

Chapter 82

Listening to Images: Exploring Alternate Access to a Digital Collection

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores a pilot project investigating the development of audio descriptions to accompany an academic library's digital image collection. The project was introduced in selected classes and directly involved faculty and students in the creation and delivery of audio descriptions. The collaborative project initiated by the art librarian was in answer to a legislative act requiring accessibility for vision-impaired users. The discussion will specifically examine developing descriptions for images from Illinois State University's International Collection of Child Art a resource that presents a fascinating challenge to use language to broaden access to the content and construct a compelling representation with the spoken word for individuals with print disabilities such as vision impairment.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine encountering a database filled with a collection of wonderfully rich, imaginative, and vivid artworks created by children and adolescents from around the world. The Web-based resource allows viewers unfettered access to the creativity and imaginings of young artists. The multicultural collection displays digital images encompassing worlds filled with family, friends,

animals, home lives, activities, and observations from children's experiences. Colorful, bright, and frequently fantastical the collection is culled from the countries and cultures of six continents over a period of more than forty years. Imagine the joy of viewing such a delightful collection. Now take a moment to imagine a world where your vision is limited or consider the possibility that you are legally blind. How do you experience a digital image resource such as the one described above? Do the creators of digital image archives, such as libraries and museums, build in mechanisms

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for meaningful access for all to these visual resources? A piece of state legislation sparked these thoughts and questions and set the course for a serendipitous journey of into the world of audio description. What is audio description and how does it fit into an image collection? How does audio describing an image collection enhance access for all users? What resources are required to describe a collection? Does the creation of audio description have a place in the collaborative and pedagogical environment of an academic library and university? The discussion that follows will describe an investigation into audio describing a digital image collection in an academic library and uncover preliminary observations that may begin to answer these questions.

In fiscal year 2009, Illinois State University's Milner Library was awarded a Library Service and Technology Act digitization grant through the Illinois State Library. This grant provided funding to digitize one of the library's collections, the International Collection of Child Art (ICCA). Just as the grant was awarded the state passed Public Act 095-0307, also known as the Illinois Information Technology Accessibility Act (IITAA). This act essentially requires that any state funded information technology, including development, purchase, or new provision, will be made accessible to users with disabilities. Due to this legislative act questions arose that had not been considered at the outset of the project. How do we, as art librarians and visual resource curators provide access to a digital image? At the outset of a project, do we consider our users with print disabilities such as vision impairment? How do we account for various modes of access to an image such as text, or the spoken word?

Following is a discussion of an audio description pilot project, in its early stages, including the implications of the IITAA. State funded grants in Illinois are required to prepare audio descriptions to accompany digital images to enhance access for individuals with print disabilities. The primary objective for this project was to develop strategies

that will inform future digital image grant initiatives requiring audio description. Discussion will specifically examine developing descriptions for images from Illinois State University's International Collection of Child Art (ICCA). The ICCA presents a challenge to use language to broaden access to the content and to construct a compelling representation with the spoken word. Highlighted will be approaches to uncovering resources and options for writing and recording narratives for images. The collaborative efforts initiated between the librarian and selected teaching faculty to integrate the creation of audio description for digital images from the child art collection into their courses will be discussed.

BACKGROUND

Audio description, also referred to as verbal or narrative description, is the act of purposefully providing language to describe the visual elements of a theatre production, film, television program, museum exhibit or even an artwork to a primary audience of vision impaired individuals. The Audio Description Project (2011), an initiative of the American Council for the Blind, defines audio description as a spoken word service which provides "the accessibility of the visual images of theater, television, movies, and other art forms for people who are blind, have low vision, or who are otherwise visually impaired." Snyder (2003) further describes audio description as "a narrative technique that renders the visual images of theatre, media, museum exhibitions, and other endeavors more accessible to people who are blind or have low vision." Audio description is linked historically to the performing arts. The late Dr. Margaret Phanstiehl, founded the Metropolitan Washington Ear in 1974 and served as a longtime activist for and educator of descriptive services to enhance quality of life by supporting access to venues such as television programming, theatre, and the daily newspaper for the visually impaired.

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