**Report on the**

**Trial of Audio Description**

**on ABC iview**

Prepared by

Vision Australia

In collaboration with

Australian Communications Consumer Action Network

Blind Citizens Australia

Blind Citizens NSW

Media Access Australia

Royal Society for the Blind (SA)

VisAbility

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# Enquiries

For inquiries about this report, please contact:

**Bruce Maguire**

Lead Policy Advisor

Vision Australia

Ph: (02) 9334 3173

Email: bruce.maguire@visionaustralia.org

**Emma Bennison**

Executive Officer

Blind Citizens Australia

Ph: (03) 9654 1400

Email: emma.bennison@bca.org.au

**Krystel Keller**

Executive Officer

Blind Citizens NSW

Ph: (02) 9744 1516

Email: executive@bcnsw.org.au

**Wayne Hawkins**

Disability Policy Advisor

Australian Communications Consumer Action Network

Ph: (02) 9288 4000

Email: wayne.hawkins@accan.org.au

**Manisha Amin**

Chief Executive Officer

Media Access Australia

Ph: (02) 9212 6242

Email: manisha.amin@mediaaccess.org.au

**Tony Starkey**

Government Relations & Accessibility

The Royal Society for the Blind (RSB)

Ph: (08) 8417 5563

Email: tony.starkey@rsb.org.au

**Dinesh Burah**

Manager Information and Education Services | VisAbility

VisAbility

Ph: (08) 9311 8246

Email: dinesh.burah@visability.com.au

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# Executive Summary

This report has been produced by the blindness sector and associated stakeholders to provide consumer feedback, perspectives and analysis of the Government-funded trial of audio description on the ABC's iview service. The trial commenced in April 2015 and concluded in July 2016.

We received prompted and unprompted feedback from people who are blind or have low vision during and after the trial, which allows us to draw a number of conclusions.

People who are blind or have low vision and who were able to participate in the trial said that:

* the experience was generally positive and the benefits of audio description immense;
* The quality of the audio description was very good;
* The mix of program content was generally satisfactory.

Irrespective of this feedback, many people were unable to participate in the trial for various reasons, including:

* Lack of access to smartphone or internet technology;
* Low bandwidth and/or slow data speeds;
* Prohibitive data download costs.

We received feedback from people who had participated in the 2012 trial of audio description on the ABC's free-to-air channel ABC1, and who also participated in the iview trial. There was a near-unanimous consensus that although the iview experience was valuable and the audio description of a high quality, the overall experience of watching audio-described programs on iview was significantly inferior to watching them on free-to-air television. A strong view was expressed that even if a permanent audio description service were to be provided on iview, it must be in addition to, and not a substitute for, a permanent audio description on free-to-air television.

# Recommendations

We recommend that:

1. The Australian Government move without further delay to mandate minimum targets for audio description on all free-to-air television networks in Australia;
2. the Australian Government ensure that the ABC provides a permanent audio service on iview.

# Introduction

This report has been prepared collaboratively by Vision Australia, Blind Citizens Australia (BCA), Blind Citizens NSW (BCNSW), Royal Society for the Blind (RSB), VisAbility, Media Access Australia, and the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN). References to "we" and "our" throughout this report are to the collective and considered views of these organisations unless indicated otherwise. The report derives both from the expertise within our various organisations and from telephone and email feedback that we have received from consumers during the audio description trial on iview and immediately following its conclusion. This report supplements and expands on the interim sector report that a number of organisations submitted in May 2015.

We had hoped to provide our report following the release of the ABC's own report on the iview trial, so that we could respond to issues and provide analysis from a consumer perspective. We are aware that the ABC's report was provided to the Department of Communications some time ago, but despite numerous requests it has not so far been released to us. This is most regrettable, especially given the ongoing cooperation and advice that we provided during the trial and the considerable time and resources that we invested in promoting it. We hope that the Government makes the ABC's report public, and that we do not have to resort to an FOI request to obtain it, as we did with the ABC's report on the 2012 audio description trial. In the meantime, we reserve the right to submit a supplementary report once we have had a chance to review the ABC's report.

The quotations from consumers used throughout this report are from real people with a keen interest in audio description. In addition to these written quotations, Vision Australia has produced an audio compilation of consumer perspectives on the iview trial, which can be found at <https://youtu.be/3hQc39Yz9jo>

# Benefits and Nature of Audio Description

The benefits of audio description on television generally, and the disadvantaging and discriminatory impact of its absence, have been well-articulated as part of our ongoing advocacy and campaigning over many years and will not be repeated in detail in this report. They are presented comprehensively in the Sector Report on the 13-week trial of audio description on ABC1 in 2012.[[1]](#endnote-1) In summary:

Audio description (AD) refers to a verbal commentary used to describe 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.

Without audio description, people who are blind or have low vision cannot experience television with the same level of understanding and enjoyment as the rest of the community. This is because almost all television programs include a significant amount of visual content that is not duplicated in an audio form. Without access to this visual content, which audio description provides, many television programs can be largely incomprehensible to a person who is blind or has low vision.

The provision of audio description also benefits other sections of the community, for example, people on the autism spectrum[[2]](#endnote-2). People on the autism spectrum typically have trouble discerning emotions, identifying people and remembering names. Audio description includes descriptions of characters' moods and temperaments, names and physical appearance. This level of description is essential for people who are blind or have low vision, and it can also significantly increase understanding of content and therefore create a more engaging viewing experience for people on the autism spectrum.

# Background to the iview Trial

We became aware in late September 2014 that the Australian Government would be funding a trial of audio description on the ABC's "catch up" television service iview. In December 2014 we were invited by the ABC to meet with them to discuss arrangements for the trial. The trial began on April 14 2015, and concluded in July 2016. During this time we met regularly with the ABC to provide our organisational and consumer feedback, and to discuss the progress of the trial and how emerging issues could be resolved.

We are confident that the ABC staff involved in the development of the technology needed for the delivery of audio description on iview did their best to ensure that the trial was successful from a technical point of view. In view of this conscientiousness and enthusiasm it is extremely disappointing that the ABC as a whole squandered opportunities to promote the trial through its national radio, television and online networks. We discuss promotion later in this report.

During the trial, audio-described program content of 14 hours per week was available through the iview app, beginning with iDevices, and later extending to the Android, desktop/laptop and HBBTV platforms.

The ABC was able to measure the number of "views" of this audio-described content, and they provided us with cumulative figures throughout the trial, with the exception of the final three months. We are still waiting to receive the final figures although the ABC indicated in July they would be provided.

It must be emphasised that these viewing figures are not able to identify whether the content was being viewed predominantly by people who are blind or have low vision. Because the audio description content was publicly available, anyone could view it as often as they wished. While we assume that audio description during the iview trial was mainly viewed by people who are blind or have low vision, we are also aware that others viewed it as well, for example, to find out what audio description was.

Neither the ABC nor the blindness and low vision sector have any reliable statistics about the number of people who are blind or have low vision who participated in the iview trial. Based on the very limited prompted and unprompted consumer feedback we received, noting the persistent failure of the ABC to use its national outreach to promote the trial, and also taking into account what we know about internet and smartphone usage by people who are blind or have low vision, we believe that only a very small percentage of the blindness and low vision community were able to participate in the trial. It is our analysis that these numbers do not reflect a low demand for audio description services, but is most likely due to the barriers in place for the blindness and low vision community in viewing audio description through an online only service.

It is also worth noting that the consumer feedback we did receive during and following the 15-month iview trial, and which we summarise later in this report, was much less than the feedback received from consumers during and after the 13-week trial of audio description on the ABC's free-to-air television channel ABC1 in 2012. While we no longer have the 2012 detailed feedback records and are therefore not able to quantify this difference, it is significant that only about 12 people responded to a widely-circulated request for consumer feedback following the conclusion of the iview trial. We believe that this reflects a widespread view among the small percentage of the blindness and low vision community who could participate in the trial that iview simply does not amount to equal access to television and therefore does not provide them with the same basic access to culture and entertainment through television that is taken for granted by the rest of the community.

# Community Context

Vision Australia models the population of people who are blind or have low vision by using data provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)[[3]](#endnote-3). This model estimates that 70% of people who are blind or have low vision are aged 65 and over, and predicts a significant increase to this figure in the coming decades. This projected increase is a consequence of the primarily age-related nature of blindness and vision loss resulting from causes such as macular disease and diabetic retinopathy. 75% of Vision Australia's more than 26,000 clients are over 65, and a survey of the blindness and low vision sector produced in 2015 by Vision 2020 Australia, National Disability Services and the Australian Blindness Forum found that 60% of people who are blind or have low vision receiving services are over 65[[4]](#endnote-4).

In October 2016 Vision 2020 Australia and the Centre for Eye Health Australia (CERA) released the results of the first national survey designed to measure the prevalence and causes of blindness and vision loss in Australia[[5]](#endnote-5). A key finding of this report is that the prevalence of blindness and vision impairment doubles for each decade over 60 years for non-indigenous Australians.[[6]](#endnote-6)

It is therefore undeniable that there are a significant number of people who are blind or have low vision, and that the majority of these are over 65. This is especially relevant in the context of audio description, because it shows that a substantial number of people need audio description in order to have equal access to television, and also because it suggests that the way audio description is delivered must take into account the age-related nature of blindness and vision loss.

## Internet and Smartphone usage among People who are Blind or Have Low Vision

In October 2015 Vision Australia used its ongoing Client Satisfaction Tracker to survey approximately 500 clients about their experience with smartphones.

The survey revealed that of the 500 approx. clients surveyed:

* 17% used a smartphone

Smartphone usage by Vision Australia's clients decreased consistently with age:

* 86% of those aged 19-34 used a smartphone
* 58% of those aged 35-54 used a smartphone
* 34% of those aged 55-64 used a smartphone
* 25% of those aged 65-74 used a smartphone
* 2.8% of those aged 75+ used a smartphone

The above statistics show a direct correlation between a client’s age and their smartphone usage. 47% of respondents said that the reason they do not use a smartphone is because their vision inhibits them from doing so. This reason was more common in older respondents.

During the financial years 2012 to 2014 Vision Australia tracked the internet usage of more than 2500 of their clients:

* 65% of the 2500 clients tracked indicated that they did not use the internet
* 39% of those said that their vision hinders them from accessing the internet.
* 35% of the 2500 clients tracked indicated that they used the internet.
* 46% of those who use the internet said the main reason they use it is for searching online.
* 44% of those who use the internet said the main reason they use it is for emailing.

When analysed by age, clients who use the internet decreased as their age increased:

* 93% of those aged 19-34 used the internet
* 18% of those aged 65+ used the internet - this group identified emailing as the main reason they used the internet.

These figures for internet usage among people who are blind or have low vision compare unfavourably with those for the general population. An ABS study on ‘Household use of IT in Australia[[7]](#endnote-7)’ showed that internet usage is high for people aged 18-64. The rate was over 80% compared to 72% of people in the age group who are blind or have low vision. For the age group 65+ internet usage fell to 46% in the general population, compared to only 18% of people in the same age group who are blind or have low vision.

Further to this, a report on ‘Older Australians and the take up of technology’[[8]](#endnote-8) showed that over a third of people aged between 15-24 used the internet on a daily basis compared with only 8% of men and 3% of women aged 65 and over.

This research is of critical relevance in any discussion about audio description in platforms like iview because it shows that reliance on smartphone apps and the internet for delivering audio description (such as the iPhone iview app and the iview desktop app) will exclude the majority of older people who are blind or have low vision. In view of the ageing of the population, this exclusion is likely to increase rather than decrease. There are, furthermore, other factors that contribute to the exclusionary effect of technology for people who are blind or have low vision, especially the high cost of accessible devices and software, and the need for training and skills development in how to use both mainstream and adaptive technology.

# Consumer Feedback

In the first few days of the iview trial, we received a number of phone calls and emails from people who are blind or have low vision who were having difficulty launching the iview app, or who were unable to find the audio-described programs. A number of people also reported that the video available in the app giving further information about the audio description trial was either unplayable or crashed their iPhones or iPads. We also received reports that the Voiceover screen-reader was not verbalising the program descriptions provided in the Play screen.

We reported these issues to the ABC, and we are pleased to note that as a result a number of accessibility improvements were made to the app. However, even by the end of the trial we were still receiving reports from users, especially about the difficulty they had in finding the audio-described content in the iPhone iview app.

Within the blindness and low vision community, the ABC does not have a good reputation for building accessibility into its online services. As the iview trial became available on the desktop platform after a long delay, a number of consumers mentioned to us that they had reported accessibility issues with the desktop iview player to the ABC more than two years previously, but that none of these issues had been addressed. Unfortunately, the delay in making audio-described content available through the desktop iview app meant that people who used this platform were only able to participate in the trial for 8 months instead of 15.

In early August 2016, just after the iview audio description trial had ended, we circulated a Call for Feedback through our networks, including email discussion lists, websites and social media. We invited general comments rather than requiring responses to a structured survey, since we felt that this would provide the best opportunity for consumers to provide their own perspectives on the iview trial. We did, however, suggest a few guiding questions to assist people in preparing their responses. These questions were:

* How often did you use the audio description on iview?
* Was the audio description useful?
* Was there a particular type of program or specific program that you watched more than others?
* Was it easy to find information, for example, which programs were audio described?
* Were there things that made it difficult or impossible for you to participate in the trial?
* If you participated in the trial of audio description on ABC1 in 2012, how do you think the iview trial compared with it?
* What would you like to see happen now, for example, a permanent audio description service on iview, audio description on free-to-air television, etc.

Most respondents chose to address these questions, and below are samples of the feedback received.

## Frequency of Viewing

Responses ranged from "three times during the trial", to "once a week", to "five nights a week". One respondent commented:

"I used the service with variable frequency from the beginning of the trial period to the very end. Frequency depended on the available content and the time available to me. I certainly watched several times a week, and at times I would probably have watched at least one hour of programming each day."

A big issue for some people was the large amounts of data that must be downloaded in order to watch any program in Iview. One person noted:

“If I watch one audio-described program that’s my entire monthly download quota used up. Am I supposed to give up my email just so I can watch TV?”.

6 Another respondent commented:

"I don’t have sufficient data available to view TV shows on my iPhone. Much as I would have loved to be able to use this service, on my computer, the available download speed to my residence is so slow that it takes 24 hours to get a movie."

Another respondent told us of their experience:

"I attempted to access the iView audio description trial even though I realised it would be very limited because of my quite low monthly download limit. I had acquired an Apple TV and was playing the iview stream through my TV so I could sit comfortably on my lounge (not at my computer, and not listening through the tiny iPhone speaker). However the stream invariably stopped half way through and I got tired of having to start it again only for the same thing to happen. Thus, because I could not get my iPhone to stream through my Apple TV to my main TV, and was not prepared to have an unrelaxing night at my computer just to get relaxing entertainment, I gave up."

The previous three comments succinctly illustrate that in the real world in which people live there are often insurmountable barriers to participation. If audio description had been available on free-to-air television, these respondents would most likely have had no difficulty accessing it, and would therefore have been able to watch television programs with the same level of understanding and enjoyment as the rest of the community. People generally have little control over factors such as slow download speeds and connection drop-outs, even if they have the knowledge and skill to use the technology. No doubt some of these issues will be addressed at some point in the future, but people who are blind or have low vision have a right to access television on an equal basis now.

Some respondents did not participate in the iview trial, or participated only occasionally, because they realised that their access to television would once again be removed once the trial had ended. One respondent said:

"I watched Rake during the 2012 trial and I was looking forward to watching it again thanks to audio description on iview, but then I realised that I wouldn’t enjoy it because it would always be in my mind that this was limited access and none of my friends would have the door closed on them in July 2016 when the iview trial ended. So I didn't watch it."

## Usefulness of Audio Description

All respondents spoke of the immense value to them of audio description. One said:

"The audio description was a game changer, especially in cases where dialogue is not present and visuals are integral to the unfolding of the story."

This from another respondent:

"Almost always extremely useful. On occasions I watched a programme on Broadcast television with members of my family, and then afterwards watched the same programme with audio description on iview. The experience was greatly enhanced by audio description, and was sometimes essential for even the most basic comprehension. A recent excellent example of the benefits of audio description was the 4-part series, ‘Barracuda’. This was programming of an exceptionally high quality, completely complemented by very good audio description. It was a rare pleasure."

Another respondent provided the following feedback:

"I found the AD useful as I find it in other areas of entertainment. It adds meaning to the silences and gives a better understanding of the show."

Some respondents referred to the value of audio description in the context of relationships and family life. For example:

"I found the audio description fantastic, giving me the opportunity to watch TV with my partner without her having to explain what was happening on screen in those parts where either silence or only a music backing track was being played. Prior to the audio description my partner had to constantly explain various parts of what was happening, reducing her viewing pleasure and mine, so I tended not to watch much TV leaving my partner to her own TV watching.

We received the following feedback from a person who had lost their vision and was able to watch TV again thanks to the audio description provided during the iview trial:

"I was previously sighted, and always enjoyed TV. Audio description for me adds in all the non-verbal information such as setting, people's looks, costume, and provides an idea of what's going on when the actors aren't talking. I thoroughly enjoyed listening again to various TV shows that were shown on the ABC [iview]."

Audio-described content during the iview trial came from a number of sources, including the UK and locally-produced programs. Based on the comments we received throughout the trial, we are confident that the quality of the audio description was invariably of a high standard. We are also aware that a number of local companies who provided audio description on iview sought feedback directly from consumers to ensure that their audio description was accurate and comprehensible. We commend these companies on their proactive initiatives.

## Viewing Preferences

The viewing figures provided by the ABC to the blindness sector during the first 12 months of the iview trial showed that drama and comedy was by far the most popular program genre, with documentaries and other factual programs second, and children's content third. For example, by April 2016 (when the trial had been running for 12 months) there had been 65520 views of drama/comedy programs, 19733 views of documentary and other factual programs, and 17792 views of children's content.

A number of respondents commented on their viewing preferences during the iview trial. For example:

"I prefer drama, documentaries and sit coms. Programs like The Dr Blake Mysteries, The Australian Story and The Ex Prime Minister were firm favourites. Also short series like Secret River and Barracuda were most enjoyable with audio description. I wouldn’t have watched it otherwise."

We also received the following feedback:

"I suppose that in general I mostly chose to watch drama programmes, some Australian but mostly British. I also made a point of watching ‘Australian Story’ because in the past I had been so annoyed by that programme’s persistent refusal to narrate the written text at the conclusion of each episode. I watched various other kinds of programmes, such as ‘Antiques Roadshow’, ‘Gardening Australia’, and the like, out of curiosity in order to see how the audio description was done. I did not watch any of the children’s programmes, which seemed to increase in frequency towards the end of the trial."

One respondent commented on the value of audio description in the context of foreign segments in English programs:

"I have been an avid watcher of Foreign Correspondent for many years, and prior to the iview audio description endured much frustration, interviews that were in languages other than English had sub-titles which meant I missed large sections of the program as I was unable to access the subtitles."

Unfortunately we only received direct feedback about children's content from one respondent, who noted that they enjoyed watching them with audio description as an adult. As we note later, it is disappointing that more was not done by the ABC to raise awareness of audio-described children's programs, especially given that children in Australia who are blind or have low vision had not had a previous opportunity to experience audio description on television.

## Accessibility and Usability of the Iview Apps

The majority of feedback we received was from people who had accessed iview on an iDevice, and in general those who had access to it found that this platform was relatively accessible and straightforward to use. One respondent noted:

"It was relatively easy to find programs with audio description. However, it was rather disappointing when you see the names of other recommended programs on the submenu for a particular program, only to find that the recommended program does not have audio description."

Another respondent agreed:

"I had no difficulty about finding out which programmes were audio described. I read monthly updates about the next month’s AD programmes on bca-l and vip-l [email lists within the blindness and low vision community]. Mostly, however, I used the iview app on my phone to see which programmes were currently available with audio description."

## Accessibility Barriers

We received feedback about various barriers that prevented people from participating in the iview trial altogether, or made it difficult to participate. We have already referred to slow download speeds and connection drop-outs. One respondent commented on the difficulty of setting up the television and associated devices to receive iview:

"Difficulties do exist in accessing the trial. I was not prepared to watch iview on the small screen, small sound phone. I watched it on the big screen TV using an Apple TV. The setting up and use of this via a series of remote control wands was not possible for me - sighted help was necessary. As it was necessary to use my home Wi-Fi network, the loading process could be prolonged and difficult and it was not possible to determine where faults lay."

Another respondent noted:

"There were a couple of times when, for various reasons, I did not have wifi access and then I could not watch iview. In particular, I spent a couple of months in a country area where I had to pay for data on my phone and it was far too expensive to watch television programmes (especially considering that these programmes are available to the rest of the population for free). I also had a period in hospital without wifi access, and would have loved to have the benefit of audio description at that time."

According to figures provided to us by the ABC, there had been 6323 views of audio-described content using iDevices in April 2016, 4084 using the web (desktop/laptop iview player), 2345 using Android devices, and 318 using Freeview+ (HBBTV). We are not surprised by the 48% figure for use of iDevices, because currently accessibility of Apple's iPhone, iPad, and Apple TV far exceeds that of Android; the greater use of iDevices compared with the web version of the iview player is also not surprising: firstly, audio-described content only became available in the web version towards the end of 2015, and feedback we received suggested that people did not find it a particularly enjoyable experience using their computer to watch television. The very low figure for Freeview+ is in our view a reflection of the general inaccessibility of HBBTV (Smart Tv) devices, and is a reminder that people who are blind or have low vision cannot access inaccessible technologies just because a particular service becomes available.

## Comparison with the 2012 Trial

We received feedback from people who had participated in the 2012 trial of audio description on ABC1 and also in the iview trial. One respondent commented:

"During the 13 weeks of the 2012 trial I would turn my TV on every day, and just leave it on in the background while I did other things. When a program with AD came on, I could sit down on the couch with a cup of coffee or a glass of wine and just watch the program like everyone else. Television became another part of my life. But with iview, I had to set aside time to watch programs, I couldn’t just have it playing in the background, and all I had to listen to it was my small iPhone instead of my stereo TV on the wall. That's just not how any of my friends watch TV, and it's not how I want to watch it either. I want the same choices as others have."

Another respondent commented:

"For a start, the first trial was of much shorter duration: it took a little time to work out how to use our equipment, and there wasn’t sufficient time to develop regular viewing habits.

From memory, it was much more difficult to get access to information about which programmes were audio described. Given that there were only 14 hours of programming each week, and audio description was only available on broadcast television (not on iview as well), a lot of planning was required in order to catch any of the 14 hours – hard to do when the programme information was not easily come by.

I really enjoyed being able to watch whole series, and even more than one series in some cases. This wasn’t possible in the earlier trial because of its short duration.

I hated the fact that I could only watch audio described programmes after they had been broadcast: this meant that I could not watch them in the company of others and missed out on a social experience as well as the opportunity to discuss programmes with others following their broadcast. This was a very much more isolated experience for me than the previous trial had been.

There seemed to be a lot more available content in the recent trial – not in terms of the total number of hours per week (which I think was the same), but in the range and diversity of programmes available. And overall I thought that the quality of the audio description itself had improved – not sure if a more systematic analysis would support this impression, though."

Another respondent provided similar feedback:

"With the 2012 trial, it was in real time which was a lot more convenient.

The quality of the AD was similar. Also no data use was involved.

So it was available to many more VIP's [vision-impaired people] for no cost."

This comparison was provided by another respondent:

"I did also participate in the trial on TV conducted a few years ago. This was my preferred way to watch a program live with my family. Nothing replaces a shared experience when something can be discussed after the program has been watched by sighted members of the family and the person who is blind."

One respondent drew attention to the importance of television in aged care facilities, reflecting the reality that vision loss is predominantly age-related:

"Currently I work in aged care as a chaplain. Several of the residents I visit are legally blind. Many of them no longer watch TV at all, because to them it has lost being a pleasure to do so."

Finally, this feedback from another respondent:

"As a participant in the trial of audio description on ABC1 in 2012, comparing that trial to the current trial, I did find the increased range of programs in the current trial an improvement, although I did like the 2012 trial being on live to air TV.

I would like to have audio description on free to air TV with an option of catch-up for viewing at a later time, the same that is offered to sighted TV watchers.

If audio description on TV fails to go past the trial stage and is not permanently an option for me to watch TV it will mean I will have to leave the TV watching to my partner and once again be separated from a joint TV watching experience."

## Next Steps

The previous feedback introduces a theme echoed by every response we received: audio description must continue because it is essential for people who are blind or have low vision:

"Audio description should be available on both free-to-air television on all its platforms, as well as on pay TV. Access to audio description should not be any less than it is for the deaf and hard of hearing using captioning. I believe audio described tracks are available on most foreign content that are bought, so why not switch it on?"

This theme of choice and universality is continued in this feedback:

"Well, of course, what I’d really like to see happen is that all television, on all free and pay channels, is audio described. But, given the high level of improbability about this ever happening, I would like to see a permanent introduction (not yet another trial, please!) of a minimum number of hours (perhaps 20 initially?) per week of audio described programmes on both free to air and pay television, I would want this to be spread across a diversity of programme content, and to be available on both broadcast television and catch-up services such as iview. And I do not want to see audio description restricted for those who do not possess devices other than a television set."

Another respondent continues:

"Audio description on free-to-air television is clearly my preferred option from the point of view of convenience, cost and accessibility. Expecting VIP’s [[vision-impaired persons] - especially the elderly - to travel the iview path is clearly discriminatory."

One respondent mentioned the growing impatience and frustration in the blindness and low vision community at the failure of both government and industry to provide audio description:

"It would be really wonderful, and more specifically equitable if audio description was available not only on ABC television, but also on free-to-air channels and also on pay television. Perhaps this could be introduced gradually, with a certain percentage as the target over a period of a few years. The service would be very effective if it was available on the catch up services offered by the ABC and other television channels including SBS, as well. In my opinion, it is about time that the government took this matter seriously and provided a level of equity for people who are blind or those who have low vision to access something that everyone else who is sighted takes for granted. So far, the blindness community has worked collaboratively with the ABC, and the government, but the mood and patience of the blindness community is being sorely tested."

Another respondent provides a fitting summary of the desire for audio description to be permanently available to all, universal, and easy to access:

"For residents in aged care, or for those living alone who are blind, audio-description on free to air TV could bring a whole new meaning to life. People would be able to talk to friends and family about what they saw, recommend good movies or programs to others and in general be able to hold conversations with others that sighted people just take for granted. Not everyone has access to the Internet, especially in our older population, but most have at least some access to a television. Audio description means greater participation in the World in which we live and a better quality of life for those who are blind or vision impaired."

# Discussion

A clear message from the feedback we received on the iview trial is that audio description is absolutely essential if people who are blind or have low vision are to have equal access to the richness and diversity of culture and entertainment conveyed through television. This is no surprise, and is entirely consistent with the feedback received after the 2012 trial and also with the advocacy that the blindness and low vision sector has undertaken over many years. Many other countries, including New Zealand, the UK, the US, and Canada, have responded proactively to this reality by introducing audio description as a permanent part of their free-to-air television service. Australia has not.

An equally clear message is that people who are blind or have low vision do not see iview as an acceptable platform for providing audio description as a substitute for providing it on free-to-air television. While participants in the iview trial enjoyed watching audio-described content, there are significant barriers that limit access to iview for the majority of the blindness and low vision community. Even for those who participated in and enjoyed the iview trial, there was a strong desire for choice, motivated by a recognition that the experience of watching television on iview is nothing like the experience of watching it on free-to-air, universally-available television. We believe that many in the blindness and low vision community would say that the iview experience is inferior because it is isolating. One cause of this isolation is the difference between the technology used compared with free-to-air technology which can be shared by everyone at the same time. Another cause is the "catch up" nature of iview: participants in the trial were not able to watch programs at the same time as all their friends and family (and most of the community generally) who were watching them on free-to-air television.

Any policy response to the iview trial will be insufficient, and rejected by the blindness and low vision community, if it fails to provide solutions to these factors that cause experiences of isolation, and if, in addition, it fails to adequately address the many barriers to participation that have been identified in this report: inadequate data speeds, connection dropouts, lack of access to smartphone and internet technology, inaccessible mainstream products such as "Smart TVs", lack of awareness of what is available, and the lack of information that is accessible.

The strong view that we have formed through interacting with consumers over the past decade is that only the provision of audio description on free-to-air television will provide equal access to television. Anything else, such as a permanent audio description service on iview, must be seen as supplementary at best.

## The ABC's Survey

In April 2016 the ABC conducted an online survey to obtain feedback from participants in the iview trial. We had worked with the ABC to improve the accessibility and potential value of the survey within the parameters that the ABC had set, which included scales for ranking responses to specific questions. We promoted the survey through our networks.

The ABC provided us with a "top line summary" of the results of this survey, and we expect that the ABC will provide more detailed information and analysis in its own report on the iview trial.

Based on a consideration of the "top line summary" that was provided to us, we believe there is nothing in the survey results that in any way contradicts or calls into question any of the feedback we received about the iview trial from the blindness and low vision community, or the conclusions we have drawn from it.

In all, 234 responses were received to the ABC survey. We are not clear whether the survey design included measures to reduce the possibility of multiple responses from the one participant, but in any case this number is still very small compared with the viewing figures that the ABC reported.

Almost all respondents to the ABC survey said that they were "likely" to recommend the service to others. This is hardly surprising given that there was no alternative for watching audio-described content on Australian television.

More than 75% of respondents to the ABC survey indicated that they were positive about the selection of iview programs with audio-described content, and found the audio description track of good quality. Again, this is consistent with the feedback we received.

The majority of respondents to the ABC survey said that they had been made aware of the iview trial through Vision Australia and other organisations. While it is pleasing that our organisations were successful in promoting the trial, we believe that many more people would have become aware of the trial if the ABC had actively promoted it. The combined reach of our organisations into the blindness and low vision community probably represents less than 10% of the total number of people who are blind or have low vision. The ABC survey also found that children's programming with AD content was "less preferred". We believe that a key reason for this is that the majority of children who are blind or have low vision and their families were simply not aware of the iview trial. Certainly the lack of children's programming during the 2012 AD trial was commented on at the time as being a shortcoming of that trial.

One finding in particular from the ABC survey warrants some comment. Of those respondents who said that they did not use audio-described content during the iview trial, more than half claimed that they did not use AD content at all, 25% said that they used it in cinemas and theatre, and 10% said that they access it via Netflix. It is important to note that the lack of use of AD content is no indication of whether it would be used if it were available on television. In September 2014 Vision Australia used its Client Satisfaction Tracker to survey clients about audio description. 86% of respondents said that they felt it was important to have audio description on television, so that people who are blind or have low vision can access the full television experience.

Many people who are blind or have low vision do not access audio-described movies in cinemas because in reality it is fraught with problems: cinema staff who are not familiar with audio description and so don't know where to find the special headsets that are needed; headsets that either don't work at all or are tuned to the incorrect frequency to receive the AD track; websites that are inaccessible and cannot be used to find out which movies are audio-described; and audio-described movies that are cancelled or rescheduled without notice. As one person commented:

"I really want to have audio description, but I'm not prepared to jump through hoops to get it. My sighted friends go to the cinema to enjoy themselves, so why should I have to endure an unpredictable and stressful experience that takes away from my enjoyment."

If audio description were available as a permanent feature of Australian free-to-air television we have no doubt whatsoever that it would, over time, be used by a large percentage of the blindness and low vision community.

## Promotion of the Trial

“If this is a trial, why isn’t it mentioned on the main screen? Why is the audio description buried several levels down? It makes me think that the ABC don’t want anyone to know about this trial so they can later say it didn’t work.”

"I have been blind since birth and enjoyed audio described videos and DVDs. I did not take part in the IView trial as I did not know it existed. However, from my previous experience, I much enjoy audio-described movies as they greatly enhance my quality of life in the 21st century – including being able to watch children’s movies with my nephew and niece, which gives me great joy!"

As mentioned earlier, we are extremely disappointed that neither the ABC nor the Government did anything to actively promote the trial to potential users. While it was only a trial and not a permanent service, the point of having trials at all is to identify any issues and areas where improvements could be made. It is self-defeating to conduct a trial and then not promote it to the people for whom it is intended and who are best placed to comment on its effectiveness.

While we worked hard to promote the trial through our networks, the reality is that the ABC has a much greater national reach into all sections of the community than our organisations do. The trial should have been promoted routinely on ABC radio programs, for example, by conducting interviews with ABC staff involved in the trial and with consumer organisations and individuals. Many people who are blind or have low vision regularly listen to ABC radio, and such promotion would have raised awareness of the trial generally.

The ABC should also have promoted the trial on its free-to-air TV channels at the time when programs that would become available with audio description on Iview were originally broadcast. Many people who are blind or have low vision have families and friends who regularly watch ABC TV, and promoting the trial in this way would have significantly increased community awareness. This is especially the case for audio-described children’s content. Because the 2012 trial of audio description on ABC1 did not include any children’s content, Australian children who are blind or have low vision have had no experience of audio description on television, and children were the least likely group to learn about the trial through the networks that our organisations have access to.

Similarly, the ABC should have used its online networks such as websites and social media to promote the trial. It is puzzling that a trial that requires access to the internet should not have been promoted using this medium.

On several occasions the ABC told us that their reluctance to promote the iview trial was because they did not wish to create unrealistic expectations. We do not know whether they formed this view themselves or it was given to them by the Department or the Government. In any case, it led to a poorly-promoted, almost secretive trial, and did nothing to create an atmosphere of genuine consultation with the blindness and low vision sector. The reaction to the trial has also been less favourable than the reaction to the 2012 trial. A key reason for this is well-expressed by one person, who said:

“I really want to watch TV, but I don’t want to watch it in a second-class way. All my family and work colleagues watch programs and talk about them soon after they’ve watched them. By the time I get to watch them on Iview the conversations have moved on and I’m left behind. Is this what apartheid feels like?”

We wish to again emphasise that the trial of audio description on Iview is not a substitute for audio description on free-to-air, real-time television. While 86% of Vision Australia’s clients responding to a recent survey indicated their strong wish to have audio description on television, only 37% of clients have internet access to take advantage of services like Iview, and, in addition, 70% of clients are aged over 65 and much less likely to embrace new technologies. For many people who are blind or have low vision, Real-time television will remain the only viewing option for the foreseeable future.

# Conclusion

The iview trial demonstrated clearly that Australia has the expertise to provide high-quality audio description that is well-received by consumers. It also demonstrated that the iview platform does not and cannot deliver an audio description service that meets the needs of the majority of people who are blind or have low vision. Access to culture and entertainment provided by television is taken for granted by the rest of the community, but continues to be comprehensively denied to people who are blind or have low vision. Even if audio description were provided as a permanent feature of iview, and even if the percentage of audio-described content approached 100% (similar to that for captioning), and even if audio description were provided on "live" programming rather than the "catch up" programs that were audio-described during the trial, there would still be a significant need to have audio description on free-to-air television.

There is no doubt that the delivery of television content will evolve over the coming decades, and will eventually either replace or exist in parallel with more traditional services. However, for the foreseeable future free-to-air television will continue to be ubiquitous in Australia, and in any case there are significant barriers that prevent many people, including those who are blind or have low vision, from embracing new technologies. Systemic discriminatory barriers never disappear as the result merely of noble aspirations or isolated policy decisions. People who are blind or have low vision will continue to face significant barriers accessing technologies such as the internet and smartphones until there is a whole-of-government, well-resourced commitment to remove them.

The blindness and low vision sector would welcome a continuation of audio description on iview as a step in the direction of equality of access to television. However, by itself such a step would represent 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.

We call on the Australian Government to show the moral and policy leadership in the audio description space that has been conspicuously lacking so far, and to move without further delay to mandating minimum levels of audio description on all free-to-air television networks in Australia.

The strong message of this report is well summarised in a comment we received from a consumer:

"As a blind Australian I feel like I'm living in a country that has legalised cultural apartheid. Everyone else can watch and enjoy television, talk about particular programs with their family and friends, and be informed and entertained. But I can't, and it feels like the Government doesn't care that I can't. The iview trial really just added insult to injury because all it did was offer me a chance to scramble and play catch-up while everyone else had already caught up. When I talk to my blind friends in the UK and the US, I feel embarrassed, humiliated and frustrated, because they aren't forced to play catch-up and they take audio description for granted, whereas I don't have it at all. How long are we going to allow this cultural lock-out to continue?"

# About the Contributors



## Australian Communications Consumer Action Network

The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) is the peak body that represents all consumers on communications issues including telecommunications, broadband and emerging new services. ACCAN provides a strong unified voice to industry and government as consumers work towards availability, accessibility and affordability of communications services for all Australians.

ACCAN believes that access to information and communication services are an essential tool for all people with disability to be able to participate to the fullest extent possible in Australian society.



## Blind Citizens Australia

Blind Citizens Australia (BCA) is the national peak consumer body of and for Australians who are blind or vision impaired. We are driven by our mission to achieve equity and equality by our empowerment, by promoting positive community attitudes and by striving for high quality and accessible services which meet our needs.

Blind Citizens Australia’s unique point of difference is that our organisation is solely made up of and represents people who are blind or vision impaired. Both our Board of Directors and our committees are required by our Constitution to be people who are blind or vision impaired. We have over 3000 members Australia-wide, all of whom share a lived experience of blindness; whether they be a parent, professional, job seeker, volunteer or student. This is why we are best placed to comment on the specialist needs of people who are blind or vision impaired.



## Vision Australia

Vision Australia is Australia’s largest provider of services to people who are blind, have low vision, or are deaf blind. Our vision is that people who are blind or have low vision will increasingly have the choice to participate fully in every facet of life in the community.

To help realise this goal, it is committed to providing high-quality services to the community of people who are blind or have low vision, and their families, in areas that include early childhood, orientation and mobility, employment, information, recreation and independent living. We also work collaboratively with Government, business and the community to eliminate the barriers people who are blind or have low vision face in accessing the community or in exercising their rights as Australian citizens.



## Media Access Australia

‘We believe that all Australians have the right to access all forms of media and information, through technology, so they can participate fully in society.’

Media Access Australia is Australia’s only independent not-for-profit organisation devoted to increasing access to media for people with disabilities.

At the core of our work is the understanding that exclusion from mainstream audiovisual media has profound effects on educational outcomes, workforce participation and social inclusion.

Access to media through technology empowers people to be independent, gain knowledge, make their own choices, and be active members of our society.



## Royal Society for the Blind (RSB)

The RSB is a quality endorsed organisation, with over 130 years of service history and is the primary provider of a full range of specialist services to over 12,000 Australians who are blind or vision impaired.

We believe people who are blind or vision impaired must be able to participate independently in all aspects of community life.



## VisAbility

VisAbility is a leading provider of disability services specialising in supporting people who are blind or vision impaired. VisAbility has provided innovative, life-changing services to West Australians for more than 100 years. Our professional therapy and support services assist people across a range of ages and disabilities in their homes, at school, at work and in the community. At VisAbility, we focus on achieving outcomes, promoting mobility and independence, improving each person's quality of life and making life easier.

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