

ASSOCIATION FOR THE BLIND OF WA (INC.)

SUBMISSION

**ACCESS TO ELECTRONIC MEDIA FOR
THE HEARING AND VISION IMPAIRED
- DISCUSSION PAPER**

13 June 2008

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Organisational Background

The Association for the Blind of WA is the principal provider of services to people with vision impairment in Western Australia. For more than 90 years it has been providing a wide range of services aimed at maximising the quality of life and, where appropriate, facilitating independence for people who are blind or vision impaired.

1.2 Vision Impairment

- The incidence of blindness and vision impairment is rising fast. Statistics from ABS and the Centre for Eye Research Australia indicate that 52,400 West Australians were blind or vision impaired in 2005. In 2004, Access Economics and the Centre for Eye Research estimated that this figure will top 65,000 by 2020.
- Blindness and vision impairment are among the most frightening and isolating of disabilities.
- Vision loss is strongly linked to higher rates of mental health problems such as depression as well as under-employment and poverty and significantly higher rates of falls, injuries, hospital stays and nursing home admissions.

2.0 Key Comments

2.1 Mandatory

Many digital media presentations convey information in a non-verbal manner. As a consequence, equitable access to digital media, for people who are blind or vision impaired cannot be achieved without the provision of audio description.

For this reason, as a minimum, the use of audio description should be required in the same manner and to the same extent as that required for captioning. This should be mandatory rather voluntary for all forms of media, including community announcements and advertisements.

2.2 Cinemas

It is commendable that cinemas are screening audio described films. However, it appears that such availability is currently limited to a restricted number of sessions at allotted times and that this appears to be limited to the East coast of Australia.

In mainstream cinemas, audio description should be significantly more available than is currently provided, with a more generous offering of scheduled screening sessions.

2.3 DVDs

At present, DVDs available for purchase are inconsistently labelled, which means that the provision of audio description isn't always stated.

Consistent, accurate labelling is required.

2.4 Imported / Exported Product

Currently, audiences in other countries are able to access some Australian digital media product *with* audio description, whereas Australian audiences watching the same product do not have this opportunity. Further, while audio description is not broadly available on Australian product, Australian audiences have the opportunity to benefit from the presence of audio description on imported product. Such inconsistencies are further exacerbated by the release of audio described DVDs overseas, which never reach the Australian market.

These anomalies could be overcome if all Australian product is audio described as a matter of course.

2.5 Standards

Audio description should be applied in accordance with a code, registered by ACMA. Such a code should be developed according to standards recognised by industry partners as well as the blindness and vision impairment sector.

2.6 Regulatory Requirements

The Broadcasting Services Act 1992 should specify requirements for audio description, in a manner similar to its imposition of captioning requirements. ACMA's role re: audio description should also be similar to that which it performs for captions.

3.0 Conclusion

The Vision of the Association for the Blind of WA is "that people who are blind or vision impaired share a quality of life equal to other Western Australians".

In representing its clients who are blind or vision impaired, the Association for the Blind of WA takes the broad position that audio description provisions should be at least comparable, and at best far more generous, than current requirements for captioning. It is only by making all forms of digital media readily accessible to people who cannot see the visual elements that true equality will be achieved.

4.0 Contact Person

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