Accessible Media
Introduction to the Special Thematic Session

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Abstract. The Special Thematic Session of ICCHP 2014 entitled Accessible Media promises to yield exciting research and development from around the world in the areas of access to television and audio-video content, eBooks, and social media. The scholarly works in this session report on and discuss a wide range of activities under the umbrella of this important theme, which are all working towards the United Nations specified goal of providing more equal access to the cultural environment for person with disabilities.

1 Introduction

Inclusive design refers to design methodology and practices as well as business models that account for a wide range of users, abilities and functionalities at the outset of the design process [1]. It is not something that is an afterthought to the process but rather infused into design thinking, user analysis, business strategy and resulting products or service provisions. When new features or upgrades are considered, inclusive design should also be part of the process.

Inclusive media is a term that describes techniques, methods and theories for making media, in its many forms, more accessible to persons with disabilities. However, it also implies that as many people as possible are included in the efforts to produce more inclusive media. In general, inclusive media objects refers to closed captioning/subtitles for the hard of hearing (CC), audio description (AD) for blind/low vision audiences, alternative access to print-based media, and low literacy tracks for various media. Specifically, CC refers to the verbatim translation of spoken dialogue from television, film and video content and AD is “a second audio track produced in conjunction with the original audio track, to provide descriptions of important visual elements” [2, pg 1] of that content.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [3] “recognizes the importance of accessibility to the physical, social, economic and cultural environment…” (para 1). The cultural environment includes media and other cultural artefacts and providing access in alternative formats makes them more inclusive of a wide range of audiences. Many different signatory countries in the world have introduced regulations and legislation that attempt to operationalize these recommendations. For example, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications
Commission has regulations that govern the quantity of closed captioning/subtitling and audio description required by Canadian Broadcasters. By 2016, all Finnish broadcasters will be required to have 100% of their Finnish and Swedish language programming captioned. Alternative access to print-based media is considered an allowable exception to copyright legislation in many countries. What is important to recognize is that most of the regulations and standards do not mention the notions of quality, engagement, entertainment or understanding when specifying the need for access to media. However, whenever there is a translation/interpretation from one medium to a second one, meaning can be lost because contextual cues are missing. This is compounded by the fact that most inclusive media is produced by a third party after the original is finished rather than by the people responsible for creating that original so much of the context or purpose for specific elements is unavailable. As a result, there is usually no supervision or approval of the inclusive form even though it is for the consumption of that media by audiences.

As the world goes through change and upgrading driven by technology, particularly in the media industries, there are incredible opportunities to bring in inclusive design thinking to address missing or new elements that are enabled by the new technologies. For instance, CC has always been static text with limited font properties and styles due to the limitations of the television technology that could display it. Television and production technologies have changed dramatically as have consumption and viewing models. CC, however, has not changed much even though the limitations imposed by the television technologies of the 1970s no longer exist. Innovation for CC is needed because it is incomplete in its current form and thus it could convey more of the content (e.g., techniques for conveying non-dialogue sound could be developed and provided with new digital technologies). The inclusive media domain is ripe with opportunity for research, development and new ways of thinking about access to media.

In this special thematic session, there are three short papers and four long papers that focus on the broad theme of inclusive media from a diverse group of international researchers from the United States to Europe to Japan. Authors will be presenting research related to subtitles for the hard of hearing/captioning, audio description, access to social media and ebooks. Specifically, papers will describe: a three-dimensional framework describing eInclusion opportunities and elements for social media; a novel technique for expressing non-speech audio using tactile captions; a method for generating real-time remote captions for mathematical formulae; attitudes of and desires for subtitling for the hard of hearing or captioning in Japan; an analysis technique to determine non-dialogue spaces for more efficient production of audio description; LIA, a project that involves providing ebook publishers with a simple method for integrating accessibility features into mainstream production flows; and Synote allows teachers and students to annotate video using a second mobile technology and then make it available to others.
References