Focus group IO1 ACT - Antwerp - 08/06/2016
University of Antwerp, 8 June 2016

Report

1.   PARTICIPANTS:

The following organisations were contacted by INTER (partner in ACT) and took part in the FOCUS GROUP organised by academic partner UAntwerp (Aline Remael, Nina Reviers, Gert Vercauteren).

User organisations:
- *VeBeS* (Flemish user organisation for the blind and visually impaired; http://www.vebes.be/Home.aspx): Lesley Deceulaer, Erik Van Damme, Christine Kenens
- *Onder Ons* (Flemish user organisation for the hard-of-hearing; http://www.onder-ons.be/): Arsène Vyncke
- *Ahosa* (Flemish user organisation for the hard-of-hearing): Patrick Selis
- *Onze Nieuwe Toekomst* (Flemish user organisation for people with mental disabilities; http://www.ont.be/): Didier Peleman, An Van Eyck

2.   SUMMARY OF THE TOPICS DISCUSSED IN THE FOCUS GROUP

Lack of consistency and lack of accessibility standards

The members of the different organisations taking part in the Focus Group commented on the fragmented nature of the accessibility services for live events currently available in Flanders.

More specifically, they pointed out that there is no consistency in what is provided or for whom it is provided. Some events cater for one target group, other events cater for another target group; alternatively, one or another user group may itself take the initiative but the outcome is much the same, i.e. they will provide accessibility for some but not for all.

This state of affairs led the focus group participants to conclude, quite unanimously, that accessibility should be a concerted effort, combining the expertise of *all* the different stakeholders, so as to meet the needs of *all* users. The participants stressed that accomplishing this is a shared responsibility, their own, that is, the user organisations' but also that of the cultural centres or venues organising events.

In fact, these comments confirmed the need for an accessibility coordinator or manager since this person would be able to coordinate the efforts of the different stakeholders or centralise their expertise so as to ensure that all groups and all needs are covered. All agreed that creating this new professional profile was an excellent initiative , and that accessibility must encompass all the aspects of a given event, those related to content as well as those relaed to technical and other practical issues. In addition, access services must be directed at a broad audience.

Consequently, another conclusion was that it is important to build on the existing expertise and develop a set of norms/standards for access to content as well as access to buildings and

all the logistics both entail. This would prevent venues from having to reinvent the wheel or to go looking for solutions time and time again. Standards would ensure the consistency that is currently lacking, and thereby also ensure that users know what to expect when they wish to take part in an event. This is not the case at present: users often do not know what forms of access will be in place even when event is promoted as 'accessible', since this means something different for each organiser. In practice this often results in some users deciding to stay at home.

Planning ahead

The participants, and especially VeBeS, pointed out that accessibility is still something many venues or organisers of events only think of at the last minute, very late in the production process of a project or event. This is problematic, firstly, because it is more difficult to integrate accessibility at the end of the production process and secondly, because it risks rushing access provision, which will lead to further problems.

Instead, accessibility should be taken into account at the start of a project, in the planning stage of the cultural season and the preparation of a project/event. Again, it was believed that this is something that an accessibility manager could ensure.

Sensitising, informing, communicating

All parties involved in live events should be sensitised and informed: cultural centres, users, and the government or governmental agencies. Particularly the role of the government was felt to be important in reducing the financial impact of accessibility services, which remains one of the main obstacles for many organisations in the cultural sector.

Communication with users was also felt to be unsatisfactory in many cases. The most important suggestions that were made by the focus group participants in this respect were:

• develop symbols for indicating accessibility in written communication, in particular a symbol indicating accessibility in general (inclusive design), which is missing today;
• make sure the communication channels themselves are accessible (e.g. websites);
• avoid limiting communication channels to digital channels only, since these channels are problematic for some users, especially, elderly people;
• instead, use 'regular' communication channels as well (e.g. magazines, press) and not only specialised channels that reach specific user groups only through their organisations; a large potential user group is not reached today;
• centralise information about accessible events (preferably on a European level): users have no idea where to look for information about accessible events; they often have to wait until they are contacted by their user organisation or an organiser.

Official status of some professions

There is a problem with some professions that are important when it comes to the provision of access services. Some professions have no official status in Flanders/Belgium (e.g. live transcribers for the deaf and hearing impaired). In addition, the current fast staff turnover in the cultural sector does not promote quality in accessibility services. In this respect too, (written) standards and norms are essential.

The target group is large and there is overlap between groups

The target groups considered for accessibility should also be broadened and consolidated. Disabilities should not be considered separately since there is overlap between the different groups. The hard of hearing may also find an amplified form of AD at events useful (more useful than the sub/surtitling that is presently provided) . They would no doubt also like to be provided with introductions at the start of events, like the blind and visually impaired.

Establish a European focus group or platform

The participants also pointed out the need to set up a European focus group/platform for accessibility that would serve as an umbrella organisation for all user organisations and stakeholders in the sector.

Pay attention to situation-bound or one-off factors

The quality of an event also largely depends on situational factors, apart from the quality of the sub/surtitling, or AD itself. Actors speaking dialects may be difficult to understand for the hard of hearing, or actors who talk fast, or are rendered inaudible by noises in the surroundings, etc. One cannot control all these factors, but it may help to select an appropriate event, one that can be optimally provided with accessibility services.

The UAntwerp team.