

## Participatory accessibility: Creating audio description with blind and non-blind children

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### Abstract

This article focuses on participatory accessibility by providing a definition, several theoretical insights and practical examples. By reporting on an inclusive and participatory experience carried out with blind, partially sighted and non-blind children in the drafting, recording and using audio description (AD) for a live opera performance, the aim is to bring into the spotlight the potential benefits of making accessibility a collective, open enterprise where end-users and creators are one. The article also advocates for the participatory turn in media accessibility research and practice.

**Key words:** media accessibility, audio description (AD), participation, children, inclusion

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These performances simply wouldn't exist without an audience; it's not a matter of needing spectators, but of needing co-creators. (Kattwinkel, 2003, xi)

As Susan Kattwinkel says with reference to the experiences reported in her collection of essays on *Audience Participation* (2003, x), “the audience has had a direct and immediate effect on the performance”, which upturns the more frequent point of view in research whereby the effect of the performance on the audience (reception) is under scrutiny, and not the opposite. In the contributions to Kattwinkel's volume, “either the performance is structured to include audience members, or it was created with the help of potential audience members” (p. x). Taking one step further, in this article we will present and discuss an experience that encompassed both aspects: the performance was structured to include audience members, but it was also created with their direct participation. Moreover, such twofold participation occurred on two levels: the performance was initially conceived for the young (children and teenagers) but was later expanded to the blind and partially sighted.

*Opera Domani* is an Italian opera education project founded in 1997. Every year, a new opera is commissioned, generally based on a work from the international repertoire. This new opera normally contains arias and music from the original work, with the addition of some dialogues and a partial or total change of settings. Its main beneficiaries are school teachers and, above all, students who are invited to be creative and participate in the performance by producing some elements of the costumes, by preparing for singing and even dancing. With over 140 performances across Italy in the first six months of 2018 *Carmen la stella del circo di Siviglia* (Bernard, n.d.) (a 90-minute opera performance) reached out to 5,000 teachers and 140,000 students. In June 2018, the opera was made accessible with and for blind children for the very first time.

By reporting on this experiment in participatory accessibility, the aim of this article is to reflect on the changing face of media access services, their provision, their consumption and related research. Fifteen years ago, audiovisual translation (AVT) scholars first opening up to media accessibility research were eager to develop a knowledge of the target users (mainly deaf and blind) so as to be able to reflect on, and enhance, services for them. Today we seem to be increasingly moving towards the end users' active participation, with a positive reshuffling of the production-to-consumption cycle.

In the following sections, methodological and theoretical reflections on end users' engagement in the creation of access services, here defined as participatory accessibility, will accompany the report on an inclusive, creative audio description laboratory with blind and non-blind children, the very first of its kind. Informed by an interdisciplinary approach and steeped in action research, this contribution aims to pave the way for more audience participation in media accessibility research and practice.

## 1. From audience mapping to participation

In relation to AVT consumption, particularly for live events, the move from merely studying audiences, to their involvement and participation has matched the evolution of the viewer/spectator from user to prosumer (Toffler, 1980), and ultimately producer (Bird, 2011; Bruns, 2008). In relation to several AVT techniques, this has been evident for a few years: see, for instance, the increasing relevance of the work of fansubbers and fandubbers around the globe and the amount of – crossdisciplinary – research their activities have generated. For other forms of entertainment, such an evolution has been slower to come, especially with reference to live shows and even more with special segments of the audience such as persons with sensory impairments. There are several reasons behind such a slower evolution: first of all, access services for live shows are generally more complex to create and, far too often, they live and die within the duration of a performance, not enjoying any afterlife as often happens with cinema, television and VOD. A second reason is to be found in the primary audience for such services: taking AD as a case in point, the blind and partially sighted are still seen today as a niche audience, therefore pouring resources into access services for them is not always financially viable. However, it is precisely by setting up these services, by disseminating them and ultimately by sharing their very creation and consumption that an ever-larger space can be created, and accessibility can further expand.

Going back to AVT and the evolution of the role of the audience, the acknowledgement of the latter as prosumers (Toffler, 1980) rather than 'merely' spectators, has indeed defined a turning point in research, but also in provision and consumption. The advent of TV on demand and of increasingly specialized channels at the turn of the century, clearly laid the emphasis on the needs and tastes of what had far too long been considered a somewhat blurred, mass audience (Drotner, Schroeder, Murray & Kline 2003). From then onwards, prosumers have been seen increasingly and more systematically as contributors not only to the success of an AVT text, but also to its content: initially influencing the shape of new texts, audience members have been increasingly taking part in their very creation.

Indeed, as Bruns prophetically stated ten years ago with reference to the internet and the consumption of online content, “the future is user-led” (2008) and this future – now turned present – conveys a passage from passive to active audience involvement. With reference to accessibility for the blind and partially sighted that is central to this article, this active involvement (or participation), is still in its infancy and it is the applied researcher's task to support and enhance it as much as possible.

Although already used several times above, the word *participation* deserves a definition. In general terms, participation evokes action, agency, shared learning and experience. It implies a proactive attitude and, as intended in this article, it also involves a move beyond involvement. In relation to access services, for instance, audience involvement may refer to encouraging attendance to accessible performances, followed by the collection of feedback, but also to being

involved in creating accessibility. Participation, in accordance with Kattwinkel's definition (2003), is here synonymous with full collaboration, with the sharing of creative efforts, consumption and further creation.

Thus, participatory accessibility refers to the design, creation, revision and consumption of access services in an inclusive way: the blind, partially sighted and non-blind; the deaf, hard of hearing and non-deaf; children and adults; they can all work together in the making of truly shared access services for the media, for live performances, for museums. In fact, when referring to participatory accessibility, even the word 'services' becomes inappropriate: what is created and enjoyed should rather be seen as an inclusive experience, not merely a service.

Although it implies difficulties at several levels, participatory accessibility also ensures many benefits: as a shared experience, it implies learning from each other, regardless of sensory or age-related limitations. Moreover, it involves shared awareness of the difficulties that lie in the creation and provision of accessibility and, at the same time, it stimulates joint efforts in advocating for it. Indeed, participatory accessibility *is* a joint effort both in the creation and in the dissemination of the inclusive experience, thus also bypassing potential problems of mistrust and lack of commitment on the part of any end user. Furthermore, participatory accessibility supports the central notion of the universality of inclusive entertainment, where benefits are for all, beyond more or less codified, standardized classifications of audience types and special needs. To be more precise, in participatory accessibility those special needs remain central and are indeed taken into consideration, but they are blended into the needs of other audience types and groups.

As Kattwinkel (2003) states, participation means inclusion in a performance from beginning to end. But where exactly does a performance begin, and where does it end? These and other issues will be discussed with reference to our own case study in the following sections, but before we get there, let us focus on opera, its audiences and their emotions.

## **2. Profiling opera audiences and their emotions**

In the second part of the 20th century and into the beginning of the 21st, opera suffered from an image as a stilted, elitist genre, appealing to well-educated, wealthy and generally not-so-young audiences (Piso, 2010). This was true across Europe and North America, although several attempts at creating opera for the masses (restoring its original 17th and 18th century purpose) had been made during this period. One example of this can be seen in the history of the New York City Opera and its endeavours since the 1940s (McFadden, 2014). Another is evident in the innovative dissemination enterprise started by the Metropolitan Opera in 1977 to broadcast opera on television (The Metropolitan Opera, n.d.), which has since inspired dozens of theatres and opera companies worldwide. Today, opening up to, and embracing, as broad and diverse an audience as possible is a major concern of virtually all opera houses and festivals: thus, accessibility has become

a buzzword across Europe and North America. Opera aims to reach out to all, and this aim is pursued in a variety of ways: from opening rehearsals to the public to inviting it behind the scenes. From classes and lectures delivered everywhere (from kindergarten to nursing homes), to extras and singers recruited in the streets, there seems to be no limit to what accessibility can mean in relation to opera today.

In terms of research, beyond the predictably wide explorations carried out in musicology and music history, opera has offered stimuli for analysis to many a scholar in many other fields. From a reception studies perspective, opera audiences have been widely explored, occasionally – and perhaps most interestingly – in relation to people's emotional responses to different types of performance. Being most frequently and traditionally enjoyed live on unique occasions, opera allows for the collection of feedback immediately after a performance, complex though this operation may be. In “Opera and emotion: the cultural value of attendance for the highly engaged”, O'Neill, Edelman and Sloboda (2016) focus on *emotional engagement* with opera by carrying out qualitative research in audience experience through interviews with 19 opera attendees, selected for being long-standing opera lovers. Although the number of interviewees is not particularly high, the interviews' structure and ensuing qualitative analysis are complex and stimulating. Experience in this study is especially related to audience *behaviour*, *sensations* and *reactions*, all factors which are indeed essential to study both the audience itself and the performance appreciation. In their article, the authors start by making an interesting distinction between feedback gathered *during* and feedback obtained *after* a performance. Although claiming that evaluating emotional response during or immediately after a performance is of tantamount importance (O'Neill, Edelman & Sloboda, 2016), in their study they settle for the process of reflection on the opera experience, i.e. the “reflective activity” (p. 26) which can be stimulated in the days following a performance, which they recorded by means of structured interviews. As a first methodological strategy for their analysis, the authors identify 16 themes, based on their recurrence across the interviews. Among them, one of the most salient is 'emotion', which is mentioned several times by virtually all interviewees and which connects back to the *sensations* and *reactions* identified as central issues in the article premises. Concentrating on 'emotion', especially in relation to engagement as it surfaces in most interviews, O'Neill et. al (2016) report on what has elsewhere been defined as the “mediated experiencing of emotions” (Dias & Jorge, 2016, p. 431), i.e. the reporting of emotions through individual memory. Interestingly, although the emotions they analysed were mediated through memory, their conclusions lead the scholars to define their respondents as “highly engaged” (2016, p. 443). If this is certainly true in relation to the interviewees' enthusiasm, which brought them to volunteer for the study, it is not perhaps so objectively true for their experience, which was recalled through memory after a number of days. A comparison of feedback gathered straight after a performance and upon recollection several days later would indeed be of great interest. However, although recollection is beyond the scope of this essay, behaviour, sensations and reactions, as well as overall emotional engagement are key concepts in relation to participatory accessibility and will be called into play in our analysis of the inclusive experience reported below,

where emotions were felt and recorded live and involved the participants, their families and the experiment operators.

### **3. Participatory accessibility in practice: Opera Domani and *Carmen la stella del circo di Siviglia***

As mentioned in the introduction, participation and action go hand in hand, since participation *is* action. Thus, participatory activities are ideally the object of action research, as we aim to demonstrate in the following paragraphs.

#### **3.1. Participation in action research**

Amongst the many approaches and methodologies employed to analyse participatory activities from the point of view of action research, we will mainly refer to Andrew Townsend's 2013 volume *Action research. The challenges of understanding and changing practice*, where a detailed discussion of the opportunities and challenges offered by action research is provided from the very first pages. In particular, Townsend identifies three major modes of action research. The first is especially relevant for this essay: named “community engagement and participative enquiry” (2013, p. 8), it is defined as the involvement of communities in processes of action and change and it refers to experiences which enable people or groups to participate effectively in action and change. As an added value for this type of action and the ensuing research, the author evokes authenticity, i.e. the participation in an authentic experience/action, not constructed for an experiment.

The second mode of action research is defined as “developing practices through reflective enquiry” (Townsend, p. 9) and it refers to ways in which action research can be a stimulus to reflect upon, and further develop, those practices. Rather than being different from the first, this second mode seems to identify an additional pathway for investigation: community engagement and participative enquiry can be further observed through reflection, and the outcome of this reflection can then be applied to review practice.

Both approaches are useful and relevant for a description of the inclusive and participatory experience with *Carmen, la stella del circo di Siviglia*. Equally relevant is one of the models for the action research cycle that Townsend illustrates in his volume. Although it is the oldest and simplest (first proposed by Kurt Lewin in 1946) it seems to be of great relevance for the study of participatory accessibility:

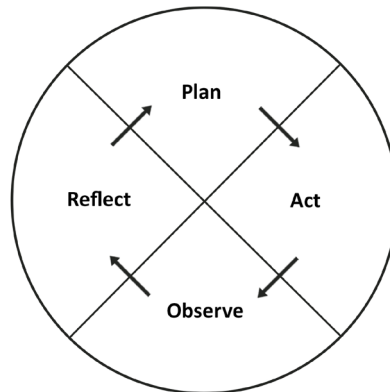


Figure 1. Kurt Lewin's action research cycle.

It may be worth recalling here that Kurt Lewin (1946), generally recognized as the father of action research, was long concerned with empowering minority groups, raising their self-esteem and helping them seek “independence, equality and cooperation” (Adelman, 1993, p. 18). Lewin supported what he called democratic participation (inclusion, in our terms) in many contexts, thus being perfectly in line with the aim of this essay and the experience it discusses.

According to Lewin's cycle outline, plan–act–observe–reflect are consequential but also feeding into each other, thus all equally essential to renew the cycle. This seems to suggest that action research, and the participatory activities it is concerned with, are never a final point, but rather the stimuli for further planning, acting, observing and reflecting. This is precisely what we shall see below, in a description of our participatory and inclusive experience.

### 3.2. Planning the participatory experience

The project called *Opera Domani* finds its roots in opera education from a participatory standpoint: every year a new opera is written to fully include the audience, i.e. young viewers/participants from 6 to 14 years of age, under the guidance of their teachers. As it stands, opera education aims first and foremost at educating young viewers to enjoy the opera by removing all virtual barriers between the performance and the audience.

Inspired by such a truly participatory enterprise, a group of scholars active in the provision of opera accessibility and working at the University of Macerata<sup>1</sup> decided to design a lab to make the *Opera Domani* experience inclusive also for blind and partially sighted (BPS) children.

As *Carmen, la stella del circo di Siviglia* was to close its Italian tour in Macerata, on 5 and 6 June 2018, we contacted the managers of *Opera Domani* and discussed the idea of setting up a participatory laboratory to write, revise and record the AD for the show with blind and non-blind children and teenagers, to then deliver it live in the form of short audio clips during the performance.

The proposal was received enthusiastically, and we thus drafted a programme for the lab, to be held on 29 May 2018. We shared the draft with the President of Unione Italiana dei Ciechi e degli Ipovedenti (UICI)<sup>11</sup> for the Marche region and defined the details together. A call for participants was then issued and distributed to all five provincial sections of UICI for the region. The call mentioned that each BPS boy or girl who wished to take part in our lab could bring along one or more friends, brothers or sisters between the ages of 6 and 14. We aimed to host a maximum of 20 participants, in line with the number of seats we were able to reserve for the 6 June performance. Being the very first experience of this kind, recruiting participants was not too easy. Nonetheless, 5 BPS girls and 1 boy took part in the lab, along with 9 sighted friends or relatives of approximately the same age.

In order to make the lab as entertaining and interactive as possible, we planned two subsequent sessions, starting from 2.30 pm. The first one (approximately 90 minutes) was for rewriting and revising the AD together, whereas the second one (approximately 90 minutes) was for recording the AD.

As our young participants were between 6 and 15 years of age (average age: 9.8), we tried to keep all sections of our lab as flexible as possible, making drinks and snacks available throughout the afternoon and welcoming parents on the premises. Having prepared a draft AD for the first part of our lab, we used it as a basis for discussion with the BPS and non-blind participants; as we will exemplify below, many changes were suggested by our group as a result of lively discussions.

For the first part of the lab, we used three laptops, one for reading out the text, one for making all the changes and additions, and one for the projection and sound diffusion of the show recording. For the ensuing recording session, we used one laptop and two recorders: one recorder was connected to the laptop (Marantz Professional MPM-1000, plus a 3-channel Yamaha mixer), while the other was a portable Zoom H1 Handy Recorder. Recordings and mixing were performed on Audacity 2.2.2.

### **3.3. Acting together**

Having dealt with the planning stage, we will now focus on the actions involved in our inclusive and participatory experience. Although they were manifold, the actions can be summed up under four headings: 1) drafting the AD; 2) discussing, revising, and rewriting the AD; 3) recording it; 4) and listening to it during the performance.

As anticipated, a draft AD was created in advance by two members of the University of Macerata team: they worked on the introductory section and the in-act descriptions based on a full recording of the 90-minute show, but also on the booklet prepared by *Opera Domani* to guide the teachers



and the sighted pupils in their preparation for the show. A shortened, accessible version of this booklet, containing the arias to be sung, a physical description of the characters and the plot of the show, was created by the University of Macerata team and sent by email to the families of all participants 10 days before the lab. The aim of the draft AD was to function as a basis for discussion with the BPS and non-blind participants. It proved very useful also as a practical explanation for those who had no previous exposure to AD, i.e. over 80% of the participants.

To ensure full participation during the lab, chairs were arranged in a semi-circle, facing a wall where the recording of the show was projected. Very good sound diffusion for the audio was ensured and the three operators running the lab were seated among the children. The latter were mixed: the BPS sat next to their sighted friends or relatives, the youngest children (6 to 8 years old) occasionally stood up and sometimes they went as far as mimicking the objects or actions we were discussing.

As is customary for the University of Macerata team, the AD was drafted in the form of a rather long introductory sequence comprising the following sections: 1) an initial, explanatory (how-to-use-this-AD) message, 2) a summary of the plot, 3) a description of the settings, 4) a description of the main costumes, 5) a description of the initial scene. To this introductory sequence, approximately 70 short in-act descriptions were added, to highlight the main changes or actions happening during the performance.

As a starting point, the explanatory message of the draft AD was read out to the participants and, after a lively discussion, it was shortened by a third for the final AD. Below is an excerpt from this section, where the names of all characters and the reference to an “all colourful” circus, “with a lot of artists”, where added on the children's suggestion.

Questa è l'audio descrizione di *Carmen, la stella del circo di Siviglia*. È uno spettacolo tutto per noi bambini e ragazzi, ispirato all'opera di Bizet scritta nel 1875. In questo spettacolo Carmen e gli altri protagonisti, che sono Don José, Micaela, Zuniga ed Escamillo, vivono tutti una storia un po' diversa: siamo tutti al circo! Un circo colorato e pieno di artisti, a Siviglia, in Spagna.

[This is the AD of *Carmen, la stella del circo di Siviglia*. The show is all for us, children and teenagers, and it is inspired by Bizet's opera written in 1875. In this show, Carmen and the other protagonists, who are Don José, Micaela, Zuniga and Escamillo, experience a rather different story. We are inside a circus! The circus is all colourful and with a lot of artists, set in Seville, Spain.]

*Example 1. Excerpt from AD.*

The plot section was also shortened and a number of references were revised or utterly changed during the discussion. Subsequently, the first 15 minutes of the video were played, and the settings, costumes and main actions were discussed, so as to define the respective introductory descriptions. Example 2 below shows the draft and the final version of the AD for the settings.

DRAFT AD	FINAL AD
<p>Siamo all'interno del tendone del circo, che è a grandi strisce bianche e rosse. Come gli spettatori, siamo collocati davanti all'area circolare dove gli artisti si esibiscono. Al centro del tendone di fronte a noi c'è una sontuosa entrata fatta di drappi rossi, come un sipario di teatro. Sopra a questa entrata c'è la scritta "Circo di Siviglia".</p> <p>Lungo il perimetro del tendone ci sono delle pedane di legno con sopra le sedie per gli spettatori. Sotto le pedane, lungo il perimetro circolare, dei blocchi rossi e gialli che delimitano l'area dello spettacolo. A volte, gli artisti del circo saltano o camminano anche su questi blocchi rossi!</p> <p>Nell'area centrale del circo troviamo vari oggetti: un grande pannello circolare rosso, giallo e bianco che sembra una grande ruota ed è invece il bersaglio del lanciatore di coltelli! Ai lati troviamo un'altissima bici con una sola ruota, birilli e cerchi. Dal soffitto scende un cerchio per la trapezista.</p> <p>[We are inside the circus tent, which has large, red and white stripes. Just like the circus audience, we face the circular area where the artists perform. In front of us, the striped circus tent has a lavish entrance made of red drapes which look like theatre curtains. At the top of the entrance, a board says "Circo di Siviglia".</p> <p>All along the large tent are wooden platforms with chairs for the audience. Under these platforms are red and yellow blocks marking the performance area. Some of the artists occasionally walk or jump on these blocks, too! At the centre of the performance area there are several objects: a large, round panel painted in red, yellow and white which looks like a large wheel but it's the knife thrower target. We also have a tall, single-wheeled bike, some skittles and hoops. A large hoop for the trapeze artist hangs from the top of the tent.]</p>	<p>Siamo dentro al circo, che è un tendone a strisce bianche e rosse. Come gli spettatori del circo, abbiamo lo spettacolo davanti a noi. Al centro del tendone si trova l'area di spettacolo, dove si muovono gli acrobati, i giocolieri, le ballerine. C'è una trapezista che salta in un cerchio e ... anche un fachiro! Il fachiro ha un coltello in mano.</p> <p>Al centro del tendone c'è un'entrata, un'apertura in drappi rossi dalla quale entrano tutti gli artisti. Sopra all'entrata c'è la scritta "Circo Siviglia". Al centro dell'area di spettacolo c'è una pedana rotonda, rossa e gialla, dove siede il fachiro.</p> <p>[We are inside the circus, which is a large tent with white and red stripes. Just like the circus audience, we have the performance right in front of us. At the centre of the large tent is the performance area, with the acrobats, the jugglers and the dancers. There is also a trapeze artist that jumps into a hoop and ... a snake charmer! The charmer holds a knife.</p> <p>At the centre of the tent opposite us is an entrance made of red drapes, where all artists enter from. At the centre of the performance area is a round, red and yellow platform, where the charmer is seated.]</p>

Example 2. Draft AD and final AD for the settings.

Besides being visibly shorter, the final AD contains a variety of changes which are worth discussing briefly, although a linguistic and semantic analysis of the two ADs is beyond the scope of this article. First of all, the young participants liked the idea of explicitly locating the point of view of the audience ("like the circus audience, the performance is right in front of us"), although this is not customary

in AD. On the contrary, they asked us to remove the descriptions of the platforms, the seats and also the red and yellow blocks that mark the performance area. In general, the participants suggested that we deleted most information about objects (a large wheel, the trapeze artist's hoop, etc.) and instead asked us to add references to the characters that appear on stage: acrobats, jugglers, dancers and above all the charmer, who aroused great curiosity and excitement.

These changes recall one recurring feature discussed by researchers working on the perception of still or moving images, as found, for instance, in eye tracking research: Goldstein, Woods and Peli (2007) ranked individuals and their faces as the most frequent centre of interest (COI) in most experiments with moving images, whereas Cerf, Harel, Einhaeuser and Koch (2007) focused on faces only and found, for instance, that these were fixated by 88.9% of their experiment participants in their first two fixations, whereas other areas of interest scored much lower percentages. In AVT research, similar findings from eye tracking tests on film are discussed by Di Giovanni (2013).

To continue with the discussion and rewriting of the AD during the lab, the following sections of the introduction and the short in-act descriptions yielded equally interesting and occasionally unexpected results, with all lab participants providing comments and solutions through constructive and lively negotiation.

For the recording session, we had planned to actively involve the sighted participants only, who would have read out the revised AD text from printed sheets. To our great surprise, however, all the BPS children and teenagers were eager to participate in the recording session and asked us to read out to them excerpts from the script, which they would memorize and repeat. Their memorization skills represented the most impressive finding of the whole experience, which the operators hadn't even envisaged. In the end, most of the recordings (over 85%) were done by the BPS, as the sighted participants found it hard to memorize sentences and their reading was generally far less natural than the spontaneous acting of the BPS. During the performance, on 6 June 2018, we distributed headsets to the 15 lab participants, who listened to their own AD and sang along with the other children in the audience. We managed to record some of their comments right after the performance, to support us in the “reflective enquiry” suggested by Kurt Lewin (1946).

### **3.4. Observing and collecting observations**

During and immediately after the lab, the three operators involved in this inclusive and participatory experience (including the author of this article) exchanged comments and made notes of what had been observed.

One common observation was related to the lengthy and passionate discussions among the lab participants about colours to be mentioned in the AD. As stated elsewhere (Di Giovanni, 2014), BPS children are eager for colours in AD, to such an extent that empirical research shows that references to colours are frequently amongst the best remembered. For us, sighted adults, it was incredibly interesting to hear the blind, partially sighted and non-blind young participants discuss nuances of colours, or suggest the addition of bright colour references for costume and set descriptions where they had not been inserted. In the brief interviews gathered immediately after the performance, over 80% of the interviewees, both BPS and non-blind, mentioned colours as being well described and useful for overall comprehension.

Another interesting observation resulting from the lab experience is connected with the use of what we may here generally define as 'engaging verbs', which were often preferred, or even suggested by the BPS participants. As we can see from the three examples in Example 3, more engaging, less generic verbs were preferred to convey actions, thus implicitly enhancing the overall emotional engagement:

DRAFT AD	FINAL AD
Il lanciatore di coltelli <i>lancia</i> un coltello [The thrower throws a knife]	Il lanciatore di coltelli <i>scaglia</i> un coltello [The thrower flings a knife]
Gli acrobati <i>portano</i> in scena... [The acrobats <i>bring</i> on stage...]	Gli acrobati <i>trascinano</i> in scena.. [The acrobats <i>drag</i> on stage...]
I giocolieri <i>prendono</i> una palla [The jugglers <i>take</i> a ball]	I giocolieri <i>acchiappano</i> una palla [The jugglers <i>snatch</i> a ball]

Example 3. Change of verbs from the draft to the final AD.

With reference to this last point, it is perhaps even more interesting to note that such preferences in the choice of verbs were especially noticed by some parents attending the lab, who informed us they had never thought of discussing nuances of meaning for verbs or other words with their children. Parents' engagement is the next element that was generally observed and that we would like to highlight here, as it was one of the most remarkable outcomes of this participatory lab. When leaving the premises after the lab, all parents thanked us for the overall experience and a few of them reiterated that our discussion over word meaning had been especially enlightening.

#### 4. Reflections and conclusions: the lessons of participation

As a final set of reflections to close our action research cycle and foster a new start, let us first focus on the discoveries that were made during this inclusive and participatory experience.

From the point of view of the action researchers, discoveries were made mostly in connection with the emotional engagement and the skills of the primary users of AD, i.e. BPS children and teenagers.

Their memorization skills, their enthusiasm in searching for the most engaging words to describe actions, their active role in the overall lab – they were often more active than their non-blind counterparts – were indeed surprising. Equally surprising was the BPS children and teenagers' wish to engage several senses during the lab: they asked us to listen to some excerpts from the show more than once, to touch the computers and the recorders we were using, to sit on our laps and also touch us while we were working. Emotional engagement for BPS children, to use O'Neill's et. al, seems to come from an active participation which “involves multiple sensorial stimuli and reactions” (2016, p. 440).

As a further reflection coming from this experience, learning needs to be mentioned, as it happened on many levels: the operators, or active researchers, learned from all the discoveries above, but also from the spontaneous, constructive collaboration between all blind and non-blind participants, from their discussions over nuances of meaning, from the parents' interest. As stated above, some parents overtly reported to have learned from the lab, whereas other parents admitted that this inclusive and participatory lab was one of a kind, hopefully to be repeated in the future. The children themselves learned about the opera, as most of them had never heard about *Carmen* or about classical opera in general.

As a semi-final comment, let us say that this experience did not end here, as reflections were immediately turned into the planning of further action. In 2019, the newly commissioned opera by *Opera Domani* will be the object of participatory AD labs in 3 towns throughout Italy. All the observations above have been poured into the drafting of an action plan for this experience, to be refined and expanded through further experience.

A very final comment takes us back to the beginning of this article, where the changing face of media accessibility research and practice was highlighted: participatory accessibility *can* and *should* bring about great changes, towards increased awareness and true inclusion. Our hopes are that a participatory turn in media accessibility research and practice will be acknowledged soon.

## Biographical note

**Elena Di Giovanni**, PhD, is Associate Professor of English Translation at the University of Macerata, Italy. She has taught audiovisual translation and media accessibility for 20 years, her research interests ranging from dubbing and subtitling from a reception studies perspective to media accessibility, especially audio description. From 2008 to 2016, she was Visiting Lecturer at Roehampton University, London, MA in audiovisual translation. Since 2013, she lectures on film translation and accessibility at the Venice International Film Festival, within the European Parliament-funded LUX Prize for cinema. Since November, 2016, she is President of ESIST, European association for the study of screen translation ([www.esist.org](http://www.esist.org)). She is coordinator of accessibility services at Macerata Opera Festival ([www.sferisterio.it](http://www.sferisterio.it)) and Teatro Grande in Brescia ([www.teatrogrande.it](http://www.teatrogrande.it)). She has published extensively on translation from a literary and audiovisual perspective. Her publications are here: [http://docenti.unimc.it/elena.digiovanni\\_content=publications](http://docenti.unimc.it/elena.digiovanni_content=publications).

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<sup>11</sup> Unione Italiana dei Ciechi e degli Ipovedenti (UICI) is the most prominent Italian association for blind and partially sighted people. Their website is here: <https://www.uiciechi.it> (accessed August 2018).