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Indefinitely beyond Our Reach: The Case for Elevating Audio Description to the Importance of Captions on Australian Television

Katie M Ellis, Mike Kent, Kathryn Locke

Abstract

Introduction

In a 2013 press release issued by Blind Citizens Australia, the advocacy group announced they were lodging a human rights complaint against the Australian government and the ABC over the lack of audio description available on the public broadcaster. Audio description is a track of narration included between the lines of dialogue which describes important visual elements of a television show, movie or performance. Audio description is broadly recognised as an essential feature to make television accessible to audiences who are blind or vision impaired (Utray et al.). Indeed, Blind Citizens Australia maintained that audio description was as important as captioning on Australian television:

people who are blind have waited too long and are frustrated that audio description on television remains indefinitely beyond our reach. Our Deaf or hearing impaired peers have always seen great commitment from the ABC, but we continue to feel like second class citizens.

While audio description as a technology was developed in the 1960s—around the same time as captions (Ellis, “Netflix Closed Captions”)—it is not as widely available on television and access is therefore often considered to be out of reach for this group. As a further comparison, in Australia, while the provision of captions was mandated in the Broadcasting Services Act (BSA) 1992 and television sets had clear Australian standards regarding their capability to display captions, there is no legislation for audio description and no consistency regarding the ability of television sets sold in Australia to display them (Ellis, “Television’s Transition”). While as a technology, audio description is as old as captioning it is not as widely available on television. This is despite the promise of technological advancements to facilitate its availability. For example, Cronin and King predicted that technological change such as the introduction of stereo sound on television would facilitate a more widespread availability of audio description; however, this has not eventuated. Similarly, in the lead up to the transition from analogue to digital broadcasting in Australia, government policy documents predicted a more widespread availability of audio description as a result of increased bandwidth available via digital television (Ellis, “Television’s Transition”). While these predictions paved way for an audio description trial, there has been no amendment to the BSA to mandate its provision.

Audio description has been experienced on Australian broadcast television in 2012, but only for a 14-week trial on ABC1. The trial report, and feedback from disability groups, identified several technical impediments and limitations which effected the experience of audio described content during this trial, including: the timing of the trial during a period in which the transition from analogue to digital television was still occurring (creating hardware compatibility issues for some consumers); the limitations of the “ad hoc” approach undertaken by the ABC and manual implementation of audio description; and the need for upgraded digital receivers (ABC “Trial of Audio Description”, 2). While advocacy groups acknowledged the technical complexities involved, the expected stakeholder discussions that were due to be held post-trial, in part to attempt to resolve the issues experienced, were never undertaken. As a result of the lack of subsequent commitments to providing audio description, in 2013 advocacy group Blind Citizens Australia lodged their formal complaints of disability discrimination against the ABC and the Federal Government.

Since the 2012 trial on ABC1, the ABC’s catch-up portal iView instigated another audio description trial in 2015. Through the iView trial it was further confirmed that audio description held considerable benefits for people with a vision impairment. They also demonstrated that audio description was technically feasible, with far less ‘technical difficulties’ than the experience of the 2012 broadcast-based trial. Over the 15 month trial on ABC iView 1,305 hours of audio described content was provided and played 158, 277 times across multiple platforms, including iOS, Android, the Freeview app and desktop computers (ABC, “ABC iView Audio Description Trial”).

Yet despite repeated audio description trials and the lodgement of discrimination complaints, there remains no audio description on Australian broadcast television. Similarly, whereas 55 per cent of DVDs released in Australia have captions, only 25 per cent include an audio description track (Media Access Australia). At the time of writing, the only audio description available on Australian television is on Netflix Australia, a subscription video on demand provider.

This article seeks to highlight the importance of television access for people with disability, with a specific focus on the provision of audio description for people with vision impairments. Research consistently shows that despite being a visual medium, people with vision impairments watch television at least once a day (Cronin and King; Ellis, “Netflix Closed Captions”). However, while television access has been a priority for advocates for people who are Deaf and hard of hearing (Downey), audiences advocating audio description are only recently making gains (Ellis, “Netflix Closed Captions”; Ellis and Kent). These gains are frequently attributed to technological change, particularly the digitisation of television and the introduction of subscription video on demand where users access television content online and are not constrained by broadcast schedules. This transformation of how we access television is also considered in the article, again with a focus on the provision—or lack thereof—of audio description.

This article also reports findings of research conducted with Australians with disabilities accessing the emerging video on demand environment in 2016. The survey was run online from January to February 2016. Survey respondents included people with disability, their families, and carers, and were sourced through disability organisations and community groups as well as via disability-focused social media. A total of 145 people completed the survey and 12 people participated in follow-up interviews. Insights were gained into both how people with disability are currently using video on demand and their anticipated usage of services. Of note is that most subscription video on demand services (Netflix Australia, Stan, and Presto) had only been introduced in Australia in the year before the survey being carried out, with only Foxtel Play and Quickflix having been in operation for some time prior to that.

Finally, the article ends by looking at past and current advocacy in this area, including a discussion on existing—albeit, to date, limited—political will.

Access to Television for People with Disabilities

Television can be disabling in different ways for people with impairments, yet several accessibility features exist to translate information. For example, people who are D/deaf or hard of hearing may require captions, while people with vision impairments prefer to make use of audio description (Alper et al.). Similarly, people with mobility and dexterity impairments found the transition to digital broadcasting difficult, particularly with relation to set top box set up (Carmichael et al.). As Joshua Robare has highlighted, even legislation has generally favoured the inclusion of audiences with hearing impairments, while disregarding those with vision impairments. Similarly, much of the literature in this area focuses on the provision of captions—a vital accessibility feature for people who are D/deaf or hard of hearing. Consequently, research into accessibility to television for a diversity of impairments, going beyond hearing impairments, remains deficient.

In a study of Australian audiences with disability conducted between September and November 2013—during the final months of the analogue to digital simulcast period of Australian broadcast television—closed captions, clean audio, and large/colour-coded remote control keys emerged as the most desired access features (see Ellis, “Digital Television Flexibility”). Audio description barely registered in the top five. In a different study conducted two years ago/after, when disabled Australian audiences of video on demand were asked the same question, captions continued to dominate at 63.4 per cent; however, audio description was also seen to be a necessary feature for almost one third of respondents (see Ellis et al., *Accessing Subscription Video*).

Robert Kingett, founder of the Accessible Netflix Project, participated in our research and told us in an interview that video on demand providers treat accessibility as an “afterthought”, particularly for blind people whom most don’t think of as watching television. Yet research dating back to the 1990s shows almost 100 per cent of people with vision impairments watch television at least once a day (Cronin & King). Statistically, the number of Australians who identify as blind or vision impaired is not insignificant. Vision Australia estimates that over 357,000 Australians have a vision impairment, while one in five Australians have a disability of some form. With an ageing population, this number is expected to grow exponentially in the next ten years (Australian Network on Disability). Kingett therefore describes this lack of accessibility as evidence video on demand is “stuck in the dark ages”, and advocates that people with vision impairments *do* use video on demand and therefore continue to have unmet access needs.

Video on Demand—Transforming Television

Subscription video on demand services have caused a major shift in the way television is used and consumed in Australia. Prior to 2015, there was a small subscription video on demand industry in this country. However, in 2015, following the launch of Netflix Australia, Stan, and Presto, Australia was described as having entered the “streaming wars” (Tucker) where consumers would benefit from the increased competition. As Netflix gained dominance in the video on demand market internationally, people with disability began to recognise the potential this service could have in transforming their access to television.

For example, the growing availability of video on demand services continues to provide disruptive change to the way in which consumers enjoy information and entertainment. While traditional broadcast television has provided great opportunities for participation in news, events, and popular culture, both socially and in the

workplace, the move towards video on demand services has seen a notable decline in traditional television viewing habits, with online continuing to increase at the expense of Australian free-to-air programming (C-Scott).

For the general population, this always-on, always-available, and always-shareable nature of video on demand means that the experience is both convenient and instant. If a television show is of interest to friends and family, it can be quickly shared through popular social media with others, allowing everyone to join in the experience. For people with disability, the ability to both share and personalise the experience of television is critical to the popularity of video on demand services for this group. This gives them not only the same benefits as others but also ensures that people with disability are not unintentionally excluded from participation—it allows people with disability the choice as to whether or not to join in. However, exclusion from video on demand is a significant concern for people with disability due to the lack of accessibility features in popular subscription services. The lack of captions, audio description, and interfaces that do not comply with international Web accessibility standards are resulting in many people with disability being unable to fully participate in the preferred viewing platforms of family and friends.

The impact of this expands beyond the consumption patterns of audiences, shifting the way the audience is defined and conceptualised. With an increasing distribution of audience attention to multiple channels, products, and services, the ability to, and strategies for, acquiring a large audience has changed (Napoli). As audience attention is distributed, it is broken up, into smaller, fragmented groups. The success, therefore, of a new provider may be to amass a large audience through the aggregation of smaller, niche audiences. This theory has significance for consumers who require audio description because they represent a viable target group. In this context, accessibility is reframed as a commercial opportunity rather than a cost (Ellis, "Netflix Closed Captions").

However, what this means for future provision of audio description in Australia is still unclear. Chris Mikul from Media Access Australia, author of *Access on Demand*, was interviewed as part of this research. He told us that the complete lack of audio description on local video on demand services can be attributed to the lack of Australian legislation requiring it. In an interview as part of this research he explained the central issue with audio description in this country as "the lack of audio description on broadcast TV, which is shocking in a world context".

International providers fare only slightly better. Robert Kingett established the Accessible Netflix Project in 2013 with the stated aim of advocating for the provision of audio description on Netflix. Netflix, despite a lack of a clear accessibility policy, are seen as being in front in terms of overall accessibility—captions are available for most content. However, the provision of audio description was initially not considered to be of such importance, and Netflix were initially against the idea, citing technical difficulties. Nevertheless, in 2015—shortly after their Australian launch—they did eventually introduce audio description on original programming, describing the access feature as an option customers could choose, "just like choosing the soundtrack in a different language" (Wright). However, despite such successful trials, the issue in the Australian market remains the absence of legislation mandating the provision of audio description in Australia and the other video on demand providers have not introduced audio description to compete with Netflix. As the Netflix example illustrates, both legislation and recognition of people with disability as a key audience demographic will result in a more accessible television environment for this group.

Currently, it is debatable as to whether this increasingly competitive market, the shifting perception of audience attraction and retention, and the entry of multiple international video on demand providers, has influenced how accessibility is viewed, both for broadcast television and video on demand. Although there is some evidence for an increasing consideration of people with disability as "valid" consumers—take, for example, the iView audio description trial, or the inclusion of audio description by Netflix—our research indicates accessibility is still inconsistently considered, designed for, and applied by current providers.

Survey Response: Key Issues Regarding Accessibility

Respondents were asked to provide an overall impression of video on demand services, and to tell us about their positive and negative experiences. Analysis of 68 extended responses, and the responses provided by the interview participants, identified a lack of availability of accessibility features such as audio description as a key problem. What our results indicate is that while customers with a disability are largely accommodating of the inaccessibility of providers—they use their own assistive technology to access content—they are keenly aware of the provisions that could be made. As one respondent put it:

they could do a lot better: talking menus, spoken sub titles, and also spoken messages on screen.

However, many expressed low expectations due to the continued absence of audio description on broadcast television:

so, the other thing is, my expectations are quite low because of years of not having audio descriptions. I have slightly different expectations to other people.

This reflection is important in considering both the shifting expectations regarding video on demand providers but also the need for a clear communication of what features are available so that providers can cater to—and therefore capture—niche markets.

The survey identified captioning as the main accessibility problem of video on demand services. However, this may not accurately reflect the need for other accessibility features such as audio description. Rather, it may be indicative that this feature is often the only choice given to consumers. As, Chris Mikul identified, "the only disability being catered for to any great extent is deafness/hearing impairment". Kingett agreed, noting:

people who are deaf and hard of hearing are placed way before the rest because captions are beyond easy and cheap to create now. Please, there's even companies that people use to crowd source captions so companies don't have to do it anymore. This all came about because the deaf community has [banded] together ... to achieve a cause. I know audio description isn't as cheap to make as captions but, by these companies' budgets that's like dropping a penny.

Advocacy and Political Will

As noted above, it has been argued by some that accessibility features that address vision impairments have been neglected. The reason behind this is twofold—the perception that this disability is experienced by a minority of the population and that, because blind people "don't watch television", it is not an important accessibility feature. This points towards a need for both disability advocacy and political will by politicians to introduce legislation. As one survey respondent identified, the reality is that, in Australia, neither politicians nor people with vision impairments have yet to address the issue on audio description in an organised or sustained way:

we have very little audio described content available in Australia. We don't have the population of blind people nor the political will by politicians to force providers to provide for us.

However, Blind Citizens Australia—the coalition of television audiences with vision impairments who lodged the human rights complaint against the government and the ABC—suggest the tide is turning. Whereas advocates for people with vision impairments have traditionally focused on access to the workforce, the issue of television accessibility is increasingly gaining attention, particularly as a result of international activist efforts and the move towards video on demand (see Ellis and Kent).

For example, Kingett's Accessible Netflix Project in the US is considered one of the most successful accessibility movements towards the introduction of audio description. While its members are predominantly US-based, it does include several Australian members and continues to cover Netflix Australia's stance on audio description, and be covered by Australian media and organisations (including Media Access Australia and Life Hacker). When Netflix launched in Australia, Kingett encouraged Australians to become more involved in the project (Ellis and Kent).

However, despite the progress towards mandating of audio description in parliament and the resolution of efforts made by advocacy groups (including Vision Australia and Blind Citizens Australia), the status of audio description remains uncertain. Whilst some support has been gained—specifically through motions made by Senator Siewert and the ABC iView audio description trials—significant change has been slow. For example, conciliation discussions are still ongoing regarding the now four-year-old complaint brought against the ABC and the Federal Government by Blind Citizens Australia. Meanwhile, although the Senate supported Senator Siewert's motion to change the *Broadcasting Services Act* to include audio description, the Act has yet to be amended.

The results of multiple ABC trials of audio description remain in discussion. Whilst the recently released report on the findings of the April 2015–July 2016 iView trial states that the "trial has identified that those who utilised the audio description service found it a valuable enhancement to their media engagement and their social interactions" (ABC, "ABC iView Audio Description Trial" 18), it also cautioned that "any move to introduce AD services in Australia would have budgetary implications

for the broadcasters in a constrained financial environment" and "broader legislative implications" (ABC, "ABC iView Audio Description Trial" 18). Indeed, although the trial was considered "successful"—in that experiences by users were generally positive and the benefits considerable (Media Access Australia, "New Report")—the continuation of audio description on iView alone was clarified as representing "a systemic failure to provide people who are blind or have low vision with basic access to television now, given that iView is out of reach for many people in the blindness and low vision community" (Media Access Australia, "New Report"). Indeed, the relatively low numbers of plays of audio described content during the trial (158, 277 plays, representing 0.58% of total program plays on iView) were likely a result of a lack of access to smartphones or Internet technology, prohibitive data speeds and/or general Internet costs, all factors which affect the accessibility of video on demand significantly more for people with disability (Ellis et al., "Access for Everyone?").

On a more positive note, the culmination of advocacy pressure, the ABC iView trial, political attention, and increasing academic literature on the accessibility of Australian media has resulted in the establishment of an Audio Description Working Group by the government. This group consists of industry representatives, advocacy group representatives, academics, and "consumer representatives". The aims of the group are to: identify options to sustainably increase access to audio description services; identify any impediments to the implementation of audio description; provide expert advice on audio description implementation options; and develop a report on the findings due at the end of 2017.

Conclusion

In the absence of audio description, people who are blind or vision impaired report a less satisfying television experience (Cronin and King; Kingett). However, with each technological advancement in the delivery of television, from stereo sound to digital television, this group has held hopes for a more accessible experience. The reality, however, has been a continued lack of audio description, particularly in broadcast television.

Several commentators have compared the provision of audio description with closed captioning. They find that audio description is not as widely available, and reflect this is likely a result of lack of legislation (Robare; Ellis, "Digital Television Flexibility")—for example, in the Australian context, whereas the provision of captions is mandated in the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992*, audio description is not. As a result, there have been limited trials of audio description in this country and inconsistent standards in how to display it. As discussed throughout this paper, people with vision impairments and their allies therefore often draw on the example of the widespread "acceptance" of captions to make the case that audio description should also be more widely available.

However, following the introduction of subscription video on demand in Australia, and particularly Netflix, the issue of audio description is receiving greater attention. It has been argued that video on demand has transformed television, particularly the ways in which television is accessed. Video on demand could also potentially transform the way we think about accessibility for audiences with disability. While captions are a well-established accessibility feature facilitating television access for people with a range of disabilities, video on demand is raising the profile of the importance of audio description for audiences with vision impairments.

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