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# Position Paper on Audio Description

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## Background

For more than 25 years, Blind Citizens Australia and disability advocates have been campaigning for Audio Description to be provided on Australian TV.

Audio description (AD) is a service that facilitates access to film, television, live performances or other live events for people who are blind or vision impaired. It involves providing verbal narration during natural gaps in dialogue to communicate information about visual elements – such as scenes, settings, actions, costumes and on-screen text, including credits. This feature makes it easier for people who are blind or vision impaired to follow what is happening; particularly when there are large sections of visual only content. When accessed on broadcast television or online streaming services, AD can be turned on or off as needed and does not interrupt the experience of viewers who do not require the service.

Australia’s public broadcasters (ABC and SBS) began offering some AD content from June 2020, after receiving $2million in funding from the Federal Government; however, this content was only available on live broadcast television until July 2023, when the ABC introduced AD functionality to their on-demand streaming platform, iView. SBS will soon launch AD on their SBS OnDemand platform.

In late 2022, after a lengthy complaints process, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities found Australia has breached the rights of people who are blind and vision impaired by failing to meet its obligations under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) by refusing to mandate any level of audio description on free-to-air TV.

Many subscription streaming services provide AD, but the availability of the service is inconsistent across platforms.

In late 2022, BCA’s campaign for AD was expanded to include all broadcast TV, free-to-air online streaming, and subscription platforms.

## Key Issues

Australia lags behind much of the developed world in the provision of AD. It was introduced to New Zealand television in 2011, the United States introduced it in 2010, and the United Kingdom has the most developed and regulated laws, with AD featuring on both free to air and subscription channels since 2003. Ironically, Australian productions such as Neighbours and Home and Away are produced with AD for overseas release but the AD is not a feature available for Australian viewers on commercial TV networks.

People who are blind or vision impaired have described the significant positive impact AD can have on their ability to access and enjoy entertainment. One BCA member described the ‘deeply moving’ experience of watching a movie with AD for the first time: “For the first time in my life, I knew exactly what was happening throughout the entire movie, including all the visuals”. Other members have described how AD helps them “feel included and lets me participate in social and cultural life” and shared their joy at being able to participate in discussions with family and friends about (some of) their favourite shows.

In additions to the benefits to community inclusion, AD can have a huge impact on how people who are blind or vision impaired receive vital information. During the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, press conferences lead by government ministers or health officials regularly included graphs, maps and infographics with details on the most up to date restrictions or testing information. While governments across Australia rightly included Auslan interpreters to ensure information could be communicated to people who are deaf or hard of hearing, these presentations were inaccessible for anyone blind or vision impaired. During emergencies (such as natural disasters and public health crises) the verbalisation of on-screen text and graphics, a key element of AD, is crucial in ensuring that people who are blind or vision impaired have access to the same, potentially lifesaving, information.

This reflects a broader policy landscape where people who are blind or vision impaired are still fighting for equity of accessibility in a way that has long been acknowledged as necessary for people who are deaf or hearing impaired. The Broadcasting Services Act 1992 outlines broadcaster’s obligations for compliance with the rules and standards relating to captioning of television programs for people who are deaf or hearing impaired, and the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) monitors and regulates the broadcasting industry through the Broadcasting Services Act.

## Policy solutions

In handing down their decision, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities called on the Australian Government to identify and remove any barriers to accessing free-to-air TV for people with a disability. This includes updating laws and policies to ensure audio description is available for all broadcasts.

Despite calls for change, no measures have yet been taken to provide audio description on commercial networks, even though the programs are exported with audio description for international audiences.

As a result, and in keeping with the precedent that has already been established for captioning, Blind Citizens Australia urges the Australian Government to legislate to mandate the provision of audio description on free-to-air television and online streaming platforms to give effect to the Committee’s decision and Australia’s obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

## Recommendations

Blind Citizens Australia recommends:

1. That all Australian free to air commercial networks provide audio description on their broadcast and streaming platforms
2. That the Australian government includes audio description provision in the Broadcast Services Act, to ensure the accessibility of Australian TV for all Australians.
3. That the ABC and SBS continues to provide and expand audio description on both broadcast and catch up services.