Accessing Northern Ireland's contested past: Creating descriptive guides of the Maze and Long Kesh prison video tours

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ABSTRACT

This article charts the creation of descriptive guides of a series of video tours of the defunct Maze and Long Kesh prison in Northern Ireland, as part of a PhD research project, in collaboration with the creative team behind the Prisons Memory Archive (PMA) (n.d.), an audiovisual archive that documents the carceral system in Northern Ireland during the 30-year conflict known as 'the Troubles'. In an effort to bridge what Greco has called the "maker-expert-user gap" (2018: 219), a purposeful collaborative methodological approach was applied that involved the author and the PMA creative team alongside PMA participants as well as blind, partially blind and non-blind audiences across the region. In line with recent research on media accessibility, this article foregrounds the broader benefits of an inclusive approach that engages creators and end users in the co-design of accessible content. Drawing on conversations with the PMA creative team and PMA participants as well as the results of an exploratory study with blind, partially blind and non-blind audiences, this article highlights the wider applicability of audio description in engaging people of all abilities with an important, albeit contested, heritage site in Northern Ireland.

KEYWORDS

Audio description, descriptive guides, digital heritage, heritage sites, Maze and Long Kesh prison, participatory practice.

1. Introduction

In the summer of 2007, a small group of filmmakers recorded the buildings of the defunct Maze and Long Kesh prison (M/LK) in Northern Ireland as part of the oral history project the Prisons Memory Archive (PMA) (n.d.). These recordings were later edited into video tours of the prison's built environment. Given the ongoing controversy surrounding M/LK in contemporary Northern Ireland, which is discussed in Section 3.1, no voiceover was used in the original recordings. According to the PMA Director Professor Cahal McLaughlin, this minimal approach allows the viewer to interpret the prison on their own terms (2014). Yet, this approach excludes those who cannot access or have difficulty accessing the recordings in their original format. These include blind and partially blind people[1] as well as those who are unfamiliar with the prison and its controversial legacy in Northern Ireland.

This article documents the creation of three descriptive guides of the video tours of M/LK prison: the Compound (n.d.), H-Block (n.d.) and Hospital (n.d.) buildings, which were created in collaboration with the creative team behind the PMA, PMA participants, as well as blind, partially blind and non-blind audiences. The aim of this article is to report on the processes and people involved in making accessible an important, albeit contested, cultural artefact of Northern Ireland's past to blind and partially blind as

well as non-blind audiences.

This article begins by situating the current project within the growing body of work on media accessibility; a research area that moves beyond the traditional bounds of how audiovisual products are created and consumed (Di Giovanni 2018: 157). More specifically, this research project is situated in the context of specialised translation for digital heritage. Central to the model of media accessibility adopted in this research project is the active participation of both creators and end users in the co-design of accessible content that caters to a wide set of potential audiences (Greco 2018). This model was incorporated into my doctoral research project through the involvement of the creative team behind the PMA, PMA participants as well as blind, partially blind and non-blind audiences throughout Northern Ireland. Drawing on conversations with the PMA Director, Project Manager and PMA participants as well as discussions with an audience of mixed abilities in an exploratory study, this article demonstrates the broader benefits of a proactive approach to accessibility that unlocks the creative potential of audio description in engaging people with the past in and about Northern Ireland.

2. Digital heritage: From access to participation

With the steady advance of technology, the heritage sector has evolved and devised new ways of engaging people with culture through digital means (Ioannides *et al.* 2018). This has resulted in the rise of what is known as 'digital heritage'. In their *Charter for the Preservation of Digital Heritage*, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) defines digital heritage as a set of "unique resources of human knowledge and expression" that encompass "cultural, educational, scientific and administrative resources as well as technical, legal, medical and other kinds of information created digitally" (2009: 1). These include "texts, databases, still and moving images, audio, graphics, software and web pages, among a wide and growing range of formats" (2009: 1). As underscored by the Charter, these resources have lasting cultural value and significance that should be protected and preserved for future generations. Tied to this aim is the requirement that access to digital heritage should be "free of unreasonable restrictions" (2009: 2). Research conducted in the field of media accessibility offers a way to overcome such restrictions by creating accessible content that is user-friendly, user-focused and collaborative.

As an emerging field of research, media accessibility has evolved to encompass a broad range of modalities and contexts. These include, but are not limited to, the modalities of audio description, subtitling, surtitles and sign language interpreting in the domains of film, television, theatre, dance and museums. With the growth of access services in these contexts, the field of media accessibility has evolved and changed over time, undergoing what Greco has identified as three significant shifts (2018:

211). The first of these shifts is the move away from a particularist approach, aimed solely at those with disabilities, towards a more universalist methodology that includes those with and without disabilities (Greco 2018: 211). The second concerns the move away from a maker-centred approach towards a more user-centred one (Romero-Fresco 2021: 1), in which users are recognised as "bearers of valuable knowledge" (Greco 2018: 212). Linked to this is the third and final shift, which is the switch from reactionary practices, i.e., considering accessibility as an afterthought in the post-production process, towards more proactive approaches that prioritise accessibility from the beginning of a project's inception.

With the growth of media accessibility as a research field, scholars have developed and expanded its remit to include different contexts that come with their own set of practical and theoretical concerns. In the context of heritage, the desire to make culture open to all has led to the adoption of accessible practices that cater to people of different abilities from a wide range of linguistic, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds (Szarkowska *et al.* 2016; Neves 2016: 138). As an offshoot of the standard museum audio guide, the descriptive guide routinely combines audio description with personal testimonies, music and sound effects that is beneficial to both blind and non-blind users.

As argued by Hutchinson (2019), these descriptive guides have the potential to foster inclusive experiences in museums by simultaneously facilitating an accessible experience for blind and partially blind visitors while also guiding the visual attention of their non-blind counterparts towards specific details in an exhibit. Increasingly, descriptive guides are created in collaboration with end users. Participatory accessible practices, such as those described by Neves (2016), place users at the heart of the creative process often working with museum and heritage professionals to create descriptive guides that cater to the needs of a wide range of potential users while also keeping in mind access for those with additional needs.

In comparison to audio description for film, descriptive guides for museum and heritage sites differ in three key areas: relationship to the 'source text', time-space constraints and content selection. As discussed by Neves in the ADLAB guidelines (2014), descriptive guides are normally created outside the confines of a scripted narrative. Unlike audio description for film, the descriptive guide is the narrative itself, which relies on a series of open co-texts to determine its overall shape and narrative structure. Within the context of the gallery, examples of co-texts include the composition of the artwork, information about the artist or the historical or artistic period of a piece. As such, timing issues normally relate to maintaining the visitor's attention rather than keeping pace with the moving image as in film. A description of a museum exhibit therefore requires contextualisation, interpretation and "above all, selection" (Neves 2014).

However, contextualisation, interpretation and selection prove problematic in contexts where historical narratives about an exhibit are disputed. We need only look at the examples of objects taken by European powers during the age of imperialism to appreciate that contextualising, interpreting and selecting information about such an exhibit is challenging. Similarly, what the audio describer chooses to include or exclude ultimately affects how people come to engage with an exhibit. In such contexts, what could be called a 'source text' does not always have a clear or undisputed narrative. This is the case for the PMA video tours (Prisons Memory Archive n.d.), which exist within a context that is multi-layered, complex and above all contested.

3. The Northern Irish 'Troubles'

The Troubles are commonly understood to have erupted in the late 1960s with the beginning of the civil rights movement, and formally ended in 1998, after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement[2]. Over the course of almost 30 years, it is estimated that over 3,600 people died and another 40,000 were injured (McKittrick *et al.* 2004: 13). While these figures are irrefutable, the causes that led to the conflict are disputed. Surveying the various interpretations, O'Leary and McGarry remark how the subject of the Troubles has become a "meta-conflict" — that is, "a conflict about what the conflict is about" (1995). Almost all aspects of the Troubles are contested, from their origins to the status and motivation of their main actors. As a result of this, many observers have put forward different interpretations to explain the Troubles. These include an ethno-national conflict (McGarry and O'Leary 1995), an anti-colonial (MacSeán 1991; Miller 1998) or class struggle (Farrell 1976), a terrorist campaign (Ryder 2000; Dingley 2009), a manifestation of religious sectarianism (Mitchell 2006) or a combination of all of the above (McBride 2017: 14).

The most pervasive of these interpretations is that of an ethno-national conflict, which typically frames the Troubles as an intercommunal conflict between two historically opposed identity groups — Unionist/Loyalist (mostly Protestants) versus Nationalist/Republican (mostly Catholic). Terms such as 'Protestant' and 'Unionist' are often used interchangeably in literature, with 'Loyalist' typically denoting a working-class Protestant[3]. Similarly, terms such as 'Catholic' and 'Nationalist' often appear together, with 'Republican' signifying a more radical, typically working-class Catholic. These terms are commonly used to denote "the intensity of relationships to national identities that often have class connotations" (McAtackney 2014: 12). In general terms, Unionists/Loyalists (mostly Protestants) seek to maintain the political union with the United Kingdom, while most Nationalists/Republicans (typically Catholics) seek to integrate Northern Ireland into a united Ireland. While the ethno-nationalist paradigm has been criticised for its conceptual simplicity (Vaughan-Williams 2006)[4], it nevertheless offers a useful starting point from which to discuss M/LK and

the range of political and ideological positions relative to it — from Republicanism to Unionism.

3.1. The Maze and Long Kesh prison

M/LK opened as an internment camp in 1971 to house the rising prison population in Northern Ireland after the introduction of internment[5]. For almost 30 years, it was used by the state to intern, detain and imprison those convicted of conflict-related offences, many of whom would later go on to redefine the political landscape of Northern Ireland (Ryder 2000: x). The prison took centre stage in many of the confrontations between paramilitaries and government authorities over issues related to the constitutional legalities of internment, the policy of criminalisation and the loss of 'special category status'[6] for prisoners, all of which led to either political initiatives or further violence (McAtackney 2014: 1–2). This included prison protests, prison escapes, hunger strikes and eventually the brokering of peace talks in the lead up to the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

Given the prison's sheer scale, it's impact on the society of Northern Ireland was significant. It is estimated that 10,000 men, from both Loyalist and Republican communities passed through its gates (Purbrick 2004: 91; McAtackney 2014: 27). The human impact of this level of imprisonment and political violence upended civil society, separating families and dividing communities. As one of the main sites of imprisonment during the Troubles, the prison's associations with this violent period continue to loom large in popular memory as reflected in memorials, murals and commemorative marches all of which express different aspects of the prison experience. Since its closure in the early 2000s, the prison has undergone partial demolition as part of redevelopment plans to build an International Centre for Conflict Transformation on the site, designed by the renowned architect Daniel Libeskind (Chalcraft 2013). However, these plans were eventually dropped following disagreements between the project's main political stakeholders (BBC 2019). As argued by Purbrick, the ensuing political debate over the future of the prison concerned "established political meaning rather than those that may [have been] contained in its remaining material forms" (2018: 97).

In her analysis of the political discourse surrounding the redevelopment of the prison site in the early 2000s, Purbrick observed the resurgence of old animosities in which "Republican and Unionist were played off against each other in a simplified opposition between preservation and demolition" (2018: 88). While Republicans sought to preserve and redevelop part of the site, Unionists called for its demolition citing the risks of the prison becoming a shrine to terrorism (BBC 2007). In contrast to Republicans, Loyalists maintained a relatively ambiguous relationship to the prison (Graham and McDowell 2007: 350). Loyalists' lukewarm response to the redevelopment of the site did little to advance the political stalemate

between Unionists and Republicans leaving what remains of the prison caught between its contested past and indeterminate future (Kindynis and Garrett 2015: 10). Today, M/LK serves as a visible reminder of Northern Ireland's divided past that captures the different and often competing ways in which the past is understood. Given the prison's continued controversy within contemporary Northern Ireland, creating descriptive guides of the video tours necessitated a proactive approach to co-creation that involved people of varying abilities from different political constituencies.

4. Creating the descriptive guides of the PMA video tours: Bridging the 'maker-expert-user gap'

The creation of the descriptive guides of the PMA video tours involved different stakeholders and professionals at various key stages throughout the creative process. As illustrated in Figure 1., adapted from the ADLAB guidelines (Remael *et al*. 2014), the production of the descriptive guides consisted of five key stages: script-writing; rehearsal; recording; mixing and review. The process of writing the script involved the PMA Director, Project Manager and Chief Archivist, who advised the author on the presentation of the content in each video tour. PMA participants, many of whom were former prisoners of M/LK, were also consulted by the author throughout the script-writing process. The descriptive guides were initially designed to cater to the needs of blind and partially blind audiences although this was later expanded to include non-blind audiences prior to the exploratory study. The approach to writing the descriptive guides was informed by an interpretative framework proposed for museums, cultural venues and heritage sites in the ADLAB project guidelines (Neves 2014). According to this framework, descriptive guides should take into account:

1. The type of guide — whether live or recorded.
2. What is to be described?
3. Where the listener is in relation to what is being described.
4. What is the context of the object on display?
5. What are the specialities of what is being featured?
6. What will the listener do with what is heard?
7. What is the linguistic approach to the descriptive guide — whether factual, narrative or interpretative.

Using this framework as a guide, the descriptive guides were pre-recorded and timed to each video tour. Description of the prison buildings were prioritised with descriptive sections combined with more narrative passages throughout each video tour. For example, historical information about each building was interwoven with visual descriptions of the prison space in each PMA video tour, as demonstrated in Table 1, taken from the descriptive guide of the Hospital building.

Visual description	Off the wing we enter a large, empty rectangular room.
Historical information	At one point in the history of the Hospital this room would have served as a canteen for prisoners.

Table 1. Example of descriptive guide taken from the Hospital PMA video tour.

As noted in the above example, the first-person plural 'we' was used in the descriptive guides. This decision was motivated by a desire to encourage audiences to imagine themselves inside the prison space, similar to the original goal of the video tours as described by the PMA Director Cahal McLaughlin in the introduction to this article. Similar approaches have been taken in theatre and film by Cavallo (2015) and Lopez *et al.* (2016), who replaced the third-person narration with the first-person singular 'I' as a way to connect audiences directly with the actors' performances. The use of the first-person plural in the descriptive guides of the PMA video tours also reflected the camera work of each video tour, which prioritised a first-person perspective of the prison with walking shots at eye level. Movement through the prison space was elicited through verbs like 'move', 'pass', 'enter', 'return', and 'leave', which orientated the audiences' viewing experience and replicated the experience of a tour through the prison complex.

An audio introduction was created for each prison building which was played before the beginning of each video tour. Designed to work in tandem with the descriptive guides, the audio introduction provided audiences with additional factual and visual information about each prison building. This included contextual information about the key events that took place in each building, which provided audiences with a historical framework to better understand the subsequent video tour. The audio introduction can therefore be best categorised as a form of "thick translation" (Cheung 2007; Appiah 2012), which sought "to locate the text in a rich cultural and linguistic context" (2012: 341). Together, the audio introductions and descriptive guides added context to each PMA video tour with additional information about the size and dimensions of the prison space. After the initial drafts of the descriptive guides were written, they were then reviewed by blind and partially blind consultants who advised on the content of each descriptive guide after which they were recorded by local voice actors. The recordings were then mixed in consultation with the PMA team. The various drafts of the descriptive guides were subsequently reviewed by blind and partially blind as well as non-blind people in a series of reception studies. This process was iterative in nature with changes made to the descriptive guides based on feedback received at various key stages.
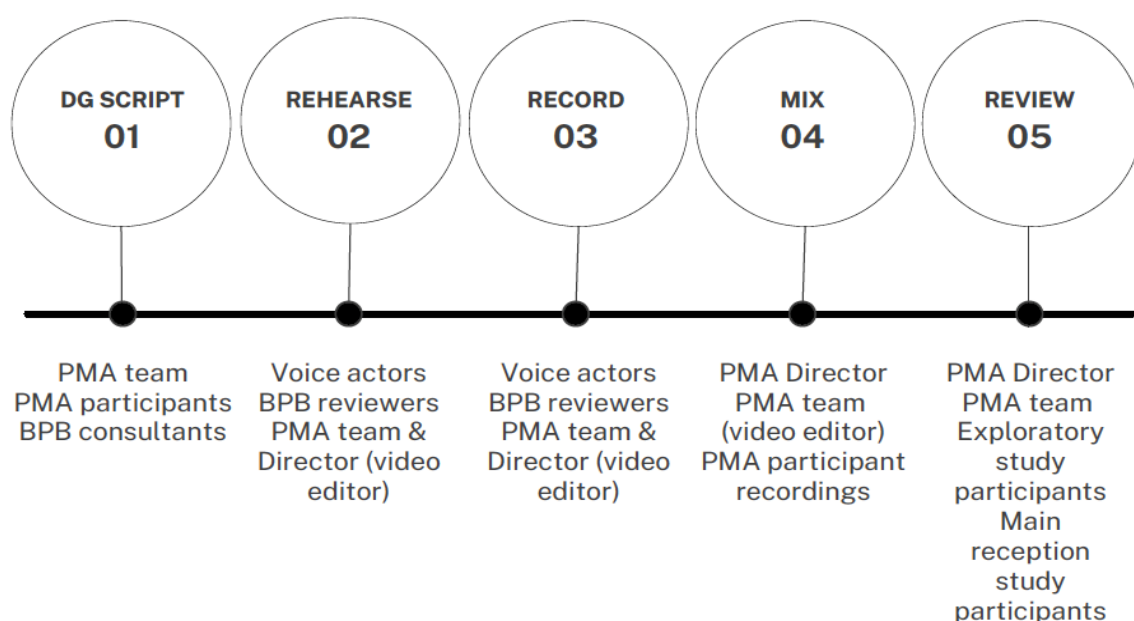
Figure 1: Workflow for the creation of the descriptive guides of the PMA video tours, adapted from the ADLAB guidelines (Remael *et al.* 2014).

The tasks of writing, rehearsing, recording, mixing and reviewing the descriptive guides were purposively collaborative in order to bridge what Greco terms the "maker-expert-user gap" (2018: 202), understood as the disconnect between those who create, those who translate and those who use an artefact (Romero-Fresco 2019: 4). As argued by Romero-Fresco, the maker-expert-user gap creates natural silos in which the accessibility professional works in isolation from the creative team while audiences are normally excluded from the creative process (2019: 5–6). In contrast to this model, the methodology adopted in this research project actively encouraged collaboration between the creative team behind the PMA, PMA participants as well as blind, partially blind and non-blind audiences throughout Northern Ireland, as illustrated in Figure 2.
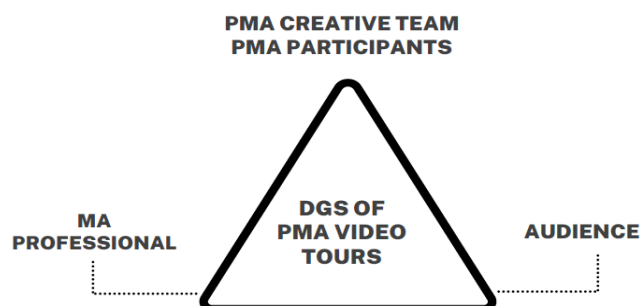

Figure 2: Collaborative model applied in this research project to bridge the 'maker-expert-user gap' as identified by Greco (2013) and adopted by Branson (2018) and Romero-Fresco (2019).

This collaborative approach is rare in most audio description practice, with

many access services outsourced to external providers with little to no contact between the audio describer, creative team and audiences (Benecke 2007: 7). Normally, the audio describer does not have the opportunity to consult with the creative team on how best to present their material to audiences (Romero-Fresco 2019: 4). The creative team, too, are usually unaware of how their work is rendered accessible to audiences, and how these audiences respond to the accessible version of their work (2019: 5). With reference to film, Romero-Fresco highlights the ineffectiveness of this model in which creatives "have no control over […] the accessible versions of their films, no awareness of how their films are translated or rendered accessible or how they are received by […] their sensory impaired audiences" (2019: 5). As an alternative to this practice, Romero-Fresco proposes accessible filmmaking (AFM), which incorporates accessibility into the filmmaking process through the collaboration between creators, translators and consumers of audiovisual content. Romero-Fresco defines AFM as follows:

> AFM is a consideration of translation and/or accessibility during the production of audiovisual media (normally through the collaboration between the creative team and the translator) in order to provide access to content for people who cannot access or have difficulty accessing it in its original format. AFM does not aim to compromise the filmmakers' vision or constrain their freedom. Instead, it reveals to them the unknown aspects of how their films are changed in their translated and accessible versions (2019: 5–6).

In conversations with the author, McLaughlin acknowledged the value in creating access to the PMA video tours, which challenged his own understanding of inclusivity within the archive:

> I think to begin to open this archive to other people, who have different range of abilities […] whether it is deafness, hard-of-hearing, or difficulty in seeing, I think we need to find a way of doing that. And that's completely new agenda for me to consider. […] I've been obsessed with other kinds of issues of access – of inclusivity around prison officers, Loyalists and Republicans, of generational differences […] That is another issue. And so, access in terms of range of abilities is something we most definitely need to take into consideration (McDonagh *forthcoming*).

This sentiment was echoed by the then PMA Project Manager Lorraine Dennis, who emphasised the importance of creating an "inclusive picture of history":

> We know that there were barriers to basic historical information about the conflict. So, that was the one thing in terms of an inclusive picture of history, which ultimately is one of our aims that were able to make that accessible to as many different audiences as possible regardless of communication barriers (McDonagh *forthcoming*).

While the research project described in this article borrows much from Romero-Fresco's collaborative approach (2019), particularly in its engagement with the creative team behind the PMA and end users, it does not neatly fall into the category of AFM because the PMA video tours were

not initially created with accessibility in mind. As discussed by McLaughlin, the video tours were largely improvised, created in between the gaps in filming the main PMA participant recordings:

> [The video tours] were slightly random, in that we began filming the site when we had gaps in the interviews. […] So, for example, [if] a Wednesday afternoon came free […] crew members would go out and they would film. […] Generally, we tried to do a representational coverage. So, we got some H-Blocks. We got some Compounds. We didn't get all of them, but we tried to make sure we got as much as possible (McDonagh *forthcoming*).

One of the initial challenges in writing the scripts of the descriptive guides was determining where each recording took place. When asked about the location of each video tour, McLaughlin acknowledged that information about where these recordings took place was limited:

> I'm not sure we took very good notes of exactly where we were filming and it was slightly random (McDonagh *forthcoming*).

This challenge was further compounded by the prison's standardised layout and structure. On returning to H-Block 4, former prison officer and PMA participant John Hetherington highlights the prison building's monotonous structure in the following remark:

> It's almost true to say, if you've seen one H-Block, you've seen them all (Prisons Memory Archive n.d.).

Nevertheless, by collaborating with PMA participants, all of whom were familiar with M/LK, we could discern the locations of the prison spaces that featured in each video tour. In total, four PMA participants, three of whom were former prisoners (one Loyalist and two Republicans) and one visitor to the prison agreed to take part in the initial script-writing process. PMA participants' motivations to contribute varied, however all highlighted their desire to make the PMA accessible to a wide range of potential audiences. The approach to working with former political prisoners was from the perspective of gathering information about the prison space that featured in each video tour, rather than their involvement in armed groups during the conflict. As such, questions were only used to gather information on the prison space and ask for clarification. PMA participants held a primary advisory role throughout the script-writing process with their participation subject to the same ethical procedures to those who participated in the subsequent reception studies. PMA participants advised on the location of each video tour offering valuable information on the names and functions of the prison space. PMA participants explained the layout of each prison building, as illustrated in the following drawing from one PMA participant, who drew the layout of the H-Block, which is broken up into wings A, B, C and D.
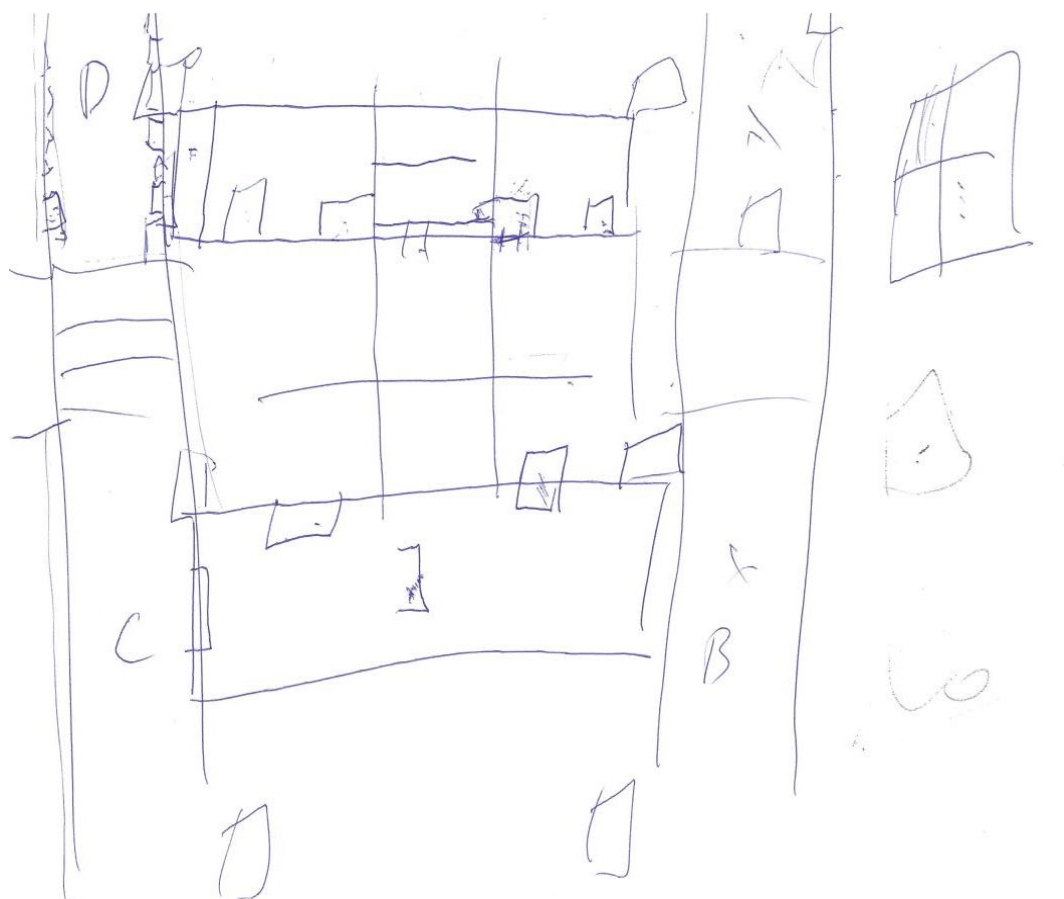
Figure 3: PMA participant drawing of H-Block.

The third and final gap in the maker-expert-user triangle concerns potential end users of the descriptive guides. As previously stated, both blind and partially blind as well as non-blind audiences provided feedback on the various iterations of the descriptive guides in a series of reception studies held between 2017–2019 (McDonagh *forthcoming*). Each reception study acted as a form of quality control, where ideas could be tested out to explore alternative ways of presenting M/LK to audiences. By the end of each reception study, the descriptive guides were subsequently partially revised and rewritten in response to user feedback. The following section presents the results of an exploratory study held in 2017 in Belfast, Northern Ireland. The aim of the exploratory study was to gather feedback from both blind and partially blind as well as non-blind people on the first iteration of the descriptive guides of the PMA video tours, the results of which fed back into the creative process as illustrated in figure 1 and discussed later in Section 5.3.

5. Exploratory study: Methodology

The exploratory study sought to address the following research question: How are the initial drafts of the descriptive guides of the PMA video tours received by both blind and non-blind audiences? In addition to this principal

aim, the purpose of the pilot study was to explore alternative ways of presenting the prison and generate items for a questionnaire for the main reception study (McDonagh *forthcoming*). The methodology of the exploratory study was based on a qualitative approach that made use of focus groups as the main method of data collection. The exploratory study was organised in collaboration with the PMA as part of their event 'Storytelling from Conflict: Lost and Found Stories', which was held in the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland in Belfast on 21 November 2017. Participants were firstly introduced to the concept of audio description and presented with the author's research. The first iteration of the descriptive guides (Compound n.d.; Hospital n.d. and H-Block n.d.) of the PMA video tours were then shown to participants. The screening took approximately 15 minutes, after which participants were divided into seven smaller focus groups of five to six people, with each group assisted by a facilitator who briefed participants on the nature and purpose of this initiative. The questioning route of each focus group was structured around the following eight questions:

1. Did you find these recordings interesting?
2. In order of importance, which of the following do you consider to be the most important [in the descriptive guides]?
    a. Balance
    b. Language
    c. Voice
3. How important is it for the descriptive guides to strike a balance in describing the multiple narrative/stories/perspective associated with the prison? i.e., from former prisoners, prison officers, relatives etc.?
4. How can we achieve balance without prioritising one perspective over another?
5. What are your thoughts on the language and terms used to describe the prison?
6. What are your thoughts on the accents of the speakers of the descriptive guide?
7. What are your thoughts on the combination of both male and female voice in the descriptive guides?
8. Do you think it is important to make this material accessible to different audiences? Which audiences? What do you understand by accessibility more generally?

These questions acted as more of a guide to steer the conversation of each focus group rather than to impose a rigid structure. The focus groups were consequently semi-structured and relied on participants to lead the conversations. Group consensus was not sought. Instead, participants were encouraged to speak freely, with facilitators gathering comments of all on the first iteration of the descriptive guides of the PMA video tours. Responses were recorded on flip charts; post-it notes and audio recordings. Recorded conversations were later transcribed and thematically analysed, which is discussed later in Section 5.2.

5.2. Recruitment of participants in the exploratory study

A convenience sample, drawn from those who took part in the wider 'Storytelling from Conflict: Lost and Found Stories' event, was used in the exploratory study. The rationale for this method of sampling was based on practical concerns related to the geographical proximity and availability of participants. Blind and partially blind people were recruited purposively through local user organisations of the Royal National Institute of Blind People and Guide Dogs. In total, 40 participants took part, ten of whom were blind and partially blind and 30 who were non-blind. All of those who participated in the exploratory study had some interest in the political history of Northern Ireland, and, as such, the sample was not random.

5.2.2 Data analysis

The results of the exploratory study were coded and analysed thematically. In comparison to other qualitative methods, such as grounded theory, interpretative phenomenological or narrative analysis, thematic analysis is relatively flexible in its methodology and applicable across a range of theoretical frameworks (Braun and Clarke 2006: 81). Unlike grounded theory, which strives to generate a theory or model derived from the collated data, I did not seek to generalise the findings of the exploratory study. Nor was I focused on exploring in detail research participants' personal and lived experiences of the conflict in Northern Ireland, as would be the case in interpretative phenomenological and narrative analysis (Smith 2004; Crossley 2000; Kohler Riessman 2012). Instead, I chose thematic analysis because it provided a basis from which to understand the thoughts of those who participated in the exploratory study on the initial draft of the descriptive guides of the PMA video tours, which subsequently fed back into the creative process, as illustrated in Figure 1.

The data analysis comprised of several steps. Firstly, I familiarised myself with the data, after which I generated initial codes of data that were descriptive. In the analysis and coding of focus group findings, I drew from literature in the field of audiovisual translation and media accessibility to identify the principal themes in the data. However, not all research findings corresponded to the literature in the field. Indeed, in some cases, the findings from the exploratory study contradicted some research in the field, particularly around the merits of objectivity, which is discussed in more detail in the next section. I then collated the codes into potential themes and selected the relevant data extract that corresponded to each theme. These units of text were then grouped according to similarities under each code, sub-code, sub-theme and theme, as shown in Table 2. In total, there were 80 units of text from the focus group discussions, which were subsequently grouped into 19 codes, with ten subthemes and two overarching themes.

Unit of text	Coded for	Sub-theme	Theme
"What was missing was an indication of the size and scale of the rooms and the buildings e.g., the length of the corridor and the size of the cells".	Content of descriptive guide.	More description of the prison is needed.	It is important to include more information about the prison and how it was used.

Table 2. Example of thematic data analysis taken from focus group discussions in the exploratory study.

In the analysis of the focus group discussions, I recognise my role as analyst in searching for meaning in the data as well as reporting these themes. Notwithstanding these issues of impartiality, participants did raise points during the focus group discussions that were not anticipated in the data gathering phase, particularly around how to present this material. These suggestions are subsequently included in the results of the exploratory study, which are presented in the next section. A representative sample of participant quotes from the exploratory study is included the results section of this article to illustrate the point made during the focus group discussions, which have been edited for clarity. Full results are available in McDonagh (*forthcoming*).

5.3. Analysis and discussion of the results of the exploratory study

Due to the sampling method, which relied on a convenience sample, the results of the exploratory study are not necessarily generalisable to the wider population of Northern Ireland and should therefore be interpreted with caution. Notwithstanding the limitations of the sampling method, useful conclusions can nevertheless be drawn. Firstly, the results of the exploratory study demonstrated the broad applicability of descriptive guides outside of their primary user group. Non-blind participants found the descriptive guide added focus to their viewing experience of the video tours, while blind and partially blind participants appreciated the level of visual information provided. This is best summarised in the following two quotations, taken from a discussion with one non-blind and one blind participant:

> It was excellent for the sighted as it gave helpful direction and added focus.
> The description of the space guided you through the space (McDonagh *forthcoming*).

As demonstrated in the above examples, the descriptive guides guided and informed sighted participants' own viewing experience, lending focus to the PMA video tours. This demonstrated the broader applicability of audio description outside of its core user group. This finding is consistent with recent research on museum audio description, which demonstrates the

potential of descriptive guides as important engagement tools in museum and heritage sites (Neves 2016, 2018; Eardley *et al.* 2017; Hutchinson and Eardley 2019; Hutchinson 2019).

Nevertheless, while focus group participants appreciated the level of detail and visual information provided in the descriptive guides, they still found them lacking. Many felt the descriptive guides alone could not fully communicate what life was like for those who passed through the prison. According to one non-blind participant:

> [The descriptive guides] were well detailed, however it didn't evoke what life was like there. It was just a sterile description of an empty building in a state of decay (McDonagh *forthcoming*).

This remark offered some insight into how audiences, both blind and non-blind, interpreted the prison, which was from the perspective of what life was like for those inside, rather than how the prison appeared in the PMA video tours. What was most striking about these findings was that blind, partially blind and non-blind participants alike all wanted more mediation rather than less. However, how this could be achieved was less clear (ibid). Nevertheless, the results of the exploratory study provided a useful starting point from which to analyse how the descriptive guides could best meet the needs of their potential users, which were categorised into the following two themes listed in Table 3:

Theme 1	It is important to include more information about the prison and how it was used during its operation
Theme 2	The descriptive guides should include a diverse range of experiences and voices

Table 3. Results of the exploratory study organised according to themes.

While overall exploratory study participants found the video tours with descriptive guides thought provoking, many felt they lacked emotion. Atmosphere and emotion were frequently perceived as absent by participants who noted the descriptive guides were "missing feeling" (McDonagh *forthcoming*). Participants in the exploratory study wanted "more stories about people" such as "prisoners as well as families/relatives and others who visited" (McDonagh *forthcoming*). Participants felt the descriptive guides were overly factual, which underplayed the cultural significance of the prison and its place in the history of Northern Ireland. This overtly factual description can be attributed, in part, to the descriptive approach followed in the early stages of the script-writing process, as discussed earlier in Section 4, which prioritised fidelity to the source text and did not deviate from describing the prison as it appeared in the video tours. Given that participants did not respond well to this approach, a more interpretative descriptive guide that offered additional contextual information as well as integrated PMA participant testimonies was

considered and later applied to the next iteration of the descriptive guides as discussed in Section 6.

Normally, audio describers are advised to refrain from overtly subjective descriptions, with objectivity normally equated with quality (Hutchinson and Eardley 2019: 43). Central to this debate is the extent to which the audio describer interprets the visuals for blind and partially blind audiences, rather than letting them draw their own conclusions based on the visual information provided. According to Snyder, a key proponent of objectivity in audio description:

> The best audio describer is sometimes referred to as a 'verbal camera lens', objectively recounting visual aspects of an event. Qualitative judgements get in the way; they constitute a subjective interpretation on the part of the describer and are unnecessary and unwanted (2014: 43).

Snyder's recommendation against overtly subjective descriptions pervades industry guidelines and professional standards (Ray and Greening 2010). And yet, as Orero points out, objectivity, while desirable, is ultimately unattainable given the intuitive nature of audio description scriptwriting (2008: 180). This, coupled with the subjective way in which we perceive reality casts doubts on Snyder's assertion of objectivity (Holsanova 2016; Fryer 2016: 165). Moreover, what constitutes subjectivity and objectivity is a matter of interpretation. Therefore, any assertion of objectivity is inherently contradictory. Notwithstanding these contradictions, Mazur and Chmiel offer a more nuanced response to the question of interpretation by proposing a scale "with objective and subjective at the two extreme and varying degrees of objectivity and subjectivity in between" (2012: 180). Indeed, this interpretative model was reflected in the comments by participants in the focus groups who considered the descriptive guides "factual and the objectivity was good, but there was no emotive direction", with the suggestion that "a more subjective account might help" (McDonagh *forthcoming*). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the extent to which the descriptive guides could be more subjective or emotive varied among participants. Nevertheless, the suggestion of integrating the perspectives of others in the prison alongside a more interpretative descriptive guide garnered widespread support.

Following this suggestion, personal testimonies taken from the wider PMA archive were later integrated into the descriptive guides, offering audiences personal recollections of the prison space that were rooted in the lived experiences of the prisoners, prison officers and visitors who were detained, worked and visited M/LK as discussed later in Section 6. Indeed, focus group participants were adamant that the inclusion of PMA participant testimonies should be wide-ranging and include those from different political, social and regional backgrounds. Questions of political balance also extended to what to include or exclude from the descriptive guides. An example relevant to this discussion is the reference to the Hunger Strikes of 1981 in the

descriptive guide of the Hospital building. The Hunger Strikes marked a seminal moment in the history of M/LK in which ten men, from the Republican groups of the Provisional Irish Republican Army and the Irish National Liberation Army, died in protest over the British government's decision to withdraw special category status to political prisoners. The Hospital building was the focal point during this tumultuous period and has since become closely tied to the Hunger Strikes and by extension the Republican movement at the expense of other less articulated and more marginalised discourses (Graham and McDowell 2007: 344).

Some focus group participants felt the descriptive guide of the Hospital building was consequently biased towards Republicanism (McDonagh *forthcoming*). This sparked a debate over whether to include or exclude the story of the Hunger Strikes in the Hospital descriptive guide, which presented unique challenges to the translation process that centred on differing and competing understandings of the prison within contemporary Northern Ireland. While omitting information about the Hunger Strikes arguably erases a significant part of the building's history, overemphasis of the Strikes also risks reinforcing the dominant Republican narrative of heroic sacrifice in the face of British duplicity, often expressed through the rhetoric of civil rights, that is prevalent in Republican commemorative discourse (McAtackney 2014: 174; Hopkins 2016: 54; McBride 2017). This narrative of heroism is problematic because it ignores the role Republicans played during the Troubles as one of the main perpetrators of violence (Graham and McDowell 2007: 351–52). In the end, participants in the focus groups proposed including the story of the Hunger Strikes alongside less well-known stories from those who were in the Hospital building:

> It's very important to get the balance right. There was a lot of emphasis on the Hunger Strikes but there are other things that happened (McDonagh *forthcoming*).

This example offers important insights into the ways in which M/LK continues to provoke conflictual readings in Northern Ireland, which in turn, casts doubt on assertions in audio description research to simply describe what you see. Instead, the above example results demonstrate that what we see is not necessarily reducible to the physical space of the prison, but rather incorporates different understandings of the past in Northern Ireland that are often mutually exclusive.

Finally, exploratory participants underscored the importance of accessibility to the PMA video tours by highlighting its role as a tool for inclusion. While discourses around inclusion in Northern Ireland have normally only applied to those from different political constituencies, participants recognised the need for a broader understanding of this concept to include those with different access needs, such as Deaf or hard of hearing and non-English speaking audiences. Here, participants were keen to underscore the broader social benefits of accessibility that gives 'voice' to those who might not otherwise

have access to this material. This, in turn, they argued would facilitate participation in wider discussions on the past in and about Northern Ireland.

> Everyone should be able to access this — especially important cultural issue.
>
> It should be open to the deaf and hard of hearing through sign language and subtitles.
>
> Everyone should have access and a voice (McDonagh *forthcoming*).

6. Lessons learned

After analysing the results of the exploratory study, some revisions were made to the overall design of the descriptive guides of the PMA video tours. Based on the feedback received in the exploratory study, PMA participant recordings were integrated alongside the descriptive guides in each video tour. The integration of PMA participant testimonies alongside the descriptive guides allowed for competing versions of the prison experience to co-exist. The selection included the experiences of people from a range of different constituencies within the prison, such as ex-prisoners (both Loyalist and Republican), prison officers and staff, as well as visitors. In keeping with the PMA ethos of inclusion, the sampling choice followed in this practice included PMA participants from both sides of the community in Northern Ireland.

In selecting PMA participant recordings to include alongside the descriptive guides of the PMA video tours, we presented participant stories side-by-side. For example, the descriptive guide for the final version of the H-Block video tour comprised testimonies from a former loyalist prisoner, a republican prisoner, and a prison officer, each of which tell the story of the building from a different viewpoint. A similar approach was taken in McLaughlin's work prior to the PMA for the film *Inside Stories: Memories from the Maze and Long Kesh Prison* (2004). Of the 175 participant recordings from the PMA, twelve were selected in total. All twelve PMA recordings were then edited down into smaller samples that were integrated into each PMA video tour alongside the descriptive guide. Of the twelve recordings initially selected, seven were eventually integrated into the final versions of the descriptive guides of the PMA video tours, which are now available on the PMA website (McDonagh 2021).

7. Conclusion

This article began with a consideration of the inaccessibility of the video tours of M/LK. As one of the main sites of imprisonment during the Troubles, the prison remains a divisive symbol of Northern Ireland's recent past. Creating the descriptive guides of the PMA video tours therefore necessitated a collaborative approach that involved the input of PMA creative team, PMA participants and blind, partially blind and non-blind audiences. By engaging with creators and end users, we demonstrated the potential of accessible content as an alternative way of engaging people of

all abilities with the past. As evidenced in the results of the exploratory study, blind, partially blind and non-blind participant all benefited from the inclusion of the descriptive guides. Indeed, sighted participants input also offered some valuable insights into what to focus on in each PMA video tour as well as how to communicate the story of M/LK within the broader context of Northern Ireland. As someone who did not grow up in Northern Ireland or have first-hand experience of the conflict, I came to view the results of the exploratory study as an important resource to draw on in the development of each descriptive script, which then fed back into the creative process. Due to the contentiousness of the prison, many of the norms governing audio description were not equipped to deal with the complexity of the source material. This necessitated a collaborative approach that invited end users and creators to share in the creative process.

While the example of M/LK is extreme, it nevertheless demonstrated the challenges contending narratives pose to accessibility professionals and translators more generally. As with any project engaging with such a polarising subject matter, the descriptive guides of the PMA video tours lead to a reckoning with some of the cultural sensitivities at play in discussions about the past in Northern Ireland that captured the different ways in which the past is understood. What is included or indeed excluded from the descriptive guides carries significant ideological weight. This emphasis on the ideological and political feeds back into wider societal debates over issues of representation, particularly of minority or marginalised groups within society. Considering these conversations, there are still gaps in knowledge on some of the ethical implications of how audiovisual content is selected and subsequently described. Moreover, translation strategies put forward in audio description guidelines, mostly for film, tend towards an ahistorical reading of an audiovisual text that privileges a structuralist approach, which derives meaning from the systemic relationships between the various semiotic codes that make up an audiovisual text (Delabastita 1990; Braun 2011; Vercauteren 2012; Neves 2014).

How the audio describer communicates information — through their word choice, detailed descriptions, or delivery — invariably impacts on how audiences understand and interpret the audiovisual text — whether intentional or not. While issues of linguistic and cultural representation have been examined in dubbing and subtitling (Díaz Cintas 2012; Díaz Cintas *et al.* 2016; Ranzato and Zanotti 2018), the topic has only recently garnered serious academic attention in AD research. The question of how audio description and media accessibility more generally can responsibly and effectively deal with issues of representation is therefore a topic that demands further investigation. This article marks a first step towards critically analysing the role of the audio describer in shaping the translation and reception of multimodal texts, which in turn, has implications for how audiences come to view individuals, social groups and historical events within wider society.

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Data Availability Statement

This data is openly available from 31 December 2022 via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal, at: https://pure.qub.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/audio-describing-the-maze-and-long-kesh-prison.

Biography

Sarah McDonagh is a postdoctoral researcher at Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. Sarah's current research centres on accessibility to digital heritage, sustainability and designing accessible applications and digital platforms for people of varying abilities. She is a member of the Transmedia Catalonia Research Group, IATIS, EST and ESIST.

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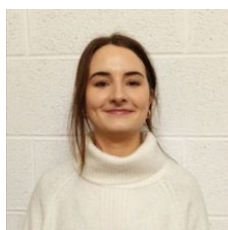
Notes

[1] In line with the VocalEyes report on diversity (Hutchinson *et al.* 2020) rather than use the term 'sighted' to refer to people who are not blind, I have chosen instead to use the term 'non-blind'. This choice aims to re-centre discussions about people "for whom audio description is primarily designed" (2020: 5). In this regard, I am keen to avoid framing blindness within the medical model of disability, preferring instead to centre my discussion of blindness within the social model of disability, as advanced in the writings of Michel Oliver (1990, 1996) and Georgina Kleege (2018).

[2] This overview is by no means exhaustive. For a more in-depth historical overview of the Troubles, see McDonagh (*forthcoming*).

[3] Academics have distinguished between two traditions within Ulster Unionism: Ulster Loyalists and British Unionist (Todd 1987; Byrne and O'Malley 2013). Some have questioned whether the two groups evolved in different migratory patterns to Ulster during the 1600s between English (mainly Episcopalians) and Scottish (mainly Presbyterians) settlers (Byrne and O'Malley 2013: 131). While religion is an important differentiating factor between the two traditions, it is not the only one. Other factors, such as class and educational background also contribute to the constitution of both identities, which are constantly evolving, both in relation to one another and in response to Irish nationalism.

[4] Critics of the ethno-nationalist paradigm argue that its conceptual simplicity frames the Troubles as a conflict between two intransigent groups with competing religious and political ideologies (Vaughan-Williams 2006). While this binarism is hard to dispute, this conceptual framing ignores the ambiguous identities of those who engaged in the conflict (2006: 517–18). Nevertheless, the ethno-nationalist paradigm is acknowledged in the day-to-day workings of the Northern Irish State in which legislative power is shared between unionist and nationalist communities, as per the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, with members of the Assembly required to declare whether they are Unionist or Nationalist on election (Tonge 2004).

[5] Internment involved the mass arrest and imprisonment without trial of 1,981 people (mostly men) suspected of membership of paramilitary organisations. Of the 1,981 interned, 1,874 were Catholic, while 107 were Protestant (CAIN Web Service 2022).

[6] Special category status recognised those convicted of conflict-related offences as "de facto prisoners of war" (McEvoy 2001: 217), which granted certain privileges, such as the right to wear their own clothes and exception from prison work.