

AUDIO DESCRIPTION – ACCAN POSITION

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ACCAN continues to call for the adoption of audio description (AD) across the Australian free-to-air market.

What is audio description?

Audio description refers to a verbal commentary used to describe key visual elements of a television program, film, or live performance or event. Identification of speakers, description of gestures, facial expressions, locale, scene changes, and other visual content are narrated. If dialogue is present as part of the program or event, these narrations are inserted during breaks in the dialogue.

Without audio description, people who are blind or vision impaired cannot experience television with the same level of understanding and enjoyment as the rest of the community. This is because almost all television programs include a significant amount of visual content that is not duplicated in an audio form. Without access to this visual content, which audio description provides, many television programs can be largely incomprehensible to a person who is blind or vision impaired.

Background

ACCAN, in alliance with Australian blindness organisations and other disability and consumer organisations, believes that it is time that the Australian free-to-air television sector provides audio description for viewers who are blind or vision impaired. Unlike other comparable countries – United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand, United States – Australia has no audio description services on television. This lack of access impacts hundreds of thousands of Australians with vision impairment leaving them without functionally equivalent access to our foremost medium for news, information and entertainment.

Access Economics research indicates that more than 500,000 Australians over the age of 40 had vision loss in 2009 and this number is projected to exceed 800,000 by 2020¹.

Vision Australia research² indicates that the majority of Australians with vision impairment do not have access to the internet further amplifying the essential nature of audio description services on television for Australians who are blind or vision impaired.

Blindness sector discussions with broadcasters and the ACMA have not resulted in any AD services on Australian television.

¹ 2010, 'Clear Focus: The Economic Impact of Vision Loss in Australia in 2009', Access Economics, viewed 24 May 2016 <http://www.vision2020australia.org.au/resources/clear-focus-the-economic-impact-of-vision-loss-in-australia-in-2009>

² Vision Australia (2015) 'How are our clients using smartphones and the internet?' Available from Vision Australia

Recent trials of audio description delivered by ABC across both broadcast television and online catch-up have not resulted in any permanent service.

Ongoing dialogue with successive Governments has not resulted in positive outcomes for vision impaired consumers – a 2012 community petition to continue ABC the broadcast television AD service was unsuccessful; discussions with the current Government's previous Minister for Communications were unsuccessful in implementing a permanent AD service on the ABC.

Efforts to challenge this impasse through disability discrimination complaints have also had no positive outcome for consumers with vision impairment – Disability Discrimination Complaints against the ABC for not providing AD were terminated by the Australian Human Rights Commission when conciliation failed.

What is needed?

A willingness by Parliament to ameliorate this 'market failure' and provide the consumer safety-net necessary to ensure that all Australians are able to benefit from the ubiquitous and essential service of free-to-air television.

ACCAN supports efforts by Vision Australia and Blind Citizens Australia to advocate for audio description across the Australian free-to-air television sector as a matter of priority.

Broadcasting Services Act amendment

ACCAN recommends that the *Broadcasting Services Act* be amended to mandate the inclusion of audio description across all free-to-air broadcasters, as is the case for the provision of closed captions for television viewers who are Deaf or hearing impaired. ACCAN recommends the *Broadcasting Services Act* be amended to require a minimum of 14 hours per week of audio description initially, with annual increases as has been implemented in the United Kingdom.

Online and Broadcast AD

ACCAN is aware that the Government is currently reviewing the results of the recent ABC AD trial on their catch-up service iView. While ACCAN supports all increases in access for Australians with disability, the age-related nature of vision impairment indicates that provision of AD solely over online platforms will not be sufficient to ensure that the vast majority of people with vision impairment are able to benefit and enjoy audio description.

Additionally, the issues of cost and connectivity necessary for online audio description services create significant issues of inequity. The fundamental principle of free-to-air television is its ubiquity as a free service to anyone in Australia with a television. Requiring Australians with vision impairment to pay for broadband services capable of streaming large video files in order to access free-to-air television undermines the implicit principle of it as a free service. Additionally, given the age-related and disabling nature of vision impairment, many Australians with vision impairment are dependent on social security payments, limiting their ability to afford the extra cost of high speed, high capacity broadband connectivity.