Hadley Presents

Audio Described National Parks

Presented by Ricky Enger

Ricky Enger: Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host, Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax, and enjoy a conversation with the experts. In this episode, Dr. Brett Oppegaard joins us to talk about the UniDescription project. Welcome to the show, Brett.

Dr. Brett Oppegaard: Thanks for having me. I really appreciate it.

Ricky Enger: Yeah, I am so happy to have you on because this is something I have only recently discovered myself. So, the UniDescription project is an accessible app that contains audio descriptions of a lot of these historically significant places, like national parks, museums, monuments, things like that. Places that people like to tour and really learn a lot about. Now that things are starting to open up a little bit, people are ready to explore again, and so this is what I think is so cool about this project is that whether you are exploring this from your home and just getting an idea of what you missed even though you’re not traveling there. Or maybe you are going on vacation, and you want get an idea of what is at these museums and parks and such. Rather than not having anything at all other than the people with you describing things that’s what’s so amazing about this project. So yeah, I love the concept and really happy to share this with the word. So really before we jump into that, why don't you tell us a little bit about who you are and what you do?

Dr. Brett Oppegaard: Sure, yeah. I'm glad you discovered us. We have actually been around since 2014. I'm an associate professor at the University of Hawaii and I do a lot of research on what's called "locative media," which is the connection of content and information to place through mobile technologies. In 2014, the National Park Service, who I'd worked with before, came to me with this problem, that "We have these brochures, which are called 'UniGrid brochures,' and we want to make those accessible to people who are blind or low vision. Can you help us with that?" That set us on this odyssey that we've been on for the past seven years to figure out how to do that. That's really involved a variety of steps, but the initial one was to create open-access and open-source web tools to allow for people to learn about audio description and to make audio description and then we created free mobile apps to disseminate the audio description once it was made and then we spent a lot of time just really investigating and researching how to make better audio description as a part of this.

Ricky Enger: Awesome. I love the whole approach to this, both from the perspective of you are able to create a material to teach people how to describe things, and then, of course, there is the described material. When I was checking out the website, I could so relate to the backstory of being at a historic site and there's nothing described there and so the people around you are, "Ooh, ah, oh, wow, this is so fascinating," and as a blind or low-vision person, it's not the most exciting thing to happen. I love your motto, kind of a goal, which is to describe the world. That shouldn't take too terribly long, I would think. You have to start somewhere. What exists right now? What are the kinds of materials that are available for people that have been described?

Dr. Brett Oppegaard: Yeah. Well, to go along with your story, I interviewed people who are blind or low vision and asked them about their experiences in different public places, including national parks, and I would get a lot of stories, kind of like what you say, the "oohs" and "ahs" but "I don't know what's going on," or I had one person that told me, they went to Gettysburg, and "It felt like I was driving around a parking lot for hours because it's just an auto tour." We really, really wanted to focus first on just the orientation part of coming to a site, like what is there and what's available.

By focusing on the brochures, those usually give a great overview and that gives people who are blind or low vision some agency to say, "Well, I read in the brochure that this, that, or the other thing's available and that's what interests me, so that's what I would like to do," instead of the situation that most people ended up in, which was, "I've come along with my family and friends, they pick everything. I'm a good sport about it, but I'm not really having a great time," and so we really wanted to change that dynamic and give people to begin with the basic orientation, like, "Why is this site important? What is it about? What are its highlights?" Then that gives people agency to start to choose the agenda for the day and to start to ask questions about, "What's accessible here?" That becomes a major part of the planning instead of getting there and everyone's disappointed.

Ricky Enger: I know that there are a number of things, like national parks and other historic sites where the brochures have been described. How do people actually access the material once it is there?

Dr. Brett Oppegaard: We have free mobile apps on the Android and iOS markets and you can just search for UniDescription, U-N-I Description, and those will pop up and you can download those and open them on your smartphones. They're heavily tested for accessibility. Basically, once we do our training, once the staff and volunteers and people in the community of, usually American Council of the Blind, but sometimes Blinded Veterans Association or Helen Keller, as soon as all of that comes together and they've co-created this wonderful description, then we push it into this UniDescription mobile app that's free, anybody can download. It's geo-located, so you can search for things near to you or you can just search key terms of things you're interested in.

On that app, this point, we have more than 130 US National Park Service sites, plus Fish & Wildlife sites, and other places of interest, including the Statue of Liberty, the Washington Monument, Yellowstone National Park, Yosemite National Park, I mean, just all sorts of things that you might be interested in related to our shared American culture. Now, you can hear the description of those things. That's become very powerful for people. One of our primary volunteers lives about a mile away from Minuteman National Park in the Boston area and she'd lived her whole life there, but never went to the park. Then once the descriptions were made of that park, she started to go there and just was having a great time. That's the kind of success stories that we really base our merit on.

Ricky Enger: I love that story and I can relate to that as well. When I first got the app, I searched for the sites in D.C. and the Washington Monument. I had taken a high school band trip and it stood out in my memory as being one of the most boring things I'd ever done and having the opportunity to then go back and get some of those descriptions and put it together with, I was there and now many years later, I'm actually able to experience the history of that, so it's very cool. How do the sites get chosen? How do we know what venues are being described and how is that all brought about?

Dr. Brett Oppegaard: Yeah, it's a really interesting experience you mentioned about the Washington Monument because we found that not only does the audio description help people when they're on-site, it also helps with planning, and it also helps with memory of the experience. That's something I don't think has really been addressed very well in the research and that's part of what I've been working on, but the audio description, particularly of a brochure, because it's not necessarily about the site experience, it's more about the site itself, the brochure really helps the people conceptualize and build a mental image of what they're going to be experiencing.

You may have went in the Washington Monument and not known about all the different gifts that each state had given to it on the way up the elevator or something like that because nobody articulated that to you, but then you might read later that, "Oh, my gosh, when I went up that elevator, there was a whole bunch of cool stuff that every state had given a different thing as a tribute." That creates this dynamic of memory-building, it also creates a dynamic for planning.

In terms of who can participate in this, we're fully grant-funded. There's no cost for producers or audiences, so basically, when we have the grant funds, we do more of it and we do as much of it as we can, so if a site wants to participate, whether that's a museum or a national park or a wildlife refuge. We work with any public place and a place where people are going to want to have shared communal experiences with their friends and family. Those are the primary places we focus on.

Ricky Enger: That's excellent. If you are someone who is blind or low vision and maybe you're planning a vacation, or you want to relive one that you've taken already, but something isn't yet described, are there ways that people can encourage these venues to begin to describe these things, or how does that all work?

Dr. Brett Oppegaard: Yeah, I think this is one of those classic examples of if nobody pushes for accessibility, that probably won't happen, so if you want your special place to be accessible, I think it's important to ask the people, the staff that work there, the leaders of it, to say, "Can you please help us get this to be more accessible?" That could include a lot of things. It could include ramps, tactiles, braille, any number of things. But in terms of UniDescription, it's pretty much as simple as sending me an email and saying, "Our organization would like to participate in this. When you get a chance, can you fit us in?" Then as soon as we get the grant funding to do that, we'll try to include as many people as we can.

Ricky Enger: That's great. Since it is grant-funded, it means that all of this is free to those who are experiencing the description. There's an interesting process, right, for when something has been funded. Can you talk a little bit about Descriptathons?

Dr. Brett Oppegaard: We built our open-source, open-access tools in the beginning and just handed it to national park people and found out that some people would be real good at creating description and other people would really struggle at it and there was just a very difficult transition from being totally non-accessible to learning how these tools worked to making an audio description, which is complicated on its own, and then to delivering it to the public in different ways.

So we created this event called a "Descriptathon," which is basically our idea is to bring together staff at public places and volunteers for those public places, not paid staff members, but volunteers, and then people in their audience of that site, people in the community who are blind or low vision, and then putting them all together on a team and saying, "Here's a brochure that we want to make audio described and accessible at the end of this three-day workshop. We'll train you on these genres of description. We'll give you the tools and train you on the tools and we want to see if you can figure out how to make this happen." Like I said, it's more than 130 places have been able to put that together in a very short amount of time and make their sites more accessible. We know it's possible. We know it's something that just takes a little bit of elbow grease and engagement and commitment, and if everybody could do that at every place, we'd have a very accessible world.

Ricky Enger: I love that. It's happening more and more every day, so it's a wonderful thing to see. I like that blind and low-vision people are a part of this because if you're creating something and it doesn't really serve the audience that it was intended to serve, we probably have wasted a bit of time and maybe not made something as good as it could be, so yeah, I love that blind and low-vision people are involved.

I also like that on your site you have tools and templates that talk about, "If you're a describer, these are some things that you should think about." How did all of that come together? Was it a process that you created the tools as you went and you were learning along with everyone else and decided to compile that and share it with others, or how did this library and template of this is how you describe things come together?

Dr. Brett Oppegaard: Originally, when we were asked to work on this project, we were given a box of about 400 brochures and just said, "Can you make this happen?" What we started to first investigate was: Are there any tools out there to use for audio description? We had the expertise in accessibility, we had the expertise in writing, but we didn't have any way to build description and then get it to people, so our first few years we primarily spent designing the web tool. What we found in that process was that there are some best practices descriptions out there and when we discovered those, we wanted to share those with other people.

Ricky Enger: That actually means that people can go to your website and learn about all this, whether or not they're training directly with you.

Dr. Brett Oppegaard: Yeah, absolutely. They can go to the UniDescription website, create a free account, build a project, disseminate the information however they want, and never talk to us, if they feel real comfortable. There's enough there in terms of background material and best practices. We publish our research there, so you can read our research. All of that is designed to create the infrastructure for description and let people do it. But then the Descriptathon is a way to bring energy to that effort and get people excited about it.

Another thing I'll say is when we first started creating descriptions on our tool, although we worked with people who are blind or low vision, they weren't a part of the teams in the beginning. They were more along the lines of reviewers or assessors. We just felt like it would be better to have those people involved with the process from the beginning as the drafts are getting created all the way through rather than just being a judge at the end of the process, like, "Did you do a good job or not?"

Once we made that switch, the quality of our descriptions just improved dramatically, I guess, is the best way to put it. It started to have people on the teams ask themselves more questions because they had a face and people, they talked to that they knew were going to be listening to this. Then the people in the ACB or BVA or Helen Keller, they would ask really great questions to their teammates and that would prompt these rich discussions and it would just all lead to better descriptions, so that co-creation model, something we've committed to for a few Descriptathons now, and I can't imagine ever changing that. That has really been an important development.

Ricky Enger: It really shows in the quality of material that has been produced. I'm so looking forward to, I've just gotten started exploring the app, and there are so many more sites for me to check out and then yet more for me to ask to be described. Even with all of this amazing wealth of description in the app already, we want more and more and more, right? Can you give any sneak peeks as to what is coming in the very near future that isn't in the app just yet?

Dr. Brett Oppegaard: I mean, number one, even though we have done a lot of work, 130-plus sites, there are 400 in the system, so we're just at the very beginning of creating brochures for those sites. That doesn't even count the wayside signs and the exhibits. There's just a tremendous amount that needs to be done. What we've focused on is creating the training and the infrastructure to allow people to go out and create all the description that needs to happen.

We've been working with Parks Canada so there's some Canadian sites that we've been working with. We have scheduled to work with The Kennedy Center in D.C., which is a primary performing arts center in the country, to help make that more accessible. We're working with the national parks in the UK, so we're really trying to embody this idea that it's not just the United States that needs to be more accessible, it's the world that needs more be more accessible. Anywhere any person who is blind or low vision goes, they should be able to have equivalent experiences to people who are able to see the brochures or paper or wayside signs or whatever it is, and so we're really trying to push this as a universal experience throughout all societies and cultures and give people the tools to do it at no cost and just see where that leads us. So far, it's led us to quite a few exciting places and I think the future is bright.

Ricky Enger: I agree. Fantastic. I'm looking forward to so much more and love what you guys are doing. If people are interested in finding out more about UniDescription, what are a couple of ways they can do that?

Dr. Brett Oppegaard: Well, the primary way is to go to the website, U-N-I description dot org, unidescription.org. There's a ton of information on there about our research or the best practices, about our Descriptathon, who's involved, and then the other part of that is you can go there. When you asked earlier, "How do you get started?" I really encourage people to just create an account and start describing things. You could describe your kitchen if you want, what's in the cupboards in your kitchen, and export that as a URL and you can keep it on your phone. I mean, there's just a lot of ways you can make all parts of your world more accessible with what we're providing already. But if you have any other questions or want to know more or want to get some other site involved, just send me an email to my name, brett.oppegaard@hawaii.edu and I'll be happy to talk with you more.

Ricky Enger: Excellent. We'll have all of that in our show notes, so be sure and check that out. I want to thank you so much for taking a little time in describing what you do and starting to describe the world. I love it. Thanks so much.

Dr. Brett Oppegaard: Yeah, thank you.

Ricky Enger: Got something to say? Share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@hadley.edu, That's P-O-D-C-A-S-T @ Hadley dot E-D-U, or leave us a message at (847) 784-2870. Thanks for listening.