Article

National Theatre in My Kitchen: Access to Culture for Blind People in Poland During Covid-19

Monika Dubiel

Faculty of Artes Liberales, University of Warsaw, Poland; m.dubiel@al.uw.edu.pl

Abstract
This article reflects on the phenomenon of the virtualization of culture and its significance in providing accessibility to people with visual impairment. From this point of view, virtual culture becomes a space of negotiation between social inclusion and exclusion. By examining the experiences of participants in cultural events and the planners of such events, I try to identify possible advantages as well as dangers related to the process of transferring cultural life to the Internet. The scope of my research embraces accessible cultural events offered by selected institutions and non-governmental organizations in Poland. Research data was collected by interviewing both employees and participants of events with visual impairment. I have also drawn upon my own experiences as a blind admirer of culture and a worker in the sector of cultural accessibility. My main research question is: Does the virtualization of culture make events more accessible for people with visual impairment, or does it increase already-existing barriers? A further issue is explored—namely new solutions that are appearing in the accessible remote events on offer. The theoretical framework for this study includes accessibility studies and disability studies.

Keywords
culture; disability studies; virtualization; visual impairment

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed human life in nearly every way. To limit the spread of the disease, many countries decided to introduce lockdowns, the length and scope of which varied from country to country. In the meantime, living habits have changed all over the world, as people have shifted many of their activities to virtual spaces. Information and communication technologies (ICT) such as computers, smartphones, and tablets became the principal means of carrying out multiple functions, for millions of people. Groups who are traditionally more vulnerable in crises, such as people with disabilities, were especially affected by these changes. Much has been already written about the impact of lockdowns on this group concerning work (Aydos et al., 2021), healthcare (Schotland, 2021), personal security

(Katz, 2020; Lund, 2020; Shelton, 2021), and more. In this article, however, I address an area that has not been thoroughly examined to date, namely the participation of people with disabilities in cultural activities. Except for very few and fragmentary examples that focus on Western Europe (Gentry, 2021; Reason, 2022; the audience agency, 2021), we lack research on this topic.

To fill this gap, at least minimally, I examine how the virtualization of cultural life impacted accessibility for persons with visual impairment. I present the findings of a study that I conducted in Poland among individuals with visual impairment and employees of cultural institutions and NGOs. I present and discuss the various solutions being implemented in order to make virtual cultural events accessible and indicate the main difficulties from both the participants' and the organizers' perspectives. I ponder on the benefits for both sides and take into

account the cognitive, entertaining, and social dimensions of one's contact with culture based on the very broad range of the examined events, starting with cooking workshops and ending with theater performances.

My main research question is whether the virtualization of culture makes events more or less accessible for persons with visual impairment. In other words, does it contribute to producing new and inclusionary mechanisms, or does it merely increase already-existing barriers? Generally speaking, "access can be divided into physical access (e.g., to objects and places) and intellectual access (e.g., to ideas and information)" (Jaeger & Bowman, 2005, p. 63). This article centers on the latter aspect and—for the sake of clarity—it is necessary to define the extent of this access. The focus here is on the issue of accessibility of culture for persons with visual impairment: Where I use the term "accessibility," I refer only to the accessibility of culture and only for this group of people. In search of an answer, I analyze examples of various remote cultural events and divide them into two categories, which I refer to as online and offline. The former are virtual meetings with patrons which are held in real-time, also called streaming, organized on a given internet, social media, or video-conferencing platform. These are often interactive meetings, though the degree of interaction may vary. The latter category includes various audiovisual materials, including films and performances, which can be downloaded or accessed at one's convenience. In this category, I also include activities that do not use the internet directly, such as the practice of sending CDs with films with audio descriptions to viewers.

2. Access to Culture and Accessibility Studies

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the chance to freely participate in cultural life is a fundamental human right (United Nations, 1948). However, people with disabilities often face considerable difficulties in exercising this right. This particular issue was also addressed in the Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities, which imposes on states parties the obligation to take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities may take part in cultural life on an equal basis with others (United Nations, 2006).

Making culture accessible to persons with disabilities is a long process, comprising numerous stages and including factors such as architectural accessibility, digital accessibility, the accessibility of events, the training of staff, and many others (Come-in, 2019). Persons with various disabilities might need various accessibility services, and accessibility itself might work differently depending on the sphere of life. The main accessibility service for persons with visual impairment is audio description, which can be defined as "a verbal commentary providing visual information for those unable to perceive it themselves. AD helps blind and partially sighted people access audiovisual media and is also used in live settings

such as theatres, galleries and museums" (Fryer, 2016, p. 1). Other accessibility services are related to the sense of touch and include 3D models, tactile graphics, touch tours, and others (Hayhoe, 2017; Kleege, 2018).

The accessibility of culture in Poland does not have a long history, as the first screening of a movie with an audio description took place in 2006, in Bialystok (Jankowska & Walczak, 2019). Since then, accessible cultural events have appeared in various cities, though the choice of accessible cultural events in Poland is still not very wide-ranging. For a long time, the need for access was addressed predominantly by NGOs, who were involved in preparing audio descriptions and closed captions for selected films and performances. The situation appears to have changed at least in theory: In 2019, after years of efforts from people with disabilities and their allies, the Act on Ensuring Access for Persons With Special Needs was adopted. This new legislation imposed an obligation on public institutions and cultural sites to adapt their activities to the needs and abilities of a diverse audience. This is a big step towards increasing social awareness about accessibility. However, in practice, many institutions have still not implemented the guidelines of the Act.

Until recently, the process of making culture accessible had received little scholarly scrutiny, and when examined, it was mainly in terms of technical guidelines. Audiovisual translation, which includes audio descriptions and closed captions, has aroused the interest of scholars for some time. Nevertheless, as Matamala and Orero (2016, p. 2) assert, "the object of study and its methodology have outgrown the field where they were initially studied." They point to the need for the emergence of a new research field, namely accessibility studies composed of audiovisual translation, assistive technologies, new media technologies, audience development, tourism management, and many others.

Accessibility studies in Poland, especially research into the accessibility of culture for people with visual impairment, have hardly been explored. The majority of works on this topic have considered it within the rehabilitative paradigm and highlight its compensatory and therapeutic dimensions (Kłopotowska, 2016; Paplińska, 2016; Szabała, 2019). This approach strengthens the medical model of disability, which is based on the assumption that disability is a dysfunction that should be eliminated through a process of rehabilitation or medical intervention. This methodology was criticized years ago by members of the disabled persons' rights movement and scholars from the field of disability studies (Barton, 1989; Oliver, 1983) as it is considered a harmful and oppressive approach with a devastating impact on emancipatory and empowerment processes. Disability studies and the closely-related area of accessibility studies are based on the social model, the principle assertion of which is that disability is not a result of the bodily dysfunction of an individual, but a social construct triggered by defects in the social environment,

which is designed to satisfy the needs of a privileged group of users only (Finkelstein, 1981; Oliver, 1983; Shakespeare, 2006).

Accessibility studies suggest considering accessibility as a human right (Greco, 2016). When thus conceptualized, accessibility goes beyond the narrow structures of adaptive or rehabilitative tools for a specific excluded group. It resonates with the concept of universal design, defined as "the design of products and environments to be usable by all people from all ages to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design" (Mace, 1985, p. 147). The use of universally designed spaces and products is equitable, flexible, simple, and intuitive. It provides perceptible information, shows tolerance for error, and generates low physical effort. Understood in that way, universal design is a fundamental principle of social inclusion.

Establishing standards for designing universal and accessible solutions urgently requires the development of an interdisciplinary field for knowledge transfer (Greco, 2018). It is necessary to reflect on what solutions support the development of accessibility and which merely seem to perform a task. Therefore, it is hoped that this article will contribute to the process of developing theoretical considerations and practical solutions.

3. Methodology

The study discussed in this article was conducted between 1 November 2020 and 30 June 2021. First and foremost, the examined material includes structured interviews with the participants of cultural events and representatives from institutions and NGOs that offer accessible cultural events. It is supplemented with the autoethnographic material based on my own experiences as a blind participant in cultural events online (Anderson, 2006), which were collected in form of short diary notes taken after each event in which I participated (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2016). Furthermore, the core ethnographic material is complemented by the information acquired from the websites and social media profiles of cultural institutions. Due to safety concerns at the time, related to the ongoing pandemic, all interviews were conducted by telephone.

The group of participants in cultural events numbered 20; there were 14 blind and six low-vision people (12 women and eight men), ranging from 25 to 52 years of age. The interlocutors came from the following cities: Ciechocinek (north of Poland, ca. 10000 habitants), Gdynia (north of Poland, ca. 240000 habitants), Lublin (east of Poland, ca. 340000 habitants), Łomianki (central Poland, ca. 25000 habitants), Otwock (central Poland, ca. 45000 habitants), Poznań (central Poland, ca. 530000 habitants), Sieradz (central Poland, ca. 41000 habitants), Skierniewice (central Poland, ca. 48000 habitants), Warsaw (the capital, central Poland, ca. 1800000 habitants), Wrocław (west of Poland, ca. 640000 habitants), and Zduńska Wola (central Poland, ca. 42000 habitants).

The study was conducted following the ethical standards of qualitative research. Before starting the interviews I contacted all potential interlocutors, presenting myself, the aims of the project, and the conditions of the interview, namely: the approximate length of the interview, the fact that I would be recording them, and the general topic of the interview. All the interlocutors were informed that they could withdraw their consent at any moment during the research and that they could skip any question if they found it uncomfortable. Each interview took place only after prior consent has been obtained.

In the case of blind and visually impaired interlocutors, I ensured all of them that I would not use their true names. However, I asked them for consent regarding using true demographic data and wrote about them only after this consent was granted. The names of visually impaired interlocutors will not be disclosed throughout this article: Their sex, age, and city of provenance will be provided instead.

Demographic data, including age and place of living, are important information that allows the reader to situate a given respondent in a context, which may be pertinent to the numerous issues discussed in this article, such as the digital divide.

In the case of representatives of cultural institutions and NGOs, their personal names won't be disclosed either. Demographic data, in their case, were found to be irrelevant. When referring directly to their statements, I provide the name of the institution or organization they are related to.

Participants in my research were reached through announcements posted on two Facebook groups for the blind and visually impaired in Poland: Niewidomi i Niedowidzący—Bądźmy razem (The Blind and the Visually Impaired—Let's Be Together) and Trzecie Oko—Niewidomi i widzący razem (The Third Eye—The Blind and the Sighted Together).

The group of accessible culture providers was composed of six people, representing the following cultural institutions and NGOs: Zachęta Narodowa Galeria Sztuki (Zachęta National Gallery of Art), Fundacja Kultury bez Barier (Culture Without Barriers Foundation), Fundacja Wielozmysły (Multisenses Foundation), Okręgowe Muzeum w Nowym Sączu (The District Museum in Nowy Sacz), and Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Łaźnia (Łaźnia Centre for Contemporary Art). It should be noted that all of them had previous experience working on issues of accessibility to culture before the pandemic.

Participants from this group were known to me before the research started, and I reached them through my private network.

The collected empirical material was subjected to a thematic analysis. To examine the data for the most relevant themes, a six-step analytical process was implemented: (a) familiarizing with the data; (b) initial coding; (c) searching for recurring themes; (d) reviewing themes; (e) identifying themes, and (f) producing the final research report (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Madden,

2010; Saldaña, 2011). The recurring subjects were initially organized into topical themes—such as events organized by a particular institution—and subsequently grouped into broad categories of overarching themes—such as advantages of remote participation in cultural events (Bailey, 2018). Finally, five main categories were defined and are examined below: The first two categories embrace the analysis of the variety of techniques to make remote cultural events accessible depending on the type of event; the remaining three categories refer to the challenges, advantages, and disadvantages of a remote contact with culture.

4. The Accessibility of Remote Cinema and Theater

It is worth mentioning that the process of making culture accessible in a remote form for persons with visual impairment had begun in Poland long before the Covid-19 pandemic started. The "De Facto" Association sends CDs to its members by traditional mail, with an audio-described film that may be viewed at home. After a certain period, it must be returned ("De Facto" Association, n.d.-a). The Barrel Organ Foundation carries out a similar initiative: It established and runs the website Adapter (https://adapter.pl/filmy), where films with audio descriptions and closed captions are systematically uploaded. Unlike the "De Facto" Association, the Adapter website offers access to its resources without any restriction on time or quantity. Moreover, theater lovers may visit the website of the Polish national film archive (https://fina.gov.pl) and view selected plays from The Television Theater provided with audio descriptions and closed captions (https://ninateka.pl).

In 2020, these activities turned out to be far from sufficient; therefore, audio descriptions were prepared for many new performances and films. Theaters put them on platforms such as YouTube or VOD, free of charge (Teatr Kamienica, 2020; Teatr Polski w Bielsku-Białej, n.d.). The 17th edition of Millennium Docs Against Gravity Festival took place in the autumn of 2020 in a hybrid form, and spectators could watch selected films provided with audio descriptions in theatres as well as on the internet. Watching films on the website was free of charge and made possible during the entire festival: "After logging in, you have 24 hours to start watching and then, after you start, [you have] about four hours to finish," explained a representative of the Culture Without Barriers Foundation.

The 10th Culture and Art for Blind Persons Festival (https://fkison.defacto.org.pl), organized by the "De Facto" Association was held entirely online; it is one of the most representative cultural events for the blind in Poland, lasting one week and providing participants with culture in every form—mainly film, though it included concerts, performances, and meetings with writers. While usually based in the city of Płock, in 2020 it took place on an internet platform called BigBlueButton.

The shifting of cultural life towards the remote mode has introduced cultural events to the internet that do not need accessible services for the blind, for example, author's meetings or concerts. It has thereby contributed to broadening the scope of cultural life for audiences with visual impairment. Interestingly, as my interlocutors indicated, they often found out about certain kinds of cultural activities for the first time when they were made online. One participant (female, 52, Otwock) said:

In the first lockdown, I discovered stage reading online. Kwadrat Theater, for example, did that. It was an event completely open to the wide public, but also accessible to us because they read stage directions as if it was an audio description.

5. The Accessibility of Remote Museums and Galleries

The most common activity organized by museums and galleries during the lockdown was virtual visits, both online and offline. In Zachęta National Gallery of Art, in the spring, educators recorded audio descriptions for whole exhibitions, as well as particular works. Although recordings of that kind were usually prepared by professional narrators, in this case, the institution decided that the recordings would be done by employees from the gallery, out of a desire to create the most faithful impression of being at the place: "In order to make it more natural, to provide a familiar voice, it is recorded not by lectors but by the educators who usually guide the tours for persons with visual impairment," a representative said.

During the autumn lockdown, the gallery expanded its activities and organized online visits. I had the opportunity to participate in one of them. During such events, the educator was in the gallery, walking around the spaces and speaking about the exhibition on the Zoom platform. Again, the need to represent "being" in the exact place was addressed. By listening to the educator, we could experience an audio description of certain objects and hear sounds from the exhibition, sounds of the gallery space, that varied depending on where the educator was walking. Offline accessible visits were also carried out by the Łaźnia Centre for Contemporary Art.

In the spring, a unique form of online event that emerged was "the workshop" (for example, on cooking). The Culture Without Barriers Foundation organized them in collaboration with various other cultural institutions. I participated in the one arranged by the Royal Łazienki Museum, during which the educator first spoke about the culinary customs of the royal court, presented historical pictures, and audio-described them. Secondly, she cooked according to a recipe from the cookbook of the royal chef and participants were cooking along with her in our own homes, in front of our laptops and phones. She observed us on Zoom through our cameras and gave us feedback and tips.

6. Challenges to Making Remote Culture Accessible

Researchers on the issue of digitalization concerning disability have indicated various underlying challenges to the process (Ellis & Kent, 2011; Good Things Foundation, n.d.; Jaeger & Bowman, 2005). The findings of my study highlight two of them in particular. The first of these is related to the fact that some people with visual impairment do not have access to the internet or have very limited abilities in navigating it. It is the so-called "digital divide" or "digital exclusion" (Castells, 2001), a phenomenon usually associated with poor countries that have no digital infrastructure. It can, however, be observed in well-developed countries like Poland. Here, there is a gap between digital natives and digital immigrants (Prensky, 2001). Additional demarcation can be seen between people living in major urban centers and those from rural areas (Steele, 2019).

Young urban digital natives with visual impairment, who seamlessly incorporate new technologies, are well-accustomed to getting information in that manner and are more often aware of opportunities for participating in accessible cultural life in their cities. Therefore, after shifting to a "remote cultural mode," it is natural that they find and enjoy new possibilities. To some extent, they feel that culture has become more accessible, as they are able to participate in events far away from their homes. For those on the opposite side of the digital divide, however, this new status quo is not as positive: Their exclusion has become even greater. One participant (male, 38, Skierniewice) explained:

> In the big cities, in Warsaw and Lodz, many institutions do audio descriptions and people are used to it. In my city there is nothing. There is no accessibility in real life, even less so in the digital one. Our city has 50000 habitants, persons with the disability certificate [are] about 400, a few dozen of them should walk with a white cane, but only six of them do. So how are they supposed to [consume] digital culture? They do not know how to use a smartphone.

One of the elements of digital exclusion is insufficient knowledge of English. The Zoom platform, while frequently used by various cultural institutions, did not have a Polish language version for some time. It was mentioned by several of my interlocutors as a significant factor that hindered their participation in remote cultural life. One woman (46, Warsaw) said: "I have a problem because I do not always understand the commands in English." A representative of the District Museum in Nowy Sacz complemented this idea: "During the first visit, some elderly people were connecting with the USA instead of connecting with us, because they did not understand what was going on."

To face this challenge, organizations and institutions tried to offer active technical support. The case of the "De Facto" Association can serve as an example: Before their annual festival, the organizers provided all participants with a brief training session about how to manage the BigBlueButton platform where the festival was taking place. A woman (46, Warsaw) recounted:

> We received instructions on how to use it. If you had a problem, you could call them. They prepared short instructions on how to turn the microphone on and off and so on. Thanks to that, many elderly people took part in it.

Since the elderly are more likely to experience computer anxiety and frustration with user interfaces (Gallistl et al., 2020), referencing well-known analog technologies might be also an accessibility service. That was the path the Multisenses Foundation chose when implementing the project of accessible walks; the format of "radio play" was used. "We don't call it a podcast so as not to frighten elderly people. We call it 'radio play,' as if it was on the radio. Radio is a well-known space," said a representative. Another form of adaptation to the digital capabilities of the audience is a choice of medium less problematic to recipients than the internet. Another representative explained: "We sent the CDs to the Polish Association of the Blind because there are many elderly people in this project and most of them don't know how to use the internet."

The second main challenge, as Ellis and Kent (2011) observe, is the inaccessibility of selected websites and internet platforms for screen readers used by persons with visual impairment to manage ICTs. Here, the most challenging turned out to be platforms for selling tickets online:

> I know that there was a kind of film festival. It was free of charge. But you had to generate free tickets on the website. And many blind persons couldn't deal with that because the platform was inaccessible. (male respondent, 41, Poznan)

> Calendars are usually inaccessible to me. So when I want to buy the ticket and I have to choose the date, I can't. (female respondent, 46, Warsaw)

> Buying a ticket on the internet…is always problematic for me. I just ask my friend to do it for me. (female respondent, 28, Warsaw)

> I struggled a lot with the website of the Philharmonic, first to buy the tickets and then to turn on the concert. I finally managed to do it, but it is not very accessible. (female respondent, 40, Łomianki)

These quotes clearly indicate how digital inaccessibility is a factor of exclusion that pushes persons with visual impairment back into the medical paradigm. The responsibility for participation again rests on the individuals with disabilities, who personally have to

struggle with websites or look for the assistance of non-disabled persons. As creators of the social model claim, the disability (or, in this case, digital disability) is constructed by the inaccessibility of the common social space, in this case, a digital space (Oliver, 1983; Shakespeare, 2006).

7. Advantages of Making Remote Culture Accessible

Although all of my interlocutors eagerly awaited to enjoy cultural life again in person, they also reported many benefits of having a virtual cultural life. For persons with visual impairment, one of the most essential aspects was the increased independence in managing their own time. Offline accessible cultural events have allowed them to choose what film or performance they watch, as well as where and when they do so. Non-disabled spectators can usually go spontaneously to the theater or cinema whenever they want. However, persons with visual impairment who would like to participate in the city's cultural life are forced to subordinate all their plans to this desire. Accessible screenings are not common and frequent events. They are available only for an exact date, in an exact place. If a person miss the accessible screening or performance, she or he will probably have to wait several months until there will be next opportunity of enjoying it. Offline accessible cultural events, such as the audio-described films and performances that are available on the internet for several days, are a way to overcome these limitations. It significantly increases the probability that persons with visual impairment will reach it. It may also apply to offline museum and gallery visits. "For guided tours in person there were usually eight or ten people coming, and now these recordings on YouTube have tens or even hundreds of displays," said a representative from the Łaźnia Centre for Contemporary Art.

Additionally, such arrangements allow a spectator to see the material more than just once, which turns out to be another type of accessibility service. "A blind person, after watching a film sometimes doesn't know what it's going on. And it is necessary to watch it twice or even thrice in case of difficult films," said a male respondent (41, Gdynia).

A further, indisputable advantage of having a "remote cultural life" is the reduction of geographical barriers. Both the participants of cultural events and their organizers have stated that due to the virtualization of cultural life, the rate of participation in cultural activities beyond one's place of living increased significantly. "Now, on our online visits, we have many people from outside of Warsaw," said a representative from Zachęta National Gallery of Art. A male respondent (35, Wrocław) agreed: "In one day, I can participate in events that take place in various cities in Poland or [around] the world." I personally was able to participate in accessible cultural events of several European institutions for the first time, thanks to their remote form.

The removal of this physical, spatial dimension increased the autonomy of persons with visual impairment:

> I have never been to the National Theatre before. I will probably never go there in person because I don't have anybody who will go with me. But now I have the National Theater in my kitchen. (male respondent, 49, Lublin)

> One person told me during the online workshop that she had never gone to that institution before because she was afraid of getting lost. (representative from the Culture Without Barriers Foundation)

Accessible remote cultural events are especially significant to persons living in small cities, who are particularly vulnerable to cultural exclusion. For those who do not have an opportunity to watch an audio-described film or attend a performance in person, the internet is the only space for contact with culture. For this group, the increased number of accessible, virtual cultural events in 2020 resulted in much better access to culture, in general.

> I live in a small city. There is no cinema here. Films are shown in the theater and of course without audio description. So I have always watched films on the internet. The pandemic forced everybody to shift to the internet and much more accessibility appeared. (female respondent, 50, Sieradz)

It appears that accessible, remote cultural events have great potential. The virtualization of cultural events favors the development and expansion of accessibility in certain aspects. Nevertheless, there are also inherent flaws that will be addressed in the following section.

8. The Disadvantages of Making Remote Culture Accessible

Although remote cultural life creates many promising opportunities, it may deprive us of many others. Some of my interlocutors frankly admitted that remote participation in cultural life has much less value to them: "It definitely doesn't satisfy my need for theatre. I'm not as focused as in a real theatre where everything is happening here and now," said a female respondent (28, Warsaw). Even people who appreciated various new possibilities created by this situation were not uncritical towards it. The claims that come up address technical and social aspects.

The first of those is related to the fact that within the cases of remote accessibility, the scope of accessibility services that can be utilized is restricted. In a virtual theatre, there is no opportunity to touch decorations or costumes. In a virtual museum, visitors cannot touch tactile graphics and blind participants can only rely on their

hearing; due to the low quality of the recordings, this is sometimes very challenging. When participating in a live theatre performance, blind people can understand much more of what is happening on stage than when merely listening to a recording:

> When you sit in the theater, even without audio description, thanks to rustles and puffs you can more or less see the plot. And in virtual theatre you cannot. (female respondent, 52, Otwock)

I remember that my sensation was quite similar. While watching several audio-described theater performances on my computer I thought frequently that deprived of all the embodied experience of being in the place, the audio-described show becomes, in fact, nothing more than a radio play. An interesting strategy of overcoming these limitations was adopted by The "De Facto" Association. In the project dedicated to the figure of Irena Sendler various accessibility services were combined. The participants could watch the documental movie with audio description, but also received via traditional mail the tactile graphics representing, for example, the medal of the Righteous among the Nations and others images related to the theme ("De Facto" Association, n.d.-b).

The second aspect is related to the social dimension of participation in cultural life. For many people, the actual theater or museum is not only the physical space one gets in contact with art; it is also the space one gets in contact with other people, where social relationships are established and maintained:

> I don't feel this atmosphere. I know that I won't meet them in person. (male respondent, 38, Ciechocinek)

> After these theatre performances, my two friends and I always went to have a glass of wine. I can now have a drink at home, but, you know, it is not the same. (female respondent, 33, Warsaw)

It is necessary to stress, however, that a cultural event is not only an excuse for meeting others; experiencing art together is a matter of producing and strengthening interpersonal relations. In the case of a group that is especially vulnerable to social exclusion, such as persons with disabilities, an experience that can be shared with people outside of the group is especially important. Cultural life is a space of social life where raising awareness and breaking stereotypes leads most naturally and smoothly to better inclusion. The exchange of opinions and discussion about films and performances that have just been experienced is a motive that appeared in the remarks of many of my interlocutors, as a component of the cultural event and their social lives. One respondent (female, 50, Sieradz) said: "I need people. I want to meet my friends. Go out and talk to the others about what we have just seen."

The next drawback pointed out by my interlocutors is the lack of interaction with the artists themselves. As it turns out, for many, the opportunity to express their applause is an important element of participation in a cultural event. It is perhaps related once again to the issue of creating and fostering a sense of belonging to the community: "I miss the opportunity to scream 'encore!' I miss the applause," said one of my female respondents (47, Zduńska Wola).

Moreover, for many people, participation in cultural events is a source of rituals that organize the world and separate the space of festivities from that of everyday life. By going out, one draws a natural divide between what is private and what is public. When participating in cultural events, people usually enter a public space dressed elegantly and behave in a specific way. By watching films and performances at home, one relocates culture to a private space. Simultaneously, ICTs that were rather associated with privacy before the pandemic have become the main carriers of "publicness" (Soriano & Cao, 2017). The boundaries between the private and public spheres become fluid and eventually blur. It results in dissonance and longing for the return to pre-pandemic life:

> When I go to the Philharmonic, I can wear high heels. At home I can also [do this], of course, but it's not the same. I can dress perfectly, wear high heels, makeup, sit on the sofa, and I will still feel stuck. (female respondent, 40, Lomianki)

> When I watched this online spectacle I wore a shirt and jacket. I turned off the phone. I tried to feel the atmosphere. (male respondent, 35, Wroclaw)

My interlocutors have tried to recreate old rituals to feel included in the community of spectatorship again, but in the remote mode, it has proven very difficult.

9. Discussion

The data collected and discussed in this article are undoubtedly insufficient to make definitive diagnoses. Due to the recruitment method, the group of interlocutors I have cited is surely not a representative sample. In fact, I interviewed only those persons with visual impairment who are more or less active and functioning well in digital spaces and employees from those cultural institutions that have already some experience with accessibility questions. Nevertheless, the material collected seems to provide interesting insights into the functions of accessibility of remote culture in Poland, providing a starting point for the discussion on the positive and negative aspects of virtualization.

Speaking of positives, it should be noted that, in some cases, the virtualization of cultural events resulted in the creation of completely new, experimental forms of accessibility. The radio plays prepared by the Multisenses Foundation fall into this category.

Furthermore, it contributed also to creating new standards of providing digital access. The practice of individual IT support for the festival participants offered by the "De Facto" Association can serve as a good example.

To some of the visually impaired interlocutors, the virtualization of cultural life was also a factor that significantly expanded their knowledge and competencies. Some of them reported that they developed their digital competencies significantly during 2020. Others mentioned that they had gotten to know many cultural institutions that they had not known before. Another aspect that is worth mentioning, is the partial reduction of the financial and geographical barriers. Last but not least, a benefit of virtualization—partially related to the former—is its emancipating dimension, namely the increase of autonomy and agency it means for persons with visual impairment. In Poland, accessible screenings and theater performances are not frequent events, though in big cities they take place a few times a year. A spectator with a visual impairment has no impact on where, when, and which piece might be prepared with an audio description. As a consequence, they have no way of choosing what to watch and have to gratefully accept whatever is offered. This situation corresponds to the charity model of disability, in which a person with a disability is reduced to a passive subject of assistance by the non-disabled (Shapiro, 1993). This also resonates to some extent with the medical model of disability, which requires an individual with a disability to adapt themselves constantly to external conditions designed only with the non-disabled in mind (Barton, 1989; Oliver, 1983).

Concerning the negative sides, the main problem from the point of view of institutions and NGOs is the fact that preparing a remote accessible cultural event is much more time-consuming than live events. Nevertheless, all of my interlocutors from this group declared that they positively assessed the remote form of organizing events and that they would like to introduce virtual events to their permanent programs, even though live events are being held again. This opinion was shared by the participants in their events. When asked if they would still participate in virtual events, 17 persons answered positively. Most of them pointed to the geographical aspect as the main reason.

Among the main disadvantages of remote cultural events, from the point of view of participants, the first and foremost is the lack of social dimension. It turns out that even the best digital technologies are incapable of substituting real human presence (De Kerckhove & Rowland, 1997). Further issues can be considered under the umbrella of technical flaws or limitations. Digital communication proved to be much more unreliable and—in several cases—inaccessible for people with visual impairments than we could expect. Additionally, there is an impoverished sensory range in online accessibility services. At the same time, one cannot neglect the problem of digital exclusion. For many, the shift towards the vir-

tual only deepened existing inequalities instead of raising accessibility levels.

10. Conclusion

It would be beneficial to broaden the scope of my research and interview employees/representatives from institutions that started their accessibility arrangements during the pandemic. Furthermore, it seems necessary to interview much more visually impaired event participants to consider the sample as representative of the community of persons with visual impairment at large in Poland. However, I believe that, with due care, useful tips and suggestions may be found in the discussed material. Single individual testimonies of the challenges faced by my respondents, as well as the new possibilities they have discovered, can serve as a warning or inspiration respectively. Aware of the limitations and shortcomings of this study, several conclusions can be drawn.

First and foremost, it is noteworthy that accessibility is already well-grounded in several cultural institutions in Poland. Shifting towards a remote mode did not interrupt this long and dynamic process; on the contrary, to some extent, it had a stimulating effect. Some institutions and organizations saw developmental potential in it. Furthermore, further reflection on the virtualization of culture contributes significantly to expanding the general knowledge about digital accessibility, understood not only in what concerns accessibility for screen readers but also in the broader context of universal design.

Last but not least, it is often overlooked in studies concerning the functioning of people with visual impairment that this is a very diverse group, in which representatives have very different needs, capabilities, and preferences. Since disability is an intersectional and coconstructed concept, it should be always taken into consideration together with a wide range of demographic factors, including gender, age, and place of living.

In light of the presented study, the accessibility of a remote cultural life seems to have an ambiguous nature. On the one hand, it is conceived of as an inferior version of accessibility to live events, as it is deprived of many key accessibility services. On the other hand, it is an interesting and promising alternative for persons excluded from a more varied cultural life due to geographical or financial factors. This leads me to conclude that my research question remains, to a point, unanswerable. However, I hope this study contributes, if only partially, to the intellectual debate surrounding the inclusion of visually impaired persons as consumers of culture in Poland. All of my interlocutors seemingly appreciated the value of remote cultural life, while at the same time indicating its flaws. I believe that the issue of remote cultural life requires extensive further research, though it can already be claimed that it is a very important component of the current accessibility panorama.

References

Anderson, L. (2006). Analytic autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *35*(4), 373–395.

Anderson, L., & Glass-Coffin, B. (2016). I learn by going. Autoethnographic modes of inquiry. In S. Holman-Jones, T. E. Adams, & C. Ellis (Eds.), *Handbook of autoethnography* (pp. 57–83). Routledge.

Aydos, V., Navarini, D., & Oliveira, B. (2021). The paradox of "remote working" in Covid-19 pandemic times: Disability, inclusion, and accessibility in Brazil. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, *41*(3). https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/8359/6188

Bailey, C. A. (2018). *A guide to qualitative field research* (3rd ed.). SAGE.

Barton, L. (1989). Introduction. In L. Barton (Ed.), *Disability and dependency* (pp. 1–6). The Falmer Press.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101.

Castells, M. (2001). *The internet galaxy: Reflections on the internet, business, and society*. Oxford University Press.

Come-in. (2019). *Guidelines*. https://www.interreg-central.eu/Content.Node/COME-IN/COME-IN-Guidelines-FINAL-English-version.pdf

"De Facto" Association. (n.d.-a). *Internetowy Klub Filmowy Osób Niewidomych Pociąg* [The internet Film Club of Blind Persons Train]. https://www.defacto.org.pl/ikfonp.html

"De Facto" Association. (n.d.-b). *Mosty pamięci—Irena Sendlerowa* [Bridges of Memory—Irena Sendler]. https://www.defacto.org.pl/P2020.html

De Kerckhove, D., & Rowland, W. (1997). *Connected intelligence: The arrival of the web society*. Somerville House.

Ellis, K., & Kent, M. (2011). *Disability and new media*. Routledge.

Finkelstein, V. (1981). To deny or not to deny disability. In A. Brechin, P. Liddiard, & J. Swain (Eds.), *Handicap in a social world* (pp. 31–38). Hodder and Stoughton.

Fryer, L. (2016). *Translation practices explained: An introduction to audio description—A practical guide*. Routledge.

Gallistl, V., Rohner, R., Seifert, A., & Wanka, A. (2020). Configuring the older non-user: Between research, policy and practice of digital exclusion. *Social Inclusion*, *8*(2), 233–243.

Gentry, A. (2021). *#WeShallNotBeRemoved: UK disability arts alliance 2021 survey report: The impact of the pandemic on disabled people and organisations in arts & culture*. UK Disability Arts Alliance. https://usercontent.one/wp/www.weshallnotberemoved.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/STANDARD-PRINT-UK-Disability-Arts-Alliance-2021-Survey-Report-1.pdf

Good Things Foundation. (n.d.). *Doing digital inclusion: Disability handbook*. https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/insights/doing-digital-inclusion-disability-handbook

Greco, G. M. (2016). On accessibility as a human right, with an application to media accessibility. In A. Matamala & P. Orero (Eds.), *Researching audio description* (pp. 11–35). Palgrave Macmillan.

Greco, G. M. (2018). The nature of accessibility studies. *Journal of Audiovisual Translation*, *1*(1), 205–232.

Hayhoe, S. J. (2017). *Blind visitor experiences at art museums*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Jaeger, P. T., & Bowman, C. A. (2005). *Understanding disability: Inclusion, access, diversity, and civil rights*. Praeger.

Jankowska, A., & Walczak, A. (2019). Audio description for films in Poland: History, present state and future prospects. *The Journal of Specialised Translation*, *32*(2), 236–261.

Katz, S. (2020, June 22). Many deaf women aren't safer at home. *Bitch Media*. https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/deaf-women-domestic-violence-pandemic

Kleege, G. (2018). *More than meets the eye: What blindness brings to art*. Oxford University Press.

Kłopotowska, A. (2016). *Doświadczanie przestrzeni w rehabilitacji osób z dysfunkcją wzroku. Sztuka a tyflorehabilitacja* [Experiencing the space in the rehabilitation of persons with a visual impairment. Art and typhlorehabilitation]. Oficyna Wydawnicza Politechniki Białostockiej.

Lund, E. (2020). Interpersonal violence against people with disabilities: Additional concerns and considerations in the Covid-19 pandemic. *Rehabilitation Psychology*, *65*(3), 199–205.

Mace, R. (1985). Universal design, barrier-free environments for everyone. *Designers West*, *33*(1), 147–152.

Madden, R. (2010). *Being ethnographic: A guide to the theory and practice of ethnography*. SAGE.

Matamala, A., & Orero, P. (2016). Audio description and accessibility studies: A work in progress. In A. Matamala & P. Orero (Eds.), *Researching audio description. New approaches* (pp. 1–11). Palgrave Macmillan.

Oliver, M. (1983). *Work with disabled people*. Macmillan.

Paplińska, M. (2016). Niewidomy odbiorca sztuki—Społeczne, edukacyjno-rehabilitacyjne znaczenie audiodeskrypcji przedstawień teatralnych dla osób z niepełnosprawnością wzroku [Blind art recipient—Social, educational, rehabilitative meaning of audio description for theater performances for persons with visual impairment]. *Forum pedagogiczne*, *6*(1),

181–194.

Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants. *On the Horizon*, *9*(5). https://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part1.pdf

Reason, M. (2022). Inclusive online community arts: Covid and beyond Covid. *Cultural Trends*. Advance online publication. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epub/10.1080/09548963.2022.2048170?needAccess=true

Saldaña, J. (2011). *Fundamentals of qualitative research*. Oxford University Press.

Schotland, S. (2021). Let them go! Compassionate release for disabled prisoners with chronic health conditions during the Covid-19 public health emergency. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, *41*(3). https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/8305/6183

Shakespeare, T. (2006). The social model of disability. In L. J. Davis (Ed.), *The disability studies reader* (2nd ed., pp. 197–205). Routledge.

Shapiro, J. P. (1993). *No pity: People with disabilities forging a new civil rights movement*. Times Books.

Shelton, S. Z. (2021). Bringing the pandemic home: The shifting realities of intimate violence for disabled people in the time of Covid-19. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, *41*(3). https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/8392/6197

Soriano, C. R., & Cao, R. J. (2017). Of owned, shared, and public access ICT constructs of privacy and publicness in marginal spaces. In A. Serrano Tellería (Ed.), *Between the public and private in mobile communi-cations* (pp. 77–101). Routledge.

Steele, C. (2019). *What is the digital divide*. Digital Divide Council. http://www.digitaldividecouncil.com/what-is-the-digital-divide

Szabała, B. (2019). Uczestnictwo osób z niepełnosprawnością wzrokową w kulturze [Participation in culture of persons with visual impairment]. *Lubelski rocznik pedagogiczny*, *38*(4), 41–58.

Teatr Kamienica. (2020, October 10). *Spektakl Teatru Kamienica pt. "Mój Dzikus" (AD)* [Performance of the Theatre Kamienica entitled "My Savage" (AD)] [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_JVpp-xGEis

Teatr Polski w Bielsku-Białej. (n.d.). Spektakle bez barier sezon 2020 [Performances without barriers 2020 season]. https://teatr.bielsko.pl/sbb/spektakle-bez-barier-sezon-2020

the audience agency. (2021). *Focus on disability. Cultural participation monitor*. https://www.theaudienceagency.org/evidence/covid-19-cultural-participation-monitor/equity-and-access/focus-on-disability

United Nations. (1948). *Universal declaration of human rights*. https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights

United Nations. (2006). *Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities*. https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-2.html

About the Author

Monika Dubiel holds masters degrees from the University of Warsaw in psychology and Spanish philology. She is working on a doctoral dissertation in the field of disability studies, on the topic of visually impaired artists in Mexico. In her research, she combines ethnographic research and literary studies. Her scientific interests also include accessibility studies, postcolonial disability studies, and the activism of people with disabilities. At the University of Warsaw, she also teaches courses related to accessibility studies and literary disability studies.