Chapter 16

Inclusive Football Commentary:   
Should Radio Commentary Learn from Audio Description to Create a Richer Experience for Audiences who Cannot See the Match?

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**Abstract**

Football radio commentary does not assume that listeners have visual access to match play. Similarly, audio description (AD) within football stadiums ‒ an access provision for individuals who are blind and partially sighted – cannot assume that listeners can see the play on the pitch. Yet, football AD and radio commentary are not the same. Guidance for football AD states that it should describe on and off-pitch action so that the listener has the opportunity to form a complete internal picture of the event as it happens, rather than talking about statistics, summaries or describing past action. Although radio commentary aims to paint a picture, it is accepted that during the uneventful portions of a match, time can be filled with supplementary information to keep the listeners interested. These differences raise interesting questions about what is being communicated, in other words, what is being described in each instance. This chapter explores the nature of the football match experience, AD as a potential example of ‘blindness gains’, and considers the viability and desirability of combining techniques from both practices to produce optimum commentary that is also inclusive.

**Keywords:** Football, radio commentary, audio description, inclusive design, blind and partially sighted

**Introduction**

Football is arguably the most popular and influential sport in the world, with approximately 3.5 billion supporters globally (FIFA, 2018). The importance of sport, and in particular football, is beyond simply a leisure activity or pastime and is defined as part of our cultures (UN, 2009). It has been described as a new religion, as a result of the passionate and powerful emotions it engenders in fans (Eyre, 1997; Fulconis & Pache, 2014). Given the global importance of football spectatorship as a cultural experience, it might be expected that access provision for fans with disabilities would be well developed. Indeed, access to football, live or secondary, is underpinned by a moral mandate, with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) stipulating that everyone has the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community. For some fans, their experience of football matches is live, but for the majority, matchday experiences are mediated through TV (often at a cost) or radio. Despite the importance of football, access for people who are blind or partially sighted (BPS) is surprisingly underdeveloped.

In-stadium access is dependent on the provision of audio description (AD), traditionally defined as the translation of visual into verbal information (Fryer, 2016), a service that has only really begun to be offered formally in stadiums in the UK in the last 20 years. For fans reliant on secondary access, either through television or radio, AD provision in the UK is limited. In the UK, unlike other televised content, live sports have never been audio described. This approach is justified by the broadcasters and the regulator on the grounds of the impracticality of audio describing an event where the intervention of the commentator is entirely unpredictable (ITC, 2000). Audio description is inserted in the gaps between other relevant speech such as dialogue (for film and TV) or commentary (sports), so it is argued that the difficulty in predicting the placement of such commentary justifies the sports exemption, which has been ratified by the UK regulator OFCOM (2019). As the number of football fans grows globally (FIFA, 2018), so does the number of radio listeners (e.g., Conlan, 2018). This chapter considers the current access provision for BPS users, explores the live matchday experience and secondary sources, and considers what access could be, in particular in the case of radio.

**Accessibility in stadiums**

Considering first the live matchday experience, within the UK, there is a legal requirement (*Equality Act, 2010*) for football clubs (along with all other businesses and organisations) to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ to ensure access, so as not to discriminate against anyone because of their disability. The first coordinated attempt to improve access to football for BPS people in the UK came in the form of Soccer Sight, a Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) project, developed and delivered in collaboration with BBC Sport, and partially informed by the work of the Rex Blind Parties charity in the Scottish football leagues. Working with 12 clubs from the Scottish Premier League and 17 clubs in the English and Welsh football leagues, Soccer Sight aimed to improve the accessibility of football clubs for BPS people, and had audio description (AD) at its core (RNIB, 2009). The traditional purpose of AD has been to translate visual information into verbal description, in order to render the information accessible to someone who is blind or partially sighted (Fryer, 2016). Within a football match, AD is more commonly described as Audio Described Commentary (ADC). AD within sports is the newest branch of this form of audio-visual translation, although provision has been growing - in-stadium AD has now been provided at major sports competitions such as the Olympics, including the opening ceremony - the FIFA World Cup since 2010 (Atherton & Macbeth, 2019), and the UEFA European Football Championships since 2008 (Michalewicz, 2014). In the UK, while bigger clubs are increasingly working towards a professionalised provision for ADC, in smaller clubs the provision may be delivered by volunteers if it is available at all. In Europe, several football clubs in Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, UK, and Ukraine provide AD for match-goers. Nevertheless, although in-stadium AD provision is growing globally, access is restricted to the limited number of BPS football fans who are able to attend matches.

**Accessibility through radio?**

Access to audio described matches for BPS fans not attending the match in the UK is very limited. Nevertheless, it is the case that radio commentary is available for some matches, either through national radio or local radio. However, questions need to be raised about whether or not this radio commentary meets the access needs of BPS football fans. At first glance, one might assume it does: radio has been described as a ‘blind medium’ (Crisell, 1994), that is, a medium that does not use or assume access to visual information to tell a story or communicate an item of news. Indeed, for the first ever radio sports commentary in the UK (an England v Wales rugby game in 1927), a blind army veteran was asked to sit in front of the commentary box in the ground, so that the commentator could address him, as the audience (Wakelam, 1938). This first broadcast was described in *The Times* newspaper as ‘vivid and impressive’ (cited in Adams, 2002). That commentator, Teddy Wakelam, continued to use this style of sports commentary throughout his career. Wakelam and other early commentators were accompanied by an anonymous second announcer whose sole role was to state the portion of the pitch where the football was at all times, aiming to provide comprehensive spatial information about where the action was for those listening at home (Haynes, 1999). In 1930, the head of Outside Broadcasts at the BBC suggested that radio was the medium by which people who were unable to see live matches (identified by him as ‘the blind, the invalid and the poor’) could ‘renew and keep alive their interest in a national sport’ (Cock, cited by Haynes, 1999, p. 147). Müller (2008), in an article comparing the historical evolution of English and German commentaries from the 1920s to the 2000s, noted that the focus on accurate description of the play seems to have been greater in England than in Germany (where commentators were more concerned with capturing the atmosphere).

Although it is possible that early radio commentary in the UK may have provided satisfactory access to BPS football fans unable to attend a matchday experience, anecdotal evidence from present-day BPS football fans tells us that mainstream radio commentary (in its current form) no longer provides adequate access. Simply put, modern radio football commentary does not provide the degree of description of the visual events that is needed to facilitate match ‘access’ (Morgan, 2018; Hassell, 2019; Thompson 2018). BPS fans have stated that radio commentators fail to sufficiently describe the details of play, and so it is not possible to get an impression of the order of play and the events on the pitch (Morgan, 2018, Thompson, 2018). Given the global reach of football as a spectator sport, the importance of this shared cultural experience, and the moral and legal mandates that underpin the human right to access culture, it seems incredible that enhancing accessibility for BPS supporters both within stadiums and through secondary sources such as television and radio has not been prioritised.

**Accessibility as a niche requirement**

Arguably, one reason why access provision for BPS football fans is not better is the fact that such provision is assumed to only benefit a minority of football fans. However, recent research on AD in the context of museums has challenged the ghettoization of AD as relevant to only BPS audiences (Eardley et al., 2016; Eardley et al., 2017; Hutchinson & Eardley, 2019; Hutchinson & Eardley, 2021; Hutchinson & Eardley, In press), and has provided evidence that AD experiences are not only equally as enjoyable and interesting to an average audience as non-AD facilitation, but also crucially that AD enhances memorability of artworks within a museum context (Hutchinson & Eardley, 2021; Hutchinson & Eardley In press). This is an example of ‘blindness gain’ (Thompson, 2017); a concept that explores the ways in which the experience of blindness, and the tools designed to enhance that experience, can enhance the experience of sighted individuals (see also Bauman & Murray, 2014). Although many sighted football fans might not feel the need to listen to additional audio described commentary whilst in a live matchday experience, AD could potentially enhance the experience of all radio listeners (see also Trede, 2007). Radio listeners might see real benefits from the use of AD techniques in radio commentary, as has been shown to be the case in the museum context.

**The experience of AD**

There has been surprisingly little research examining the experience of AD in BPS users. Given the fact that the largest application of AD is currently within television and film (Fryer, 2016), where a spoken description is pre-recorded and embedded into the auditory experience of the film, it is unsurprising that the majority of the research on user experience is within this domain. Research has suggested that AD adds to the enjoyment and understanding of the original programme (Schmeider & Kirchner, 2001; Rai, Greening & Petre, 2010). In a study by Schmeider & Kirchner (2001) 73% of participants, all of whom were BPS, stated that AD makes the experience of television more inclusive, by making participants considerably more comfortable or a lot more comfortable in talking about television programmes with sighted people. For BPS audiences, film audio description also enriches understanding, by layering up the levels of comprehension of the events that are taking place, which enhances enjoyment (Rai, 2009). It is worth noting that for both people with sight and people without, cinematic AD can enhance feelings of presence, such that people feel more immersed in the experience (Fryer & Freeman, 2012). There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that AD enhances imagery (Fryer, 2016; Walczak & Fryer, 2017) but the nature of imagery resulting from AD, and the impact that this has on experience, need to be explored more systematically. The lack of research on user experience potentially arises from the assumption that AD is by definition beneficial to those who are blind and partially sighted, given that the goal is the communication of information that is not easily available. However, this simple assumption potentially raises complex questions about what needs to be translated or described within AD, which are particularly pertinent to experiences such as matchday spectatorship. Arguably, this is more complex and challenging a question for football AD than any other branch of Audio Description.

**What is being described in AD?**

Audio description, both a profession and an academic discipline, grew out of the need to translate visual (television/film/stage) information into verbal information, to enhance access for people who were blind or partially sighted (Fryer, 2016). Central to early guidelines for screen AD was the need for describers to be as objective as possible in their descriptions. In the UK, ITC guidelines (2000, p. 20) advise against reflecting ‘the personal view of the describer’, stipulating that objective adjective (dark green, moth-eaten) are preferred over subjective ones (e.g., *hideous*). Similarly, the American guidelines recommend the use of objective statements to avoid patronising listeners and let them ‘draw their own conclusion’ (cited by Audio Description Coalition, 2009, p. 3). This principle of objectivity is summed up by the aphorism What You See is What You Say (WYSISYS) (Snyder, 2014). However, whilst audio describers will clearly describe something they see, what is not clarified is *what in particular* and *how* to describe it. Over the years, researchers have challenged the aim of objectivity. For some, it has been through an acknowledgement that subjectivity is central to any decision made by an audio describer (Marzà Ibáñez, 2010). For others, it has been a more profound challenge to the value of objectivity to the user experience (Neves, 2012; 2016; Szarkowska, 2013). Researchers have already noted the importance of emotion to AD; Iglesias, Martínez and Chica (2015) showed that mood congruence enhanced the ability to understand the emotions of a scene, for the majority of participants. Similarly, in a study with 40 participants (20 sighted, 20 non-sighted) exposed to two AD versions (one more descriptive, one more narrative), Ramos (2016) showed that for scenes involving fear or sadness, the narrative version prompted a stronger emotional reaction. However, there was no difference between the two types of AD for scenes involving disgust.

Underpinning some of these challenges is a broadening of the notion of the ‘source text’ ‒ the ‘text’ for translation ‒ to include more than simply ‘visual’ information translated into words. The use of creative AD, which may incorporate metaphor, emotion and subjective description, has been advocated within film AD (e.g., Szarkowska, 2013) and within museum environments (e.g., Neves, 2012; 2016). The use of emotional language has also been shown to enhance memorability (Kensinger & Corkin, 2003; Sadoski & Quast, 1990). However, recent research has also argued that creative AD needs to think beyond the traditional ‘text’; within museum AD it has been argued that the ‘experience’ within a museum, and certainly the experience of an object or painting, can be broader than simply seeing the colours and shapes of that object, but rather can be an emotion, or a thought generated alone or through social interaction (Hutchinson & Eardley, 2019; Hutchison, Loveday & Eardley, 2020). Similarly, for the football match experience, a strict intersemiotic transfer from the visual to the verbal would arguably fail to accurately translate the experience of a football match. However, to understand what might need to be translated in football AD or radio commentary, it is necessary to examine the nature of the matchday experience.

**What is the matchday experience?**

A nationwide English Football League survey of almost 30,000 match-going spectators (EFL, 2019) found that, for 84% of those surveyed, ‘the atmosphere in the stadium and amongst the fans’ motivated them to attend live matches. Atmosphere scored higher in this case than attending to show loyalty to their club, although this was also an important motivation for 71% of supporters. This suggests that there is something special about the in-stadium experience. Researchers have argued that football as an industry is driven more by emotions than by economic reasoning and it is specifically on matchdays when those emotions are heightened (Shakina, Gasparetto & Barajas, 2020). Arguably, understanding the source and power of those emotions is crucial to understanding the matchday experience, and to being able to translate the matchday experience for radio or audio description.

Koenigstorfer, Groeppel-Klein and Kunkel (2010), in a large-scale survey of fans in the English and German leagues, found that both English and German fans rate stadium atmosphere as the second most attractive aspect of their top league, second only to the league’s perceived competitiveness. Similarly, within one Premier League club, 59.7% of respondents rated crowd noise (e.g., singing/cheering) as the most important feature contributing to the creation of atmosphere (Charleston, 2008). In an exploration of the role of chants and singing within the football experience, Clark (2006) argued that they were integral to the formation and reinforcement of place-based cultural identity, in relation to football. Although research on non-league clubs and supporters highlights the importance of singing and chanting to the formation of atmosphere, it also looks beyond these aspects to include what Ashmore terms ‘quieter moments’, that is comments and words of support, and running spectator commentary; weather, particularly bad weather, and the movements of fans around the ground in the creation of atmosphere (Ashmore, 2017). Similarly, Wilhelm (2020), using on-site diaries of neutral spectators recording their perceptions of the stadium atmosphere at Hertha Berlin during a game, establishes that the wide range of bodily sensations, emotions and changes of mood reported by the participants are determined not only by the incidents of the game but by the actions of the crowd (e.g., singing and other rituals) and the space surrounding them. Drawn together, these different areas of research begin to underpin the fact that the importance of the matchday experience, and football spectatorship, consists of much more than solely following the action on the pitch. This has significant implications for the nature of football audio described commentary and, potentially, radio commentary.

**Matchday Audio Description**

Within film and television, the user experience includes dialogue and the soundtrack, both of which are available to individuals who are BPS. Similarly, the sounds of the crowd are available within a matchday experience. However, music is added to film and television as a way of enhancing the atmosphere or emotion created by the dialogue and images (Prendergast, 1992). In football matches, the crowd is at once the source and recipients of the noise. All fans, irrespective of their level of vision, can sing their support for their team. However, the shouts, the cheers, the groans, are arguably a reaction to the action on the pitch, or in the stadium more broadly (for example, home and away fans engaging with each other). This shared emotional experience has positive impacts on identity and relatedness amongst fans (Neville & Reicher, 2011). Although BPS fans can access the sounds of the crowd, without mediation of the visual aspects of the game, it becomes harder to get the full details of the shared emotional experience and relatedness that forms an important part of the matchday experience.

Football Audio Description is defined by RNIB (2009) as a continuous and live commentary of the action, provided by a commentator specifically trained for this, enabling BPS listeners to know exactly what has happened at the same time as everybody else in the stadium. The Centre for Access to Football in Europe (CAFÉ) describe ADC as commentary that:

…describes all significant visual information such as body language, facial expression, scenery, action, clothing, colours and anything else that is important to conveying the image, venue, match, event or surrounding ambience. During the match, the commentator should describe the on-pitch action rather than talking about statistics or tactics or providing lengthy summaries of previous action. (CAFÉ, n/d)**.**

In line with this, Ginley, one of the authors of the paper, an avid football fan who is blind, believes that effective AD commentary helps to paint the picture: firstly, by setting the scene before and during play, for example, starting with the fact that the ground is half empty and we have five minutes before kick-off; describing the orientation of play, which way the teams are kicking for example, ‘left to right towards the Kop’; then describing the team colours. Useful AD commentary then describes things as they happen including the weather, for example, ‘the rain has stopped, and the sun is coming out’; and describes the crowd response to on-the-field action, or a manager looking agitated on the touchline following a VAR decision. Each description helps provide the supporter with the details needed to fill in the visual blanks, thus adding to the matchday experience. In line with Schmeidler & Kirchner (2001), Ginley suggests that a good AD commentary enables the BPS supporter to discuss elements of the game with family or friends during a post-match drink or when travelling home.

Up to now, very little research has explored what should be ‘translated’ through football audio description. Trede (2007) argued that the describers’ role is to select the most salient information of everything happening in the stadium as well as to contribute to communicating the excitement of the game while keeping silent when needed (e.g., immediately after a goal). The trainee audio describers for the Euro 2012 Championship were encouraged to describe in real time all facets of the game, from the location of the ball to whether the spectators were doing a Mexican wave (Michalewicz, 2014). If the objective is to enable listeners to react at the same time, enabling full participation in the matchday experience, Thompson (2018) suggests that for some at least, these goals are met:

…good ADC should enable anyone – whether they are blind or non-blind ‒ to understand what is happening on the pitch (and off it) as it happens…As I know from my own experience at the [2016 Euros in Toulouse](https://hannah-thompson.blogspot.com/2016/06/bravo-for-live-audio-descrption-at-euro.html), good audio description can transform the matchday experience. If I can imagine the movement of the ball, I feel immersed in the action of the game.

What has yet to be explored in football AD is the relationship to ‘objectivity’, both in terms of the choices of what to describe, and the role of the describer’s voice, in terms of pitch, speed and volume. Trede (2007) advocates the use of two commentators, as a way of creating a more objective description. At the Euro 2012 Championship, commentators working in pairs were encouraged to use subjective descriptions while remaining accurate (Michalewicz, 2014). Michalewicz (2014) noted that the approach provided a freedom of interpretation and the use of a colloquial language that normally contradicts the more objective style of AD. Given the role of emotion within the shared matchday experience, it is also questionable whether or not a neutral delivery as prescribed by some theoreticians and practice guides (see Machuca, Matamala & Ríos, 2020) is either desirable or appropriate. Having said that, it is interesting to note that some BPS fans have suggested that radio commentators get too carried away by the emotions of the game (Morgan, 2018; Hassell, 2019).

**Radio football commentary**

Similar to audio description guidelines, both professional radio commentators and training programmes for sports commentators talk about painting a picture, or facilitating the creation of images, as being important for the experience of listeners (e.g., Crisell, 1994; Green, 2000; Booth, 2008; Fleming, 2010). However, anecdotal evidence from BPS football fans suggests that there is not enough description in secondary sources, such as radio or television, aimed primarily at sighted audiences, to really enable the creation of images:

TV and radio commentary…comment(s) on the action without describing it, and thus relies on the listening public also having visual access to what is happening...all I have is general reflection on the players' performance, I feel completely isolated from the fans around me. (Thompson, 2018)

Given this discrepancy between objective and outcome, it becomes necessary to explore the nature of radio football commentary, in order to consider whether, through the use of more descriptive techniques, it can not only become more inclusive but also create a richer experience for all listeners.

Researchers have tried to establish the different categories of discourse inherent in a sports commentary. Crystal and Davy (1969) made a simple distinction between informative and descriptive content; Delin (2000) established four distinctive commentators’ actions: narrating, evaluating, elaborating and summarizing, and Müller (2007) distinguished between description and elaboration. Popov (2019) analysed radio and TV football commentary, comparing games from 1996 and 2015. He broke down the content into three distinct categories: action, analysis and background (e.g. extra information ranging from the weather to statistics). Although the data is only descriptive, it suggested that radio commentaries contained a higher percentage of action in 2015 (40.58%) compared to 1996 (33.92%). Analysis had also increased from 1996 (16.33%) to 2015 (36.69%). Both of these have increased at the expense of background (1996: 49.75%; 2015: 22.78%). In thinking about the comparison of television commentary to radio commentary, it seems clear that television commentators are assuming visual access, because description of action is low (1996: 28.69%, 2015: 21.20%) (Popov, 2019). In line with this, Clarke (2016) identified a greater use of spatial language in radio, compared to television commentaries. Although it is not surprising that radio commentary devotes more airtime to describing action, and is more likely to embed that in spatial language, it is noteworthy that Popov’s (2019) analysis suggested that over 50% of the content is devoted to background and analysis, rather than action (although some information in ‘background’ - such as weather descriptions, would form part of an audio description). Arguably, this could explain why BPS listeners are frustrated and are left lamenting: ‘...that this assumption of visual access routinely happens in mainstream radio commentary is beyond disappointing’. (Thompson, 2018)

Whilst content is clearly an important part of football commentary, given the role of emotion, both for football fandom (e.g., Eyre, 1997; Fulconis & Pache, 2014) and matchday experience (e.g., Shakina et al., 2020), the manner of delivery must also play a role. Researchers exploring the prosody of radio commentary, as a form of spontaneous spoken language, have shown that the timing and the prosodic features of the commentators’ utterances mirror, with some accuracy, the live-action events happening on the pitch (Müller & Mayr, 2007). Kern (2010) showed how the commentator’s voices create drama (e.g., with a higher pitch and faster speech rate, for instance), which potentially adds to the listeners’ sense of shared experience and relatedness to the collective fan-based identity (Neville & Reicher, 2011). Indeed, in a rare reception study, Samlowski, Kern and Trouvain (2018) explored empirically how listeners perceived suspense and concluded that *what* is said is not as relevant as *how* it is said (with a sudden pitch increase, for example). Taken together, this suggests that a neutral tone is neither preferable within radio commentary nor audio descriptive commentary. At the same time, it is worth considering the degree to which emotion has to equate to bias. Arguably, national and local radio have different target audiences. Local radio may broadcast a matchday commentary for a home club in their area, and as such could be forgiven for assuming they are talking more to home fans than away fans, and as a result, it is perhaps not surprising that a local radio broadcaster would declare his commentary ‘partisan…but not biased’ (Fleming, 2010, p. 172). This raises interesting questions about the nature and role of objectivity in what is, essentially, an audio-visual translation.

**Conclusion: Should radio commentary become more inclusive?**

The British Standards Institute (2005, p. 4) defines inclusive design as the ‘design of mainstream products and/or services that are accessible to, and usable by, people with the widest range of abilities within the widest range of situations without the need for special adaptation or design’. If radio commentary could, through the use of audio descriptive elements, provide an accessible matchday experience for blind and partially sighted listeners, without compromising the experience for other users, this would be a successful example of inclusive design. For BPS users, research has suggested that AD results in increased understanding of the details (Rai, 2009), enhances the sense of presence (Fryer & Freeman, 2012), and enriches imagery experience (see Fryer, 2016; Walczak & Fryer, 2017), for an experience for which visual information is limited or non-existent. Research has also shown that, even where visual information is available to sighted viewers, audio description can enhance the experience within a museum or gallery context (Hutchinson & Eardley, 2021; Hutchinson & Eardley, In press).

For many BPS football fans, including Ginley, radio commentary and ADC should be one and the same, given they both work towards describing the visual to the audience who do not see it. Even acknowledging the fact that both national and local radio also have other pressures on their time than dedicated ADCs, detracting from on the pitch action ‒ including providing up-dates at other games, travel reports, and advertising notices ‒ Ginley argues that the art of the radio commentator should be to describe what is happening on the field of play to both people in the ground and at home. However, for Ginley, as well as other fans, unlike the early radio commentaries, current football radio commentary is less about describing play, and more about summarising. If this is the case, it becomes necessary to ask why. In a personal communication to Ginley, one BBC (British Broadcasting Cooperation) executive once said: ‘commentary is the entertainment, we don’t want listeners to tune away’. This seems to be underpinned by an assumption that, unlike BPS listeners, sighted listeners do not want to have the depth of description so as to be able to ‘picture’ the game. However, particularly in the context of creative AD, Thompson (2017) argues that audio description should be considered as an example of ‘blindness gain’. In other words, football commentary is an area in which the experience of sighted listeners could be enhanced by a provision developed to provide access to the BPS community.

Given that radio listeners, whether they have sight or not, cannot be assumed to have visual access to the match-play, the evidence suggests that the use of AD within radio commentary could enhance the experience of both BPS and sighted radio listeners. Indeed, the link between audio described commentary and radio football commentary has already been made in Germany, where ADC has been situated as a journalistic, broadcasting discipline (Trede, 2007) as it is considered a ‘new’ form of live football commentary (Trouvain, 2007). Despite these links, further research is needed to explore the matchday experience, not only of those within the stadium, but also those listening at home, to better understand whether or not the transition of radio commentary to audio-described radio commentary would have a negative impact on the experience of any group of listeners.

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