

Excerpt from “The Visual Made Verbal: A Comprehensive Training Manual and Guide to the History and Applications of Audio Description” by Joel Snyder, PhD – published in 2014 by the American Council of the Blind – Copyright 2014, Joel Snyder – All Rights Reserved.

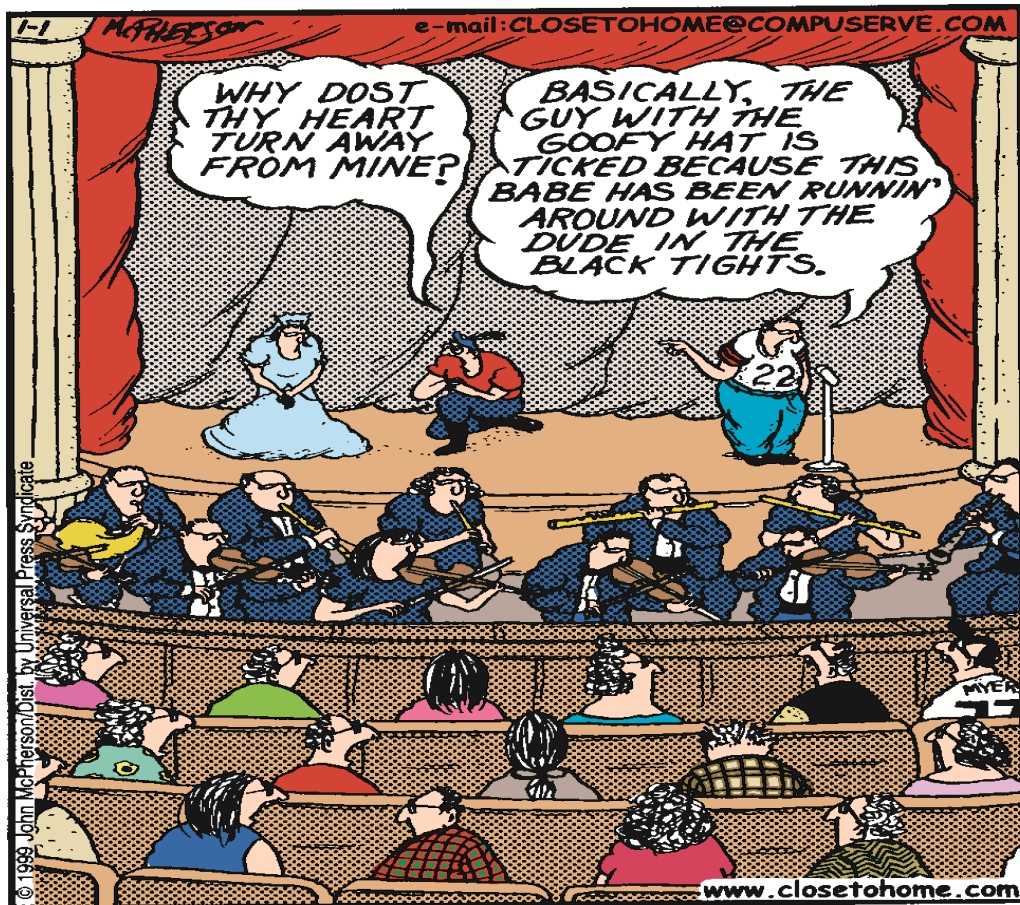
Chapter Two - Audio Description: A Brief History (From Prehistoric Times to the Present)

(This account is from an American perspective; much has been written of audio description development in

other countries in other languages, such as Benecke 2004, in German.)

I think it was back in prehistoric times when two sighted cavemen were munching on some leftover saber-tooth tiger. One fellow screamed to the other, “Look out behind you, there’s a mastodon coming from the left!” There you have it, ladies and gentlemen -- the origin of Audio Description (AD), for the sighted who happen to be looking the wrong way.

Or perhaps an audience member is just a tad myopic (near-sighted): as a result, the caption at the bottom of the following cartoon, viewed as a projected image in a large room with the viewer in the back row, might be totally inaccessible:



Many opera companies now provide interpreters for the culturally impaired.

[Alt tag: Caption: "Many opera companies now provide interpreters for the culturally impaired."]

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My description:

“On a stage – at left, a woman in a flowing gown, her hands clasped in front of her, stands before a kneeling man in a doublet and feathered cap. He croons, ‘Why dost thy heart turn away from mine?’ At right, a man at a microphone speaks: ‘Basically, the guy with the goofy hat is ticked because this babe has been runnin’ around with the dude in the black tights.’ The caption reads: ‘Many opera companies now provide interpreters for the culturally impaired.’”

Since prehistoric times, description has been employed regularly if not professionally by companions and family of people who are blind or have low vision. Sometimes total strangers, compelled by the urge to “help,” will approach a person who is blind and describe/offer directions/provide guidance (whether it’s requested/needed or not!) Such is the case in the 2001 film *Amelie*:

Description: Amelie, a young woman with short dark hair, crosses a bridge.

Narrator: It's a perfect moment. Soft light. A scent in the air. The quiet murmur of the city. She breathes deeply. Life is simple and clear. A surge of love, an urge to help mankind comes over her.

Description: An elderly man, standing on a sidewalk, taps a white cane on the curb of a busy street. Amelie gazes intently at the man and grabs his arm and ushers him along the street.

Amelie: Let me help you. Step down. Here we go! The drum major's widow! She's worn his coat since the day he died. The horse's head has lost an ear! [LAUGH] That's the florist laughing. He has crinkly eyes. In the bakery window, lollipops. Smell that! They're giving out melon slices. [VENDOR SHOUT] Sugarplum ice cream! We're passing the park butcher. Ham—79 francs, Spareribs—45! Now the cheese shop. Picadors are 12.90. Cabecaus, 23.50. A baby's watching a dog that's watching the chickens. Now we're at the kiosk by the metro. I'll leave you here. Bye!

Description: She darts off.



[Alt tag: a still image from the film Amelie: a young woman with short, dark hair leans to the ear of an elderly gentleman, bald at top with long white hair at the sides – a caption: “In the bakery window, lollipops.”]

A still from *Amelie*.

The 1991 film *Proof* features a young man who is blind who photographs his surroundings and has a trusted, sighted friend describe the photos. Eventually, the friend asks “You ever had moving pictures described?” And they’re off to a drive-in (with hilarious results – see this book’s associated web site, #1).

In the 1940s, the mayor of New York City, Fiorello LaGuardia (LaGuardia Airport is named in his honor) practiced description – although he may not have realized he was doing so. A newspaper strike was of great concern to New York residents. Mr. LaGuardia, a savvy mayor, refused to side with the striking news workers or the owners of the papers. He took the side of *the people*, taking to the radio on WNYC to give the people what they were missing: the comics! He read the comics on the radio and, of course, interrupted the text with colorful descriptions of the cartoon images – see this book’s associated web site, #2.

People will often compare audio description to radio theater. They’re both aural conveyances of narrative material. The essential difference, though, is that radio theater assumes all listeners have no access to the visual. Consequently, “visual” elements are conveyed principally by sound effects created by a “foley man.” Television, on the other hand, assumes that all patrons can see. Audio description fills in that gap—the gap

created when the “default” audience member is an individual with five senses.

Audio description might be more precisely compared to the “play by play” offered by sports announcers on radio broadcasts. Again, the assumption is that all listeners are “blind” and while the sound of the game may be in the background, the commentator will describe visual elements in order to make them accessible to his listeners.



[Alt tag: a young Ronald Reagan, smiling broadly behind a microphone—signage at left is labeled “W-H-O”]

Ronald Reagan, sports announcer for WHO in Des Moines, Iowa, c. 1934.

Courtesy Ronald Reagan Library

Early in his career, former president Ronald Reagan was a sports announcer, offering play-by-play of Chicago Cubs baseball games *via telegraph*. During one game in 1934 between the Cubs and their arch rivals the St. Louis Cardinals that was tied 0-0 in the 9th inning, the telegraph went dead: an often repeated tale of Reagan's radio days recounts how he delivered "play-by-play broadcasts" of Chicago Cubs baseball games he had never seen. His flawless recitations were based solely on telegraph accounts of games in progress. Reagan smoothly improvised a fictional play-by-play (in which hitters on both teams gained a superhuman ability to foul off pitches) until the wire was restored. Reagan

says: “There were several other stations broadcasting that game and I knew I’d lose my audience if I told them we’d lost our telegraph connections so I took a chance. I had (Billy) Jurgens hit another foul. Then I had him foul one that only missed being a homerun by a foot. I had him foul one back in the stands and took up some time describing the two lads that got in a fight over the ball. I kept on having him foul balls until I was setting a record for a ballplayer hitting successive foul balls and I was getting more than a little scared. Just then my operator started typing. When he passed me the paper I started to giggle - it said: ‘Jurgens popped out on the first ball pitched.’”

Using only his imagination, Reagan managed to “describe” what *wasn’t* happening. Obviously, describers must be faithful to what can be seen, but the difference between a narrative that will conjure images and one that doesn’t is often the imagination employed by the describer (see the Training chapter).

So audio description has a place wherever the visual image is important to the experience of an event. I have provided description for office meetings, award ceremonies, parades, sports events, weddings, and even funerals.

And on cruise ships:



[Alt tag: Joel Snyder and Marlaina Lieberg]

Joel Snyder uses an FM steno mask microphone and transmitter to describe a glass-blowing show for

Marlaina Lieberg who uses an earpiece and an FM receiver. The show is aboard a Royal Caribbean Cruise Line ship in Alaska.



[Alt tag: Joel Snyder and Denise Colley standing on a stage]

Also aboard a Royal Caribbean Cruise Line ship (in the Caribbean), Joel Snyder provides “description” of the lyrics on a karaoke monitor for singer and blind woman Denise Colley (the first known instance of “karaoke for the blind”).

And other “live” settings—wherever the visual image is critical to the event.



[Alt tag: Denise and Berl Colley]

Joel Snyder

Denise and Berl Colley, both blind, in the main theater aboard a cruise ship, display the FM receivers they use to access description being transmitted from another part of the theater.



[Alt tag: President Barack Obama greets the author, shaking hands, following a White House Ceremony for which the author provided audio description; Dr. Snyder holds a steno-mask microphone.]

President Barack Obama greets the author following a White House Ceremony for which the author provided audio description.

It's also quite clear that audio description can have a place in office meeting or conference presentations. In

a plenary session at the VISION 2008 gathering in Canada, I enjoyed much of what the keynote speaker, a former astronaut, had to say in her future-oriented address. At its end, apparently impressed with the international scope of the conference, she remarked that she hoped to see us again, perhaps – “here.” The room erupted in applause and laughter – but I didn’t join in, noting that a number of audience members who were blind remained silent, turning to people at their sides. The speaker had flashed a slide of an astronaut with a “VISION” flag, planting it on the moon. Had she prefaced that slide with just a bit of audio description, she would have gracefully included all of the attendees in her concluding remark.

In the 1960s, Chet Avery, a blind theater-lover, now retired from the Department of Education, conceived of audio description as a formal process that could convey the visual images of theater performances to people who are blind or have low vision.

He shared his experience with the concept of audio description in an interview in July 2011. Mr. Avery was born in Sanford, Maine in 1937 and by the age of 17, he lost all vision due to a detached retina. He notes that he had some vision as a teenager but once he had lost all vision, he felt a sense of relief—he no longer had to “spend my life concerned about my eyes.”

He was “really into” movies: it was 1954 and “everyone had great voices and there was a lot more storyline than today’s films ... but they’re a visual experience principally.”

Mr. Avery recalls that he used talking books with earphones and live readers and soon graduated from high school with honors, pursuing a college education at Harvard. Ultimately, he received a Masters degree from Harvard in education and guidance counseling, taught at private schools and moved to Washington, DC in 1964 to accept a grants management position at what was then the United States Office of Education.

It was a time of increased government focus on domestic programs. The area that managed statistical information and grants for “special education” (programs for children with disabilities) was close to Mr. Avery’s office. Part of the special education division office responsibilities involved support for captioning programs for educational video. Avery knew the head of that division at the time – John Goss – and Avery proposed “audio captions” on film for blind people. That was in 1964. (Avery recalls that a non-government worker – Spencer Tracy’s wife, Louise Treadwell – was the moving force behind getting captions developed for film. 35mm films were sent to schools with the captions burned in, as was done with silent movies.)

Nothing came of Avery’s proposal – his plea fell on the proverbial “deaf ears.” Even among other blind people, the notion, according to Avery, seemed “like cheating. Blind people should be as independent as possible, getting along with Braille, tactile techniques and service animals or the white cane.” One of Avery’s colleagues,

Josephine Taylor, a project officer and branch chief with Special Education Services, was a strong advocate for educational services for blind and multiple-handicapped children and supported teacher training programs for those specialized populations. Ms. Taylor, however, believed that “a parent who describes is not helping. [Blind children] should learn to think with their ears. [Using description] is cheating! The visual doesn’t exist for that person so you need to orient the child to the world around them using their own capabilities.”

In 1967 a new administrator, Dr. Morland Woods, appointed Avery director of the Office for the Disadvantaged and Handicapped. Over the next decade, Avery made links with what was then the Arts Program in the Department of Education and worked actively with Washington, DC-based arts entities on access provisions. Title 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 provided that any organization receiving federal dollars must be accessible – “No otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States ... shall,

solely by reason of his or her disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.” In 1998, Title 508 was included in the law requiring government agencies to abide by the following, mentioning audio description specifically: “All training and informational video and multimedia productions which support the agency's mission, regardless of format, that contain visual information necessary for the comprehension of the content, *shall be audio described.*” (emphasis added)

As a part of Avery’s activity locally, he helped Wayne White, house manager at Arena Stage in Washington, DC, create an access committee to advise Arena on ways to make theater accessible. Much of the focus was on access for people who use wheelchairs as well as the use of a new electronic development: an assistive listening system designed to boost sound for people who are hard-of-hearing.

Once again Avery wondered aloud if the “audio caption” idea could be employed using the same equipment – except with an individual voicing descriptions during the pauses between lines of dialogue and critical sound elements. This time, Avery was among a receptive audience, including fellow committee members Margaret Rockwell, a blind woman with a PhD in Education, and her future husband Cody Pfanstiehl, an expert in media and public relations. Rockwell had founded The Metropolitan Washington Ear, a closed-circuit radio reading service for people who are blind or for those who don’t otherwise have access to print; Avery served on its original board of directors. The Ear had dozens of volunteers with excellent language and speech skills; Dr. Pfanstiehl realized that she had the capacity to develop an audio description service that could realize Avery’s “audio caption” concept.

From there, in 1981, the Washington Ear's Audio Description program was developed. I was already a volunteer reader at The Ear, and a professional voice

talent/actor and English teacher. (When I began reading for The Ear in 1972, one of my assignments was The Washington Post on Sundays – and just like Mayor LaGuardia, I became a describer of “the funnies”!) I became one of the first audio describers in The Ear’s program, the world’s first ongoing audio description service.

At the Arena committee’s last meeting, White recited the list of access features that the group had recommended, emphasizing the recent installation of an “assistive listening system” to boost sound for the benefit of theater-goers who had difficulty hearing. Folks using the system would don earphones and listen to theater dialogue and music amplified by microphones placed on stage. White asked: “Is there anything else?” Avery piped up: “There’s one more thing! Could we have the plays described, perhaps using the same listening system?” Rockwell noted that her radio-reading service had recording equipment (for recording pre-show material) and a core of talented readers who

might serve as describers. That was in 1980. The Pfanstiehl's gathered about 5 or 6 of volunteers that she hand-selected. As a part of that small group, we began to define and develop what was to become the world's first ongoing audio description service.

On the U.S.'s west coast: Gregory Frazier, a professor at San Francisco State University, formally developed the concepts behind audio description and general guidelines for its use. His work happened in the 1970s, unknown to Mr. Avery and Dr. Pfanstiehl on the east coast. In its 1996 obituary of Gregory T. Frazier, the New York Times called Frazier "a San Francisco visionary who hit on the idea of providing simultaneous electronic audio descriptions for the blind so they could enjoy more than the dialogue of movies, television and theater performances."

In the early 1970s, Frazier was relaxing at his home with a friend who happened to be blind. The evening's entertainment? *High Noon* with Gary Cooper, playing on television. The NY Times article relates that "At the

friend's request, Frazier, speaking rapidly between the lines of dialogue, provided terse descriptions of the scenes and actions. The friend was so appreciative that by the time Gary Cooper had shot Frank Miller dead, ripped the star off his own chest and thrown it to the ground before climbing into a carriage and driving off with Grace Kelly, Mr. Frazier ... was a changed man.”

Frazier realized that the concise descriptions he provided for his friend extemporaneously could be thought-through, edited, recorded and played through FM radio receivers at movies – or carried over secondary audio channels on television. Frazier, a graduate of San Francisco State University, returned to college to obtain a Masters degree in broadcast journalism, developing a thesis—“television for the blind”— that explored the use of description to enhance the 1974 television production of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. Over the next ten years, Mr. Frazier worked in communication arts at the university, ultimately founding the non-profit corporation

AudioVision SF in 1991 to provide description for the performing arts in San Francisco-area venues.

Late in Frazier's tenure at San Francisco State University, August Coppola, the head of the communication department at the university, became an enthusiastic supporter of the concept Frazier continued to nurture. Mr. Coppola's brother, the director Francis Ford Coppola, and Frazier established the Audio Vision Institute and Coppola agreed to incorporate audio description for his 1988 movie, *Tucker*.

AudioVision SF still exists, providing description on a regular basis for theater performances throughout the Bay Area. In 2010, Audio Vision SF and Gregory Frazier posthumously received the Barry Levine Memorial Lifetime Achievement Award in Audio Description, presented by the American Council of the Blind's Audio Description Project.

The Washington Ear's service premiered on April 1, 1981 at an Arena Stage performance of George Bernard

Shaw's *Major Barbara*. By the end of the 1980's, over 50 theaters throughout the United States were producing described performances. Over the next two decades, audio description accompanied a wide range of arts events.

Between 1982 and 1985, The Ear experimented with offering description for television, including an unsuccessful attempt to “simul-sync” description delivered over FM radio with television broadcasts. Eventually, Dr. Barry Cronin and Laurie Everett of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) station WGBH in Boston, MA approached the Pfanstiehl's about developing AD scripts that could be recorded on a secondary audio track. This alternative audio track would be transmitted over the “SAP” (Secondary Audio Program—also known as “MTS” or Multichannel Television Sound) channel that was available on most stereo televisions in the United States.

In 1984, the Secondary Audio Program (“SAP”) or Multichannel Television Sound (“MTS”) standard was

established in the United States by the National Television Systems Committee (“NTSC”) as part of an auxiliary audio channel for analog television.

Initially, the primary broadcasting application of SAP was for the voluntary transmission of a secondary language program dialogue audio track, such as the Spanish translation of an English language program. With the realization that SAP could also be used for delivery of other program related audio services, video description for broadcast and cable television was born.

On January 18, 1988, the first national television broadcast was made available with audio description—a program in the PBS series *American Playhouse* — Eugene O’Neill’s *Strange Interlude*. (I feel honored to have written and voiced the audio description for the *American Playhouse* productions of *Native Son*, *Rocket To The Moon*, and *The Diaries of Adam and Eve*.)

The PBS effort, led by the WGBH Educational Foundation, became a year-long nationally broadcast

test of what would, in 1990, become the Descriptive Video Service, as a part of the WGBH Educational Foundation. For the first time, synchronized, pre-recorded audio description was broadcast for the season's 26 *American Playhouse* productions.

[International activity: While this overview is focused on the United States, it is important to note that the earliest known audio described television was transmitted in 1983 by the Japanese commercial broadcaster NTV. Its descriptions continued on an occasional basis and, interestingly, were “open”, added to the program’s original soundtrack and heard by all viewers. In the late 1980’s some occasional open broadcasts were also made by Television de la Cataluna in Spain.

By the mid-1980’s audio description was in place in the United Kingdom, premiering in a small theatre--the Robin Hood--at Averham, Nottinghamshire; this was the locale for the first described performances in Europe.

Today, U.K. leads the world with the number of venues (for live performance, film screenings and DVDs) which regularly offer audio described performances. (In addition, certain movie theaters in the U.K. and the U.S. have offered live reading of audio description scripts via the FM Radio or infrared equipment used in performing arts settings, while in France the Association Valentin Haüy established a portable service travelling throughout the country giving “performances” to audiences of people who are blind or visually impaired.)

In 1991, the U.K. also was first to establish, under the rubric of the ITC (the Independent Television Commission, its duties now a part of OFCOM, the Office of Communications), a working group (the Audetel consortium) charged with exploring all the issues associated with beginning regular broadcasts of described programs, concentrating initially on the development of descriptive styles and guidelines.]

The first film screening with audio description (and closed captions) was *The Jackal*, exhibited at a

California movie theater in 1997. *The Jackal's* release was followed by the release of *Titanic*--the first major studio direct-release of a movie with audio description (and closed captions). In 1992, WGBH began its Motion Picture (MoPix) Access project providing “closed” audio description (via headsets) for first-run films in selected theatres nationwide (in conjunction with its Rear Window System for displaying captions). *Forrest Gump*, with “open” audio description, was screened on December 28, 1994 at the Cineplex Odeon/Fairfax Theater in Los Angeles, CA, sponsored by TheatreVision, a subsidiary of Retinitis Pigmentosa International.

In the late 1980's and early 1990s, the first “audio described tours” of museum exhibits and National Park Service exhibits were developed. In 1986, The Metropolitan Washington Ear created the first audio described exhibit tours – recorded on audio cassettes – for the Statue of Liberty and Castle Clinton in New York State. Others soon followed – I produced an audio

cassette based tour of the Clark County Heritage Museum in Henderson, NV chronicling the development of gaming and the area around Las Vegas, NV.

Description for broadcast television continued with funding from the U.S. Department of Education, and other providers joined WGBH. In 1988, James Stovall of Tulsa, OK, a blind man, produced audio description of classic TV shows and movies for home videos and one year later Stovall founded the Narrative Television Network to offer description for movies on cable television. In 2009, James Stovall and the Narrative Television Network received the Barry Levine Memorial Lifetime Achievement Award in Audio Description, presented by the American Council of the Blind's Audio Description Project.

In 1990, The Metropolitan Washington Ear created the first audio description soundtrack for an IMAX film, *To Fly!*, premiering at the Smithsonian Institution's Air and Space Museum. It was soon followed by other IMAX film with description – including *Blue Planet*, for which I

wrote and voiced the audio description – and my audio description for the Air & Space Museum’s Planetarium show *And A Star To Steer Her By*.

Also in 1990, the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences acknowledged the burgeoning audio description efforts for television by awarding special “Emmys” to four organizations that brought audio description to television: AudioVision Institute (Gregory Frazier), the Metropolitan Washington Ear (Margaret Pfanstiehl), the Narrative Television Network (James Stovall), and PBS/WGBH (Barry Cronin and Laurie Everett).

Note: In 2009, following the death of Margaret Pfanstiehl, the American Council of the Blind’s Audio Description Project (created and directed by this author) established its Margaret Pfanstiehl Memorial Research and Development Award in Audio Description.

In live theatre, Rod Lathim, the Artistic Director of Access Theater, developed the first audio description

script for the company's touring production of *Storm Reading*: this allowed *any* performance to be audio described as opposed to the usual practice of providing AD only at selected performances. Audio description was growing and growing up—its consumers and practitioners began to gather to discuss common concerns. A passionate advocate for and practitioner of audio description, Rod Lathim brought together a small group of people involved with description at a pre-conference meeting of the Association for Theater and Accessibility – that was in 1994 and I was pleased to be a part of that group. Access Theater produced a video, *Theater Without Limits*, it provides an excellent overview of assistive technology for live performing arts events: see this book's associated web site, #3.

Also on this book's associated web site (#28) is a videotaped live performance of Access Theater's landmark piece *Storm Reading* with description provided by this author.

About thirty states in the U.S. have AD in live theater and in museums via live description, audio tours or trained docents.

In a live theater setting, at designated performances (depending on the availability of the service and how it is administered), people desiring audio description are provided headsets/earplugs attached to small receivers, about the size of a small pocket calculator. Often, before the show, a taped or "live" version of the program notes plays through the headsets, after which a trained describer narrates the performance from another part of the theater via an FM radio or infrared transmitter. The narrator guides the audience through the production with concise, objective descriptions of new scenes, settings, costumes, and body language, all slipped in between portions of dialogue or songs.



[Alt tag: from left to right: an FM radio steno mask microphone, a headset microphone, a portable, cigarette-pack-sized FM transmitter, a similar FM receiver with earpiece, a “plug-in” FM transmitter, at rear, a flat rectangular box about 6 inches by 10 inches.]

Joel Snyder

The FM radio steno mask microphone, a headset microphone, a portable FM transmitter, an FM receiver with earpiece, a “plug-in” FM transmitter (at rear).

Often, the designated performance is accompanied by a “touch-tour,” allowing AD consumers to touch costumes, props, set pieces – even the performers themselves, during a post-show gathering backstage.



[Alt tag: Five hands touch a flat block.]

Joel Snyder

Theater-goers handle a prop circulated among them during a post-show visit backstage.

In 1995, audio describers and description consumers from across the U.S. and Canada gathered for the establishment of “Audio Description International (ADI),” a meeting hosted by the National Endowment for the Arts (I was the NEA’s arts specialist for presenting organizations) and The John F. Kennedy Center for the

Performing Arts in Washington, DC. I was the Chair of the Founding Steering Committee and Alan Woods of Ohio State University became the President of ADI; the organization incorporated in Washington, DC in 1998.

A second gathering was chaired by me and held at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in 2002; Barry Levine was elected President of Audio Description International (ADI). The Conference proceedings for both of these meetings are available on this book's associated web site.

Audio description continued to grow in performing arts settings, principally staffed by volunteer describers using notes gathered at one or two viewings of a performance. Description on broadcast television was also still available, largely due to the ongoing funding from the Department of Education. Leading entities providing description with this support included WGBH/Media Access Group, the Narrative Television Network, Caption Max, Closed Caption Latina (now DiCapta) and the National Captioning Institute.

Children's programming was enhanced with the addition of audio description tracks; as the Director of Described Media for the National Captioning Institute for over five years, I coordinated the production of description for shows like *Sesame Street* including *Sesame Street* DVDs as well as the Spanish-language version of the show, *Plaza Sesamo*. NCI also became the only other entity beside WGBH to provide description for first-run feature films—highlights included *Wallace & Gromit and the Curse of the Were-Rabbit*, *Flags of our Fathers*, *Dreamgirls* and *Shrek III*.



[Alt tag: the red, furry “Elmo” with large eyes and an orange nose]

An excerpt from a *Sesame Street* episode (*Elmo’s World*) with description written and voiced for national broadcast by the author is included here: see this book’s associated web site, #4.

The process for developing description for film is highlighted in a FOX-TV news broadcast: see this book’s associated web site, #5.

The availability of description and captioning on educational media gave rise to the Described and Captioned Media Program (DCMP), administered by the National Association of the Deaf. DCMP exists “to promote and provide equal access to communication and learning for students who are blind, visually impaired, deaf, hard of hearing, or deaf-blind.” The DCMP media library has over 4,000 free-loan described and captioned media titles available to its members who

can watch media online or order a DVD copy to be shipped to them.

Further, with the support of the Department of Education and the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB), DCMP developed a *Description Key*. The Key began as recommendations, suggestions, and best practices culled from an extensive literature search and meta-analysis [PDF] in 2006. AFB assembled an expert panel (of which I was a part) in media description and education for children with visual impairments to help evaluate media description strategies for educational material.

Meanwhile, the Federal Government was taking note of the value of adding audio description to federally-produced or financed media. In 1998, Congress amended the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 by adding Section 508 to require Federal agencies to make their electronic and information technology accessible to people with disabilities. All film, video, multimedia, and information technology produced or procured by

Federal agencies must include audio description. Certain agencies, like the National Park Service, have created audio description projects at highly visible parks: for example, I created description for the Death Valley National Park, Philadelphia's Independence Hall, and the Star-Spangled Banner exhibit for the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History.

Indeed, museums can use Audio Description techniques to translate the visual to a sense form that is accessible. Using these techniques for the description of static images and exhibitions, museum docents find that they develop better use of language and more expressive, vivid, and imaginative museum tours, greatly appreciated by all visitors. In this way, docent-led tours are more appropriate for the low-vision visitor and docents find that their regular tours are enhanced.

Some museum administrators are interested in having a recorded tour, specifically geared to people with low

vision. Combined with directional information, these recorded tours on audiocassettes enable visitors who are blind to use a simple hand-held audio player to tour at least a portion of the museum independently and with new access to the visual elements of exhibitions. Other curators are interested in having certain videos within an exhibit or a special film described.

An excellent video that encompasses the broad range of access issues involving museums was produced by the American Association of Museums: *Universal Design: Museum Accessibility*: see this book's associated web site, #6.

Another important resource for developing accessibility in a museum or visitor center is the organization Art Beyond Sight (formerly Art Education for the Blind). More information is available at:
<http://www.artbeyondsight.org/>

Returning to highlights in the development of description for broadcast television, in 1997, the

American Foundation for the Blind (AFB), published the seminal work *Who's Watching?: A Profile of the Blind and Visually Impaired Audience for Television and Video*, by Jaclyn Packer, and Corinne Kirchner. Based on a survey of blind and visually impaired people, this publication provided detailed demographic information about the experience with and interest in video description as well as viewing habits and preferences among this population. The survey found that blind and visually impaired individuals watch television at comparable rates to the general population. The report also addressed the real life consequences of lack of full access to television programs.

In 1999, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) also acknowledged how AD can enhance popular culture for people who are blind or have low vision. The agency issued its Notice of Proposed Rulemaking for phased-in video description for television and in 2000 the FCC implemented the rules requiring major broadcast networks and cable companies in the top 25

television markets to provide 50 hours of described programming per quarter effective April 2002.

Unfortunately, late in 2002, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia reversed the FCC ruling, finding that the FCC had acted beyond the scope of its authority in adopting those rules. CBS and PBS continue to provide approximately the same 50 or more hours of described programming per quarter. Other broadcast and cable networks also continue to provide varying amounts of described programming.

Essentially, an act of Congress would be required that authorizes the FCC to mandate description on broadcast television. In 2003, Representative Ed Markey (D-MA) introduced a bill to update the FCC's authority to adopt audio (video) description rules; the bill did not pass. In 2005, Senator John McCain (R-AZ) introduced a bill to update the FCC's authority to adopt audio (video) description rules; the bill did not pass. Largely in response to these events, the Coalition of Organizations for Accessible Technology (COAT) was formed. COAT

is a national advocacy organization of almost 300 national, regional, state and community-based disability rights organizations to advocate for legislative and regulatory safeguards that will ensure full communication and video programming access, including the reestablishment of the FCC's 2000 rules regarding description on broadcast television.

It would not be until a new administration and a new Congress before the mandate would be put in place as part of a far-reaching access rights bill—The Twenty-First Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act of 2010, signed into law by President Obama on October 8, 2010.



[Alt tag: President Barack Obama is seated at a desk emblazoned with the presidential seal while four individuals stand behind him.]

President Barack Obama finishes signing the Twenty-First Century Communications and Video Accessibility

Act of 2010 during a ceremony in the East Room of the White House in Washington, Friday, Oct. 8, 2010.

The bill – and its mandate for about 4 hours of description per week by the top 9 broadcasters in the nation's top 25 markets – went into effect on July 1, 2012.

Digital television makes it possible to transmit many secondary signals like that employed for audio description. Unfortunately, while it is technically possible, broadcasters are reluctant to use bandwidth for additional audio signals, preserving their capacity for bandwidth-devouring video quality.

In 2009, the American Council of the Blind launched its Audio Description Project (ADP) to promote and produce description via a range of initiatives. When Barry Levine passed away, the ADP took over the Audio Description International website and listserve and built various programs: description training, description conferences including awards for leading describers,

and young AD consumers who write reviews of described video (the “Young Described Film Critic” contest, sponsored in collaboration with the Described and Captioned Media Program), a greatly expanded website (www.acb.org/adp) with listings of describers and description programs and services worldwide (but principally in the United States), the production of description for the ABC broadcast of President Obama’s inauguration. Several specific projects include: description of the DVD of *The Miracle Worker*, the HBO broadcast of *Monica and David*, and the development of a self-guided, audio described tour of The White House, put in place in January 2013. Most critically, the ADP hopes to establish national, consumer-focused guidelines or best practices for the production of description in a variety of formats, leading to the development of a certification program for professional describers in the United States.

There's still much to be done in other formats: DVDs and downloads via the Internet. The percentage of all

video and film that incorporates description is still miniscule. DVDs are an ideal format for description because the audio track can be turned on or off as desired and an audio menu can be programmed. Given that fact, it's unfortunate that there are still so few DVDs produced with description in the United States.

