Abstract
Audio tours and audio descriptions provide distinctly different ways of achieving goals for interpretation and accessibility. This session will discuss the characteristics of audio tours and audio descriptions, including when, where, and how they can be used most effectively. Audio can inform and inspire visitors and enhance their site experience. Determining how audio tours or descriptions can or should be used at a site requires thoughtful consideration of audience, accessibility, and the interpretive message being conveyed. Case studies will highlight the effective use of on-site audio: Rohwer Japanese American Relocation Center; Blue Ridge Parkway; and Blytheville Historic Greyhound Depot - Dixie Line.

Keywords
audio, audio description, audio development, audio distribution, audio interpretation, audio narration, oral history

Introduction
The planning process for any interpretive project considers the place-specific historical, cultural, and natural resources in order to develop relevant messages and, subsequently, media. As Brochu and Merriman observe in The 5-M Model for Successful Planning Projects, “Planning for interpretation allows us to deliver messages through the creation of experiences. Some of these experiences may include interaction with interpretive media, while others may be carefully constructed to seem serendipitous, allowing self-discovery of the resource at hand.” In order to successfully make use of interpretive media, we must link interpretive messages with the right media type. This process was addressed in a paper by the 106 Group during the 2009 NAI conference: “Planning for Interactive Interpretation:
Choosing the Right Media for your Organization, Story, and Audience.” Our presentation today, building on this foundation, addresses media implementation—specifically, audio interpretation.

As a communicative media, audio appeals to auditory learners, helps to contextualize a place, provides a means to reach multiple audience groups, and has the potential to transport visitors to different times, seasons, or places.

Sound can be delivered in many ways including hand-held audio devices, downloadable podcast tours, apps, mobile-enabled websites, mobile phone tours, and on-site installations. It is important to remember that media is a means, not an end.

Once it is determined that audio is the appropriate media to communicate the interpretive message, a number of new challenges present themselves. Sometimes developing and implementing audio can feel overwhelming: Should we use audio description or audio narration? Who is the voice for our site? What will they say? What equipment and resources do we need to record? How do we achieve high-quality audio? What hardware do we need to best serve our visitors?

This paper seeks to help you answer these questions and enable you to provide accessible audio interpretation to your visitors.

Body

What is the difference between audio description and audio narration?

There are important differences between audio description and audio narration. Audio descriptions enable those who are blind or have low vision to access visual resources through a detailed description of key visual elements. Audio narrations are interpretive components that complement other interpretive elements, such as a wayside, scenic view, or other exhibit.

Audio description

Audio description describes the visual content, including posted text, of any program in order to provide individuals who are visually impaired with the information available to sighted visitors. Audio descriptions are typically produced as separate tracks for each interpretive exhibit. In some cases, a primary audio track is repeated at each exhibit in combination with a shorter, site-specific track (NPS Standard Specifications for Audio Description, June 2008).

Case Study

At Blue Ridge Parkway, the audio description consists of two elements: individual descriptions of each wayside and an overview description of the parkway that is repeated at each audio station.

For this project, audio descriptions for each wayside include:

- a reading of the wayside text (including seasonal text where applicable);
- a description of the wayside visual elements and physical characteristics;
- a description of the environment surrounding the wayside, including the view; and
- a description of notable features along the route to the next wayside.
This single repeated description of the parkway notes the extent of the parkway, a brief history, and notable characteristics; safety information is included at the end.

Welcome to the Blue Ridge Parkway. The two-lane parkway follows the crest of the central and southern Appalachian Mountains, from Shenandoah National Park in Virginia to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in North Carolina. The road-side scene changes constantly. Sheer rock walls 30 to 40 feet high; flat land; small farms; chapels and churches; deep valleys and gorges; small communities; old cemeteries; campgrounds and cabins; heavy forestation; high steep mountain; even a few Christmas tree farms.

Audio description segments that contain both description and reading of posted text are commonly produced with two voices: one for description and the other for reading. With a brief explanation, listeners quickly associate the voices with these two different components and develop an understanding that the description is the added information and the reading is material available to sighted visitors. Of course, the use of two voices also provides vocal variety for listeners.

Audio narration

Through the use of audio narration, visitors can listen in on another world. First person narratives, oral histories, and interviews with people associated with a story or site all offer certain benefits. Just as with audio descriptions, audio narrations can correspond with wayside signs, scenic views, or other interpretive elements. Instead of an exact description, however, audio narration tracks provide complementary interpretation to other interpretive elements.

Case Study

At the Rohwer Japanese American Relocation Center in rural Arkansas, audio narration became a crucial interpretive tool because the site lacks on-site staff. The audio narration consists of eight audio tracks that complement the interpretation offered at four wayside locations. Audio tracks convey the national context of the executive orders, explain the forced removal process, describe the cultural struggles and hardships endured by internees, and express the misunderstandings that existed between internees and rural Arkansas residents. Two audio stations are integrated into a kiosk structure and three are separate solar posts installed next to the appropriate wayside.

Actor George Takei narrated the audio tour for the Rohwer site. Takei, remembered for his role as Mr. Sulu in the television series Star Trek, was himself an internee at the relocation center during his
childhood. As narrator, Takei provides name recognition, a professional command over his voice, and a significant personal connection to the site. Throughout his narration, Takei shares personal experiences, conveys broader historical information about the site, and directs visitors to the next stop along the walking tour.

[Audio: Rohwer audio narration - track 1: 26 seconds]

Welcome to the former Rohwer Japanese American Relocation Center. I’m George Takei. You may know me as Mr. Sulu from Star Trek. You may not know that I spent a part of my childhood here at Rohwer behind barbed wire. I remember that terrible day when American soldiers came to our California home to order us out.

Whose voice should visitors hear?

There are a number of options available when selecting a narrator. The narrator could be an actor or someone with a personal connection to site. Actors may be nationally or locally famous, or unknown. Using people with a personal connection may also include the use of oral histories, which can provide a variety of voices and personal connections to a site or story.

Actors

A famous actor lends name recognition and a public personality to the story that he or she narrates. Also, visitors may feel familiar with the voice of a famous actor. Of course it can be difficult to secure such a narrator based on their schedule, accessibility, and cost, but if secured, these narrators can be quite effective.

Hiring a non-famous voice actor may be a less costly and more accessible option. It also retains an anonymous or neutral narrator, thereby letting the site or story keep visitor focus. Voice actors have better control over their voices than the average person, and, as a result, produce clear and easy to listen-to narration. Hiring multiple actors, for example a man and a woman, provides variety when there are several audio narrations for the visitor to hear.

Non-actors

Choosing a narrator with a personal connection to the site lends authenticity to site interpretation that cannot be provided by actors. For example, a head curator at a museum could discuss their favorite story or artifact to captivate the listener and provide a personal perspective. The vocal quality may not be at the level of an actor’s, but the knowledge and intimacy this person has is a unique and powerful feature of this type of narration. The narrator should identify herself by name and in connection to the story, to allow the visitor to assess what level of authority her voice carries.

Oral histories

Oral histories are another option for audio narration. These stories are not narrated by professionals, but told by people with firsthand knowledge. As a result, these histories are inherently subjective, but also have a high level of authenticity. Oral histories convey experiences, memories, and anecdotes from the past. The Smithsonian Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide is a helpful primer outlining the process of capturing such histories. The Minnesota Historical Society’s Oral History Office provides a similarly helpful set of guidelines.
StoryCorps is another resource to consider in the collection of oral histories. As a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving American stories of all sorts, StoryCorps provides a number of different options to capture oral histories. StoryCorps has permanent recording studios in Atlanta, New York, and San Francisco as well as MobileBooth locations that travel the country. MobileBooths, through partnering with a variety of local organizations, have visited Minneapolis, Chicago, Indianapolis, Detroit, Medford (OR), and rural New Hampshire. StoryCorps also provides a Door-to-Door Service that arranges for recording equipment and facilitation on-site, as well as portable StoryKits that can be rented for smaller scale recordings.

Case Study

At the historic Greyhound Bus Depot in Blytheville, Arkansas, oral histories are an especially effective form of audio narration. At this site, oral histories are incorporated into an interactive phone booth as part of an exhibit installation. Riders on Greyhound’s Dixie Line used this phone booth to call friends and relatives in places near and far, some to say hello and others to say their last goodbyes. This exhibit tells the stories of individual bus riders through a collection of oral histories. When a visitor enters the phone booth, they lift the telephone receiver and listen. A genteel voice greets them and provides instructions for the exhibit. Listeners are guided through story topics related to the bus station such as the Blues, military service, and personal experiences riding the Dixie Line. With each number dialed, visitors hear reminiscences of past visitors’ connection with the bus station. Visitors can listen to as many stories as have been recorded by past visitors. The visitor is then prompted to leave a story of their own. They can become part of the exhibit by recording their own story—playing back, deleting, and starting over as often as they wish. As more and more people leave their stories, the experience is enhanced for future visitors.

[Audio: Blytheville oral history – V. James: 1:19 seconds]

Perhaps my fondest memory, and memory of the bus station, will always be, in my heart, is because this is the last place that I saw my father alive. I lived in Kansas City, I was 19 when he died. That particular weekend, I said, “I’m going home.” Nobody knew I’m coming, but I’m just going to surprise them. But when I got here, that Friday afternoon, my father was standing here at the bus station. And he said there was just something in him knew that I was coming home. And so I spent the weekend with him, my mother, and my siblings. That Sunday afternoon he brought me back and I caught the bus. And so when the bus pulled out of the bus station my father was standing on the north side of the bus station. And I went to the back of the bus and my dad walked to the end of the parking here and he was waving and I was waving and he stood there and I stayed at the back of the bus ’til the bus got out of sight. And, uh, it was here that my dad hugged me afore I got on the bus and told me he loved me. So the last words I heard from my dad was here at the bus station. The last time I saw my dad was here at the bus station. This was on a Sunday afternoon, September 1967. On Wednesday morning at 3:00 am, September 1967, I get a call that my father was dead. So, yes, this has some memories for me that I’ll always cherish.

How is audio created?

Whether a site uses audio narration or audio description, the audio development process can be broken down into three basic parts: pre-production, production, and post-production.
Pre-production: Scripts, voices, and histories.

During pre-production, scripts are researched, drafted, and finalized; narrators are selected; and oral histories are identified. It is during this step that the interpretive information is created. This phase often takes the longest.

Production: Recording and determining level of quality.

When scripts have been finalized and voices have been selected, it is time to record. There are a number of different venues and means to record narration and oral histories: a studio, on-site, or in a private home. Each location produces a different level of audio quality. Remember to always try for the best recording quality possible because no amount of post-production can fix a poor quality original recording.

Post-production: Clean up and sharpen.

After the recording session, it is time to perfect the product. Filler speech (umms and ahhs) is edited out to improve clarity and flow, and sound effects and background music may be added to support the story. Audio effects are applied to shape the sound and prepare the final output. For audio descriptions, however, sound effects or music should be avoided as they interfere with the track’s function. Instead, audio description tracks should contain only straightforward, spoken information.

During this final step, the interpretive auditory experience emerges and the track is ready for distribution.

[Audio: Rohwer audio narration - track 4 (final): 27 seconds]

One of my best friends was Eddy Takahashi who lived in the barrack behind us. And he didn’t have a daddy there. It was only his mother and his two sisters. And he said his father is a Buddhist Minister and he was taken away immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. They didn’t know where their daddy was. After the war Eddy’s father was reunited with the family.

[Audio: Rohwer audio narration - track 4 (raw): 46 seconds]

How will visitors hear the audio?

After the production phase is completed, it is time to distribute the audio. The type of distribution will likely have been decided earlier in the interpretive process, but audio files can be used in multiple ways as funding is available. Audio can be built into exhibits or site infrastructure; provided through hand-held devices; or accessed remotely. Once installed, audio tracks can be triggered automatically or manually by visitors, depending on the delivery type.

Audio distribution decisions should include whether visitors will hear an audio track as a group or individually. Speakers allow multiple visitors to listen to the same audio track at the same time, but may cause noise pollution, depending on the installation. Headphones limit noise pollution, but visitor concerns about hygiene and feelings of isolation need to be considered. There is no right or wrong, just what is best at a given location for a specific audience.

Built-in audio
Audio can be built into interpretive exhibit structures, such as waysides or indoor exhibits, or a site’s infrastructure.

Audio players and speakers can be integrated into signage, kiosks, other interpretive elements, or housed separately and installed adjacent to the interpretive element. Audio components may be powered directly (hard-wired), battery-operated, solar-powered, or manually powered (typically a hand crank). A site’s location, staffing, and utility service should be well-understood when considering this type of audio distribution.

Alternatively, audio feeds can be transmitted short distances through FM radio broadcasting which visitors can listen to in their car. While FM radio broadcasts are ideal for an outdoor setting over a large area, information is looped, which means that visitors may have to wait for one loop to end when they arrive at an audio site. In addition, several small antenna transmitters are required to offer visitors different audio tracks in different areas of the site.

**Case Study**

At the Rohwer Japanese American Relocation Center, solar-powered audio hardware was selected because the remote location lacks electricity and on-site staff. Solar collectors mounted on the kiosk roof charge the batteries that power two audio players integrated into the kiosk structure. The four-sided kiosk has two audio stations located opposite each other to minimize audio overlap. At three additional waysides on the site, solar-powered audio components are contained in wooden posts and installed adjacent to each interpretive wayside.

Solar-powered audio components were an ideal solution for this site because of the rural location, lack of on-site staff and utilities, and ease of maintenance. Maintenance includes replacing the rechargeable batteries after 2 or 3 years and cleaning the solar collectors, panels, and base structures periodically with mild soap and water.

**Hand-held devices**

Audio can be delivered to visitors through hand-held devices that are rented or provided free-of-charge, or through a visitor’s own device, such as a smartphone or MP3 player. Hand-held devices can be triggered automatically, by GPS, or manually by visitors.

Audio-only hand-held devices are, typically, relatively small devices with or without headphones that allow visitors to type in a number to hear a short audio clip. Numbered stops can be identified on a brochure or signs. Rented hand-held devices are a potential profit generator if they are rented for a fee, but it is also important to consider the potential for theft of such devices. If these devices are intended to be used by low-vision or non-sighted visitors, ensure that the device design meets accessibility (ADA) standards. Specialized devices can be GPS-triggered or triggered by proximity to a hidden signal device to automatically launch an audio track when the player is within a certain distance of the audio transmitter. When this type of activation is used, transmitters must be located at least a certain distance apart to ensure that the transponders activate the correct transmitters. These types of devices are typically easy for visitors to understand and use, but there may be a learning curve for some audience segments.
It can often be easier for visitors to use their own devices to access audio. A mobile phone tour assumes that a site has a strong signal for mobile phones using a variety of carriers and that visitors are willing to use their plan minutes to access interpretive information. Podcasts or streaming, available through a website or mobile app, assume that Wi-Fi is available to download information, visitors are willing to use their plan data to access interpretive information, or that they planned ahead and downloaded information before arriving. When a site allows or encourages visitors to download audio files on-site, they should offer free internet access and ensure their own electronic security.

Note: Smartphone technology is rapidly changing. Although its reliability is clear, it is not yet clear how many visitors actually use it for interpretive information and what their determining factors might be.

Remote access

As previously mentioned, once audio files are created, they can be distributed through a variety of devices and used for different purposes. Even as technology changes, digital audio files can be used again and again, although different hardware may be needed.

Select audio tracks may be used to entice potential visitors to visit a site, or, upon returning home, visitors may want to access memorable audio tracks, such as oral histories, to share with friends. Podcasts and CDs offer easily accessed options for visitors whether they are on-site or at home.

Podcasts, as noted in the previous section, can be downloaded from a website to computers, smartphones, or MP3 players. Site tours, apps, or podcasts can be made available on iTunes or iTunes U as a secondary delivery method. Visitors can use their own devices and/or the organization can consider selling or renting these devices, though issues of loss, theft, and damage need to be carefully considered and accounted for in the policies and procedures for rental.

Audio tracks can also be recorded and saved to CDs and made available for sale. If the CD features a site tour, the sleeve could include a fold-out map of the interpretive site with the stops numbered to correspond with the tracks. The sleeve could also contain historic images or illustrations, and some short narratives to complement the audio tour. Initially, there may be one site tour CD, but tours for specific audiences or with additional information could be developed and recorded. CDs have the added benefit of becoming a souvenir of the site. An audio tour on CD can be especially useful for byway or regional tours where visitors will be in their car as they move between interpretive stops.

Conclusion

The use of audio as an interpretive media allows visitors to listen in to another world. Audio description describes the visual content of any program in order to provide individuals who are visually impaired with the information available to sighted visitors. Audio narration is a complementary interpretive element. The voice chosen for audio can be an actor or someone with a personal connection to site. Oral histories can also be used to enhance an interpretive experience.
To make audio accessible, it must be successfully implemented. The development of audio for an interpretive project can be broken down into three parts: pre-production, production, and post-production. After production is complete, an audio track is distributed as part of an exhibit. By thoughtfully creating meaningful audio tracks, audio can be a powerful and effective media for interpretation at your site.

References


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