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Reference:

Zajdel Alicja Karolina, Schrijver Iris, Jankowska Anna.- What goes on behind the scenes? Exploring status perceptions, working conditions and job satisfaction of audio describers
Perspectives : studies in translatology - ISSN 0907-676X - (2024), p. 1-17
Full text (Publisher's DOI): <https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2023.2297245>
To cite this reference: <https://hdl.handle.net/10067/2032170151162165141>

WHAT GOES ON BEHIND THE SCENES?:

EXPLORING STATUS PERCEPTIONS, WORKING CONDITIONS AND JOB SATISFACTION OF AUDIO DESCRIBERS

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Abstract

This paper explores the working conditions, status perceptions, and job satisfaction of audio describers, professionals involved in the process of producing audio description for individuals with visual impairments. The study employed an online questionnaire to gather insights from a total of 150 respondents working as professional describers. The main findings reveal a prevailing sense of invisibility among audio describers as a professional group in society. Furthermore, respondents expressed dissatisfaction with their income level and the inherent lack of job stability in the audio description profession. This was particularly prominent among freelancers, as opposed to in-house audio describers. Despite these challenges, respondents in this study exhibited a high overall level of job satisfaction, echoing a paradox also present in studies on translators. This satisfaction is primarily attributed to the opportunity to utilise their skills and expertise while making a meaningful impact on the lives of others.

Keywords

audio description; professional status; working conditions; job satisfaction; questionnaire, audio describers

1. Introduction

Audio describers are professionals who make visual media accessible to people who are blind or have a visual impairment. They can have “one or multiple profiles”, depending on whether they provide audio description (AD) for television and/or cinema, for theatre and/or other live events or for museums and/or other forms of static art (Mazur & Vercauteren, 2019). However, across all profiles, the main task of an audio describer is to convey crucial visual information to enable a comprehensive understanding of the content and story line, in the case of narrative works. This process requires strong textual and linguistic skills, as describers need to be able to select significant visual information, possess an excellent command of their mother tongue and express meaning succinctly (ADLAB PRO, 2017). Additionally, they need to have a strong understanding of the needs of the target group and good general knowledge, as they are likely to work with a wide range of content and topics (ibid). Despite their high level of competence and immense contribution to society, describers do not often get the recognition they deserve; working primarily behind the scenes, their role is often little known or misunderstood.

As compared to other AVT modes, AD is still an emerging profession and research on AD is also scarce. The largest study to date is the European ADLAB PRO project, which ran from 2016 to 2019 and which focused on AD and the profile of audio describers. As part of this project an online survey was carried out to identify the skills and competences audio describers need to provide high quality AD. The survey also included several questions on status of AD and audio describers; themes which will be investigated further in this study. In addition to the ADLAB PRO project, a few recent studies have begun to examine the figure of an audio describer. The majority of these studies have continued to explore the topic of AD training and the skills and competences of audio describers (see for example (Chmiel et al., 2019; Perego, 2022; Sanz-Moreno, 2018b), with some focusing on specific countries (see Mendoza & Matamala, 2021 and Sanz-Moreno, 2018a for Spain and Tor-Carroggio & Casas-Tost, 2020 for China). Other studies have explored AD and the figure of an audio describer drawing on skills from other professions, such as translation (Karaszewska, 2014), script writing (Martínez-Sierra, 2012) and interpreting (Fryer, 2019).

However, to the best of our knowledge, no study to date has investigated the working conditions and job satisfaction of audio describers, nor professional status, with the exception of the section included in the ADLAB PRO survey. This stands in contrast to the wider field of Translation Studies, where numerous studies in the past decade have focused on aspects such as working conditions of translators (Pavesi & Perego, 2006, Ehrensberger-Dow et al., 2016; Silvester, 2022; AVTE, 2023), their job satisfaction (Moorkens, 2020; Piecychna, 2019; Ruokonen et al., 2020) and status perceptions (Ruokonen & Makisalo, 2018; Ruokonen & Svahn, 2021). These are important areas of study, as we spend a large proportion of our time at work, and the way we feel about our job greatly affects our overall wellbeing. For example, the American Psychological Association states that “feeling undervalued at work can make employees less motivated and more likely to change jobs” (2012). Therefore, examining the status of the profession and identifying potential sources of dissatisfaction can have a direct impact on the wellbeing of professionals and their performance at work. It is important to highlight here that status cannot be viewed “as an absolute notion but is a complex, subjective and context-dependent construct” (Dam and Zethsen 2008, p. 74). Ruokonen and Mäkisalo (2018, pp. 2–3) identify the following five meanings of status:

- the status of a fully-fledged profession (as opposed to an occupation);

- the socio-economic status of an occupation as a product of income and educational level;
- status as occupational prestige: perceptions of value and appreciation attached to an occupation;
- status as market value produced by signals of expertise and trustworthiness; and
- the status that individual agents negotiate themselves in a particular context.

In this study status is understood in terms of prestige: perceptions of value, appreciation and respect attached to audio description and audio describer's work, in line with a similar study on translators by Ruokonen and Svahn (2021).

Previous studies on translators have hinted at a paradox. While the translation profession enjoys only a middling level of prestige, translators themselves feel highly appreciated at their workplace and are overall satisfied with their job (Dam & Zethsen, 2012; Katan, 2011; Ruokonen & Makisalo, 2018). Ruokonen and Makisalo believe that this paradox stems from the multiple meanings of "status", more specifically "the perceived prestige and value of the profession in general as opposed to that of an individual translator's own work" (2018). We do not know how this compares to the context of AD, as to the best of our knowledge, no study to date has looked at the job satisfaction of describers. The results of the ADLAB PRO, however, show that audio describers do not feel their job is very visible (also observed among translators), and this sense of invisibility can correlate with low levels of prestige.

The current study aims to address this gap by exploring the notion of professional status among audio describers, in view of their working conditions and job satisfaction. Data was collected between April and September 2022, by means of an online questionnaire that collected 150 responses from respondents from 22 countries. Section 2 of this article will outline the design of the questionnaire (2.1), information about participants (2.2) and the statistical methods used to analyse the data (2.3). Section 3 will discuss the results and limitations of the study. Finally, Section 4 will provide the conclusions and suggestions for further research.

2. Method

2.1 Questionnaire

Questions for this survey, hosted on the Qualtrics platform, were adapted from previous surveys on translators and audio describers, such as Ruokonen and Makisalo (2018), Ehrensberger-Dow et al. (2016), ADLAB PRO (2017) and Piecychna (2019), who used the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ). The questionnaire consisted of 32 closed and 4 open-ended questions, divided thematically into four categories: Background Information, Working Conditions, Professional Image and Job Satisfaction. For a full copy of the questionnaire, please consult Appendix 1. Questions included multiple choice, matrix, Likert-scale and open-ended questions. To ensure questions were clear, an interview was conducted with a practicing audio describer who was asked to verbalise their thinking process as they read through the questions. Then, the questionnaire design was piloted by two of our research group members who are also practicing audio describers. Once finalized, the questionnaire was translated into five languages: Spanish, Polish, French, Italian and Dutch.

The questionnaire was distributed via a social media and email campaign. The link to the questionnaire was shared on Twitter and LinkedIn accounts of the researchers and the Twitter account of the research group at the University of Antwerp. The link was also posted in Facebook groups aimed at audio description professionals. Potential participants were also contacted via email, based on the

contact lists of AD associations (such as the Audio Description Association in the UK and Asociación de Traducción y Adaptación Audiovisual de España in Spain), via LinkedIn accounts and through the network of personal contacts of the researchers. An invitation email was also sent out to service providers in multiple countries.

Prior to being distributed, the study had received positive advice from the Ethics Committee for the Social Sciences and the Humanities at the University of Antwerp (SHW_22_027 on 16.02.2022).

2.2 Participants

In total we received 168 responses, 150 of which were complete and therefore used for the analysis. Figure 1 shows the distribution of participants by country of residence ($n=150$). Respondents came predominantly from Europe, although North-America, South-America, Asia and Oceania were represented as well. Since the sample size per each individual country was too small, we did not include country of residence as a variable in the statistical analyses.

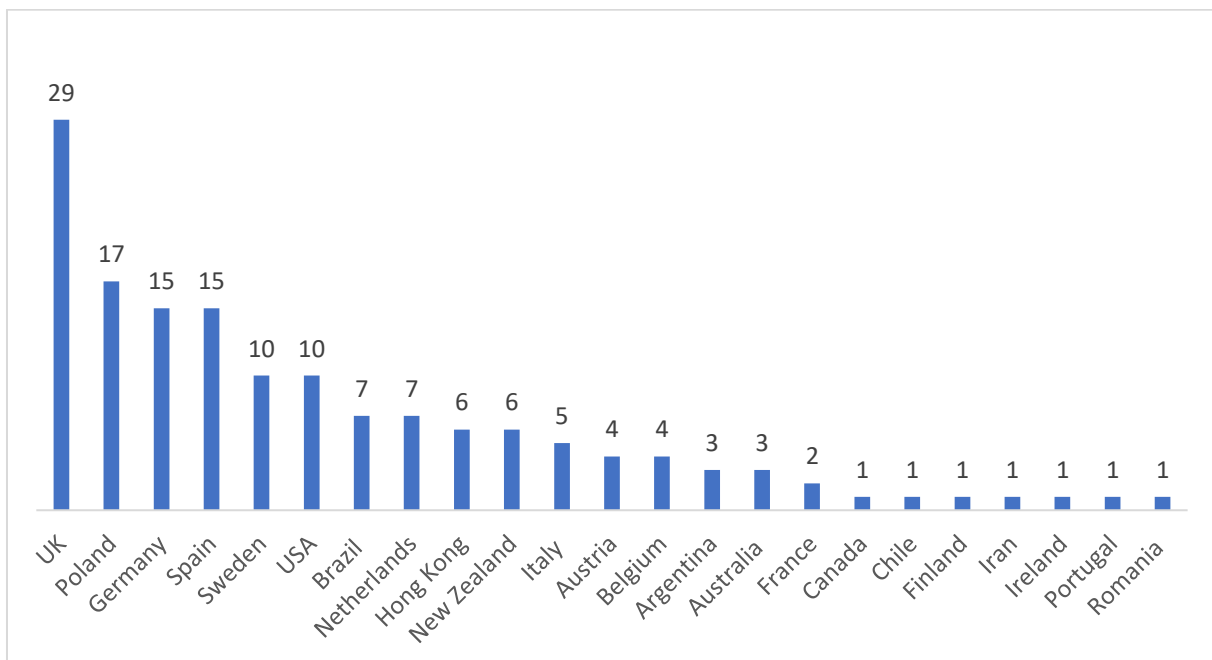


Figure 1. Distribution of respondents by country of residence (n=150)

The majority of respondents has been university educated, with 68% having obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. The data also showed that respondents came from a wide range of educational backgrounds. As shown in Figure 2, subjects from arts and humanities were the most common, which replicates the findings of the ADLAB PRO questionnaire (2017). Language and linguistics, translation and literature were the most commonly selected answers, followed by film/TV and theatre studies.¹ Although AD is usually conceptualized as a type of audiovisual translation, only 49 out of 150 respondents (33%) reported to have studied translation. This is in line with the findings of the ADLAB

¹ Unfortunately, we discovered a technical error, as respondents were able to select 'other' but could not provide further details. We know that 13% of our respondents selected this option but we do not know which educational fields were included in this category. One participant mentioned this in a comment at the end of the questionnaire, specifying their background as social/cultural anthropology and history.

PRO project, in which 22% of audio describers who took part in the survey indicated a background in audiovisual translation (2017).

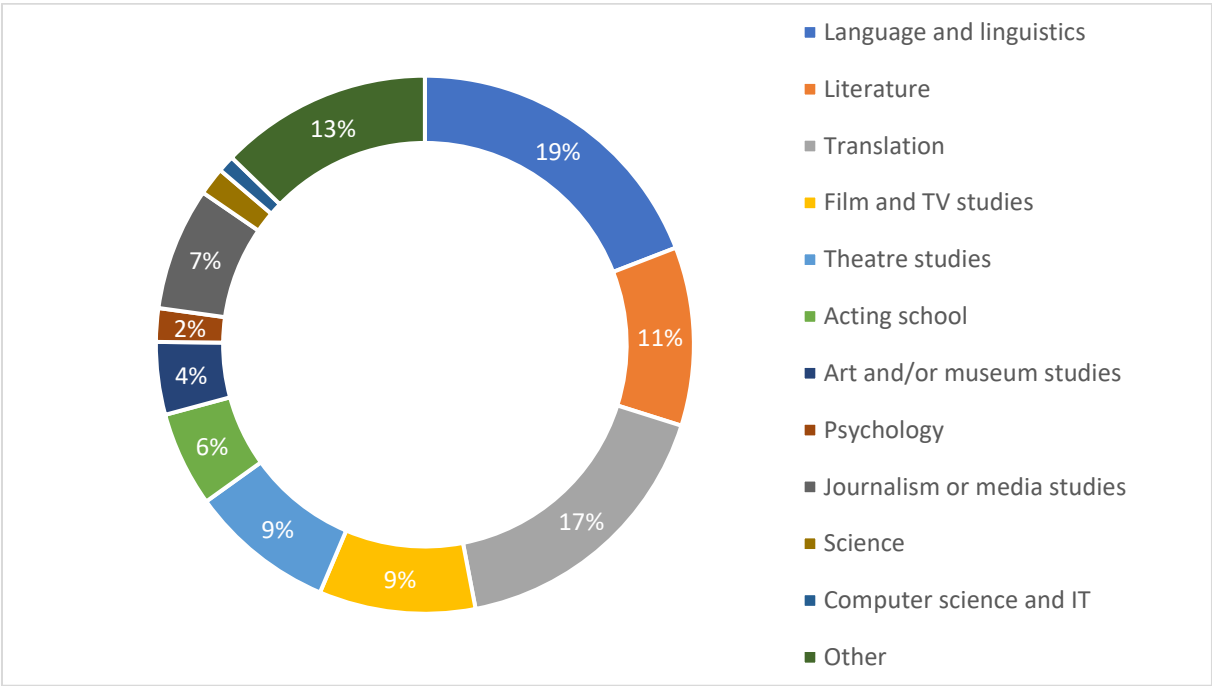


Figure 2. Distribution of respondents' educational backgrounds²

Regarding experience, a third of respondents (50 out of 150) reported having between one and five years of experience. Only 10 respondents had been working as an audio describer for a period shorter than one year. Figure 3 provides a full breakdown of the sample by years of experience.

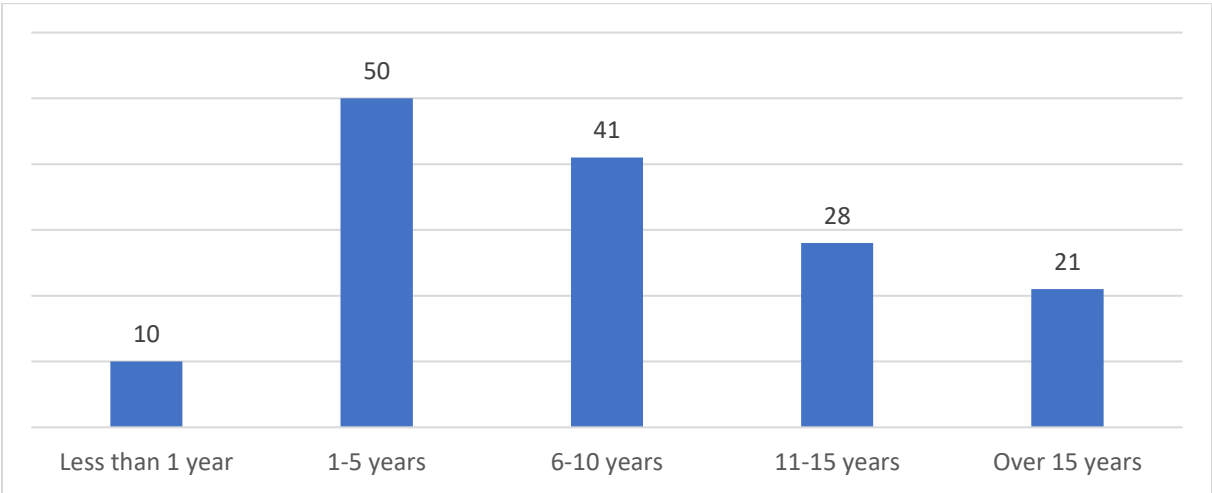


Figure 3. Respondents' experience of working in AD

Out of 150 respondents in this study, 124 (82%) reported working on a freelance basis, while 26 (18%) are contracted employees. This is in line with previous studies that also show most audio describers tend to work on a freelance basis (ADLAB PRO, 2017).

² This question, like many others in the survey, allowed for multiple answers. Therefore, the total does not add up to 100%.

2.3 Data analysis

The data collected through Qualtrics were first exported to Excel to yield descriptive statistics. On the basis of these descriptive statistics, we identified certain profile characteristics of the respondents. We subsequently used SPSS to ascertain statistically significant differences in working conditions, job satisfaction and status perception between respondents with different profiles, based on the following variables:

- a) educational background (translation vs. non-translation)
- b) years of experience (more vs. less than 10 years)
- c) employment status (freelance vs. employed)

We used the nonparametric Mann U Whitney test in our analysis, since our data were not evenly distributed.

3. Results

This section of the paper will present the results of the questionnaire, grouped into three categories: working conditions, status perceptions and job satisfaction. Results of statistically significant findings are discussed in each section, following the guidelines outlined by Field (2017).

3.1 Working conditions

3.1.1 AD Workflow

Most respondents work primarily with AD for film and TV, followed by theatre, museum, opera and other live events (see full breakdown in Table 1). These results reflect the findings of the ADLAB PRO survey (2017), and the fact that demand for AD is highest in film and TV.

Table 1. Types of AD most frequently involved in.

<i>Which of the following AD types have you worked with the most in the last 5 years?</i>	Number of participants	Percentage of participants
Film	124	83%
TV	105	70%
Theatre	57	38%
Museum	37	25%
Other live events	23	15%
Opera	22	15%

All participants in this study reported being responsible for writing and/or revising the AD script, which can be seen as the core task of audio describers (see Table 2). When it comes to voicing AD, this appears to depend on the type of AD in which one specialises. For those working in AD for theatre, museum and other live events, almost all respondents reported voicing the AD themselves. However, for those working in AD for film and TV, just over half (56%) reported voicing the AD. This suggests two possible profiles of describers: those who voice the AD and those who do not. This requires an additional set of skills, and brings the role of an audio describer closer to that of a voice actor, radio presenter and/or interpreter.

Table 2. Stages of the production process involved in.

<i>Which of the following stages of the production process do you have experience with (in any area of AD, e.g., film, TV, live events)?</i>	Number of participants	Percentage of participants
Writing and/or revising the AD script	150	100%
Quality control of the final product (e.g. checking the script or recording or both)	89	59%
Voicing AD	85	57%
Assisting at recording AD with voice talents	53	35%
Mixing the AD with the original soundtrack	38	25%
Translating AD scripts	26	17%
Using machine translation with post-editing	8	5%

Although translating AD scripts has been advocated by some scholars in recent years (see Jankowska, 2014; Matamala & Ortiz-Boix, 2016), this was not common practice among the respondents in this study. In this particular sample some respondents have experience of translating AD scripts (17% reported to do so), but the use of machine translation and/or post-editing are not yet common (5%).

Regarding software, text editors appear to be the most commonly used programmes by describers, followed by subtitling software and voice recording software. About a third (45 out of 150) of respondents reported using specific AD software. A similar proportion (42 out of 150) also reported using video-editing software, indicating yet another skillset of these professionals.

Most respondents (87%) reported receiving specific AD training, mostly in the form of workshops (25%), in-house training (17%), one-on-one instruction (13%) or a university course (13%). This reflects the lack of standardised AD training and/or certification, resulting in a wide range of entry routes into the profession. Respondents were also asked about their opportunities for further professional development. The majority of freelancers (70%) reported taking part in professional development activities. Meanwhile, 73% of contracted respondents said that their employer provides them with opportunities to continue their professional development. For both groups, this happens primarily through workshops, online courses and guest lectures. Together with their educational background, these results show that most audio describers are educated professionals who continue developing their skills throughout their career, whether employed on a freelance or contract basis.

In order to see whether respondents in this study combine AD with other professional activities we asked those working freelance what percentage of their income comes from AD assignments, and those working on an employment basis, what percentage of their working time they dedicate to AD assignments. For 55% of those who work freelance, income from AD assignments constitutes less than half of their overall income (see Figure 4). This suggests that AD is rarely practiced full time and is usually combined with other professional activities. On the other hand, the majority of contracted respondents (60%) reported dedicating at least 75% of their work time to AD assignments; suggesting a disparity between freelance and contracted describers.

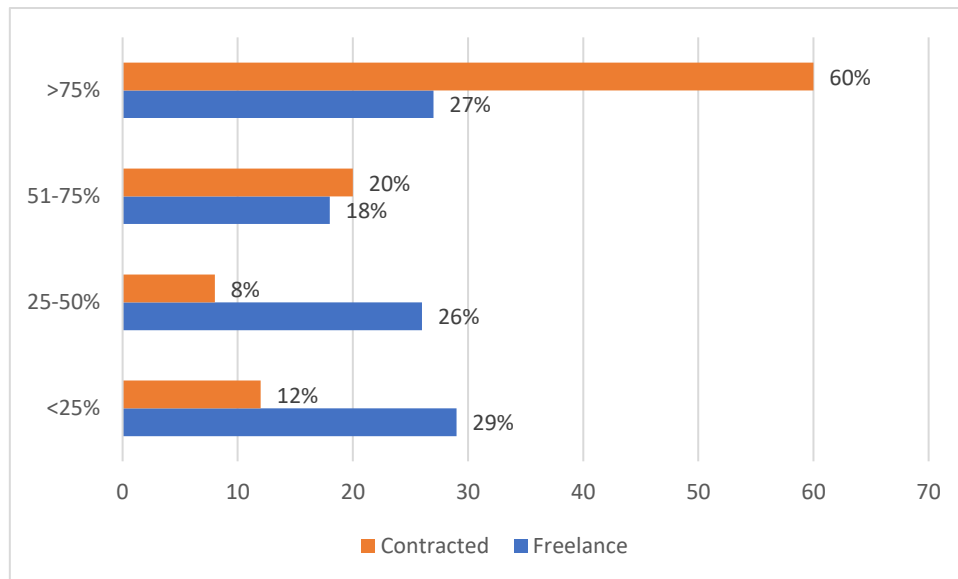


Figure 4. Percentage of income gained from AD assignments by freelancers vs. percentage of work time dedicated to AD assignments by contracted describers

3.1.2 Working environment

Most respondents (75%) reported working from home, with some enjoying the hybrid model of combining working from home with the office during the week. The vast majority (76%) work alone. Here, however, we found a statistically significant difference between those who work as freelancers and those with an employment contract. Freelance describers reported working alone more frequently ($Mdn = 1.00$) than their contracted counterparts ($Mdn = 2.00$), who often share an office with more than two colleagues ($U = 937.00$, $z = -4.48$, $p < .001$, $r = -.37$). This puts freelance audio describers (who represent a vast majority in this study) in a very solitary position.

Respondents were also asked how often they discuss AD problems with a) other audio describers, b) blind and partially sighted patrons and c) their clients/employer (depending on their employment status). The results suggest that audio describers do not have frequent interactions with others, further enhancing the solitary nature of the profession. We have, however, found that respondents with +10 years of experience reported having more frequent interactions with other audio describers ($Mdn = 3.00$), as compared to those with less experience ($Mdn = 2.00$) ($U = 1625.00$, $z = -3.51$, $p < .001$, $r = -.29$). This was also the case for interactions with blind and partially sighted patrons: more experienced audio describers had more frequent interactions with them ($Mdn = 2.00$) than less experienced audio describers ($Mdn = 2.00$) ($U = 1907.50$, $z = -2.21$, $p = .027$, $r = -.18$). We hypothesize that more experienced describers were most likely more involved in developing the profession and are therefore more closely connected to the AD community and its end users.

Regarding interactions, we also asked respondents how often they received feedback on their work. More than a third of participants (39%) reported never receiving feedback on their assignments (see Figure 5). This was also mentioned as one of the causes of stress, as discussed in section 3.1.4. Furthermore, frustrations related to lack of feedback were visible in the comments left at the end of the questionnaire:

The work itself is very interesting and stimulating, but this is lost when you are not being paid properly, not having proper working hours and no contact with your employer, who only

assigns the projects, without even confronting, giving or asking for feedback from the audio describer.

3.1.3 Autonomy and influence

One of the variables measured in the questionnaire was the level of influence over a) working hours, b) clients, c) AD tasks, d) fees and income level and e) quality of the completed AD tasks. Results are shown in Figure 5.

In general, respondents in this study reported having most influence over the quality of the completed AD tasks, their working hours and the AD tasks they accept, which aligns with the fact that the vast majority works on a freelance basis. In contrast, the lowest level of influence concerned fees or income level, showing that most describers do not feel they have the agency to influence how much they earn. This is a concern that was also echoed in the job satisfaction questions of the survey (see section xx). Nevertheless, respondents with +10 years of experience reported having more influence over their fees and income level ($Mdn = 3.00$) as opposed to respondents with less experience ($Mdn = 2.00$), suggesting that more experienced audio describers might have more negotiating power to determine their fees ($U = 1955.50, z = -2.17, p = .030, r = -.18$). Similarly, respondents with a translation background also reported having more influence over their income ($Mdn = 3.00$), as opposed to their colleagues from non-translation backgrounds ($Mdn = 2.00$) ($U = 1931.00, z = -2.37, p = .018, r = -.19$). They also reported having more influence ($Mdn = 4.00$) over the clients they work for than their non-translator colleagues ($Mdn = 3.00$) ($U = 1723.00, z = -3.19, p = .001, r = -.26$).

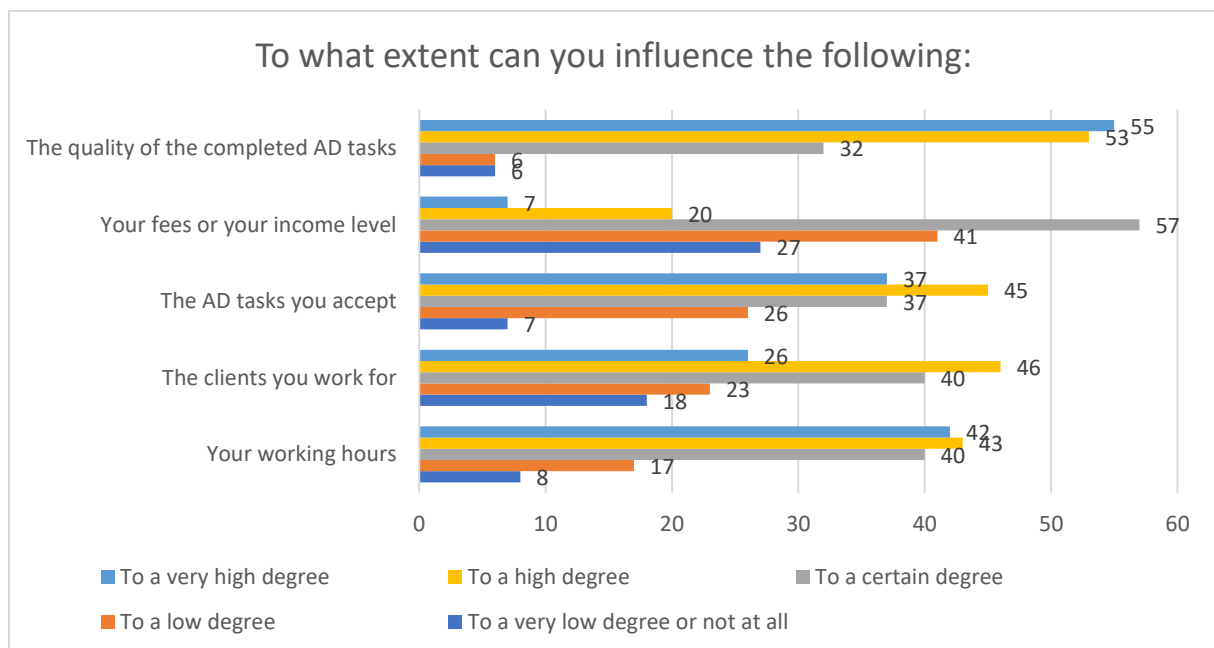


Figure 5. Self-reported levels of influence

Another variable included in this study was the extent to which clients/employers a) trust the quality of respondents' work and b) consider it important. Overall, 94% of respondents felt that their clients or employer trust the quality of their work to a "high" or "very high" degree. Results also showed that more experienced describers felt that their clients/employer trust the quality of their work to a higher degree ($Mdn = 1.00$) than those less experienced ($Mdn = 2.00$) ($U = 1817.50, z = -2.03, p = .043, r = -.17$). This could be due to longer, more established relationships with clients and increased expertise gained over the years.

When it comes to whether their work is considered important, 64% of all respondents felt that this is the case to a “high” or “very high” degree. Contracted describers reported feeling that their employer considers their work important ($Mdn = 1.00$) more frequently than freelancers ($Mdn = 2.00$) ($U = 862.50$, $z = -3.28$, $p = .001$, $r = -.23$).

3.1.4 Quality of life

In this next section of the questionnaire, we asked about variables related to respondents’ quality of life, namely frequency and causes of stress, work-life balance and whether they consider leaving the profession. We found that 7% of respondents never experience negative, work-related stress, 48% do so occasionally, 21% monthly, 20% weekly and 5% daily. There were no statistically significant differences based on years of experience, employment status or educational background in this section.

The biggest stress factors are by far tight deadlines (as illustrated in Figure 6), followed by unfair payment and lack of feedback.

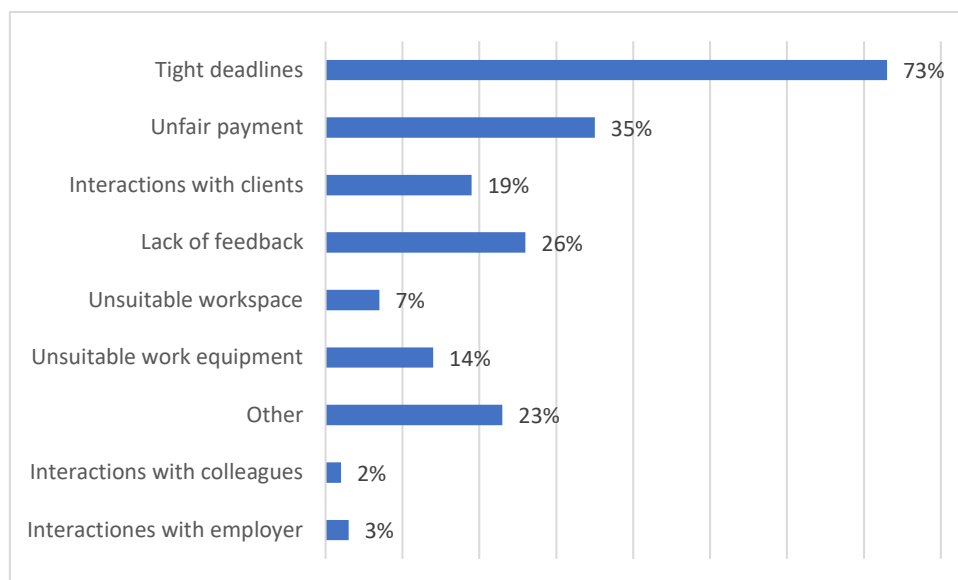


Figure 6. Causes of stress

To measure work-life balance we asked respondents whether they had enough time for themselves or their family outside of work. For 11% this was the case always, for 39% most of the time, for 32% sometimes, for 18% occasionally and for 1% never. The respondents in this study have also generally not considered leaving the profession over the past year, with 56% having never done so, 33% occasionally, 5% monthly, 4% weekly and 1% daily.

3.2 Status perceptions

Questions in this section were displayed in a matrix table, with a stem question (“To what extent do you think...”) and six subsequent questions, as shown in Table 3. The answers were measured on a 1-5 scale, corresponding to the level of agreement with the questions (1 = to a very low degree or not at all; 2 = to a low degree; 3 = to a certain degree; 4 = to a high degree; 5 = to a very high degree).

Table 3. Mean answers for questions on professional image

To what extent do you think...	Mean	Median	Mode
AD requires expert skills?	4.45	5.00	5
AD involves creativity?	4.27	4.00	5
the work of an audio describer has an economic, political or social impact?	3.46	4.00	4
AD is a prestigious job?	2.91	3.00	3
audio describers are valued in society?	2.28	2.00	2
audio describers are visible as a professional group in society?	1.74	2.00	1

These results show that overall respondents in this study consider AD to be a highly creative job that requires expert skills. As we saw in previous sections, the majority of respondents were university graduates who followed specific AD training, and who continue to develop their skills through ongoing professional development. However, they felt that describers are not very visible as a professional group in society and that the profession has a middling level of prestige. They also felt that audio describers are not particularly valued in society, which could again be linked to the lack of visibility and understanding of the profession. This was further confirmed by some of the comments participants made:

“Regarding how the role is perceived, I've always had to explain what it is when asked what I do.”

“Sometimes people think that AD is sign language interpretation. And not all understand why people with visual impairments want to see a film, at all.”

Nonetheless, respondents also highlighted that people are generally enthusiastic about the profession, once they understand what an audio describer does:

“I notice that the visibility of audio describers in society is very low, but that people are always enthusiastic when I explain what kind of work I do. I also feel that the appreciation among the end users, people who are blind or visually impaired, is very high.”

The lack of understanding of the profession, however, seems to be an issue not only among the general public but within the industry itself. Participants commented on the fact that commissioners often do not understand the complexity of the process and the time required to produce good quality AD. One respondent even suggested training for clients and commissioners to increase their understanding of what AD should look like.

The way in which the profession is viewed might, however, be impacted by employment status. We have found that contracted describers in this study found the profession more prestigious ($Mdn = 3.00$), as compared to freelancers ($Mdn = 3.00$) ($U = 1009.50$, $z = -2.88$, $p = .004$, $r = -.24$). We found no statistically relevant differences based on years of experience or educational background.

3.3 Job satisfaction

The final section of this paper discusses the questions related to job satisfaction, adapted from the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ). Questions were again displayed in a matrix table, with a stem statement (“In my present job, this is how I feel about...”) and twelve subsequent statements, as shown in Table 4. The answers were measured on a 1-5 scale, corresponding to the level of satisfaction

for each statement (1 = not satisfied; 2 = somewhat satisfied; 3 = satisfied; 4 = very satisfied; 5 = extremely satisfied).

Table 4. Mean answers for questions on job satisfaction

In my present job, this is how I feel about...	Mean	Median	Mode
The chance to do something that makes use of my abilities	4.12	4.00	5
The chance to do things for other people	4.03	4.00	4
Being able to do things that do not go against my conscience	3.91	4.00	4
The chance to do different things from time to time	3.79	4.00	4
The freedom to use my own judgment	3.79	4.00	4
The chance to work alone on the job	3.78	4.00	4
The chance to try my own methods of doing the job	3.71	4.00	4
The feeling of accomplishment I get from the job	3.69	4.00	4
The working conditions	3.06	3.00	3
The chance to be 'somebody' in the community	2.82	3.00	3
The way my job provides for steady employment	2.68	2.00	2
My pay and the amount of work I do	2.52	3.00	3

Having the chance to make use of one's abilities at work, was the highest scoring answer in this section of the questionnaire. Based on the previous answers, we know that describers see themselves as highly skilled professionals, and applying these skills in practice is a source of professional satisfaction. The second highest scoring answer was having the chance to do things for other people. This highlights the nature of AD, which at its very core, is a service for people with blind and visual impairment. Therefore, it can be concluded that making the most of their skills in service of a good cause is the main driving force of describers. Unfortunately, this might put them in a vulnerable position of accepting poor rates and working conditions in the name of a higher good. Respondents in this survey were generally dissatisfied with the way their job provides for steady employment, their pay and the amount of work they do.

Despite these negative aspects of the profession, respondents in this study were generally satisfied with the chance to do different things from time to time, the freedom to use their own judgement and the chance to work alone on the job. This suggests that audio describers as professionals value their autonomy and independence, which often aligns with the fact they often work alone and from home. Respondents also commented on the job being interesting and stimulating in the comments left at the end of the questionnaire. However, they also felt that their expertise is not always fully recognised:

"AD is a supplementary job but requires high levels of creativity and articulacy"

"I think it's important that our skills are recognized"

Respondents in this study also did not feel they had the chance to "be somebody in the community". This, once again, circles back to the low status and prestige of the profession, but also possible hints at the lack of community within the profession. This makes sense considering most describers work on a freelance basis and, as seen in section 3.1.2, their interactions with other audio describers, their clients and blind and partially sighted patrons are somewhat limited. The results suggest, however, that this might be different for more experienced describers, who have been more involved in the evolution of AD as a profession and have therefore worked in closer contact with the blind community. Overall, those with more than 10 years of experience reported feeling a higher sense of

accomplishment they get from the job ($Mdn = 4.00$), as compared to less experienced colleagues ($Mdn = 4.00$) ($U = 1954.50, z = -2.00, p = .046, r = -.16$).

However, the biggest discrepancies in job satisfaction were between freelance and contracted respondents, who reported a higher level of satisfaction in six out of the twelve items in this section, as illustrated in Table 5. The largest discrepancy was in the statement “the way my job provides for steady employment”, in which contracted describers expressed a much higher level of satisfaction, as compared to freelancers ($U = 457.00, z = -5.63, p < .001, r = -.47$). The same tendency was observed, unsurprisingly, in the question on working conditions ($U = 997.50, z = -2.81, p = .005, r = -.23$). The discrepancies between freelance and contracted describers were also reflected in the comments:

“My only wish is that I were a full-time employee with benefits instead of being a freelance contractor.”

“I don't earn enough to live on which is the biggest stress factor. I would like to find a full-time permanent job so that I have sufficient earnings and some security.”

Table 5. Differences in means and modes between freelance and employed respondents

In my present job, this is how I feel about...	Freelancers		Employed	
	Mean	Median	Mean	Median
The chance to be ‘somebody’ in the community	2.65	3.00	3.64	4.00
The way my job provides for steady employment	2.38	2.00	4.08	4.00
The chance to do things for other people	3.93	4.00	4.48	5.00
The chance to do something that makes use of my abilities	4.03	4.00	4.52	5.00
The working conditions	2.94	3.00	3.64	4.00
The feeling of accomplishment I get from the job	3.60	4.00	4.12	4.00

Contracted respondents also reported a stronger feeling of accomplishment they get from the job ($U = 1101.50, z = -2.81, p = .02, r = -.23$) and higher satisfaction with “being somebody in the community” ($U = 832.50, z = -3.69, p < .001, r = -.30$). As seen in section 3.1.2, contracted respondents also reported more frequent interactions with blind and partially sighted patrons, which could have an impact on these differences between the two groups. Especially, since contracted respondents also reported a higher level of satisfaction with the chance to do things for other people ($U = 1024.00, z = -2.78, p = .005, r = -.29$). Having the opportunity to work directly with blind colleagues and patrons is likely to increase one’s sense of purpose in their work. It is likely that freelance describers miss out on this aspect of the profession, by working alone and in isolation to the end users. These results suggest that both the sense of community and purpose in one’s work increase one’s job satisfaction.

At the end of the questionnaire, we asked respondents about their overall job satisfaction. Despite the issues outlined in this paper, respondents in this study appear to be overall quite satisfied with their job, with 91% of participants choosing “satisfied”, “very satisfied” or “extremely satisfied” when asked about their overall job satisfaction. We also found that the overall satisfaction was lower among respondents with a translation background ($Mdn = 3.00$), as opposed to those without³ ($Mdn = 2.00$) ($U = 1942.00, z = -2.21, p = .027, r = -.18$) (see Figure 7).

³ 1 = Extremely satisfied; 2 = Very satisfied; 3 = Satisfied; 4 = Somewhat satisfied; 5 = Not satisfied

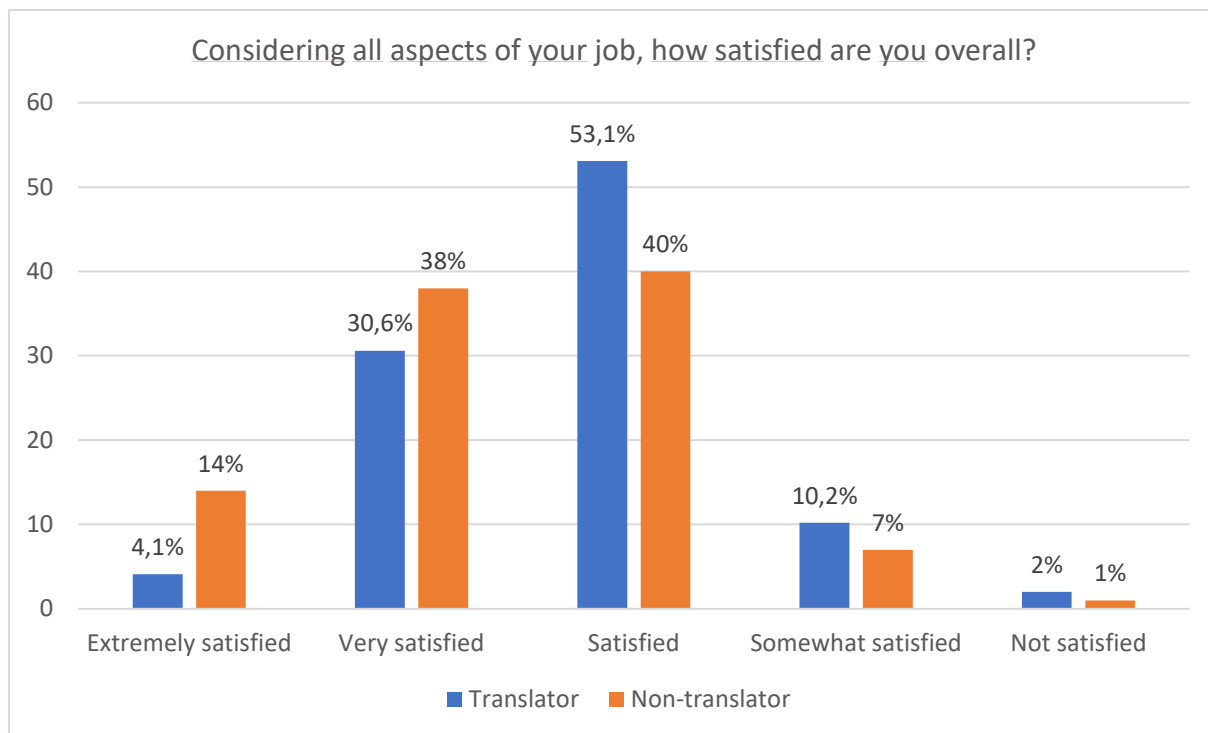


Figure 7. Overall job satisfaction among respondents with and without a background in translation

These results reflect a paradox; while the profession itself enjoys only a low-to-middling status, audio describers themselves appear to be quite satisfied with their job. They particularly enjoy making use of their abilities and generally consider AD a creative and demanding task. They tend to be very independent, autonomous professionals who enjoy freedom and variety in their work. They also find it important that their job is in service of others. On the other hand, describers believe the profession does not receive enough recognition and is generally not well understood, both by the general public and people in the industry. They also express their dissatisfaction with low wages, lack of job stability and poor communication and/or feedback on their work.

3.4 Limitations of the study

The findings of this study have to be seen in light of some limitations. First of all, while the sample size is larger than in previous studies on audio describers, it remains limited to 150 respondents. Furthermore, the majority of respondents in this study create AD for recorded content, such as film and TV. Audio describers for live events are underrepresented in this sample. Another characteristic of the sample that should be considered is the uneven representation of different countries. While we received responses from 22 countries in total, there biggest representation was from the UK, followed by Poland, Germany, Spain, Sweden and the USA. Such a wide distribution of different geographical areas made it impossible to perform per country analysis. Therefore, we would like to invite anyone who might wish to replicate this study in their country to contact the authors of this paper, as this will allow for comparisons between different regions. A copy of the questionnaire is also available as an appendix.

4. Conclusions

Taking into account the responses collected in this study, it can be concluded that audio description is still an emerging profession. Audio describers struggle with the lack of understanding of the AD process, mainly the time and skill required to produce good quality AD. There is also not enough awareness about why AD is needed, and it is often treated as an afterthought or a box that needs to

be ticked to fulfil legal accessibility requirements (Romero-Fresco, 2013). This translates to poor working conditions and rates of pay, as the expertise and creativity required to write AD is often not recognised and valued sufficiently. However, despite relatively low levels of prestige, most respondents in this study were quite satisfied with their job. A similar paradox has been previously observed among translators (Dam & Zethsen, 2012; Katan, 2011; Ruokonen & Makisalo, 2018). The results indicate that although describers are frustrated with low rates and lack of job stability, they enjoy the task itself and find it rewarding to do something for others. Unfortunately, this also makes them more likely to accept substandard rates.

While this study initially set out to explore differences based on respondents' educational background (translation vs. non-translation), only a few statistically significant differences were found. This will be explored further in the next stages of this project, where a qualitative approach will be applied to investigate professional identity among audio describers. In this questionnaire, however, we have found many differences based on employment status (freelance vs. employed). The results showed that the working conditions and job satisfaction of contracted audio describers was generally higher than of those who work on a freelance basis. This translates into higher professional status, as contracted respondents considered the job to be more prestigious, as compared to freelancers. It is, however, important to highlight that audio describers generally tend to work freelance, as has been shown here and in previous studies (ADLAB PRO, 2017).

Another variable which showed significant differences was the level of experience (more vs. less than 10 years). More experienced respondents in this study appear to have better financial conditions, gaining a larger proportion of their income from AD assignments and having more control over their fees. They also reported having more frequent interactions with other audio describers and blind and partially sighted patrons, and having a higher sense of accomplishment in their work. Here, we would like to hypothesize that this might indicate some shifts in the profession, particularly the workflow of AD. Those starting more than 10 years ago were most likely involved in setting up and establishing AD as a profession; pioneering the way in which AD should be done. This often involved more direct contact with end users and also other audio describers, as guidelines and best practices were negotiated by trial and error. The work of an audio describer nowadays is often more fragmented; they receive an assignment to complete, and particularly in the case of AD for film and TV (for which the demand is highest), the work is very solitary, without direct feedback from other describers or end-users.

To explore these issues in more depth, we would like to invite others to replicate this study. Our sample did not allow us to conduct an analysis by country, as there were not sufficient respondents per each individual country. To gain a more thorough understanding of the AD profession, further studies are needed to allow for comparisons between countries. Furthermore, these issues are not static but rather evolve over time, thus repeating these types of studies at regular intervals will allow us to gain a longitudinal perspective. This is particularly pressing now as new technological developments, such as the increasing use of AI, are likely to impact the profession. If you are interested in conducting a replication study please contact the authors of this paper, who will make their instruments available.

This work was supported by the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) under Grant 1181723N.

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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Appendices

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