1. Introduction

An email conversation:

Hello! Since Flanders Audiovisual Fund\(^1\) has granted us a subsidy for our upcoming programme, we seem to be obligated to provide our programme with so-called audio description.\(^2\)

Since our series will be broadcast by VRT, could you furnish the audio description?
Please let us know what you expect from us!
Thank you, yours sincerely,
Production company X

Our answer is invariably the same:

Of course we can create audio description for your programme at a rate of \(x\) euros per minute, can you agree with these terms?

Please send us asap an image lock of the episode with a completed audio mix and a shooting script or the dialogue lists. We need this at least three weeks prior to broadcast.

Hope to hear from you soon,
VRT-Audio description team

The answer:

We didn’t calculate such a high cost for audio description – after all it is something extra to our production and our budget is already very tight. Also we cannot provide such an early delivery. Grading and mixing will not be ready. Also as you are the (public) broadcaster don’t you have an obligation as well and can’t you assume these costs yourself?
Alternatively:

*We have spoken to the broadcast channel and they said you would take care of the costs internally.*

Yours sincerely,

Production company X

These examples illustrate how broadcasters are confronted with the reality of audio description (AD) and the difficult position they can find themselves in. They are often caught between legislation such as the EU’s Audiovisual Media Services Directive, internal or external obligations and production companies for whom audio description is often just another administrative box to tick. But things might be changing as awareness of audio description and accessibility in general grows in an international market which starts demanding AD as a non-negotiable deliverable.

In this chapter, we shall look at the broadcaster as a stakeholder for audio description. This role can be interpreted in various ways, each with a different level of engagement with the AD product and the target audience. We will elaborate on our own position as a public broadcaster and our number one priority – creating and distributing accessible content for all including audio description for the blind and visually impaired. They are our target audience and we collaborate and ask feedback from them as their voice needs to be heard. Their needs and wants are our main concern.

At first glance broadcasters are in a sense distribution centres for AD. They literally broadcast the programmes and their associated AD via the different distribution channels which they have at their disposal. But the role of a broadcaster, especially public broadcasters, is much broader than this. As broadcasters order their programming from different production companies they also have a role to play in the production or purchase of audio description for this programming. In their role as the client and when there are no legal obligations for audio description, it is up to them to make the decision to invest in AD for certain programmes. There also seem to be differences between commercial broadcasters and public broadcasters. Traditionally public broadcasters seem to be more at the forefront of accessibility services. This will not come as a surprise as they are funded partially or completely by government grants and tend to have more legal obligations than some commercial broadcasters. In general they have an agreement or charter with their overseeing government which binds them to agreed upon budgets and limits their commercial activities. Being financed by the taxpayer they also have to tender rigorously for purchases in accordance with EU law. As a public broadcaster they are deemed to provide a public service and cater to specific target audiences. When it comes to accessibility, they should strive to be the best in the class. This is also visible in Flanders where the public broadcaster has more obligations regarding accessibility than the commercial broadcasters.

We will be writing from the perspective of a public broadcaster, in our case – “Vlaamse Radio en Televisie”, henceforth identified as VRT – pioneering in a small European market where commercial broadcasters have few to no obligations regarding audio description. In future, it is likely that these commercial broadcasters will need to provide AD for a percentage of their programming, when the European Audiovisual Media Services Directive becomes a local decree. The Flemish market is small with only 6 million inhabitants. Even when we consider all Dutch speaking people across the globe it still encompasses only 24 million people,
mostly living in Flanders and the Netherlands. Despite sharing a common language, for television production these are two distinctive markets with little transfer between them. This also means there is less potential for international sales and certainly not for audio description as the target audience is limited to a few, 100,000 people at most for native Dutch speaking regions. Although research shows that globally the number of blind and visually impaired people will triple by 2050 (Bourne et al., 2019) this is still only a fraction of the total possible audience of a programme. Lastly, at VRT we try to produce our audio description internally and also have an in-house editorial staff safeguarding our AD quality. We believe this approach offers certain opportunities, but also challenges as seen in the opening email conversation, and which we will address later in this chapter.

2. Audio description: the road towards professionalism – a historical perspective

To see where we as a public broadcaster are going, it is important to provide some background. VRT – Flemish radio and television – is a public broadcaster which is financed by a Flemish government endowment and which operates within a charter that is renegotiated every four years. This charter describes measurable targets and obligations which the public broadcaster needs to meet. As a broadcaster, VRT operates three separate television channels, each with different target audiences: one channel focuses on children, one targets a broad audience and the third channel aims at a niche audience of people who like documentary, news and fiction with an edge to it. VRT also hosts an online video platform and app called VRT NU, where all the content of the different channels is made available, comparable to BBC’s iPlayer in the UK.

When a VRT channel commissions a programme to be produced, it has a choice: order the programme within its own organisation or source it out to an external production company. The percentage of orders to be placed on the market is regulated by the charter with the Flemish government. In practice, this means that a lot of content is produced for VRT but not always made by VRT. VRT is also obligated to support the Flemish audiovisual sector and therefore commission a large part of its programming from privately owned production companies.

In the charter, the following major principle is stated: VRT should reach a majority of viewers and listeners, of all ages, social ranks, with no exclusion of minority groups. This means the VRT content has to reach a very broad audience for which we utilise a variety of platforms such as linear television, radio, online services and over-the-top or OTT-media services. We strive to offer our audience a truly user-friendly experience for all of our products accessible for all. Accessibility services can therefore be considered as a core business for VRT or other public broadcasters in similar situations. These services include subtitling, sign language, digital access service and of course audio description.

At VRT we started with AD in 2012, whereas larger public European broadcasters such as the BBC had already started producing audio description in the early 2000s. However by starting with AD almost a decade after the pioneers, we had the chance to look abroad for examples of how it should and could be made, adopting best practices from different countries, such as the United Kingdom, Sweden and Germany, trying to take maximum advantage of academic research that had already been carried out. As we started with our internally produced AD we collaborated with academia, for example the University of Antwerp or via our involvement in the ADLAB-project (2011–2014), but also with blind and visually impaired people. This way we could further improve the quality of our audio description and also ensure it met the needs of our target audience. Our first and preferred academic partner was the University of
Antwerp, who were and are still doing research into the subject of AD and who also have an audio description course for aspiring AD writers. Their students are our future creative talent pool.

The VRT audio description pioneers were a small team of volunteers, as was the case in many other places. They worked, partly out of idealism and partly because they had the time, in different departments and taking on AD as an extra task. At first VRT audio described only one high-end drama series per year, comprised of ten to 13 episodes. In the years since production has been gradually increased and in 2016 the Flemish government defined further objectives and a path toward more audio described programming which VRT was obliged to meet by 2020. As of the moment of writing, these objectives were fully met and even exceeded the obligated volume.

Over the years, as the VRT audio description unit, we have been striving to streamline our workflows and build a professional and competitive audio description department. We have also worked on reducing the production cost per minute of our AD without compromising on quality. The reduction of this cost per minute therefore provides us with the opportunity to produce more audio description. A lower cost also helps us to convince production companies to allocate part of their production budget towards AD, as costs become more bearable and reasonable. Today as VRT audio description we have a small internal production team that works together with freelance professionals such as writers and voice talents. In future we aim to further increase our AD production output and have an internal editorial staff defining and safeguarding our quality standards.

European broadcasters have usually started with audio description for their high-end drama series, which generally have the biggest budgets, largest audiences and have generally more need of AD compared to other television formats. This was also the case for VRT where in the first years only quality drama was audio described. These quality fiction dramas are until today the only category for which VRT has a legal obligation to offer audio description for. However, since 2016–2017 the VRT audio description department has also taken on comedy, documentary, children’s programming and even some human interest. We feel strongly this is part of the service we as a public broadcaster need to provide. We need to experiment and look beyond the borders of different genres, find solutions for challenges these new genres are presenting and position ourselves as a knowledge centre for AD in Flanders. We need to go beyond audio description theory and adapt it for a production environment.

In Flanders awareness of AD is growing and the Flanders Audiovisual Fund, which subsidises films and television series, has now put a regulation in place which requires all productions they support to produce audio description. It is expected that in the near future all Flemish broadcasters will need to broadcast more programmes with AD. This surge in regulation and the obligation to broadcast programmes with AD is a blessing for our target audience but a challenge for many broadcasters, both public and commercial.

3. Critical issues for broadcasters

During the last eight years in which we have created and broadcasted audio description, VRT has faced and is still facing several critical issues. And we see other broadcasters sometimes struggle with similar challenges. In order to properly identify these issues, we have contacted colleagues at two other public broadcasters and asked them what challenges they face. These broadcasters are the BBC and NRK. The British Broadcasting Cooperation, the BBC, started with AD in 2000 and can be considered as a veteran providing rather large volumes of audio
description. Norsk Rikskringkastin, NRK, started in 2016 with AD and has a smaller volume of audio description broadcasts. VRT sits in between.

Although our approaches might differ, we found many similarities regarding the challenges we face and also the views we hold on AD as public broadcasters. These challenges might not apply to all broadcasters, but we try to think broad and open-minded. In the following paragraphs we will discuss these issues and try to offer solutions or tracks towards solutions.

3.1 The cost of audio description

Today the creation of audio description is a rather lengthy and labour-intensive process which comes at a cost. While this cost may be relatively small when compared to the budget of major productions, for smaller ones it can represent a financial hurdle. When it is compared to an accessibility service such as subtitling it could be viewed as expensive. Creating AD is a creative endeavour and as such cannot be fully automated. And even with an efficient supply chain, labour intensive processes such as writing and voicing will still have a significant cost. In the case of VRT, writing costs incur 30 to 50% of the total audio description cost.

Cost is always a delicate point in a sector where budgets are already strained and where ever higher quality is expected at lower costs. Even when budgets go up, the demands are higher. Today local drama series are expected to have international sales. Although these sales can be rewarding, they also bring with them an extra initial investment for production companies, as extra deliverables such as international sound and AD are often required. However not all series have international potential and series within different genres often have a smaller budget while the audio description cost is the same – even higher relative to the budget. As mentioned before, some productions in Flanders receive funds in support of their artistic endeavour, but these funds come with the condition of producing AD which means they will need to spend a portion of these funds on audio description. This makes it a double-edged sword for production companies.

When it comes to the cost of audio description two questions arise:

1. who commissions the programme and decides on the addition of AD?
2. who will pay the AD costs?

In an ideal world, the answer is easy: the client who demands the AD will pay the price set by the contractor.

But this is not an ideal world and the answer is complicated. As was made clear in the introduction, the interests of all parties concerned are diverse and often opposed.

Different scenarios occur:

- the broadcaster has a legal obligation to provide audio description;
- the production company has a legal obligation to provide audio description;
- both broadcaster and production company have a legal obligation to provide audio description;
- none have a legal obligation to provide audio description.

Only in the last scenario is there an option not to produce any audio description, although should one of the parties choose to produce and pay for AD, it can still be done. But in the other three scenarios the funds to cover the audio description cost need to come from somewhere.
When we take a look at the BBC and NRK once more, we learn that they outsource their AD production, but as broadcasters they fund their audio description from an allocated or central budget. In this model there is no extra cost for the production companies or the core budget of each production. AD at VRT started as a pilot project and the audio description was created completely internally. Although production increased over the years, AD kept operating in this pilot project setting. This also meant that there was no structural funding for AD and people and means needed to be sourced across various departments. In an effort to further professionalise our audio description workflow and create a dedicated AD department and knowledge centre, we needed to change tactics and become self-reliant. In collaboration with our various stakeholders, we decided that in future the AD cost would be covered by the programme’s production budget.

3.2 Dealing with costs at VRT

As it could be argued that accessibility is a core value for a public broadcaster and that these accessibility services should be covered by the general budget, we believe a different model makes more sense. The model we are proposing and implementing at VRT can also be used by commercial broadcasters, even when they do not have an in-house audio description department.

In our model, all parties should agree upon the audio description cost at the very early stage of contract negotiations. By acknowledging AD in the budget, it becomes part of the programme and not just an afterthought. Like international sound, it is a deliverable. For VRT audio description we give an estimate and make an offer based on the information provided. By giving production companies a chance to look for AD elsewhere on the market we also ensure that we conform to market prices and work with a cost-based model. It also gives our in-house AD department the opportunity to work for other parties, provided we are not disruptive to the existing market and support a developing peripheral market of writers, recording studios, voice-actors and more. As the audio description invoice will be part of the production budget, it can also be used for tax-shelter, further spreading the cost of the audio description over more parties, as now external investors who use tax-shelter will contribute to the overall production. This model which distributes the costs of audio description more equally between all partners will also reduce the threshold to start with AD for commercial broadcasters as they will not be the sole party responsible for picking up the extra cost.

In our experience so far, making AD an integral part of the programme from the start also enhances the awareness of audio description and accessibility in general. While some broadcasters such as the BBC already have editorial guidelines for their programme in order to provide space for AD within programmes, we also believe a greater awareness of audio description will make creators think further on how AD can be implemented in their programmes. We try to actively encourage production companies to have their creators work together with our audio description department in order to provide the best experience for our audience, staying as close to the vision of the programme creators as possible, with respect to the purpose of AD. Of course, this is a preferable scenario for fiction but it can be implemented in different genres.

This workflow can also be used for programmes which are not made by an external production company, like a daily soap opera for instance produced by the broadcasters internally. However here there will be no invoice but rather a re-allocation of funds towards the audio description department to cover the costs.
3.3 The effective appropriation of funds

Aside from the question of who needs to pay, there is also a question of how funds can be used as efficiently as possible. In every possible scenario, funds for AD will be limited and choices will have to be made. Broadcasters need to look for the highest value for money strategy in order to provide as much quality AD as possible. This can be done by excluding some genres from audio description from the start. For instance, news programmes have very limited potential for AD because of their information density and their live character, which we will discuss later. Then there might be programmes where there is so little room for audio description that it might not add any value to audio describe them. So when the value for money is low, it is better to focus on more suitable content. In this regard, it is interesting to mention the BBC’s “bimedia” editorial policy that was put in place in the 1990s. This policy implies that the audio from a television programme can be used in a radio programme without much issue. They even have content that is broadcast both on radio and television with the only difference being the absence of images on the radio broadcast. This “bimedia” approach is used particularly for news content and could serve as an example for other broadcasters struggling to make their news content more accessible with minimal costs. Today this policy is no longer in use as it has been replaced with elements of training for people involved in producing content.

For broadcasters, more cost efficiency could also be achieved by replacing voice talents with synthetic voices, creating automated AD based on timecoded scripts. In this case the production of the scripts will still be labour intensive and costly, but by skipping the recording and mixing process, programmes with smaller budgets could become eligible for audio description, at drastically reduced costs. This could offer a much larger volume of audio described programmes for the target audiences, the quality being somewhat lower but still acceptable. However these synthetic voices will need to be very well tuned to have some resemblance to human speech. For a world language such as English this is more feasible – and already reality – than for relatively small languages such as Norwegian or Dutch. Nevertheless, for fiction we would prefer to continue investing in AD with human voice-over artists, as this is greatly appreciated by target audiences. It is also important to note that AD of a high quality might speak to a larger audience. We see a global trend of focus shift, where people consume media in different situations, and even use high quality AD as a derivative of the original programme for audio-only purposes such as podcast: people listening to their favourite soap opera in their car or on the train.

There is in our view no right or wrong way to tackle the problem of audio description costs, but it is important that all parties involved are aware of the benefits and the potential of AD. Hopefully then the cost of AD will be considered a reasonable investment instead of a wasteful cost.

3.4 Audio description and the “just in time” delivery

While VRT and NRK mostly provide audio description for their local high-end drama series, the BBC has already offered AD on 20% of their broadcast hours, a lot more than required by the UK regulator Ofcom which demands they cover at least 10%. An impressive amount, yet they indicate that it will be hard to increase the volume further because of several issues: technical, editorial and cost related. However, another major reason AD is not always feasible is the time between delivery of programmes and broadcast.
In general, broadcasters and audio description companies only start the AD process when a programme is finished. For certain programmes, it is possible to work with a temporary file containing picture lock and finished audio mix, but for most television programmes, audio description needs to wait for a broadcast file. There are deviations from this approach and studies have been done into the subject of further integration of the AD process into the main programme’s production process. At VRT we also conducted an experiment creating AD based on small and unfinished segments of the programme and reassembling these after the programme’s final assembly. Here we learned this method needs further refining as we felt that this was very costly and time consuming with a lot of wasted effort. Also, creating AD before there is a copy of the finished programme is not considered standard practice for most audio describers and broadcasters.

Being at the end of the production chain is a non-enviable position which audio description shares with subtitling. But subtitling has a relatively short production chain compared to AD, is better equipped to handle last-minute deliveries and they even have live or semi-live capabilities. It should be noted that while it is technically possible to provide live AD and it is done by some broadcasters, the particularity of live shows makes it very hard to do well, and near impossible for news programmes, as the risk of speaking over interviewees is very high. The quality of live audio description will be lower than for scripted AD and is extremely dependant on the audio describer’s voice and talent.

As mentioned before, audio description is a lengthy process with several steps which have to be followed in sequence: writing, recording, mixing and integration. For a 50-minute programme this process takes at least four to five days and usually involves more than four people depending on the roles they take on; for instance, a writer could also voice and even record the AD. Writing the AD is again the most time consuming step. While with subtitling, several translators or subtitlers can work on one programme simultaneously, we believe this is not best practice for audio description, nor is the writing of a more minimalistic AD within a programme, which might speed up the production process but holds less value for target audiences. And so for many programmes there is not enough of a gap between delivery and broadcast of programmes.

It is also a problem that seems to get worse as television is changing and just-in-time deliveries are becoming the new normal. Today, new content is pushed out faster and faster to try and capture audiences with timely and relevant subjects, taking society’s pulse. The drawback is that many productions struggle to meet their deadlines. This is true even for fictionalised drama which in the past was often ready up to a year in advance of broadcast but now only a few weeks, with ever changing versions.

Another problem for series is that they are often offered on a broadcasters’ digital platform in boxset. This means all episodes go online simultaneously and need to have audio description. This is not always possible and at VRT the AD versions are then released in a later window, which is sometimes a disappointment for the target audience.

For our fiction we now have contractual agreements and guidelines which should help mitigate this problem, another advantage of making audio description part of the programme and putting it upfront in the programme’s budget. But this will not always be possible for other formats such as documentaries, human interest and others. Constant communication with all parties concerned will hopefully lead to a better understanding of audio description needs, and might impart the importance of timely deliveries for broadcast materials. But there is also the need for AD departments to find new workflows, be flexible and guide programme creators to help them help us. Our strategy is to talk with creators. The better they understand our
position, the more willing they are to comply or compromise. They need to understand that audio description is a part of their programme, their baby.

3.5 Audio description quality

How can you determine the quality of audio description? While quality has and always should be a primary concern, it is a changing concept. As is the case in every sector of production, quality is proportionate to cost and sadly quality is sometimes used to justify exorbitant cost. AD cost is an extremely limiting factor for the production of more audio description and this is why it is imperative that broadcasters and production companies find this balance between quality and cost.

Audio description quality also has many different aspects: the technical comfort of listening with a perfectly mixed-in AD where the AD voice is integrated in the programme. The style of writing which should aim to be in sync with the style and form of the story. And the voice artist’s narration of the story, a middle ground between an impersonal commentator and an engaging narrator.

In the early days of VRT we mostly defined our audio description quality by a rigorous adherence to certain academic guidelines such as the ADLAB audio description guidelines (Remael et al., 2014), the variety in the words that were used to describe similar actions or objects and the amount of visual information provided regardless of narrative value. Quality of the narration and storytelling were of a more secondary nature. While there is nothing wrong with these guidelines, they should be a tool to work with instead of a rulebook that will not allow for change, improvisation or improvement. Gradually, VRT audio description found its own voice and the definition of quality, elusive as the concept may be, is changing. As our definition of quality evolves towards more engaging storytelling with respect for the particularities of audio description, we hope that our quality has increased over the years. But how to evaluate the concept of “quality”? As a public broadcaster, we try to do this by asking our target audiences. Since the very beginning, the team has been questioning focus groups of blind and visually impaired people on a regular basis. We show them episodes of our programmes with AD and closely observe their reactions: at which moments did they frown or show a certain discomfort? Watching a funny scene, did they laugh? After the initial screening of the episodes, we discuss their reaction and their observations in a long feedback session. We try to capture this feedback and implement it in future audio description. Weaknesses are remedied, good practice is being confirmed and suggestions of the target group will be reflected upon.

We also have new writers collaborate with our more experienced writers in order to further endow them with our vision on the creation of audio description. Combine this with an in-house editor double-checking AD texts and you see how quality is never dependent on one individual but on a well-functioning team whereby each has their expertise. The information thus obtained helps us to adapt our AD more closely to the needs of our target audience and improve our quality. Another strategy we use is to work closely with the production teams; they know their programme best and we use their knowledge to better understand the story and character motives. Thus we can offer our target audience an audio description experience which is in line with the vision of the creators.

3.6 Distribution of audio description

While the production and cost of audio description might be challenging for broadcasters, the distribution of AD can be a serious problem. In order to provide audio description, a
broadcaster will need to add an extra audio track to an existing programme – simple enough. But as a broadcaster you also need to be able to distribute this track to your target audience and you want your audience to be able to choose whether they would like to see the programme with or without AD. This is where broadcasters often encounter difficulties. We shall discuss issues with various platforms where audio description can be distributed and the problems and solutions associated with each platform.

**Television broadcast**

By classic television broadcast, we mean the regular service television broadcasters have provided for decades now, with a fixed linear programming for their channels. For many broadcasters these channels are still the backbone of their services, despite changes in people’s viewing habits and a move towards on demand services. Unfortunately, the options to offer AD on these channels are limited by the general audience’s preferences and technology. As a broadcaster you cater firstly to a broad audience of people without visual impairment. This audience does not need or want audio description when they sit down to watch their favourite programmes. So for a broadcaster it is imperative that only people who want audio description will get it. In Flanders and at VRT we have no tradition of offering tailored content for minority groups in society; this also implies we cannot offer fixed appointments with target audiences whenever we have content which has been made accessible. We try to remedy this by offering all our content via OTT-media services, where the accessible content is also made available and retrievable. In linear broadcast this can only be done in two ways, both of which VRT provides. The first way is to broadcast the same programme twice, once with open audio description and once without. This is a service the BBC provides as well.

At VRT we try to broadcast programmes with open audio description simultaneously with the regular programme but on another channel where before 20.00 children’s programming can be found. Although this simultaneous or sometimes even delayed broadcast is greatly appreciated by our audience because of its ease of use (De Ceuleneer, 2019, based on 83 blind respondents), we see that offering this service is becoming increasingly problematic in terms of scheduling. As we produce more and more AD and schedule reruns of old programmes we cannot continue to schedule for simultaneous broadcast. Reruns of VRT-programmes before 20h00 would be interrupting the children’s programming. Also for the children’s programming with AD there is no similar solution as no other channel is available. We can only offer children’s programming with open AD in two weekend slots and via our OTT-media services. To make things even more complicated, our children’s channel is also often being used after 20.00 for sports and the broadcast of sign language programmes. So the few available slots are filled in fast and the AD audience cannot be served in a manner which they are accustomed to, with a comprehensible schedule and fixed appointments. While we try to maintain this service and our target audience is still very much in favour, we feel as a broadcaster that this will become ever more challenging. Therefore we should look for different solutions.

One of these solutions we might find is in Norway at NRK. NRK has a different approach than VRT. They have four main channels: NRK1 (news, entertainment and drama), NRK2 (documentaries), NRK3/Super (children and after 20h00 young drama) and NRK Tegnspråk (signed and sign interpreted programmes). For the three main channels, NRK has a duplicate channel with the distinction that on the duplicate channels they broadcast all of their programmes with audio subtitling and also AD when available. These channels are called NRK1 lydtekst, NRK2 lydtekst, NRK3/Super lydtekst and are implemented by all Norwegian distributors. By broadcasting these channels with synthetic generated audio subtitles – both NRK
and VRT subtitle foreign programmes or languages rather than dubbing them – NRK offers an easy-to-use system for watching television with audio subtitles without third party hardware for the audience to install, as is still the case in Flanders. With the three duplicate channels offering a combination of audio subtitling and audio description, NRK makes a large part of its programming more accessible to blind and visually impaired people.

Another solution might be offered by technology. The audio description track is embedded in the digital signal broadcast on our main channel; by using digital television viewers can turn the audio description on or off themselves via a language choice option. Again, these options are also provided by other broadcasters such as the BBC.

However, once the broadcast signal is sent to the distributors it is out of the broadcaster’s hands and it is up to the cable companies, who distribute the television signal towards their customers and provide them with the required hardware. Firstly, the cable companies need to pick up the extra AD track we broadcast and distribute this along with the normal programme, which sadly not all of them do. Another problem is that when they do provide the audio description track and offer viewers the option to turn it on or off, sometimes you need a hardware set-up from the distributor to use this option and often their hardware has no or few accessibility features, making them near impossible to use for blind or visually impaired people. The only way they can use this feature is to have someone else enable it. We hope that under the impulse of the EU Accessibility Act (European Parliament, 2019), cable companies and distributors will speed up the process of making their hardware solutions more accessible and oblige them to carry accessibility services signals.

In the Netherlands, another distribution system deserves to be mentioned. The Dutch public broadcaster NPO does not broadcast its audio description together with the programme, but provides it via an app called “Earcatch” (Walczak, 2018 for apps used in other countries). This app can also be used for watching audio described films in movie theatres and even for live theatre. It allows you to download the AD voice onto your smartphone after which the app listens to the original soundtrack on the programme to sync the audio description with the programme. As a viewer, you need to use an earbud to listen to the AD in one ear and with the other ear you listen to sound coming from the television. While this is extremely useful for mixed viewing whereby audio description users and non-users can view together, our audience indicates they prefer a full audio description broadcast mix, as they feel this offers a more comfortable listening experience for the AD users.

**On demand/catch-up services**

In the last two decades linear television has been in decline and on demand services have been booming: viewers decide for themselves what programmes they want to watch and more importantly, when to watch them. The on demand and catch-up services via television sadly have the same problem as the language choice option within digital television: often the hardware provided by cable companies and distributors is not accessible. So the easy features which could allow you to view a programme with AD cannot be used by our target audience. Again, we as broadcasters hope that this will change in the years to come.

**Streaming platforms and apps**

In recent years, almost all major broadcasters have developed their own web-based streaming platforms and apps. For the BBC this is iPlayer, for NRK it is called NRK TV and at VRT we have a platform and app called VRT NU. On these platforms, all content can be made
available including the audio described version of programmes. Here broadcasters develop these platforms in-house and are themselves responsible for making these accessible. For all three broadcasters: BBC, NRK and VRT, these platforms adhere to accessibility guidelines and a great deal of effort goes into maintaining this accessibility for all web and app-versions, for example, through screen reader compatibility and a carefully developed user interface.

These platforms also offer the option to cluster certain programmes into categories, such as audio description programmes. This offers our target audience a fast and easy access to our accessible content. On these platforms we also have the option to post additional audio content such as our “audio guide”, which we produce for all of our fiction programmes. It offers a detailed description of important characters and locations, as well as some extra background information.

While these platforms offer many improvements, they are not perfect: some web-based video players do not allow for more than one audio track, forcing broadcasters to create separate videos for audio description. The best solution would be if the viewer could switch between the different language tracks provided, failing that a direct link between the original and the audio described programme is highly recommended. For our target audiences it is important that audio description is easily accessible on these platforms as a practical way for broadcasters to offer AD. An internal survey also shows that these platforms are greatly appreciated and we sense this shift from linear to streaming also within our target audience (De Ceuleneer, 2019, based on 83 blind respondents). However, these platforms are mostly used by a younger portion of our target audience, while the older generation risks being left behind. As a broadcaster this is something to be mindful of. But as generations change, users will become more accustomed to digital technology. It would not surprise us if this will become the standard practice for AD distribution in the future.

Audio only

Since more and more content is consumed via mobile devices such as smartphones, watches, tablets that use mobile internet access, as broadcasters we should not be blind to the option of providing audiences with an audio only option. Here the users will only stream or download the audio description mix – including the original programme mix and audio description voice – without the heavy data consumption of video (cf. Senza Barriere Onlus in Italy, Perego, 2017). Several German broadcasters already offer this option. In this regard, the podcast boom could provide an opportunity to stream or podcast programmes directly to the audience’s devices, giving them the possibility to subscribe to AD programmes. These podcast programmes could also be used while commuting to work and attract a larger audience, who have no need for video. This is not only for blind people, but people who would like to listen to their soap opera in the car, or to human interest stories. We believe there is a larger audience waiting for this kind of AD.

3.7 Communication with our target audience

As a public broadcaster we at VRT aim to understand the needs and desires of our target audience of blind and visually impaired people. Their feedback and reaction to our audio description is crucial and the focal point of our entire department. As mentioned before, we actively engage with them and their representatives to create better AD products or change the way we offer these to them. By mapping their needs and demands we try to broaden the scope of the programmes we provide with AD. Yet not all of their needs can be met due to
budget restraints. An example: from our interaction with focus groups of blind and visually impaired people or larger surveys based on personal queries conducted by VRT’s-diversity department, we see there is a great demand to audio describe our daily soap opera, but this would be an enormous and costly undertaking for us as a broadcaster, requiring a large workflow overhaul.

Our target audience is also a difficult group to reach individually and our internal surveys show that many people are still unfamiliar with audio description or they have no idea which AD is available or where they can find it. As broadcasters we need to further raise awareness with the general public to reach people whom we otherwise cannot reach, as proven by an Ofcom (2013) survey.

Once new series with AD become available you need to inform your target audience. This can be done via radio commercials, television teasers, mailings to pressure groups and social media channels. The BBC, for instance, includes the availability of AD in their programme guides. Emphasising that AD is available is very important, even more so for broadcasters with a relatively low percentage of audio described programmes. Here again, web platforms and apps will be important in the future. Because even when communication fails, a portion of your target audience will know where all available audio described content can be found at any time.

Sometimes broadcasters have to deal with last-minute changes in programming. These are near impossible to communicate through regular media and you need to try to reach your target audience of blind and visually impaired via a social media network. The larger the network you can build as a broadcaster the more you can reach your intended audience via regular updates and posts on these social media channels, enhancing the connection you make with your target audience.

3.8 Foreign language programmes and audio description

At VRT we only produce audio description for our own programmes and they are usually in Dutch. When foreign languages are spoken in these programmes we use audio subtitling. At VRT this audio subtitling is part of the AD and cannot be turned off. It is basically dubbed for the audience’s benefit. However, our internal survey has shown a portion of our audience members finds this annoying when they themselves understand this foreign language, like French or English. In the future, we hope to provide quality audio subtitles which can be turned off. Or should we even offer this option for all different languages that might occur in a programme? A difficult question to which we have no answer yet, but we feel an audience should be given as many options as possible (see Orero in this volume).

Another question concerns purchased international programmes. As do many smaller broadcasters, we buy a considerable portion of our content abroad: films, documentaries and series. In our case, these are often in English or French, two of the bigger television markets. For some of these programmes, audio description is available as an extra deliverable. But as a broadcaster should we also invest in this? Although there are differences between people and generations, a large portion of our audience knows one or more foreign languages. Should we as a broadcaster make the effort to always provide original AD for these programmes? Again, we are of the opinion you should give your audience as many options as possible, and with digital technology, this could become possible. We hope for an international market which realises the importance of AD and which will in future provide broadcasters with AD as an extra deliverable.
4. What will the future hold?

It is difficult to look into the future but it is clear that technology will play a crucial role in how broadcasters will provide audio description for their programmes. There could be a role for standardised scripts in open standard file exchange formats, which could be used with synthetic voices, screen readers or other assistive technologies such as Braille displays. While we believe synthetic voices and artificial intelligence could play a role in creating larger volumes of audio description, we also think voice-over artists will still be needed for fiction to maintain a narrative quality. Audio description will live online and will be easily accessible and hopefully the audience members will get the freedom to choose the AD options and mix for themselves – this so-called receiver mix is already available in the UK with some distributors. More choices for the audience is a given and we as broadcasters should do our best to offer these choices. Another issue we hope will be solved in the years to come is the mixed viewing dilemma. Perhaps AD users and non-users will soon be able watch a programme together in their own preferred way without interference.

5. Conclusion

Broadcasters in general and public broadcasters in particular hold a key position in the production and dissemination of accessible content for many different groups in society. While audio description might seem like a heavy cost to bear with limited reach, broadcasters should envisage audio description as an investment. Not just an investment in an audience of blind and visually impaired people whom they are only now starting to serve, but also an investment in a larger audience that can benefit from accessibility features to compensate their focus shift and that consumes media in a new and different way. Audio description and products derived from AD allow broadcasters to offer content on platforms they never thought possible and to find different audiences whom they otherwise might not or no longer reach. However, the needs of the original target audience of blind and visually impaired people have to be addressed first and foremost.

As public broadcasters we must assume our responsibility to help determine audio description quality and create standards. We need to support this evolving market and create awareness. Audio description must be part of a programme and not just an appendage or an after-thought. This will take patience and a lot of explaining on the how, the what and mostly, the why of AD. Or in one word: it takes communication, communication, communication. This should be feasible for any broadcaster worth their salt.

Notes

1 The Flanders Audiovisual Fund (VAF) is the cultural public funding body of Belgium’s Flemish Community. More information www.vaf.be/flanders-audiovisual-fund

2 Flanders Audiovisual Fund regulations regarding audio description for film and media funds:

Filmfonds – 2.1.6. Verplichte deponering, Nederlandse ondertiteling en audiodescriptie Het VAF legt in zijn overeenkomsten met aanvragers van productiesteun contractuele verplichtingen op m.b.t. de deponering van bewaarkopieën en, waar technisch mogelijk, het voorzien van Nederlandse ondertitling en audiodescriptie van Nederlandstalige creaties.


Mediafonds: 2.1.5. Verplichte deponering, Nederlandse ondertiteling en audiodescriptie Het VAF legt in zijn overeenkomsten met aanvragers van productiesteun vanuit het VAF/Mediafonds, verplichtingen op m.b.t. de deponering van bewaarkopieën, en waar technisch mogelijk, het voorzien van Nederlandse ondertiteling en audiodescriptie voor Nederlands gesproken creaties.
VRTNu is the brandname of the VRT webbased content platform, it translates to English as VRTNow referring to now as instantantious
Over-The-Top media services are media services brought directly to the audience via the internet, it bypasses cable, broadcast and satellite television platforms which tradionally act as a controller or distributor of the content.
International sound is an extra audio track with only music and ambiance sounds. The voices of the characters are removed to allow for dubbing in different languages.
This is only applicable for audio description and not audio subtitling which is a different matter.
For ease of reference, the BBC channels (excluding BBC Parliament) are required to subtitle 100% of their programme content, audio describe 10% of their programme content (except in the case of BBC News), and sign 5% of their content (Ofcom, 2019).
Open audio description means that the audio description will always be playing and the viewer has no control over this. It does not have to be turned on but cannot be turned off either.
6. References
7. Acknowledgements
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