Portugal and Transmedia Benelux.

With regard to training in AD, two types can be distinguished: training at higher education institutions (HEI) and in-house training at private companies. Notwithstanding the growing interest in AD at universities and other HEIs, the bulk of all training is still conducted by access service companies, although this approach is very varied across Europe. A list of some of the training initiatives at both levels, in the studied countries, can be found on the ADLAB project website. It is, however, clear that the two types tend to prioritise different issues in the training provided: university training focuses mainly on the scriptwriting phase, while companies provide vocational training and devote more attention to technical aspects of the AD process as well. Both approaches have their stronger and weaker points and more cooperation between academia and the industry would therefore be invaluable. Exciting avenues for further research where universities and the industry can successfully co-operate include research related to the translation of AD scripts, audio subtitling techniques, text-to-speech technologies and, last but not least, AD training itself.

6. Concluding remarks

This paper indicates that AD is a media access practice still lacking critical mass in terms of terminology, practice and training, especially when considered in conjunction with the number of people in Europe that (would) benefit from this service. Television can definitely be seen as the most sought-after mode for AD, and television and film are precisely the areas where most progress has been made in recent years in all studied countries. However, AD and media accessibility for B/VIP are still in their infancy in many countries, and AD is too often limited to public broadcasting alone. What is more, when it comes to AD in other areas, such as cinema, museums and performing arts, blind and visually impaired audiences cannot count on a consistent or regular service since only sporadic screenings or performances are on offer.

However, the data collected also indicate rising awareness at all levels with regard to media accessibility for B/VIP. AD is being introduced in different areas and the market is slowly becoming more professional, universities and HEIs are becoming more and more involved in research and training, more and more governments are putting legislation into place, and user associations are active in organising events as well as supporting the development of AD in the respective countries. Nevertheless, the challenges to be tackled with regard to AD are plentiful. One of these challenges is the rapid development of technology, which can pose problems, but also creates opportunities. For example, while DVDs with AD seem to be on the increase across Europe, films with AD for broadcasting are the most popular format. With the advent of cloud computing, DVDs, Blu-Rays and VHS formats are, however, no longer necessarily representative of market trends, a fact made evident by the sluggish growth, in some areas, of DVDs with AD when compared to the number of films and television series broadcast with AD.

The data also show that various countries have different strengths and competences in respect of AD types. For instance, compared to other countries, AD in opera is well developed in Spain, while Germany has developed professional procedures for AD on television, and Flanders is experimenting with the application of AST. It is thus recommended that European countries exchange experience and share their best practices to aid the overall development of the various AD types, bearing in mind that different priorities exist in different countries and different skill sets are required for the different types of AD. The cultural diversity and multilingualism of Europe obviously pose many challenges for AD (such as audio subtitling and the question of translating AD), but they also open doors for convergence (e.g. in sharing same-language AD across same-language regions and countries). Developments in these areas require more insight into the AD scriptwriting phase, a very young field at present.

Finally, two important questions that this paper raises are: why is the state of AD in the UK so much ahead of AD developments in the rest of Europe, and what can we learn from the UK in this respect for the future? Some possible explanations have been suggested above. Firstly, a seemingly essential driving force for the development of AD services in a professional context is the implementation of regulations and guidelines at national and European levels. Next, powerful lobbying groups that collaborate actively with all stakeholders seem to be a prerequisite to raising awareness. The ADLAB questionnaire (ADLAB 2012) indeed indicated that in terms of lobbying in the studied countries, very little has been done so far, and raising awareness at governmental level is one of the priorities to be kept in mind. To conclude, the avenues for further research are challenging and one thing is certain: European collaboration is a must, and it should cross not only geographical borders, but boundaries between disciplines and between sectors as well.

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Biography

Nina Reviers is a fulltime PhD researcher at the University of Antwerp in the field of Media Accessibility. Her research project involves developping the first multimodal corpus of Dutch audio descriptions. She has professional experience as an audiovisual translator, particularly in the theatre and has collaborated with several prominent Flemish theatres, accessibility providers and user organisations. She is building experience in academic and professional training and helped develop Flemish guidelines for the audio description of live-events as a member of the Transmedia Benelux Research Group.



E-mail: nina.reviers@uantwerpen.be