

Audio description – where to now?

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The Federal Government has now released the technical report compiled by the ABC following the trial of audio description on ABC1 which took place between 5 August and 4 November 2012. The report gives a detailed account of the trial, the technical difficulties which arose during it, and how the ABC coped with them. In this article, I will be looking at the findings of the report and the implications they have for the introduction of a permanent service on Australian television.

For audio description's intended audience – the blind or vision impaired – there is no doubt that the trial was a resounding success. People who had TVs or set top boxes which were able to access the service were overwhelmingly positive about it in their feedback to the ABC. Nevertheless, the trial did identify some technical issues around the broadcasting of audio description, and the supply of audio description files, which need to be resolved. This was to be expected – indeed, identifying such issues was one of the main reasons to have the trial.

1. Technical issues raised by the trial

The most serious problem encountered during the trial was the number of people who received the audio description who didn't want it, or for whom it caused other problems. Prior to the trial, the Federal Government commissioned a survey of digital reception equipment which identified hundreds of models of TVs and set top boxes available in Australia that could receive audio description. What was not anticipated was the different ways that some receivers would react when an audio description track was broadcast.

The ABC received over 1,000 phone calls and emails complaining about the service. In most cases, people were hearing the audio description track when they had not turned it on. Some people lost all audio on ABC1 (or heard the AD without the main audio track). In most cases, the ABC was able to explain to people how to turn off the audio description (by going into the set-up options for their receivers), although some people had to do this every time they switched from the ABC to another channel then back again. However, a small number of viewers (the report does not say how many) were unable to change the settings and restore the main audio track.

When the extent of the problem was realised, the ABC considered moving the trial to digital channel 22 (an identical version of ABC1 is broadcast on channels 2 and 22, but the audio description was only broadcast on channel 2). After consulting with consumer groups and MAA, it was decided not to do this, as it would have caused too much confusion among viewers who wanted to receive the audio description.

In addition to the problems some viewers encountered with their receivers, the ABC had to deal with some obstacles in integrating the audio description into its broadcasting system. Because of the timeframe of the trial and complexities of setting up an automated system, the ABC decided to implement a temporary, manual system. This involved the creation of a second mastertape of each program which was to be audio described. This was sent to the audio description supplier which

created the description and integrated it onto the tape, which was checked by the ABC and then used for broadcast. While this system worked, the report notes that it was an inefficient and labour-intensive approach, and an automated system would need to be developed and implemented for a regular audio description service.

Some of the other technical issues raised by the trial can be summarised as follows:

- Prior to the trial, it was not known whether broadcasting of the audio description track could be accommodated within the ABC's allocated 7 Mhz of the radiofrequency spectrum, while maintaining all the other services currently carried on it (three standard definition channels, one high definition channel and two digital radio channels). It was thought that one of the digital channels would need to be turned off while audio description was being broadcast. In the end, a solution was worked out which meant this was not necessary. However, the report states that future demands on the spectrum may mean that this is not the case in the future.
- Limitations in the ABC's audio processing capacity meant that the sound quality of the audio description broadcast during the trial was not as high as it could have been. This is an issue which should be resolved before a regular service is introduced.
- Ideally, a marker should be included in the broadcast stream to alert digital televisions and set top boxes that a program has audio description. This proved to be impossible with the ABC's current system. Instead, the marker was transmitted continuously throughout the trial, which caused more problems with receivers. This could be rectified with an upgrade to the ABC's digital broadcasting system.
- The audio description during the trial was not available on ABC iView or on ABC1 via Foxtel, so systems to enable this will need to be developed.

2. Supply issues

The ABC contracted two Australian access suppliers, Red Bee Media and CSI, to supply audio description for the trial. Some of the audio description files were produced here, and others were purchased from the UK. The ABC found that the cost of purchasing overseas files was much higher than anticipated, and will consider including audio description in its contracts with overseas program suppliers.

The report also notes that the ABC had to spend set per-hour prices based on the duration of the program, regardless of how much audio description was involved. It suggests that there may be a formula which could be negotiated which would give better value for money.

The trial parameters stipulated that an average of two hours of programs each evening in prime time (6pm – 10.30pm) would be audio described. The ABC stated that it sometimes had difficulty achieving this, as on some nights programs were mostly news and current affairs, which are not suited to being audio described. The report recommends that if audio description becomes mandatory on Australian television, set hours per day should not be stipulated.

The report also notes that audio description rights are not included in the ABC's contracts with program suppliers, and there is some uncertainty about the copyright issues involved. However, I am not aware of this issue being an impediment to the production of audio description anywhere else in the world.



3. Conclusion

It is clear from the report that the biggest stumbling blocks to initiating a regular audio description service on Australian television are the receiver issues. Hundreds of people were adversely affected by the trial, and while in most cases, the problems could be fixed, in a few cases they could not, and viewers essentially lost the ability to watch ABC1 during the trial. While this is a small number of viewers in terms of the ABC's overall audience of millions, it caused great frustration for them and is obviously a serious issue which needs to be handled with great care.

The report makes some suggestions about dealing with the receiver issues.

In the future, should AD become a priority, it may be possible for a coordinated and cooperative approach between the ABC and manufacturers to eliminate a significant number of the problems reported with receivers during the Trial. This could be achieved by loading a new version of software (sometimes referred to as 'firmware') in the consumer equipment (subject to contractual arrangements and agreement on testing and liability issues).

In addition, the ABC notes that the ACMA has the power to enforce the Australian Standards for digital terrestrial television reception equipment imported into Australia. Given that the relevant standard accommodates the additional audio track, this could eliminate the particular problems that manifested during the Trial for new receivers but would not address the issues encountered with existing receivers. (Page 18)

Another option would be to move the audio description to digital channel 22, as was canvassed during the trial. However, this would only be possible if channel 22 continued to be a 'mirror' channel of ABC1. Also, the report states that some viewers lost audio on both channels 2 and 22, which means that even this solution would not eliminate the problem.

In summary, it appears that there is no solution or combination of solutions which would entirely eliminate the problem of some people being adversely affected by an audio description service. In these circumstances, the number of people affected needs to be balanced against the number of blind or vision impaired people who would benefit significantly from the service.

The report states that it will take the ABC 18 months to implement an automated system for delivering audio description, as well as sorting out various other technical and supply issues raised by the trial. People who are blind or vision impaired who have already waited a long time for a regular service in Australia, when it has become increasingly available in many other countries, will be frustrated by this long timeframe. However, Media Access Australia believes the complexity of the technical issues identified in the report justifies this lead time. If not implemented carefully, an audio description service has the potential to adversely affect a great many viewers, so the ABC is right to err on the side of caution.

The ABC's report on the audio description trial is a very comprehensive document, and demonstrates that the various technicians and other staff at the ABC who were involved in the trial worked very hard to make it a success. Now that the report has been released, the logical next step is for the new government to follow the proposal made by the previous government, and initiate roundtable discussions with the various stakeholders in an audio description service – the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, the ACMA, the ABC and



other networks, Foxtel, consumer groups, Media Access Australia and audio description suppliers. The discussions would cover:

- Technical and supply issues
- Receiver issues
- Funding
- Timeframe for introducing the service
- Types of programs to be included in the service
- Audio description standards

The ultimate aim of this process would be the commencement of a regular audio description service on the ABC, with a timetable for it to be extended to other free-to-air networks and to subscription television. The mechanism for this should be the *Broadcasting Services Act*, which needs to be amended to include targets for audio description as it does for captions.

