Montana Voices Amplified: My Perspective: What Just Happened? Audio Description can Answer that

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The Montana Voices Amplified project offers people of all ages and abilities a stage to speak for themselves. The series is hosted by the Montana Family to Family Health Information Center (MT F2F), a program of the Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities (RIIC) at the University of Montana.

My Perspective: WHAT JUST HAPPENED? AUDIO DESCRIPTION CAN ANSWER THAT

By Sara Streeter
Sara Streeter spent her career as an accounting and finance professional. Now retired, she loves to be outdoors, travel and volunteer as an animal advocate. She uses assistive technology to deal with her vision loss from degenerative myopia and is passionate about making the world more accessible.
“Hmm, let me think about it.”

I begin to look for a movie to stream; it will have to be a drama, or maybe a comedy. My husband loves action films, but with my vision loss, I can’t follow them. I need something slow, preferably with not too many characters, so I can follow what’s happening. At least, this was my experience until a few years ago. Then, along came audio description, and once again I can enjoy movies, some television, and even live theater.

So, what is audio description, and how does it work? You can think of it as turning a movie or theater production into an audiobook that also has video or a live stage. Much of what happens on screen or stage is visual; facial expressions and body language can convey a huge amount of information. But when I stopped being able to see that level of detail, those kinds of interactions were lost on me. Now, however, if I am watching something that is audio described, there will be a narrator speaking between breaks in dialog explaining what is happening. The describer highlights the important features of the environment and tells which characters are present and what they are doing.

My experience with audio description started with a new Star Wars movie several years ago. It probably wasn’t the best choice. In that franchise, when the characters aren’t speaking, there’s probably a light saber battle or a spaceship ‘shoot ‘em up’ going on, so the description was often hard to make out. In contrast, description made watching the Tom Hanks movie about Mr. Rogers, “A Beautiful Day In The Neighborhood”, an absolute delight. It was exceptionally well done, and I would have entirely missed a pivotal interaction at the end were it not for the audio description.
Audio description is available in movie theaters and some professional theater shows. To access it, tell whoever is taking tickets that you need audio description. They will point you to where you can get the equipment, usually a small receiver unit and a set of headphones. The description is pre-recorded and will start when the show starts.

If you are watching at home, audio description will need to be set up in either your TV settings or through the service you use to watch. There is a website run by the American Council of the Blind, Audio Description Project Master List of Audio Described Videos, that lists shows and movies with descriptions, and the list is getting longer every week.

A trip to New York City a few years ago gave me the chance to see how audio description works with Broadway musicals. Again, the results were a bit mixed. For a Disney production, I really didn’t need it. For another show, it was extremely helpful. And for a third, it was so poorly done and distracting that I turned it off part way through and took my chances. Perhaps not the best decision, I concluded, when afterward my husband mentioned a scene I missed, despite being in the third row from the stage. It wasn’t an insignificant miss either, but oh well…

For community or university theater, audio description is not yet consistently available. Nonprofessional shows don’t always run at the exact same pace each time, so a live describer must be present to accommodate such things as changes in tempo or missed lines.

I look forward to having more audio description available, and I’m thrilled that it’s being added to older programs and movies. My husband is very patient, but being asked every five minutes, “Who is that?” or “What just happened?” is, I’m sure, a little wearing. But hopefully, my in-house narrator will be out of a job (at least this one!) eventually.

Advocate for audio description! Request it at your local community theater if they don’t have it. Be persistent if the ticket taker at a movie theater looks at you quizzically when you ask for it. Explain it if necessary. And keep up with the Audio Description Project for the latest titles that have the feature.

**Resources:**

**The Audio Description Project**
The American Council of the Blind’s (ACB) Audio Description Project (ADP) promotes the use of high-quality audio description in television, movies, performing arts, museums, educational materials, and other venues where the presentation of visual media is critical to the understanding and appreciation of the content.

**Library of Congress**
National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled
Audio Description Resource Guide
Montana Voices Amplified provides a microphone and broad audience so the stories, lessons, causes, and advice of individuals with disabilities and their families are heard.

Montana Voices Amplified welcomes submissions of five-minute videos or 600-700-word essays on any topic related to your lived experience as a person with a disability or caring for someone with a disability.

Authors of chosen submissions receive $100. Videos will be posted on the MT F2F website and shared on social media. Essays will be posted on the website and ScholarWorks, shared on social media, and printed in a professionally designed publication to distribute to families, schools, agencies, and legislators as appropriate.

Let us amplify YOUR voice!

Send your idea for an article or brief video to stacey.bliss@mso.umt.edu or shawna.hanson@mso.umt.edu.

If you prefer to talk through your idea, you can call Shawna at (406) 243-4531 or Stacey at (406) 243-5760.

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