

Issue 7: Audio Description



**ASSOCIATION OF
BLIND CITIZENS OF
NEW ZEALAND INC**

Supplement to “The Great Barrier Brief”

A Sentence Paints A Thousand Pictures

So What's it Sound Like?

Blind People Speaking for Ourselves

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So What’s it Sound Like

Founded in 1945, the Association of Blind Citizens of New Zealand Inc (Association) is New Zealand’s leading blindness consumer organisation and one of the country’s largest organisations of disabled consumers. The Association’s aim is to heighten awareness of the rights of blind and vision impaired people and to remove the barriers that impact upon our ability to live in an accessible, equitable and inclusive society.

In the context of this document, the word “blind” encompasses all those with a vision impairment who can identify with some or all of the barriers described below.

INTRODUCTION

Being unable to follow body language, activity, scenery, facial expression, clothing and manner of dress etc, blind, deafblind and vision impaired people benefit from audio description because it provides a commentary on these aspects of the visual experience. Audio description has existed for around 15 years and is the equivalent of captioning for the deaf and hearing impaired.

As early as the 1990's, New Zealand On Air began investigating the feasibility of introducing audio described television into New Zealand. At that time, New Zealand's television broadcasting system did not have the capacity for an audio channel to be easily broadcast in addition to the existing stereo audio content. Fortunately, technological advances mean that the barriers which until now, have impeded the development of audio described television here in New Zealand, have been surpassed.

Theatre, television and other art forms play a crucial role as a social and cultural medium. The absence of audio description means that blind people in New Zealand, are denied access to these major agents of influence and change in society.

Audio described television was introduced to New Zealand on 1 March 2011, through a pilot grant funded by New Zealand On Air. TVNZ's commitment to meet the needs of blind people (in much the same way as it does through captioning for the deaf) has been achieved with all episodes of Coronation Street now being audio described. Involving an additional channel of audio information that provides blind people with a commentary of the visual experience, this audio channel is broadcast in such a way that it does not interfere with normal television listening and viewing.

Live theatre and performing arts can also be brought to life for a blind audience through audio description. This is achieved using a wireless transmitter and head-sets.

Audio Description is the equivalent of captioning for the deaf and hearing impaired. It is the “accessible format” which enables blind and vision impaired people to enjoy access to all facets of television, films, theatre etc, on the same basis as their sighted counterparts. Access to Audio Description is a basic right upheld by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.(Articles 21, 29 and 30.)

WHAT WE NEED

- A commitment from Government and relevant authorities to ensure that cinemas and other venues are suitably equipped and will provide regular audio described movies, theatrical performances and live art
- A commitment by FreeView and Pay to View broadcasting authorities to provide audio described television content to a level comparative with captioning for the deaf and hearing impaired.
- A commitment that audio description is included in and will remain in the FreeView broadcasting standard, and that there will be adequate supplies of FreeView certified set top boxes and other equipment capable of receiving it.
- Adoption by FreeView and other broadcasters of a standard way of identifying that a programme contains audio description both on screen and in published programme promotional material.
- Legislation that mandates a minimum level of audio described television programmes that includes both local and imported programming content.

REFERENCE SOURCES

- The Great Barrier Brief: ABC NZ July 2008
- UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Articles 9, 21 and 30: adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 13 December 2006, ratified by New Zealand, September 2008 and enforced in October 2008.
- New Zealand Disability Strategy — Objectives 6 and 9

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