

***Thailand's Current Situation Regarding Audio Description Service  
on TV Program  
: Policy and Problem Analysis***

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Abstract

*The method of this study is content analysis and criticism from the textual announcement, guidelines, gazette, and policy. The results showed that some points in the policy have been obstacles for this mass communication development. Thailand National Broadcasting and Telecommunication Commission (NBTC) may launch this policy at the improper time, when there is not enough body of knowledge on audio description. This may cause misunderstandings, which can turn into contradictions between the policy and the practical production process. Therefore, the policy can cause television broadcasters to get caught in the middle, rather than improving the lives of the visually-impaired as the objectives stated in the policy.*

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Currently, Thailand puts more consideration on the equality issue for handicap people. One of the objectives is to make opportunities for the handicap people to socialize and participate in social activities as the normal people. Many organizations always create campaigns, communities and activities for various types of disadvantage, for example: deaf people, movement – handicap people, autism, and for visually – impaired people. “*Run Together*” in 2016 was the great prototype for the campaign that allowed visually – impaired people to go for some mini marathon running with the sighted runners along the track. Or, “*Please Touch Exhibition*” by the same year, was the experimental art display which was made by the special innovative pens, making all the lines drawn on the panel to be in relief. So, visually – impaired museum goers could touch the paintings and imagined them. For the media consumption, Thailand’s National Broadcasting and Telecommunication Commission (NTBC) has proposed the government gazette (number 133) in 2016, concerning about the right and the equality of handicap people in media exposure which they should be involved, understand and get the benefit as the normal people do.

This gazette was announced on 5<sup>th</sup> February 2016 by NBTC and planned for 5 – year – policy roadmap of starting offering the added – on services for making the television more understandable for both deaf and visually – impaired handicaps. Sign Language (SL) and Closed Caption (CC) services were proposed for the advantage of deaf people; meanwhile Audio Description (AD) service was stated there too for visually – impaired people’s television exposure. By this policy, the NTBC has intended to directly enforce all the television broadcasters in the form of percentages of all television programs broadcasted which will have to be added the SL, CC and AD services and, yet, the period has been scoped the time frame for the first 5 years, 2016 – 2020, to provide all the services be reaching the stated goals. Plus, for more convince, NBTC has provided the extra funds for the broadcasters who will be able to accomplish the milestones percentages stated in the policy, on contrary, for those who cannot make to the determined ones, will receive some punishments. The evaluations, controls and regulations from nominators selected by every disability organizations have to take place in each broadcaster, for the purpose of providing the direct and true benefit for all handicaps.

However, the policy has stated time frame 1 – year flexibility for all Thailand television broadcasters. That means all the rules and regulations in this gazette will be applied from 5<sup>th</sup> February 2017 including all the punishments and compliments as

well. During the flexible first year, NTBC specifies all broadcasters to add the one-hour-per-day services of SL, CC and AD in total. So, the broadcasters can make their own various combinations, for example: they can provide 45 minutes per day of SL, 12 minutes of CC and only 3 minutes of AD per day. After that, when it reaches to 2018 or 2 years after the policy has been announced, television broadcasters have to provide all the adding services by the proportion form the appendix part of the gazette as stated below.

Types of service	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
Sign Language (SL)	5%	5%	7%	7%	9%
Closed Caption (CC)	40%	40%	50%	50%	60%
Audio Description (AD)	5%	5%	7%	7%	10%

The latest service mentioned on this NBTC policy for Thailand mass media and broadcasters is audio description (AD) which normally communicates to visually – impaired audiences by translating the picture on the screen to the described voice. Thus, the handicaps can imagine the picture along the program on TV. Those voiced AD scripts give information about what on the screen, title – end credits, when and where the situation takes place, how that happens and also who is there right then (Rai, Greening and Petre, 2010 ; Lopez Vera, 2007) by not interpreting the connotative meaning for the receivers or, to say, the scripts should objective and communicate no any subjective content by the script writers (Snyder, 2014). In addition, those AD scripts should be voiced into the “sound gaps” from TV programs, by not overlapping the dialogs or sound effects there. And ideally, the voiced scripts should communicate what happens on the screen right at the same time the scene appears and play in the role of parallel communication with the main media. The shocking, smiling, laughing, sadness or surprising should happen for the same time both sighted people and visually – impaired audiences watching the same TV program.

In Thailand, there were not much studies about the blind people and the media. Jitravanichakul (1999) stated the research results in her thesis about behaviors and demands of the visually – impaired audiences in Bangkok to their media exposure, collecting data by using questionnaires and quantitative method. The results showed that television was the most popular media exposed by the blinds and 59.7% of the

handicap audiences watched TV by not asking for any describing by the sighted people sitting next to them. The reason given was they felt it was disturbing and annoying for those sighted people or, to say, they don't want to inconvenience even they did not comprehend all the content from TV programs. Also, the result displayed the demand of some description that could make them get more point, meaning and understanding as well.

15 Years later, Klinlakha (2014) did the research on the same topic. And, then, the result did more emphasis on the demand for TV among the visually – impaired audiences. The handicaps tended to watch TV in everyday, usually 6 A.M. – 9 A.M. for receiving the news and information before starting the day. The most popular genres were news, documentaries and cartoon, and they would like to be more involved into the media by some pictures or scenes describe and any textual information appears on the screen.

The researches revealed some demand of audio description on TV. Thus, the percentage proportions of the adding service were officially announced. Further than the percentage determined as displayed, NTBC has specified the details for all broadcasters to provide the AD services:

*“Audio description (AD) service (should be) at least 5 percent calculated from the television programs in the genre of **News Information and the Public-Benefit Content** by the category of permitted broadcasting business and the proportion should be increasing to 10 percent by the time frame specified in the appendix, and by total the (AD) service must reach not less than 60 minutes per day in average.”*

To summarize about the AD service providing specified in the policy, so far, NBTC has emphasized the main focus to the News and Informative public content TV program genre, which identified as news program, democratic government education supportive program, education – ethics – art and culture program, and economics – social – life and environment program (NBTC, 2016), to be the very first priority by determining as the starting point for AD service on TV steadily grow from 5% up to 10% in 5 years.

About genres, according to NBTC announcement in 2013 about TV program genre categories, NBTC has divided TV program genres in to 16 categories as shown: (NBTC, 2013)

- (1) News and information program
- (2) Democratic government education supportive program
- (3) Education, ethics, art and culture program
- (4) Economics development, social, life and environment program
- (5) Children and adolescents program
- (6) Local program
- (7) Science and health program
- (8) Sports program
- (9) Infotainment program (information and entertainment)
- (10) Special program
- (11) Music program
- (12) Entertainment program
- (13) Movie program
- (14) Comedy program
- (15) Drama series (soap opera)
- (16) Documentary film program

The comparison between the AD adding service policies in 2016 to the TV genre categorization in 2013 reveals some points about the TV genre boundary required for AD service. The 2016 NBTC policy of AD adding service requires the news and informative – public content genre to be the first-start milestone for audio description, so there are 4 from the 16 categorized and announced TV genres since 2013, directly refers to the genre mentioned in the 2016 policy, number (1) – (4) from the list which are almost 100% run by anchors, narration and voice to be informative as much as possible.

Normally, news and informative TV program genre is already full of the verbal speech making them lack of the space for describing or, to say, unsuitable programs for being made audio description because the audio description making process always requires the “sound gaps” to be fulfilled with the pictorial – described speaking words giving the space for visually – impaired audiences to imagine the frame. According to Rai, Greening and Petre (2010), some forms of TV program are not matched with the audio description service especially which contain quick movements or lack of the opportunity to fill in the voiced script. As well as Karuchit’s (2015) research about principles and practices for making audio description for television gave the result for 2 categories of TV program divided by researcher. One is the genre that can be comprehended mostly by listening, such as: news, talk show,

interview, and so on. Another is the genre that communicates us through the pictures and images, such as: movies, drama series, documentaries and some demonstrative programs (cooking, handicraft, etc.). So, the need for AD service should be, at least stated in the research, for the second category first.

Moreover, the result from Thailand National Institute of the Blind for Research and Development survey research (2016) about media exposure of the visually – impaired audiences in Bangkok showed that the first 3 genres of TV program those were approached by the blinds are news, drama series and variety in order. The reason received from the sample group about their exposure to the news most was despite no AD service attached, they still could get the information from the voice of the anchors and could follow the content most. On the other side, they felt more demand AD service on TV drama series, the second place by the survey.

From this point, while there is the genre “News, Information and Public – Benefit Content” is not matched for the AD production process, yet the demand from the audiences, for AD in drama series, does not match with what written on policy. The television broadcasters may somehow get caught in the middle: they have to put some “News and Informative TV program” with AD added on the broadcasting system for avoiding the punishments, but potentially, this genre is not served for the AD production. So, this announced policy by NBTC may get the unpleasant outcomes if there is no correction occurs.

In addition, the details written in the announcement were not including the period of the day that the AD service should be added to the TV program. That leaves us the big gap for the broadcasters to make this service in any time of the day. For instance, if they select to provide AD for 2 A.M. – 3 A.M., they can reach the 60 - minute minimum limits from the policy, they can leave the punishment behind, but they don’t have to concern about there will be or will not be any visually – impaired audiences watching or examining their AD quality.

By comparing to the Great Britain’s audio description growth, which has the percentage proportion for the SL, CC and AD adding service too. In Great Britain, the policy about mass communication that involved all handicaps has started since 1990, the announcement of the Broadcasting Act (1990) including only closed caption for deaf people. Then, Office of Communication (Ofcom) was established in 2002 for controlling and moderating in policy in communication and broadcasting. Ofcom has stated all the additional services (SL, CC and AD) for 5 – year goal and 10 – year goal.

According to the table below, Great Britain has planned the roadmap for 10 years in adding those 3 additional services. Consider on AD issue, from the first 5 years, the percentage started from 2% and continually exceeds 2% each year until up to 10% in year 5. Then, stay at 10% for 5 years more. Plus, this announcement has not controlled or scoped any TV genre to be described first like it has in Thailand.

Anniversary of relevant date	Subtitling	Signing	Audio Description
First	10%	1%	2%
Second	10%	1%	4%
Third	35%	2%	6%
Fourth	35%	2%	8%
Fifth	60%	3%	10%
Sixth	60%	3%	10%
Seventh	70%	4%	10%
Eighth	70%	4%	10%
Ninth	70%	4%	10%
Tenth	80%	5%	10%

Source: <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/broadcasting/broadcast-codes/tv-access-services/code-tv-access-services-2013/>

In the same way of regulation between Thailand and Great Britain, both countries have their own controlled proportion for the additives. Great Britain's Ofcom started at 2% first year. While Thailand's NBTC started at 5%. In 5 years, they both look forward to ending up with 10%. Some differences are (1)NBTC has framed only the percentage of the news and informative programs when Ofcom has not, and (2)Great Britain had been influenced in audio description since 1992, by the live performances (Snyder, 2014). After 10 years of crystallization, Ofcom has been set and policy has been announced by 2% of all genres at the first year. For Thailand, Sarakornborirak (2015) stated in her research that the very first research in Thailand, which was Thythavat Janevatchararuk's thesis about audio description production,

was completed by the year 2011. Thus, the audio description knowledge body just has been planted for only 6 – 7 years before the regulation announced.

At present, although the announced AD service proportion is set at 10%, BBC television station provides up to 20% of all TV programs on 4 channels: BBC1, BBC2, BBC3 and CBeeBies. Most of which are drama series, sit-com and children programs. (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/corporate2/insidethebbc/howwework/policiesandguidelines/audiodescription.html>)

The good point for this policy launched in 2016 was that Thailand, now, puts more official concern on the disabilities and their rights upon communication, especially mass communication. All the visually and auditory – impaired audiences seem to get one more step closer to the media. But, somehow, there are many issues missing from the reality, for example; the TV program genre determined in the gazette, which is News and Informative public content TV program genre, is not qualified with the audio description production process, or even the audiences' behaviors and demands either. So, this obstacle, probably, will make the policy ends up with unsatisfactory results by the time frame of 5 years.

This policy analysis leads to the recommendations as followed:

- (1) NBTC should not scope the policy with the TV genre. Because, firstly, all the television stations have to be educated and practicing their skill in audio describing in many ways of TV programs. Secondly, visually – impaired audiences need more than the news and public information from watching TV.
- (2) NBTC should do more research on both audio description production process and limits, and the audiences' demands or needs for, at least, being able to provide the supply that matches with social demands.
- (3) NBTC should give the public education about the production or making process of audio description first, before determining the percentages. Because, since this issue is the newest one in the country, the body of knowledge needs a lot more fulfillment. If to compare with the determination in United Kingdoms as stated, there has been much longer period of experiments and adaptations than in Thailand. So, if NBTC would like to go for the same policy model, there should be more amount of time for research, study, experiment and practice.

- (4) NBTC should conduct some survey research on the needs of broadcasting organizations and provide them some workshops or some body of knowledge and exceeding to inspiration for their adding services broadcasting in nearly future.
- (5) NBTC should extend the roadmap timeframe for the first roadmap policy, or should make the demonstration roadmap for being the role model before the policy announcement.

For the criticism and analysis form NBTC policy of audio description adding service, the discussion is that NBTC should act some adjustments for providing all broadcasters chances to get their trials and errors effort on the service. Then, the objectives of “equilibrium” in society will shine as the NBTC’s first intention stated in this nation-wide policy.

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