

Blindness Sector Report on the 2012 ABC Audio Description Trial

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Contributing organisations:

Blind Citizens Australia

Vision Australia

Australian Communications Consumer Action Network

Media Access Australia



About the contributors

Blind Citizens Australia

Blind Citizens Australia is the national peak consumer body of and for Australians who are blind or vision impaired. We are driven by our mission to achieve equity and equality by our empowerment, by promoting positive community attitudes and by striving for high quality and accessible services which meet our needs.

Blind Citizens Australia's unique point of difference is that our organisation is solely made up of and represents people who are blind or vision impaired. Both our Board of Directors and our committees are required by our Constitution to be people who are blind or vision impaired. We have over 3000 members Australia-wide, all of whom share a lived experience of blindness; whether they be a parent, professional, job seeker, volunteer or student. This is why we are best placed to comment on the specialist needs of people who are blind or vision impaired.

Vision Australia

Vision Australia is Australia's largest provider of services to people who are blind, have low vision, or are deaf blind. Our vision is that people who are blind or have low vision will increasingly have the choice to participate fully in every facet of life in the community.

To help realise this goal, it is committed to providing high-quality services to the community of people who are blind or have low vision, and their families, in areas that include early childhood, orientation and mobility, employment, information, recreation and independent living. We also work collaboratively with Government, business and the community to eliminate the barriers people who are blind or have low vision face in accessing the community or in exercising their rights as Australian citizens.

Australian Communications Consumer Action Network

The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) is the peak body that represents all consumers on communications issues including telecommunications, broadband and emerging new services. ACCAN provides a strong unified voice to industry and government as consumers work towards availability, accessibility and affordability of communications services for all Australians.

ACCAN believes that access to information and communication services are an essential tool for all people with disability to be able to participate to the fullest extent possible in Australian society.

Media Access Australia

'We believe that all Australians have the right to access all forms of media and information, through technology, so they can participate fully in society.'

Media Access Australia is Australia's only independent not-for-profit organisation devoted to increasing access to media for people with disabilities.

At the core of our work is the understanding that exclusion from mainstream audiovisual media has profound effects on educational outcomes, workforce participation and social inclusion.

Access to media through technology empowers people to be independent, gain knowledge, make their own choices, and be active members of our society.

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Executive Summary

This collaborative report, prepared by Blind Citizens Australia, Vision Australia, ACCAN and Media Access Australia, aims to highlight the consumer experience of the audio description (AD) technical trial on ABC TV to help inform Government's thinking regarding the introduction of a permanent AD service.

While we understand that the trial was commissioned to investigate the technical issues with delivering a receiver-mixed AD service, the impact of AD on the lives of hundreds of thousands of blind and vision impaired Australians and their friends and families has resulted in a strong push for AD to continue.

This report attempts to reflect such demand through communicating the consumer response to the trial, outlining the benefits of AD and providing an outline of the 'It's as easy as ABC' campaign, which ran in the last month of the trial and gained support from consumers, organisations and media around Australia.

Feedback on issues involving programs, timing, equipment, promotion and evaluation serves to inform Government and the ABC of issues that consumers faced during the trial that should be considered for any future service.

The report then outlines considerations for the Government's establishment of a permanent service, including the legal imperative, receiver standards and costs involved, in an appeal for AD to continue at the same level maintained throughout the trial.

Finally, in order to achieve this and bring Australia in line with international counterparts, and as Senator Stephen Conroy acknowledged, cooperation between all parties to address the technical issues raised in the ABC's report on the trial is essential.

Introduction

"Audio description on TV is a complete new lease on life for me, as I don't have to constantly ask questions and interrupt my partner. I feel I am part of the 'normal' audience now. What a great feeling that is!"

Female viewer who is blind, NSW

The commencement of the 13-week technical trial of AD on ABC1 provided an invaluable opportunity for hundreds of thousands of Australians who are blind, vision

impaired or who could otherwise benefit from AD to have independent and meaningful access to television for the very first time. The trial commenced on 5 August 2012 and ended on 4 November 2012.

Audio description is the descriptive narration of key visual elements of a TV program, movie, DVD, performance or other media, giving access to people who are blind or vision impaired. AD may be pre-recorded and delivered as an option for television programs or DVDs, or it may be performed live (e.g. for a theatrical performance). During gaps in dialogue, descriptions are given of visual elements such as scenes, settings, actions and costumes.

An excerpt from audio described legal drama *Rake*, for example, gives the explanation:

Cleaver turns his apartment upside down as he frantically searches for something. He pulls pictures off the wall, and rummages through piles of books. He searches through his clothes and looks under the bed.

We would like to extend our thanks to Senator the Hon Stephen Conroy and the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy for providing funding for and delivering on the promise of a technical AD trial on ABC television. We would also like to thank the ABC for their implementation of AD and commitment to making it work throughout the trial period.

To inform this report, we have drawn on consumer feedback provided to blindness organisations via phone and email during the trial period, as well as responses received through the various teleconferences hosted by Blind Citizens Australia, in late October and early November 2012, seeking consumer feedback on the trial.

Benefits and impact of audio description

The current picture for people who are blind or vision impaired

Statistical information varies, with recent research suggesting that there are currently between about 350,000 and 600,000 Australians living with blindness or vision impairment. In 2005, research carried out by Taylor et al. (2005) put the number at around 600,000. In any case, the prevalence is predicted to significantly increase by the year 2020, due to the ageing Australian population and the subsequent increase of age-related vision conditions (Vision 2020 Australia, 2008). These factors demonstrate a growing need for services that are universally accessible to all consumers, regardless of disability.

Access to information and entertainment is one of the most significant barriers faced by Australians who are blind or vision impaired and, for many years, the inaccessible nature of free-to-air television services has been a major contributor to this problem. In 2011, a report published by the Australian Communications and Media Authority concluded that there were around 18.7 million working television sets in Australian households (averaging 2.2 in each home). These high figures suggest that television plays a fundamental role in Australian society – but what is the experience of television for someone who cannot see the images on the screen?

A significant number of people who are blind or vision impaired have expressed the frustration that they experience as a result of being forced to rely on sighted friends or family to find out what is happening when accessing television. Conversely, people who live independently will often simply shy away from television altogether, with one NSW woman explaining:

“As a person who lives on my own, I often have a battle with myself as to whether or not I try to watch a program because you miss out on so much that it becomes frustrating and pointless.”

The following excerpt taken from an opinion editorial which was published on the Australian Human Rights Commission portal provides an insight into how such limited access to television can impact on the lives of people who are blind or vision impaired:

“You might think that missing out on television is no great loss, but it’s about more than watching the latest episode of Days of our Lives. Like the rest of my friends and family, I want to have choice about what I watch and have the ability to be informed about what is going on in the world. I lost many things when I lost my sight, but one of the things that I lost was social inclusion.”

Furthermore, a NSW man who provided feedback on the trial explained:

“Television isn’t just entertainment. It helps to shape culture and public opinion as well as the conversations that we have socially.”

The role of audio description in bridging the access gap for people who are blind or vision impaired

Audio description (AD) is a form of narration which allows people who are blind or vision impaired to enjoy television. Without it, people who are blind or vision impaired are left to guess or rely on family and friends to fill them in.

Access to mainstream media, such as TV, DVDs and cinema through AD empowers people to be independent, gain knowledge, make their own choices and be active members of our society.

When considering the impact that AD can have on the experience of a person who is blind or vision impaired, it is important to understand that over time, many forms of media seem to have become less dialogue-driven and more visual in nature. This has been a common observation amongst consumers, with a male viewer from Western Australia writing:

“The programs seem so fast paced and can jump from scene to scene very quickly and I had lost interest over the years because I couldn’t access them.”

Agreeing with this point, a New South Wales woman explained:

“There are often long periods where there is no dialogue at all and without the AD, it’s easy to completely miss the point.”

To provide an example that may appeal to a wider audience, consider for a moment the opening sequence of James Cameron’s *Titanic*. This sequence is entirely visual, with no dialogue to offer an insight into what is happening. How would you interpret such a scene if you suddenly found yourself unable to view the images on the screen? The following is an excerpt from the script which was used to describe this film, written by Di Langford for the RNIB’s Talking Books Studios in the United Kingdom.

“A silent film, faded by time, shows a gigantic liner leaving a crowded dockside. Smoke trails from the four tall funnels. On every deck, the rails are lined with excited passengers. As the ship slowly pulls away, women in simple shawls or elegant Edwardian fashions, men in cloth hats or tailcoats and top hats, wave farewell to the exuberant spectators assembled on the dock.”

From this example, it is easy to see that for a person who is blind or vision impaired, a word is worth a thousand pictures. But it is not only the description of scenes, settings, actions and costumes that help to shape a person’s understanding of a film or television program. In fact, the mere act of verbalising the credits at the end of a television program can serve to empower consumers who are blind or vision impaired through allowing access to the same information as their sighted peers. A New South Wales woman who participated in the trial on ABC1 explained:

“When people refer to movies and TV shows, they’ll often say ‘that Marlon Brando movie’ or something like that which makes it difficult because we often don’t know who the actors are. I have really enjoyed having access to the credits for this reason.”

A 1998 study that was undertaken by the American Foundation for the Blind found that consumers who viewed content with AD had experienced:

- A deeper understanding of televised materials and the visual world
- A higher level of enjoyment when watching television
- Enhanced feelings of independence
- A greater sense of social inclusion
- Relief of burden on sighted people that share the viewing experience

This last factor certainly warrants further consideration. As previously stated, many people who access television alongside sighted friends or family often feel as though they are a burden to others when they need to have something explained, as stopping to describe the visual elements on the screen can alter the sighted person's experience and enjoyment of a particular program. When asked about the experience of family members during the trial, a Queensland woman who is blind said:

"I watched it with my husband and he didn't seem bothered by it. I think he was more relieved that he didn't have to keep explaining what was happening."

The enhanced level of social inclusion that was reported by participants in the 1998 study was also consistent with the experience of consumers who participated in the technical trial of AD on ABC1, with one participant noting:

"The trial has opened my eyes to the sheer impact that television has on people's lives and the extent to which we are excluded by not having access to it."

Another viewer noted:

"I realised the worth of television as social currency. When I catch up with the family for example, we might talk about other things as well, but a fair chunk of the conversation seems to revolve around television programs and I can finally participate in these conversations."

The role that AD can play in enhancing social inclusion for children who are blind or vision impaired was also considered, with a male viewer from Victoria explaining:

"It would enhance the development of children to immediately participate and be included. TV is an important medium in Australia at social events where people get together. It would enhance the ability of blind children to understand the world around them – without that inclusion it would be hard to grow as a person."

Benefits of audio description for other viewers

History has shown that often the implementation of systems which are targeted towards people with a disability can lead to a number of flow-on benefits for the rest of society.

An example of this is captions which can boost literacy for all students, not just those who are Deaf or hearing impaired. Similarly, while AD was originally intended as a service for people who are blind or vision impaired, it may also offer a number of benefits for sighted Australians.

As listening is one of the first steps in learning either one's own or a secondary language, AD can play an extremely important role in learning language for both children and adults. The human brain processes information from a number of sensory modalities including vision and hearing, and findings indicate that the brain's ability to accommodate new information is significantly enhanced when information is presented using both of these channels (Sector et al., 2008).

A Queensland woman who had participated in the trial explained:

"My husband likes it as much as I do. He does not have vision impairment, but it allows him to follow the show easier and know who's who."

In providing extra descriptive detail through a secondary audio track, AD has also been seen to enhance general reading and writing abilities. Used as a teaching aid, studies have shown that it may improve vocabulary, concept development, background knowledge and language precision (Hoffner, Baker & Quinn 2008). AD can also help people with print disability, such as dyslexia, learning disabilities and colour blindness, by providing an alternative way of accessing a text and reinforcing information that is presented visually.

UK researcher Judith Garman provided insight into the positive impacts of AD on people on the autism spectrum in her article *Autistic spectrum, captions and audio description* (2007). By combining visuals and audio, she found that AD can help create a complete picture for people who have autism, Asperger's, monotropism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and dyslexia.

The extra information provided through AD, which includes descriptions of people's temperaments, was found to assist people on this spectrum, who generally struggle to understand human emotions. It also helped reinforce information, such as people's names, which is something that people with autism can struggle with.

Further to these educational benefits, it seems that one of the largest audiences for an AD service may include those people, who for one reason or another, are unable to dedicate their full attention to the television screen. A 1995 study into television viewing habits which was undertaken by the ITC in the United Kingdom found that of 1000 respondents, 39% often or occasionally accessed television while undertaking other activities; such as cooking and cleaning (Independent Television Commission, 2005).

This research also appears to be consistent with viewing trends in Australia, with a trial participant from New South Wales explaining:

“One of my colleagues turned it on just to get a sense of what it was like. She said that she actually found it useful, because she didn’t have to be right there in front of the television looking at it the whole time to know what was happening.”

Another trial participant reported:

“My wife thought it was great because she could follow what was happening while she was cooking.”

Support for audio description

The ‘It’s as easy’ as ABC campaign

During the AD technical trial on ABC TV, Australian blindness and consumer organisations launched ‘It’s as easy as ABC’, a national campaign promoting the importance of and demand for AD on TV, and urging Communications Minister Senator Stephen Conroy and ABC Managing Director Mark Scott to keep the service going.

The campaign saw over 30,000 postcards distributed around Australia addressed to Senator Conroy and Mr Scott, thanking them for the trial and asking them to keep AD going after the scheduled end date of 4 November 2012.



The front of the campaign postcard

Postcards were distributed with the support of 62 blindness and disability organisations nationwide and could be ordered online through the campaign website www.audiodescription.com.au or via supporting organisations. An email alternative was also available for accessibility.

Spokespeople for the campaign included Lauren Henley, Coordinator of Blind Citizens Australia's campaign to improve media access, Disability Discrimination Commissioner Graeme Innes and Maryanne Diamond, then President of the World Blind Union. The campaign gained coverage in mainstream and disability media and achieved considerable traction in social media, including Twitter and Facebook over the one month campaign period (2 October – 4 November).

The campaign was jointly run by Blind Citizens Australia, Vision Australia and ACCAN.

Campaign statistics

The total number of postcards ordered came to 30,020, including 4,352 requests through the website, and all others via phone or email. Total number of email alternatives sent to Senator Conroy and Mr Scott came to 233.

Supporters

The campaign gained the support of 62 organisations in the disability and blindness sectors, which distributed postcards through their networks and promoted the campaign to their members, staff and contacts.

Media

The campaign generated a number of media items, including in mainstream and disability print media and radio, to raise the awareness of the 'It's as easy as ABC' campaign and the ABC's AD trial generally.

Key media coverage included:

- An interview with Disability Discrimination Commissioner Graeme Innes that appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* newspapers' *The Guide* section.
- An interview with campaign spokesperson Lauren Henley on ABC Radio National's *Life Matters* program.
- An opinion editorial by Graeme Innes on the ABC's 'Ramp Up' portal.
- An opinion editorial by Lauren Henley on the Australian Human Rights Commission portal.

Assessing the ABC trial from the consumer perspective

Experiencing AD on Australian TV for the first time

The ability to experience AD on television for the first time through the commencement of the technical trial on ABC1 evoked a wide range of emotions amongst consumers. For those who have been blind from birth, the trial was a milestone event which allowed them to experience television independently for the first time in their lives. For people who had acquired vision loss later in life, the trial provided a somewhat different experience by allowing them to regain some of the independence and enjoyment that they had lost:

“I’ve always had a bit of sight up until around four years ago, and after this time I just stopped watching television because it was all too hard to follow. Watching television was never a huge part of my life, but I definitely missed it and I’m enjoying having access to it again.

“For the first time in many years I have been able to follow a program on TV.”

Conversely, while many people with vision impairment may still be able to make out some of the images on the screen, the role that audio description can play in enhancing the experience for these viewers (through providing supplementary information that they may have missed out on otherwise) should not be underestimated. One woman with vision impairment writes:

“Audio description is absolutely fantastic for us VIPs [vision impaired persons]. I thought I saw not too bad on my very large TV. Experiencing programs with AD makes me realise how much I’ve missed.”

Importantly, while there were no children’s programs broadcast with AD during the trial, the AD service gave parents of children who are blind or vision impaired a glimmer of hope that one day their children would be able to experience the same level of access as their sighted peers, thus enhancing their level of social inclusion. A mother from Victoria explained:

“My daughter is still young, but as she gets older I would love her to be able to enjoy shows the same way I do (and without ME doing our own AD!). So it's planning for the future for us!”

During the teleconferences that were conducted by Blind Citizens Australia, participants were asked how they felt when accessing AD for the first time and what having access to television meant to them. Responses included:

“It made me, as a blind person, feel like I am part of the world.”

“It has brought me into the living room with family and friends.”

“It was fantastic. I felt included.”

“It has given me more independence. I didn’t have to rely on someone else to know what was going on.”

“It’s absolutely fantastic. It has allowed me to spend time with my husband rather than him watching TV and me being on the computer.”

Choice and quality of programs

Consumers felt that most of the content that was broadcast during the trial period was of a high standard; however they expressed some frustration with the choice of programs such as *Grand Designs* which were very dialogue-focused, and therefore did not lend themselves as readily to audio description.

When talking about the AD service, one member explained this perspective in greater detail, noting

“I’ve found it to be more useful for some programs than others. For example shows like Grand Designs didn’t lend themselves well to AD and I didn’t think it added to the experience of watching that show. The shows with complex scenes though, like Rake, are fantastic with AD and this show was brilliantly done.”

Whether purchasing imported programs with AD or producing an audio track in-house for the Australian market, careful consideration should be given to the nature and suitability of content. The ABC can gain a greater understanding of the needs of consumers who are blind or vision impaired by ensuring that there is significant consumer input into the selection of programs for any future AD service. As one viewer noted:

“If we only get a few hours of content each day, they need to make sure it’s not wasted on a show that doesn’t really lend itself to audio description. It has to be beneficial.”

Further to this point, some viewers felt that the information that was conveyed through the AD service did not always reflect the visual elements that were most crucial to the story. One woman said:

“Sometimes they left out information that’s really important. The audio description needs to be able to set the scene from the very beginning of a program.”

Another trial participant told us:

“There were instances where scene changes were not communicated quickly enough and I was left confused.”

Similarly, the voice and tone of the describer was noted to occasionally influence the experience of a program. One woman who had participated in the trial noted:

“I often find it annoying when the tone used by the describer is not consistent with the tone of the actual program.”

This seemed to be a feeling that was shared amongst consumers, with another woman explaining

“Sometimes the description can be a bit mechanical which makes it a less enjoyable experience.”

These factors further demonstrate a need for the Government to undertake measures to ensure that an AD service that is implemented in the future is relevant to the Australian context and meets the needs of the wider blind and vision impaired community. Internationally, there are varying schools of thought on how an AD service should be delivered, with inconsistencies between guidelines used to determine the production of AD overseas.

There is often a great deal of debate over whether describers should remain objective, or move towards a more interpretive approach. As a result of this debate, the blindness sector wishes to reinforce the importance of consumers being involved in these discussions prior to the development of Australian guidelines to help guide the practice of AD for the Australian market.

Additionally, the majority of trial participants who had provided feedback to blindness organisations had raised concerns about programs such as *Australian Story*, which is relatively easy to follow for the most part but does not include the verbalisation of on-screen announcements that appear at the conclusion of the program. On-screen announcements are also relevant to a number of news programs where a person may be interviewed and their name is presented on-screen. As expressed by one viewer:

“I’d get so much out of one day having AD of the captions that come up saying who certain people are speaking on certain issues. I actually used to think that everyone else but me just knew who these people being interviewed and commenting on news issues were.”

Broadcast time

The majority of people who participated in the trial felt that the broadcast of content during peak hours provided sufficient choice for viewers and it was noted that there were several programs on during weekends, which appealed to most viewers. On evenings when there was no content broadcast at all, however, trial participants felt extremely disappointed and excluded from their regular viewing pattern.

Some consumers raised concerns that restricting the AD service to prime time did not properly acknowledge the role that AD could play in bridging the access gap for children who are blind or vision impaired. As one woman explained

“I think that children could have benefited from the service if there was children’s content available. I have just come into contact with a seven year old girl who is completely blind and she is just so isolated and excluded.”

As there were many barriers that prevented people from participating in the trial, which will be explored in greater depth in the next section of this report, some blindness organisations had reported trying to set up demonstrations so that interested consumers could come and experience AD on television during the trial period. The timing of described content did not, however, allow for such events to be organised within business hours.

Discussion on the topic of timing also led to concerns regarding the accessibility of the ABC’s online catch-up service, with one participant noting:

“I often find that I might not be able to access a program at the time that it is broadcast, so I have tried to access that television program online using I-player, the ABC’s catch-up service. I was frustrated though because at this stage, the catch-up service does not include audio description.”

Some teething problems for viewers

While the AD service was embraced by the blind and vision impaired community with great enthusiasm, it is important for the Government to understand that there were still several issues which may have prevented consumers from participating in the trial.

In essence, this demonstrates that the number of people who tuned into the trial does not accurately reflect the greater demand for an AD service.

As one consumer wrote:

“It is essential that AD continues so that people have time to acquire the equipment to receive it. Any lack of take-up should not be seen as disinterest.”

Blind Citizens Australia conducted a teleconference which was specifically targeted at consumers who had not been able to access AD during the trial. These participants were asked whether or not they would have used AD had they been able to access it and what it would have meant to them.

Responses included:

“If I had AD, my nights could be a lot better spent because I would be able to get the background of what is going on and be part of a group and not have them tell me what is happening. It would make you feel like you are part of the system. At the moment, I feel like we are excluded from the system.”

“Yes I would have. It would mean that I have the same access to the content that sighted people have access to and that’s very powerful.”

Knowing what equipment was compatible to receive audio description

As the Government is aware, a consumer’s ability to access receiver-mixed description is dependent upon two factors:

1. The consumer having made the transition from analogue to digital technology and
2. The consumer having access to a digital television or set-top box that has the ability to access receiver-mixed description

Consumers who are blind or vision impaired experienced significant confusion when trying to determine whether or not their equipment was capable of receiving AD. In the media release announcing the trial which was issued by DBCDE on 22 February 2012, it was indicated that the final report from Australian Digital Testing would be completed by March 2012.

While we understand that the delay with the release of this report was a result of ensuring that the information published was accurate and reliable, the fact that the report was not published until July did not allow a significant enough window of opportunity for blindness organisations to promote the findings of the report to their members as effectively, which could have resulted in greater uptake of the trial.

Accessibility of the user guides and on-screen menus

The digital nature of the user guides also posed an additional problem for some consumers, as many people who are blind or vision impaired still face significant barriers to accessing computers and the internet. One woman explained:

“I didn’t find the user guide helpful because it could only be accessed online. I don’t use the internet and there was no phone number that I could call to find out this information.”

Additionally, a number of members have reported either not being able to access the trial at all, or having missed out on the trial for a number of weeks due to not being able to navigate through the on-screen menu independently to turn on the AD

“I didn’t have enough time to find out whether or not my TV had audio description because I had to wait for someone sighted to come and tell me.”

Set top boxes and digital TV compatibility

Those members who had access to either the Hills or the Bush talking set-top boxes reported that they were able to tune into the trial independently and easily. However, the status of talking-set-top boxes under the Household Assistance Scheme (HAS) also served to prevent many people from accessing AD during the trial period as people living in regions that switched to digital prior to June 2012 were still awaiting the retrofit of talking boxes and there were still several areas whose residents could not yet opt into the scheme, as switchover was yet to occur in their region. One individual explained:

“Our geographical area (including upper Spencer Gulf in South Australia) was the second region in Australia to be 'switched over to digital'. At that time talking set top boxes were not available; these were first trialled in the next area to be switched over (e.g. country Victoria). I did not request a set top box through the HAS as I did not want to acquire yet another remote control with yet another lot of buttons to memorise in order to operate it. Instead I purchased a digital television and unfortunately this brand is one of those that do not have the capacity to access the AD trial on ABC1.”

As with the above example, there were a number of consumers who had already made the transition to digital television but were unable to participate in the trial due to their equipment not being compatible with the receiver-mixed description service. These consumers were also ineligible for the HAS so were unable to obtain a talking set-top box which would have allowed them to access the AD service.

A woman noted her frustration with this situation, saying:

“I didn’t get a talking set top box from the Government so therefore we couldn’t evaluate the trial. We were very disappointed about that.”

In addition to the HAS, both the Bush and Hills talking set top boxes were available for purchase for \$199 through Vision Australia and some retail outlets. Blind Citizens Australia and Vision Australia are aware that quite a number of people who are blind or

vision impaired specifically purchased a talking set top box so they could participate in the trial, with stocks of boxes unavailable towards the end of the trial.

Some people, however, were deterred from purchasing a talking set top box due to the cost and the knowledge that they would only be able to access AD on television for a 13 week period. For people whose sole income is the Disability Support Pension (Blind) or the Age Pension (Blind), spending \$199 on an appliance that may only benefit them for 13 weeks is not economically sensible. There was also uncertainty about when a free talking set top box would be provided.

Furthermore, an issue for some people who did purchase regular or talking set top boxes was installation (connecting them to the television), which often required sighted assistance that in some cases was not available.

Promotion of the audio description trial

Leading up to the commencement of the trial, the audio description service was only advertised through blindness organisations such as Blind Citizens Australia and Vision Australia and via Media Access Australia. While blindness organisations aimed to disseminate as much information as possible to their members and clients to ensure that they were well-prepared for the trial, it is important to understand that a number of Australians who are blind, vision impaired or may otherwise benefit from audio description on television may have no affiliation with blindness organisations at all.

This concern was consistently raised in feedback provided to blindness organisations during the trial. Feedback included:

“There wasn’t enough advertising around the trial. It wasn’t really promoted at all apart from through blindness agencies.”

“I spoke to quite a few people telling them about it, and they didn’t know at all. Very disappointing and a shame.”

“I get most of my news by radio and it didn’t come over radio.”

In discussions with the blindness sector leading up to the trial, the ABC indicated that a voiceover announcement would be implemented prior to each described program to inform consumers that the audio description feature was available. While this voiceover message was broadcast prior to some programs, it was not utilised to its full capacity and the majority of programs did not include this announcement.

We believe that the promotion of the trial through the ABC’s many communications mechanisms would have allowed a far greater take-up of the audio description service.

We encourage the ABC to give further consideration to this issue when investigating options for introducing a permanent service in the future.

For those people who did have access to a suitable television or set top box, there were still further barriers that negatively impacted on their ability to access content with description during the trial. The ABC's occasional delay in updating the online program guide was one issue that was raised by members, with a New South Wales viewer explaining:

"There were a few instances where the content on the website had not been updated and so you had no way of finding out which programs would be broadcast that week."

Additionally, as was the case for the user guide which was published by Australian Digital Testing, the online nature of the program guide posed a problem for those people who are blind or vision impaired who are unable to access the internet. During teleconferences that were conducted by Blind Citizens Australia, participants without internet access were asked how they found out what programs would be described. One woman said:

"I just left the audio description switched on, so if I came across a program that had audio description it was only by chance. I didn't actually know what would be on ahead of time."

Other consumers reported using this same approach, with a New South Wales woman saying

"I did the same thing. It was a bit difficult and it would have been nice to have known what was on in advance."

To try and provide an alternative option for those consumers who did not have internet access, blindness organisations provided the phone number for the ABC's Customer Service Line (13 99 94) which was referenced on the webpage for the audio description trial. Those consumers who did phone this number to try and determine what programs were scheduled to be broadcast with audio description found that staff, in general, did not have any awareness about the trial and were therefore unable to offer assistance. One woman explained:

"When I called to ask about it, nobody knew anything about the trial."

The ability of people who are blind or vision impaired to be able to access information via smart phone technology was also not considered during the trial, with one viewer noting:

“I have the mobile app for the ABC’s program guide and I found that information about which programs were going to be described was rarely included. I mostly had to rely on sighted help which kind of defeated the purpose.”

Most consumers who provided feedback on the trial indicated that they would have found it useful if there was a telephone number that they could have called to find out what programs were going to be broadcast. Some trial participants living with sighted friends or family also felt that it would have been beneficial for information about described programs to be available in hardcopy form, with one woman explaining:

“I’m not the best computer user and I had a lot of trouble accessing information about what was on. It would have been useful if they included information in the program guide that comes with the paper, like they do for captioning.”

Additionally, those viewers who were able to access the trial through one of the set top boxes manufactured by Bush Australia or Hills experienced some confusion when trying to determine which programs would be broadcast with AD, as the box would announce that audio description was available for programs that didn’t actually include the audio description feature. It is our understanding that this was the result of the ABC not correctly setting up the profile for the audio description service and it is our hope that, in the future, this problem will be resolved.

ABC audio description survey

Consumers who are blind or vision impaired have expressed some concern at how the data collected from the ABC’s audio description survey might be used to shape the delivery of a permanent audio description service in the future. These concerns stem from two factors:

1. The aforementioned barriers that prevented a higher take-up of the audio description service during the trial and
2. Several barriers that consumers experienced when attempting to provide feedback via the ABC’s audio description survey.

While we commend the ABC for implementing a phone alternative to the online survey to accommodate the needs of those consumers who may be unable to access the internet, an alarming number of people have reported experiencing difficulty when trying to provide feedback over the telephone.

The process for providing feedback over the telephone required the viewer to phone a designated survey line using the number 1800 616 882. A recorded message would then give a voice prompt for the viewer to leave a voice message with their name and phone number so that someone could return their call.

Blind Citizens Australia had received several complaints during the trial period from people who had left messages on the 1800 number and had waited several weeks without their call being returned.

A New South Wales man explained:

"I called and left a message last Wednesday but I'm still waiting to hear back. I called again on Friday and Monday, but still haven't had my call returned."

A South Australian woman also explained:

"I have just left my 3rd message on the ABC 1800 number, trying to give my feedback. Hopefully there is a glitch on their side and others may not have experienced this."

Alternatively, trial participants who were able to access the online survey noted that while they had been able to complete the survey using magnification or screen reading software (which reads information displayed on a computer screen audibly), there were still some barriers to accessibility which they were required to navigate around; such as some page elements being labelled incorrectly.

Vision Australia had offered to work with the ABC to ensure that these accessibility issues were addressed, however the ABC failed to take advantage of this offer and did not implement any changes to attempt to improve the accessibility of the survey. As a result, some viewers were unable to complete the survey at all. As one Victorian member noted:

"I decided to go ahead and fill out the ABC's online survey. I became most frustrated and discarded my response form when, as I reached the final page "About you", the website timed out and I was unable to continue. You may like to please bring this to the attention of the ABC advising them that people with low vision, or those who use screen readers, are not as fast at filling in online forms and that if they wish to have responses from us, they will need to give us time to provide them."

Some viewers were deterred by the survey questions relating to visual acuity and said that they did not understand why this level of information was needed. Nonetheless, the acuity figures adopted by the ABC were not consistent with the figures that are usually used to measure visual acuity in Australia and instead, reflected those that are referenced in the United Kingdom. This left participants very confused as they, in most cases, did not have any understanding of the figures that were being used and how they applied to their own vision condition.

One woman from QLD stated:

“There were questions around visual acuity that were a bit out of place. I didn’t understand why they needed that sort of information.”

Additionally, blindness organisations were provided with a link to the audio description survey at the commencement of the trial and asked to promote this information through their networks. This caused confusion for consumers, however, when the ABC changed the link to the survey several weeks into the trial, meaning the link that had originally been provided to blindness organisations was no longer active.

All of these factors further reinforce the need for Government to engage more closely with the blindness sector prior to the implementation of a permanent service on ABC1, to ensure that processes are relevant to the Australian context and meet the needs of the wider blind and vision impaired community.

How does Australia compare internationally?

UK

Audio description was first trialled on British TV in 1994. Ofcom, the communications regulator, currently sets the minimum amount of audio described programming for channels (both free-to-air and subscription TV) which have been broadcasting on digital for 10 years at 10%. Sky Television and Channel 4 have, however, volunteered to do 20% on all their channels, and other channels, including the BBC, also regularly exceed 10%.

US

AD was made mandatory in 2000 with a ruling by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which stated that the four largest free-to-air TV networks and five largest cable channels had to broadcast 4 hours of AD per week. This ruling was struck down in 2002 after a legal challenge by the Motion Picture Association, but some networks continued to provide AD.

The FCC’s ruling was reinstated as one of the key provisions of the *21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act of 2010*, which was signed into law by President Obama in October 2010. AD rules came into effect again on 1 July 2012, with

the Act stating that two years from then, the FCC will report to Congress on audio description, and four years from then, will have the power to increase it to 7 hours a week.

Canada

The broadcasting of some audio description has been a licence condition for broadcasters since 2001. Canada is also notable for having AMI-TV (formerly The Accessible Channel), a cable channel which is unique in that all its programs have open audio description so that the viewer doesn't need to turn it on.

New Zealand

A trial of AD began in March 2011 with *Coronation Street*, and became a regular service later that year. 20 hours of programs a week are now described, including local programs such as *Shortland Street* and movies. The AD is funded by the government through its subsidiary, NZ on Air.

Germany

Germany was the first country to broadcast a regular AD service in 1993. It is currently mainly limited to movies. Approximately 20-30 movies are broadcast each week (although many are old and repeats), as well as some popular programs and documentaries.

Spain

AD started in Spain in 1995 and has grown steadily since. In 2010, 881 hours of audio described programming were broadcast (about 17 hours a week) almost all by public broadcasters.

One notable Spanish audio described program was the children's cartoon series *Nicolas*, which was produced with the description incorporated and broadcast with open AD by the public broadcaster RTVE in 2002.

Italy

AD began on TV in 2003, and described programs are mostly old movies and repeats. Italy is unique in that the audio description there is delivered via radio or a live stream over the internet.

Poland

The public broadcaster TVP screens about 8 hours of TV series and movies a week with AD, and one of the private broadcasters audio describes some talk shows.

France

AD is available on programs from both public and private broadcasters. About five programs a week, either movies or TV shows, have audio description, which includes repeats.

Portugal

One public channel broadcasts 45-60 mins of audio described programs a week.

Korea

AD began in 2006. It is currently on approximately 6% of programs on the four terrestrial broadcasters. It is partly funded by the government through the Korea Communications Agency.

Other

Some AD is also available in Austria, Switzerland, Belgium and other European countries.

Considerations for the future of audio description

The legal imperative

While this report has already demonstrated the many benefits that audio description can offer, the future implementation of a permanent audio description service on ABC television would also help ensure that the Government is meeting its legal obligations to the blind and vision impaired community, particularly section 24 of the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (Cth) which requires that there not be discrimination in the provision of goods, services and facilities.

As a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Australian Government is also required to undertake measures to ensure that government services, such as ABC television, operate in accordance with the principles laid out in the convention. Section 30 of the Convention states:

“States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to take part on an equal basis with others in cultural life, and shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities enjoy access to television programmes, films, theatre and other cultural activities, in accessible formats.”

Additionally, Australia’s National Disability Strategy 2010-2020 adopts the principles set out in Article 3 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and In particular, states that:

“It is important that people with disability are not left behind as the use of digital communication continues.”

Receiver standards

Standards Australia will be conducting a review of the digital television receiver standard AS 4933 in 2013. Media Access Australia is represented on the committee that will be conducting this review, and will be arguing that all digital receivers should have the capability to receive and play receiver-mixed AD (as was broadcast during the trial and is the standard for free-to-air television in the UK) to meet Australian standards, just as they now have to receive and display captions.

Providing audio description into the future

We are aware that, during the trial, the ABC developed a fairly ad hoc system for delivering the audio description. Should a regular service be introduced, a more streamlined solution will need to be put in place which will properly integrate the audio description files into the ABC’s broadcast stream. There will be one-off costs in setting this up.

Media Access Australia has estimated that the cost for purchasing audio description files from the UK, converting them for use here and integrating them into the broadcast system would be approximately \$750 per hour of program. Producing audio description files locally will be more expensive, and will probably be in the region of \$1,600 per hour.

During the trial, the majority of programs which were described were British. A regular service of 14 hours per week, and consisting of two thirds overseas programs and one third local programs, would therefore cost in the region of \$750,000 per annum (without

taking into account the cost savings that would flow from a long-term contract or the impact of repeated programs), which is estimated to represent less than a quarter of the ABC's annual captioning budget.

Conclusion

Blind Citizens Australia, Vision Australia, ACCAN and Media Access Australia certainly regard the trial as being a successful first step in the introduction of a permanent service on Australian television and thank the Federal Government for making this happen. We are also strongly encouraged by the generally supportive commentary from both the Minister and the ABC in the aftermath of the trial, particularly the interest in working through any issues that have been raised.

A suggested next step for keeping the process moving is that a roundtable discussion is scheduled to look at the issues raised in the ABC report and this report, and to work through potential solutions and approaches to those. That discussion should include a representative from the organisations above, the ABC, the ACMA and the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy. A very clear objective of those discussions would be to explore what would be required to establish a permanent service on the ABC.

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