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Identity, Language and Diversity

Chief Editors: Giuditta Caliendo & Maria Cristina Nisco

Collaborative Media Accessibility: Theory, Methodology and Practice

Guest editors: Elena Di Giovanni, Louise Fryer & Francesca Raffi



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A Participatory Approach in Enhancing Accessibility at a Film Festival: A Case Study

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Abstract

This paper explores the potential of a participatory approach in enhancing accessibility at film festivals, with a primary focus on engaging deaf and blind audiences. The investigation utilises a case study¹ conducted over the last four years of the international documentary film festival One World – the largest and oldest documentary festival in Slovakia, and at the same time, the first Slovak film festival addressing the access needs of visually and hearing-impaired audience. Having the opportunity to continuously observe access strategies at the festival from their inception, the study aims to provide insight into why and how a creative and organising team transitions from traditional, add-on access strategies towards a more integrated, inclusive, participatory approach – and what the benefits of such a development can be. It analyses findings gathered from participatory observation, direct access to the festival organisation, and semi-structured interviews with the festival management, access professionals and participating communities, providing an analysis of an applied strategies, their planning and implementation. Key findings offer valuable insights into practical applications of the more integrated, inclusive, participatory approach in the context of film festivals, demonstrating its effectiveness in creating a more inclusive environment for festival attendees.

Keywords

Film festivals, organisation, accessibility, inclusion, participation

1. Introduction

Since their very inception, film festivals have served as meeting points for works from diverse regions and backgrounds, utilising the transnational communicative character of cinematic art (Iordanova 2016) and celebrating films as collections of creative contexts and their engaged participants (Wong 2011). However, besides cinematic dialogue, film festivals are also sites of more comprehensive artistic, cultural, social and political exchange (Diestro-Dópidio 2021). Depending on their type and intended outreach, film festivals can also create a space for activism, advocacy and transformative learning (Torchin 2012; Roy 2016), which can be implemented not only at the level of film selection and festival programming, but also festival organisation, promotion, and creation of community networks and engagement (Torchin 2012). By bringing together industry professionals and stakeholders from the cultural and creative sectors,

¹ This case study was conducted under the project VEGA No. VEGA 2/0092/23 *Translation and Translating as a Part of the Slovak Cultural Space History and Present.*



viewers, various policy and change makers, and public figures and supporters, film festivals can play a noteworthy role in manifold socio-economic areas. They can contribute to enlivening local cultural life, contribute to its image or the image of the region and often even support its economic development (Grunwell/Ha 2007).

The possible areas of impact documented in previous research are indeed of significant value and can be of benefit to all involved stakeholders. This article will, however, first turn its attention to scenarios in which access to these benefits often cannot be granted, as the film festivals as such commonly remain rather inaccessible for people with specific sensory needs. Although not many relevant data regarding provision of access services and user satisfaction in this context in Europe can be gathered from existing research aimed directly at film festivals, available resources indicate that deaf and blind audiences mostly do not attend film festivals, mainly due to insufficient provision of access at the event (Uzzo 2020).

In other documented scenarios, services are commonly limited solely to provision of access to individual screened films, in the form of Subtitles for the Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing (SDH) and audio description (AD), and the specific communication needs of deaf and blind festival attendees in the festival environment – be it during debates, workshops, discussions with film creators, or communication with the organising team – are often neglected (Pedersen/Aspevig 2014; Perez *et al.* 2022). Film festivals are live events by their nature, with significant engagement and interaction. Access to a festival as an overall event is essential, as any partial efforts might lead to communications issues, feelings of discomfort and exclusion, and increasing mistrust towards cultural events (Perez *et al.* 2021, 2022) and resulting in audiences with sensory disabilities avoiding the social and entertainment aspects of film festivals entirely (Uzzo 2020).

Another significant aspect pointed out by Pedersen and Aspevig (2014) in the case of European and North American film festivals is that inclusion of people with sensory disabilities in the film culture in general is still very rare. Their self-representation in the film cultural ecosystem is marginal, both in terms of representation in films and in creative teams (e.g., as writers, directors, or actors). In some European regions, such ecosystems almost entirely exclude deaf and blind people, leaving them with the opportunity to be external ‘observers’ rather than ‘participants’.

The identified issues indicate that, despite accessibility gaining increasing attention (Fresno/Greco 2023), and despite the growing efforts to grant everyone access to information, content and full participation in cultural life, the journey towards accessibility of film festivals remains intricate. This paper therefore aims to point out that the question of access to film festivals with deaf and blind audiences in mind should not be limited solely to the provision of SDH or AD to individual films – if even that is the case. Designing accessibility for a live event requires more complex efforts from the film industry, festival organisers and policymakers, aiming to establish and enforce accessibility standards and promote inclusivity.

The presented case study, which follows the (so far) four-year-long



accessibility journey of the international documentary film festival One World in Slovakia, attempts to explore the potential of such initiatives. The study maps the development of access-design strategies from their very initiation – continuously shifting from traditional access provision towards a more integrated, inclusive and participative approach. Its main focus lies on the motivation for, planning and implementation of access strategies leading to close cooperation with and participation of deaf and blind communities. It demonstrates what results the shift towards more integrated, inclusive, participatory approach can bring.

2. Mapping the context

Curating a diverse array of films from various productions and cultures, film festivals assume the coexistence of multiple languages (Damiens 2020). Consequently, to ensure the accessibility of international cinema to a festival's domestic and/or international audience, the provision of linguistic access becomes essential. In the case of the Central European region, from which the case study presented in this paper originates, the practice of providing linguistic access to films at festivals has always been in place. In Slovakia, linguistic access to films screened at film festivals is almost by rule provided in the form of interlingual subtitles and in cases where the industry programme includes workshops, masterclasses, discussions or industry reward ceremonies with international speakers and participants, good practice involves implementing Slovak-English/English-Slovak interpreting. In terms of provision of access other than linguistic to cinema in the country in general, however, only very few – although valuable – initiatives can be identified. Such a situation could be due to factors recognised also in other European regions – mostly in relation to legislation, funding and a certain scepticism among live events organisers towards the efficiency of implementing efforts to open up access to various audiences (Di Giovanni 2018; Perez *et al.* 2021).

In terms of a legislative basis, the right to access information, content, and participation in cultural life has been stated by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities of the UN (2006). As an initiative aimed at the rights and well-being of persons with disabilities, the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy (2019) calls for fostering their inclusion and equal participation in various aspects of society, including employment, education and everyday life. The European Accessibility Act (European Parliament / Council of the European Union 2019) aims to enhance the accessibility of products and services for persons with disabilities and obligates EU member states to incorporate its objectives into national legislation. In the context of this study, these documents provide a solid foundation for promoting and improving accessibility in the cultural sector and live events such as film festivals, even though they may not directly pertain to live cultural events.

At the national level in Slovakia, a framework for provision of access services to film can only be found in relation to TV broadcasting and



VOD streaming. The existing updated legislation in this regard establishes basic quality standards for SDH (Decree No 318/2023 Coll., Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic 2023), with no specific attention dedicated to the quality requirements for audiodescription or sign language interpreting. Proportions of content required to be provided with access services (SDH, AD, Slovak Sign Language/Slovak Sign Language Interpreting) are defined in Slovak Act 40/2015 on Audiovision (National Council of the Slovak Republic 2015), which sets out a clear framework for both public and non-public broadcasters. The compliance of broadcasters and streaming services with the legislation is reviewed by the Council for Media Services, which is the key authority reviewing and assessing the implementation of access provision and its quality. In terms of cinema distribution, as defined by Audiovisual Act 40/2015 Coll., provision of access services is rather vague. It sets requirements for provision of linguistic access, specifying the use of dubbing translation or subtitles for films in a foreign language. In terms of access for viewers with hearing or vision impairment (other groups of viewers with specific needs are not addressed), access provision is required only in relation to Slovak audiovisual works (or works originally presented in Slovak), effective from 1 January 2020. Quality requirements and quality assessment in this context are absent. In terms of access, the use of AD and SDH is required, however the definitions remain broad and responsibility is placed on the distributor not the screener – in other words, SDH and AD must be provided, but there is no legal obligation for them to be available at a cinema screening. As a result, beyond the individual initiatives of very few Slovak film theatres, screenings with access services are entirely absent in the main film theatres, encompassing both foreign and Slovak audiovisual works.

Reflecting on the context of Slovak cinema-access provision, research previously conducted with the focus on deaf viewers (Perez/Zahorák 2023) indicates that deaf audiences in Slovakia tend to avoid major film theatres and screening events, confirming observations made by Uzzo (2020) in the Italian context. In some cases, they might attend special screenings organised 'by' and 'for' their communities, where specific access needs are respected. Young-adult audiences, however, claim that the selections of films at such screenings are not always up-to-date or sufficiently attractive (Perez/Zahorák 2023). They are more likely to attend film theatres, willing to make a compromise with the insufficient provision of access – when foreign films are screened with interlingual subtitles, as Slovak films are never screened with intralingual subtitles in ordinary Slovak screening practice. Their satisfaction with such experiences varies. Additionally, such state of affairs in the country also raises concerns about exclusion from Slovak current film production (Perez/Zahorák 2023).

In terms of film festivals in the country, until the year 2020, no comprehensive efforts in the provision of access with respect to the needs of deaf and blind audiences have been recorded. In comparison with increasing initiatives in the provision of access to musical and theatrical events, even with the identification of shifts towards integrated approaches (see Hefty/Hefty 2022; Secarā/Perez 2022),



the specific needs of these audiences were significantly overlooked in the context of film festivals. Reasoning for such oversight on the part of film festivals or film events in general often lies in limited funding and questions around value, with commonly cited concerns regarding turnout at screening events (Perez *at al.* 2021). As demonstrated before, though, it is important to understand that people with hearing impairments have been denied access to film screening events in the country for a long time and thus lack motivation to attend them. However, as Di Giovanni (2018) advocates in case of similar situations in case of theatre productions, by setting up access services, disseminating information and sharing experience, the accessibility of cultural events can grow and expand. Plus, as she argues, engagement with audiences in the creation of access services can lead to new shared experience, increased interest in the new context, and can stimulate future joint efforts in advocating for accessibility.

3. From ‘removing barriers’ to ‘creating access’

As film festivals provide prerecorded content combined with elements of live interaction and engagement (Burgess 2020), designing and implementing accessibility for this specific type of cultural event is a rather complex task. As pointed out in the previous sections of this paper, it goes beyond the provision of access to individual films, which – as is often argued – can be ‘easily’ outsourced and delivered when cooperating with qualified professionals. A festival comprises other elements than just films, which might indeed have a certain autonomy but, from the perspective of a viewer, ultimately create a unique experience blended with the overall programme (Diestro-Dópido 2021). This can entail various intersections, for instance contextual introductions of films, follow-up discussions with film creators, or impact workshops focused on understanding the societal, cultural or educational significance of a film. If any of these elements were to be inaccessible, then the overall experience of the viewer – despite having access to the film via SDH or AD – will not be fully comprehensive.

Aiming for a more complex accessibility design for a film festival therefore requires something different from an add-on, post hoc approach. Drawing parallels with theatres and theatre performances, Fryer and Cavallo (2021) advocate for integrated access provision – an approach in which strategic planning of solutions to address the specific needs of diverse audiences takes place from the beginning. They emphasise the potential of involving access experts as internal members of creative teams, helping to further develop accessibility in theatre productions. Fryer and Cavallo (2021) point out that such an approach is, in principle, more inclusive in several aspects and moves away from understanding accessibility as an external procedure designed to remove barriers imposed by the disabilities of viewers. On the contrary, integrated access brings together creative teams and access experts, does not strive to neutralise the specifics of various communication tools in the provision of access, and can result in a new, joint artistic experience for all.



Di Giovanni (2018, 2022) develops integrated access even further, when advocating for end users' engagement in the creation of access services. She introduces the concept of participatory accessibility referring to "design, creation, revision and consumption of access in an inclusive way" (Di Giovanni 2018: 158) that aims to create an inclusive experience enjoyed by various audiences. In a later experiment conducted in the context of inclusive theatre, Di Giovanni and Raffi (2022: 182) confirmed the importance of a shift from "barrier-centred accessibility to people-centered inclusion", as such an approach in inclusive and participatory integrated access increases the subjective well-being of audiences. Di Giovanni's work (2018) also suggests that audience participation in the creation of access can contribute to encouraging attendance of accessible events. This was – in the case of deaf audiences – later partially documented also by Mével (2020: 208), who believes that "making accessibility accessible" can contribute to "greater immersion levels and accessibility for audiences". Mével (2020) documented participatory experience with actively engaging audiences in creation of paratexts to theatre productions and showcased how efficient such approach can be.

Based on the presented approaches, integrated, inclusive, participatory access strategies can improve the overall experience, bring audiences and creative teams together, and encourage inclusive efforts in shared learning and enjoyment. In their substance, they also have the potential to open access to creation and organisation within the creative industry, which is, as pointed out and documented by Romero-Fresco (2018) in relation to audiovisual creation, an area that needs to be addressed.

Now, despite the differences in their mediums, developments towards a more complex, integrated, inclusive, participatory accessibility that can be observed in the context of theatre may find their use in enhancing accessibility in the context of film festivals. The same can be applied to researching accessibility in film festivals, an area to which not much academic attention has been dedicated so far – unlike accessibility in other art forms, e.g., in the context of theatres, opera and museums (Uzzo 2020). This study strives to examine the concepts of the integrated, inclusive, participatory approach in the film festival environment, providing insight into the practical implications of developing such approach in the case of the One World international documentary film festival.

4. One World Slovakia: Towards integrated participatory accessibility

This section presents a case study of the international documentary film festival One World Slovakia and its ongoing journey in initiating and enhancing the accessibility of the event. The week-long film festival is organised annually by the Slovak branch of the non-governmental organisation People in Need, and with its (so far) 24 editions, it is the oldest and largest documentary event in the country. Focusing on social, political and environmental issues and human



rights, every year it brings approximately 50 feature-length and short-length awarded documentaries from all over the world. In the dedicated competition section, it also gives space to domestic and regional documentaries. Besides individual film screenings, the festival offers a wide range of discussions and roundtables, talks by creative industry professionals, an industry impact programme and interactive side events open to the general public.

One World Slovakia is a member of the Human Rights Film Network and, on its fora, it openly states its aim to bring high quality film production to everyone, regardless of gender, race, age, social status and health.² In the long-term, the festival has been quite consistent in provision of linguistic access. To domestic audiences, it provides linguistic access via interlingual subtitling of films and provision of interpreting into Slovak (e.g., in case of invited speakers from abroad). To international audiences, access is usually provided via English as a lingua franca – through communications always conducted bilingually, screenings offered in English or with English subtitles, and with use of English or use of Slovak-English interpreting where essential. In terms of accessibility respecting the needs of deaf and blind audiences, who lie at the centre of attention of this study, access provision does not date back so long – with its initiation in 2020.

This case study reveals why and how the festival's creative and organising team has been transitioning from traditional, barrier-centred access strategies to a more integrated, inclusive, participatory approach. In terms of methodology, it draws on the exploratory method of observation and participation, as the author of this study plays an active part in the observed case as an invited co-coordinator of translation and accessibility projects. The presented findings were gathered thanks to access to creative and organising team and through semi-structured interviews with the festival management, access professionals, and representatives of participating communities. The study showcases the potential of integrated, inclusive, participatory access strategies in the three subsequent stages – preparing the ground, understanding the benefits of becoming more inclusive, and shifting towards an integrated approach and participation.

4.1. Stage 1: Preparing the ground

The 21st edition of the One World film festival that took place in November 2020 could be marked as exceptional because of several factors, first and foremost because of its forced transition to an online environment due to restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the outbreak of the pandemic in the country had put a stop to several cultural events that year, the popular One World International Documentary Film Festival reached its audience fully in the online space, offering nearly 50 high-quality films, several discussions and workshops.

During the preparations for the 2020 edition, One World Slovakia articulated their first ideas on dedicating more attention to accessibility. The festival planned to pilot provision of access to deaf and blind audiences and encourage broader industry debate on the accessibility

² See the website of One World Slovakia, section About the festival (Jeden Svet 2023).



of film festivals in the region. According to the executive director of the festival, Eva Križková (2021), such an initiative was “in line with the values of the festival”, which attempts “to overcome barriers between people and between their worlds, to mediate dialogue and open discussions across different communities and spectrums of opinion across various social groups”. Although in many countries the guarantee of access to art and culture for all is almost a given, Slovakia has been lagging far behind in several areas in this respect. The One World festival has thus become the first film festival in Slovakia to address the issue of making films and cinemas accessible also to deaf and blind audiences.

When asked about the initial motivation, Križková (2021) stated that the festival had long been aware that the traditional form of their event “handicapped” a relatively large group of people, who were therefore left out of this shared experience. In her words, such a situation “goes against the very essence of the whole project”. Looking for possibilities as to how to address her concerns, Križková (2021) stated that one of the essential motivating factors in the accessibility efforts of the festival was initiation of cooperation with the Department of Translation Studies at the Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra – the only academic institution in the country to specialise in research and training, advocacy and supervision in media accessibility, and audiovisual translation. This for the festival organisers “was an opportunity to take the first practical steps in this direction” (Križková 2021). The new cooperation resulted first in planning and strategy discussions regarding accessibility and translation co-ordination with the author of this paper and her team. Consequently, the first collaborative networks started to be established, involving translation and access professionals, companies, volunteers, and activists.

Although the creative and organising team hoped for an on-site or at least hybrid version of the event, the worsening pandemic situation moved the 2020 festival to fully remote mode. This had been rather a demanding challenge for film festivals across the globe (Damien/de Valck 2023), One World Slovakia not being an exception. The reported increased organisational burden on the shoulders of the creative and organising team, but also the pilot nature of the broader access provision transposed into implementation of a rather limited, barrier-centred approach, aiming to provide access (or remove barriers) to three selected feature-length films via AD and SDH (Kačmárová 2020).

In several respects, the pilot stage of access provision efforts at the One World Festival bore characteristics of a traditional, barrier-centred approach. In terms of its design and workflow it cannot be marked as inclusive, as communication with target audience representatives was minimal and their involvement in access design absent, except for joint efforts in promoting the pilot access attempts towards the target communities. This promotion, however, did not take the form of specific advertising aimed at the communities, and its outreach was not that successful. For 2020, data from the screening platform indicated that the number of deaf and blind viewers – or people opting to view films with AD or SDH – was minimal. On the other hand, the 2020 pilot opened the door to more strategical



accessibility planning. It attracted the attention of the creative industry in Slovakia, forged initial links among stakeholders and provided space for advocacy in developing accessibility.

4.2. Stage 2: Exploring the benefits of becoming more inclusive

For the 2021 edition, the festival opted for a hybrid event, with the majority of films still screened online and a selection of films screened live in festival film theatres. In terms of accessibility, the festival organisers decided to develop their accessibility initiatives more strategically. With the aim of providing a more systematic framework involving more relevant parties, 2021 One World organised a six-month workshop programme, One World without Barriers. In this way, it managed to create a platform bringing together stakeholders from across the creative audiovisual industry in Slovakia, access experts and professionals, and representatives of communities with limited access to culture. The represented communities were those with visual and hearing impairment, people with no home, foreigners living in Slovakia, people fleeing their country, people with physical impairment and parents with little children. Although embedded in the principle of ‘removing barriers’ in a traditional access provision setting, the contact network this initiative created among target communities, members of the creative and organising team, access experts and professionals was highly enriching. It has led to more significant involvement of representatives of communities that were reached out to as advisors in how to address and fulfil the needs of the specific audiences they represented.

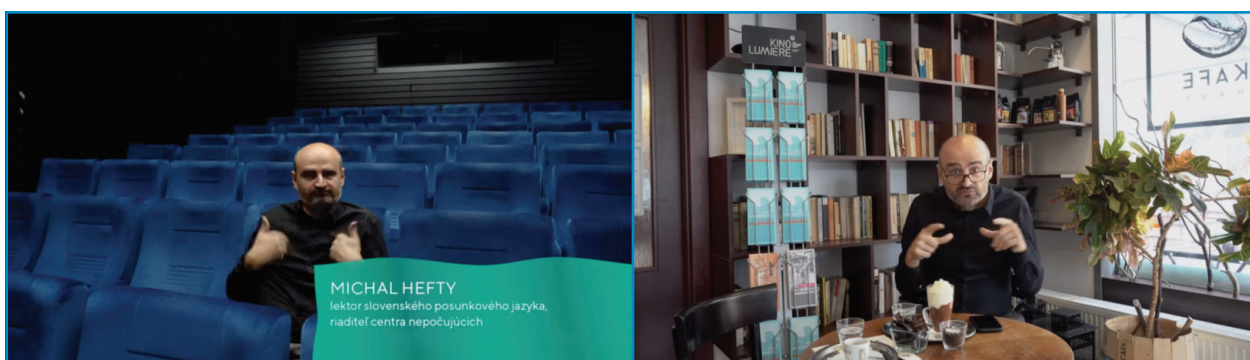
In 2021, representatives of the deaf and blind audience were involved in reaching out to potential viewers via their internal community networks. This led to a slightly increased number of deaf and blind viewers as well as more lively internal debates on ‘what works and what doesn’t’ when enhancing the accessibility of a film screening event. One World 2021 decided to secure access respecting the needs of deaf and blind audiences to more screenings – 10 films with SDH and AD (Kačmárová 2021), initiated cooperation with access assistants on-site, and included provision of sign language interpreting to several parts of its overall programme. The significant shift towards more inclusive attempts, intensive communication with access experts and co-coordinators as well as the overall energy the creative and organising team were willing to invest into searching for solutions for new contexts and scenarios can be taken as a significant signal of awareness of the importance of accessibility as well as the responsibility of the team in attempting to provide it.

One World 2021 also implemented the first targeted video invitations addressing deaf viewers and Slovak Deaf³ community, prepared in sign language by a cooperating representative of the Slovak Deaf community, Michal Hefty. As an expert in the creative arts field and experienced organiser of events within the Deaf community (see Hefty/Hefty 2022; Secarǎ/Perez 2022), Hefty has elaborated effective invitations informing the community about accessible screenings, given advice on how and where to obtain tickets for the online or on-

³ The ‘uppercase D’ is used to specifically describe Deaf community and its members actively sharing a sense of community, its language (sign language), and a positive affirmation to Deafhood identity and culture (Vojtechovský 2011).

site version of the festival, explained how access could be secured, and provided tips on the most interesting parts of the film festival programme. From 2021 until the 2023 edition, his video invitations have regularly served as a valuable tool for festival communications towards D/deaf audiences. His active participation in creation and co-creation of these paratexts has been instrumental in continuously growing the number of viewers with hearing impairment. Furthermore, it has contributed to increasing awareness of good practice in similar contexts, helping to promote the need to address the specific requirements of audiences who lack access to sound and increase visibility of the issue.

Figure 4.2.1. Excerpts from the 2021 invitation to the One World film festival in Slovak sign language (Hefty 2021)

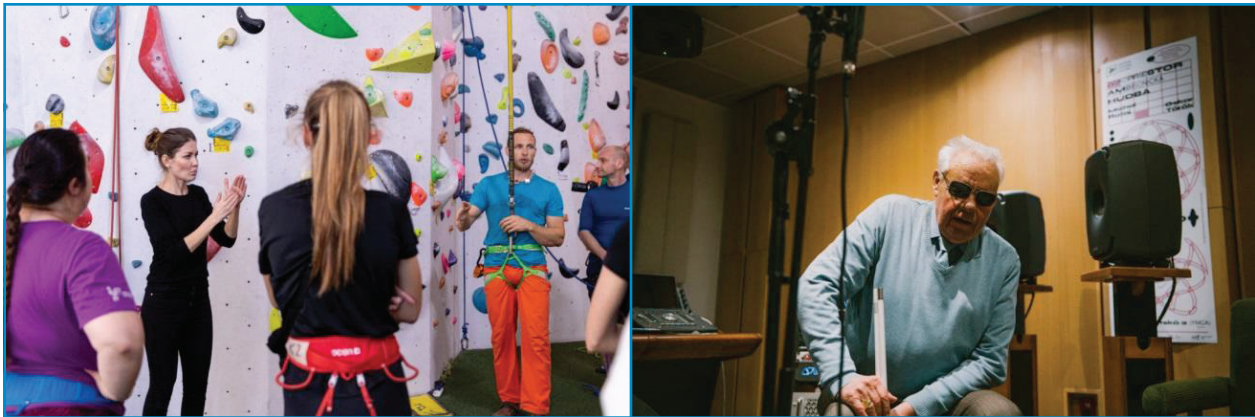


2021 was also the year when the One World festival started to openly share its experience in accessibility efforts, not only within the creative film industry but also with the broader public. Since 2021, this has been done via two festival initiatives: the Manual for Accessible Film Events (Križková 2021), which was published online (in Slovak), presenting the main findings on the accessibility development journey of One World, and the annual public debate Audiovision without Barriers. The format of Audiovision without Barriers has been designed in cooperation with the author of this paper and festival management, aiming to bring together key stakeholders active in and advocating for accessibility of film screenings and film screening events. It provides a space for film-event organisers, cinema managers, distributors, policymakers, and funding institution representatives to openly discuss their ideas and concerns in the provision of access to film screening events. Besides the aforementioned stakeholders, which have varied in the last three editions of the debate, the debate as standard hosts members of target communities and an international accessibility expert. In this way, the issues discussed never exclude the audiences this study focuses on, and a space for sharing ideas of good practice is provided. Access is always provided to online and on-site audiences in the form of English-Slovak/Slovak-English interpreting, Slovak sign language interpreting and transcription, and the option of inter/intralingual subtitles available for an online audience. This debate resonates in the Slovak cultural environment, within as well as beyond the creative industries. One of its outcomes within Slovak film-



making funding schemes is a new priority in the support structure of the essential national film-funding organisation, the Audiovisual Fund, calling for (and financially supporting) an increase to the accessibility of audiovisual content of Slovak audiovisual works to viewers with sensory impairment.

Figure 4.2.2. Accompanying accessible climbing workshop following the screening of the film *Adam Ondra: Pushing the Limit* (Šimánek/Záruba 2022), and workshop on film sound design (One World photographs 2022 by Kvet Nguyen©)



Valuable initiatives that emerged in 2021 were further developed in the 2022 edition. In this year, festival management explicitly aimed for an even more inclusive experience for viewers, although remaining within the barrier-centred mindset (see Slobodová 2022). Its access provision efforts grew again, mainly based on cooperation with target-community members. The programme structure in this year provided more elements recommended directly by representatives of the deaf and blind audience (11 films with SDH and AD, sign language interpreted discussions, inclusive thematic workshops and film sound design workshops). Representatives of the target communities were involved in strategic discussions on the selection of films to be provided with access (as it is still not in the capacity of the festival to provide total access) and continued with participatory collaboration in communication strategies towards the target communities. The festival also enhanced international cooperation in promoting and advocating for accessibility – namely with the Women in Italian Cinema: An Inclusive Project, funded by the Italian Ministry of Culture, and with EARCATCH international, aimed at implementing technological enhancement in ensuring accessibility for viewers with vision impairments. In 2022, the audiences at the heart of this study again slightly increased in number, involving also attendees with sensory impairment coming to enjoy the festival from the neighbouring Czech Republic.

4.3. Stage 3: Shifting towards an integrated approach and participation

In planning for the 2023 edition, the festival management decided to maintain the hybrid format of the event. Although audiences had largely returned to film theatres after the COVID-19 pandemic, the



organisers decided to keep the online version available to those who for various reasons couldn't attend the festival in person. In terms of the accessibility design – in this study with the main focus on deaf and blind audiences – and in the fourth year of its implementation, several significant developments can be documented.

Based on an evaluation of previous design efforts conducted during joint discussions between the creative and organising team, access coordinators and audience and community representatives, a strategic aim of developing inclusion in future events was articulated. This transposed into inclusive efforts not only towards the audience attending the festival in its final stage, but to overall inclusion of people with different abilities in festival organisation. Planning discussions on how to fulfil this aim at various levels commenced shortly after concluding the 2022 edition – this means from the very early stages of designing the next edition of the festival as such.

Outlining the access strategy from this point enabled the festival to engage in a different paradigm, shifting towards efforts to promote different abilities. In the first stage, this was done at the level of the selection of films, including output by and about those who usually not in the spotlight. Secondly, representatives of deaf and blind communities cooperating with the festival were involved in the action as speakers or presenters in various parts of the programme. For instance, the film festival opening ceremony was hosted by a Deaf moderator, Michal Hefty, welcoming on stage and interviewing the festival executive and creative management. Hefty participated in co-designing and co-creating this event and as a Deaf actor and creative events' organiser himself, he turned the ceremony into very appealing, interactive encounter.

The film selected to be screened at the opening ceremony was a feature-length film *The Tuba Thieves* (O'Daniel 2023), written and directed by American director Alison O'Daniel. Made in American Sign Language (ASL), English, and Spanish, presenting D/deaf and hearing actors and testing the limits of sound, this film invites audience to a joint experience of the hearing and non-hearing worlds. The film was screened with creative SDH in Slovak which in many aspects presented a challenge for the involved access professional. Besides parts in ASL, the film contained sections in artistic signing and although English creative subtitles were provided as a source material, participation of representatives of cooperating communities at this point became essential.

At the opening ceremony, the film was presented by O'Daniel herself, offering the attendees a unique experience. Inspired by sound workshops, the director invited everyone to enjoy the screening focusing on the sound, whether the viewer was a hearing or non-hearing person. The audience was provided with balloons which thanks to the sound vibrations that could be felt though the balloon offered a different sound experience. In this way, the audience became engaged in the screening and was directly invited into participation of the overall programme element. Consequently, the balloons inflated by the viewers in the audience served for an immersive art installation titled *Unity in Breath*.



Figure 4.3.1. Alison O'Daniel introducing *The Tuba Thieves* and the audience experiencing sound at the festival opening ceremony (One World photographs 2023 by Šimon Lupták©)



Cooperation with O'Daniel was a new experience for the festival. Being a representative of the D/deaf and hard of hearing herself, she advocates for access and inclusion in the world of film and, in this cooperation, she played a very active role in the preparation of the screening. She provided the creative and organising team with her suggestions on how the work should be introduced to the Slovak audience, and offered specific procedures and guidance when necessary. Besides the opening ceremony, the film was screened once more to the broader festival audience, followed by a masterclass on how models of disability intersect, diverge and form cultural expectations, led by O'Daniel. Attended mostly by future creative industry professionals and students, the masterclass set an inspiring example to future filmmakers, creative team, and access professionals.

Shifting towards an integrated and more inclusive design of the festival enabled for a more participatory approach. Besides cooperation with representatives of the communities whose role developed into access co-coordinators, wider deaf and blind audiences were invited into active participation in shaping the event. Besides abovementioned efforts, the 2023 edition re-designed the annual Audience Award in order to make it accessible also to visually and hearing-impaired audiences. By sharing evaluations, they can help to shape future film selection and provide new stimuli. The audience also became actively involved in interactive festival discussions with access professionals on access provision, the changing views and opinions on applied strategies, quality of provided access as well as selection of films.

4.4. Discussion

The initial 2020 approach to access at the One World film festival could be classified as traditional, piecemeal and in its substance barrier-centred. The documented progress in the subsequent three editions of the festival, however, indicates that, for events that truly aim for opening up access to audiences that were previously neglected, said approach does not yield satisfactory results.

The 2021 and 2022 editions started shifting towards a more complex and inclusive approach. In the updated festival's Manual for Accessible



Film Events (Križková forthcoming) describes the journey that One World has taken in recent years as one towards inclusion. From her perspective as executive director of the festival, “while providing access is more about removing technical barriers (e.g. providing audio commentary or subtitles for the deaf), inclusion encompasses much broader contexts, for which in the case of the affected communities constant contact and dialogue is essential”. As showcased in this study, such dialogue can result in new cooperations and efforts to be more inclusive with regard to festival audiences and at the same time establishes a more inclusive environment for the creative team. Working on accessibility then becomes a joint pursuit. Hefty states that in his view, after three years of cooperation with One World several things are improving and have improved – at the festival, but also beyond. Joint advocacy and pressure for more funding and existing legislation to be improved has started to bear fruit. Advancements in funding schemes, gaining the attention of policymakers, and establishing contacts with national authorities are valuable achievements. In the case of marginalised audiences, participating in this pursuit together with a well-established film festival, recognised access experts and representatives of other communities makes the advocacy significantly stronger, and thus more efficient.

In One World 2023, the inclusive, this time integrated, approach reached more areas of the festival, especially in terms of inclusion and participation on stage, in the selection of films and their themes and in promoting and advocating for accessibility. The festival turned into – by Slovak standards – an absolutely unique experience, actively involving communities and viewers. This edition started to create more opportunities for participation of audiences with sensory impairment, inviting them to co-create, co-analyse, and co-evaluate various aspects of the festival, which can be seen as an evident shift towards participation.

5. Conclusion

The presented case study on the One World international documentary film festival documents the efficacy and benefits of an integrated, inclusive, more participatory approach in enhancing the accessibility of film festivals for deaf and blind audiences. Over the analysed four-year period, the festival underwent a transformative shift from traditional, add-on access strategies to a more integrated and inclusive model, demonstrating a commitment to actively engaging with the diverse needs of its audience and contributing to the creation of a more inclusive environment. The study showcased the effectiveness of such an approach. Furthermore, its findings also indicate that the integrated, inclusive, participatory approach not only addresses immediate access requirements but also fosters a sense of industry inclusivity, and contributes to advocacy for initiatives to improve the funding for such development.



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