Universalist, user-centred and proactive approaches in media accessibility: The way forward

Gian Maria Greco, University of Macerata
Pablo Romero-Fresco, University of Vigo

1. The moving landscape of media accessibility

The question of accessibility has become a driver of radical change in many aspects of society and produced paradigmatic revolutions in many research fields. Common to these fields is a series of theoretical, epistemological and methodological shifts (Greco 2018). First, accessibility usually entered these fields through an initial focus on some specific group, often persons with disabilities. Over time, the focus was progressively widened to include other groups, until finally reaching the widest scope. That is, these fields have shifted from various particularist accounts that frame access as exclusively or mainly related to some groups of people, towards a universalist account, where access concerns all. Second, the creation and implementation of accessibility artefacts and services has long been based on the assumption that makers know best, leaving limited room, if any, for users. The constraints posed by this stance have progressively given way to the adoption of user-centred approaches, according to which users bear knowledge that is fundamental for the investigation of access issues and the design of accessibility solutions. Third, and for a long time, access issues were addressed through reactive approaches, that is, through devising add-on solutions after the creation of an artefact. Yet, addressing accessibility as an afterthought drastically limits both the range of actions one can take to make that artefact accessible and their efficacy. This has resulted in a shift towards proactive approaches, which make access concerns an integral part of the design process of products and services, from its very initial phases and through the active participation of users and experts.

Through the joint action of these shifts, the question of accessibility has given rise to new areas within many fields; areas which, through gradual convergence, have then led to the emergence of the interdisciplinary field of accessibility studies. The reach of these shifts is especially evident in media accessibility (MA), which is at the forefront of the consolidation of accessibility studies. At first, media accessibility was framed as the subdomain of audiovisual translation concerned with some specific modalities related to persons with sensory disabilities. Some of the most restrictive particularist accounts initially formulated media accessibility as being limited to 'audio description for the blind and the visually impaired' and 'subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing' (SDH). Over time, new particularist accounts extended media accessibility to other groups and modalities. More recently, scholars have been increasingly embracing a universalist account that challenges traditional notions of audiovisual translation and does not confine media accessibility to any specific group of people or barriers and instead sees it as relevant for all (Greco 2016).

The value of users as bearers of fundamental knowledge for the design and evaluation of access solutions has become a cornerstone in media accessibility. Reception studies now chiefly dominate the area, and user-centred methodologies are becoming well-established practices in the production of media access products and solutions (Orero *et al.* 2018; Romero-Fresco 2019a). The shift of media accessibility towards user-centred approaches has also had considerable impact on audiovisual translation as well, stimulating audience-based research on the most diverse topics of the field. Long regarded as ex-post solutions, that is, relegated to the end of the production process of an artefact, media access modalities and services are now at the centre of practices that promote their full integration into that very process (Fryer 2018; Udo & Fels 2010).

In recent years, media accessibility has been witnessing a wealth of cases where access concerns are moved up to the ex-ante stages of the design process (Naraine, Whitfield & Fels 2018; Romero-Fresco 2018). Moreover, the new position acquired by media accessibility has been calling for both a revision of traditional conceptions of the audiovisual translator and the development of new vocational profiles able to successfully integrate the knowledge of (and interact with) makers, users, other experts and stakeholders in the design of media access products and services (Greco 2019b; Romero-Fresco 2019b). The broader reach of the newfound position of MA is also evident in many contexts of specialised translation, particularly as a consequence of the drastic transformations of society brought about by new technologies, which are making media access a pervasive and ubiquitous concern. For example, consider the effects that technological developments are having on translation and interpreting in emergency situations, virtual and immersive environments, cultural heritage, tourism, and creative industries. Finally, through their joint actions within media accessibility, the aforementioned shifts have also been providing new insights into the very field of translation studies. They provide new ground for the analysis of translation phenomena and processes, and are leading to the formulation of new theories, models, methods and practices of translation (Greco 2019a).

2. Moving media accessibility towards people

Over the past few years, MA has been witnessing the surge of forms that move beyond traditional practices. They embody a series of approaches that often draw on collaboration and creativity and which are not afraid of experimenting (even if this leads to occasional failures) in the attempt to provide an engaging experience for users. Those approaches to MA are an illustration of the aforementioned three shifts and, in some cases, an implementation of the accessible filmmaking model. However, it is important to look at the wider picture, which shows that this movement is accompanied and propelled by the ongoing struggle led by minoritised and

oppressed groups (persons with disabilities, but also women, black, indigenous and LGBTI+ people) to occupy their rightful place in society.

In the case of persons with disabilities, this attempt to give concrete meaning to the traditional slogan 'nothing about us without' is being thwarted by the ableism that still prevails in society. The literature on MA has still not engaged consistently with this form of exclusion[1]. Therefore, it is critical to understand some of the new and alternative access practices that have been gaining momentum lately so as to bring this debate to the fore. Indeed, in order to take all this into account, it is useful to look at MA as a case in point where the three areas that determine the exclusion of persons with disabilities and other minoritised groups from audiovisual media become evident: participation, representation and fruition, that is, the role they play behind the camera, on screen and as consumers of storytelling (Greco *et al.* 2022, Romero-Fresco 2022).

Starting with participation, and limiting our discussion to persons with disabilities due to the space here at our disposal, one can wish that artists with disabilities take up a more prominent role. Just looking at the film industry, the reality, though, is that in a country that is known for its progress on access issues, such as the UK, and where persons with disabilities make up over 20% of the total population, only 3% of the arts workforce declares a disability (ICO 2019). One way to address this is to have media regulators monitor diversity in the audiovisual industry, as is being done by Ofcom in the UK (2022) or by CRTC in Canada (2022). A more forceful measure is to opt for diversity and inclusion targets, such as those set by the BFI (2022), which has pledged to have, by 2022, a 50-50 gender balance, 20% of staff belonging to an under-represented ethnic group, 10% identifying as LGBTQ+ and 12% identifying as D/deaf and disabled.

Still, as mentioned by Documentary Filmmakers with Disabilities (2021), including professionals with disabilities in a film crew is not enough. The filmmaking process needs to change so that specific needs are met. These needs are often laid out in documents known as access riders, which are being used by artists with disabilities to demand, for instance, extended shooting time when existing schedules become challenging. Without this, inclusion can turn into a form of tokenism or, as described by Mitchell and Snyder (2020: 187), (neoliberal) inclusionism, which "requires that disability be tolerated as long as it does not demand an excessive degree of change from relatively inflexible institutions, environments and norms of belonging." Applied to accessibility, a distinction can then be made between "liberal approaches to accessibility that aim to include the disenfranchised in an existing world", as is the case in traditional forms of access, and "radical approaches to accessibility that aim to transform the world by centering minoritised groups" (Giles 2018), as in the cases of collaborative and/or creative MA.

The representation of disability in the artistic artefacts is another area that is rife with ableism. Limiting once more the observation to the film industry, persons with disabilities make up over 25% of the US population and yet over the past ten years, only 2.5% of characters were depicted with a disability (Smith *et al.* 2017). To make matters worse, only 0.5% of the characters with disabilities have a speaking role (Woodburn and Kopić 2016). The problem, though, is not only that films and series do not engage with disability, but also that, when they do, they tend to portray it in stereotypical and harmful ways. As analysed in the website Critical Axis (2022), depictions of disability on screen are usually full of tropes that present characters with disabilities as defined solely by their disability or as devices to provide comic relief and support for non-disabled characters or to elicit pity or inspiration in the (non-disabled) audience.

Which brings us to fruition. Authors and artists with disabilities such as Kleege (2016), Thompson (2016), Mingus (2017, 2018) or Lazard (2019) have all identified ableist elements in traditional forms of access to fruition. An important one is the focus on compensation, that is, on providing visually– and hearing-impaired users (sometimes solely) with what they cannot see and hear, respectively. For Eardley *et al.* (2022), this defines users by what they can or cannot do. Traditional access is sometimes, according to these authors, compliance-based, static and focused on objectivity, which, for Kleege (2016), is neither desirable nor possible. Instead, they propose a type of MA that is openly subjective, flexible and which aims to provide an aesthetic experience through sensory and emotional engagement with the audience.

This does not mean that there is no value in traditional MA practices. These are, after all, the practices that have enabled millions of users to access audiovisual media across a wide range of formats and platforms. They are also the practices that have set the basic conditions so that new, alternative approaches can now be proposed. However, traditional access is often conservative. For instance, access services that are designed with an emphasis on accuracy and objectivity aim to portray the world as it is and to leave it unaltered, that is, to maintain the status quo. In contrast, some of the approaches to access presented here are examples of what Mingus describes as "liberatory access," which works actively to "transform the conditions that created that inaccessibility in the first place". This can result in the provision extra time when shooting with artists with disabilities, in the depiction of characters with disabilities as complex persons not solely defined by their disability or in subtitles or AD that provide users with a new and engaging experience. As explained by Mingus (2018):

> I don't just want us to get a seat at someone else's table, I want us to be able to build something more magnificent than a table, together with our accomplices. I want us to be able to be understood and to be able to take part in principled struggle together—to be able to be human together. Not just placated or politely listened to.

Liberatory access is thus "a way of doing access that transforms both our 'today' and our 'tomorrow'. In this way, it both resists against the world we don't want and actively builds the world we do want" (Mingus 2017).

3. Moving media accessibility forward

It seems safe to say that traditional forms of accessibility are here to stay, for there will always be cases where they are the only possible way. But the new forms of accessibility that have been growing in the past few years and which are moved by an attempt to bring the three shifts to their full development may also be here to stay. The debate, then, is not about which of the two perspectives is better or which one should be abandoned; nor it is about one perspective against the other, in absolute terms. The debate is about how the two perspectives can co-exist, what are their constraints and limits (for the new, creative forms of MA are not impervious to being affected by bias themselves), what are their strengths and possibilities, and how they can jointly be instruments of social justice.

Although non-ableist forms of accessibility were already explored at the dawn of MA, the way forward for MA seems to be a journey into mostly uncharted territory. This is a risky and exciting journey, but one where MA is not alone, for the debate on these very topics is already mature in other areas. In order to move forward, it is important for MA to look at its past to understand why some perspectives have been ignored or forgotten and why others have become dominant, to look at its sides to see and learn how other areas have already addressed those problems, and to make MA a contested space where different voices can be heard. As simplistic as it may sound, the way forward for MA seems ultimately to revolve around diversity; that is, to become truly universalist, by debunking oppressive forms of accessibility, accepting that the question of access concerns all (each one according to their own specificities and wishes), and overcoming the temptation to conceive access as a monolith that imposes one solution for all.

References

- **Eardley, Alison F. et al.** (2022). "Devisualizing the Museum: From Access to Inclusion." *Journal of Museum Education* 47(2), 150–165.

- **Fryer, Louise** (2018). "Staging the audio describer: An exploration of integrated audio description." *Disability Studies Quaterly* 38(3), https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/6490/5093

- **Greco, Gian Maria** (2016). "On accessibility as a human right, with an application to media accessibility." Anna Matamala and Pilar Orero (eds) (2016). *Researching audio description: New approaches*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 11–33.

- **Greco, Gian Maria** (2018). "The nature of accessibility studies." *Journal of Audiovisual Translation* 1(1), 205–232.

- **Greco, Gian Maria** (2019a). "Accessibility studies: Abuses, misuses and the method of poietic design." Constantine Stephanidis (ed.) (2019). *HCI International 2019*. Cham: Springer, 15–27.

- **Greco, Gian Maria** (2019b). "Towards a pedagogy of accessibility. The need for critical learning spaces in media accessibility education and training." *Linguistica Antverpiensia* 18, 23–46.

- **Greco, Gian Maria, Alessandra Rizzo and Cinzia Spinzi** (2022). "Accessible Stories Within Mediascapes: Voicing Otherness in Digital Museums." *Journal of Audiovisual Translation* 5(2).

- **Kleege, Georgina** (2016). "Audio Description Described: Current Standards, Future Innovations, Larger Implications." *Representations* 135(1), 89–101.

- **Mitchell, D. T. and Sharon Snyder** (2020). "Disability, Neoliberal Inclusionism and Non-normative Positivism." Simon Daes and Marc Leonormand (eds) (2020). *Neoliberalism in Context: Governance, Subjectivity and Knowledge*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 177-193.

- **Naraine, M. D., Margot R. Whitfield and Deborah I. Fels** (2018). "Who's devising your theatre experience? A director's approach to inclusive theatre for blind and low vision theatregoers." *Visual Communication* 17(1), 113–133.

- **Orero, Pilar *et al.*** (2018). "Conducting experimental research in audiovisual translation (AVT): A position paper." *Journal of Specialised Translation* 30, 105–126.

- **Romero-Fresco, Pablo** (2018). "Accessible filmmaking: Translation and accessibility from production." Luis Pérez-González (ed.) (2018). *The Routledge Handbook of Audiovisual Translation*. London: Routledge, 498–515.

- **Romero-Fresco, Pablo** (2019a). *Accessible filmmaking: Integrating translation and accessibility into the filmmaking process*. London: Routledge.

- **Romero-Fresco, Pablo** (2019b). "Training in accessible filmmaking." *Linguistica Antverpiensia* 18, 47–72.

- **Romero-Fresco, Pablo** (2022). "Reconsidering the Balance between Standardisation and Transformation in Media Accessibility." Paper presented at *Languages and the Media* (ICWE GmbH, Radisson Collection Hotel, 7 November 2022).

- **Smith, Stacy, Marc Choueiti, and Katherine Pieper** (2017). *Inequality in 900 Popular Films*, Los Angeles: Annenberg Foundation and USC Annenberg.

- **Thompson, Hannah** (2018). "Audio Description: Turning Access to Film into Cinema Art." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 38(3).

- **Udo, John Patrick and Deborah I. Fels** (2010). "Universal design on stage: Live audio description for theatrical performances." *Perspectives* 18(3), 189–203.

- **Woodburn, Danny and Kristina Kopić** (2016). *The Ruderman White Paper on Employment of Actors with Disabilities in Television*. Boston: Ruderman Family Foundation.

Websites

- **BFI, British Film Institute** (2022). *Inclusion targets*. https://www.bfi.org.uk/inclusion-film-industry/inclusion-targets (consulted 5.12.2022)

- **BITRA, Bibliography of Interpreting and Translation**. http://dti.ua.es/en/bitra/introduction.html (consulted 5.12.2022)

- **CRTC, Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission** (2022). *Annual/Monthly Reports Filed by Broadcasting Industry Players*. https://crtc.gc.ca/eng/BCASTING/ann_rep/annualrp.htm (consulted 5.12.2022)

- **FWD-Doc, and Doc Society** (2021). *A Toolkit for Inclusion & Accessibility: Changing the Narrative of Disability in Documentary Film*. London: FWD-Doc. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5dd1c2b5a0f7a568485cbedd/t/602d4708d39c1d1154d0902a/1613581716771/FWD-Doc+Toolkit+small.pdf (consulted 5.12.2022)

- **Giles, Harry Josephine** (2018). *Access Means It's Not For You*. https://harryjosephine.com/2018/11/15/access-means-its-not-for-you (consulted 5.12.2022)

- **Independent Cinema Office** (2019*). It's time to make disability visible in cinema* https://www.independentcinemaoffice.org.uk/its-time-to-make-disability-visible-in-cinema/ (consulted 5.12.2022)

- **Lazard, Caroline** (2019). *Accessibility in the Arts: A Promise and a Practice*. https://promiseandpractice.art/ (consulted 5.12.2022)

- **Mingus, Mia** (2017). "Access Intimacy, Interdependence and Disability Justice." *Leaving Evidence*. *https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2017/04/12/access-intimacy-interdependence-and-disability-justice/* (consulted 5.12.2022)

- **Mingus, Mia** (2018). ""Disability Justice" is Simply Another Term for Love." *Leaving Evidence*. https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2018/11/03/disability-justice-is-simply-another-term-for-love/ (consulted 5.12.2022)

Biographies

Gian Maria Greco (PhD in Philosophy, University of Salento; PhD in Translation Studies, University of Roehampton) is Senior Research Fellow at the University of Macerata. His research focuses on theoretical and applied issues in accessibility, translation, disability, and human rights. He complements his research expertise with an extensive experience as an accessibility consultant for public institutions and private organisations. He is a Board Member of the Marie Curie Alumni Association, where he co-leads the ResearchAbility Initiative, the inter-organisation programme for researchers with disabilities.

ORCID: 0000-0002-8714-6349
Email: gianmaria.greco@poiesis.it

Pablo Romero-Fresco is a Senior Lecturer at Universidade de Vigo and Honorary Professor at the University of Roehampton. He is the leader of the international research centre GALMA and the author of *Subtitling through Speech Recognition: Respeaking* (Routledge) and *Accessible Filmmaking* (Routledge). He is a filmmaker and an accessibility consultant for international institutions such as the European Parliament, the Canadian Government and media companies such as AiMedia, Sky or Netflix.

ORCID: 0000-0003-2166-5792
E-mail: promero@uvigo.es

Notes

[1] The BITRA database, one of the largest databases of publications on translation and interpreting, includes 1282 entries on MA. An initial look at Google Scholar, which features most of these publications, shows that only eight of them mention the words 'ableism' or 'ableist'. Though this does not mean that only eight publications out of those 1282 entries discuss the issue of ableism, the fact that those two terms, which are an integral part of the discussion in other areas, are basically absent in titles, abstracts and keywords of publications in MA is a sign of the extent to which ableism is not an integral part of the debate and research in MA yet.