

Bringing the Stage to the Screen: Enhanced Audio Introductions to Complement Broadcast Audio Description

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ITV

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Abstract

This industry practice paper outlines the work ITV is doing to develop a series of audio introductions to complement the television audio description (AD) it produces for blind and visually impaired audiences. Inspired by the use of audio introductions in live spaces such as theatre and by other examples from across the TV industry, ITV set out to adapt the practice to suit the small screen, exploring a range of different options in terms of the exact form this content would take and how it would be accessed by users. The practice has strong potential to be adopted by TV broadcasters more widely, offering AD users and broader audiences a better understanding of selected programmes and providing describers themselves more opportunity to describe characters equitably and in doing so fulfil new objectives concerning how onscreen diversity is conveyed to audiences.

Key words: audio description, audio introduction, broadcasting, television, visual impairment, blindness, diversity, representation, industry practice, user engagement.

1. Introduction

This paper outlines the work ITV is doing to develop a series of audio introductions to complement and enhance the in-programme audio description (AD) it currently provides for selected broadcast television programmes, while also functioning as interesting audiovisual content in its own right for a more general viewership. Section 2 outlines the industry context, including the use of audio introductions as a precursor to theatre AD, and why they are not standard practice in broadcast TV. It also includes some examples of different interpretations of audio introductions from around the world. Section 3 explains the two-stage consultation process that took place and helped to shape ITV's conception of the ideal audio introduction, before section 4 discusses an important additional aim of the project: determining the extent to which audio introductions can support ITV's ongoing efforts to improve representation of onscreen diversity characteristics in its AD provision. The paper concludes with an overview of the current state of the project (section 5) and its aims for the future (section 6).

2. Context

For the purposes of this paper, AD is a spoken narration that makes video content accessible to blind and visually impaired audiences by describing onscreen elements. Screen AD is typically confined to the gaps afforded by breaks and pauses in the dialogue; this limitation means that AD practitioners or describers need to prioritise the most useful information that can be conveyed in the time available. AD audiences therefore do not receive some pieces of visual information which, depending on the programme and the spacing of its soundtrack, could range from small details that might add visual colour to the AD but not have much bearing on the programme's plot to more important information that could be vital to audiences' comprehension and enjoyment of the programme.

A few words about AD at ITV. Like some other UK broadcasters, ITV voluntarily commits to including AD in at least 20% of its broadcast output across 5 of its 6 channels. Recent figures from the communications regulator Ofcom (2021) show the required quota being exceeded during the first half of 2021, quite comfortably in the cases of ITV2 (51.06%) and ITV3 (69.98%). Internal monitoring shows that ITV currently makes AD available on approximately one third of its catch-up and on-demand content. ITV provides AD for a wide range of genres from its diverse offering of programmes, ranging from children's TV and gameshows to documentary, drama and film. AD is written and voiced in-house by a staff team, typically in the days before a programme's first transmission, and sometimes many months after production teams have finished creating the programme.

The field of AD has seen extensive research carried out to explore other models of description that are more integrated into the production process, ranging from Walczak and Fryer (2017) and the use of a more filmic and subjective 'creative audio description' to Lopez et al. (2020 and 2021), whose research outlines and proves the effectiveness of creative sound design, first-person narration and binaural audio as tools in the AD provider's arsenal. The practicality and cost-effectiveness of

introducing such strategies to the UK's broadcast AD sphere are yet to be tested at scale; at present, TV AD continues to be a post-production process managed by teams who have relatively little contact with programme makers. This is an important point since if the problem is the lack of sufficient time to describe a programme with adequate visual detail, then one solution could be to create more time where needed—something that would be more easily accomplished in a workflow in which AD is built into the production process from an earlier stage. However, although this might be more in keeping with the social model of disability, i.e. adapting the creative process and product to meet the needs of the AD service and its users, given the context of today's mediascape and TV AD industry norms, the present project sought instead to explore the efficacy of a tool that is already widely used in other AD settings: the audio introduction.

An everyday part of AD in live settings, such as for theatre productions, an audio introduction is typically understood as a spoken overview of the visual make-up of a piece of content. Fryer & Romero-Fresco (2014, p. 9) provide a useful definition: “pieces of continuous prose, spoken by a single voice or combination of voices lasting between five and fifteen minutes [...] to provide a framework by which to understand the play”. They go on to say that audio introductions must “engage the listener's attention [and] whet their appetite”. For a play, an audio introduction might typically last 10 minutes, providing a brief summary of the plot alongside detailed descriptions of characters and locations as well as other relevant information. It could be made available online in recorded form, but would almost always be delivered just before the play begins, usually over the theatre's AD transmission system.

TV AD began in the linear era when it would not have been possible to broadcast 10 minutes of ancillary content in and around programme transmissions. Now, however, in a world of broadcaster-curated catch-up and streaming platforms, not to mention the Internet, many more opportunities are available for easy content sharing and audience engagement. Research by Romero-Fresco & Fryer (2013, p. 294) has shown that, for film, audio introductions “can provide a useful complement to improve access to screen media for people with visual impairments”. Secondary project questions for ITV included determining the exact form this content could take: how audiences would access it and how easy and cost-effective it might be to make it part of the existing AD delivery timescale. When the process was launched, no examples of a major UK broadcaster doing work in this sphere existed. It is, however, worth acknowledging the encouraging and varied examples of audio introductions from around the world, e.g. the text-based character descriptions utilised by describer Kat Germain (Slo Pitch, n.d.) on the Canadian comedy series *Slo Pitch* (Haight et al., 2020). Similarly, the Flemish broadcaster VRT produces “audio guides” for its fiction titles (Saerens et al., 2022), one example being the audio-only content made available on the broadcaster's web player (VRT NU, n.d.) for its drama series *Dertigers* [‘Thirties’] (Blazer et al., 2020–2021). Nevertheless, even while the research topic of audio introductions for film attracts attention, in practice they “remain experimental and anecdotic” (Romero-Fresco, 2022) and especially so in the world of TV, which has its own considerations around recurring characters and continuing storylines that might affect an audio introduction's content, timeline and intended mode of consumption.

Taking inspiration from the international examples, a further consideration from the outset was that ITV audio introductions need not be limited to the spoken word. Research by Eardley et al. (2017) and Hutchinson & Eardley (2021) demonstrates that adding sound effects to complement museum AD helps audiences retain more information about the work of art being described. Similarly, Portillo (2020) and Lopez et al. (2020, 2021) have carried out work on immersive sound design to create yet more alternative forms of AD. It was decided to explore the extent to which the spoken word AD within a TV programme could be enriched or enhanced by including additional audiovisual materials, such as sound excerpts (like in the VRT audio guides) and still images. The aim was to cement aural and visual connections in the minds of audience members with varying levels of visual experience, thus improving their retention of descriptive information between the time when they consumed the audio introduction and later viewed the programme itself. It was hoped that this would increase viewer engagement and enjoyment of the content. A crucial additional aim of the project ranging from the level of support for ongoing improvements to how well ITV's AD conveys visual diversity cues is discussed in section 4.

Drama and soap were selected as the primary genres of the research process because these are the programmes for which ITV's describers find they frequently have to leave many visuals under-described or even *undescribed*. Furthermore, drama is also the genre which affords visual details of costume and location the greatest importance. Film was excluded from the project simply because ITV is not primarily a film broadcaster. While it shows films that are released in the cinema and later acquired for TV broadcast, it regularly commissions and premieres high-profile, flagship drama series. Accordingly, this is the content the project sought to support and complement with the use of enhanced audio introductions.

3. The consultation process

3.1 Initial consultation

The audio introduction project cited in this paper was carried out in 2020 and its methodology was intentionally limited in scope. It was a research and development project carried out by AD practitioners working in the field and as such its findings are small-scale and exploratory, comprising a back-and-forth approach of sharing sample files accompanied by online surveys.

The subjects were drawn from the ITV AD Users' Forum, a permanent focus group established in 2020 to allow ITV's AD audiences to offer feedback on a wide range of issues, from editorial aspects of its AD to technical matters and other issues. Approximately 30 users were recruited by a public call for members made via specialist radio network RNIB Connect and thereafter by word of mouth among AD users. The group comprises people with a range of visual experience: some with acquired sight loss and some with congenital sight loss, some who are blind or blind with some residual vision or partially sighted.

Two distinct rounds of consultation were planned and scheduled to take place a few months apart. Both rounds would consist of making media attachments available to all forum members and inviting them to fill out accompanying online surveys. The sample audio introduction for the second round of consultation would take into account learnings from the survey responses to the first. The survey questions to the second round of consultation would similarly be modified in response to the changes implemented. An additional distinction was that the demo for the first round of consultation would be shared in isolation for a series that had already been broadcast, to elicit feedback on the concept, while for the second round respondents would be encouraged to consume the demo and then begin the TV series to which it related, in order to simulate the intended mode of viewing.

Forum members are not remunerated for their time so all gave their opinions voluntarily. The reasons for ITV carrying out this project and the approach to the research process were introduced in discussions at the regular bimonthly meetings of the Users' Forum, which are conducted over Google Meet video conferencing software. SurveyMonkey links were shared by e-mail with all members of the forum, who were invited to complete the surveys in their own time and in conjunction with listening to or watching the media attachments that were included. Some of the survey questions invited multiple-choice responses while others were open questions and invited free-text responses. The insights gained from these two consultation stages were further explored in discussions held during the forum meetings, although all quotations included in the present paper come from the written survey responses.

Several arguable flaws are evident in the methodology, for instance that an unknown degree of overlap between the respondents of the two stages may exist. However, this process was not intended simply as research, but rather to determine the appetite for the service and the viability of bringing it to audiences in a way that meets users' needs and works within ITV's business setting. Another limitation of the study concerns the survey questions, which could be said to be too preoccupied with the practical considerations of how users would access and consume this audio introduction material. Again, this was an intentional step designed to build up a clear picture of how an audio introduction workflow could function, with the quality and content being far easier to refine in response to future feedback and thus more easily adapted to each particular programme.

Lastly, it is worth restating that prior to the research process, it had been decided to offer one audio introduction to cover a *series* rather than one to precede each episode. The intention here was that an audio introduction would introduce the main characters and locations of a series while keeping to the theatre describer's mantra of not giving away information crucial to the plot (Fryer, 2016, pp. 161–162). Creating one single audio introduction file before a series began its linear transmission (or streaming release) is a far easier proposition than creating one for each episode. A subsequent series could get a new or updated introduction, whereas multiple introductions for a single series seemed to be creating additional effort without a clear benefit to users.

The remainder of section 3.1 focuses on the first stage of the consultation process, while the second round is discussed in section 3.2.

Twelve anonymous respondents took part in the initial consultation, which consisted of 2 audio-only sample files of audio introductions produced to accompany ITV drama *Cheat* (Aird et al., 2019). The content was prepared by a TV describer with experience of stage description, thus familiar with the principles behind writing audio introductions.

Here is a brief excerpt from the audio introduction, containing the preamble, one character description and one location description:

Cheat is a four-part drama. At the heart of the series is the dangerous relationship between Leah and Rose. What begins as a seemingly open-and-shut case of academic deception quickly spirals out of control, and ends in fatal consequences. This triggers a devastating sequence of events that threatens to engulf both women. [...] Leah Dale, a young academic, is played by Katherine Kelly. Leah is a thirtysomething of above-average height. She is white and has a slim frame. She has a fringe and often wears her mid-length blonde hair in a ponytail. Leah dresses smartly, in tops and blouses worn with wide-legged formal trousers. [...] *Cheat* unfolds in the town of Cambridge, with its cobbled alleyways, sunny riverside paths and arched bridges, and buildings made of honey-coloured stone. Leah and Adam share a detached house in a secluded area, possibly out of town. It has a farmhouse-style kitchen and a large living room, with study area to one side. The bookshelves are full of thick volumes and the couple also have a black-and-white cat.

One version contained spoken word only, while the second was augmented to include some pieces of music from the programme, including the title music. The aim here was to determine if users preferred the written and recorded content on its own, or if there was any benefit to enhancing the content. Version 1 (spoken word) was 6 minutes 30 seconds in length and version 2 (with music) lasted 6 minutes 54 seconds.

The accompanying survey contained 8 questions, 7 of which offered multiple-choice answers and 5 of which allowed the 12 respondents to write free-text comments. No information was collected about the respondents. However, owing to the closed circulation within the ITV AD Users' Forum, it is safe to say that all live with a degree of visual impairment and are regular viewers of TV dramas.

The survey questions were:

1. What is your first reaction to the introduction?
(Very positive / Somewhat positive / Neutral / Somewhat negative / Very negative)
2. Did the introduction make you want to watch the series itself?
(Yes / No)
3. Did the introduction adequately explain the visual details of the show, such as character appearance and location descriptions?
(Yes / No / Other, please specify)
4. Did you prefer the version with spoken word only, or the version with music?
(Spoken word only / Spoken word and music / Both the same)
5. Out of the following options, which would you like to have included in an introduction, considering your personal preferences and accessibility needs?

- (Character voices at the point that character is described / A still image of the character at the point that character is described / Large onscreen text of a character or location name as it is being described / Ambient sounds from a location at the point that location is described / A still image of a location at the point that location is described / Programme music, e.g. the main theme music / Other, please specify)
6. What did you think about the fact that the colour of the characters' skin was described in the audio introduction?
(I didn't notice / I noticed and it didn't bother me / I noticed and thought it was good / I noticed and didn't like it / Other, please specify)
 7. How would you choose to access the audio introduction to a drama series?
(Within the ITV Hub via app, website, Smart TV etc. / From an audio or podcast platform such as SoundCloud or PlayerFM / From a video platform such as YouTube)
 8. Please give any further feedback relating to this idea.

In question 1, 11 of 12 respondents gave a somewhat positive or very positive initial reaction to the demos, with 1 selecting somewhat negative. In question 2, 9 said the demos made them want to watch the actual series, while 2 said they did not. In question 3, all 12 respondents said the introduction content adequately explained the visual details of the programme (which the question specified as the appearance of the characters and the locations).

In question 4, 10 of the respondents preferred version 2 (with music) while just 2 respondents preferred version 1 (spoken word). In question 5, respondents were invited to select which features they wanted an enhanced audio introduction to include, based on their personal preferences and their own accessibility requirements. 10 respondents selected voice excerpts for main characters, 9 selected programme music, 7 selected ambient sounds for main locations, and 1 selected images (characters and locations). No respondents selected onscreen text to reinforce spoken utterances of character or location names. This provided a good justification for ITV to continue exploring audiovisual enhancements during the second stage of the study, building on the aforementioned practices explored by Lopez (2020, 2021), Hutchinson & Eardley (2021) and Portillo (2020).

In both versions of the *Cheat* demo, the skin colour of all characters was included as part of their physical description. Prior to 2020, such information was not always included in ITV's in-programme AD owing to time constraints and the standard industry practice of striving to include this sort of information only if it had a strong relevance to a programme's plot. The influential Royal Holloway and VocalEyes report on how visual diversity characteristics are conveyed in theatre AD (Hutchinson et al., 2020) led to ITV conducting its own internal research into this topic (see section 4 for a more in-depth discussion on this diversity aspect and how the audio introduction research relates to a policy change to improve ITV's in-programme AD). Because of this ongoing exploration, and owing to the unlimited duration available when creating these demos, it was decided to present the skin colour information in the two *Cheat* demos in order to gauge respondents' feelings. Question 6 drew this matter to respondents' attention and the responses were overwhelmingly positive with 2 of the 12 respondents selecting the second option (noticing but not having a negative reaction) and the

remaining 10 respondents selecting the third option (noticing and having a positive reaction). One respondent commented in the free-text field, “I think this is essential.”

In question 7, respondents were also asked how they would choose to access or consume an ITV audio introduction. 11 out of 12 respondents answered this question. 8 selected the ITV Hub platforms (ITV’s catch-up and on-demand player), 2 selected an audio or podcast platform, and just 1 selected a video platform.

The survey’s final question invited respondents to give any additional feedback relating to the audio introduction idea. This elicited 10 free-text responses, the majority of which were very supportive, demonstrating enjoyment and a positive experience while also offering constructive criticism.

This is a fantastic idea. [...] It gives so much more detail on the characters and settings [than traditional in-programme AD].

It would make the programme much easier to understand and attractive to watch from the start.

Really enjoyed the version with music, it helped paint a picture of what the series may be like and it wasn’t too long. [...] I believe it will be a valuable addition to the programme. There’s nothing worse than starting a new series and you’re overwhelmed with lots of characters [...] the audio introduction does help with this.

I do like this idea. [...] I did actually watch *Cheat* and enjoyed it as it was, but can see how this would have enhanced the experience for me.

On the cognitive understanding of the information presented, some of these comments revealed a range of responses regarding the level of textual detail and information in the spoken description:

The first two character descriptions and clothes were detailed, but the rest were less so. [...] There were areas I felt the description could use less [sic] words. [...] The description could have been more refined.

[...] there was too much information, or rather too many characters to remember all at once.

Finally, some comments highlighted shortfalls in areas such as audio balance:

I would like the spoken word accompanied by background music or atmospheric sounds if the volume could be toned down slightly so the spoken word is clearly heard.

This is a really great idea, I just felt the production values needed to be better executed.

3.2 Second consultation

For the second stage of the consultation process, it was deemed useful to try and replicate the likely viewing pattern of users, in other words, having users access the audio introduction *before* watching the series with AD in order to comment on whether they began the series with a strong understanding of the programme's characters and other visuals.

The series selected was ITV's *The Singapore Grip* (Hampton et al., 2020). This time a single video demo was produced, which aimed to contain improvements from the first stage's feedback. In addition to the spoken description, the demo contained elements of music (including the title music), recorded excerpts of main characters' voices at the points they were described, and images of those main characters while they were being described. In order to keep a tight focus on its audio-driven nature, it was decided to abandon the idea of onscreen text for character or location names and only to include still images of characters, and not locations to avoid the video becoming too visually busy. The video was 10 minutes 40 seconds in length.

Below is a brief excerpt from the audio introduction, containing the preamble, one character description and one location description:

The Singapore Grip is an epic six-part drama set during World War II, centring on a British family living in Singapore at the time of the Japanese invasion. Rubber merchant Walter Blackett, his wife Sylvia, ruthless daughter Joan and spoilt son Monty live a life of luxury, seemingly untouched by the troubles in Europe. However, the failing health of Walter's business partner Mr Webb causes the arrival of his dashing but naïve son, Matthew Webb, and a mysterious Chinese refugee. [...] Walter Blackett—played by David Morrissey—has a tall, commanding build and walks with an easy swagger. He is the co-owner of Blackett and Webb, a rubber factory in Singapore. A white Englishman in his forties, he sports a greying moustache and neat greying brown hair with a parting. He wears a range of plain suits and bow ties and has an upright but charming manner, though his smiles range from placatory to devious. [...] The drama is set in Singapore in the 1940s. The Blacketts' extravagant residence is in stark contrast to Vera's cramped living quarters in town. The Blacketts' mansion is surrounded by dense tropical trees on a hillside. It has a clean, white facade with gabled roofs and white columns on the ground floor. There's a pool at the back of the house, where Joan can often be found reclining under a sun lounger. A pool house also doubles up as an air-raid shelter, lined with sand bags. They have a large retinue of native servants and stylishly furnished rooms, including an ample-sized dining room.

Nine anonymous respondents took part in this second consultation. The survey contained 10 questions, 4 of which offered multiple-choice answers and all of which allowed the 9 respondents to write free-text comments.

The survey questions were:

1. What was your initial reaction to the demo?

- (Extremely positive / Positive / Neutral / Negative / Extremely negative / Please type any additional comments, or anything to explain your answer, in the box below)
2. Did the demo give you a good overview of the series?
(Yes, extremely good / Yes, good / Neutral, not sure / No, poor / No, extremely poor / Please type any additional comments, or anything to explain your answer, in the box below)
 3. Did the demo adequately explain the visual details of the series, such as character appearance and location descriptions? Was there anything you felt was missing?
 4. Could you say something about the length of the demo or the level of detail? If it was too long, was there anything you felt was unnecessary?
 5. In writing the character descriptions, we included characters' racial backgrounds. How did you feel about this?
 6. In addition to the spoken description, the demo contained additional features (listed below). Could you let us know which, if any, of these you found useful? Please select as many options as you agree with.
(Excerpts of dialogue from characters, at the point those characters were described / Still images of main characters, at the point those characters were described / Music from the programme / Is there anything else you would like to say about these additional features? Were there enough or too many?)
 7. How did watching or listening to the audio introduction affect your experience of the programme's first episode?
 8. When do you think you would be likely to want to listen to an audio introduction?
(A week before a series started / A few days before a series started / On the day a series started / Immediately before a series started / Could you express how you would like to hear about a new audio introduction being made available? Do you think a notification service would be useful?)
 9. Some users may like to listen to the introduction multiple times, to refresh their memories before each episode and to find out more about more minor characters as a series progressed. What do you think about this?
 10. Please could you tell us about your level of vision. It would be helpful for us to know whether or not you have partial sight that you use when watching TV and if you have no useable vision, whether this has always been the case or whether your vision got worse over time?

The final question asked respondents to outline their level of vision, to ensure that the responses represented a broad range of visual experience from our diverse base of users of any potential service. Whether this affected the responses was not taken into account in the analysis, though it could be the basis for future research. 4 respondents had acquired sight loss, 1 respondent had congenital sight loss, and 4 respondents did not specify. 5 respondents were blind, 2 respondents were blind with residual vision, and 1 respondent was partially sighted.

In question 1, 8 out of 9 respondents gave a positive or extremely positive initial reaction to the demo, with 1 remaining neutral. In question 2, 5 said it gave them an extremely good overview of the series, 3 said it gave them a good overview, and 1 remained unsure. In question 3, 7 out of 8 respondents gave positive comments to the effect that the demo adequately explained the series' visual details, while 1 respondent commented:

I feel it needed more substance and detail of visual ambience.

In question 4, respondents were invited to comment on the length or level of detail of the demo, in particular whether it was too long or if there was any information they found superfluous. Comments are arranged from broadly positive to broadly negative:

It met all my expectations, any more information would have been too much to retain. Good balance struck.

The demo was written very well [...] there was nothing I found to be unnecessary, I found it helpful.

Just the right length and content.

I would prefer it around 15 to 20 minutes but split into sub-sections.

Ten minutes was a touch on the long side. Perhaps [...] descriptions and sound clips of less prominent characters could be abandoned?

It was maybe too long [...] it is hard to say if all the characters covered in the demo had to be included in so much detail.

At roughly ten minutes in length it may be too long for most people. Perhaps [...] a more condensed three or four minutes could be trialled?

For me, a demo would probably need to be rapid and in 5 minutes, or available in text format.

I found it hard to listen to the entire piece.

Just felt it was maybe too long.

As with the first round of surveys, respondents were also prompted to express their reaction to the inclusion of characters' racial backgrounds in the character descriptions (question 5). The programme includes White British characters living in Singapore and characters with a Chinese or Singaporean background. Some comments revealed that users think this information should always be mentioned:

This is important and should never be shied away from.

I have no problem at all with this and I couldn't fault the way it was handled.

Some comments suggested that users think this information should only be mentioned when it is relevant to the programme's plot:

As the plot of the story was set in Singapore, it was necessary.

In this case, racial background was important and these were covered well.

Felt it was relevant in this context.

Moving on to question 6, 8 out of the 9 respondents indicated which of the additional enhancements they found useful, with 8 selecting the character dialogue excerpts, 2 selecting the character images, and 5 selecting the programme music. Comments included:

I really enjoyed hearing the characters at the same time they were described; connecting voice to image.

I grasped the feel of the show and the characters from the audio hints.

[...] useful to identify the characters' voices.

Excellent scene-setter and character descriptions. Great to hear the voices of each character before watching the series.

Some respondents offered constructive criticism on the excerpts chosen to represent the characters:

These elements need more explanation or should be [...] described in more detail.

The length of the voice clips varied: some were long enough to gain a level of recognition, however, some could have been longer.

ITV considered it important to learn how potential users envisaged themselves accessing the audio introductions (question 8). Responses were wide-ranging concerning when respondents would choose to make use of an audio introduction relative to the linear transmission (or streaming release) of the series to which it related. 7 of 9 respondents answered this question, with 1 selecting a week before the series began, 3 selecting a few days before the series began, and 3 selecting the day a series began. In addition, responding to the prompt in the question, 4 users indicated in their free-text responses that they could envisage wanting to access the introduction more than once, for instance, to refresh their memories as the series progressed or to find out more about minor characters who might have come to the fore since the first episode.

The survey for this second stage of the study included opportunity for any additional feedback (questions 7 and 9). Several users took this chance to suggest e-mail or social media notifications or announcements as a way of publicising audio introductions, should the project continue. Other comments included:

The information contained within was mostly interesting and added extra detail you would not ordinarily find in an audio description.

I found myself imagining the location of the homes, i.e. when Joan was laying by the pool looking down at Vera's arrival. This kind of little extra information had made it through to my subconscious and did help create a better overall picture.

The demo vastly improved my enjoyment and, I felt more involved in the series from the start. Often, when viewing an AD drama, it can take a while to get used to the character's voices, which, in turn, detracts from the viewing experience.

It is testament to the good spirit and helpful nature of those ITV AD Users' Forum members who responded to these surveys notwithstanding the fact that the programmes selected for the demos were not to their taste; with tongue somewhat in cheek, these two closing remarks nonetheless illustrate the clear appetite for more TV audio introductions from some respondents:

You picked the one series of [ITV's] current three dramas that I did not want to watch!

Please can we have this for all your dramas, not just the ones you select!

3.3 Towards ITV's conception of an audio introduction

With two rounds of survey remarks and a wealth of constructive feedback in hand, it was now possible to lay the foundation for ITV's conception of an enhanced audio introduction for a TV drama series. The information presented here could be considered an initial blueprint which can be refined in response to future interaction with audiences and adapted to suit the needs and styles of the specific series to which the introduction relates.

ITV had decided beforehand that the text of the audio introduction should be written and voiced by the describer or describers working on the series, to provide continuity of content and user experience. It was now decided that, much like a theatre audio introduction, the introduction should set the scene by giving an overview of place and period. It should also provide relevant production information, such as writer, director, etc. (Fryer, 2016, pp. 158–159), as, like with a play, this rather functional information often cannot be included in the in-programme AD for TV programmes due to time constraints.

Detailed descriptions should be given for main characters, with still images of the characters and audio excerpts of their voices (ensuring the excerpts are sufficient to enable users to identify their voices). Descriptions could also be given for minor characters, weighed up against the risk of providing users with so much information, resulting in overload. Descriptions should be included for important locations, ideally accompanied by ambient sounds or relevant audio excerpts. Programme music or audio excerpts could be used to frame the different sections of the audio introduction content.

Ideally, an introduction was to be no longer than 10 minutes, although this would depend on the series in question. When the introduction was longer than 10 minutes, the describer team should consider splitting the content into shorter and more manageable sections, making these available as separate videos to aid staggered listening and comprehension.

The involvement of the ITV accessibility team ensured that the video content would also be subtitled and this, in turn, bolstered by one survey respondent's request for a text version of the content, meant that it would also be wise to provide a transcript to aid consumption from as wide a user base as possible, whatever their exact accessibility needs might be.

In terms of where an audio introduction might be served to AD users, the survey respondents showed a clear preference for it to be integrated in ITV Hub platforms in some way. Audio introductions could be contained within their own category with the ITV Hub, or made available under an existing "brand" such as ITV Shorts. Alternatively, an intuitive user experience could even suggest or prompt the relevant audio introduction when a user activated the AD for a given series. However, it is worth bearing in mind that this makes the content less accessible or discoverable for potential audiences that do not usually use AD. Although Hub integration remains an option for the future, this solution would require a substantial amount of preparatory work which would not be achievable in the short term, not least because ITV's technology teams still have some way to go in adding 'traditional' AD functionality to many of its platforms.

An interim step, and one which would also fulfil the notifications aspect requested by several respondents, was to host audio introductions on a video platform such as YouTube. They could be curated or organised into playlists so that longer files that had been split into more manageable sections could be grouped together. Users could also subscribe to a YouTube channel to receive notifications of new audio introduction content being published. Most importantly, a YouTube URL would be common to multiple different platforms allowing for far easier dissemination of the content than between mobile player apps and smart TVs. A URL could be included in an ITV social media post or e-mail and easily forwarded among AD users. Lastly, this approach, being rather more public than sequestering the audio introduction content within a dedicated ITV Hub category, meant that ITV would have the opportunity to gather information about engagement from non-blind user groups and wider audiences as well as building support for the practice of audio introductions from the target blind audiences and other stakeholders within ITV.

4. Diversity

As indicated throughout this paper, an important additional motivation behind the audio introductions project was to lend support to a separate project ITV run during 2020, which sought to examine how successfully ITV's TV AD conveyed visible diversity cues, specifically about skin colour and race. Indeed, it is no accident that ITV ran these two projects concurrently: the two help each other achieve their outcomes and support each other both practically and as linked concepts. A brief overview is provided here to contextualise the relevance to audio introductions, but Penny (2020) provides a fuller outline of ITV's research in this area.

The role of any describer is determining the relevance of visual information and then deciding how to express it in words. This means AD audiences rely on the describer's decisions to understand visual

diversity cues and what meaning they may carry. Recent research by Royal Holloway University and VocalEyes challenged conventions and highlighted the risks that can arise when diversity is not given adequate consideration as a relevant visual characteristic (Hutchinson et al., 2020), focusing on theatre AD. Additionally, there is the matter of representation both for those being described and for the AD audience: for blind and visually impaired TV audiences, the comprehension of any progress in this area is contingent on this information being made available by describers.

ITV produced a new internal policy document encouraging its audio describers to strive to provide physical descriptions where appropriate and to include diversity information as part of this (Penny, 2020). As this new approach is still constrained by the strictures of dialogue placement and programme timings, it is clear that the findings of this diversity study lend the audio introductions a clear additional purpose as a place to provide a more balanced and equitable overview of a programme's diverse cast.

A vital note: including visual diversity information in the audio introduction does not preclude it from also being presented in the in-programme AD. To do so would risk alienating AD users choosing to consume programme AD without accessing the audio introduction as much as it would seem an unsavoury relegation of sorts, shunting diversity information to a piece of secondary content because there is no room for it within the AD itself. Hence audio introductions can be seen as strengthening support to ITV's diversity policy covering its AD provision.

5. Subsequent steps

Having established a clear appetite among the respondents for this kind of audio-driven content to provide a genuine supportive function, the next step was to create a public demonstration to test the practice beyond the limited Users' Forum and to prove the concept as viable to stakeholders within ITV. These avenues would both be key in laying the groundwork for offering the service on a more regular basis.

It was decided to offer an expanded version of an audio introduction to accompany one of ITV's continuing soaps, *Coronation Street* (MacLeod, 1960–2022). The attraction of a soap was that the content could be developed over time and released when ready. It would not matter if unforeseen delays meant a fixed transmission date was 'missed' because the series airs all year round on 3 to 4 nights each week. Furthermore, *Coronation Street* is a series produced by ITV Studios. Compared to the many dramas made for ITV by external production companies, an in-house series would offer greater opportunities for meaningful consultation and collaboration with colleagues in creating the content. The show has a cast of over 80 regular characters and many different homes and public locations, so owing to the length of the material required it also provided the opportunity to test the 'content splitting' some respondents had requested (which is, for instance, the approach the Flemish public broadcaster VRT has taken with some of its online audio guides).

This *Coronation Street* audio introduction comprises audio-led video content grouped into YouTube playlists. All of the videos are subtitled, with these subtitles being available as attached transcripts for the benefit of users of screen reader technologies, who may prefer to move through the content at a more rapid speed.

The first video is a brief introductory section to inform users what they are listening to and to invite them to complete a feedback survey. The second section takes the form of a guided walking tour of Weatherfield, the fictional Salford suburb where *Coronation Street* is set. This section lasts under 5 minutes and is intended to be a brief description of the programme's main locations, giving users a visual map of their close positions relative to one another.

The third section is a more in-depth description of every current location on the programme, lasting over 20 minutes in total, but split into three sections geographically. For example, one section is Coronation Street itself, another is Viaduct Street. Although no images were included in these location description videos, sound effects were included in the form of ambient noise recordings acquired from the programme's production teams and audio clips to illustrate key moments referenced in the text, sourced from the *Coronation Street* archive. A reference to the programme's 50th anniversary, which saw an explosion cause a catastrophic tram crash, is illustrated by an audio excerpt from the episode in question, to add colour and underline the drama. The hubbub and bustle of the traditional café Roy's Rolls is similarly illustrated by an ambient sound recording from this filming location.

Another, much more expansive section presents a playlist of minute-long videos, each containing a description of a character. This approach serves a practical purpose by making the process of introducing new characters and retiring older ones easier, and also caters for users who might only be interested in the appearances of their preferred characters, or indeed, their least favourite ones. All these videos include a hi-res image of the character. Many of them feature a traditional third-person description of the character, written in conjunction with colleagues from the *Coronation Street* team, while around 20 offer 'self-descriptions,' written in collaboration with the production team and recorded by the actors themselves as their characters.

To illustrate this, it is useful to compare the draft text for the character description as prepared by the AD team with the version that was voiced:

I am Dev Alahan and I am a fifty-something British-Indian man. I have wide, dark eyes; short, silky black hair (going a little grey); and I'm clean shaven. I dress sharply – in shirts, waistcoats and jackets – and for special family events, I wear traditional Hindu clothing. I live with my twins, Aadi and Asha.

The expanded and rather more polished version, after input from the programme's team of writers, was voiced with all the panache it deserves by actor Jimmi Harkishin:

I'm Dev Alahan, a British-Indian man in my fifties. I have wide, dark eyes and short, silky black hair which is going a bit grey but I'm embracing it – you know, being true to yourself is a very wise thing. I'm clean shaven thanks to these brilliant razors you can get at the shop – they're currently on offer if you're interested. As the foremost businessman in Weatherfield, it's important I look the part. I dress sharply, in shirts, waistcoats and jackets. The way you look reflects the products you sell and I know people want to buy sophisticated and crushingly handsome things. I wear traditional Hindu clothing for special family events; but really, aren't all family occasions special? They are for me; I cherish every moment living with my darling babies Aadi and Asha. I suppose I'm technically their father but it's a very non-hierarchical relationship, they see me as a friend first. The coolest dad on the street.

At the time of writing, this proof of concept demonstration for *Coronation Street* is still in production but ITV hopes to release it in the near future.

6. Conclusion

Audio introductions clearly have the potential to complement TV broadcasters' traditional in-programme AD and benefit blind audiences, particularly if they are 'enhanced' by additional audio and visual elements. Importantly, an audio introduction also provides useful extra space for describers to utilise to include important visual information that might be relevant for some audiences, whether that is in support of new policy directions in terms of describing diversity, as was the case for ITV, or simply to add visual colour to the rich descriptions of a period drama.

ITV continues to develop its audio introduction service and Penny (2022) summarises a recent successful collaboration with marketing and digital teams that saw actor-voiced character descriptions released to accompany the high-profile launch of ITV thriller *Trigger Point* (Mercurio et al., 2022). It is hoped this collaborative approach can be extended to production teams across more of the broadcaster's dramas.

This project also highlights topics for further research, including how audience needs differ depending on precise levels of visual experience (with variations on the same audio introduction being tailored to different audience groups) and whether the audio introduction can function as a service in its own right for non-blind audiences (rather than as an add-on to AD).

Though clearly a full programme of TV audio introductions would require extensive planning and efficient organisation and for materials to be available in time before the programme in question's initial transmission, no significant costs would act as a barrier to wider adoption of this practice. In many cases, describers are already 'seeing' the additional visual features and details that could be included in the audio introductions. They simply have no suitable juncture in which to place their descriptions.

Audio introductions are by no means new. Nonetheless, it is hoped that adapting them for the small screen could bring a new dimension to TV viewing for ITV and other broadcasters. Sharing this

development process allows fellow broadcasters and other stakeholders to continue exploring this field and to develop their own interpretations of this practice. The project outlined offers a sketch of tomorrow's mediascape in which audio introductions can be a central part.

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