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LONG PAPER

Accessing access: the importance of pre-visit information to the attendance of people with sight loss at live audio described events

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Abstract
Tourism scholars propose that lack of knowledge is a major barrier for people with a disability. This article makes links between accessible tourism and quality in media accessibility provision. It explores the importance for people with sight loss of access to *x* once *x* has been made accessible. It reports data from a survey relating to the use of and appetite for access information (termed here pre-visit information) provided as part of an audio introduction by the UK charity VocalEyes (VE) for users of audio description services at live events. The majority of participants found the access information useful or very useful. 40% reported using the access information for some shows, 13% for most and 26% for every show. The prospect of VE withdrawing access information left 71% of respondents feeling unhappy to some degree. The study suggests that barriers to access can be overcome through the provision of appropriate verbal information. This needs to be rich, reliable and reflect an understanding of the needs of its target users. This research supports theoretical overlaps between accessible tourism and media accessibility (MA) as well as calls to expand the domain of MA beyond the boundaries of translation studies where it currently resides.

Keywords Media accessibility · Accessible tourism · Blindness · Audio description · Information

1 Introduction

To date most research in MA relating to quality has been concerned with the best way in which to make the source text accessible to people with a sensory impairment. The aim of this article is to widen that focus. In his seminal article, Greco (p. 207) [1] points out that "the use of the formula 'the right to access to *x*' instead of 'the right to *x*' has been steadily increasing in international texts and human rights treaties" This is in recognition of the fact that "simply providing *x* is not sufficient if the means to access it is not also provided. Such access means being able to use, interact with, and enjoy that good". Greco then outlines the importance of ICT in delivering such access, and how the availability of online information divides languages into those that are well provided for and those that are not i.e. those that are "information rich and information poor" with regard to online content and services. The purpose of this article is to illustrate that this division is not solely determined by language. Even within a language that is as information rich as English, there is a lack of some very basic information to aid accessibility provision, for those with sensory impairments such as low vision or blindness. This article reports the results of a survey relating to the use of and appetite for access information provided by the UK charity VocalEyes (VE) for users of live audio description (AD) services. Consequently, supporting data comes from the UK, to set the case in context. The access information of concern can be called pre-visit information to distinguish it from the access created for the product itself. The need for it echoes Romero Fresco's call to embrace "a wide notion of media accessibility (MA)" [2]. Although Romero Fresco wants to widen the remit of MA beyond its primary audience of people with sensory or physical disabilities (PWD) this article focuses on the needs of people with sight loss (PSL) while calling for the focus to spread beyond accessible media to embrace access to accessible media. It makes links between theatregoers with disabilities and tourists with disabilities and stresses the importance of collaboration to supply the

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former with relevant information. It outlines the constituent parts of an Access Script before using the survey results to illustrate how barriers to participation may be overcome with the provision of appropriate verbal information and how that, in turn, impacts on MA quality. Romero-Fresco talks of the need for MA to have a house of its own, rather than simply a room in the house of translation studies. This article calls for describing the MA house and providing AD users with its address and postcode as well as assuring them of a warm welcome when they arrive.

Michopoulou, Darcy, Ambrose, and Buhalis [3] illustrate the link between Articles 9 and 30 of the United Nations [4] Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) i.e. "the right for tourists with disability to access transport and the built environment" and the right "to enjoy access to television programmes, films, theatre and other cultural activities, in accessible formats". This present article links Articles 9 and 30 in relation to one accessible format in theatre. It argues that making theatre accessible through the provision of audio description (AD) is not sufficient if the means to access that provision is not also provided. This does not necessarily mean physically providing transport such as a minibus or organising a coach party rather it means making information available about existing transport provision and by describing the route and the appearance and layout of the theatre and its environs. Such information may not be as "sexy" or interesting to provide as creating the AD for the performance itself which may be one reason it has not been addressed to date in the literature on MA. However, it is easy to see that concern with the minutiae of how to describe becomes irrelevant if AD users cannot easily reach the venue where the AD is taking place. It will be argued that as theatre is a cultural activity that may require a trip to an unfamiliar place, it is akin to tourism. Consequently, the literature from the tourism industry will be referenced to show that theatregoers and tourists have common requirements even when the theatregoer is attending a performance in an unfamiliar part of their home city. It will be further argued that theatregoers with disabilities, like tourists with disabilities, have a greater need for information than their able-bodied counterparts. Having shown that both theatregoers with disabilities and tourists with disabilities are currently "information poor," this article will demonstrate what type of information is required to redress the balance and the extent to which that information is valued.

1.1 MA and tourism

Unlike screen AD which may or may not involve a trip outside the home, AD of live events almost invariably does so, requiring people who are blind or have low vision to venture out to a theatre, a circus tent or a museum in order to access the cultural content. For this reason, this article draws on literature from the tourism industry. Tourism is not simply confined to going on holiday. Alén, Domínguez, and Losada [5] state that:

> Accessible tourism can be defined as the variety of activities occurring during the free time devoted to tourism by people with restricted capacities, which enables them to fully integrate their functional and psychological perspectives and achieve individual satisfaction and social development.

It follows then that audience members with disabilities share with disabled tourists the need for prior information about their destination and the journey they will need to undertake to reach it.

Pagán [6] found that owing to difficulties encountered in travelling "disabled people are more likely to be non-participants in the tourism industry than their non-disabled counterparts". In the UK, 7% of theatregoers have a disability [6]. This compares with 16% of the UK's adult population and suggests that People with Disabilities (PWD) are under-represented in theatre audiences. While it cannot be argued that all of the UK population are theatregoers, it suggests that 91% of the UK's population has access to theatre and other cultural activities (the 84% who are not disabled plus the 7% of PWD who currently attend) a figure which should be 100% if the UNCRPD is to be observed. This discrepancy is recognised by Arts Council England [7] who state "Theatres struggle to reach audiences with disabilities."

In line with the social model of disability [8–10] three main types of barrier have been identified that inhibit equal participation. These are environmental, including attitudinal, architectural, and ecological factors; interactive barriers relating to skill challenge incongruities and communication barriers; and intrinsic barriers associated with each individual's level of physical, psychological, or cognitive function. It will be argued here that lack of knowledge about wayfinding is another barrier that needs to be removed, especially for People with Sight Loss (PSL) following the psychologist J.J. Gibson's assertion that wayfinding is the primary affordance of sight i.e. "to see things is to see how to get about among them" [11].

2 Rethinking audio introductions

This section examines two types of information that are currently supplied in an Audio Introduction (AI) that is provided when PSL book tickets for an audio described show. The section distinguishes between the "pre-show" and "pre-visit" information and will argue that the pre-visit information has generally been overlooked in the AVT literature yet is crucial for removing wayfinding knowledge barriers for PSL. It is the content of this pre-visit information that was

the subject of the VE access survey, as the company sought to ensure it was providing necessary and desirable information rather than overwhelming its audience with information they did not require.

VE has traditionally provided information about the venue as part of the AI. AIs are also known as introductory notes or programme notes [12] and are recorded on CD and posted out to AD users when they book their ticket. AIs have been considered to date in relation to their function and the type of information they convey to PSL. Fryer and Romero-Fresco, [13] cite Remael and Reviers [14] who distinguish five functions of AIs:

> a general function in creating a framework by which to understand the play; an information function providing relevant details from the printed programme such as running time, cast and production credits, as well as detailed descriptions of the set, costumes and characters, and if necessary the point-of-view of the audience; a foreshadowing function that prepares the user for the AD by providing a fuller description of particular visual elements than is possible during the show itself; an explanatory or expressive function that describes the nature of the production, for example whether the actors perform in a naturalistic or deliberately stylised manner, and whether scene changes are marked by a blackout or flow seamlessly from one to the next; and finally an instructive function where the describers may prepare users to, for example, increase the volume of their AD headset in parts of the show where there is loud music.

It should be noted that this instructive function might also replicate environmental information such as signs displayed in the foyer, warning users about hazards during the performance such as strobe lighting, smoke effects and gunshots.

Most of this may be thought of as *pre-show* information i.e. information that augments and supports the AD performance and consequently the AD users' enjoyment of a specific production. Yet the function of the AI that is the subject of this article could be termed pre-visit information. It is access information that for the most part is independent of the production. Its aim is to provide geographical and physical context and practical information about the venue including its location, how to get there and what to expect when you arrive, as well as more descriptive information about the appearance and layout of the theatre building. An AI combining both the pre-show and pre-visit information is designed to give users independence not just in accessing the production but also in getting to the theatre where the AD is taking place. As Khalil and Fathy note "the availability of information on accessible destinations plays a vital role in increasing tourism opportunities for disabled potential tourists" (p. 196) [15]. They emphasise the informational needs of the disabled traveller, arguing that "the disabled tourist looks for the crucial five components of informational needs; richness and reliability of information, appropriate travel information sources, communication and customer-oriented services" [ibid.]. These factors will be returned to and discussed in relation to the VE survey. Similarly, shapearts, a disability-led arts organisation in the UK, list the following barriers to accessing theatre: "transportation issues, price of tickets, lack of information and support at venues" [16].

2.1 The importance of collaboration

Michopolou et al. recognise the importance of collaboration if people with disabilities (PWD) are "to function independently and with equity and dignity through the delivery of universally designed tourism products, services and environments" [3]. The pre-visit information in AIs provided by VE is also known as an access script. It is created in conjunction with the venue that completes a pro-forma access questionnaire, provided by VE, creating a basic framework from which the access script is prepared. This is usually done by the VE editor. More detail of content is given in Sect. 3 and the questionnaire is included in the Appendix. Collaboration is necessary as staff may be the ones with the best knowledge of their venue, compared with an external describer who may only visit once or twice to prepare the AD. By contrast, describers have been trained to be aware of the type and quality of information needed by PSL. The assumption that visual awareness training is lacking for venue staff is borne out by the EU-funded ACT (Access to Culture and Training) project which aims to develop a certified training course for arts managers and other interested parties. ACT found "there is very little [accessibility] training across the partner countries" [17]. Furthermore, "there are (sic) a high percentage of venues with no training at all. For example, in Belgium and Austria over 50 per cent of venues have no training". The most important stakeholders in accessibility i.e. AD users, are missing from this current model of collaboration. While this is regrettable, it is typical of the marginalisation of PWD, as found by Nyanjom Boxall, and Slaven [18]. Qualitative comments from the survey reported in this article allow the voices of some users to be heard.

3 Creating an access script

The structure of an access script follows the logic of a visit. Consequently, venues are prompted to supply information according to the access questionnaire that is divided into 4 sections. These are labelled: Getting there; Arrival, Inside the venue; Further information and contact numbers. Each section is explored further below and it is to be noted how these sections correspond to the needs categories proposed

by Eichhorn, et al. [19] i.e. richness and reliability of information, appropriate travel information sources, communication and customer-oriented services.

3.1 Getting there: travel information

This section of the access questionnaire asks venues to supply the venue address and postcode and "detail all public transport links (bus and tram stops, train and underground stations—and which lines or services stop at each)". Information on how to get a taxi (either from a rank, or by providing numbers to local services) is also requested. According to Woldeamanuel and Cyganski, "to those with limited mobility public transportation accessibility is a significant quality-related characteristic and a determinant factor for their decision on usage" (p. 2) [20]. However, as there are many other ways of accessing this information, it was thought that this might be the least valued by AD users.

3.2 Arrival

The second section of the access questionnaire, entitled Arrival, asks venues to provide a description of the building exterior. This is in order to help people with residual vision to identify the venue. Over half of the shows described by VE take place in London where, particularly in the West End, theatres are cheek by jowl. It can be easy to walk into the wrong theatre by mistake because the show hoarding may not be visible to the user. It also requests details of parking facilities for people arriving by car, and particularly information about parking spaces reserved for Blue Badge holders, or other schemes that benefit PWD, such as reduced parking charges. Taxi drop-off points are also requested, as is a description of the front entrance. This is quite detailed, with venues prompted to include information about the built environment such as steps, ramps to the door, and door type (automatic, revolving, push or pull to open), weight (i.e. if heavy) and material (glass, wood, etc.). This is so that people can know in advance how a door works—for example, revolving doors can pose difficulties for PSL [21] particularly for guide dog users.

3.3 Inside the venue

Having arrived at the venue and made it through the doors, the third section of the access questionnaire asks about the environment inside. Venues are prompted to warn if there are steps or stairs (and whether up or down) soon inside the entrance; Describe the foyer, lifts, stairs and wheelchair access as well as the location and description of the Information desk / Box office.

Venues are also asked to "note changes in light levels as you go between different spaces (outside/inside and between internal spaces) and identify where the light source is, if it is strong (e.g. from a glass roof, or wall)". The questionnaire justifies its request thus: "Many people who have a visual impairment are affected by changes in light level and need more time to adjust, than those who don't." Although much of the information requested is visual, it is not exclusively so. Details are also requested about sound (noise and/or music). Again the questionnaire gives an explanation "At theatres, the foyer may be multi-use, with box office and bar both in the space, and noise levels of conversation raised over the background music can together be quite overwhelming. Warn people about different sources of noise, and if this is high at particular times (e.g. during the interval)".

From features of the environment, the questionnaire moves on to ask about customer service provision, specifically how to access assistance: "Let visitors know where they will be able to find front of house/visitor staff, and how to identify them (T-shirts, other uniform, badges)." Functional information is also requested and again a justification given: "What time do the doors open? Theatres can get very busy before their evening performances, and some blind or partially sighted patrons like to arrive early before the rush, get their bearing and get a drink at the bar".

Venues are also asked to provide information about toilets, including accessible toilets as well as the location and details of refreshment facilities (cafés, restaurants).

While the above information might be of help to any visitor, some is specifically of relevance to some (but not all) PSL. For example, information for guide dog owners such as the provision and location of water bowls, any nearby toileting areas for dogs and whether or not guide dogs can be taken into the auditorium or a sitting service is provided whereby theatre staff can look after guide dogs during the performance, if owners prefer.

3.4 Further information and contact numbers

The final section asks for information specifically for patrons using the AD service and provides a sample statement for venues to personalise.

> At the X Theatre guide dogs are welcome, although the theatre does not have any facilities for looking after guide dogs during performances. Guide dogs may stay with their owners in the auditorium. If you are bringing a Guide Dog and have not already informed the theatre, or if you require any further information before your visit, please [insert telephone number] between the hours of 10am and 8pm. Provide telephone number and email address for access contacts at the venue. Often these are named individuals such as the Access Officer or the Box office manager.

Once the details from the questionnaire have been written up into a coherent script designed to be listened to rather than read, this is recorded. The recording and its transcript are uploaded to the VE website and a CD of the recording is mailed out to people who book to see the audio described performance of the show. Access scripts usually take approximately 3 min to listen to, compared with 12 min of pre-show information, corresponding to about a quarter of the CD's total running time, although the length of the pre-show information might vary.

The pre-show information is read out live at the start of the described performance (usually 15 min before curtain up) [22] and might be adapted, shortened or updated but as the pre-visit information is no longer relevant it is discarded from the script at this point. The pre-visit information is only likely to change if a theatre is moved or refurbished. Consequently, the recording is retained and added to audio introductions for future described performances at the same venue.

4 The survey

It is evident from the above that not only is the questionnaire designed to elicit information from the venue, it also provides the venue with information about the needs of PSL. It is highly detailed, designed to draw out information that will reassure as well as inform the AD user, a necessary feature to encourage participation [23]. But is there a danger of overburdening the venue by asking for too much information? Or of over-burdening the user with too much detail?

In 2017, VE decided to review the content of its access scripts, in order to understand which parts of the access information are valued and to learn more about how the information is accessed. Consequently an online survey was created. Participants were asked to rate how useful they found the information in general as well as which specific elements they appreciated. Participants were also asked demographic questions including age, whether they were registered blind or partially sighted, as well as about their use of VE AD services in general and the access information specifically. Participants were also invited to comment on their use of pre-visit information. They gave their consent by proceeding with the survey which was conducted before the implementation of the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). The results are reported below.

4.1 Participants

The link to the questionnaire was circulated to people on the VE database and via the VE newsletter. Participation was voluntary. As a result, the sample was self-selecting. This may be regarded as a limitation, although as answering the questionnaire required experience of VE access notes, it would have made no sense to try to reach a broader sample. The questionnaire was available for three months, between March and May 2017.

Table 1 Age of participants

Age Category	Frequency	Percent
18—24	3	5.6
25–34	10	18.5
35–44	6	11.1
45–54	9	16.7
55–64	10	18.5
65 +	16	29.6
Total	44	100

Table 2 How often do you Attend?

How often do you Attend?	Frequency	Percent
Every few years	4	7.4
Every 6 months	32	59.3
Once a month	13	24.1
More than once a month	3	5.6
Once a Year	2	3.7
Total	54	100

4.2 Results

A total of 54 responses was received. With around 2500 people on the database, this represents an extremely high rate of non-response (c. 98%). However in terms of a study with PSL, the actual number was unusually large. Cattaneo and Vecchi [24] reviewed 43 such studies and none had greater participant numbers. Responses came from across all age groups from 18–24 to 65 plus. The results are shown in Table 1. The highest proportion, 16 people (29.6%), fell into the oldest age group. This is not surprising given that in the UK blind population overall, 79% of people with sight loss are aged over 64 [25]; 43 participants (79.6%) declared themselves to be registered blind; 9 were registered partially sighted (16.7%); 2 were not blind, but answering on behalf of someone who was. One person commented: "I accompany a blind friend, and we use the information if the site is unfamiliar"; 12 (22%) of the 54 participants were guide dog users.

4.2.1 Visit frequency

Participants were given six options to elicit how often they attended performances audio described by VE. These ranged from "never" to "once every few years" to "more than once a

Table 3 Do you attend on your own or with others?

Do you Attend…	Frequency	Percent
On my own	1	1.9
With friends/family	43	79.6
It varies	10	18.5
Total	54	100

Table 4 How often do you use the venue access information?

Frequency of use	Frequency	Percent
Never	11	20.4
For some shows	43	40.7
For most shows	10	13
For every show	14	25.9
Total	54	100

month". The results are shown in Table 2. The most common answer regarding frequency of attendance was "once every 6 months" (59.3%). Around a quarter of respondents (13 or 24%) attended "once a month". One participant complained "there is no category for me to answer. I might use AD 10 times a year or more or less depending what I book from your list".

4.2.2 Visit type

Participants were asked whether they attended a performance on their own, with friends or family or whether it varied from show to show. The results are shown in Table 3. Only 1 participant attended alone and the majority (43 or 79.6%) attended with friends or family; 10 (18.5%) replied that it varied.

4.2.3 Frequency of use of the access information

In terms of frequency of use of the pre-visit information (see Table 4) 43 participants (40.7%) reported using the access information for some shows; 10 (13%) for most and 14 (25.9%) for every show. 11 people (20.4%) replied that they never used it. These participants were dropped from the rest of the analysis leaving responses from 43 people.

4.2.4 Usefulness of the access information

Using a 1–5 Likert scale labelled at each end where 1 = not at all useful and 5 = very useful, 16 (38.1%) participants awarded it a 4 (useful) and 18 (42.9%) found it very useful. Only one participant rated it as not at all useful. One participant failed to complete this question. Results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5 How useful do you use find the venue access information?

Usefulness of the pre-visit info	Frequency	Percent
1″Not at all useful"	1	2.4
2	3	7.1
3	4	9.5
4	16	38.1
5 "Very useful"	18	42.9
Total	42	100

Table 6 Responses to "Which aspect of the access information do you appreciate?"

Item	Count
Public transport links	44
Venue address	38
Venue postcode	31
Parking facilities	29
Venue telephone number	28
Taxi contact numbers	25
Information about guide dogs	22
Description of the foyer	17
Description of the building exterior	16
Information about refreshment facilities	12
Description of the auditorium	11
Information about accessible toilets	11

4.2.5 Degree of detail

Respondents were asked to assess the amount of detail provided in the Access notes. Possible responses included "not nearly enough"; "not quite enough"; "just about right"; "slightly too much" and "far too much" detail. Fewer than 2% said there was far too much and 6% thought there was slightly too much while 6% thought there was not quite enough and 2% agreed there was not nearly enough. Most respondents (36 or 66.7%) agreed it was about right.

4.2.6 Content appreciation

Further questions asked which types of information the participants found most useful and which they could do without. These were positive and negative ways of asking the same question. In answer to "which of these do you appreciate (multiple answers possible)", public transport links received the highest number of counts (44). The lowest number of counts (11) was received for the description of

the auditorium and for information about accessible toilets. In terms of appreciation, types of information were ranked in the order reported in Table 6.

4.2.7 Manner of accessing the pre-visit information

In order to understand how best to supply the pre-visit information, the participants were asked how they accessed it; 19 respondents said they listened to the notes from the VE website and 17 downloaded the notes as a word document; 32 used the CD.

4.2.8 Correlations with participant characteristics

There was a significant positive correlation between severity of sight condition and whether or not the access notes were downloaded as a word document ($R=0.326$, $p=0.03$), as well as a negative correlation between whether or not the access notes were downloaded as a word document and whether or not a respondent attended on their own $R=-0.024$, $p=0.024$. A significant negative correlation was found between how useful participants found the information and whether or not it provided enough detail $R=-426$. $p=0.009$. A significant negative correlation was also found between how often a participant used the information and whether or not it provided enough detail $R=-331$. $p=0.043$. These results are discussed in Sect. 5.

4.2.9 Withdrawing pre-visit information

VocalEyes wanted to ascertain that they were providing AD users with the information that they wanted. Consequently, the respondents were asked "If VocalEyes stopped providing venue access information, how would you feel on a scale of 1–5, where 1 is very unhappy, and 5 is very happy?" 4 people failed to answer this question. The results are shown in Table 6: 23 people (59%) said they would feel either unhappy or very unhappy; 16 people (41%) would feel neither happy nor unhappy. No one would feel either happy or very happy. These results are shown in Table 7.

Table 7 If VocalEyes stopped providing venue access information, how would you feel?

If VE stopped provision	Frequency	Percent
1 "very unhappy"	12	30.8
2	11	28.2
3	16	41
4	16	38.1
5 "Very happy"	0	0
Total	39	100

4.2.10 Qualitative comments

The final question allowed participants to comment freely. Their responses relate not only to the five components of informational needs referred to above, i.e. richness and reliability of information, appropriate travel information sources, communication and customer-oriented services, but also to independence and reassurance. These comments have been incorporated into the discussion below.

5 Discussion

Eleven (20.4%) of the original 54 participants stated they never used the access notes. Qualitative responses revealed a number of reasons for this, including the user's location or preferred venue being out of VE's range of operations, the CDs (on which the information is recorded) not arriving in time for the show and personal circumstances as the following comments illustrate:

- "My partner is sighted, so don't use the access info"
- "VocalEyes don't operate in my area. When I have received their CDs they were always too late to be useful."
- "I have never received information prior to my visit "
- "I would generally have booked by phone and I would enquire at this point."
- "Familiar with local theatre."

This last comment suggests that the similarity between tourists and theatregoers proposed in the introduction applies when a destination is unfamiliar. A similar distinction might be made about the type and amount of information required by tourists between those for whom a destination is familiar and those considering travelling to a place for the first time. Participants who never used the pre-visit information were excluded from the rest of the analysis. One limitation is that by removing the people who never use the access information, those who found it least useful are under-represented, although 4 such respondents failed to explain why they never used it and it is hard to see the relevance on their thoughts on aspects of a service they never use. After their removal, 43 participants remained of whom 34 (79%) found the information useful or very useful. Reasons cited for this include: "This is extremely helpful to my son who can get anxious about new spaces. Going through it in advance helps him a lot"; "I appreciate any information which gives me independence and the ability to interact with my companions".

A significant negative correlation was found between how useful a participant found the information and whether or not it provided enough detail. This was negative because of the way the data was coded with 1 being not nearly enough

detail and 5 being far too much whereas its usefulness was measured using a 1–5 Likert scale where 1 is not at all and 5 is very useful. 31 participants rated it as useful or very useful, of whom 25 (78%) rated the degree of detail as about right. A significant negative correlation was also found between how often a participant used the information and whether or not it provided enough detail. This would appear to be negative because no one who used the pre-visit information for most or every show felt it had too much detail. There was a tendency for those who used it for every show to think the amount of detail it provided was about right or not quite enough.

That 81% of respondents found the pre-visit information either useful or very useful supports findings in the tourism literature that for PWD, "the provision of information about the state of accessible features at the destination represents a key functional need" [19]. Access providers, such as venues, should note "the fulfillment of these needs becomes particularly crucial within the pre-travel phase as it determines whether tourism remains an abstract concept or individuals become actively engaged in tourism" [19]. A report into ways technology can support independent travel in the UK [26] also found "Uncertainty about any aspect of travel can deter someone from making a trip." That the pre-visit information was appreciated for making travellers with sight loss feel more secure was confirmed by additional comments. "I feel more confident, if I know the layout of the place I am going." "It is really helpful to have an idea of the theatre location, nearest tube station, buses that go there and facilities at the theatre when visiting a new theatre."

Even such basic details as the venue address, postcode and telephone number were highly appreciated. The expectation that this would be the type of information readily available elsewhere and consequently the least valued by AD users was not supported. In the pre-visit information details about accessible toilets and a description of the auditorium were deemed to be the least useful. The former might be because accessible toilets are most useful to people with a physical rather than a sensory impairment and the latter because the essence of a show is not affected by the design of the auditorium or because by the time you reach the auditorium you have arrived at your destination and will be guided to your seat by an usher. As mentioned above, over half of VE described shows take place in London where parking is difficult and public transport relatively plentiful. This is reflected in the appreciation of information about public transport links by all participants. This is in line with Woldeamanuel and Cyganski's findings for tourists with disabilities [20] referred to in the introduction. This might also be seen as demonstrating a desire for independent travel or is perhaps related to cost. The Department for Work and Pensions found that "Employment rates are lower for people with sight loss relative to the average person in the UK" [27] with a likely effect of reduced income. While schemes are available in the some London boroughs to subsidise taxi costs, public transport is free for PWD. Interestingly, 22 respondents appreciated information about guide dogs even though only 9 respondents were guide dog users. It is possible that PSL were thinking about the needs of others. As one person commented in general about the pre-visit information "Even if I don't use it—other people will benefit". Alternatively, it might be reassuring to know that a venue has the needs of PSL in mind.

The degree of (un) happiness at the prospect of VE withdrawing access information was strongly skewed towards the unhappy end of the spectrum. This is not surprising given that those who never used the pre-visit information had been removed from the analysis. However, qualitative comments illustrate the depth of feeling better than the quantitative data:

- "What a backward step that would be!"
- "There isn't a way to get it. I've tried in other places. Theatres will try to help but they are busy and do not understand the problems."
- "I can Google most of the information but it's still useful to have it all in one place. A description of the exterior and interior of the building is more difficult to come across though."
- Phoning is hit and miss and I would then have to relay the information to my son, he would lose the independent access he gets to the information through you. He really values this."

In terms of accessing the AI, more participants (32) listened to the notes on the CD mailed to them by VE compared with the number listening to the notes online (17), while 17 people downloaded the notes as a word document (multiple answers were allowed). These responses do not necessarily reflect preference. The CD was seen as the least reliable method. As one person stated: "I prefer the audio CD but this doesn't always arrive in time or with very short notice." Another commented "I download them [the AIs] so I don't miss out" A third wrote: "I have attended many vocalise (sic) audio descriptive (sic), however I've only received a CD wants [once]". However, downloading was also seen as more flexible. "This (downloading) is the most flexible way to access the information and read it wherever I wish." The majority of respondents (24) at least sometimes use the online resource. This may seem surprising given the elderly age profile of the sample and considering the extra challenges that visual impairment poses to computer use [28]. It is also surprising that the manner in which the information was accessed did not vary significantly across age categories. Okonji Jibogu

and Akinsola cite evidence that "the perceived relevance and benefits of technology use are an important decisional factor among many older people in whether or not to use the internet" [28]. This could be seen as evidence of the importance the participants place on accessing the AIs although it is not possible to separate out the role played by the pre-visit compared with the pre-show information. As one person stated "I very much appreciate all the information. It does improve so much the enjoyment of any show or performance. It gives me a real feeling of participation." Eichhorn and colleagues suggest "Many citizens with access requirements follow a multi-source planning approach because the quality of information given in single sources is usually insufficient, only partially accurate or inaccessible" [19]. VE AIs appear to be appreciated precisely because they provide a "one-stop shop" as attested to in participants' comments: "Having the relevant information all in one place and accessible is really appreciated." "Websites are simply too difficult and/or use too much of my energy to access, so I very much prefer a CD, which I often copy on an SD card, to play on my pocket player, without being restricted to a specific location."

The results from the VE survey support findings from tourism data that information needs to be rich, if by rich is meant plentiful. As for reliability, the prospect of VE stopping providing access information left 29% of respondents feeling neither happy nor unhappy whereas the remainder (71%) were all unhappy to some degree. No one expressed joy at the prospect of the access information being withdrawn. Although 37 respondents reported they would rely on friends and family and a further 30 would telephone the theatre (multiple responses were allowed), the prospect wasn't always relished. Respondents commented:

- "The kind of information I most need is only available by other people speaking it to me e.g. description of auditorium and this can be very hit or miss when people haven't been given any awareness training."
- "Usually, the telephone access line for the data is rarely answered therefore it can be difficult trying to contact."
- "I'd feel left out"
- "I have only so far attended two AD theatre events both of which were enormously enhanced by AD and access information. It transforms the theatre experience."
- "Phoning is hit and miss and I would then have to relay the information to my son, he would lose the independent access he gets to the information through you. He really values this."
- "Having to rely on others emphasises a feeling of being dependent"

One participant commented that in the absence of access information they "Probably wouldn't go."

These comments underline the emphasis attached to reliability that has been reported in tourism research, which found "the lack of reliability is one of the major causes that prevent disabled people from traveling" [23]. They suggest reliability concerns knowing for certain not only that the information will be provided but that it contains appropriate content that meets people's needs. The comments also further support the finding by McKercher et al. that mainstream channels have a "deficient understanding of the particular needs of disabled people" [29] and that PSL value the independence enabled by the access information. The recognition that the access information needs to be tailored to the requirements of PSL also support Fryer's suggestion that "The expertise of the describer is recognised in terms of knowledge of their audience and selecting from the range of visual information available" [30].

6 MA and quality

To date most research in media accessibility (MA) relating to quality has been concerned with making the source text (i.e. the AV production) accessible to people with a sensory impairment. For example, Orero and Matamala [31] detail the guideline proposed on AD to the ISO (International Standardisation Organisation) thus "how to develop an audio description, the styles of narration, the levels of importance, and how to describe relevant sounds and text on screen. Specific guidance on how to describe objects, characters, spatio-temporal settings and relationships". Yet the research presented here suggests, in line with Greco [1] that the quality of the accessible product is only as important as the quality of the means provided to access it. As Yao et al. found in relation to tourism for PWD, "Unless appropriate enabling environments are facilitated and the individual is empowered to take advantage of these environments, people may still not have access" [23]. It is suggested that this has been overlooked in MA because most research concerns the accessibility of screen-based media namely film and tv products that are commonly consumed in the familiar surroundings of a person's home. The results here confirm that the empowerment of individuals with sight loss, as with any individual, is achieved through knowledge. As the Latin aphorism puts it *scientia potentia est* (knowledge is power). The results further demonstrate that for such knowledge to be conveyed it must be rich, reliable (accurate, up to date, appropriate and trustworthy), and easy to access by being in one place.

7 Suggestions for further research

The results of the survey suggest that the current focus of AD courses on describing the source text should be widened such that students are also familiarised with the importance of creating pre-visit content. Indeed, the new training materials created by ADLAB PRO include details of what such information should include [32]. In addition to the AD of live events, the relevance of pre-visit information to other modes of AD such as the AD of heritage arts and museums should be tested, as should the relevance of pre-visit information to other audiences with particular needs. These might include Deaf and Hard of Hearing audiences, people with learning difficulties or on the autism spectrum, even people with physical disabilities. It would be expected that the needs of all these audiences would differ as to content but some surprising overlaps may be uncovered that may increase the economic viability of such provision.

8 Conclusion

Tourism research has previously ascertained that "lack of knowledge is one of the major barriers for disabled guests" [26]. The results reported here suggest such barriers can be overcome through the provision of appropriate verbal information. The results also reinforce the extent to which this is appreciated by PSL. Furthermore, it suggests that a describer's skills are not restricted to describing only the AV product but might also be able to illuminate the type of information that mainstream channels need to provide to further engagement and participation of PSL in cultural activities. While the finding that the need for such information to be rich and reliable and easily accessed may not be new to the field of tourism research, data to support it in the field of MA certainly is. Therefore expanding the domain of MA beyond the boundaries of the MA house is to be encouraged, if appropriate measures of quality are to be ensured and all potential users are to be made welcome. For PSL, it is not only important to provide a description of the exterior of the house and of the rooms inside but to let people know that a warm welcome awaits them together with giving them details of the nearest bus stop.

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Appendix: The vocaleyes access questionnaire is reproduced here by kind permission of VocalEyes

Vocaleyes access questionnaire

Please answer the questions below as fully as possible, typing the answer directly into the spaces below the question. You can make your answers as long as you like as the space will expand to accommodate the text and we will edit the information at a later date. When you have finished, please send it back to Vocaleyes by email and if you require any assistance or have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us on [telephone number]. If you have any material which may be of use to us in understanding the layout of the building such as ground plans or photographs, we would be happy to look at those too. Subsequently, you may be contacted by our Access Editor in order to clarify specific questions arising from the information you provide us. Many thanks.

1. The theatre and how to get there:

1.1. Please give the name and address of your theatre.

1.2. Is the theatre situated near any notable landmarks that we could mention on the tape to help people find their way? If so could you explain where they are in relation to the theatre—for example: "The entrance to the theatre is on King Street adjacent to Boots the Chemist" or "The theatre is opposite the town hall".

1.3. If arriving by car, where, in relation to the theatre entrance, can the customer be dropped off?

1.4. Please explain nearby parking arrangements—e.g.: On street and / or car park; parking times and restrictions; whether or not disabled badges can be used; cost of parking; how far from the theatre etc.

1.5. Please give any details relevant to a wheelchair user.

1.6. Which number buses serve your theatre? Please explain the route(s) from the bus stop(s) bearing in mind anything that may help or hinder a visually impaired person on their way to your theatre—for example, pedestrian crossings, railings, street furniture etc. How long do you estimate it would take to get from the bus stop(s) to the theatre? It may be worthwhile walking the routes yourself to refresh your memory.

1.7. Is your theatre served by any other forms of public transport such as trains, trams or tubes? If so, what is/are

the station(s) called? Please describe, as above, how to get to the theatre from each of these stations.

1.8. Can you think of anything else to do with transport that may be helpful to a visually impaired person? For example, location of taxi ranks; phone numbers of local cab firms; whether or not nearby streets are pedestrianised etc.

1.9. Please describe the main entrance to your theatre. For example—is it up/down any steps? If so how many? How many doors are there? Do the doors open towards or away from you or both? Are they held open in the run up to a performance? Are they glass or do they have glass panels in them?

Is there anything else you would like to say about the theatre and how to get there?

2. Picking up tickets and headsets.

2.1. Please describe the foyer or main entrance hall into which the visually impaired customers will walk once they have entered the building. For example—you may wish to alert them to things like flights of stairs, publicity stands, furniture etc. as well as to the size, brightness and ambience.

2.2. Where will the customer need to collect his or her tickets? Where will the headsets be collected from? Do you charge a deposit for the use of headsets? Will the Braille and large print cast lists be in the same place? If not, could you explain where they need to be collected?

2.3. Please describe where the toilets are in relation to the entrance to the theatre, taking into account thing like stairs, which way doors open etc.

2.4. Are there any other facilities the customers may want to take advantage of e.g. cafes, bars etc.? Please describe how to get to them.

2.5. Please explain the relevant routes to the auditorium. There may be lots of different entrances to the auditorium so if you have different levels (e.g. stalls, circle, gods etc.) you may wish to nominate one just route to each area and describe it.

2.6. Is there anything else you would like to mention about the Front of House areas? For example, opening times of the cafe; where the cloakroom is located etc. You may wish to describe the overall look of the foyer, especially if it has some particularly interesting feature such as a chandelier or works of art.

3. The Theatre Auditorium.

3.1. Please describe the theatre auditorium. You should include the following:

Where in the auditorium will the customer arrive—e.g. at the back; on the left/right; with the stage to the left/right; level with row G etc. What shape is it (i.e. in the round, horse shoe shaped etc.)? Is it modern or traditional in style? What colour is it? How many people does it seat on how many levels? Is the floor raked? How are the seats arranged (i.e. does it have a central aisle or just aisles at the sides etc.)? Do the seats flip up? Where and how are the seats numbered? Where are the wheelchair positions?

4. Useful information and contact numbers.

4.1. Do you have a policy on guide dogs? If a person is bringing a guide dog, do they need to inform anybody in advance? If so, who should they call and on what number?

4.2. Some guide dog owners may wish to take their dog into the auditorium while others may need somebody to mind it during the show. Are you able to accommodate both options?

4.3. If a visually impaired person has any questions or requires further information before attending the theatre, who should they call and on what number?

4.4. Is there any other general information you would like to provide which you think may be of use?

5. Thank you for taking the time to fill this form in. As we come to edit the material, we may want to contact somebody at the theatre during office hours to clarify certain details. Please provide the name and phone number of somebody we could call during the day to check anything that may require clarification.

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