

Storytelling and Cultural Heritage: the #smARTradio Project

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Abstract

smARTradio is a pilot project by Radio Magica Foundation in collaboration with the Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Italy). The project aims to spread knowledge of Italian cultural heritage to a targeted audience of children aged 8-13, through audio and video stories penned by famous authors. In order to reach this goal, heuristics were created to allow authors to write simplified, accessible texts using storytelling methodology. The creation of texts was the primary point of the project. These texts were then converted into multiple formats (audio, video, video with Italian sign language, translations in multiple languages), which reduce communication barriers and lead a large audience on a journey, to discover the landscape and cultural heritage of the Friuli Venezia Giulia region of Italy.

1 Fondazione Radio Magica onlus

Launched in May 2012 from a Ca' Foscari University of Venice spin-off project, Fondazione Radio Magica onlus is one of the first digital non-profit organizations in Italy that applies the paradigm of open innovation to the field of children's education. In addition to a web radio broadcasting storytelling, music and other programs, the Radio Magica platform offers a designed-for-all multimedia library (with audio stories, video stories, videos with the Italian sign language, videos with symbols (AAC), and radio programs) to match different cognitive-level groups (fig. 1).



Figure 1. Web page with multimedia library

2 The #smARTradio project

The #smARTradio project was born in 2016 and it is currently at its third edition. It was inspired by the “History of the World in 100 Objects” by Neil McGregor (2012), director of the British Museum. At a time when it is more and more difficult to reach out to the younger generations, the project aims to promote the cultural heritage of the Friuli region through storytelling, thus stimulating children to enjoy the experience of discovery and making them active citizens. As Navracics (2016) maintains, “bringing citizens closer to their heritage means to bring them closer to one another, and this is a fundamental step into a more inclusive society.”

The #smARTradio project can be summarized in a sequence of actions, which chronologically include:

- 1. Choice of the territory** (city or more extended regional areas). In the different editions different cities were chosen. For instance, the first edition was dedicated to big cities like Udine and Pordenone, smaller cities with a relevant cultural heritage like Cividale del Friuli and Marano Lagunare and very small lesser known locations, which deserve special attention like Pesariis and Pradis.

- 2. Choice of the objects.** Contact with local primary schools allowed the children to

identify specific artwork, parks, characters, cultural sites, monuments and legends from the area where they lived. They were asked to compile a simple card, in which they indicated their favourite choices (fig. 2). Moreover, staff from local museums, cultural associations, and tourist offices helped provide the historical and scientific information necessary for any selected object.

Figure 2. Card for object selection.

3. Texts writing. The writing phase has involved renown authors of Italian children’s literature such as Roberto Piumini and Beatrice Masini. The authors visited the selected territories and were asked to write short texts, which described the objects using heuristics for a simplified language (see paragraph 4). Thanks to the narration technique, they were able to stimulate attention and to share knowledge and information through a non-didactic process.

4. Accessibility tests. All authors received a *vademecum* as a guideline to write accessible texts *ex ante*, but the texts were also proof read by a scientific committee made up of psychologists, paediatricians, art historians, naturalists, and teachers, to assure accessibility of texts *ex post*. For instance, on the legend about the Aganes, the text originally was: “*they were human creatures, perhaps a little ugly, a mix of nymphs of the woods and those of the waters.*” The text was simplified as follows: “*they were human creatures, perhaps a little ugly, a mix of wood and water nymphs*” (Elena Commessatti, *The House of the Aganes*, 2017).

5. Creation of digital outputs. Once the texts were ready, different digital materials were made to reduce communication barriers and expand the potential targeted audience (children aged 8-13).

6. Measuring of text effectiveness. It will be very useful to measure the text clarity and comprehensibility through the user experience. This study is under way and it will be available in December 2018.

3 Project outputs

The #smARradio project allowed the creation of different digital outputs, which included online materials such as:

- Audio stories. These were produced using the talent of well-known Italian actors (including Lella Costa and Giuseppe Battiston), who contributed to the beauty and accessibility of the products.

- Videos. Some stories were illustrated and became videos with or without subtitles.

- Videos with Italian sign language. Some stories became videos with Italian sign language (LIS) to further improve the barrier free communication.

- Audio and video translations. Some audio and video stories were translated into English and German languages.

The project also included offline materials such as:

- Live storytelling performances in theatres and schools.

- FM radio programs.

4 Heuristics for a simplified language

The project starting point and biggest challenge was in defining a set of criteria, which every author had to follow in order to create “simplified” texts. These texts were intended not just to convey simple basic information regarding a selected monument, which would most likely be uninteresting and insignificant for many people. They would instead be creative in order to tell a story, thus light and captivating at the same time. For instance, if we have to explain to a young audience that wolves are afraid of human beings, how effective would a paragraph like this one be: “*Those who are afraid of the big bad wolf raise their hands. Unfortunately, even today, many people are still terrified by this wonderful animal. Is Little Red Riding Hood’s fault? Probably so, since the wolf only eats little girls and grandmothers in fairy tales. In actual fact, however, wolves are afraid of human beings and would never dream*

of attacking them” (Giuseppe Festa, *The Wolf*, 2018).

The definition of the boundaries between too simplified a text and a creative but simple and accessible text was not an easy task to achieve. A vademecum with heuristics was therefore created as a guideline for all authors, who participated in the project. In the vademecum the author is given an introduction on the project and he/she is asked to write a synopsis of the text. Once the synopsis is approved, the author starts the writing process, keeping in mind, among others, the following guidelines:

- the title should be short and effective;
- soon after the title there should be a short description of the object, with date and location.
- the text length should be between 2000-2300 characters;
- every text should describe just one object;
- the narrative style should be of high quality and should involve the reader emotionally;
- there can be limited fantastical elements such as a talking statue or a dream;
- there may be fictional descriptions of real events;
- the narrative style must not be too notionist;

In addition, the *vademecum* gives instructions for accessible writing through a list of heuristics for lexicon and syntax. Some examples are shown in table 1.

Further studies will have to measure the effectiveness of these texts by comparing different typologies (more simplified versus less simplified ones).

Lexicon	Syntax
Use of familiar words that belong to the basic language	Maintaining order in the subject-verb-complements structure
Do not use implicit subjects	Avoiding subordinate clauses or complex syntactical constructions
Avoid using synonyms	Avoid the passive form

²⁰ For a comparison between the two videos typologies see: <http://www.radiomagica.org/portfolio-articoli/un-marciapiede-sullacqua/> and

Table 1. Screenshot from the video "Lo Zaino dei Cramars".

5 Other ways to expand the project accessibility

Along with the heuristics for a simplified text, the #smARradio project offered different ways of measuring the appreciation of listeners. For instance, based on the user experience, it is clear that illustrations of video productions could be more effective if the drawing strictly followed the text, so that the image is used as a visual support to the audio description (see: <http://www.radiomagica.org/portfolio-articoli/laltare-di-ratchis/>). It has also been shown that among the different illustration techniques, the ink drawing or the monochrome drawing is more effective for partially sighted people. See for instance Figure 3.



Figure 3. Screenshot from the video "Lo Zaino dei Cramars".

And last but not least, when using the Italian sign language, would an interpreter be more appreciated if she appears on the video side or if she interacts with the text illustrations as in Figure 4.²⁰ All of these are still open questions, which deserve further study and research.

6 Results

Does a universal, common language really exist? In this ongoing project there are still many potential ways of embracing a wider public and reducing communication barriers. Although this research project does not allow coming up with an ultimate answer to this question, it has allowed exploring the potentials of storytelling,

<http://www.radiomagica.org/portfolio-articoli/il-porto-di-aquileia/>.

accessibility, and social inclusion. All of them seem to work very well together.



Figure 4. The Italian sign language interpreter is integrated in the image.

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