RNIB report on improving audio description for documentary television programs

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Abstract

This study aimed to identify potential actions which could improve the quality of audio description for documentary television. Feedback was collected from 68 audio description users via a focus group, multiple interviews, and a distributed questionnaire. Participants were shown examples of audio described documentaries and asked a variety of questions about their own experiences. Suggestions for improvement were abundant, but key points included ensuring an audio description script is concise and relevant, the delivery style matches that of the documentary, and volume levels of the audio description and programme audio are consistent and well-balanced.

Introduction

Audio description is described by Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) as additional commentary for television programmes that explains what is happening on screen. Audio description can describe body language, expressions, and movements, as well as the aesthetics of a programme, making a programme clear through sound. This accessibility feature has been designed to allow individuals with partial or no sight to watch and enjoy television, and whilst it is an effective tool, its current availability is limited. A content analysis conducted by RNIB revealed that, across 3 days and 82 channels, only 27% of television was audio described. 20 television genres were identified across the 3-day period and their audio description availabilities were noted against their potential audio description availabilities. This research motivated RNIB to conduct additional research to establish specific barriers to accessibility within each genre identified. Factual television, often referred to as documentary television, comprised 10 of the 20 genres identified, due to its abundance of sub-categories, such as factual nature, or factual reality. As a result, this far-reaching and varied genre will be the focus of this study. The aim of this research is to establish the

current quality of audio description for documentary television and how the audio description for this genre can be improved upon.

Method

Focus group

Data collection began with a small focus group, intended as a preliminary search for prospective audio description barriers and concerns within the documentary genre.

Participants

5 participants (2m, 3f) were recruited for this focus group. All were regular audio description users, 4 being severely sight impaired and 1 being sight impaired. Participants were recruited via advertisements online and on RNIB Connect Radio.

Design

The focus group was conducted online, via Microsoft Teams. It was a structured discussion, consisting of a pre-written script, including questions about lived experiences using audio description for documentaries. Additionally, participants were shown example video clips of audio described documentaries (for more detail, see: Interviews – Design). The participants were shown each example, once, with audio description, and general comments were collected. The focus group was recorded and transcribed to ensure of accurate data collection and analysis.

Procedure

The focus group script was followed throughout the conversation, although participants were allowed time to digress if they wished to. Participants who were hesitant to respond were occasionally prompted by the discussion leader. On completion of the focus group, key points (those which had relevance to the research topic) were extracted from the meeting transcript, with duplicate points being removed. The points that remained were organised into one of four categories: script, delivery, audio, and general.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted with the intention of gaining in-depth experiential feedback from AD users.

Participants

Participants were recruited via advertisement online and RNIB Connect Radio. 8 participants (1 nb, 4f, 3m) were recruited for an interview. 2 participants were sight impaired, and the remaining 6 were severely sight impaired. All were regular audio description users.

Design

Interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams. Each interview was structured, following a set of pre-prepared questions. Questions concerned the interviewee's lived experiences using audio description when watching documentaries. In addition, each interview featured 3 examples of audio described documentary programmes, detailed below.

Example video clip details:
- **BBC: Africa – Sahara [00:41:30 - 00:46:00].**

A group of ants working to bring a fly to their nest. Example chosen due to the rich descriptions and literary devices used in the audio description script. For example, "they bodily haul their catch across stone ridden sands."

- **Netflix: Surviving Paradise (A Family Tale) [00:10:00 - 00:14:20]**

A family of elephants drinking and eating from flood plains surrounding the delta river, followed by hippos swimming in the water, and a story of an excluded lioness. Example chosen due to rich soundscapes which feature in the clip, depicting splashing water and animal sounds.

- **Channel 4: The Secret Life of the Zoo – Difficult Dates [00:05:50 – 00:09:30]**

The lead breeding male of a group of sengis attempting to bond with a female sengi. Then, a young and feeble sengi, tasked at taking over from his 'stud' father. Example chosen due to the detailed narration accompanying the clip.

All examples were from the nature documentary genre to reduce bias in participant responses and were chosen for including a device which was theorised to increase accessibility. Sophisticated language with rich descriptions and literary devices, rich and clear soundscapes, and consistent narration were all investigated for their possible benefits. Each example was taken from a different TV channel or streaming service to encourage an accurate reflection of the audio description available. Each video clip was approximately 5 minutes long, and was

shown without, then with, audio description. Detailed responses to each video clip were collected, using pre-written questions. Each interview was recorded and transcribed to promote accuracy of data collection and response.

Procedure

Participants were questioned by the interviewer in an informal manner to encourage a relaxed and honest atmosphere. Each participant received the same interview questions. However, there were a few instances when questions were removed as the participant had answered the question in a previous response or due to time constraints. Participants were also allowed to digress in their response, should they wish to share additional thoughts. On completion, relevant feedback was extracted from the transcript of each participant. Responses were collated for each question and their content was analysed to produce standardised summaries.

Surveys

Participants

Recruitment was conducted via online advertisement. 55 participants completed the survey, 43 being severely sight impaired, 5 sight impaired, 3 blind and 4 not specifying their level of vision. When asked how often they use AD, 33 responded 'daily,' 11 'weekly,' 5 'monthly,' 2 'yearly,' 1 'never,' and 3 didn't specify.

Design

The survey was made available online, using Microsoft Forms. As example videos could not be played, due to Netflix requiring a subscription service, participants were merely asked a series of questions about their experiences with audio described documentaries.

Procedure

Participants could complete the survey independently, in their own time, up until a given closing date. After closing the survey, responses were analysed. Multiple choice question responses were collated to produce percentage figures. Open questions were summarised using content analysis techniques: responses were categorised based on their content and the frequency of responses for each category was calculated to generate percentage figures.

Results
Focus group
Participant feedback is organised into topic categories. Each point was raised at least once within the focus group discussion.

Script:

- Should include concise language
- Should include descriptions of actions, facial features and expressions, ethnicity, age, appearance of animals, people and surroundings
- Should not include information which can be found elsewhere in the programme.
- AD should be included in the programme wherever possible and appropriate.

Delivery:

- Speech should be clear
- Dislike when a voice is patronising or dull. Tone of voice should be natural, engaging, and emotive.
- Pace of speech should be appropriate.
- Delivery style should match that of the documentary.
- Use the same audio describer throughout a series.

Audio:

- Audio description should be in time with the program, so that what is being described is on screen.
- Volume of the soundtrack and the AD should be balanced so that both are clear.
- Sound effects should be rich and clear as these can enhance understanding of program content.

General:

AD should be considered from the production process of a documentary, not added in at the end.

Interviews
Notes sections include relevant quotes and additional information.

- Does audio description tend to be available for the television programs you are interested in?

- Sometimes: 72%
- Yes: 14%
- Unsure: 14%

Notes:
- "About 60% of the TV that I watch has audio description on it."
- "They often put on-screen text at the end […], and if there's no audio description, I essentially can't access that."
- "Very hit and miss."
- "How often is it that there is something that you are planning on watching, but it doesn't have audio description?" "Maybe 30%."

- Does audio description tend to be available for the documentary programs you are interested in?
  - Sometimes: 60%
  - No: 20%
  - Unsure: 20%

Notes:
"A lot of them don't, especially when they're reruns of documentaries."

- **Is it always necessary for documentaries to have audio description?**
  - No: 100%
  - Alternative factors which can increase accessibility: a good presenter, good narration, the way it has been shot or filmed, lots of dialogue.

Notes:
"I can watch without the audio description, but it's not as enjoyable and I definitely know that I miss out on things."

- **Would you watch television more often if there was a higher availability of audio description?**
  - Yes: 60%
  - No: 40%

Notes:
- "I don't choose my programs based on whether it's audio described or not."
- "I just go for what I'm interested in."
- "100% I would watch more TV if [audio description] was more available. Yeah, for sure. I mean, it should be available on everything."

- "I don't know if I'd watch more, but I probably wouldn't give up quite so much."

Example 1: Africa – Sahara (BBC) without audio description
- **General**
  - 62.5% felt unclear about what had happened in the clip.
  - 62.5% would not watch this program without audio description.

- Narration
  - 50% found it to be helpful.

- Recorded sound
  - 37.5% found it to be helpful.

- Soundtrack
  - 12.5% found music beneficial.
  - The narrator "narrated for a seeing audience."

Notes:
- Participants argued the music was 'too loud,' making it harder to focus on the program's narration.

Example 1: Africa – Sahara (BBC) with audio description
- Script
  - 62.5% spoke positively of language choices
  - 12.5% would prefer simpler language choices
  - 37.5% complained of duplicate information in audio description

- General
  - 100% claimed audio description 'much improved' their viewing experience.
  - 3/8 claimed audio description improved their viewing experience 100%.

- Delivery
  - 100% spoke positively of delivery

- Audio
  - 50% praised the audio levels

Notes:

- Script:
  - "It covered everything."
  - "That was like having a book in front of me."
  - "Some audio description is just there, whereas that one properly enhanced it." … "added to the atmosphere."
  - "I really like the language."
  - Complex vocabulary "unnecessary."
  - "She was saying things, often, just slightly different from what he did." "David Attenborough says about the lizard […] and she repeats that. I don't think that's necessary."

- Delivery:
  - Natural, soft voice
  - Good contrast of female voice against male narrator
  - Unobtrusive
  - Matched the style of the program

- Audio:
  - "It was done with good balance."
  - "The mixing was good."

- Criticisms:
  - Describer could have been clearer
  - Audio description didn't line up with visuals
  - Soundtrack volume reduced for audio description

Example 2: Surviving Paradise (A Family Tale) (Netflix) without audio description
- General
  - 50% found the clip hard to follow
    25% could visualise the program

- Narration
  - 50% criticised the narration

- Soundtrack
  - 62.5% praised the music for being gentle and not overpowering the narration.
  - 25% unhelpful for visualising the program
  - 25% helped with engagement with the emotions of the program

- Recorded sound
  - Helpful: 25%
  - A little helpful: 37%
  - Unhelpful: 25%
  - Unsure: 13%

Notes:
- "Narration failed to paint a visual picture."
- "It left me wanting to know more."
- "I can see where audio description would come in handy."

Notes on the recorded sound:
- "The soundscape actually helped more than the narration in this instance."
- "[It helped] a little bit but again having extra audio description would have been helpful."
- "That helps a bit. It made me realise that it confirmed my idea that they were in water, and something was happening with water."
- "It did help me visualise what I thought might be going on."

Example 2: Surviving Paradise (A Family Tale) (Netflix) with audio description
- General
  - 75% believed audio description didn't significantly improve accessibility of the program.
  - Small improvement: 63%
  - Big improvement: 25%
  - No improvement: 12%

- Script
  - 87.5% thought script needed improvement.
  - Delivery
  - 50% unhappy with delivery of AD

- Audio
  - 75% happy with audio level.

Notes:
- Script:
  - Unnecessary items in script

- Important items missing from the script
- Gaps in audio not being taken advantage of

- Delivery:
  - Patronising
  - Too fast
  - Not distinctive enough from narrator

- Audio:
  - Volume levels consistent
  - Clear
  - Non-disruptive

Example 3: The Secret Life of the Zoo (Channel 4) without audio description

- General
  - 87.5% could recount what had happened in the program
  - 50% wanted more visual descriptions (e.g., animal appearance).

- Soundtrack
  - 50% said soundtrack was helpful.
  - 50% said soundtrack was entertaining, although 3/4 said it wasn't helpful for visualisation

- Narration
  - 37.5% found narration very beneficial
  - 62.5% argued more visual descriptions were needed
  - 75% couldn't visualise what the animal looked like.

- Happy to watch this program without audio description:
  - Yes: 62%
  - No: 25%
  - Undecided: 13%

- Narration:
  - "I could tell you really well what happened in that clip. […] To be honest, I thought you'd actually show me the one with audio description when it started, because it was so good."
  - "I didn't know what one looked like. That's the only thing I missed on it. Apart from that, I got a very good idea what was going on."
  - "I needed more description, […] what does he look like?"

Example 3: The Secret Life of the Zoo (Channel 4) with audio description

- General
  - 75% found the audio description improved their viewing experience to some extent.
  - 50% significant improvement (80-100%)

- Script
  - 62.5% satisfied with audio description script.

- Delivery
  - 75% satisfied with delivery.

- Audio
  - 100% satisfied with audio.

Notes:
- Script criticisms: not detailed enough, need more visual description, not using spaces effectively.
- Delivery:
- Tone of describer critiqued for failing to fit the program style, lacking enthusiasm.

- Audio
  - Audio clear and non-disruptive.
  - Ideal audio description script for a documentary
  - Describe things relevant to the program's purpose
  - Fill in gaps
  - Visual description important for less well-known features
  - Visual description of scene change
  - Do not include duplicate information
  - Describer should tell a story, "Not just tick a box."
  - Do not provide more information than a seeing viewer would have. Want to make own discoveries and inferences the same way seeing viewers can.

- Ideal delivery of audio description for a documentary
  - Clear voices.
  - Match tone of program.
  - Passionate, emotive tone.

- Should "do the program justice."

- Ideal audio for an audio described documentary
  - Clear audio.
  - Audio description distinctive from original program audio.
  - Consistent volume levels.
  - Smooth, mixed well.

- Most beneficial feature for accessibility
  - Complex vocabulary in script: 37%
  - Narration: 37%
  - Soundscapes: 13%
  - All: 13%

Notes:
  - Complex vocabulary in script praised for being most beneficial to the visualisation of a program.
  - Narration praised for being beneficial when audio description isn't available. Minimal gaps are left unfilled, and narrators tend to be more enthusiastic and knowledgeable about subject matter.
  - Soundscapes praised in cases where there is little audio description available, or when viewer has some sight.

Surveys
Notes sections include relevant quotes and additional information.

- Would you watch television more often if there was a higher availability of audio description?
  - Yes: 64%
  - No: 11.3%
  - Maybe: 22.6%
  - Other: 1.9%

- How often do you watch documentaries?
  - Daily: 22.2%
  - Weekly: 37%
  - Monthly: 14.8%
  - Sometimes: 20.3%
  - Other: 5.6%

- Do the documentaries that you want to watch tend to have audio description available?
  - Yes: 15%
  - No: 11%
  - Sometimes: 67%
  - Other: 7%

- Would you watch documentaries more often if more documentaries were audio described?
  - Yes: 67%
  - No: 9%
  - Maybe: 22%
  - Other: 2%

- If it is not possible to add audio description to a documentary, for example, due to there not being enough pauses in the audio, what would you like to happen?
  - An introductory description to be provided before the program begins: 12%
  - The program to pause at intervals to allow audio description to be inserted: 28%
  - Audio description to override the program audio: 4%
  - Visual descriptions to be written into the built-in narration: 38%
  - Other: 18%

- Do you feel that the audio description for documentary programs provides enough detail? Why or why not?
  - Yes: 36%
  - No: 20%
  - Sometimes: 31%
  - Other: 13%

Notes:
  - "I think when there is audio description on documentaries it is perfect."
  - "It is a balance, but too much detail could slow down the overall flow of the film."
  - "Sometimes the audio description is both entertaining, informative and fits in nicely with the tone of the program. Sometimes it can be rather minimalist."

- "During some animal documentaries, I am not always sure what the animal under discussion looks like."
- "I love documentaries and wish to get a fuller experience of them."

- Which features of a documentary would you most like to hear described? Pick your top three.
  - Facial expressions: 9%
  - Facial features: 1.5%
  - Clothing: 3%
  - Bodily appearance: 2%
  - Behaviours of characters: 17%
  - Text on screen: 19%
  - Graphics on screen: 11%
  - Scenery: 9.5%
  - Objects or landmarks: 14%
  - Subtitles: 12.5%
  - Other: 1%

- Do you find there are some documentaries that you can follow without audio description? If yes, which ones and why?
  - Yes: 67%
  - No: 14%
  - Sometimes: 19%

  - Notes: Mentioned examples:
  - True crime documentaries
  - Music documentaries
  - Sports documentaries
  - Historical documentaries
  - Travel documentaries
  - Science documentaries
  - Hannah Fry
  - Brian Cox
  - Louis Theroux
  - Robert Bartlett
  - Andrew Marr

  Notes
  - "If there is enough detail in the narration, I can follow a documentary without any audio description."

- "Yes, generally those where the presentation is given by someone who treats their audience with respect and whose description is pertinent and comprehensive."

- How could broadcasters improve their audio description for documentaries?
  - Appropriate delivery: 8%
  - Availability: 13%
  - Description content: 25%
  - Better mixing: 4%
  - Consider AD at production stage: 8%
  - Quality testing: 4%
  - Easy to access: 8%
  - Increased education and training: 8%
  - Name and role of speaker: 4%
  - Read text on screen: 4%
  - Subtitles: 8%
  - Volume: 10%
  - Consistency: 2%

- When watching a documentary with audio description, do you find the audio quality of the documentary is reduced?
  - Yes: 13%
  - No: 41%
  - Maybe: 31%
  - Other: 15%

- Would you benefit from decreasing the pace of documentaries to allow more room for audio description?
  - Yes: 20%
  - No: 35%
  - Maybe: 35%
  - Other: 10%

- Does the audio description in documentaries tend to fit with the style of the program (in terms of tone, pace, accent etc.)?
  - Yes: 40%
  - No: 6%
  - Sometimes: 43%
  - Other: 11%

- Would you prefer for the style of audio description (tone, pace, accent, etc.) to match that of the documentary?
  - Yes: 62%
  - No: 11%
  - Sometimes: 19%
  - Other: 8%

- Have you ever known an audio describer to change between episodes of a documentary series? If so, how did that affect your viewing experience?
  - No: 54%
  - Yes: 36%
  - Other: 8%
  - Unsure: 2%
  - Bothered by this: 17%
  - Not bothered by this: 25%
  - Sometimes bothered by this: 6%
  - Didn't express feelings: 52%

- When designing high quality audio description for a documentary, which factor is the most important?
  - Script: 50%
  - Delivery: 6%
  - Audio quality: 22%
  - Frequency: 2%
  - Consistency: 14%
  - Other: 6%

- When designing high quality audio description for a documentary, which factor is the least important?
  - Script 14.3%
  - Delivery 6%
  - Audio quality 8.2%
  - Frequency 41%
  - Consistency 8.2%
  - Other 22.3%

- What are some strengths of audio description in documentaries that you would like to see continue in the future?
  - Script:

- Concise, accurate, relevant, sophisticated. Includes text on screen. 'Fills in the gaps.' Announces scene changes. Identifies speaker where relevant.
  - Delivery:
    - Appropriate tone. Clear, eloquent speech. Familiar voices used.
  - Audio:
    - Clear. Non-disruptive. AD in sync with documentary.
  - General:
    - AD for adverts. Consistency in quality and availability. "Can do better."

- What aspects of audio description for documentaries do you dislike?
  - Audio description speaking over program audio: 8%
  - Lack of availability: 11%
  - Inaccurate descriptions: 8%
  - Inconsistent volume levels: 16%
  - Irrelevant descriptions: 27%
  - Not enough descriptions: 6%
  - Not reading text on screen: 11%

Discussion

From this research project, much feedback was obtained from audio description users that could contribute to the production of more accessible television documentaries. Combining the data collected across the focus group, interviews, and surveys, recommended actions can be established to benefit the audio description script, delivery, and audio quality.

Survey data indicated script quality to be a priority in improving audio description for documentaries. Participants suggested that it was preferable for only relevant items to be described in the script, and that an audio description script contains only new information, not information which is available or could be inferred elsewhere in the programme. This is so that the time available for audio description is used wisely, consisting of as much useful information as possible. Similarly, the language used should be concise, and pauses within a programme's audio should be filled with audio description where possible. The most frequently mentioned items which participants hoped to hear described included text on screen, the behaviours of characters, objects or landmarks, facial features and expressions, character ethnicity and age, and the appearance of animals. Sophisticated

language with rich descriptions and the use of literary devices, for example, "they bodily haul their catch across the stone ridden sands," can be beneficial to viewers' understanding of on-screen content, according to feedback given on BBC's 'Africa.'

Participants indicated a preference for audio description to be delivered in a style which fits that of the programme. For example, a fast-paced action scene in a documentary could be paired with fast-paced audio description, delivered in a dramatic or intense tone, to complement the content on screen. This is to ensure the viewer remains immersed in the programme content, and the experience is not disrupted by audio description which sounds out of place. Further, participants stressed the importance for the audio describer to speak in a clear voice, which is easy to hear, with most being reliant on the audio description for their understanding of the programme's visual content. Finally, participants expressed desire for the audio describer to speak in an interested and engaging manner, "doing the programme justice" by describing its contents with enthusiasm. One participant suggested that it should feel like "watching TV with a friend."

Regarding the audio quality of the audio description, participants expressed a preference for the audio description to be clear and well-balanced with the program audio and surround sound. Consistent volume levels were favoured, with participants complaining of programme soundtrack volumes fluctuating beyond reason to account for the audio description track. Partially sighted participants complained of audio description being out of sync with the images on screen, a problem when attempting to depict what is being displayed at a given time. As a result, audio description was requested to be in time with on-screen content where possible. Soundscapes were also said to be beneficial for understanding programme content in some cases, reiterating the importance of clear audio when producing accessible documentaries.

General feedback included the suggestion for broadcasters to address audio description content, availability, and volume if looking to improve their audio description for documentary programmes, with these topics being voted as most in need of development. Additionally, the research data suggests that some documentaries can be accessible without audio description, due to factors such as narration and dialogue quality, which may be something for broadcasters to consider when deciding which documentaries to broadcast without audio description. Perhaps those

which are completely inaccessible without audio description should be prioritised. Similarly, if a documentary requires audio description, but lacks pauses in audio for audio description placement, participants suggest writing visual descriptions into the programme's narration to account for this. Finally, but perhaps most importantly, this study found that audio description which participants deemed to be low quality failed to make a documentary more accessible. This finding reflects the importance of quality control when designing and producing audio description for documentaries; whilst availability of audio description is important, increasing availability would have little benefit if the audio description produced is of a low standard. For audio description to be impactful, it requires a high-quality script, delivery, and audio, as is outlined in this study.

To conclude, whilst there are a lot of positive comments to be made about the audio description presently available for documentary television, it is evident from this research that there are still many improvements which can be made. The aim of this research was to deliver a set of actions which could be consulted by audio description producers and broadcasters to improve the quality of their documentary audio description. With the help of blind and partially sighted participants, this aim has been met. Hopefully, this research has provided a voice for those who use audio description on a regular basis that had thoughts they were keen to share and has provided guidance to those who are working to produce high quality audio description for their blind or partially sighted users.

Questions or comments in relation to this document can be sent to broadcasting@rnib.org.uk