

Boxed Out: Visually Impaired Audiences, Audio Description and the Cultural Value of the Television Image

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Abstract

Television is vital to the interpersonal relationships of visually impaired audiences, despite their being unable to see the images clearly. However, their ability to fully engage with television's social role hinges on their ability to gather meaning from the text, something that becomes increasingly difficult when only the aural signifiers of television are accessible. This article explores the role of audio description services, which provide an additional soundtrack detailing visual information, and the way in which they facilitate interpretation and subsequently discussion of television texts for the visually impaired. In doing so it will interrogate arguments that present a singular model of television aesthetics. Instead it will present the need for a more nuanced approach, one that understands the specificity of individual genres or programmes and the fact that the relationship between sound and image may not be the same for all television content.

Key Words: Television, audiences, image, sound, disability, audio description

It is 7:00pm on a Thursday evening and Laura is sitting with her family in front of the television, waiting for the familiar cymbal roll that signals the start of her favourite programme, *Emmerdale*. As the episode opens, conversation begins to follow the narrative. Her sister and mother debate the shifting power relationships between the King brothers, as the youngest, Carl, silently asserts his superiority over his older brother, Matthew. They wonder what the third King brother, Jimmy, will do now he's moved out of the family home. Her father comments on the car Carl is seen getting into, deciding that he'd quite like to get one when they need to replace the one on the driveway. But Laura only takes part in some of the discussion. She contributes to the discussion concerning how the brothers have changed

since Carl admitted to killing their father. But she doesn't comment on Carl's look of superiority, or whether she thinks buying a large black Lexus is a good idea. In fact, Laura is engaging with a very different text to those around her. It is a text constructed through sounds, rather than sounds and moving images. She's blind.¹

As of 2005, there are two million people with significant sight loss in Great Britain, nearly 400,000 of whom are registered as blind or partially sighted (RNIBa: online). These 400,000 people form a small but significant part of the potential television audience, one that raises a number of important questions about the nature of television and potential engagement with television texts. It seems rather obvious to point out that television involves moving images, that the pictures of 'radio with pictures' are a vital part of the process of engaging with television content. Assertions concerning the impoverished television image and the centrality of sound to attracting the 'distracted' television viewer (Ellis, 1992 (1982): 112) have been replaced with a recognition of, and attempts to articulate, the importance of visual cues in the construction of television texts. John Caldwell has asserted, in reference to US-produced television, that during the 1980s 'television moved from a framework that approached broadcasting primarily as a form of word-based rhetoric and transmission, with all the issues that such terms suggest, to a visually based mythology, framework, and aesthetic based on an extreme self-consciousness of style' (Caldwell, 1995: 4). Since then, television studies has recognised the need to explore the television image. Ellis himself has subsequently adapted his earlier stance to acknowledge that the image has become increasingly important to television, arguing that the medium 'uses images as the raw material for a process of work, transmuting, combining, changing and layering them' (Ellis, 2000:92). The image has increasingly been recognised as being positioned at the centre of television's modes of meaning-making. It seems obvious to suggest that visually impaired audiences are unlikely to engage with televisual content; that they are 'boxed out' by the importance of images to understanding the onscreen narrative. The terminology surrounding television focuses on the act of seeing: we are 'viewers' 'watching' it. For audience members who are unable to see their television set, its content seems naturally out of reach.

However, television proves to be as vital a part of the cultural and social interactions of visually impaired audiences as it is for sighted viewers. In January 2008, the Royal National Institute for Blind People (RNIB) commissioned research into the uses and value of television for the visually impaired. This research formed part of the Institute's campaign to promote the use, by both audiences and broadcasters, of audio description (AD) services. AD is an additional soundtrack providing key visual narrative information alongside diegetic sound such as dialogue, though often over other diegetic and non-diegetic sounds such as music or sound effects. AD, as described by the RNIB, allows audience members who have limited vision to 'hear what they can't see'. The aim of this research was to explore the attitudes of

visually impaired audiences towards both this service and television in general, in order to contribute to a wider RNIB campaign to raise the quota for audio description on television programmes from its current level of 10%.

To achieve this, two focus groups, of thirteen people in total, and a phone-based survey of 172 respondents, were conducted with visually impaired people². Focus group participants were provided by the RNIB from a list of members willing to take part in research and publicity exercises. They were of a range of ages from late twenties to mid-seventies and consisted of four women and nine men. Some participants were partially sighted whilst others had completely lost their sight, something that had happened at various points throughout their life (some from birth, others in adulthood). The RNIB chose participants based on availability and their experience of working with researchers. Many campaigned for the charity by appearing in adverts and newspaper articles, with one, Margaret, acting as a trustee. To a certain extent, this meant that there were political motivations for their involvement, one that was directed at increasing access and choice for the visually impaired. However many of the more general points were backed up by the larger survey group and the nature of focus groups as interactive discussions allowed us to encourage an exploration of the nuances of the television experience for visually impaired audiences.

The list of potential survey respondents was provided by the RNIB after an initial email canvassing. As a result, the sample is not representative of the visually impaired population in a number of ways. Our sample was predominantly younger, with 72% aged under sixty whereas 94% of the overall visually impaired population are over the age of sixty-five³. 90% of respondents were completely blind whilst overall there are significantly higher numbers with partial sight problems, rather than full blindness (see RNIB, 2008a: online). However, as David Morley asserts 'Research is always a question of what you can do in the circumstances you face, with the resources available, which is most likely to get you something like the kind of data that you want. You're never going to get exactly what you want' (Morley, 2007: 69). The research for this project was naturally shaped by the circumstances surrounding it. Our only access to this particular audience group was through the RNIB and so the Institute had overall control over the research sample. The initial contact of potential participants via email further restricted the sample to those who had access to, and were comfortable using, the internet⁴, something that may account for the younger skew⁵. This quantitative data provides a broader, though limited, picture of the visually impaired television audience to contextualise the specific, detailed examples of television engagement that emerged from the focus groups.

Despite the discrepancies between our sample and the UK's visually impaired population, however, the survey, together with the focus groups, provides a valuable insight into the particular value of television for an audience group that has otherwise been marginalised by

academic researchers. As Karen Ross has discussed, disabled media audiences in general have been the focus of only a small amount of academic research (Ross, 2003). The little existing research has, as Ross points out, 'been content-driven...or else focused on the views of non-disabled people' (ibid: 131) rather than issues of accessibility. Ross conducted one of the few empirical studies of disabled audiences, but focused on their responses to depictions of disability on radio, rather than on their use of media⁶. Research concerning particular types of disabilities and the media is particularly lacking; Guy Cumberbatch and Ralph Negrine are typical in their definition of 'disabled' as an extremely wide category, including conditions ranging from learning disabilities to mobility problems to diabetes (Cumberbatch and Negrine, 1992: 142-147). Caroline De Backer's work on the relationship between visually impaired audiences and film stars (De Backer, 2007) is the only piece of dedicated work on the visually impaired population's relationship to media texts, though her focus is specifically on the relationship between audiences and stars rather than on broader questions of media use. This limitation is perhaps a result of methodological difficulties in terms of accessing such a specific audience group and the apparent discordance between objects of study (audio-visual media and an audience who can't see) described above. The opportunity to conduct research with a sample of the visually impaired audience offers a unique and valuable insight into a specific mode of television reception.

The ways in which our visually impaired viewers discuss television raise a number of issues concerning both the cultural status of television and its ontology as a medium. Participants' valuing of television and of audio description offers further confirmation of the wider social role that television plays, particularly in terms of interpersonal relationships. Our respondents' visual impairment, however, causes us to interrogate the relative importance of sound and image both to television viewers' meaning making and to the subsequent conversion of meaning making into social interactions. Focus group discussions in particular highlighted the relative application of audio description to different genres of television content and, in some cases, specific programmes. Respondents told us that that while some genres are incomprehensible without some kind of aural clue to the onscreen visuals others require little or no description. Their assertion suggests the need for a consideration of the relationship between sound and image in particular genres rather than in television as a whole.

The Social and Cultural Spaces of Television

Our most important research finding was that visually impaired viewers engage with television in much the same way and for many of the same reasons as sighted viewers. Ninety per cent of questionnaire respondents who watched television did so for entertainment,⁷ with other reasons including keeping up to date with current affairs (76.8%) and relaxation (82.2%). But focus group participants were well aware of television's relevance to social participation. Timothy Todreas has commented that 'Most media products are consumed by large numbers

of people. They may be consumed alone in the privacy of the home, but the experience is then shared. The hit show that was on television last night is discussed around the water cooler today' (Todreas, 1999: 181). S. Elizabeth Bird argues for the need to look at 'media as culture' (Bird, 2003: 2), saying that '[w]e cannot isolate the role of the media in culture, because the media are firmly anchored into the web of culture' (ibid: 3). Although Bird refers to all media forms, including film, radio, print and the internet, television plays a key role in her argument. Television texts have lives outside of the television set, or even the living room, acting as a common point of cultural reference for discussion amongst friends and co-workers. Ellen Seiter has dubbed television's commonality a 'lingua franca' (Seiter, 1999: 116); television is shared, infusing our cultural and social interactions with a common language of referents. David Morley links television's status as lingua franca to the very notion of television broadcasting and the construction of a national identity: '[n]ational broadcasting can thus create a sense of unity - and of corresponding boundaries around the nation; it can link the peripheral to the center; turn previously exclusive social events into mass experiences' (Morley, 2000: 107). Individuals' access to common cultural texts, be they news events, the latest episode of a soap opera or *Big Brother*, can engender a sense of belonging to a wider familial, platonic or national group.

Focus group participants reflected this academic consensus, telling us about sharing television within the domestic sphere of the family. One focus group participant, Nigel⁸, described how:

There are two different ways that I will watch TV; one is with the family where we'll find something that we all want to watch, or we're just relaxing so it could be a gardening programme or something, or a wildlife documentary, or a film that we all want to watch. That's one way and in those cases audio description really enhanced that enormously from what it used to be because it would normally be stuff that I wouldn't necessarily have chosen to watch, but we're just together.

For Nigel, the ability to share television with his family, in particular his children, is a key motivation for watching it. For him, just 'being together' ranks more highly than watching a particular programme. The questionnaire results echoed this perspective, with 59.6% of respondents saying that they watched television with other people. For our research group, as with the wider population, television is an overtly communal activity, bringing together familial and friendship groups.

Focus group participants also ascribed a second form of cultural value to television, that of a lingua franca in the non-domestic social spaces of everyday life. Lucy asserted that:

the world has become a tiny, tiny place, because of television. Now, something can happen half way across the world, and in an instant live

cameras are there. If you remember when 7/7 happened, it was terrible and there were cameras instantly there. It brings it straight to people's front rooms. It has that power.

Michael commented that, 'it's about inclusion, when people are talking about *EastEnders* or whatever. Telly is the mainstream culture'. These participants recognised the continued central function of broadcast television even at the beginning of the 21st century, when a proliferation of other media forms competes with the box in the corner of the living room. Questionnaire data again reflected this viewpoint. When asked why they watched television, 48.8% agreed that it was 'to talk about it with other people'. When asked specifically if they talked about television with others, a significantly higher percentage, 60.7%, agreed that they did. Although the ability to contribute to television-based conversations may have been a motivation for turning on the set for only half of the research sample, such conversations proved a central part of the social and cultural lives of a greater number. Whilst many did agree that these conversations involved friends and family filling in details that they missed (54.3%) or providing additional detail about visual elements of the programme (52.7%), conversations also took more familiar forms. The vast majority (81.8%) discussed their opinions of the programme whilst 66% took part in speculative talk about future events. A central appeal of the medium for visually impaired audiences is television's ability to act as a social and cultural forum, to be used by viewers to gain knowledge of the world, for entertainment and in interpersonal relationships.

However, our research group experienced a strong sense of frustration and exclusion stemming from their inability to see what is happening on screen. Research participants felt that their lack of easy access to the same media texts as sighted viewers marked them as different. Lucy commented that 'what's happened with visually impaired people is that we want to be seen as in the same world as everyone else'. Watching television is being like everyone else, being normal, and this research group either experienced distress at being perceived as 'abnormal' or went to great lengths to appear to be 'normal'. James, for example, described how his totally blind wife watches television 'with the screen on. She wouldn't dare not have it on, that's not normal'. Michael said that he never puts 'the screen off, just in case someone found out'. This concern for normality extended to the specific apparatus of television and the *appearance* of being part of the television audience. Lucy described how it used to be possible to get a small box that received only the audio from television broadcasting, thus negating the need for visually impaired audience members to buy a bulkier television set (and pay the attached license fee). However, echoing James and Michael's comments, she rejected such a box because it made her 'look different'.

Research participants who lost their sight later in life characterised the social and cultural importance of television as particularly central to their lives. Seventy two percent of survey

respondents who had lost their sight later in life agreed or strongly agreed that there are many television programmes that they can no longer enjoy. James, who had been partially sighted since his teens but lost his sight completely five years before the research was carried out, said, 'I watch the same programmes as I used to watch, but I watch less television now because I find it frustrating'. Barry described how, 'I went blind five years ago, and being used to television all my life, it was a great shock not being able to see things or follow what was going on.' The change in their ability to engage with televisual content has altered both James and Barry's television habits, since they can no longer follow or enjoy many of the programmes they previously watched. The difficulty of understanding audio-visual texts without any access to visual content has cut them off from a favoured source of entertainment and cultural engagement and added to their general distress at losing their sight.

One might, of course, assume that radio may serve as a better form of cultural engagement for visually impaired audiences. Indeed, in our phone-based questionnaire, 44.5% said that they preferred radio to television, whereas only 23.2% enjoyed television more. However, the above issues concerning the social value of television still persist; it is television and not radio that is the focus of most media-related conversations. As Lucy described, 'we live in a society where television is the populous and it controls a lot of things, and because of that, it has a lot more power than radio'. For Lucy, it is precisely the importance of television to interpersonal relationships and the sense of community or nationhood discussed above that undercuts the potential value of radio. With everyone around her engaging with and discussing television, radio's suitability to her disability seems irrelevant. Barry said that turning on the television instead of the radio seemed more natural; his habitual allegiance to television has prevented radio from taking a significant role in his life since he became blind:

TV's something that's always in the corner and you used to come in and the first thing you'd do is get the TV on and get the news. You wouldn't think of the radio because when you can see, you naturally go for the thing you can see. You wouldn't dream of putting the radio on against the telly. So over sixty-odd years, it just grows on you, it's there, as that lady said, it's a friend, it's company. It's everything for you, so naturally you go for that telly switch.

Focus group participants also felt that radio does not offer the same variety as television. Vikram commented that 'the thing with TV I find is on TV you have the soap operas and dramas and all that whereas on radio it's not so common. You do have a few, I think Radio 4 has the Archers and stuff like that, but on TV you have much more of a variety, and I think that's why I enjoy TV more.' Michael argued that 'you can't say "one or the other", *CSI* is not on BBC7, it's only on the telly'. If visually impaired audiences want to watch programmes only available on television and most prominent within the media-related conversations around them, they must somehow access them via television. Whilst radio may appear to offer content more suitable for visually impaired audiences, our subjects continue to see television

as the most valuable and desirable media form. This leads us to consider the role broadcaster-provided audio description services play in facilitating engagement with television texts for visually impaired audiences, a consideration which in turn leads to questions about the value of television to the visually impaired and the nature of the television text.

‘The Best Thing Since Sliced Bread’: Television and Audio Description

Television’s role as a cultural lingua franca requires that everyone has access to all of the information that contributes to the narrative of a television text. For example, missing part of a serial text may restrict an individual’s ability to talk to those around them who have seen all of it (see Evans, 2008: 229-235). As we have seen above, visually impaired viewers, having access only to the aural element of a television programme, feel disadvantaged relative to sighted viewers. Research participants often turned to those around them for help in interpreting the visual cues they were unable see. Nearly half (48.3%) of those who watched television with other people agreed or strongly agreed that they asked friends and family to fill in details they had missed, with nearly 79.8% of those agreeing that such descriptions were helpful. A vast majority of the research participants believed additional information on audio-visual texts to be not only desirable but extremely beneficial (if not essential) to engagement with them. But unlike audio description, family and friends won’t always be present and even when present may have difficulty in providing verbal cues to onscreen action.

Like subtitling, the equivalent service for deaf audiences, audio description has been subject to government implementation and regulation. As previously stated, OFCOM dictates that 10% of all television content from every terrestrial broadcaster must be audio described⁹. During the first quarter of 2008, OFCOM reported that all broadcasters, terrestrial and digital, bar GMTV, Discovery Travel and Living, and Nick Jr 2, exceeded this quota, with ITV1 describing 16.2% of programmes (OFCEM, 2008: online). But audio description is a much newer service than subtitling, emerging thanks to developments in digital television technology that allow multiple soundtracks to be available for a single programme. With a quota significantly below the 99% required for subtitling, the amount of AD content available for partially sighted audiences is comparatively extremely limited. There are also problems with the service, particularly repeats being counted toward quota fulfilment. James reported this anecdotally during a focus group explaining that ‘it’s because of these quotas that they’ve got, so if you take some of the satellite channels that have audio described shows like *Airport*, they repeat and repeat it and that’s getting the percentage of what they’ve legally got to do.’ Intrigued by this assertion, we used the *Radio Times* programme listings to conduct an analysis of audio described programmes on the major Freeview channels during one week in January 2008¹⁰. Our data confirmed what James had said, revealing that only 18% of audio described content was on its first broadcast, with the remaining 82% being made up of repeats. Participants also felt the service to be unreliable, with Nigel commenting that, ‘even

when the listings say that a programme comes with audio description, just sometimes they forget to do it'.

The Value of Audio Description to Visually Impaired Audiences

Our research participants, whilst lauding AD, also pointed to the service's imperfections. In this section, we further explore AD with regard to its advantages, disadvantages and the questions it raises concerning television's status as an audio-visual medium. The additional soundtrack provided by audio description offers a way for visually impaired audiences to access a wider range of textual codes within a television programme and engage with both the cultural and social space of television more fully. It provides the detail that sighted audiences take for granted, the visual cues that provide, despite assertions of television's 'impoverished' image, key narrative information. The following example, a transcript of the credits and opening scene in an audio described episode of the soap *Emmerdale*, indicates the way in which audio description slots around the existing soundtrack whilst providing certain visual cues:

AD: The camera sweeps over countryside, a tractor and a field of crops with seagulls overhead. And, surrounded by trees, a collection of honey coloured stone houses. Emmerdale. Written by Steven Hughes and directed by Alan Wareing.

Ext. The Village

AD: Matthew's smart silver Mercedes sweeps along the main street and pulls up. He scowls at Lexie and Carl as they emerge from Dale View. Carl raises his eyebrows at Matthew and looks smug.

Lexie: Have you got any plans for today?

Carl: No.

Lexie: Good. Because you and me are going to go out and get hammered.

Carl: That sounds alright to me. Book a room somewhere and stay the night. You deserve a treat.

AD: They kiss. Jimmy emerges from Pear Tree Cottage

Jimmy: *[on phone]* That's great Rachel, thanks. I'll see you later then. Bye.

Matthew: You're up and about early.

Jimmy: Things to do.

Matthew: So I heard. New bird?

Jimmy: Rachel's an estate agent. When I said I was getting out I didn't just mean the business. I meant everything. Right, I

think that's the lot. Congratulations, you got what you wanted. All yours now

AD: At the Dingles homestead, Lisa serves breakfast to Zak...
(tx. ITV1, 29/06/2008)

The additional voiceover soundtrack slots in between the existing lines of dialogue, providing key clues to the on screen action. The setting of the scene is identified as 'the main street' in the village, letting us know that the scene is set outside rather than in a private house or the shop or pub. It also informs us which characters are involved in the scene, so that the visually impaired viewer does not have to rely on recognising actors' voices. Finally, it indicates key moments of action, including Jimmy emerging from a nearby cottage and entering the scene, and Carl and Lexie's kiss. In the absence of the AD, a visually impaired member of the audience, relying on dialogue and sound effect cues alone, would not receive the full information necessary to interpret the scene. They would not know the scene's setting or appreciate the subtext to Matthew and Carl's dialogue constructed by the actors' non-vocal performances. Without the AD signalling the scene-transition, the sudden appearance of Lisa Dingle, a character with little connection to the Kings, might be confusing. The additional narration therefore provides a context for the dialogue, articulating its locations and subtext for an audience who would otherwise be unaware of them.

Analysing a piece of audio described television presents a particular difficulty for the sighted researcher. AD foregrounds information that a sighted viewer may ignore. For example, over the opening credits, the AD soundtrack announces the names of the episode's writer and director, providing the audio description audience with an emphasis on the production process that a sighted viewer could easily overlook. The same is true of the characterisation of Matthew's expression as a 'scowl', since the character is hidden in shadow and his face not easily visible. However, the sighted viewer's ability to see the images makes us aware of the information *not* being provided by the additional soundtrack. We can see Matthew getting out of his car and watching Carl and Lexie from across the road as they make plans for that evening. We are free to interpret Carl's 'smug' facial expression for ourselves, potentially reading it instead as inquisitive or amused. We can see Carl and Lexie move to the car during their conversation and Lexie climb into the passenger seat. We know that Jimmy has exited Pear Tree Cottage carrying a cardboard box and is talking on his mobile telephone, already cueing us into the fact that that he is moving home and that his first lines are to an unseen character. Because it only provides particular information, or a particular interpretation of visual information, audio description may seem inadequate to a sighted viewer, aware of what they are not being told.

This analysis of audio description raises questions concerning the possibility for translating a medium that is bi-modal and bi-sensory into one that must rely on sounds and hearing alone.

To a certain extent, the information provided by AD is invaluable for visually impaired audiences, enabling them to fully interpret programmes and so contribute to conversations about television. As David Buckingham has argued, the ‘pleasure of “gossip” about a soap opera is essentially the pleasure of sharing secrets to which only “a select few” are privy’ (Buckingham, 1987: 64). The ‘select few’ of Buckingham’s quote, however, are potentially the majority of an individual’s inter-personal relationships, especially with programmes such as soap operas that can attract upwards of ten million viewers. Not being able to fully engage with a programme, not knowing all the ‘secrets’ gossiped about, prevents access to that pleasure. For the partially sighted audience, unable to fully interpret the onscreen text, AD reveals more of a programme’s secrets.

Barry specifically linked AD with the provision of access to the shared cultural spaces of television from which he initially felt cut off when he first lost his sight:

I went blind five years ago, and being used to television all my life, it was a great shock not being able to see things or follow what was going on. Then the RNIB introduced me to audio description and I realised that it was out there to be used and to be made the most of. I love cinema, audio described movies, all the plays etc., etc. It’s probably one of the best things since sliced bread.

AD has given the cultural activities that the sighted population take for granted back to viewers such as Barry, who said ‘if somebody says to you “did you see so-and-so”, you can turn round and say, “yes, I saw it last night”, and you can mix in and join in the conversation. Especially for young kids at school, if they’re blind, they’re kind of obscured.’ For viewers blind from birth, AD opened up a new cultural space, as seen in comments made by Michael and Jennifer.

Michael: Before AD, started happening in TV broadcast, I didn’t have a television watching culture, but just having that has created one in me. I’ll now look to see what’s on audio described most days.

...

Jennifer: I would say the same as Michael. Before AD came along, my TV was more off than on. Now it’s more on than off.

For these participants, AD overcomes the exclusion that they had felt whilst growing up, giving them access to a much wider range of cultural texts.

Focus group participants discussed their new sense of inclusion explicitly in terms of the pleasure of gossip explored by Buckingham and of television’s role in facilitating conversation. Jennifer said that ‘when things are audio described I can form my own opinions about programmes and join in with discussions.’ Michael agreed with her, saying, ‘what you’ve just said about inclusion is the main benefit of audio description. Everyone’s got an opinion about

EastEnders, everyone's got an opinion about *Terminator* and until *Terminator* was with AD, I didn't watch it. But now I can, now I've got an opinion about it.' A survey respondent said that AD is 'fantastic! The best thing that has happened to me in the last four years. It's opened up a world of conversation.' Without AD, visually impaired audience members felt cut off from a valuable cultural and social resource; lacking the vital information that gave their opinion validity, they felt unable to fully contribute to the communal evaluation of television texts. AD permits fuller comprehension of the text which in turn allows involvement in television-related conversations. Our research participants value AD for permitting them to benefit from one of television's primary cultural values, the function the medium fulfils in interpersonal relationships.

Audio Description and the Ontology of Television

Our focus group participants extolled the virtues of AD but also pointed to its limitations, this distinction making apparent the relative importance of visual and aural codes in television texts. Michael said that 'some things don't translate and there's a tendency for audio describers to assume that you can describe anything, and you can't'. Jennifer pointed towards a fundamental flaw in audio description as a service for those who have been blind from birth. 'If you talk about dolphins and seals and there is audio description about them, say, swimming down a river, surely it helps if you know what dolphins or seals look like'. The translation of images into spoken words is not always straightforwardly successful. AD's inability to completely and successfully substitute for visuals indicates that images are central to the construction of meaning in some television genres. But for some genres, those that have a level of narration as part of their aesthetic form, participants felt AD to be unnecessary. Lucy commented that, 'there's a lot of programmes out there that should be described, and there's a lot of things described when they don't need to be, like *University Challenge*'. Indeed, in the case of *University Challenge*, audio description was felt to be detrimental to the participant's enjoyment:

Cathy: They used to audio describe *University Challenge*, which must be really easy to follow; it's a quiz programme – to my mind, that was a waste of very, very valuable resources. Put it more on films, more on dramas where there are silences where we need it.

Michael: They'd audio describe on *University Challenge* something like a picture round, but that's stupid – people should have been shot for that!

Audio description was felt to be inappropriate for programming which already relies heavily on aural cues, with current affairs programming particularly cited. Said Michael, 'You're not as excluded from news or current affairs, or a game show than you are from dramas or film'. Participants believed that such programmes' narration sufficiently permitted full engagement;

in the case of *University Challenge*'s picture round, our respondents were happy momentarily to relinquish full engagement in order to prevent AD becoming a mockery by giving away the answer. Participants thought it self-evident that some programming, particularly news, sports and quiz shows, required less AD than other programming.

Television drama above all others was believed to require AD. Focus group participants specifically discussed AD with regard to drama, whilst in questionnaire responses drama was the most popular form of content watched with audio description¹¹. Mark, who was partially sighted, described watching television dramas with his blind wife, and fellow focus group participant, Jennifer:

Jennifer and I both have similar tastes, we both tend to like the dramas, the Linda La Plante type of thing which very often because the writer relies a lot on the visual, sometimes dialogue is completely missing. You can have a whole scene played out in silence. Without AD it would be very difficult for me to describe to Jennifer at times, and for her to pick up anything at all.

Televised films elicited other, similar comments, such as the following from Cathy:

I love a film called *The Others*, which stars Nicole Kidman. I've seen it three times now, the first two times I saw it, it didn't have AD on the TV. I was able to follow most of it and you can get the fantastic twist at the end. But when I watched it again, with AD, just the other night I was surprised at how many little bits were added to the story that I'd actually missed, although I'm partially sighted, I thought 'oh gosh, I didn't know that happened in it', so although I got the main gist including the twist at the end the AD absolutely enhanced my enjoyment of this absolutely wonderful film.

Many focus group participants asserted that the visual narrative cues AD provides to dramatic programming are vital to their understanding and engagement. When Cathy watched *The Others* without AD, she was able roughly to follow the film's story, including its sudden, climactic twist. However, the additional information afforded by AD greatly enhanced her enjoyment of the film, permitting a re-interpretation of the narrative.

Our respondents' opinions concerning the need for AD in dramatic programming and its redundancy in other forms indicates the relative importance of the image to meaning making in different televisual genres. News and sports programming routinely incorporate additional, descriptive narration as part of their established communicative codes, rendering additional audio description superfluous. Quiz shows relay information primarily through speech rather than images (except in the case of the *University Challenge* picture round). We earlier referenced Caldwell's argument concerning the increased importance of the image to television's framework of meaning. But discussing television with visually impaired audiences reveals that the argument should be more nuanced, accounting for variations in different genres' reliance upon the visual. Television drama, which relies far more heavily on unspoken

visual cues in terms of *mise en scène* and performance and can often feature long stretches of silence, places the image firmly at the centre of its narrative construction¹². Other televisual forms that either involve an inherent narration or are based on aural codes accord the image less significance. For the latter, the inbuilt codes of narrative and meaning allow greater accessibility to viewers with sight difficulties; there is no need for anything beyond or above the text to aid access. For the former, however, the additional information provided by audio description is vital in order for visually impaired viewers to be able to fully interpret, evaluate and discuss the text.

These discussions of audio description highlight not only the relative importance of images and sounds to the interpretation of different television genres but the *specific way* in which images construct meaning and pleasure for the television audience. Even though television drama was generally felt to require AD, even audio description cannot render certain fantastical genres of drama accessible or enjoyable. Michael commented how he was 'watching *Doctor Who* the other day and the Daleks were doing something amazing, and it's spectacle, it's CGI, it's designed to be looked at and it doesn't translate, it's just tedious'. Although basic narrative information may be translated into spoken words, some forms of content demand to be *watched*. This seemed particularly the case with comedy, with some participants seeing audio description as a not particularly effective substitute for visual gags¹³:

Michael: Some things don't translate and there's a tendency for audio describers to assume that you can describe anything, and you can't. I had a mate watching *Wallace and Gromit* the other day and he said it's boring because it's funny to look at but you can't describe it...

Jennifer: It's just like, if you say 'oh, he slipped on a banana skin', now if you see him do that you laugh, but to hear he's done it isn't funny.

Michael: There isn't enough of this recognition that there are some things you can't describe, so don't bother.

Others, however, felt that they still wanted access to that information, even if it was through the more mediated source of narration:

Vikram: And certain comedies, I think. Because there's certain comedies where someone will do something that you won't pick up and you'll hear people laughing but you won't know why.

EE: In the last group they were saying that describing visual gags would stop them being funny. And they explicitly said that comedy wouldn't work with audio description.

Nigel: It enhances them, it doesn't stop them being funny, especially with something like *Little Britain*, there's quite a

lot of verbal humour anyway, but there are visual gags that you completely miss, but when they do describe them, you get the joke.

Lucy: If there is a visual gag and people start laughing, you're just sitting there being confused.

This difference in opinion with respect to the value of AD in comedic programming indicates the nuanced approach required both in determining appropriate content for AD and for our understanding of the relative importance of sound and image to different television genres. AD can successfully translate visual to aural cues in some genres, but succeeds less well in others; in some genres images offer specifically scopophilic pleasures and meaning. The complete enjoyment of fantastical dramas and comedy depends upon seeing them as well as hearing them. The same seems to be true for natural history programmes, as per Jennifer's comment about dolphins. AD cannot successfully substitute for the images if the viewer has no visual referent to allow their imagination to follow the onscreen narration. Each of these cases indicates the importance of the image *as an image* to the experience of watching television content. The AD for fantastical dramas, comedy and natural history programmes offers visually impaired viewers the same basic narrative information as their sighted counterparts, but our respondents still felt they were missing part of the television experience. In certain genres, but not all, the image is the central site of meaning making and viewers without visual access to the image inevitably suffer from limited engagement with the content and limited capacity for integration into television's wider social and cultural spaces.

Conclusion

The importance of audio description to this research group's engagement with television tells us about the cultural role of television as well as about the importance of the image to interpretations of the medium. Despite the seemingly obvious barrier to engagement with visual media, this group of visually impaired audience members engages with television in exactly the same way as sighted audiences, enjoying it for the entertainment, information and social pleasures that have been recognised throughout television audience research. Television establishes a space to be shared with friends, families and colleagues both at the moment of watching and throughout the rest of their daily lives. Just like sighted audiences, our visually impaired viewers discuss television around the 'watercooler' and use it to explore, understand, and learn more about the world around them. AD enhances understanding and enjoyment, thereby permitting visually impaired viewers greater access to a cultural and social space from which they would otherwise be partially or entirely excluded. Our respondents' discussions of AD's applicability to specific genres indicates that the construction of meaning in television texts should be understood as a complex and often shifting balance between sound and image. This insight provides a corrective both to Ellis's early statement concerning the impoverished nature of the television image and to Caldwell's

later argument for the unequivocal privileging of the image. In some genres image is paramount, whilst in others it is not. Those interested in formal analysis and televisual aesthetics may well wish to further investigate this important empirical finding.

Our research findings also have implications outside of the study of television as an aesthetic and cultural object. Whilst OFCOM promotes the use of audio description, it remains an extremely limited service, especially compared to other accessibility services such as subtitling. The participants in this research, however, clearly highlighted the importance of the service with regard to both their enjoyment of television as an entertainment form and to their ability to integrate it into their wider cultural lives. The focus groups' discussions of the suitability of audio description to different genres and of its deployment within them show that cultural policy makers need to be aware not only of the service's immense value but also of how best to use the limited resources available for its development to ensure its greater integration throughout broadcast content.

Postscript

This research formed part of a wider campaign, run by the RNIB, to lobby OFCOM to raise the quota for audio described programmes. The research was the basis for a number of interviews in several national papers and on breakfast television. A number of television advertising campaigns also ran at the same time to promote audio description to audiences. The original report made to the RNIB and the charity's press release regarding the campaign is available via the charity's press release (RNIB, 2008b: online). OFCOM welcomed this campaign, as evidenced in their Annual report for 2007/2008, and are planning a future review of the service to gauge its impact (OFCOM, 2008b: online).

The nature of this research, as serving a particular campaign, did lead to a number of limitations to this sample (as discussed in the above article) and in particular the way in which the research was taken up by the public relations company that organised the campaign for the RNIB. We consistently found, for example, a desire for our research to emphasise the importance of news when in fact our respondents valued entertainment forms more highly, particularly in terms of audio description. Not only, then, was the research shaped by the access made available to us by the RNIB, it was also shaped by the political desires of the public relations company. This access was a unique opportunity to explore an otherwise ignored portion of the television audience, but at the same time highlighted the need for further research. The relationships between age, technical competency or level of visual impairment and use of audio description (and television more generally) is an area that a sample of this size and nature could not fully explore. In addition, a more detailed examination of the use of audio description within communal domestic viewing practices, particularly when fully sighted viewers watch alongside the visually impaired, is an area that was raised in this

research but could be examined more closely. Ultimately, the research provided an invaluable illumination on an unexplored segment of the television audience whilst simultaneously raising a number of avenues for further research.

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Appendix 1 – Focus Groups

Two focus groups were conducted on 11 January 2008 at the Royal National Institute for Blind People, Judd Street, London. Each group was preceded by a short presentation of Audio described content.

Focus group one consisted of seven participants:

- James
- Jennifer
- Mark
- Michael
- Cathy
- Kevin
- Jonathan

Focus group two consisted of six participants:

- Margaret
- Nigel
- Paul
- Barry
- Vikram
- Lucy

Appendix 2 - Questionnaire

The RNIB provided us with a list of 218 potential questionnaire respondents who had previously been contacted via email. Individuals on this list were contacted via phone during the week of 21-25 January 2008, resulting in 173 completed questionnaires.

A. Demographics

1. Age

Age	<30	30-45	46-59	60-69	70-79	80-89	90+
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2. Gender

Gender	Male	Female
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3. Household income?

Annual Household Income	<£10,000	£10,000-£20,000	£21,000-£35,000	£36,000-£50,000	£51,000-£70,000	£71,000-£90,000	£90,000+
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4. Level of education?

Education	Student at present*	Up to 16 years	Further Education (16-18)	Higher Education	Post Graduate*
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*Please specify.....

5. Profession or former profession?

Profession/Former Profession	
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6. Domestic Arrangement

Domestic Arrangement	Live alone	Live with spouse/partner	Live with other relative	Live in sheltered accommodation	Other*
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*Please specify.....

7. Are you blind or partially sighted?

Blind	Partially Sighted	b)	Sight corrected not corrected by glasses	Sight corrected by glasses
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8. At what age did you begin to lose your sight?.....

B. Activities

1) I'm going to ask you about how much time you spend on various activities **each week** using a five point scale from no hours a week to up to six hours a week or more. So for example, if I asked you how many hours a week you spend on gardening, you could answer none, from 1-3 hours, from 3-4 hours, from 5-6 hours or more than six hours.

Community groups (e.g. Women's Institute, British Legion)	None	1-3 hours	3-4 hours	5-6 hours	> 6 hours
Volunteer activities (e.g. the Samaritans)	None	1-3 hours	3-4 hours	5-6 hours	> 6 hours
Hobbies (e.g. Gardening)	None	1-3 hours	3-4 hours	5-6 hours	> 6 hours
Participatory sports / exercise	None	1-3 hours	3-4 hours	5-6 hours	> 6 hours
Socialising with others	None	1-3 hours	3-4 hours	5-6 hours	> 6 hours
Watching Television	None	1-3 hours	3-4 hours	5-6 hours	> 6 hours
Listening to the Radio	None	1-3 hours	3-4 hours	5-6 hours	> 6 hours
Listening to recorded music	None	1-3 hours	3-4 hours	5-6 hours	> 6 hours
Reading / listening to audio books	None	1-3 hours	3-4 hours	5-6 hours	> 6 hours
Computer/Internet	None	1-3 hours	3-4 hours	5-6 hours	> 6 hours

Other*	None	1-3 hours	3-4 hours	5-6 hours	> 6 hours
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*Please specify.....

2) I'm going to ask you about how much time you spend on various activities **each year** using a five point scale from never up to more than twelve times a year. So for example, if I asked you how many times a year you go to the cinema, you could answer never, once a year, 2-5 times a year or 6-12 times a year.

Cinema	Never	Once a year	2-5 times a year	6-12 times a year	More than 12 times a year
Theatre	Never	Once a year	2-5 times a year	6-12 times a year	More than 12 times a year
Spectator sport	Never	Once a year	2-5 times a year	6-12 times a year	More than 12 times a year
Concerts	Never	Once a year	2-5 times a year	6-12 times a year	More than 12 times a year
Museums/ Galleries	Never	Once a year	2-5 times a year	6-12 times a year	More than 12 times a year
Other*	Never	Once a year	2-5 times a year	6-12 times a year	More than 12 times a year

*Please specify.....

C. Specific Media Usage

I'm now going to ask you about watching television and listening to radio.

1) Approximately how many hours of television do you watch each day? The choices are:

None	1 hour or less	1-2 hours	3-4 hours	5 or more hours
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2) **What television programmes do you watch regularly?**

I'm going to give you a series of statements. Please could you tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with them. The options are 'Strongly agree', 'agree', 'neither agree nor disagree', 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree'

3) **I often watch television with other people:**

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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4) **The people I watch with regularly describe the visual content to me:**

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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5) **I find these descriptions helpful:**

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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6) [If disagree or strongly disagree] **Is there anything that might make these descriptions more helpful? What problems/challenges do you face when other people describe content to you?**

7) **Have you ever heard of Audio Description?**

'Audio description is a spoken commentary where you hear someone describing what is happening, what the actors are doing, or where the action is taking place. This helps someone who can't see very well to understand what is happening'

Yes	No
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8) **What programmes have you watched with audio description?**

9) **How do you find out if a programme is audio described?**

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

10) **I only watch programmes that have Audio Description:**

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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11) **I regularly watch programmes that do *not* have Audio Description:**

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
----------------	-------	---------	----------	-------------------

12) **I would watch a lot more television if more programmes had Audio Description:**

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
----------------	-------	---------	----------	-------------------

13) [If previously sighted] **There are a number of television programmes that, since losing my sight, I am no longer able to enjoy:**

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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14) **I enjoy listening to the radio more than watching television**

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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Why?

15) **Approximately how many hours of radio do you listen to each day? The choices are:**

None	1 hour or less	1-2 hours	3-4 hours	5 or more hours
------	----------------	-----------	-----------	-----------------

16) **What programmes do you listen to regularly?**

D. Reasons for engaging with television

1) **Why do you watch television?**

For entertainment	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
To keep up to date with current events	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
For relaxation	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
To pass the time	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
As a window to the outside world	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
To talk about it with other people	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
For information/tips	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
For company	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
For background noise	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
To test my mental agility (e.g. quiz shows)	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

a) Are there any other reasons why you watch television?

2) I often talk to other people about what I've been watching on television:

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
----------------	-------	---------	----------	-------------------

a) What do you talk about with other people regarding television?

We discuss:

Our opinions of the programme	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
e.g.					
Filling in details I've missed	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
e.g.					
Giving me information on the visual elements of the programme	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
e.g.					
Explaining what happened	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
e.g.					
Checking my interpretation/ understanding	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
e.g.					

Discussing actors/celebrities	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
e.g.					
Discussing news stories/current events	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
e.g.					
Predicting future developments	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
e.g.					

b) Is there anything else you discuss with other people regarding television?

3) What is your main source for local news/information?

TV	Radio	Internet	Newspapers	Other people	Other*
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*Please specify

4) What is your main source for national and international news?

TV	Radio	Internet	Newspapers	Other people	Other*
----	-------	----------	------------	--------------	--------

*Please specify

5) What is your main source for information on the weather?

TV	Radio	Internet	Newspapers	Other people	Other*
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*Please specify.....

6) Is there anything else you'd like to tell us?

Questionnaire Results

The demographic details of the questionnaire group are as follows:

Age

<30	30-45	46-59	60-69	70-79	80-89	90+
10.4%	28.3%	32.9%	19.1%	4.6%	4%	0%

Gender

Male	Female
48.6%	51.4%

Domestic arrangement

Live alone	Live with spouse/partner	Live with other relative	Other
28.3%	48%	12.7%	2.9%

Annual Household Income (in 000's of pounds)

<10	10-20	21-35	36-50	51-70	71-90	90+
16.8%	32.9%	28.3%	7.5%	2.9%	0.6%	1.2%

Level of Education

Current Student	Up to age 16	Further Education	Higher Education	Postgraduate Education
2.3%	15.6%	33.5%	29.5%	16.8%

Employment status

Employed	Unemployed
81.5%	5.8%

Blind or Partially Sighted

Blind	Partially Sighted
88.4%	10.4%

¹ Imagined scenario based on following empirical research.

² The authors would like to thank Dr. Nandana Bose, Dr. Frances Eames and Tatsuya Tagochi for their invaluable help with conducting the phone questionnaires and inputting the data. Thank also to Professor Maire Messenger-Davies for her advice on the questionnaire and comments on the first draft of this article.

³ These figures use the measurement VA <6/12 as a measure of acuity. The figure 6/12 means that an individual can see at 6 metres what a sighted individual can see at 12. 2 million people fall into this category, indicating severe sight problems. As previously stated, just under 400,000 of those are registered with the RNIB.

⁴ Although also a visual medium, the internet allows complete access for the visually impaired via services such as voice recognition software. Internet access in our sample is therefore determined by socio-economic factors and technological skill rather than by disability.

⁵ See Appendix 1 for further information on the focus groups and Appendix 2 for further information on the phone survey sample.

⁶ See also Pointon and Davies (1997) for a consideration of disabled people in the media, both in front of the camera and in the production process.

⁷ 3.5% of the sample did not watch any television at all.

⁸ All names are pseudonyms to provide participants with anonymity.

⁹⁹ Digital channels are subject to a range of quotas from 2% to 8%.

¹⁰ Shopping, rolling news and music channels were not catalogued as they do not consist of individual programmes or offer audio description services. All programmes with AD on all other Freeview channels broadcast in the week of 12-18 January 2008 were logged by day, time, channel, genre and whether they were an initial or repeat broadcast. Subscription channels were not included in order to make the sample manageable. This analysis did rely on the accuracy of the *Radio Times* both in terms of the AD being available on a programme

and its status as an original broadcast or a repeat but still offers a sense of how AD fits into the television broadcast schedule.

¹¹ 58.4% watched drama and 48.6% watched soap opera with audio description.

¹² This is not to deny the importance of performance to non-dramatic genres of television (see Eames, 2008 for a discussion of the importance of performance to regional news narratives), merely to suggest that performance plays a more central role within dramatic narratives.

¹³ Producers seem to realise this when creating audio book versions of comedy series such as *Blackadder* (BBC, 1983-1989). These CDs exclude the visual jokes, leaving only the verbal ones.