
This is the **accepted version** of the book part:

Hermosa Ramírez, Irene; Taylor, Christopher, ed.; Perego, Elisa, ed. «Profiling audio description service providers : A questionnaire-based snapshot». A: The Routledge Handbook of Audio Description. Núm. 1 (2022), p. 295-311. 17 pàg. DOI 10.4324/9781003003052-23

This version is available at <https://ddd.uab.cat/record/285349>

under the terms of the  license

Author accepted manuscript of the chapter: Hermosa-Ramírez, I. (2022). Profiling audio description service providers: A questionnaire-based snapshot. In C. Taylor & E. Perego (Eds). *The Routledge Handbook of Audio Description* (pp. 259–311). Routledge. ISBN 978-0-3674-3419-9.

Profiling audio description service providers: A questionnaire-based snapshot regarding Spain and the UK

Irene Hermosa-Ramírez

Orcid.org/0000-0002-0555-5748

1. Introduction

As social awareness with regard to accessibility measures increases, audio description (AD) has seen a trend of growing funding, training opportunities, academic interest and professionalisation. Spain and the United Kingdom (UK) – the focal contexts in this chapter – are two hot spots for AD for different reasons. First, these countries were among the pioneers in terms of AD projects during the 1990s. On the one hand, the AUDETEL project in the UK tested comprehension and user preferences with audio described television programmes (Pettitt, Sharpe & Steven, 1996). On the other hand, the Spanish National Organisation of the Blind (ONCE) launched the Audesc initiative, which comprised a rental network for audio described films in VHS (Díaz-Cintas, 2010, p. 176). Second, in terms of guidelines and standardising documents, Ofcom – the communications regulator in the UK – published one of the first screen AD guidelines, the ITC Guidance on Standards for Audio Description. This document gathered some general recommendations on AD for audiovisual media regarding among others character identification and prioritising information (ITC, 2001). In Spain, the AENOR standardisation agency issued the norm UNE 153020 in 2005. This norm offers some insights into the process of creating an AD, both for audiovisual and theatre productions (Matamala & Orero, 2013, p. 152). Concurrently, both countries have powerful user associations, namely the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) in the UK and the already mentioned ONCE in Spain.

The adoption of media accessibility legislation, minimum quotas and a growing professionalisation of the audio describers are other factors which have raised awareness of AD and have favoured the consequent launch of AD companies. In terms of legislation, a number of laws against discrimination in a broader sense have been passed in both countries, such as the Law 51/2003 on Equal Opportunities, Non-Discrimination and Universal Accessibility of Persons with Disabilities in Spain, or the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and the Equality Act (2010) in the UK. The latter prohibited any form of discrimination on the basis of disability, age, gender, race, sexual orientation, etc. “by not providing the service or subjecting service users to detrimental treatment, and forced providers to make reasonable adjustments to every person to provide them with the service” (UK, 2010). As for more specific legislation that purposely mandates the provision of accessible (audiovisual) products and cultural goods, both countries have adopted and subsequently amended laws in this respect. This is the case with the General Act 7/2010 of March 2010, on Audiovisual Communication in Spain, which requires television broadcasters to provide a minimum percentage of hours per week that incorporate AD, sign language interpreting and subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing.

However, a common criticism of these laws is that they often do not have any sanctioning power, and, to date, they do not incorporate quotas for Video on Demand platforms.

Linked to the gradual introduction of legislation, minimum quotas for television, as well as funding initiatives for the scenic arts, either private or public – i.e. the Spanish Network of Publicly Owned Theatres, Auditoriums, Circuits and Festivalsⁱ or the UK Film Council (Greening & Rolph, 2007) – have undoubtedly been an incentive to the provision of access services. Increasingly popular media, such as Video on Demand platforms have also broadened the scope of the market for AD.

Concurrently, the inclusion of AD in academic curricula, often under the Audiovisual Translation (AVT) umbrella, has helped to define the competences and skills of the audio describer (*cf.* ADLAB PRO, 2017a). Drawing from previous studies, Chmiel, Mazur and Vercauteren (2019, pp. 327-328) summarise such competences in seven categories: linguistic skills, analytic or cinematographic skills, translation skills, technological skills, voicing skills, social skills and personal skills. Currently, dedicated modules at master level are offered at University College London, the University of Roehampton and the Autonomous University of Barcelona, to name just a few within the scope of the study. Academic interest is also mirrored in the celebration of the biannual Advanced Research Seminar on Audio Description (ARSAD) and the inclusion of AD sessions in AVT conferences such as Media for All and Languages and the Media (Chmiel & Mazur, 2012, p. 58). Non-academic training, on the other hand, has taken the form of in-house training, workshops or vocational courses by user associations (Mazur & Chmiel, 2021).

Linked to the growing facilitation and professionalisation of AD, there has been a switch from volunteer work to independent describers and AD companies undertaking the role of “social intermediaries in making audiovisual material accessible” (Matamala & Orero, 2007, p. 329). AD professionals are now part of regional, national and international AVT associations such as the European federation of national associations AVTE, the European Association for Studies in Screen Translation (ESIST), or the Association of Audiovisual Translation and Adaptation of Spain (ATRAE).

All mentioned factors have contributed to the establishment of companies that provide AD in its different modalities. In the present chapter, the term AD service provider will refer solely to companies and not independent contractors. The precise rationale for this study is to narrow the knowledge gap on the profiling and workflow of these providersⁱⁱ. The first aim is to contribute to the profiling of AD service providers in Spain and the UK by inquiring about their business revenue regarding AD, years in business and specialisations. The second aim is to verify whether current research hot topics have also been introduced in professional practice, i.e. text-to-speech delivery, usage of ad-hoc software and quality control (QC) protocols.

This chapter is organised in four sections. First, a summarised review of current ethnographic research on AD stakeholders is introduced. Second, the online questionnaire

methodology applied to this study and the sampling procedure are defined. Third, the gathered results from the service providers are presented in a descriptive manner and later discussed. Lastly, I draw out the general conclusions, and conclude the chapter with a proposal for new avenues for research.

2. Current research

Participant-oriented studies have become central to AD research. Indeed, Greco (2019) observes a shift from *maker-centred* to *user-centred* approaches in Media Accessibility as a whole. The user-centred approach has been applied to assess the needs and preferences of AD users regarding immersion and presence (Walczak & Fryer, 2018), vocal delivery and text-to-speech AD (Szarkowska, 2011; Fernández Torné & Matamala, 2015), emotional response (Ramos, 2016), to name just a few areas. These studies have largely employed self-reporting questionnaires that follow the screening of a number of clips. Such questionnaires are increasingly triangulated with physiological measures such as heart rate (Ramos, 2016), as well as other technology-based empirical research methods, namely eye-tracking (Di Giovanni, 2014). These latter methods are however difficult to replicate and to apply in an online cross-national setting (Perego, 2016).

As for previous studies devoted to other AD stakeholders, research on AD provision has been largely centred on the training and competences of the (independent) AD professional. Earlier studies (Orero, 2005; Matamala & Orero, 2007; Remael & Vercauteren, 2007) aimed to define the necessary skills for an audio describer, namely the ability to undertake intersemiotic translation accurately, to express information succinctly, and to have a pleasant and clear voice (in live AD settings), to name just a few. Regarding more recent research, the European ADLAB PRO project (2016-2019), led by Elisa Perego at the University of Trieste, devoted their first Intellectual Output (IO1) to assessing current AD training practices. Methodology-wise, the project first developed a questionnaire for AD teachers and trainers to gather information on training programmes (duration, teaching modes, trainer profile, group size...), their content (AD modalities, teaching material) and evaluation methods (ADLAB PRO, 2017a). This branch of the project also included a qualitative section where course materials were analysed and interviews with teachers were conducted (ADLAB PRO, 2017a, pp. 16-34).

Regarding the profiling of AD service providers, I highlight the second intellectual output of the ADLAB PRO project (IO2). Therein, the profile definition section of the ADLAB PRO project comprised a series of questions targeted at audio describers, AD users and service providers. The questions posed ultimately aimed to define the necessary competences that should be included in an audio describer training course (ADLAB PRO, 2017b). Within the service providers section, the questionnaire also aimed to establish the profile, specialisation and trajectory of the companies, which is partially replicated and expanded in this study.

3. Methodology

The present study adopts an online questionnaire methodology in order to systematically gather responses from AD service providers in Spain and the UK. Prior to its distribution, the study underwent a review by the Ethical Commission at the Autonomous University of Barcelona and drafts were sent to fellow academics and practitioners in the field of AVT and subsequently adapted to ensure clarity and ease of use. Furthermore, the questionnaire was translated from Spanish into English and later revised by a native speaker.

In the following subsections, the design and distribution of the online questionnaire are first introduced, and the sampling approach is discussed. In Section 4, results on current practices are presented, with a focus on three axes: (1) trajectories and specialisation of the companies; (2) a definition of their profile; and (3) practical insights on task distribution, applied technologies and QC processes. Throughout the following sections, I draw not only from previous ethnographic research in AVT and AD, but also from primary sources in Social Research and other neighbouring fields so as to broaden the scope, given that “a good portion of [Media Accessibility] research carried out so far is still too strictly based on, or even mirror with minimal adaptation, models and metrics from translation studies” (Greco & Jankowska, 2019, p. 6).

3.1. Questionnaire design and distribution

The questionnaire methodology is systematic in nature and it allows for contrasting and comparison purposes in an objective and straight-forward way (López Romo, 1998). For this study, an exploratory 12-question anonymous questionnaire was created. The questionnaire was designed to combine multiple-choice, dichotomous, close-ended and open-ended questions and the estimated time for completion was 10 minutes. The questionnaire was purposely narrowed to 12 questions mainly to attract a higher completion rate. There were two reasons for this choice. First, according to Liu and Wronski’s (2018) study on the predictors of survey completion, longer surveys are associated with lower completion rates. The number of pages and the length of the questions prove to have a negative impact on completion rates as well. Greater proportions of difficult questions, such as open-ended questions, were also associated with lower completion rates.

Second, previous questionnaire studies on AD have conducted questionnaires of similar lengths (Szarkowska, 2011; Bardini, 2017). However, studies that have surveyed larger populations in our field – i.e. subtitlers (Robert & Remael, 2016) – have used lengthier questionnaires, often split into different sections.

Given that our population was in itself rather limited from the beginning (as detailed in Section 3.2), it was important that those providers interested in taking part in the study did complete the entirety of the questionnaire. Concurrently, the questions posed were also to be as simple as straight-forward as possible, again with the aim of fostering completion.

The chosen medium was an online questionnaire, designed and distributed with the web-based tool Web Survey Creator. This web-based tool allows for a clear display of the terms and conditions, the monitoring of responses and a fruitful extraction of the gathered data for descriptive statistics purposes. Furthermore, as stated in the ADLAB PRO IO2 Report, this tool is also accessible for blind and visually impaired participants (ADLAB PRO, 2017b, p. 6).

Regarding possible sensitive topics, special care was exercised to avoid any discomfort, following ICC/ESOMAR guidelines (2016). For instance, in the question regarding the companies' turnover (Subsection 3.3.2), respondents could indicate that they did not know the answer and could freely skip questions that did not apply to them (i.e. question 5 and question 7).

As highlighted throughout the chapter, the aim of the study is to collect socio-professional data from AD companies and cross-check the results from recent research findings with industry practices in Spain and the UK. Here we draw an exploratory map of their current technological, quality control and workflow practices. An incentive was also to provide the participating companies with up-to-date data on their niche. Regarding this last point, participants were offered the possibility of receiving a report on the findings of the study, if they so wished. This created an opportunity to strengthen collaboration between academia and the industry (Reviere, 2016) with participants ranging from small-sized to multinational companies.

The questionnaire content can thus be summarised in three axes. The first one illustrates the service providers' trajectories, reporting on the companies' average years in business, as well as their AD turnover and AD specialisations. Second, the question of the profiles they resemble is addressed. Third, the last branch of questions observes practical applications of recent and on-going research: the voice component of the AD – who voices the AD, are synthetic voices widespread in practice? – the adoption of dedicated software tools applied to AD – with in-house or third-party software, if any – and QC processes. To conclude the questionnaire, participants were given the option to add any comment or clarification they considered pertinent to the study. A total of 6 service providers shared additional comments, which are integrated in the results subsections.

3.2. Participants

Prior to disseminating the questionnaire among service providers, a list of companies that advertised AD services on their websites was compiled. The initial sampling strategy was to create a database of companies that adhered to this condition. After examining the companies' websites, the providers' population could be classified into three main categories: (1) translation or AVT companies, (2) accessibility services providers, and (3) video and audio production and post-production companies.

The questionnaire was sent to 21 service providers in the UK and 28 in Spain. A total of 22 service providers participated in the questionnaire, although two of the participants'

responses had to be discarded, as the first corresponded to a freelance describer and a second one was filled in by a company outside our geographical scope. The response rate was thus 45%, which was deemed acceptable considering Shih and Fan’s (2008, p. 257) meta-analysis study on survey response rates (45% for mail surveys and 34% for web surveys). The final sample included 8 AD service providers from Spain (40%) and 12 from the UK (60%). The limited number of responses is precisely one of the biggest limitations of the study, as small groups “may obscure the statistical analysis of the results” (Chmiel & Mazur, 2012, p. 62). This is also the reason why the study was designed from a descriptive approach. Thus, no statistical tests have been carried out and I will be referring to trends and exploratory results, rather than claiming statistical significance. In any case, a small sample was to be expected given the already narrowed eligible target for the questionnaire and the results remain valid for exploratory purposes.

In sum, given that the provision of AD is a niche modality – whether we frame it within AVT or Media Accessibility (Greco, 2019) –, a non-probabilistic sampling technique was applied. This kind of sampling technique is often adopted for exploratory purposes, when the results are not to be extrapolated to the entire studied group (López Romo, 1998). Furthermore, the population of the study was delimited geographically, as the goal was to explore AD provision practices from companies in two countries with a somewhat parallel trajectory. Therefore, the results are not generalisable to other contexts, even within the European Union, although they do allow for replication and future expansion.

On a final note, given that the emphasis of the questionnaire is placed on the companies and their AD-related tasks, demographic questions were not pertinent to our study. Rather, in order to start drafting the AD service providers’ profiles, it was first relevant to inquire about the longevity of their business.

Q1. How Long Has your Company Been in Business?

Table 1 How long has your company been in business?

	Spain	UK	Total	Total percentages
Less than two years	0	1	1	5%
two-five years	0	1	1	5%
six-ten years	4	2	6	30%
Over 11 years	4	8	12	60%
I don’t know	0	0	0	0%

Table 1 shows some degree of establishment in a still young market, with 90% of the overall respondents having been in business for over 6 years and 60% for over 11 years. Compared to the ADLAB PRO results – gathered in 2017 –, where 44% of the service providers placed themselves within the 1-5-year range and 28% within the 6-10-year range (ADLAB PRO, 2017b, p. 13), AD service providers in the context of Spain and the

UK have maintained a trend of longevity. On the other hand, the results presented in Table 1 leave out some other interesting scenarios, as it was made apparent that some of the contacted service providers had ceased business. Meanwhile, two providers contacted the researcher explaining that they had not yet produced an AD, in spite of advertising the service. They therefore did not fill in the questionnaire.

4. Results

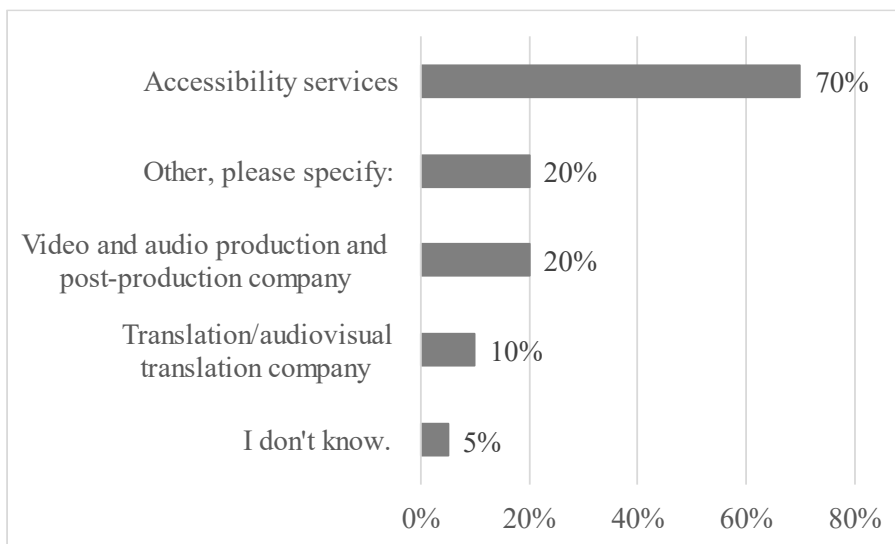
The results of the questionnaires are reported in seven subsections devoted to: the profile of the company, AD turnover, specialisations, voicing in live settings, usage of software, tasks within the AD process, and QC. When necessary, I will refer back to results from previous related research, as one of the underlying aims of this study is to test how recently researched topics translate into practice in the industry sphere.

4.1. Profile of the company

When asked about their profile, respondents could either choose between the three pre-established categories – (1) translation or AVT companies, (2) accessibility services providers, (3) video and audio production and post-production companies – or define their profile, if it felt outside the scope of said categories (Figure 1).

Q2. Profile of the Company

Figure 1 Profile of the Company



Respondents largely fell into the “Accessibility services” category (70%), with “Video and audio production and post-production” (20%) and “Other” (20%) coming second. Furthermore, it was expected that some respondents would combine several profiles, and 30% actually did. The most common combination was Accessibility services and Video and audio production (20%). As for those who did not recognise themselves in the three pre-established categories, the suggested profiles were: (1) a national broadcaster with in-

house access services provision, (2) a centre for accessibility research and dissemination and (3) a company devoted to AD alone.

Additionally, two of the providers further offered some nuance to their profile and tasks in the Additional comments question. One of the respondents clarified that they were not a company, but a not-for-profit charity coordinated by an unpaid volunteer, therefore not strictly fitting into the previously defined categories. The other respondent expanded on their specialisations (live theatre AD, recorded AD for museums and heritage sites), underlying that they also offered AD training for staff at museums and heritage sites.

4.2. AD turnover

To further refine the profiling and the degree of specialisation of the providers, it was relevant to gauge the proportion of AD in the companies' overall turnover. It must be noticed that respondents ranged from small-sized businesses to multinationals that are present in both countries. Service diversification among larger companies, as well as the variety of specialisations offered by most companies (irrespective of their size) was expected to have an impact on the results (Table 2).

Q3. Audio Description Turnover

Table 2 Audio description turnover

	Spain	UK	Total	Total percentages
0–25% of the overall turnover	4	6	10	50%
26–50% of the overall turnover	1	0	1	5%
51–75% of the overall turnover	1	1	2	10%
76–100% of the overall turnover	1	4	5	25%
I don't know	1	1	2	10%

Results in Table 2 indicate that AD is not the primary source of business for 50% of the surveyed companies. Particularly, those in the lower AD turnover ranges (within the 0-50% spectrum) show a trend of greater activity diversification, i.e. postproduction services such as Digital Cinema Package mastering, or a specialisation in other accessibility services such as live subtitling or audio guides. Other examples of activity diversification are related to the commercialisation of their own software, or a focus on training and dissemination in the Accessibility field. On the other side of the spectrum, 25% of the providers report that they generate most of their turnover from AD provision. Within the latter group, it is no surprise that expertise shows a degree of correlation with AD turnover: those who report an AD turnover of 76% and above correspond to three accessibility services companies (15%), one provider strictly devoted to AD (5%), and one that specialises both in accessibility services and audio production (5%). It is also

relevant to acknowledge that providers that identified with a translation or audiovisual translation company – already making up only 10% of the respondents – also reported a 0-25% turnover of AD. This supports the argument that there is an on-going paradigm shift from various fields that deal with accessibility topics – such as engineering, human-computer interaction and AVT – towards Media Accessibility, a “broader interdisciplinary area that criss-crosses many fields, including AVT, but that cannot be entirely nor exclusively reduced to any of them because it is a proper subdomain of a new field”: Accessibility Studies (Greco, 2019, p. 17).

4.3. Specialisations

Regarding AD specialisations among respondents, it was expected that film and television would be the most mainstreamed modalities (Reviere, 2016). Nevertheless, results revealed that 60% of the respondents provide theatre, while 55% reported cinema, 55% reported museum, and 50% television. As shown in Table 3, providers from the UK are largely specialised in theatre (67% out of the UK providers, $n=12$), with museum coming second (42%). In that sense, Spain best fits the common tendency that places cinema and television as the most commonly provided areas for AD, while museum manages to reach similar results. It must also be considered that this question leaves out the turnover variable, therefore it is not clear whether theatre is the most profitable modality, for instance. Rather, the aim was to let providers establish their own profile within the most common AD modalities.

Q4. Modality Specialisation

Table 3 Modality specialisation

	Spain	UK	Total	Total percentages
Cinema	7	4	11	55%
Television	6	4	10	50%
Theatre	4	8	12	60%
Opera	1	2	3	15%
Museum	6	5	11	55%
Landmarks	1	2	3	15%
Other live events	3	2	5	25%
I don't know	0	0	0	0%
Other, please specify	0	2	2	10%

Among minority specialisations, certain providers also work with live events outside theatre and opera (25%), landmarks (15%), opera (15%) and “Other” (10%). Within the “Other” category, respondents included dance (5%) and ad hoc jobs for online purposes (5%).

Interestingly, some differences with the results of ADLAB PRO are noticed regarding specialisations: service providers mostly reported film (67%) and television (56%) (ADLAB PRO 2017b, p. 13). This may perhaps be related to the particularities of our survey's geographical scope (the ADLAB PRO project gathered results not only from the European Union, but also, and to a lesser extent, from 10 other countries outside Europe) and the development of the market in a 3-year time lapse.

4.4. Voicing AD in live settings

As a bridge towards the technology and task distribution section of the questionnaire, the following question was addressed to respondents that had reported providing live or pre-recorded modalities, i.e. theatre, opera, museum, landmarks or other live events (therefore excluding audiovisual media): Who is responsible for voicing the AD in typically live or pre-recorded settings?

Q.5. Who Voices the AD in Live or Pre-recorded Settings?

Table.4 Who voices the AD in live or pre-recorded settings?

	Spain	UK	Total	Total percentages
The same person that has written the audio description	5	8	13	87%
A voice talent who has not written the audio description	3	2	5	33%
We use synthetic voices	1	0	1	7%
I don't know	0	0	0	0%
Other, please specify	1	0	1	7%

Table 4 indicates that audio describers in live or pre-recorded settings will often voice the AD as well. Namely, 87% of the providers ($n=15$) report a twofold describer-voice talent profile. More accurately, all of the companies that report hiring a voice talent who has not written the AD (33%, $n=5$) also alternate between the two mentioned approaches. Interestingly, in other contexts such as China, the AD is clearly divided in two tasks undertaken by two different (volunteer) figures: the scriptwriter and the voicer, and their tasks do not overlap (Tor-Carroggio & Casas-Tost, 2020). Overall, this raises the question of whether AD training should also encompass some form of formal voice-over and narration training in Media Accessibility university courses. The possibility of voice training within an AD course is also addressed by the ADLAB PRO project. Surprisingly, Mazur and Chmiel (2021) report that vocal skills are deemed to be one of the least

important skills according to non-academic AD trainers and, to a lesser extent, academic trainers. On the other hand, Snyder (2014) identifies vocal delivery as one of the four pillars of AD. In the same way, Fryer (2019) includes voice skills in her proposal of four macrocriteria for assessing AD quality, based on Interpreting Studies: accuracy, language, delivery, and synchrony (Fryer, 2019, pp. 176-177).

This question also raised the possibility of the application of synthetic voices or text-to-speech AD, which have received the interest of AD researchers and tested in preference studies with promising results: While human narration is better fit for certain genres – i.e. drama, as opposed to documentaries (Walczak & Fryer, 2018) –, and it is best suited to elicit certain emotions such as fear (Fryer & Freeman, 2014), users would accept text-to-speech AD as an interim solution and even as a permanent solution (Szarkowska, 2011; Fernández-Torné & Matamala, 2015). Within the surveyed AD service providers, only one respondent applies synthetic voices in live settings (specifically in the context of theatre). This particular service provider additionally reports to have developed a software solution that allows for the launch of the (text-to-speech) AD segments in live settings. The operation of their system is based on the premise that “AD is usually never delivered when meaningful audio can be heard; in short, the AD is complementary to the subtitles” (Oncins *et al.*, 2013, p. 156). A technician is thus able to cue both the subtitles or surtitles and the AD simultaneously. These can be rendered either via a mobile application or via infra-red or FM radio systems, while surtitles are displayed over the proscenium (Hermosa-Ramírez, 2020).

Finally, two more respondents expressed their interest in implementing text-to-speech AD in the medium term:

- (1) “Though we don’t currently use voice synthesis, we are exploring this as an option for the future.”
- (2) “Our clients have not wanted to use synthetic voices, but we are still looking at this and will potentially do it in future as there are other interested potential clients.”

4.5. Bespoke software for AD

Bespoke software for AD has been mentioned in passing in various studies (Salway, 2007; Díaz-Cintas & Massidda, 2019), often alluding to the commercial tools by Starfish Technologies and Softel, as well as the web-based and freely available tools YouDescribe and LiveDescribe. Fryer (2016, p. 75) synthesises the general operation of these software solutions as follows:

The scripting software has a dedicated window allowing you to view the source programme at the same time as the window in which you write your script. Using timecode, you create a new scripting ‘box’ within the scripting ‘window’ for each AD utterance that you are about to write.

Regarding bespoke software usage rates within the surveyed service providers, 50% report producing their AD with the aid of a software solution at least at some point of the production process, as shown in Table 5. On the other hand, service providers who report not using any bespoke software will generally stick to text editors for the scripting of the AD and likely outsource the localisation and audio recording portion of the AD, as the data from the workflow section of the questionnaire (Subsection 3.3.6) demonstrates.

Q.6 Do You Use Bespoke Software for Audio Description?

Table 5 Do you use bespoke software for audio description?

	Spain	UK	Total	Total percentages
Yes	4	6	10	50%
No	4	6	10	50%
I don't know	0	0	0	0%

The following question further inquired of the reported software users which specific tools they apply (Table 6). The first aim was to explore the hypothetical role of AD providers as AD software developers. A modest 8% of the respondents reported developing and commercialising their own AD software intended for the scenic arts. An additional respondent (8%) informed that the company utilises an internally developed software tool, but they do not commercialise it.

Q7. If the Company Uses Bespoke Software, is the Software Tool Developed by the Company?

Table 6 If the company uses bespoke software, is the software tool developed by the company?

	Spain	UK	Total	Total percentages
Yes and we commercialise it	1	0	1	8%
Yes, for internal use only	1	0	1	8%
We use third-party software. Please specify	2	6	8	67%
I don't know	2	0	2	17%

Amongst the software solutions suggested: three (25%) quoted Advantage by Starfish Technologies and two (17%) mentioned Protools. Other cited tools were Startit, Aegisub, Premiere, VoiceQ, Annotation Edit, Audacity and QLab. Interestingly, both Aegisub and Annotation Edit are software tools originally intended for subtitling. In the context of AD, however, they are utilised to establish timecodes and foster comprehension by limiting the speech rate (Fryer, 2016), also referred to as “narration speed” (Cabeza-Cáceres,

2013) or “reading rate” (Jankowska *et al.*, 2017).ⁱⁱⁱ Overall, the suggested tools can be classified into three categories: ad-hoc software intended for AD localisation and synchronisation (Advantage, Startit, VoiceQ), subtitling tools (Aegisub and Annotation Edit), and audio and video editing and post-production software (Audacity, Premiere, Protools, Qlab).

On the other hand, there is no mention of translation (Jankowska, Milc & Fryer, 2017) or post-editing (Fernández-Torné & Matamala, 2016) tools, nor any tool for automatically generated AD (Braun & Starr, 2019), which suggests that these strategies for AD creation are not yet widespread in practice.

On a final note, these results raise the possibility of including software in AD training, or the eventual requirement for freelance describers to utilise such tools with ease. Mazur and Chmiel (2021) have precisely addressed the possibility of providing audio mixing training in AD courses. The results from the ADLAB PRO project, however, showed that respondents deemed ICT related skills relatively unimportant. Furthermore, the authors stressed the cost-related drawback of professional software, even though free solutions (YouDescribe and LiveDescribe) are currently available. The trend I present here suggests that software is an ingrained part of the AD process, but perhaps not yet a prerequisite for collaborating with the service providers.

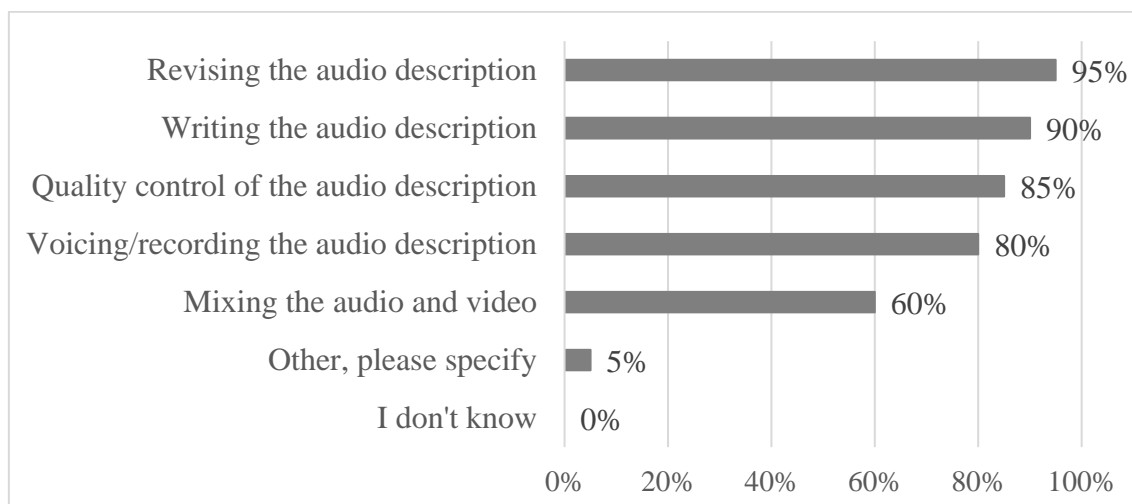
The last two following subsections move away from the technical applications and show some insights on workflow practices.

4.6. Tasks undertaken within the AD process

In order to assess the workflow and the most common tasks undertaken by the providers, the questionnaire next asked the respondents about their in-house tasks. As shown in Figure 2, the majority of the providers revise the AD (95%), write the AD script (90%), conduct the QC of the AD (85%) and voice and record the AD (80%). To a lesser extent, the audio and video mixing is also part of the workflow for 60% of the respondents. Within the “Other” category (5%), the review and editing of external describers’ AD was suggested.

Q8. Which of the Following Tasks Does your Company Do Internally? (Multiple Answers Possible).

Figure 2 Which of the Following Tasks Does your Company Do Internally?



In the additional comments section, one of the respondents touched upon the involvement of the client and the inclusion of AD throughout the creative process: “Some directors of independent films like a lot of involvement, others leave it up to us; a live AD will involve a ‘dry run’ with comments from the creative team, other describers and visually impaired patrons; museum ADs have always involved revision input from curators.” This provider is thus explicitly working towards integrated AD: “whereby AD is conceived from the start as an integral part of a production” (Fryer, 2018). In line with this respondent’s input, researchers and experts are increasingly advocating a switch from traditional AD to AD as an integral part of the process (Udo & Fels, 2010a; Romero-Fresco, 2019), as the integrated approach would better adhere to the principles of universal design (Udo & Fels, 2010b).

4.7. Quality control process

To conclude the section devoted to the providers’ internal tasks and workflow, I asked respondents to define their QC protocols in their own terms. From a company management perspective, quality assurance “refers to any planned and systematic activity directed toward providing consumers with products (goods and services) of appropriate quality, along with the confidence that products meet consumers’ requirements” (Evans & Lindsay, 2014, p. 12). The goal here was to “make use” of the vagueness of the concept of quality and test what AD service providers understand by QC. In the context of AD research:

So far research on quality has focused on the most diverse aspects of a film as an audiovisual text, that is, it has approached audio description from a translation-based and translation-centred approach. Non-translation-based aspects, such as delivery (e.g., choice of voice, pace, and intonation) and reproduction (e.g., sound mix) have been deemed as secondary or even ignored (Greco & Jankowska, 2019, pp. 6-7).

Furthermore, Fryer (2019, p. 166) recognises an anomaly in that “although the AD user might seem to be the customer, at no stage does an AD user attending a live performance have choice over which AD provider to use”. This is generalisable to all AD modalities. In the context of this study, respondents did address both translation-centred (Accuracy and Language) and non-translation-centred (Delivery and Synchrony) aspects. This section thus discusses the gathered results in a qualitative manner.

As a preface, from a human resources point of view, two of the respondents correlated the degree of experience of the describers with an inherent indicator of quality: “We employ freelance Audio Description writers who are very experienced in this genre”. The second response further highlighted that staff trainees and new freelancers’ scripts underwent more extensive review: “Extensive QC/review for staff trainees and to vet new freelancers. Once people are more experienced, this is reduced to spot-checking and peer review.” This implies that there are two differentiated QC protocols for the scripts depending on the experience level of the describer.

Regarding the translation-based portion of the process, namely the scriptwriting, the most common trend amongst the surveyed companies was peer QC, that is, describers checking each other’s scripts. A total of 82% of the respondents ($n=17$) reported this review method, some of them implying that the AD is generally written by freelance describers and later reviewed internally by another describer. In addition, keeping stakeholder involvement within the QC process, 24% mention the role of the voice talent as a reviewer: (1) “Having a different voicer to the person who scripted it (which sometimes happens) provides a natural/informal element of QC”; (2) “voicer also acts as QC on the script”; (3) “voicing and review of the voiced file by an audio specialist”; and (4) “the voicing is always conducted by two talents trained both in voice technique and AD”.

Turning to end-user feedback as a QC measure, 24% of the respondents report including the feedback from blind and visually impaired consultants in their QC workflow, often once the AD has been mixed with the original recording, but also at several stages throughout the QC: “users perform a QC on the script, the voice recording and the final mix”. As for other AD stakeholders, client feedback was also mentioned (11.8%) as part of the QC process.

Next, three more providers (18%) alluded to genre-specific QC processes. For the scenic arts: “More than one person is involved in QC – especially during a dry run/rehearsal” and “Introduction Notes are checked and edited by another describer. Carry out a dry run / rehearsal of the live ‘through description’ script, checked by another describer”. Within the filmic context, the remaining respondent addressed conducting QC within the Protools software, then “create audio mxf sync to other audio and video tracks, complete visual and technical spot QC, create DCP (a Digital Cinema Package) and run full QC in cinema theatre”.

Moving on to technical QC stages, one respondent (6%) alluded to the revision of time codes and eventual overlappings before the voice recording. Furthermore, another of the respondents reported conducting voice tests to ensure that the AD fits the atmosphere and is scene sensitive. Once the audio is recorded, further verification of the quality of the audio and video mix is required: “to ensure the description is audible and in the correct place so as not to foreshadow events or crash audio within the original recording”.

Lastly, none of the participants referred to the compliance with standards and guidelines when discussing their quality assurance processes. Admittedly, they may consider it to be self-evidently incorporated in the different stages of the QC. Nonetheless, this implies that they do not apply an ad-hoc revision based on guideline compliance.

5. Conclusions

This chapter draws a tentative map of practices among service providers in Spain and the UK. As the results are based on a self-reported online questionnaire addressed to a very restricted group, they cannot be extrapolated nor generalised, but they represent a suitable tool for exploring current practices and trends in a still young and niche market. Furthermore, the processes and tools depicted could soon evolve and outdate the current exploratory findings. Yet, these are valuable in that they offer an updated snapshot of current industry practices which have recently been subject to academic interest such as text-to-speech AD (Fernández Torné & Matamala, 2015; Walczak & Fryer, 2018), software applications, and workflows (ADLAB PRO, 2017b).

Regarding the overall profiling of the service providers, the majority of the respondents (75% in Spain and 67% in the UK) identified themselves as an accessibility services company, which supports the vindication of Media Accessibility as a subset of Accessibility Studies (Greco, 2019). As for the providers' trajectories, most (90%) have been in business for over 6 years, implying a trend of longevity and establishment. Meanwhile, AD turnover remains somewhat polarised, with 50% of the surveyed providers reporting an AD turnover of 0-25% on their balance sheet, and 25% reporting a 76-100% AD turnover rate. Several factors may contribute to this disparity, namely the size of the company, the diversification of services, the varying funding provision and the different rates for each AD specialisation, which are interesting avenues for future research. Speaking of specialisations, theatre (60%) and museum (55%) earned a place next to cinema (55%) and television (50%) among the most commonly provided AD modalities, particularly in the context of the UK. This opens up further questions, as the generated volume for each modality falls outside the scope of this study.

On the practical side of AD provision, voicing one's own AD in live and pre-recorded settings is very much prevalent among the majority of providers. This comes into conflict with the ADLAB PRO findings on the lesser importance of training vocal skills in academic courses (Mazur & Chmiel, 2021). Regarding software use, half of the respondents reported using either ad-hoc software intended for AD localisation and synchronisation, subtitling tools, or audio and video editing and post-production software.

On the other hand, the hypothesised twofold profile of companies as AD providers and AD software developers was dismissed, as it remains a minority profile for the time being.

Among the in-house tasks, AD revision (95%), AD scriptwriting (90%) and QC (85%) are the prevalent elements of the providers' workflows, along with AD recording (80%). To a lesser extent, some of the respondents are also responsible for the post-production mixing (60%). As for the QC process, several stages were defined: from translation-based processes such as the review of the AD script to technical tests of the final audio mix. Most notably, the respondents suggested a direct correlation between AD quality and the involvement of other stakeholders (namely, peer review of AD scripts, QC by the voice talents, by the client, and by blind and visually impaired consultants), as well as genre-specific QC for both scenic arts settings and filmic AD.

On this note, although user-centred research is ultimately the key for AD improvement, involving other stakeholders in AD research is socially relevant if we seek a complete overview of the industry developments and challenges. Building bridges between researchers, policy makers, practitioners, trainers, users, associations and companies can only lead us to a better comprehension of AD as a complex process. In this respect, the gathered data further raises new questions for a possible follow-up study: How do AD service providers cooperate with blind and visually impaired users in the making of the AD itself? Are they part of the regular staff? How does the use of AD software affect the quality of the final product? How can the audiovisual and cultural creators systematically involve AD providers to foster integrated accessibility? It would thus be advisable to build on the results from this exploratory study through a series of interviews, as well as assessing the state of the art of service providers practices in other geographical areas where AD is still a newcomer.

6. Further reading

ADLAB PRO. (2017b). *Report on IO2: Audio description professional: Profile description*. Retrieved from <https://www.adlabpro.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/IO2-REPORT-Final.pdf>.

Orero, P. (2017). The professional profile of the expert in media accessibility for the scenic arts. *Rivista internazionale di tecnica della traduzione (RITT) / International Journal of Translation*, 19, pp. 143-161.

Reviere, N. (2016). Audio description services in Europe: an update. *The Journal of Specialised Translation*, 26, 232–247.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the Spanish “Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades”: Project name RAD (Researching Audio Description: Translation, Delivery and New Scenarios); Project number: PGC2018-096566-B-I00 (MCIU/AEI/FEDER, UE) and the grant 2019FI_B 00327 awarded by the Catalan government. The author is a member of the TransMedia Catalonia research group

(2017SGR113) and she would like to thank the respondents for their time and interest in the study.

References

- ADLAB PRO. (2017a). Report on IO1: Assessment of current AD training practices. Retrieved from www.adlabpro.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/20170608_uam_io1_report.pdf
- ADLAB PRO (2017b). *Report on IO2: Audio description professional: Profile description*. Retrieved from <https://www.adlabpro.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/IO2-REPORT-Final.pdf>.
- Bardini, F. (2017). Audio description and film experience, design of a reception study. *Rivista Internazionale di Tecnica della Traduzione. International Journal of Translation*, 19, 49–73. doi.org/10.13137/2421-6763/17351.
- Braun, S., & Starr, K. (2019). Finding the right words: Investigating machine-generated video description quality using a corpus-based approach. *Journal of Audiovisual Translation*, 2(2), 11–35.
- Cabeza-Cáceres C. (2013). *Audiodescripció i recepció: efecte de la velocitat de narració, l'entonació i l'explicitació en la comprensió fílmica* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Barcelona.
- Chmiel, A., & Mazur, I. (2012). AD reception research: Some methodological considerations. In E. Perego (Ed.), *Emerging topics in translation: Audio description* (pp. 57–80). Trieste: Edizioni Università di Trieste.
- Chmiel, A., Mazur, I., & Vercauteren, G. (2019). Emerging competences for the emerging profession: a course design procedure for training audio describers. *The Interpreter and Translator Trainer*, 13(3), 326–341.
- Di Giovanni, E. (2014). Visual and narrative priorities of the blind and non-blind: eye tracking and audio description. *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology*, 22(1), 136–153.
- Díaz-Cintas, J. (2010). La accesibilidad a los medios de comunicación audiovisual a través del subtítulado y de la audiodescripción. *Cooperación y diálogo* (pp. 157–180). Madrid: Instituto Cervantes.
- Díaz-Cintas, J., & Massidda, S. (2019). Technological advances in audiovisual translation. In M. O'Hagan (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Technology* (pp. 255–270). Routledge: London,
- Evans, J. & Lindsay, W. M. (2014). *Managing for quality and performance excellence* (10th edition). Mason, OH: South Western Educational Publishing.
- Fryer, L. (2016). *An introduction to audio description: A practical guide*. Oxford: Routledge.
- Fryer, L. (2018). Staging the audio describer: An exploration of integrated audio description. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 38(3). Retrieved from <https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/6490/5093>.

- Fryer, L. (2019). Quality assessment in audio description: lessons learned from interpreting. In E. Huertas-Barros, S. Vandepitte & E. Iglesias-Fernández (Eds.), *Quality assurance and assessment practices in translation and interpreting* (pp. 155–177). Hershey, PA: IGI Global.
- Fryer, L., & Freeman, J. (2014). Can you feel what I'm saying? The impact of verbal information on emotion elicitation and presence in people with a visual impairment. In A. Felnhofer & O. D. Kothgassner (Eds.), *Challenging Presence: Proceedings of the 15th International Conference on Presence* (pp. 99–107). Wien: facultas.wuv.
- Fernández-Torné, A., & Matamala, A. (2015). Text-to-speech vs. human voiced audio descriptions: a reception study in films dubbed into Catalan. *The Journal of Specialised Translation*, 24, 61–88.
- Fernández-Torné, A., & Matamala, A. (2016). Machine translation and audio description? Comparing creation, translation and post-editing efforts. *SKASE Journal of Translation and Interpretation*, 9(1), 64–87.
- Greco, G. M. (2019). Accessibility studies: Abuses, misuses and the method of poietic design. In C. Stephanidis (Ed.), *HCII 2019* (pp. 15-27). Cham: Springer.
- Greco, G. M., & Jankowska, A. (2019). Framing media accessibility quality. *Journal of Audiovisual Translation*, 2(2), 1–10.
- Greening, J., & Rolph, D. (2007). Accessibility: Raising awareness of audio description in the UK. In J. Díaz-Cintas, P. Orero, & A. Remael (Eds.), *Media for all: Subtitling for the deaf, audio description, and sign language – Approaches to translation studies* (pp. 127–138). Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi.
- Hermosa-Ramírez, I. (2020). Delivery approaches in audio description for the scenic arts. *Parallèles*, 32(2), 17–31. doi:10.17462/para.2020.02.02
- ICC/ESOMAR (2016). *International code on market, opinion and social research and data analytics*. Retrieved from https://www.esomar.org/uploads/pdf/professional-standards/ICCESOMAR_Code_English_.pdf.
- Independent Television Commission (ITC). (2001). ITC guidance on standards for audio description. Retrieved from http://audiodescription.co.uk/uploads/general/itcguide_sds_audio_desc_word3.pdf.
- Jankowska, A., Milc, M., & Fryer, L. (2017). Translating audio description scripts... into English. *SKASE Journal of Translation and Interpretation*, 10(2), 2–16.
- Jankowska, A., Ziółko, B., Igras-Cybulska, M., & Psiuk, A. (2017). Reading rate in filmic audio description. *Rivista Internazionale di Tecnica della Traduzione (RITT) / International Journal of Translation*, 19, 75–97.
- Liu, M., & Wronski, L. (2018). Examining completion rates in web surveys via over 25,000 real-world surveys. *Social Science Computer Review*, 36(1), 116–124. doi.org/10.1177/0894439317695581
- López Romo, H. (1998). La metodología de la encuesta. In L. J. Galindo Cáceres (Coord.), *Técnicas de investigación en sociedad, cultura y comunicación* (pp. 33–73). México: Logman.

- Matamala, A., & Orero, P. (2007). Designing a course on audio description and defining the main competences of the future professional. *Linguistica Antverpiensia. New Series—Themes in Translation Studies*, 6, 329–344.
- Matamala, A., & Orero, P. (2013). Standardising audio description. *Italian Journal of Special Education for Inclusion*, 1, 149–155.
- Mazur, I. & Chmiel, A. (2021). Audio description training: A snapshot of the current practices. *The Interpreter and Translator Trainer*, 15(1), 51–65.
doi:10.1080/1750399X.2021.1880263
- Oncins, E., Lopes, O., Orero, P., Serrano, P., & Carrabina, J. (2013). All together now: A multi-language and multisystem mobile application to make living performing arts accessible. *The Journal of Specialised Translation*, 20, 147–164.
- Orero, P. (2005). Audio description: Professional recognition, practice and standards in Spain. *Translation Watch Quarterly*, 1, 7–18.
- Perego, E. (2016). History, development, challenges and opportunities of empirical research in audiovisual translation. *Across Languages and Cultures*, 17(2), 155–162.
doi:10.1556/084.2016.17.2.1.
- Pettitt, B., Sharpe, K., & Steven, C. (1996). AUDETEL: Enhancing television for visually impaired people. *British Journal of Visual Impairment*, 14(2), 48–52.
- Ramos, M. (2016). Testing audio narration: the emotional impact of language in audio description. *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology*, 24(4), 606–634.
doi:10.1080/0907676X.2015.1120760.
- Remael, A., & Vercauteren, G. (2007). Audio describing the exposition phase of films. Teaching students what to choose. *Trans. Revista De Traductología*, 11, 73–93.
- Reviere, N. (2016). Audio description services in Europe: an update. *The Journal of Specialised Translation*, 26, 232–247.
- Robert, I. S., & Remael, A. (2016). Quality control in the subtitling industry: An exploratory survey study. *Meta*, 61(3), 578–605. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1039220ar>.
- Rodero, E. (2012). A comparative analysis of speech rate and perception in radio bulletins. *An Interdisciplinary Journal of Language, Discourse & Communication Studies*, 32(3), 391–411.
- Romero-Fresco, P. (2019). *Accessible filmmaking: Integrating translation and accessibility into the filmmaking process*. London: Routledge.
- Salway, A. (2007). A corpus-based analysis of the language of audio description. In J. Díaz-Cintas, P. Orero, & A. Remael (Eds.), *Media for all: Subtitling for the deaf, audio description, and sign language – Approaches to translation studies* (pp. 151–174). Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Snyder, J. (2014). *The visual made verbal: A comprehensive training manual and guide to the history and applications of audio description*. Arlington, VA: American Council of the Blind.
- Shih, T.-H., & Fan, X. (2008). Comparing response rates from Web and mail surveys: A meta-analysis. *Field Methods*, 20, 249–271.

Szarkowska, A. (2011). Text-to-speech audio description: towards wider availability of AD. *The Journal of Specialised Translation*, 15, 142–162.

Tor-Carroggio, I., & Casas-Tost, H. (2020). Who is currently audio describing in China? A study of Chinese audio describer profiles. In M. Richart-Marset & F. Calamita (Eds.), *Traducción y Accesibilidad en los medios de comunicación: de la teoría a la práctica / Translation and Media Accessibility: from Theory to Practice*. *MonTI*, 12, 78–107.

Udo, J. P., & Fels, D. I. (2010a). Universal design on stage: live audio description for theatrical performances. *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology*, 18(3), 189–203. doi:10.1080/0907676X.2010.485683

Udo, J. P., & Fels, D. I. (2010b). The rogue poster-children of universal design: closed captioning and audio description. *Journal of Engineering Design*, 21(2-3), 207–221. doi:10.1080/09544820903310691

UK (2010). “Equality Act”. UK Government, London, UK. Retrieved from http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/pdfs/ukpga_20100015_en.pdf.

Walczak, A., & Fryer, L. (2018). Vocal delivery of audio description by genre: measuring users’ presence. *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology*, 26(1), 69–83.

i See <https://www.redescena.net/quienes-somos/aboutus.php>.

ii Previous literature on the profile of AD companies has been scarce. A notable exception are the intellectual outputs from the European ADLAB PRO research project (ADLAB PRO, 2017b)

iii As a reference, Rodero’s (2012) comparative study on speech rates in radio bulletins reveals that the BBC in the UK maintains a speech rate of around 170 words per minute (wpm), while RNE in Spanish records a rate of around 200 wpm.