ACCESSING

ACCESS

by Paul O'Donnell

A theatre maker's attempt to make his work more accessible, and how venues/organisations might be able to help

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#AccessingAccess

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Photo: Alex Brenner

An Introduction

The Fear of Access

Hello, I'm Paul O'Donnell, a solo theatre maker, performer and producer who has set out on the task of trying to make my solo show *We've Got Each Other* more accessible to deaf, hard of hearing, blind and visually impaired audiences. The show was captioned and audio described using Talking Birds' Difference Engine, which is covered in more detail on page 4.

My journey started at the East Meets West Symposium run by Little Earthquake in 2017, where I timidly raised my hand in a discussion about access. I explained that I, like a lot of artists, wanted to make my work more accessible, but felt there were two things that were preventing me from doing so: 1. the fear, and 2. the cost. I believe that these two barriers are prohibiting artists like me from giving it a try for fear of getting it wrong, saying/doing the wrong thing or being branded 'tokenistic', or being unable to sustainably resource access as an integral part of their practice; the cost of making the show more accessible for the 2019 tour consumed a big chunk of my under £15k ACE application - more on this later.

But, in that room the response I received was "Well, isn't it better to do something than nothing at all?" and so I thought, "I guess I'd better do 'something' then". My terrifying journey into 'access' had begun and I realised that to combat that fear of getting it wrong, I had to dive in head first, make all the mistakes and learn from them. I am still learning.

"Isn't it better to do something than nothing at all?"

Since then I have:

- Engaged in a process of making the audio descriptions and captions for *We've Got Each Other* a creative rather than just functional output.
- Captioned and Audio Described all 23 shows in my 2019 UK tour of *We've Got Each Other* using the Difference Engine.
- Welcomed in 38 audience members who usually wouldn't be able to access my work.
- Engaged 3 deaf or blind focus groups to refine this service and my understanding.

I should note that I am not deaf or blind myself, and that I understand and believe that deaf and blind individuals need to be leading on discussions around their access requirements. I do however feel that it is everyone's responsibility to ensure that access for all is considered in their creative work. In this pack I am particularly following the social model of disability with the belief that deaf and disabled individuals are only disabled by the systemic barriers, negative attitudes and exclusions that society presents. This pack is me doing what I can to challenge and change those barriers.

This pack is in part me sharing the lessons learnt through this process with you, in the hope that if you were to consider embarking on your own journey, it might be just that little bit easier. I also hope to share some of the issues independent artists like me are facing in making access a natural part of their processes. Ironically enough, for independent artists like me access currently feels a little... inaccessible.

For venues/organisations, I hope this might also encourage you to consider what support you can offer independent artists to help combat these barriers in order to make this a sustainable part of all of our practices. I truly believe it can only be achieved as a sector-wide effort, and have to remind us that technically, by law, we all should have started ten years ago now (Equalities Act 2010).

A note on terminology
Throughout this document, I have used terms including deaf, blind, visually impaired and hard of hearing. I appreciate that different people advocate for different terms - the thinking behind my use of these terms is covered on page 5.

We've Got Each Other

What is the Difference Engine?

Introduction to the Show (for context)

We've Got Each Other is the almost entirely imagined Bon Jovi musical.

The idea of the show is that I, a solo independent artist, was sadly unable to resource the full cast, opulent sets, extravagant costumes, hydraulic lifts or confetti cannons that we might expect of a modern juke-box musical. Instead… you're left with just me in the corner of an empty stage telling you what you would have seen, had I had enough money to actually make it happen. It is up to you as an audience to make the show come to life via the powers of your imaginations, assisted on your way by my live descriptions, 180+ lighting cues playing in real time, and 12 cover versions of *Livin' On A Prayer* acting as the score.

It is a meta-theatrical and loving satire of the extravagance of modern musicals celebrating the community that is formed when people come together and 'believe'.

Note The show was fairly easy to make work for blind audiences as I describe most of what you imagine, so naturally it was already partly audio described. It was an understandably harder process to cater to (and sell to) deaf spectators with a small dependency on a knowledge of Bon Jovi / *Livin' On A Prayer*.

Photo: Alex Brenner

Photo: Janet Vaughan

Philippa Cross, Talking Birds | talking birds

Talking Birds makes work in all sorts of intriguing buildings, outdoor spaces and unusual settings; work that is often site-specific, in promenade or in the round. Working in non-traditional theatre spaces has always thrown up access challenges, but we learned over the years that approaching these challenges creatively can produce more interesting work for everyone, whether they have specific access needs or not. The Difference Engine came out of that way of thinking, and from our experience of traditional access solutions not really working for us or our audiences. They were either inappropriate to the intimate contexts we were working in; required power which was not always available, were too static, or simply too expensive for a small company with small budgets (a poor excuse, but a reality).

When the smartphone came along, we realised that not only could it deliver text and audio, but it would be portable, available using devices that people carry with them already, and there might be some exciting creative possibilities with it too! So we developed a simple system using a laptop (or Raspberry Pi for our portable version) and a router to deliver captions, audio description and more to phones and tablets via a local area network (so no need for broadband, meaning it can work anywhere). In rolling it out across Coventry and the UK, we want to ensure that artists and small companies like us have a simple, affordable system to help them make their work more accessible. Most of all, we're interested in shifting 'access' from an after-thought, or a marketing or 'front of house' activity, to the heart of the creative team, encouraging writers and directors to take creative responsibility for how all their audience members experience the work they create, and making work that is better for everyone.

Things to Know

Terminology: D/deaf or B/blind

D/B
Those who identify themselves with the Deaf or Blind cultures.

d/b
Refers to the medical condition of having hearing or sight loss.

Although some people prefer the use of D/deaf and B/blind, it's important to bear in mind that some people find them divisive as they seem to separate those in 'the culture' from those 'outside of it'. Because of this, through this pack I will generally be using the terms deaf and blind under the understanding that they refer simply to the medical condition of having hearing or sight loss.

As always, on an individual basis it is best to ask the individual how they wish to be addressed or referred to.
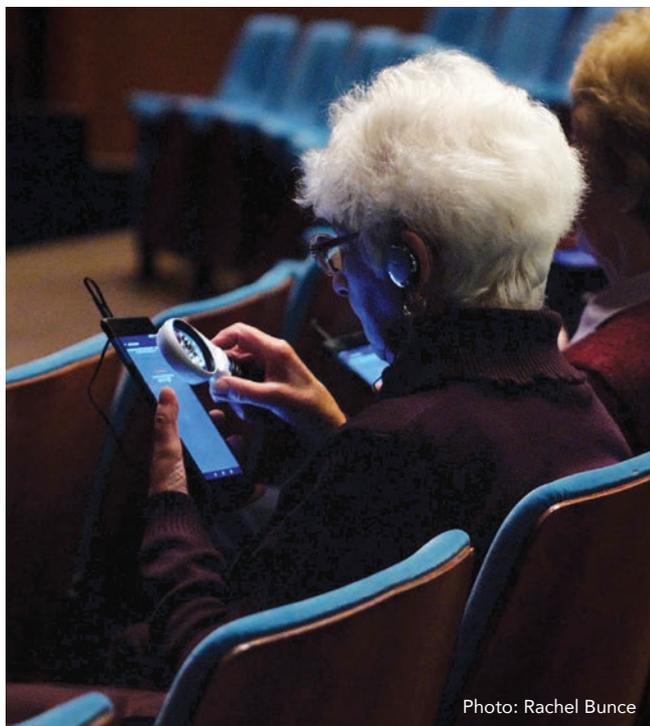
Photo: Rachel Bunce

deaf audiences: Captions are not necessarily the best way to make your work accessible to those born deaf. Communication through the English language can create problems for deaf individuals as the syntax of English is very different to BSL, which for many is their primary language. Know which audience your work is targeting and what the best access method is for them.

blind audiences: Only **10-20%**[1] of those who are visually impaired have absolutely no sight at all (different sources confusingly say different percentages in this range).

> **Note** The majority of blind users will be partially sighted. We have found that often they preferred to sit towards the front of the auditorium; being closer to the action allows them to make out movements on stage and navigate lighting changes etc. This is just a general rule of thumb and as always the best thing to do is ask the individual, but it is something to consider if reserving spaces for visually impaired users.

11 million people in the UK are deaf or hard of hearing[2] and **2 million** people are living with sight loss[3] meaning there is a huge need, and market, for catering to these needs.

You're Never Going To Please Everyone!
As with everything, it is important to note that whatever access service you offer it will not serve everyone's personal requirements. On marketing materials I would advise that you don't write something like 'accessible to deaf and blind individuals', instead say 'this show will be captioned and audio described using the Difference Engine' so that people understand how access is being offered and can make their own decisions as to whether or not it's for them.

Appendix
1. www.nhs.uk/conditions/vision-loss/
2. www.gov.uk/government/publications/understanding-disabilities-and-impairments-user-profiles/saleem-profoundly-deaf-user
3. www.nhs.uk/conditions/vision-loss/

Marketing:
Reaching deaf and blind Audiences

Photo: Paul O'Donnell

So… you've spent weeks captioning every single line of your show and you've created a sensationally funny/moving/poignant audio description… now, to get people to experience it.

Reaching audiences is generally a difficult task, but engaging individuals with specific access needs, even more so. At the start of this process I brought on board an Audience Development Officer, the wonderful Justine Watkins-Fife, to help me build new relationships with these audiences. Justine liaised with marketing departments, connected and met with access groups local to the venues and delivered a programme of audience development for both myself and the venues we toured to. We managed to reach 38 people who required these services. Although this may not sound like a lot, in 2019 this was quite the achievement and way over the anticipated reach we set out to realistically find at the start of the process… perhaps another sign that we all need to be doing more? The below are some of our top tips and lessons learnt through the 2019 tour of *We've Got Each Other*.

Making your Marketing Materials Accessible
First rule: if you are trying to engage people with specific access needs, you need to make sure that your marketing materials are also suitable to those specific access needs. And this needs to run across the board; flyers, trailers, social media posts, your website etc.

Print   Where you can, provide Large Print versions of marketing materials (Font size: 14+ using Sans, Arial, Helvetica).

Avoid capital letters and use high contrast colours - these make it easier for visually impaired audiences or audiences with reading difficulties to take in.

Avoid gloss print or coated flyers. Not only is it more environmentally friendly, but coating generally makes it harder for blind or visually impaired people to read.

Trailers   Make sure you offer a captioned and audio described trailer (they're different). Eg:
- Captioned Trailer: www.youtube.com/watch?v=cp3oA3eQdzI&t=2s
- Audio Described Trailer: www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTf6fNI5I1E

Make sure the venues are using both of these too - we often had to persuade marketing teams that having both of these trailers on their websites was essential as they serve two different groups in very different ways.

At many venues there will be no sound playing from the TV screens where your trailer might be - if so, still ask that the captioned trailers play on these as it at least sends a visual signal that the show has access in mind.

Social Media   On Twitter and Facebook you can adjust your settings so that whenever you upload an image it asks you to write an image description to make it accessible to the visually impaired:
- Twitter: help.twitter.com/en/using-twitter/picture-descriptions
- Facebook: www.facebook.com/help/216219865403298

YouTube and Facebook also allow you to add closed captions to your videos:
- Youtube: https://support.google.com youtube/answer/2734796?hl=en
- Facebook: www.facebook.com help/427723640933279?helpref=uf permalink

Website   The World Wide Web Consortium (W3c) offers tips for how to make your website fully accessible (I'm still working on this) here: www.w3.org/standards/webdesign/accessibility

Clubs and Centres

Deaf and blind clubs and centres were where we had most success in reaching these audiences, with our focus groups coming mainly from people already connected to these centres. Clubs are often volunteer led and only have meetings every few weeks meaning it's worthwhile getting in contact with them far in advance of your show to give them the chance to respond, liaise with the group and get back to you.

Think about how you best communicate with these groups; deaf centres will likely have hearing volunteers/staff/members, but it might be best to approach via email, SMS, Facebook or messenger. Likewise, you may find blind groups respond better to phone calls, though they will probably also have tools/staff to allow them to communicate via email too. We found that the best responses came from arranging face to face meetings. You'll see a budget line on the next page for travel costs for Justine to meet both the venues and the local clubs or centres face to face, so consider this when budgeting your project.

Venues Marketing Departments

Venues' marketing departments play a huge role in building relationships with these audiences. Across this tour, I was surprised to find that only 3 of the 13 venues toured to had existing relationships with deaf or blind groups in their local community before my show came to town, with most venues explaining "we're at the beginning of this journey." Although it was great that there was excitement to embark upon this journey, it does make the task much harder for independent artists if relationships haven't been built and maintained with these audiences in advance of tour dates.

My hope is that in five years time, artists will benefit from venues' relationships and contacts for access more than the other way around. I understand, of course, that marketing teams across the board are over-stretched and under-resourced, but all I can do is encourage you to find ways to cultivate these relationships. I appreciate that this is a Catch-22 situation, in that you need accessible shows to sustain these relationships, and we need the audiences to make this sustainable.

A Front of House Presence

It is important to consider what happens when your access users make their way to the venue - quite often the theatre can be a disorientating space for blind and deaf individuals. What can you do to make their experience around the theatre easier? To achieve this I engaged Will Jackson, who managed and operated the Difference Engine through the tour. Before each show, he set up a station just outside the theatre doors which provided a space to assist in setting up the app and a place for access users to direct any questions.

Will played a crucial role in ensuring that when users with access needs arrived at the venue, they were in a welcoming and comfortable environment and had all the information required, particularly if they hadn't been to the venue before. Front of house staff and ushers were really open to having a briefing conversation with Will for him to introduce them to the app and act as a point of reference for them to direct users towards for assistance. If you can, ask for a meeting with the front of house staff to make sure they are supporting deaf and blind audiences around your show as best as they possibly can.

Photo: Rachel Bunce

The
Cost

The Cost of Access

It is not a revelation to note that independent artists are not the most affluent folk in society. Quite often we are limited to what we can fundraise ourselves or what we can extract from the Arts Council as part of an under £15,000 Project Grant.

Below is a break down of the budget points in my bid that specifically relate to making *We've Got Each Other* accessible or the costs of accessible touring. These are what I put into my Arts Council application, savings have been made since, but use this as a guide for how costs can really mount up.

Expenditure	Quantity	Cost	Total	Notes
Difference Engine Operator (Fee)	25	£80	£2000	23 x shows (generally ½ day) plus 2 x days of rehearsals
Audience Development Officer (Fee)	1	£2000	£2000	To cover promoting the tour in full, as well as liaisons with venues and building relationships with access groups
Creative Audio Describer (Fee)	3	£500	£1500	1 x week traditional audio description, 1x week rehearsals/experimentation with creative audio description, 1x week split through tour to make edits required
blind Artist / Consultant (Fee)	2	£100	£200	1 x day in rehearsal process, 1 x day during tour
deaf Artist / Consultant (Fee)	2	£100	£200	1 x day in rehearsal process, 1 x day during tour
Difference Engine Operators Accommodation Costs	10	£80	£800	Some venues were Midlands based so didn't require Accommodation
Difference Engine Operators Travel Costs to venues	10	£80	£800	Some venues were Midlands based so didn't require Travel costs]
Audience Development Officer - Travel Costs	10	£80	£800	To have face to face meetings with venues as well as deaf and blind community groups.
Total: £8300				

Other Expenses to Consider

■ Your fee - for the creative work to make the access services creative in approach.

■ You will need a marketing budget to make your marketing materials accessible:
  • Design costs for Large Print packs.
  • Captions edited into and/or BSL interpreter on show trailers.
  • A potential redesign of your flyers

■ The Difference Engine was free for us to use as we were trialling this system. Whatever means of access you use is another cost to factor in. Some can be *very* expensive.

■ Rehearsal space for the process of creating the access elements and trialling it live; ours was support in kind from Arena Theatre.

An Unsustainable Practice (currently)

Making work accessible is currently a financially unsustainable practice for independent artists without subsidy; quite often the expenditure to make your show accessible and the income gained from tickets as a result do not balance. This is not to say that it is not worth doing, and is not offering an excuse to artists, but is raised just to highlight the economic issues that we need to resolve for it to become a self-sustaining part of independent artists' practice in the longer term.

To illustrate the problem; if we take the **£8300** of expenditure listed in my budget on the previous page and divide it by the **38** access users we managed to directly engage through this tour, it means we spent **£218.42** on every person who required these access services. With ticket prices being maximum **£15**, it means that economically we were making a **£203.42** loss per ticket via access alone (not even including the cost of the show itself).

I think the solution is two-fold; firstly we as artists need to start considering access as a natural part of our processes, not an 'added cost', to ensure that these expenditure lines are just 'part of our budgets', just as set design might be. Secondly, by working together, from venues through to independent artists, I hope we can find ways to cut down and reverse the economics of access to ensure that it is a financially viable part of our work.

To Consider

■ Are there ways that artists can share resources to break down the costs between them?
  • If there are shows in the same venue at different times, might you be able to split the costs and share the same system, particularly for double bills?

■ The expenditure of making my show accessible would have been exactly the same had 38 people or 76 people experienced it. Getting more paying audience members who are deaf and blind into the show is a step towards balancing the budget lines.
  • Requires venues having strong relationships with these groups to draw from.

■ There are cheaper alternatives to think about. For example you can caption a show using PowerPoint projected onto the back wall if this works for your performance. This alternative is free/very low cost.

■ Venues - if your staff have particular expertise in this area or training in making work or marketing materials accessibility, might this be something you could offer to artists as support in kind?
  • If not, it might be worth considering training your staff in this area so that they have the ability to pass this expertise onto artists?

■ Venues - in festival contexts, are you able to employ 2 x BSL interpreters, or a Difference Engine Operator, to work across the festival rather than ask each artist to provide their own? [See In Good Company's Profile on page 11].

■ Venues - if you can, make it your aim to book more work that embeds access, this keeps venue costs down and creates a culture where access is usualised for audiences.

Note Arts Council England and Access Costs
Currently 'access costs', as defined by ACE in their grant applications, covers the cost of **artists**' access needs in the **collaboration** of making work, external to the usual budget lines. This is, of course, brilliant, but the big problem with this is that audiences are not included as 'collaborators'. I would argue that for artists wanting to make their work accessible, the most important collaborators to communicate with and learn from, are the audience members who will benefit from it. Sometimes this requires BSL interpretation.

I would encourage ACE to consider including activities such as focus groups, or discussions about the work with audiences who have specific access needs as 'access costs' as this is a form of creative collaboration. Focus groups have proven invaluable to how we not only present the work, but also how we make their experiences around the theatre easier.

Venues/ Organisations

"Holding out an Olive Branch"
In a very early conversation with Philippa Cross, Derek Nisbett (Talking Birds) and Neil Reading (Arena Theatre), Neil said "Well it shouldn't just be your responsibility… I think it's important for venues to hold out an olive branch to meet you half way".

I've asked Neil and Ben Anderson of In Good Company, who are both doing some wonderful work in their support of artists, to give their thoughts as to how venues and organisations might be able to "hold out an olive branch" to support artists taking their first steps into access.

> **"I think it's important for venues to hold out an olive branch to meet you half way"**

Case Study
Neil Reading, Arena Theatre

ARENA THEATRE
WOLVERHAMPTON

The Arena has a long history of supporting accessible work, and in recent years we have committed to ensuring all in-house productions include BSL and Audio Description as standard. Alongside this we offer a creation-space and advice and support to any company looking to make accessible work.

The Arena as a small-scale theatre is not capable of supporting work in a financial way, but by offering space, advice, support and most importantly encouragement we are helping a number of young companies to make their work more accessible.

1. Whose responsibility is it to make theatre accessible to deaf and blind individuals? Artists or venues?

The responsibility for making theatre accessible is incumbent on everyone; producers, venues, audiences, performers, writers, dramaturgs, directors and anyone else involved in the process. Only by working together can we make more and more work accessible and work towards a situation where access is as much a part of the creative process as any other. By working together, we can provide better services, more appropriate access and drive down costs and remove obstacles.

2. What can venues do to tackle both the fear and cost of making theatre accessible for the independent artists they work with?

Try things. Experiment. Play. One of the advantages with work at the small scale is that it is often easier to apply big ideas. Communicating with your audience with access needs is always a valuable thing to do (set up an Access Forum) and work with them to assess what you CAN do, not what you can't. Creative responses to access challenges are more exciting than just trying to do things the way they have always been done. Once you begin on a journey of making your work accessible you will soon see how much can be achieved on little to no budget. Alongside this, lobby. Lobby whoever you need to, to gain more funding to allow you to develop the more expensive ideas. And finally, put access into your Arts Council bids. Make it part of your creative process, cost it properly and apply for those costs to be covered.

Accessible theatre is not the reserve of those with huge budgets. A significant amount can be achieved by venues and companies with more modest needs and by taking a more creative approach to delivery, these smaller organisations can progress access in new and innovative ways that those with bountiful resources may never have considered.

Case Study
Ben Anderson,
In Good Company

In Good Company is committed to increasing opportunities and support for all. We recognise the need within 'all' to be diverse and representative of the world we live in today. Being based in Derby, which has the second largest Deaf population in the UK, this is particularly prevalent for us.

We support artists to embed access in a number of ways. We ensure that all our commissions and bursaries applications include a question which talks about a theatre makers commitment to access; thus ensuring all projects are really thinking about how to embed access provision from the beginning.

Our flagship festival Departure Lounge is a home for work-in-progress and Edinburgh Previews and a key element of this is ensuring we provide staff time to caption artists scripts (ensuring we are considerate to the fact some scripts aren't finished or are improvised), provide BSL interpreters and Operators both in the tech and the show, allowing artists to work with these people to embed their work. We are also very selective with our interpreters or operators to ensure they have creative experience and can work with artists, whether that be in their tech or around the building all day, chatting to them. This is the great thing about festival contexts, they operate on an economic model that allows for more to be made of the provision provided.

Making your work accessible to deaf or blind audiences is not an easy task, it requires extra finances that are often hard to come by, a knowledge that you might not have just yet and contacts that are not yet in place. It might feel impossible.

I am, however, a firm believer that it will only become possible if artists consistently try to battle through the fear and break down the costs of making access work, after all… isn't that what funding bodies like Arts Council England are there to support?

Artists, however, cannot do it alone; we need venues and organisations to work with us to "Try things. Experiment. Play.". For me, venues' crucial role right now is to support artists in tackling the fear of access; offering guidance, mentorship and partnerships to answer questions of "What is the right way to do this?". When we start to take away the fear of getting it wrong, more artists will take on this challenge, more theatre will be available to these audiences, and as a result there will be a stronger network of access users around venues. Through getting more access users' bums on seats, as well as developments in affordable technologies like the Difference Engine, I believe we will then start to break down its overwhelming cost. It will take time.

If you are an artist who hasn't started on your journey into access yet, I hope you will take this pack as a kick start for you to at least consider your step. For venues, I hope you will use this as a provocation to think about how you can support artists in combating the fear and the cost of access. And for everyone reading this, in the words of Bon Jovi, "we've got each other [...] let's give it a shot".

Paul O'Donnell

Photo: Rachel Bunce
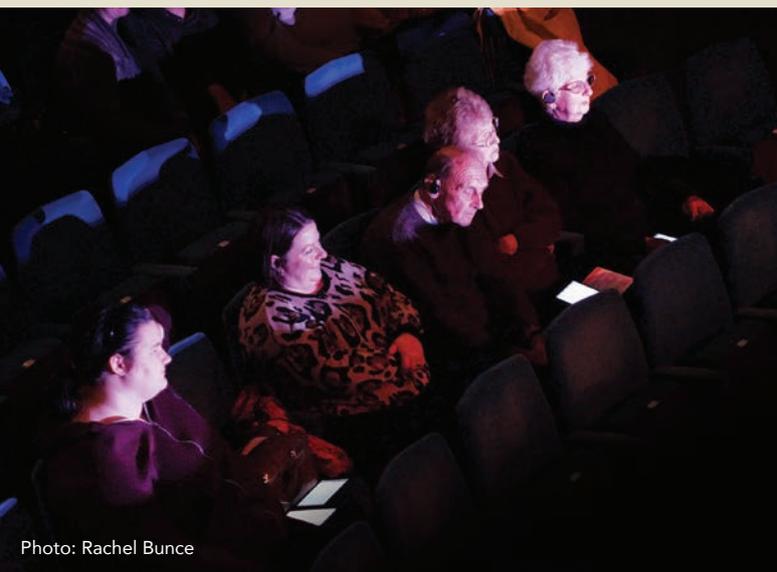
Further Resources

An example of an audio flyer created by **Taking Flight Theatre**:
https://soundcloud.com/taking-flight-theatre/dragons-house-audio-flyer-english-june19

Typography for visually impaired people by **Textmatters**:
http://www.textmatters.com/resources/pdfs/vislmpd_typogTM.pdf

DIY Access Guide by **Attitude is Everything**:
http://www.attitudeiseverything.org.uk/resources/diy-access-guide

Demystifying Access by **Unlimited Theatre**:
https://www.weareunlimited.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Unlimited_ProducersResourcePack-Dec-2015-v2.pdf

Marketing and Audience Development findings for *We've Got Each Other* by **Justine Watkins-Fife**:
http://bit.ly/WGEO_findings

Credits

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