**Making the Arts Accessible - Transcription**

Episode 4: Jonathan Penny, Audio Description lead at ITV (at time of recording)

Interview recorded: 10 January, 2022

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*AG: So in this, the fourth episode of Making the Arts Accessible, I am talking to Jonathan Penny. We recorded this conversation in January 2022 when Jonathan was working at ITV, heading up their audio description department. He has since left ITV and is now managing Access Services for Channel 4, including audio description, subtitles and signed content. Prior to ITV, he worked for Red Bee Media who are an international broadcasting and media services company, and as a freelance audio describer for theatre and opera across Scotland. He's also a board trustee for VocalEyes, who are a provider of audio description for the arts and heritage sector in London.*

*We talk a bit about how audio description is made for TV, what are the hallmarks of really good audio description, a bit about how live television is subtitled, which I found really interesting, and about how ITV were introducing introductions for their audio described content where they could have actors describe themselves in character or hear about the locations on an episode of Coronation Street before they watch an episode. So I hope you enjoy it.*

[music]

*AG: Welcome, Jonathan.*

JP: Thanks. Good to be here.

*AG: So first of all, do you mind explaining in brief what is audio description and particularly how does it work on TV.*

JP: Sure. So audio description is a descriptive commentary that aims to translate the visual elements of a piece of content, primarily to benefit blind and visually impaired users. In the UK it is currently available on broadcast TV for pre-recorded programmes, as well as on different capture platforms depending on the broadcaster. And many streaming services now offer AD too, as well as in a broader sense theatres, galleries and all sorts of entertainment / arts / heritage content as well.

And TV audio description is created much the same way as it is for theatre. So an audio description script is prepared based on repeated viewings of the source programme, it's just that for us, the source programme is an already finished article that we know is not going to change, which obviously has some advantages compared to a play or a panto or something like that.

And instead of going to rehearsals, dress rehearsals or performances to practise before doing a live delivery, for TV those repeated viewings are done all together and the script pieced together scene by scene. For a light daytime TV programme that might just take an hour or two for the whole process. But for a big drama or film even, this scripting process could be done over several days or even longer. So then the script is recorded with the recorded description slotted into the gaps between the programme dialogue, and the finished file is compiled into different formats for Broadcast and catch-up or on-demand requirements.

So that’s it really. Most broadcasters in the UK are required by Ofcom to deliver AD on 10% of their output, but some channels, including ITV, commit to describing 20% of their output. And actually in reality, ITV averages about 30% across its channels: some of our channels whose schedules are skewed towards repeats of old dramas for example, exceed this by a big margin: in our last published figures for the first half of 2021 ITV3 had AD on nearly 70% of its output across a fantastic array of ITV archive and content. But I think sometimes people criticise the Ofcom 10% mandate and actually in reality the AD that is there on different channels is going to differ depending on the content. So that ITV3 example where the content is skewed towards drama that has a lot of AD in the archive, is why the percentage is so much higher.

*AG: Of course, because once it's made, it's always available.*

JP: Yes, and it's good as well actually, because once that file is there, it is there to be shared out every time that exact version of the programme is repeated. But one of the things that my team does, in addition, to creating AD for new programmes for ITV, is ensuring that archive stays up to date. Every so often, new versions of these old or classic programmes come out because there might be a technical change, sometimes these things are restored to make the picture quality better, or sometimes it could be a content edit say to remove some offensive language or remove a graphic scene that’s not suitable for a new timeslot. And part of what we do is update those AD files to make sure they’re still in sync with the latest version of the content. It is a case that once there’s a source file to work from, it is there, but it’s also a bit of work. I guess in the same sense with theatre and opera, if it’s a revival of an old production, if you’ve got a script to work from from the orginal production, much of the work is already done.

*AG: Yes. That’s really interesting. So for instance, with new content, that must be difficult to chose what will be described – do you have feedback from users, how do you decide?*

JP: So broadly the scheduling decisions that we make, there are some rules so for instance we’ll always describe dramas. But beyond that, we chose things based on what we think will be good to describe, but also we have a permanent focus group made-up of 80 users who meet every couple months to talk about editorial aspects of AD. We try not to set them homework, but we might say ‘We've just done this and we found this problem when we were scripting this programme - have a listen to it and let us know what your thoughts are’. But also down to technical matters such as accessing AD on ITV’s different platforms. And for scheduling decisions, we do make changes based on that feedback as well. And people can send us a message on Twitter too.

I’m trying to think of an example…. There’s a show called *Britain's Brightest Family* and it's presented by one of the presenters from *The Chase* and is a very visual game show: a lot of the clues are based on visual sequences and pictures. And it didn't used to be something that we described, but now we do because we have that kind of viewer connection. They said ‘This isn't an accessible show without audio description’, and actually it's an interesting example because it's actually a very difficult show to describe. We do describe it now, but often there just isn't space - we might have two seconds to try and describe four pictures and it is just not something that is easy to do.

Another interesting angle that often comes up in conversations is to what extent can production help by changing the presenters main script to incorporate slightly more visual descriptions and a description of visual elements. That's something that I don't think happens an awful lot at the moment, but potentially thinking about ways that the industry could change in the future that’s something that could make our lives easier for that specific problem of where there's just not enough time.

*AG: It can be really tricky, I'd say, with some kind of TV and you having to make those decisions. And we all know, don't we that making something more accessible for a specific group of people ultimately, if that feeds back into the making of the programmes or the theatre, it makes it more accessible for everyone.*

JP: Absolutely. Yeah, yeah.

*AG: Can you tell us how you got into it, because don't you have a musical background yourself?*

JP: That's right. I studied music and was always quite into the writing and academic side. So then when it when it came to looking for work, I wanted that kind of writing, grammar, attention to detail, that sort of methodical process. So I ended up as a TV subtitler doing same language deaf / hard of hearing subtitles which really satisfied that process based side of my brain and obviously has a kind of proofreading element as well as applying style guides and actually unpicking what people have said as well.

So I ended up staying for about six months but there was a real kind of performative element of that which I think ties in with music and particularly when thinking about subtitles for live news and sports. Many people think that's either done by people who are sitting somewhere typing very fast, or it's a fully automated transcription, but actually most broadcasting in the UK makes use of a technique called re-speaking. So a subtitler would be listening to the audio feed from a studio and repeating that into a microphone that was attached to speech to text software. Because that software isn't yet sophisticated enough to listen to a wide array of different voices from a programme with different pitches, different deliveries, that kind of thing. Whereas having it all re spoken into the software buy a consistent voice that is trained to understand that person's voice is better for accuracy.

The thing that people will notice say if you’re in an airport and the subtitles are on, or shared on social media, is that they they are not actually typos or mistakes, but they are homophones and that's as a result of that re-speaking process where the subtitler is listening to something, repeating it two seconds after hearing it, but they're also looking at what's going on the screen and trying to make sure that they can catch those sorts of mis-hears.

*AG: Do they have to quickly re type them themselves as well?*

JP: Yes, that’s one way around it. But sometimes you can catch it before it goes in. But you might see a pause and a dash if it’s something important. It can be entertaining!

I went from that quite quickly, into audio description as a related accessibility role and really it was the first time that I realised that something I wanted a job to provide was that sense of delivering something helpful in providing access to something, whether it was content or information or experience or whatever. So yes, AD was a really attractive move for me. And it was the chance to write my own words as opposed to someone else’s was how I used to think about it. So I did a few years at Red Bee Media as a TV scripter. Quite often you have people who script AD for TV, and some people who script and voice. That's when I started describing in theatre and opera as well, again with aspects of voiceover, but especially that kind of live delivery that provides that thrill of the live performance. And obviously you’re using your ears as well. Which is good for that music background.

*AG: Yes. Do you think it’s to do with the timing? I think if you’ve got a knowledge of rhythm then you know when to leave a beat before you deliver the next line.*

JP: I think so yeah. I think I take it too far sometimes I find I’m trying to find the perfect placement to fit in with the soundtrack in a big drama or something like that, when sometimes I actually just catch myself and say no, I just need to put it in - I don't have enough room to let people to listen to every piece of the music and do my job, but yeah, it definitely helps.

*AG: That’s so interesting. And talking about opera in particular because as you know I’ve done that too, there are so many different ways that audio description is applied to different content and it really constrains how you do it. For say opera, you have to avoid a really loud section otherwise the audience just won’t hear you.*

JP: Yes, and I think potentially thinking about how opera or theatre has been done more recently, you know, with online productions and things like that potentially that's something that can be improved upon. In my experience of doing a few online productions for Scottish Opera, when I was putting the project together and placing when I was going describe things, there were a few moments where I thought well if I were doing this in the theatre where just for anyone who’s not familiar, the AD is delivered over a kind of like a headset or by radio or something from a describer who is in the theatre whereas when I was creating a kind of mix, I had a bit more control over say if the music was very loud, I could just make it quieter for the description to be heard. Whereas in a live setting there’s not that sophisticated system.

I guess you could say potentially you shouldn't be describing if the music is very important though….

*AG: Yes, but if it’s an important thing to get across, you need to.*

JP: Exactly. I always say this to my trainees at work, as with any AD question, the first part of the answer will always be, ‘It depends’. Because so much of the AD depends on the context of the programme and I think that's the thing, if you can leave the music to be saying something or maybe more about the character of an action rather than the action itself. So certainly an online recorded AD mix potentially gives you a bit more flexibility.

*AG: Yes, and listening to you talk, I’m thinking, because say the Royal Opera House do this, when they’ve done a livestream, they sometimes offer AD on that livestream. So I’m presuming if that’s delivered live, there’s probably no chance to mix it in with the output of the show, or maybe they do? Maybe they use the same technology you use in TV – Advantage or whatever?*

JP: Yes, I don’t know. It’s interesting.

*AG: Because in the theatre, the user can turn up the volume if they need to hear you, but when you’re livestreaming to someone, they don’t have the ability to independently turn you up in their ear and not the show relay… Sorry, I’m just pondering out loud there!*

JP: No it’s an interesting one! I’ve never done livestreams of stuff, it’s always been pre-recorded.

*AG: No neither have I. But it’s great isn’t it, there are so many technologies now that are affordable that people are really excited about using to make AD much more available so people have got the choice to enjoy things along with who they’re attending with.*

JP: Yes, and I think in the arts, a lot of venues or festivals or providers of content have become more aware of access needs in the last couple of years because of having to do digital productions because of the pandemic. I mean some people have worked in that sphere for a while but I think there was this influx of online things whether livestreamed or pre-recorded and having to think about subtitles or AD and making that available can only be a good thing for accessibility in general. And also, giving them more prominence by having them available for anyone to see is a way of normalising that kind of access requirement and making more people aware, rather than just having say one audio described or one captioned performance.

*AG: Exactly.*

JP: And in TV as well, I think we're in an age now where an everyday user sometimes has to put in a bit of work to find a show that they want to watch, whether it was on the BBC or is it on Netflix now. And keeping up with these kind of licence periods and cross-platform agreements can sometimes make it hard to find the show that you want to watch. And I think adding in an accessibility requirement to that mix can compound that problem. So I think for me one of the challenges that our industry faces now and in the next few years is trying to ensure that there is more compatibility between these file formats, and also allowing the access files to go with the content when the content is licenced out to a third party. Which obviously has a benefit to the business, but more importantly it can ensure a consistency of experience, and ensure that end users can just access the content they want to.

*AG: Yes. And I know that for instance you're pioneering audio introductions which is very common in the theatre where you can have a very detailed exposition of how the sets look, what the costumes are like and the lighting, and in TV, you can’t really do that. So as you mentioned to me, like where are those going to sit, how do people access those, how do they find them and quickly click on them before watching the show. And if you've got information in that bit that you will not then impart during the show because there isn’t time, will they miss out - it’s tricky, isn't it?*

JP: Yeah, it's a really interesting one. It’s something that has been in the back of my mind, ‘this is a really useful extra bit of space.’ Obviously I know why it isn't something that was done on TV initially because it is a linear format - you can't exactly ask every listener in the country to pause for five minutes while you describe what is happening at the start of *Corrie*. But yeah, you know, now I think obviously with online spaces and different platforms and things like that, it's something that's much more achievable. And for us it kind of grew alongside the *Describing Diversity* work that we’ve done, which I think equally is an area that's really transformed audio description in the last year or two.

Now, I think now describers are much more comfortable both describing people's physicality but also aware of the need to do it in a way that the old method sometimes had a detrimental effect on the AD. Say only mentioning race for example, when it was relevant to the plot. I think now we are aware as describers, but as a society as well that actually, that that kind of visual information can inform a person's opinion of another person or character and can give them a lot of information that isn't otherwise spoken or made obvious to someone who is blind or has a visual impairment. And I think it is one of the areas where we're seeing progress, which is really great.

But back to the introductions, we've found with the diversity work we've been able to, for say most of the main characters (I’m thinking about dramas but other shows as well), you know, we have been able to kind of adapt what we say to squeeze in a bit more information. But still having recourse to that extra 5 or 10 minutes to give a sort of overview I guess for people who want it, you know? We think of it as an enhancement to the programme AD rather than something extra. I think that was something as part of the user research that we did for this. And some people were concerned, that they maybe didn't want to go listen to that themselves, but they didn't want the main AD to suffer or have less content in it. So it's a balancing act and I think it's trying to do something that will enhance the experience for some. And like you were saying before, enhance the experience potentially for people who aren't going to use the audio description either: hearing those descriptions of characters, locations, can make them more vivid in their mind and live longer in the memory as well.

So we're still at the early stages of our audio introductions. We're working on a kind of proof of concept for *Coronation Street* which we’re hoping to release soon and just recently we’ve done a small-scale version of this which is character descriptions for five of the main characters from *Trigger Point*, which is a drama that started on the 23rd of January. So we got the main cast to record physical descriptions of themselves in character and we’re making those available on YouTube just to round out the physicality of those characters. The *Corrie* thing has been a really good learning curve, where it’s been kind of us leading it, trying to get bits from production and the cast, but *Trigger Point* has come along and shown us a different way of doing it. Because the marketing team for a big drama…

*AG: It’s with Vicky McClure isn’t it?*

JP: Yes, that’s right. And produced by Jed Mercurio, or his production team, and they wanted to meet with us and said ‘We’re doing all this marketing for *Trigger Point* and we just want to be really accessible, you know?’ And without being too cynical, that is quite unusual. We've had that before if there's been maybe a character with a disability or something like that. But this was just kind of, you know, we almost didn't want to ask why, but we were kinda surprised that it was coming from them. So we said we’ve been working on this thing for Corrie but it's not really done yet because of issues with music rights and things like that, but maybe it's something that we could look at doing for this. And they thought it was such a great idea. And like I said, the Corrie one was driven by us, trying to get people to do things for us. And then this marketing team came along and said, ‘Oh yeah, well, you just tell us how you want it to be and we’ll do it, you know, we’ll ring the agents and this that and the other’. And it's kind of made me think like, well, maybe if we get this off the ground in a more regular way for dramas, then it could be something that marketing do and we could support, rather than us try and get everything together as well as having to describe all the programmes.

Yes, it's just opened my eyes, I guess, to see that we could do it a different way and especially because if we talk about putting them online anyway, we'd need marketing to do that anyway. So, you know, it's almost just involving them in a different way I guess.

[music]

*AG: That's really interesting because I did that recently thanks to having been on the FutureLearn course that you mentioned (I will put a link in the notes). I just thought the course was absolutely brilliantly put together - it is all about helping people who work as audio describers feel more confident about describing things like diversity etc. So I put that into practise and did the same thing with the panto I described just before Christmas. I got all of the cast to record into their phones a bit about what they look like personally. You know, they might describe their racial background, or say something like ‘I'm a man in my 50’s, I’m a bit overweight and when I'm Widow Twankey’… and then he puts on Widow Twankey’s voice and the baddy did the baddy’s laugh. And there was a large group of children coming from a local blind school so for them to just make that connection before even coming to theatre ie. correlating the voice to the person and how that person looks in themselves was really useful. I was told by parents et cetera that it had been really helpful. And so I’d like to say thanks for putting together that course because I know you were involved in it, and it was just fantastic.*

JP: Yeah, that’s great. And I'm sure you know we can put a link to it because I think although it’s available at some specific dates, I think all the information is going to be there long term for people just to kind of self-serve.

*AG: So Jonathan, I’m asking everyone this, can you just give us a nugget of advice about what are the hallmarks of really good audio description?*

JP: That is a good question and I think I'm going to say something that was said to me in my training as a scripter, and that is that good audio description shouldn't really be noticed. Our aim should be to blend in with the programme. So if a user comes away thinking, ‘That was a great show’, then we have probably done our job because we've enhanced the programme and hopefully done justice to the programme makers’ concept without standing out too much or encroaching on the viewers enjoyment. And that could be by jolting them out of the moment with a badly chosen word or phrase, or sounding too verbose or drawing attention to ourselves in a way that is beyond the tone of the programme.

But as I hinted at before, I think good audio description can only be defined in reference to the content that is describing. So with TV in particular, we have such a broad range of genres, so good audio description on a game show is very different from good audio description on a period drama. And broadly I think for me it's about just replicating the experience of watching the show and striking a balance between being the neutral voice of an everyday viewer and giving a bit help when it's needed. And most importantly, just fitting in with the tone of the programme.

When I was training I remember writing the script for one of those programmes about walking through an old house and finding signs of supernatural activity, which wasn’t really my cup of tea and which I was quite unenthusiastic about describing, and obviously that came across in my script. And the reviewer said to me ‘Just because you don’t believe that that it’s real, you can’t let that come across in your description. You need to have the spirit of the programme in mind’. You can’t say when they’re talking about a flashing light, ‘Oh it’s probably just something on the camera’, you have to be in the spirit of it. And that’s the same with comedy, just because it might not

make you laugh, or whether or not you think it's high quality or good value or whatever, it's not your choice. It's just for you to be this sort of conduit and make sure that the users who *do* want to watch it can make their own judgement about whether it's real or not and get the chance to do it without your lens being too much in the way.

*AG: So to finish Jonathan, can you tell us your most memorable audio description experience or anything that relates to making the arts accessible?*

JP: Well, describing an immersive circus-inspired production of the opera *Pagliacci* in a big top tent in a field in Paisley is probably up there as one of the more unusual things that I have done. And last Easter, ITV provided AD on *The Masked Dancer*, which is just such a fun show and again such a visually rich thing to describe. And I think that many audio describers, whatever field they work in, usually have most enthusiasm about the last show that they worked on. So, you know, in TV, we sometimes have a feeling of being in a sausage factory having to churn out programmes, so with my team I really try to mix up the workload so you don't have a whole day of the not that interesting show back-to-back.

But sometimes the things that capture your attention can be what you least expect. A month ago I wasn't getting in the Christmas mood putting our Christmas tree up, it was when I described the Paul O’Grady *For The Love of Dogs* Christmas special! And at the other end of the spectrum, sometimes working on something that's really gritty and real can give you that thrill as well. I described the drama *Anne* and at the start of January which is about Anne Williams the Hillsborough campaigner, and trying to use your words and your voice to do justice to that sort of raw emotion is a challenge but it's also quite a privilege, and all the more so when it’s a true story.

So, you know, it's kind of a cheat answer, I suppose, but it’s just the last thing that I’ve worked on. It’s always freshest in my mind you know? So ask me next week and it will be something else!

*AG: That’s fascinating. I love it. It’s amazing you know the range that you have to have to describe such varying content. And then finally, Jonathan, just to help people, anyone either who is interested in finding out more, whether they're interested in audio description, or they are an audio description user, do you have any things you can recommend?*

JP: So we’re always pleased to hear feedback from our users at ITV. And we have an accessibility mailbox which is accessibility@itv.com. So any comments about programmes good or bad, e-mail us and we will look into those things. And also as I mentioned we've also got the users focus group so for anyone who wants to kind of have a bit more involvement beyond a single comment or complaint, then just email us at that same address again.

I think for theatre or video people or teams who are wanting to find out more about accessibility, then VocalEyes is a really good place to go. They have got a lot of resources on their website which we can share, and they offer training as well as audio description services themselves. So that's a really useful place for people to checkout.

*AG: Yes, they really are the font of all knowledge regarding audio description in the UK aren’t they. So, thank you so much Jonathan, it’s been really interesting. And I've loved hearing about everything that you do. So thank you so much for coming and talking to me.*

JP: Thanks very much.

*AG: Cheers*

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**Links**

ITV's accessibility inbox - [accessibility@itv.com](mailto:accessibility@itv.com) - for comments/complaints/to find out more about the users' forum

ITV's accessibility statement - <https://www.itv.com/terms/articles/accessibility>

VocalEyes – [www.vocaleyes.co.uk](http://www.vocaleyes.co.uk/)

FutureLearn course - <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/creating-audio-description-for-equality-diversity-and-inclusion>

Trigger Point character introductions - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_oJazqxGxSA>

Scottish Opera Audio Described performances - <https://www.scottishopera.org.uk/discover-opera/accessible-performances/>