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Focus Group on Audiovisual
Media Accessibility
Technical Report

**Part 5: Final report of activities:
Working Group B
"Audio/Video description and spoken captions"**



FOREWORD

The procedures for establishment of focus groups are defined in Recommendation ITU-T A.7. The ITU-T Focus Group on Audiovisual Media Accessibility (FG AVA) was proposed by ITU-T Study Group 16 for creation in-between TSAG meetings and it was established on 22 May 2011. The Focus Group was successfully concluded in October 2013.

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Summary

This Technical Report of FG AVA is the final report of Working Group B "*Audio/Video description and spoken captions*"¹.

The report of Working Group B has the following structure:

1. Introduction.
2. What is the current situation with respect to audio/video description and spoken captions/subtitles?
3. What is the vision for 2015-2020?
4. What are the barriers in 2012/2013 that prevent the vision from becoming a reality today?
5. What are the required actions?
6. Activities for future follow-up.

¹ *Audio descriptions* are also called *described video* in North America.

1 Introduction

At this time (end of 2013), two European projects looked at audio description (AD) and spoken captions/subtitles, i.e. audio subtitle (AST):

- *Audio-Description: Life-Long Access for the Blind* (ADLAB) in which the chair and co-chair of WG B are partners, is investigating all the issues that need to be considered for the present report. For further details regarding the issues below, refer to www.adlabproject.eu.
- *Hbb4All*, a CIP hybrid broadband television for all running from 2013 to 2016.

2 What is the current situation with respect to audio/video description (AD) and spoken captions/subtitles, i.e. audio subtitle (AST)?

2.1 Lack of standardization in terminology

As the heading of this Technical Report shows, the practice of making audiovisual products for the cinema, the television, the digital versatile disk (DVD), the Internet and other carriers accessible for the blind and visually impaired audiences goes by different names on different continents and even within continents. The most current terms in use are: audio description, video description and audio narration.

2.2 Differences in practice worldwide

Audio description (AD) has come into being and has grown "organically" across the world, drawing on existing practices in text production, audiovisual translation and access practices. AD was started by practitioners who later drew up guidelines based on their practice. As a result, all existing guidelines² (see RNIB website for a recent collation) are intuitive to different degrees and not based on research. In addition, national and cultural differences continue to have an impact.

One additional issue is related to whether AD is destined for foreign language productions or multilingual productions in what are traditionally known as "dubbing countries" or "subtitling countries", even though this distinction is no longer water tight. Dubbed films can integrate AD in the language of the dubbed dialogues. Subtitled films must provide an aural rendering of the subtitles, or audio subtitles (ASTs), since the target audience will otherwise hear an AD in language B and hear film dialogues in language A. The translation in the form of written subtitles that appear as text on screen is obviously not accessible to the core target audience.

Much research³ is still required into the best practice for AST with regard to:

- conditions under which AST does and does not work (e.g. non-fiction interviews lend themselves well to AST, film dialogues may not);
- the degree to which subtitles can (copyright) and should be rewritten to be spoken and interact with AD (subtitles may leave out essential information);
- the type of recording that works best (voice-over Internet Protocol (VoIP), dubbing without lip sync or other) the number and types of voices to be used for AST;
- the feasibility of using text-to-speech for AST as well as AD;

² See RNIB website for a recent collation, www.rnib.co.uk.

³ See also Braun and Orero 2010 and Remael 2012. Sabine Braun & Pilar Orero (2010): "Audio Description with Audio Subtitling – an emergent modality of audiovisual localisation". *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology*. 18 (3): 173-188. Remael, A. (2012), "Audio Description with Audio Subtitling for Dutch Multilingual Films: Manipulating Textual Cohesion on Different Levels", *Meta* 57(2): 385-406.

- AST does not replace AD, since it only deals with existing dialogues, and AD will still be needed to make the production accessible.

2.3 Uneven legislative requirements across countries and lack of uniform definitions of blindness

The first report of the ADLAB project, available on the project website, has demonstrated that definitions of what it means to be blind or visually impaired differ within Europe and across the world. This has an immediate impact on what services are made available for these ill-defined target groups, what is subsidised and on what conditions, including AD and AST, and AD+AST.

The project has also demonstrated that, partly as a result, legislation regulating access services for the media and for cultural events differs widely. In the UK, subsequent broadcasting acts have ensured legislation is in place, but in other countries (e.g. Finland) there is no legislation whatsoever, whereas in others (e.g. Flanders/Belgium) there are official agreements between the government and public broadcasters, dictating the use of AD on public television, but in very vague terms only. Even countries with full legislative deployment have issues regarding TV accessibility in broadcasting, Internet protocol television (IPTV) and hybrid broadcast broadband (HBB1.5), for example.

2.4 Lack of service awareness, even in countries with high percentage of AD service

Today, few members of the public, whether members belonging to the heterogeneous target group of AD or others (e.g. family members but also professionals working in broadcasting or the medical sector) are unaware of the existence of AD or have no clear picture of what it is and of what it can do.

2.5 Lack of optimization of existing ADs

The limited programmes that are provided with AD are often ill-advertised. Generally speaking, information about what productions are provided with AD, where and when, is scarce and unreliable. This holds for televised programmes, DVDs and other media.

In addition, the use of existing ADs is not optimized:

- they are not used for the same programme across different platforms;
- they are not or rarely translated into other languages to be reused.

2.6 Copyright issues

Copyright issues are at the basis of the limited circulation mentioned and they hamper extensive research into improving the quality of AD, as well as training in AD since they seriously limit access to audio described programmes.

Another copyright issue, regarding the reading of credits with audiovisual productions, determines the way AD can be integrated in the opening scenes of a production, often in a suboptimal manner.

3 What is the vision for 2015-2020?

3.1 The digital switch

As the digital switch advances, more countries will take on board media access legislation. The digital switch opens a world of possibilities for the provision of access services for the media, including AD on a quantitative and qualitative level. Integrated broadcast and broadband (IBB) service also offers great possibilities to users who will be able to customize the service to their

personal needs. What is also important is that it allows for the focused introduction of AD and AST, i.e. only to be activated by the target audience when and where they need it, and for better circulation of information about the service.

3.2 Coexistence and better publicizing of different AD modalities

In view of the existing national and other differences that are already engrained, the digital switch will be able to accommodate these to some extent.

In addition, different subgroups with different needs will be able to have AD adapted to their needs. All subgroups will be better informed and aware of services available.

3.3 Development of new working/broadcasting ecosystems

With the deployment of IBB and the convergence of formats and platforms, new opportunities arise, but also new barriers for media accessibility. The new ecosystem should be studied and tests performed before guidelines are written and legislation is passed. To this aim, the new EU project *Hbb4All* has been recently funded, and will progress looking at media accessibility from where DTV4ALL stopped.

3.4 Development of new speech technologies for minority languages

New speech technologies can already be employed for AD and AST for the recording of the AD scripts and audio subtitles providing a time and cost-cutting tool. The degree to which programmes lend themselves best to speech synthesis requires further research but the possibilities are vast.

However, to date most speech technology has been developed for some of the major western languages only, since only these are perceived to be lucrative and/or used by the developers and their geographical context. Such technologies therefore need to be developed for minority languages or less prestigious languages.

New technologies should also be able to optimize the combination of AD and AST, which is important given the rise of multilingualism worldwide.

3.5 Definition of "Quality"

Notwithstanding the fact that complete homogeneity in AD/AST practice seems impossible to achieve, research can establish flexible and adaptable best practices to be converted into guidelines grounded in research that offer strategies to be employed by AD-scriptwriters, recording studios, developers of speech synthesis, etc.

Reception research and monitoring of AD use can contribute to establishing minimal quality standards with respect to the AD/AST text, recording and sound mix as well as the quality of the voices to be used. Defining quality for the many actors in the value chain will be a desirable enterprise, and one taken on board by *Hbb4All* project.

4 What are the barriers in 2012/2013 that prevent the vision from becoming a reality today?

4.1 Digital switch

Digital switch is being implemented at different speeds and on the basis of different technologies that limit the exchange possibility of AD/AST files.

4.2 Social awareness of service availability

At present, the limited social awareness of the service worldwide constitutes a major barrier.

4.3 Production costs/business models/new technologies

Media access services are not yet seen as part of the production and distribution, but as a post-production voluntary token. AD/AST is rarely subsidized. The production costs are borne by broadcasters or filmmakers most of the time, and since they are not aware of the existence of business models and production models that could make access services profitable, they are not motivated to provide the services.

Broadcasters or filmmakers are not aware of the new cost-cutting technologies and their ever-growing potential, nor of the potential audience they might reach with the service. Finally, they are insufficiently aware of inclusive design that would allow them to incorporate the (comparatively) minor cost of access services into their overall production process. The above-mentioned development of technologies in all languages would also be a major boost in this respect. Again, it is a case of lack of awareness.

4.4 Role of international organizations

United Nations agencies such as ITU have a major role to play in distributing information of the kind discussed in this Technical Report, raising awareness of the problems as well as the remedies and championing access services as a human right that can be affordable.

4.5 Training of professionals

At present, many audio describers are trained on the job or come from various professional backgrounds. This holds for people working in all stages of the process: scriptwriters for AD, voice actors, sound technicians, etc.

5 What actions are required for sustained development

5.1 Maintenance of a lively AD multidisciplinary community

Apart from the development of training mentioned under para 4.5 above, the development of dedicated communities of researchers, practitioners, broadcasters and members of the industry for the development of multidisciplinary solutions, for lobbying and for the distribution of accurate and up-to-date information should be maintained.

5.2 Setting-up of cooperation projects to optimize resources

In view of the multidisciplinary nature of the practice, only research in a project form is viable and will be able to cover the complex issues involved in the optimization of the process at all levels.

5.3 Investment in technologies

See previous clauses above: invest in technologies and their testing by stakeholders, also stakeholders from developing nations.

5.4 Drafting of business plans

See above: only the development of viable business plans will convince those who have to invest in the service.

5.5 Promotion of training and awareness education

Better dedicated training must be provided at the academic level, based on applied research and with awareness for the need of developing qualified practitioners. Training should not only focus on the development of skills (e.g. specific writing skills), but also on knowledge and the ability to use existing and developing technologies, awareness of the heterogeneous target group's diverse and changeable needs, etc. Since media access is close to audiovisual translation, several Translation Studies departments at universities across the world offering audiovisual translation are now also offering some media access courses, including AD. This needs to be further developed in collaboration with Engineering departments that can contribute to the development of dedicated technology.

6 Activities for future follow-up

1. Contact has been established with ISO/IEC JTC 1/SC 35/WG 6 who are drafting guidelines under "Descriptive Video (Audio)".
 2. Organization of the 5th International Conference on AD at Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) in 2015.
 3. Symposium on issues in media access for the 6th International Media for All conference, to be held in Sydney, Australia, from Wednesday 23 to Friday 25 September 2015.
 4. Development of modular guidelines with AD/AST strategies within the framework of ADLAB.
 5. MOOC course in AD on offer by Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) in 2014.
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