[Section] Editorial

[Title] Creating accessible digital images for vision impaired audiences and researchers

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[Abstract]

In 2023, Curator: The Museum Journal is shifting policy to require that all figures submitted to the journal for publication include Alternative Text, a written description of an image that will be included in the HTML version of a paper to ensure that content in an image can be narrated by screen readers, increasing the accessibility of the collections to all readers using these technologies. The editorial offers the background on this move toward inclusion in professional publishing for the museum sector, the rationale for the policy decision, and the work being undertaken to ensure this new policy provides value to content users.

[Main Text]

In 1992, the UN has designated December 3rd each year as the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, an effort that aims to promote the rights and well-being of people with disabilities in all aspects of life. Under the UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the rights and wellbeing of people with disabilities should be universally accepted and protected. While a laudable goal, thirty years later, we find that these protections are not being met in the museum sector or in the scholarly journals that focus on that work. Curator: The Museum Journal has acknowledged our failure to live up to the spirit of accessibility and continues to work to rectify these deficits in the coming year.

Discussion of image accessibility is common in the discourses around social media, and the fields of Computer Science and Human-Computer Interaction, the same cannot be said for the cultural sector. The UK 'Heritage Access' report (VocalEyes, 2022) demonstrated that digital access to cultural institutions for vision impaired, D/deaf, and neurodivergent users remains very low. They find that information continues to be communicated in ways that are inaccessible, despite the rapidly increasing digital presence of cultural institutions that emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak. Similarly, the 'State of accessible publishing in the UK' report (PAAG, 2022) revealed that only a small minority of publishing institutions implemented and integrated accessibility into their workflow and their organizations.

At Curator: The Museum Journal, we have been aware of these deficits for the past five years, and have made incremental efforts to start correcting these oversights. In 2019, we formalized language accessibility by embarking on translations, officially becoming a multi-lingual journal in 2022. Since 2018, we've worked to identify access technologies for reviewers who use online tools to accommodate neurodivergence and sought out advice from access experts across the Wiley system and consulting groups. In 2022, we asked authors to start providing Alternative Text to support screen readers for papers that will appear in the HTML versions of this online journal. But we also acknowledge that this practice is not common among most scholarly publications, nor are there commonly accepted standards for this practice in museums.

Indeed, research shows that people needing accommodations for vision impairments require a specialized approach to creating accessible, empowering, and welcoming resources and environments (Cecilia, 2022). Images are subjective tools in publishing and museum display, open to multiple possible interpretations (Edwards & Mead, 2013). Grosvenor and Hall (2012) note what is commonly accepted understanding in museum education, that text and narration of any visual content play an essential part in meaning-making with images. As museum professionals, we acknowledge that how we talk about what can be seen or unseen is part of the meaning-making process that defines our work. Therefore, accessibility in our journals and museum spaces requires us to acknowledge the importance of narrative to all users of museum content.

More than ten years before this writing, Katriel (2011, p.124) noted the importance of text to provide images with meaning by acting as an "anchorage", to fix meaning, or as "relays" that complement and amplify each other. Furthermore, Rose (2014) added to this understanding of the role of text by highlighting the cultural significance of images. To use Rose's approach involves considering the *site of production*, the *site of the image itself*, the *site of its circulation*, and *the site of audiencing*. Within each of these four different sites, Rose (2014) stated that each is influenced by three different modalities:
1) *technological* (how and where the image is displayed);
2) *compositional* (the material qualities of the image and where the image is placed in relation to other texts); and
3) *social* (who circulates the image and for what purpose).
It is our intention, as a journal, to employ Rose's framework for investigating how these three modalities can be used as a framework to structure accessible content for our journal. To do this work, over the next year, we will be exploring questions about what is narrated, the analysis of any findings from that research, and the guidelines we hope to develop specifically for this journal, and in the hopes that these guidelines can also support museum and heritage professionals and other publishers who seek to fulfil the mission of accessible content for all.

Academic publications and cultural institutions use images as primary sources or 'objects' in their own rights and as contextualising media to enhance the meaning of objects and text. Despite the central role visual images play in meaning-making and the importance of being able to critically engage with the material, vision impaired users, whether they are visitors, our professional colleagues, or researchers in our practice, often cannot access digital images, due to the lack of adequate textual description and accessible formatting. Images included in academic publications or museum websites are often used as evidence and visual explanations of processes. In digital publications from heritage and museum studies, or the

larger cultural sectors like this journal, complex images are often used as key data, essential to convey information and an integral part of the discussion.

We are pleased to announce with this editorial, that for the past year, Curator: The Museum Journal, as part of the Wiley publishing family, and University College London started work on research to better serve all readers through new accessibility practices. Under the leadership of the first author of this editorial, Rafie Cecilia, our research aims to address this gap by looking at the way researchers and museum visitors requiring accommodations for vision impairments understand visual culture. That includes how they use images online, both for publications and collections on museum websites. People with vision impairments often use screen readers or accessible software (depending on their preferences, specific neurological needs, and levels of residual vision) to read and listen to a description of an image. To meet these needs in our digital world, whenever images and other non-text content are included on a website, we acknowledge that text alternatives should be part of that digital file. Ideally, these text alternatives should provide the same information presented by the image in the form of a caption, and ideally are best understood if they include what is referred to as an Alt Text Tag, a narrative text that is not visually evident on the screen, but becomes spoken text from a screen reader in lieu of or as a complement to the visual that appears on the screen.

An initial review of the literature, as part of our work, revealed that there are extensive guidelines for information in alternative formats for images like AltText, and other features that make images accessible, like high contrast backgrounds, high resolution, meaningful captions, and having images properly signposted and integrated into the text (Huntsman, 2022; Jones 2022; Wilson 2011). We note that contrast, high resolution requirements, and font size for accessibility have been standards at Curator: The Museum Journal for many years.

Our new research aimed at improving accessibility is funded by the UCL Centre for Critical Heritage Studies in collaboration with Curator: the Museum Journal and the larger Wiley publishing team. Our work investigates issues around digital practices and audience responses, in order to gain a new critical understanding of the way researchers and users of our journal content make meaning of images using non-visual access tools. The next wave of our accessibility commitment aims to investigate what prevents collecting institutions and academic publications like ours from providing comprehensive information about digital images in accessible textual formats; to understand what type of textual information and interpretation people requiring visual accommodations would find useful to facilitate meaning-making and research. Ultimately, we aim to develop accessibility guidelines for the textual interpretation of images for museum and heritage professionals and academic publishers, and to be the first to implement those standards on behalf of the field.

What has already become clear from our review of the literature, websites and publications, is that there is no systematic way of creating AltText for cultural heritage content (see: Jones, 2022). At this writing, every institution adopts its own set of guidelines, and the variation is rather wide. The publications and organisations that do include a layer of accessibility for images embedded on the website tend to follow generic guidelines that have little clarity, what we can describe as "nice to do" rather than something required to ensure the rights of persons with disabilities as clarified by the UN in 1992 are being met.

We do note, however, that the field is not entirely without notable demonstrations of excellence in innovation. Attempts to apply digital access standards by cultural organizations and museums include the Cooper Hewitt (n.d) and the creative project 'AltText as Poetry' (Finnegan & Coklyat, n.d.). But despite these precedents, there is an urgent need for further research on existing guidelines and practices. And we believe that museum literature is the first place where we can have influence on the larger practice. Therefore, we hope in the next year to be able to shine a light on how and what value can be provided by creating accessible image content. We will be experimenting with our contributing authors to test and refine our guidelines, and share our results in these pages. Understanding how guidelines can be adapted and applied to academic content related to museums and the cultural sector is needed to ensure that publications are equally accessible to all. It is time for the museum literature to lead scholarly publishing, because museum studies has long focused on interpreting our cultural heritage based on what can be seen and what remains unseen.

Acknowledgements

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