[Title] AltText: An institutional tool for change
[Authors] Rafie Cecilia, Theano Moussouri and John Fraser
[Author Biographies]

Rafie Cecilia, (**raffaella.cecilia.14@ucl.ac.uk**) is Associate Lecturer in Museum Studies at University College London (UCL) and leading the accessibility research initiative in collaboration with this journal.

Theano Moussouri, Associate Editor, (**t.moussouri@ucl.ac.uk**) is Professor of Museum Studies at University College London (UCL) and collaborator on the accessibility research initiative.

John Fraser, Editor, (**johnf@knology.org**) is a psychologist, a Fellow of the American Psychological Association and a Research Fellow at Knology, a social science research organization in New York, USA.

[A-Head] Abstract

In the second in a series of Editorials on Curator: The Museum Journal's new policy requiring Alternative Text (AltText) for all images submitted with manuscripts for this journal, members of the editorial team provide supporting information behind the policy change. They reflect on forty years of history related to improving accessibility in the museum sector, and the regrettable oversights and biases that allowed the digital revolution in journal publishing to exclude people requiring screen reader accommodations for online use of the literature. They provide supporting information on the priorities for creating AltText based on understanding the site of production and audiencing, the relationship between authors and potential readership, and the multimodal nature of authorial narratives that should be used to create access to images published in peer-reviewed journal papers. And illustrate the benefits of AltText production to authors and the research community as well as those who use screen readers for accessing content.

[A-Head] Introduction

AltText is widely recognised as a key principle of digital accessibility and accessible publishing (PAAG, 2023). It has also been discussed as a creative writing practice (Finnegan & Coklyat, n.d.), and as an access tool for museums and cultural institutions (Wilson, 2011). In the January 2023 issue of Curator: The Museum Journal (Cecilia et al., 2023), we considered the rather fragmented and decadal delays of the museum sector and the sector's peer-reviewed publishers to fully adopt the principles of the UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in the migration to digital first publishing. In that editorial, we announced that Curator: The Museum Journal has adopted a new policy to increase inclusion in our journal and advocated for wide adoption of that policy throughout the museum sector.

In this Editorial, we broaden our discussion of *alternative text* or "AltText" as we will be calling it – and more generally the discussion of digital access in scholarly journals by examining it as an institutional, political and activist tool. Understanding the way the professional publishing sector can deploy access tools like AltText provides the foundation on which this journal, Curator: The Museum Journal, will be presenting our framework for structuring accessible content that will benefit authors and readers. The insights gained

from our research will allow authors to reflect on the intricate link between images and text and how they work together to illustrate a particular claim. As announced in our January 2023 editorial, we employ Rose's (2012) approach to understand the significance of cultural images, using technological, compositional, and social modalities to discuss images' sites of production, audiencing and the image itself, and the site of its circulation.

In this Editorial, we focus on understanding the site of production and audiencing, reflecting on the complex relationship between authors and potential readership, and the multimodal nature of authorial narratives.

Advocacy to prioritise accessibility from an institutional perspective is not a new phenomenon in the museum sector. The question has been at the forefront of museum publishing since the mid-1980s when physical access to buildings started restructuring our buildings. But even after forty years of progress, professionals and academics continue to agree on the need for even more sector-wide change. At this writing, twenty-three years into the 21st century's digital revolution, it has become apparent that there is need for a new focus on how inclusion can permeate processes and operations at all levels.

Our 2022 quick assessment of a sample of the major museum websites and related peer-reviewed publications revealed that the vast majority of the images on museum webpages are without Alt attribute tags to define alternative text, despite these tags being considered a required attribute for HTML standards for more than 25 years (Bowen et al., 2001; Gleason et al., 2019; Lisney et al., 2013). The lack of Alt attribute tags is often the main accessibility error found by most accessibility-checker software and is often flagged as the main priority for improvement.

[A-Head] Reflecting on a History of Exclusion
As a peer-reviewed global journal, we apologize to our readers who have needed these accommodations, and admit to our complicity over the past twenty years for the exclusions we created. We admit to our error in not making AltText an editorial priority before we commenced this transformation in 2021.

We find important research as early as 2002, when Howitt and Mattes advocated for the needs of all users to be considered from the early stages of web resources' development. Their call for an equitable audience-centred approach to the development of websites and web resources, was prompted by the development of the British Museum 'COMPASS' resource in 2000. Despite that critical work at a major global institution, their recommendations were relegated to a sidebar in our accessibility work and the work of our museum publishing peers. We acknowledge that this tacit oversight is not exclusively our own omission, and find that digital accessibility remains outside the priorities of the sector, and the reminder of how long digital access has been ignored remains a crisis in the legitimacy of the museum sector to serve all of their audiences.

In brief, on a theoretical level, there is a consensus that good accessibility starts at the top and is implemented at every level of the digital experience design. Two decades of studies (Huntsman, 2022; Jones, 2022; Wilson, 2011) have continuously mounted more evidence on how an accessible vision needs to be embraced by everyone responsible for publishing, and

at every step of the digital journey. Accessibility researchers have demanded a shift toward more accessibility in scholarly work, from the early stages of research and projects, where aims and outcomes are established. Which is to say, our requirements and guidelines for authors to provide AltText at the manuscript submissions stages are important, we also acknowledge that these guidelines are not enough.

Some sector standards, like PAAG (2023) and W3C (n.d.) require websites and academic material to be accessible for screen reader users. But the work by members of our team leading up to our change in policy has found the reality of accessibility to be far more fragmentary.

At this writing, publications are still fundamentally inaccessible from both a technological and an epistemological perspective. In an effort to overcome this accessibility problem, and in response to various public policies in the UK (ie: Equality Act 2010 & Public Sector Bodies Accessibility Regulations 2018), US (ADA n.d.), EU (EAA due to be implemented in 2025) (European Commission 2022), English language publishers have started to add requirements for authors, including submitting AltText with images for their manuscripts. And, we note, our journal joins the ranks of journals working to remediate this historical oversight with our own migration to required AltText. However, what remains unknown at this writing is whether a requirement for researchers and authors to provide AltText has an impact on experienced accessibility for readers with vision impairments and other users of text-to-speech technology.

As mentioned in the previous editorial, Curator: The Museum Journal, as part of the Wiley publishing family, collaborated with University College London on the project 'Creating accessible digital images', funded by the UCL Centre for Critical Heritage Studies. The project builds on findings from the 'Inclusive Visions' project, which looked at the experience of museum visitors with vision impairments, and how they make meaning of the environment, collections, and digital resources (Cecilia, 2022). 'Creating accessible digital images' perceives AltText not only as alternative explanatory text with images but also as part of the broader sector's effort towards more equitable offers of cultural participation. It frames AltText as part of the creative and critical practice of research and academic writing, and as a political tool to acknowledge people with disabilities, and specifically with vision impairments, as members of the museum and academic community, both as audiences and researchers. As part of the study, we interviewed twelve researchers with vision impairments and ten sighted academics, museum and publishing professionals who employ and/or use AltText in their research and work practice in the UK, the US, France, and Italy.

In line with the idea that accessibility must be considered at the beginning of each research project, findings from the initial stage of the research show that accessibility concerns, and in particular adding AltText, cannot be considered just at publications' submission stage. When this happens, it means that authors perceive the submission requirements as challenging, time-consuming, often boring, and end-in-itself task, and infer that creating AltText does not contribute to their creative and critical research process. As a result, it appears that asking authors to provide AltText as a requirement for submission may lead to the production of rushed text disconnected from the image and the text they are linked to.

In order to achieve that sectorial change that has been advocated for the first quarter of the century, it is, therefore, necessary to acknowledge that there is an intimate link between research and its publication. We believe that institutions that support research have a responsibility to include requirements that ensure that authors embed accessibility concerns into the early stages of their research and writing, making that work a powerful interpretative tool that reflects on the nature of images and their relationship with the text and the research itself.

Our Commitment to Accessibility

Irrespective of supporting institutions include requirements for accessibility. Curator: The Museum Journal, is revising our policy as a reflection of our dual responsibility in sharing research results. On the one hand, we take it as our responsibility to create accessible and inclusive content to meet the aspirations of the legislation in the countries where we distribute our journal, ~~a process that Sandell (2019, 171) described as 'culture of compliance'~~. On the other hand, we also take it as our responsibility to lead change for a sector, whether irrespective of any legislation to meet the needs of our growing digital audiences going beyond the process that Sandell (2019, 171) described as 'culture of compliance'. Furthermore, by making this change in our policy, we hope to put in place a model that will ensure that the larger academic publishing sector can respond to the needs of all users, embracing an activist role in the cultural heritage sector.

[A-Head] Benefits of AltText

When discussing web accessibility, the consensus is that changing, adapting, or retrofitting a website to respond to accessibility requirements once it has launched is far harder than coding and integrating features from the beginning of the development. The creative development of AltText for images follows a similar pattern. When required to create AltText at the submission stage, authors face a time-consuming task if they have not started to think about this process before starting their submission. This process can lead to inadequate results that do not match the quality of the rest of the submission. The researchers with vision impairments interviewed as part of our UCL partner's study described AltText in academic journals as feeling disconnected from the text the image refers to in the main body of the paper. One participant, in particular, noted that the tone of the AltText is frequently quite different from the tone of the main text. To that participant, it was clear that either someone else wrote those descriptions or that that the timing of that text development was not given the same attention or concern. Either way, that participant described the results as inadequate and failing to meet the goals of accessibility.

> *'I have ADHD and [the different tone between the AltText and the main body of the text] is very distracting. It takes me far longer to process the new information, focus on the image and then make sense of it in the actual context. In 99% of the cases, it's not worth it and I just give up'.*
> [Research Participant]

AltText is not just a resource for users with vision impairments, it is also a resource for individuals like this participant who require other accommodations but still rely on screen readers, needs that are rarely acknowledged or addressed in existing guidelines and legislation.

AltText is an interpretative resource that enables users who require the support of screen readers, including those with low or no vision, to understand an image in the context of the manuscript. From the user's perspective, AltText is often the only tool to help them independently access information from the visual elements of a paper.

We also found that authors who consider AltText as part of their manuscript development, find that the approach is a powerful resource to creatively reflect on their work and to think critically about the images they choose to support their publications. But prior research has identified some challenges. More than a decade before this writing, Rose (2012) found that text in alternative tags contributes to the cultural significance of images. But more recently, Conrad (2021) found that the majority of authors who are sighted, still create AltText based on tacit visual biases that infer their readers can visually access the image and the surrounding text.

Consistent with Rose's (2012) approach, and focusing on the sight of production and site of audiencing (as announced in our January 2023 editorial) we believe that producing AltText benefits authors. It enables authors to critically reflect on images as integral to the scholarly writing, how each image provides new evidence not covered in the text. Assessing each image from a multisensory perspective often generates a different understanding of the image in the context of the research. The history of illustrations suggests that sighted authors tend to include images based on inferred connections between visual elements of the image and text but rarely spelt out for the readers. One author interviewed as part of the UCL collaboration explained how writing AltText made them reconsider the images they decided to include in their paper:

> 'at the beginning I thought I was only providing a basic description, but then I realised that I need to also provide context to the image. Once I tried to explain why that specific image was there, I realised that it didn't illustrate the point I was trying to make well enough [...] I showed the image and the description to my colleagues and they confirmed that they had not interpreted the chosen image the way I intended'.
> [Research Participant]

Other authors also confirmed how verbalising both the image description and the context either made them re-evaluate their image choices, or strengthen their understanding of the image in context through multimodal narratives, which was then reflected in the final AltText and revisions to their manuscript.

Creating AltText offers authors an opportunity to directly communicate with their readers in a way that is less formal than what is expected in the main body of a peer-reviewed manuscript. While journal article captions aim to be short and set the context for an image, AltText is intentionally published to allow those using screen readers to experience the content of an image when it cannot be observed. Should readers wish to see an example, we direct your attention to the extensive description to support an image of a 19th-century plate that reflected historical Western European prejudice when we were first working with authors to test our proposed policy (Vawda & Denison, 2022). These texts do more than simply describe what can be seen, they include the voice of the author guiding the reader through its choices in the context of the research, providing additional insights into that research, and the priorities and decision-making processes relevant to that work.

It is important here to acknowledge that aligning narrative styles and content is essential to develop multimodal resources to deliver authorial meaning. By using AltText to provide a multimodal representation of content in different formats, authors create accessible narratives that enable its presentation to diverse audiences through the use of diverse technology. AltText provides a window into the multimodal nature of the authorial narrative practice that frames the research but is seldom included in a final manuscript.

By embracing multimodal authoring, authors develop awareness and understanding about the relationship between meaning-making and multimodal resources (primarily texts and images, but potentially also video, sound, and other media). Authors directly communicate to readers their understanding of the image and their priorities, guiding the reader's "gaze" on the visual elements that are most significant to situate the image in context. If we consider the decision of including an image in a paper as a curatorial act, the AltText becomes a description that breaks the barrier of formality and establishes direct communication with the reader, casting a light on what remains unseen. This ultimately enables authors to guide the reader to focus on images beyond a quick scrolling glance.

As we consider the interpretative potential of AltText, for this journal and for the museum sector as a whole, we believe that AltText is more than an access tool for readers with vision impairments, in the same way audio descriptions in museum galleries have become important mainstream interpretative resources that add value and depth of understanding.

[A-Head] Conclusion
Used as an interpretative tool, whether in this journal, or in any museum sector context, AltText is an added layer for all users and not just those who require a screen reader. For this journal, AltText's role is, first and foremost, to creating accessible textual content for those who cannot fully access visual elements using sight. Access and inclusion are deeply connected to the way people develop their professional identity in the museum and cultural heritage sector, and therefore, to access the breadth of lived experience that can make the sector stronger, it is essential that the peer-reviewed literature is structured to support all who wish to contribute to our field. It is these principles that led our journal to commit to multi-lingual publishing, and now, as the next step in that access, to revising our policy to ensure that we remediate the historical exclusion of those who require screen readers.

The fact that people who require visual accommodations have been actively excluded and constantly underrepresented in the museum workforce is a regrettable condition that is finally being surfaced in the museum literature (ie: Aitchison et al., 2020; Fox & Sparkes, 2020; Goudas, 2020). Within this cultural shift, publishers have the opportunity to lead the change embracing the use of AltText and other access and inclusion resources as a political tool to increase the visibility of all researchers, authors and users. By making it visible and establishing it as best practice, AltText would be transformed from a hidden nuisance to an interpretative tool that enables academics with vision impairments to be acknowledged as part of the researchers' community.

We believe that our re-examination of the peer-reviewed publications' responsibility to create accessible content is an activist practice that opens new discourses on the political

nature of tools like AltText. If we broaden the discourse around the representation of people requiring specific accommodations in the academic fields of museum and heritage studies and the museum sector in general, it is clear that those individuals whose voices have been suppressed for far too long, and continue to be underrepresented or neglected, not just as audiences, but also as professionals, can become more active contributors who can improve practice for everyone.

Based on findings from the 'Creating accessible digital images' project, creative and critical AltText enables authors to reflect on the cultural significance of images. Acknowledging the multimodal nature of authorial narratives and the power of authorship and textual practice in the digital era of academia does not lie just in the words we use as researchers, but also in the way we communicate and acknowledge different abilities and different modalities in our practice. Embracing this activist role leads to meaningful change and equitable innovation, which is at the base of the sector shift for academic publishing and has the potential to influence the larger museum practice.

With the 2023 adoption of the AltText policy, we again apologize to those who have been excluded from the visual dialogues that have informed museum practice, and acknowledge that the museum sector is the poorer because of those biases. In changing our policy, we hope that we can move toward a more inclusive approach to publishing, and look forward to how this type of inclusive practice will make museums better workplaces and learning environments for all.

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