

See differently

## TV Content Focus Group 2 (Sports)

### Major sports events

28 April 2022

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### 1. Purpose

The purpose of this focus group was to explore blind and partially sighted people’s perspectives on watching live sports on TV and how they would like to see coverage made accessible and enjoyable. The session also explored blind and partially sighted people’s preferences for how audio description should be implemented on live sports coverage.

### 2. Participants

There were 4 participants, 3 female and 1 male. All the participants are registered as severely sight impaired (SSI). They all have a keen interest in major sporting events, including cricket, football and the Olympic/Paralympic Games.

The session was moderated by Jonny Marshall, Research Assistant in the Media and Culture Team.

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### **3. Main questions for discussion**

- How accessible are live sports broadcasts?
- Do you feel there is a need to add audio description to the live commentaries on sports broadcasts?
- Do some sports need it more than others? For example: football or rugby, which are fast paced team sports as compared to tennis? Or cricket which is not as fast paced but is a team sport. Perhaps other sports such as judo/gymnastics which may have a lot of detailed movements which need describing?
- What kind of audio description would work well on sports broadcasts? Integrated audio description or traditional audio description?
- How accessible are cultural events linked to major sporting events? For example, opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympic and Paralympic Games.
- Magic wand question – If you had a magic wand and you could do one thing to make your experience of watching sports on TV enjoyable, what would it be?

### **4. Discussion**

#### **4.1 How accessible are live sports broadcasts?**

Do you feel there is a need to add audio description to the live commentaries on sports broadcasts? Do some sports need it more than others? For example: football or rugby, which are fast paced team sports as compared to tennis? Or cricket which is not as fast paced but is a team sport. Perhaps other sports such as judo/gymnastics which may have a lot of detailed movements which need describing?

All participants agreed that live sports broadcasts need audio description to make them accessible and enjoyable. Some participants highlighted that they have stopped watching broadcasts that are not audio described, as there would be little point due to not knowing what is happening.

There was a consensus that some sports would benefit from audio description more than others. For instance, fast paced sports such as football and more visual sports such as gymnastics, synchronised

swimming and martial arts were suggested as sports that would particularly benefit from being described. Participants also suggested that the costumes could be described to add an extra layer of detail. Some participants indicated that for events such as the marathon, due to its long duration, commentators would have more time to provide description of the action. One participant felt that not enough detail is provided at the start of a race when the athletes are all bunched up and at times felt lost due to the lack of description.

When discussing short events such as the 100m, participants recognised that commentators focus on collisions and there is little time to provide a description. The group instead suggested that a slow-motion replay with an audio described commentary could be provided at the end of the race.

Some participants felt that it is particularly important to have a clear description of the sport and equipment. For example, it was suggested that since blind and partially sighted people may not know the height of a pole vault, it would be helpful to have a clear and concise description of the environment. Participants stated that for this to be effective, the language used would have to be appropriately chosen to suit the audience it is being delivered to. If this was implemented, participants felt that it would help to improve their concentration whilst watching a sporting event.

The participants indicated that they currently felt lost whilst watching many sports as there was no audio description. For example: ice skating, snooker, bowling, curling and skiing. However, one participant felt that more integrated description is provided for the shotput and javelin, from when they enter the field to when the object is thrown. It was agreed that without any best practice guidance on integrating details to describe visual displays in the commentary, it was up to the individual producers and commentators to decide what would be included in the commentary.

One participant highlighted the importance of describing refereeing or virtual umpiring decisions. For instance, during a VAR check in a football match, no description is provided on the offside lines, or while any other decision being made.

“I am grateful for what audio description is in place, but it would be great to have more in place for sports. For people who are interested in gymnastics and martial arts it would certainly be necessary.” (Sports fan)

“I would only watch what I know I can follow.” (Sports fan)

“I discovered that quite a lot of sports which I would like to follow I can't because the commentary doesn't tend to talk about what is happening. They tend to be discussing the profile of an athlete. Radio commentary is also often written and delivered for people who can or have seen the equipment or the pitch. For example, I have no idea how high or wide are the parallel bars. Yes, I can read online but then that's not good enough.” (Sports fan)

“A programme that I do get frustrated with, that I would like to watch is synchronised swimming and that would be quite good with audio description because of the costumes and bits and pieces as well as what they are doing. Yet again the commentators never tell you what is going on. They sometimes tell you that they are lining up, but not really what is going on. The experience could be very much augmented by having audio description provided.” (Sports fan)

“There are probably also a lot of other sports I don't watch because of the commentators. It just puts me off as there is not much description of what's happening.” (Sports fan)

“During snooker they don't describe what is happening, they just say the score.” (Sports fan)

“Another sport I enjoy is curling, but it doesn't have enough description, as they are not actually saying how they are playing or where they are standing.” (Sports fan)

“I felt frustrated that the curling had no audio description as I knew who the players were, but I was unable to know what they

were actually doing on the ice, the actual curling of the stone itself, they weren't describing anything. A description would have been brilliant. Sports such as bowling have been audio described in the past, so I would like to see a lot more of it." (Sports fan)

"The radio commentary is more detailed compared to the TV as there is less opportunity to go off topic or profile players. Still, I would absolutely love to hear a description of the athletes, what position they are in and all those kind of things." (Sports fan)

"For those who have not had any sight try and give them a comparison. For example, how high the pole vault bar is in relation to an individual. If you have no perception of the height, it makes it difficult, so more description of the environment as well as what's actually taking place." (Sports fan)

"Language is important. Particularly important when describing new events that people may not have come across before or explaining the different categories for differing disabilities." (Sports fan)

## **4.2 What kind of audio description would work well on sports broadcasts?**

Integrated audio description or traditional audio description?

Three types of described tracks were discussed:

Traditional audio description: This is where audio description in its traditional form is interspersed with the mainstream commentary.

Benefits: Listeners can listen to the mainstream commentary sometimes delivered by star athletes/ sportspersons.

Challenges: As the delivery is live, the probability of audio description clashing with or going over the main commentary is high.

Integrated commentary: This is where the main commentary is sufficiently descriptive and does not need an additional audio description track.

Benefits: Shared experience with family, friends and others.

Challenges: Training Producers and Commentators on the requirements of blind and partially sighted viewers.

Enhanced commentary: A separate track that is not reliant on the main commentary. It could be written in the style of a radio commentary with more descriptions of visual displays built in.

Benefits: A fully accessible commentary on the audio description channel

Challenges: Cost of production of a completely independent secondary audio track

Participants, in this focus group, concurred that the integrated style of audio description was their preferred option for live sports broadcasts. Some participants felt that it was particularly important for commentators to describe the content and not go off topic as they rely entirely on the description to follow the action. Another participant felt that commentators should have to go through a quality assurance process to ensure that they were aware of different disabilities.

“I think that the integrated description would sound quite good on lots of live sports, especially on the fast-paced sports such as rugby. I think if you could get someone who could keep the commentators in hand and stop them going off topic that would be quite good rather than having a separate track which you would have to turn on and off.” (Sports fan)

“Commentators don’t always realise their importance for blind and partially sighted people who rely on them.” (Sports fan)

Participants agreed that they were not keen on an audio description style where there would be no star commentator. Participants felt that the star commentator was integral to the experience, as they could provide expert knowledge and insights on the game. It was also highlighted that the star commentators help to make the experience more enjoyable, whilst enabling participants to connect to the game through the commentator’s personality.

“I think that it is very crucial because some presenters don’t know what they are talking about. So, if there has been a foul or

someone hits the boundary any ex-sports person would know better what it is.” (Sports fan)

“You’ve got to have that sports personality, it’s part of what makes the viewing experience enjoyable. If you have someone reading from a script it becomes quite dull and boring, whereas you feel like you are interacting more with the sports person, possibly because you remember one of their famous goals or sporting achievements.” (Sports fan)

“Their expert knowledge over the presenter could help to improve description for blind and partially sighted people”. (Sports fan)

Few participants responded favourably to the enhanced style of commentary as well particularly if it was delivered by someone who understood the sport well.

#### **4.3 How accessible are cultural events linked to major sporting events?**

For example, opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympic and Paralympic Games.

There was a consensus amongst participants that audio description is necessary on the live coverage of cultural events linked to major sporting events. Participants found that the ceremonies help to add a real sense of atmosphere to a sporting event, such as the Olympic Games. If audio description is not provided, participants were just left listening to the music and missed out on what was happening on the screen, such as cultural performances, light shows, and other visual elements. One participant wanted to ensure that any audio description did not go over the description of each team when they entered the stadium. However, participants felt that more detail could be provided about the countries flags and the athlete’s outfits.

Some participants also highlighted the importance of language when providing description. For instance, since they had not seen a traditional German outfit, it was felt that a simple description could be provided to

enhance their experience. Colours should also be described to provide a more immersive experience.

Participants who had experience of watching the audio described Paralympic Games opening and closing ceremonies thought that the overall quality was good. One participant highlighted that they were better able to understand what a set of children were doing whilst performing a certain routine, due to information being provided on their actions and age. The audio description also helped participants understand the role of famous people in the ceremony as well as any light displays, rather than just having to listen to music and guess what is happening on the screen.

However, some participants felt that a description of the stadium at the start of the event would help to improve their experience. It was also suggested that there could be more detail provided in transitions between different parts of the event, as at times solely focusing on a dance routine or a singer left participants feeling lost and that the event was disjointed.

All participants stated that they would find a guide detailing when certain elements of the ceremony were happening useful due to the events length.

Participants agreed that audio description is necessary on all sporting ceremonies. Until now, they mainly have music and commentary that isn't for blind viewers.

“It is quite important to have audio description on the opening and closing ceremonies because I love watching them to see which countries are coming up.” (Sports fan)

“It is important to have audio description on all sporting opening and closing ceremonies not just the Olympic or Paralympic Games as it adds to the atmosphere, otherwise we feel as if we are left out completely. If we don't know what is going-on on the screen, who is carrying the flag or what is going on in the arena



as the country has put on a special event for everyone, but yet again it is just noise". (Sports fan)

#### **4.4 Magic wand question**

If you had a magic wand and you could do one thing to make your experience of watching sports on TV enjoyable, what would it be?

There was a consensus amongst participants that they would like to see audio description provided on all live sports events, as well as ensuring that broadcasters make their coverage accessible for everyone no matter what their disability. Some participants felt that broadcasters could work more closely with manufacturers to make TV's and EPG's more accessible, as it was not always clear which sports channel they were watching. Participants also felt that accessibility features should be easier to access on their TV's. Some participants wanted broadcasters to ensure that accessible coverage was provided on all platforms, including TV and online.

"I would ensure that all sporting events had audio description no matter what they are. And also make them fully accessible not only for blind and partially sighted people, but also people with hearing impairments and people with language barriers too. Access for everybody." (Sports fan)

"Whilst watching sports I would like the TV to announce what channel it is on as well as providing audio description and access features for all." (Sports fan)

"All sports to be described that can as it would add so much enjoyment." (Sports fan)

"Broadcasters working with TV manufacturers to make access features easier to turn on as well as improving online services." (Sports fan)

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Please email your questions to [broadcasting@rnib.org.uk](mailto:broadcasting@rnib.org.uk)

