# Vision Australia

# Audio Description Position Statement

**June 2020**

# Position Statement summary

The use of visual media to convey culture, recreation and entertainment means that people who are blind or have low vision are often excluded and isolated from mainstream media such as television, cinema, museums and other exhibitions, and live events. By providing verbal information about key visual elements, the techniques of audio description provide significant access to visual content by people who are blind or have low vision, and thus can lead to enhanced inclusion in the cultural and recreational life of the community. Unfortunately, Australia lags well behind other developed countries in the provision of audio description, especially for television programs. The Australian Government in particular and the community in general must take urgent action to ensure that people who are blind or have low vision are included fully in the cultural and recreational life of the Australian community through the provision of audio description.

If you would like this position statement in an alternative format or wish to discuss it with Vision Australia’s Government Relations and Advocacy team, please contact us:

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# Definition

Audio description is the term used to refer to a verbal commentary that describes 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 interpolated in gaps in the dialogue. The audio description may be pre-recorded on a separate audio track in the case of television programs or films. For live performances or events the audio description is usually delivered in real-time.

For the purpose of this position statement, audio description also includes the verbalisation of “vision-only” information that is displayed on a television or other screen in the form or text, symbols or graphics. This content can include contact information, emergency service announcements, and other visual information.

# Background

This position statement is founded on principles that are set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (“the Convention”). The convention is the most complete expression of the human rights enjoyed by people with disability. Australia has signed and ratified the Convention, and hence is bound by the obligations that it establishes.

Article 30 of the Convention asserts the right of people with disability to participate fully in the cultural, recreational and sporting life of the community. The first paragraph is as follows:

“Article 30 - Participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport

“1. 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:

1. Enjoy access to cultural materials in accessible formats;
2. Enjoy access to television programmes, films, theatre and other cultural activities, in accessible formats;
3. Enjoy access to places for cultural performances or services, such as theatres, museums, cinemas, libraries and tourism services, and, as far as possible, enjoy access to monuments and sites of national cultural importance.”

It is clear that in order to “enjoy access” as described under Article 30, states Parties must take measures to ensure that people with a disability are able to participate fully in cultural and recreational activities, and audio description is therefore essential to uphold the rights of people who are blind or have low vision in cultural life.

## *Use and benefits of audio description*

Contemporary culture and entertainment rely heavily on visual elements. Without Audio description, people who are blind or have low vision therefore miss out on significant content, which often leads to exclusion from recreational and cultural activities. For example, they will be unable to follow most television programs and movies because they do not have information about key events and actions.

Content is increasingly being provided in multiple formats: television program or movie, DVD, online, etc., and to maximise the inclusion of people who are blind or have low vision, audio description must “follow the content” and be provided regardless of the format in which the content is distributed.

Although it is of greatest benefit to people who are blind or have low vision, audio description also has benefits for other sections of the community, especially when applied to television. For example, audio description can be of benefit to people with print disabilities 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 potential benefits of audio description for people on the autism spectrum in her article Autistic spectrum, captions and audio description[[1]](#footnote-1) (2011). By combining visuals and audio, she found that Audio description can help create a complete picture for people who have autism, Asperger’s Syndrome, monotropism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and dyslexia.

The extra information provided through audio description, which includes descriptions of people’s temperaments, was found to assist people with autism, who often find it difficult to understand the complexity and range of human emotions. Audio description also helped reinforce information, such as people’s names, which is something that people with autism may find difficult.

Audio description is a well-established and increasingly common service offered by television broadcasters, cinemas, theatres, museums and galleries in other developed countries such as the UK, the US, Europe and Canada. While there has been some increase in the amount of audio description offered in Australia, especially in the major cinema chains, there is no audio description provided as a regular feature of Australian television, and in general Australia lags behind other countries in the amount and scope of audio description that is available to people who are blind or have low vision.

In 2008 the Australian Government conducted a Review of Access to Electronic Media for the Hearing and Vision Impaired. Submissions to the Review highlighted the need for urgent action to increase the amount of audio description available in Australia in various genres. Following the Review, some progress was made in providing more audio description in cinemas and in making more imported DVDs available in Australia that included audio description tracks.

## *Audio-Described television*

Television viewing is a particularly important aspect of life in countries such as Australia, and the complete absence of audio description on Australian television is of great concern, and a clear restriction of the right of people who are blind or have low vision to participate fully in the cultural and recreational life of the community. Research has shown that experiencing audio-described television increases the retention of factual information by people who are blind.[[2]](#footnote-2) Audio-described television has also been found to lead to higher ratings of program content and an increased level of comfort in discussing program content with sighted people.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In 2010 the Commonwealth Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy (DBCDE) released the Australian Government’s response to the 2008 Review of access to electronic media for the hearing and vision impaired. The report recommended that the Australian Government fund a trial of audio description on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and give further consideration to the introduction of progressive audio description following its completion.[[4]](#footnote-4)

A 13-week trial of audio description was conducted by the ABC, beginning in August 2012. Consumers judged the trial to be an outstanding success, but despite considerable advocacy, neither the Australian Government nor the ABC have so far allocated resources for a more extensive trial or the ongoing availability of audio description.

# Position statement

1. People who are blind or have low vision have a fundamental right to fully experience various forms of culture and entertainment, including television, cinema, live theatre and gallery exhibitions. This right is articulated in Article 30 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Australia has ratified the Convention, and Australian governments therefore have a responsibility to ensure that this right is upheld.
2. Without audio description, people who are blind or have low vision are unable to participate fully in a variety of recreational and cultural activities that include significant visual elements, and which other Australians enjoy on a regular basis.
3. The Australian Government must ensure, through legislation and other means, that:
* Audio description is provided as a regular component of television program delivery by both the ABC and commercial broadcasters, including delivery via the internet;
* Cinemas continue to provide and expand their audio description services so that all cinema screens provide audio description.
* DVDs and Blu-Ray discs produced with audio description tracks are imported into Australia, and that locally-produced DVDs and Blu-Ray discs contain audio description;
* Multimedia content provided through the internet includes audio description and is made available using websites and technologies that comply with accessibility standards such as the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0 (developed by the W3C Consortium).
* Audio description is provided or expanded in the performing arts (theatre, opera, ballet, etc.).
* Audio description is provided as a standard component of major festivals and other live cultural and sporting events in Australia.
1. Urgent action is required by the Australian Government and television broadcasters to ensure that audio description is made widely available on Australian television. This is particularly important in light of the overwhelmingly positive feedback on the 2012 audio description trial from people who are blind or have low vision.
2. Standards governing the creation and delivery of audio description must be developed in consultation with people who are blind or have low vision and must take into account research and experience from other countries where audio description is provided.

## About Vision Australia

Vision Australia is the largest national provider of services to people who are blind or have low vision in Australia. We are formed through the merger of several of Australia’s most respected and experienced blindness and low vision agencies, celebrating our 150th year of operation in 2017.

Our vision is that people who are blind or have low vision will increasingly be able to choose to participate fully in every facet of community life. To help realise this goal, we provide high-quality services to the community of people who are blind, have low vision or have a print disability, and their families.

Vision Australia service delivery areas include: registered provider of specialist supports for the NDIS and My Aged Care Aids and Equipment, Assistive/Adaptive Technology training and support,

Seeing Eye Dogs, National Library Services, Early childhood and education services, and Feelix Library for 0-7 year olds, employment services, production of alternate formats, Vision Australia Radio network, and a national partnership with Radio for the Print Handicapped, NSW Spectacles Program and Government Advocacy and Engagement. We also work collaboratively with Government, businesses and the community to eliminate the barriers our clients face in making life choices and including fully exercising their rights as Australian citizens.

Vision Australia has unrivalled knowledge and experience through constant interaction with clients and their families, of whom we provide services to more than 26,000 people each year, and also through the direct involvement of people who are blind or have low vision at all levels of our organisation. Vision Australia is well placed to advise governments, business and the community on challenges faced by people who are blind or have low vision as well as they support they require to fully participating in community life.

We have a vibrant Client Reference Group, comprising of people with lived experience who are representing the voice and needs of clients of our organisation to the board and management.

Vision Australia is also a significant employer of people who are blind or have low vision, with 15% of total staff having vision impairment. Vision Australia also has a Memorandum of Understanding with, and provides funds to, Blind Citizens Australia, to strengthen the voice of the blind community.

1. Garman, J., 2011, “Autism spectrum: captions and audio description”, Mindful Research website, date accessed: 15 October 2013, web address: http://mindfulresearch.co.uk/2011/08/29/autistic-spectrum-captions-and-audio-description/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Schmeidler, E. & Kirchner, C., (2001). Adding audio description: does it make a difference? Journal of Vision Impairment and Blindness, (4)95, pp. 197-212. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy. Investigation into access to electronic media for the hearing and vision-impaired: media access review final report. Canberra, 2010 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)