

## **Audio Description in the International Context**

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Prepared for Parliamentarians by Vision Australia and Media Access Australia.

**Purpose:** This brief was produced to provide updated information to Parliamentarians on the delivery and regulation of audio described (AD) television content within the international context. This brief follows an event and meetings, held at the Australian Parliament House in September 2015, to discuss the urgent need for audio description to be mandated on Australian television.

The brief includes a short description of audio description on television in 15 countries as well as some general information on audio description standards and accessible TV networks.

### **Availability of Audio Described television internationally**

#### **United Kingdom**

At present, the UK has the highest amount of AD content on television of any other country.

AD television quotas are regulated by the Office of Communications through The Communications Act 2003<sup>1</sup>, which requires that 10% of television content be AD depending on the size of the channel and the content available. Some channels have voluntarily exceeded this by providing up to 20% AD content.

AD programs are advertised within the digital TV guide. Audio cues, such as beeps, also indicate when AD is available for a particular program.

#### **United States**

AD was first broadcast on national television in the US in the late 1980s. In July 2000, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) ordered the four big TV networks and the five biggest cable networks to show 50 hours of audio described programs, per quarter, by April 2002. The FCC's power to do this was challenged by the Motion Picture Association, and the challenge was eventually upheld. By then, the networks were meeting the quota, and some continue to do so.

AD television content is broadcast on a second audio channel; the Second Audio Program (SAP), which was accessible through most televisions and VCRs.

However, during the transition from analog to digital TV, beginning with the major stations between 2007 and 2009, no new legislation was introduced to ensure that digital broadcasters transmitted AD as a secondary channel.

The Twenty-First Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act of 2010 restores the initial rules set out by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) mandating the level of AD content on television.

This Act also authorizes the expansion of the number of hours of AD programming on a range of channels and to various markets over a 10 year timeline. After 10 years, the Act aims to have achieved 100% nationwide coverage of 7 hours of AD content per week.

In June 2014, the Federal Communications Commission issued a report to Congress<sup>2</sup> which looked at the current state of AD television in the US. The report found that broadcasters have largely complied with the audio description rules without significant technical issues, but consumers overwhelmingly believe the levels of AD television content are too low.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2003/20030021.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.fcc.gov/document/report-congress-video-description>

## **New Zealand**

New Zealand's AD television service was launched as a pilot in March 2011 with funding from New Zealand on Air, and providing 14 hours per week of AD content, following intensive campaigning by the blind community and New Zealand on Air staff.

Following the trial, it was determined that AD would be best funded through New Zealand on Air, which is an independent public funding system that also provides for captioning on free-to-air television. This has reduced the pressure on commercial channels and subscription television, as the expectation is that audio description is a publicly funded service, rather than a regulatory provision governing the renewal of broadcast licenses.

Presently, AD is included on a selection of movies and a range of local and international content in prime-time on TV ONE, TV2, TV ONE + 1 and TV2 + 1.

An average of 20 hours a week of audio described content is now broadcast, again favoring local programs.

## **Canada**

Since 2001, The Canadian Radio Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) has made it compulsory for an AD commitment to be made before it renews broadcasting licenses, specifically requiring broadcasters to provide AD on all in-house productions. AD content is promoted with an audio announcement before an AD program commences and with an AD logo on-screen.

Canada also has The Accessible Channel, which was launched in December 2008, and is the first and only fully audio described TV channel in the world. The channel, which is available on all cable and satellite services, broadcasts a mix of programs including movies, drama, news programs and children's programs, which are sourced from the main television networks. The AD is 'open' (i.e. anyone who switches to the channel will hear it).

## **Germany**

Audio description has been available on German TV since 1993 through a secondary audio channel to transmit AD on television.

In 1997 Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR), the public broadcaster for Southern Germany, started a self-financed regular AD service. BR is currently the only television broadcaster in Germany with a full-time AD editor.

As reported in a 2006 survey by the European Blind Union, 0.7% of German television broadcasts have AD, with 489 films being broadcast with AD in 2004 alone.<sup>3</sup>

Audio description is available on analogue terrestrial TV and on satellite TV, but only three broadcasters provide the service. It is also available on analogue cable TV, but only in some regions and by some broadcasters. There is no AD on privately owned channels or Pay TV in Germany.

In 2010, the total number of programmes with AD on German television stood at 1150, each one about 90 minutes long.

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<sup>3</sup> European Blind Union (2006) The future of access to television for blind and partially sighted people in Europe. Accessed on 9/12/2014 at: <http://www.euroblind.org/working-areas/access-to-information/nr/63#21>

## **Italy**

In Italy, there is no legislation regulating the provision of AD on television, but an agreement exists between the Ministry of Communications and the Italian public radio and the public broadcaster RAI.

In Italy, the first audio described film was broadcast by RAI in 1991, with subsequent AD content comprised primarily of old movies and repeats.

Italy is unique in that AD for television content is delivered via AM radio or a live stream over the internet. However, this dual audio delivery typically results in a poor audio experience.

With increased technological advances, integrated AD soundtracks are becoming increasingly available on RAI digital television channels in Italy.

## **Portugal**

AD has been available in Portugal since 2003 through digital terrestrial and satellite public television, with the AD soundtrack being received separately via radio.

Since 2004, one AD film has been shown per month, in addition to repeats, through a digital service, that integrates AD with the program soundtrack.

## **France**

In France, audio description has been available since 1995 and is available on channel Arté, which shows two AD films per month, which are repeated throughout the month.

Audio description is also available in both analogue formats on cable, terrestrial (antenna) and satellite TV stations, such as TF1 and TF2, through an integrated soundtrack.

## **Spain**

Spain was an early adapter to AD, having made AD content available on television since 1989.

The broadcasting of closed commercial audio description that is available only to those who activate the service began on the Andalusian TV channel in 1995. It was broadcast until the end of 1996 and some 76 films were aired.

At present, audio described programs on Spanish TV have been irregularly presented and have included films, sitcoms and children's television programming.

## **Austria**

On 20 February 2004 the Austrian national public service broadcaster ORF aired the first film with audio description. Audio description has also been available on cable television, terrestrial (antenna) and via satellite since this time.

In 2004, ORF aired 68 hours with audio description. By 2011 this number had risen to ten times that amount, coming in at 676 hours, of which only 42 percent are films. The remaining 58 percent is comprised of audio commented live events.

## **Audio Description across Asia**

Although there is less information publicly available concerning the prevalence of AD across the Asian region, **Japan** is recognised as the earliest transmitter of audio described television in 1983, by commercial broadcaster NTV<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.ofcom.org.uk/static/archive/itc/itc\\_publications/codes\\_guidance/audio\\_description/introduction.asp.html](http://www.ofcom.org.uk/static/archive/itc/itc_publications/codes_guidance/audio_description/introduction.asp.html)

The occasional service is transmitted on an open basis and added to the normal programme sound, which is heard by all viewers. A quota system for subtitles and AD has been introduced through the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication, between 6am and 11pm, with some financial incentives involved. However, it's not certain as to whether open broadcasts are the best means for increasing the regularity of this service on mainstream television, during peak times.

AD was introduced to **South Korean** television in 2006. By 2012, 6% of programs on the four terrestrial broadcasters had audio described services, which is partly funded by the government through the Korea Communications Agency.

A trial of AD on television in **Thailand** has commenced in early 2015. Each week, several hours of programs are being broadcast with AD on the Thai PBS channel. The National Broadcasting Television Commission is funding this service.

In 2011 the **Chinese** Government launched a project to produce audio described versions of movies, which are available on DVD from the China Braille Library.

Finally, there have also been some recent developments in the **Middle East** with **Egypt** screening its first audio described feature film in June 2015.

### **Standards or guidelines on how to audio describe**

Some countries have implemented standards/codes/guidelines which provide standards for the production and presentation of audio description. These include:

- Spanish Standard UNE 153020
- When pictures become words (Germany)
- The French Audio Description Charter
- Audio Description Guidelines for Greek
- Ofcom Draft Guidelines from Television Access Services Review of the Code and Guidance 2006 (UK)

### **Accessible TV Networks**

The radio and television broadcaster Czech Radiokomunikace has implemented an audio description channel, where all programmes are audio described.

Canada's AMI-tv, originally titled The Accessible Channel, was launched in 2009. All programming on the channel, which is sourced from different networks, has audio description and closed captions. The Accessible Channel shows a range of programs with the audio description broadcast in 'open' format, which means that anyone switching on the channel will hear it. In addition to this, 90% of the channel's programs are captioned for people who are deaf or hearing impaired.

### **For more information**

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