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RESEARCH

The Preferred User: How Audio Description could Change Understandings of Australian Television Audiences and Media Technology

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Audio description continues to be unavailable on broadcast television in Australia, despite the technological capabilities to provide it and the existence of a federally funded back catalogue or 'secret library' of audio described television content. This paper reveals findings into both the amount of audio described content that has been created but not made available to television audiences, while also reviewing existing innovative platforms for audio description, such as the app BAM-Describe. It contextualises these findings in an overview of the history of audio description in and outside of Australia, highlighting key technological and policy changes. Evoking theories of the preferred user and how this understanding of television audiences addresses disability, we argue that different interpretations of how audio description can be delivered, determined through a process of interpretive flexibility (and continued industry creativity and innovation) may finally shift the stagnating discussions around audio description provision, and thus ultimately change the accessibility of television for the blind and vision impaired.

Keywords: audio description; television; disability; accessibility

Audio description (AD) – also referred to as video description, video programming or descriptive video – is a track of narration included between the lines of dialogue which describes important visual elements of a television show, movie or performance. The feature ensures television access for audience members who are blind and vision impaired. However, throughout its history, AD has also been used by a wider, arguably more mainstream, audience. As such, this article questions how users of AD challenge constructions of the preferred user and of the existing hegemony surrounding access to television (Ellcessor 2016: 77), through a process of interpretative flexibility and new technologies, for example through Big Access Media (BAM)'s app BAM-Describe.

Throughout the article, particular reference will be made to the lack of AD on Australian free-to-air broadcast television, specifically on the national broadcaster, the ABC. The article also discusses that while AD content is not being widely broadcast in Australia, it is, frustratingly, 'available' behind the scenes, albeit in a limited capacity – in programming imported into Australia, in Australian programs distributed internationally, and in a back catalogue that has never been made available to Australian television audiences. Indeed, one audio description provider boasts a back catalogue of 122 television shows with AD content, yet these shows are currently airing on Australian free-to-air television without their associated AD tracks.

While the AD content and technology are available in Australia, the political will to compel broadcasters to offer this service is lacking. Indeed, while AD is increasingly available internationally – and in many European countries is even considered a form of translation as opposed to a disability access feature – Australian free-to-air television broadcasters continue to deny they have a responsibility to make it available to their audiences, citing both technical and financial issues. Crucially, they are also not mandated to do so, even though the federally funded screen funding agency Screen Australia encourages television producers to create AD as part of their funding agreement. Further, with no mechanisms in place to broadcast these tracks, Australians with vision impairment – as well as other potential audiences – continue to be denied access to audio described television content on these channels.

This study examines the amount of existing AD that could immediately be made available to Australian audiences via the public broadcaster, the ABC. An investigation was carried out to identify the amount of AD content in Screen Australia funded television dramas shown during prime-time (6pm to midnight) on the ABC primary channel, their multichannels and their online catch-up portal iview across a 1-week period commencing 31 October 2017. This data was then cross-referenced with The AD content archives we received from one Australian AD provider. The results indicate that a substantial back catalogue of Australian AD television content exists that is not being made available to the audiences who would benefit from it.

The Preferred User

The notion of the preferred user offers a useful starting point to this discussion. When it comes to technology, Ellcessor (2016) explains that the preferred user is typically white, affluent and able-bodied, an image or representation that comes to stand in for the 'default experience of a medium'. With particular reference to television, Ellcessor (2016: 77) identifies the preferred user as able-bodied:

> A television set assumes an audience capable of receiving audiovisual material; captions are opt-in, and video description is only rarely available. Such technologies maintain the hegemony of the preferred user position through their materiality and their status as a default; in doing so, they uphold an able-bodied norm regarding media and society more broadly.

Disability theorists argue that, despite being a fundamental human experience, disability is socially constructed as less than human (Garland-Thomson 2015; Oliver 1990). For example, design decisions such as those described by Ellcessor above reflect the ideal human body, the one that is considered species typical and representative of the majority of the population. Yet, Ellcessor's definition fails to take into consideration innovation and the ways media users increasingly embrace access features as a type of individualised approach to media technology. Instead, a considered examination of a disabled user reveals 'actual uses and user positions' that are starting to undermine these normative assumptions that surround users of technology. As a result, disabled audiences are beginning to challenge this construction of the preferred user (Ellcessor 2016).

For example, as graham pullin reflects in *Design meets disability*, designs for people with disability can also often benefit the majority population (pullin 2011). This is linked to how new understandings of preferred users affect the social construction of technology (SCOT), and specifically Kline and Pinch's (1996) argument that innovations often occur when a technology is not utilised to its full extent or in a way that the designer initially intended (Kline & Pinch 1996). SCOT places an emphasis on 'interpretative flexibility' or the ways 'the same artefact can mean different things to different groups of users' (Kline & Pinch 1996: 766) and 'suggests that technology design is an open process that can produce different outcomes depending on the social circumstances of development' (Klein & Kleinman 2002: 29). This comes about through contests between relevant social groups when 'all members of a certain social group share the same set of meanings, attached to a specific artefact' (Pinch & Bijker 1984: 414). Closure and stabilisation then occur when a dominant way of using the technology stabilises and 'conflicts are resolved and the artefact no longer poses a problem to any relevant social group' (Klein & Kleinman 2002: 30). As Prell (2009) notes there are a number of ways this can be achieved with the potential for two or more groups to compete over the use of a particular technology after closure has occured. For SCOT, this all takes place within a 'wider context' consisting of the 'wider sociocultural and political milieu in which artefact development takes place' (Klein & Kleinman 2002: 30).

Therefore different social groups have different interepretations, expectations and ideologies about how to use the alternative technologies identified by Ellcessor. With the wider television context shifting towards a personalisation of access, the potential to problematise the notion of the preferred user is particularly profound. The mainstreaming of captions is a good example of the ways alternative features possess 'interpretive flexibility' and invite a process of negotiation amongst different social groups. While captions are an access feature for D/deaf and hearing impaired audiences to access television, they are increasingly used in online video because different social groups recognise their usefulness in different contexts.

Likewise, the provision of AD has traditionally been approached from a disability perspective, focusing on audiences who are blind or vision impaired. Many authors reflect on the ways AD promotes a feeling of social inclusion amongst this community or on the premise that access to television is a human rights issue (Henley 2012; Blindness Sector, 2012; Ellis, Kent & Locke, 2017). However, when Netflix introduced AD on original programming in 2015, a new group of users emerged who attached a different meaning to

this feature. For this group, AD offered another layer of meaning to television shows that were difficult to follow, such as *Sense 8* (Mancuso 2015), or that did not introduce character names until several episodes along, such as *Orange is the new black*. At the same time, researchers were considering the possibility that AD could be of benefit to other users, including people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) who may have difficulty deciphering facial expressions and emotion (Garman 2011), the elderly, sick people, or people learning the language who may appreciate a verbal translation of visual content (Rai, Greening & Petre 2010). This change to the wider context introduces new relevant social groups of users of the technology and suggests that AD has entered a new period of interpretative flexibility (see Kline & Pinch 1996) – this can be seen in new expression of AD technology, such as the innovative BAM-Describe app and its application to children with ASD. Yet, despite this potential for new audiences, the Australian television industry continues to see AD as benefiting only a minority viewing community.

History of Audio Description

Conceptually, AD can be traced back to Socrates and the concept of Ekphrasis which refers to 'the ways that one form of art can be used to illuminate and accentuate the properties of another' (Dolmage 2014). Ekphrasis can 'occur between any two artistic mediums' (Dolmage 2014) and is defined by Leonard Barkan as 'the verbal presentation of a visual object inside a literary work' (Snyder 2014). However, the first account of AD being made available occurred in Spain in the 1940s when Gerardo Esteban, a radio presenter, began narrating films on the radio. Prior to this early AD, Esteban was known for narrating other forms of entertainment such as bullfights, theatre performances and football games (Orero 2007a). The service ran until the late 1950s and has been recognised as providing 'an important space in prime-time radio programming in the 1940s and 1950s until the birth of television' (Orero 2007b: 112). In 1964, the push for AD took a step forward when US department of education administrator Chet Avery encouraged consumer groups affiliated with the blind and vision impaired to apply for funding to describe educational media just as Deaf advocates were advocating for more accessible television through closed captions (Downey 2008; Described and Captioned Media Program (DCMP) 2017). However, whereas early proponents of AD such as Avery sought to align with the Deaf community's focus on access to education and entertainment via the provision of captions, the majority of Blind activists were instead more focused on the workforce and other areas of social inclusion (Snyder 2005; DCMP 2017). Also in the 1960s, in an early example of textual poaching – whereby television audiences break copyright restrictions to provide access for others or to enrich the source text (see Jenkins 1992) – communities of *Star Trek* fans began to share AD versions of the original television show on cassette tape (Cronin & King 1998). This became the first example of popular English language media being afforded a more widespread access through AD.

A decade or so later, Gregory Frazier, a professor at San Francisco State University, began working on the concept of AD theatre. He founded the AudioVision Institute in 1972 to explore making media and live performances more accessible to people who are blind and vision impaired (DCMP 2017). His 1975 master's thesis, *The autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman: An all-audio adaptation of the teleplay for the blind and visually handicapped*, was an AD adaptation of the television–film drama *The autobiography of Miss Jane Pitman* (Frazier 1975). The creative praxis explored historical attempts to entertain audiences of blind and vision impaired people, analysis of the teleplay itself to determine what information should be audio described to increase listener comprehension, and where this narration could be inserted. Frazier also explored the creative approach to developing an AD television script, concluding (Frazier 1975):

> Although the all-audio adaptation appears successful in theory, the ultimate test of its validity lies in recording the drama for testing with a blind and visually handicapped audience.

Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, Dr Margaret Pfanstiehl offered Frazier's 'ultimate test' through her work with the Metropolitan Washington Ear Reading Service. Pfanstiehl worked with both theatre and public television officials to develop technology to facilitate the provision of AD to audiences who were blind or vision impaired. Just as Gerardo Esteban had in 1940s Spain, she utilised a cross-technology AD simulcast using radio, albeit this time pared with television rather than cinema, of the PBS show *American playhouse* (Lewis 2017). This radio–television simulcast arrangement was also used in Europe throughout the 1990s. Pfanstiehl was awarded an Emmy in 1990 for her work with the Metropolitan Washington Ear Reading Service to bring AD to television (Bernstein 2009). Three other organisations facilitating AD on television also received Emmys that year – Gregory Frazier's AudioVision Institute, James Stovall's Narrative Television Network and Barry Cronin and Laurie Everett from PBS/WGBH (Lewis 2017). Throughout the 1990s these

four organisations developed initiatives, held conferences and promoted best practice guidelines for the provision of AD in movies, television shows and theatre performances.

Indeed, it is these guidelines and policy changes which are still advancing the provision of AD in many countries. In 2017, AD was available on broadcast television services in the UK, US, Canada, New Zealand, Ireland, Germany, Spain, Italy, Poland, France, Portugal, the Czech Republic, Korea, Thailand, Austria, Switzerland, Belgium and a number of other European countries. By contrast, the timeline of AD provision in Australia has been longer than that of many other countries but continues to lag behind. As early as 2008 the Australian government's policy discussion paper into access to electronic media for the vision and hearing impaired had predicted industry innovation and competition would result in the provision of AD on Australian broadcast television. In particular, the catalyst for change was cited to be the 2012 transition from analogue to digital television broadcasting in Australia – government policy documents predicted a more widespread availability of AD as a result of increased bandwidth available via digital television (Ellis 2014). Further, advances in technology meant that most smart televisions also began to include the ability to broadcast AD, and AD formats such as apps were beginning to become more accessible and user-friendly.

Additionally, following several years of delay, subscription video on demand (VOD) was launched in Australia in 2015, with the introduction of Netflix Australia, Stan and Presto within several months of each other. Netflix, already a world leader in this space, began offering AD on original programming within 1 month of launching – this was the first time Australians had access to a reliable and ongoing AD service. Following Netflix's success with AD, iTunes also began offering AD on some content and, while not relating to television access, a government funded national upgrade of cinemas to be caption- and AD-compliant by 2013 was implemented. Indeed, the optimism regarding the implementation of AD on Australian television paved the way for two AD trials on the ABC and on some subscription offerings. The first ABC trial took place in 2012 across a 14-week period. The second trial on ABC's catch-up portal iview took place in 2015–2016. Significantly, this second ABC AD trial occurred after Australians had already been granted some access to AD via these aforementioned services, resulting in expectations regarding quality.

However, despite these trials, and despite both advances in technology and repeated calls to remedy this situation, at present AD is not available via broadcast television in Australia. Even more troubling is the fact that AD content exists in this country but cannot be accessed as there is no mechanism to show them. For example, overseas content imported into Australia does not commonly contain AD content, despite it having AD content when distributed elsewhere, Australian television dramas which do feature AD content are only available for international distribution, and Australian audiences do not have access to a back catalogue of AD content, despite this being part of the federally funded Screen Australia's policies.

Indeed, to coincide with the 2013 cinema accessibility upgrade, the Australian film and television funding agency Screen Australia announced that it would significantly improve the accessibility of Australian feature films for both the hearing and visually impaired so that '[financed] feature films… [would] be captioned to provide access for the hearing impaired, and audio described for the visually impaired' (Screen Australia n.d.). CEO Ruth Harley said, 'better and more equitable audience access to Australian films at a reasonable cost is a benefit for the industry and community as a whole' (Calder 2011). Indeed, Screen Australia's Terms of Trade that apply to funding recipients state that (Screen Australia 2017):

> Screen Australia requires feature films that it funds to be captioned and audio described to provide access for the hearing and/or visually impaired, for cinemas and DVD. The producer will need to budget for these requirements. Feature film producers are also required by Screen Australia to use reasonable endeavours to ensure that all Australian distribution agreements include access for the hearing and/or visually impaired via captioned and audio-described theatrical screenings and DVDs. Screen Australia also encourages producers of all non-feature film content to budget for captioning and audio description, and for accessible web design, to provide access to their projects for both hearing and visually impaired audiences.

Further, Screen Australia's 2014–2015 Annual Report also reaffirmed a commitment to AD (Screen Australia 2015). While these policies mainly refer to films and theatrical releases as opposed to television drama, section 21.3.5 of the Core Conditions, which do apply to television dramas, cite AD as a matter that must be included in each Marketing Agreement, stating that there exists:

> … an undertaking by the Marketing Licensee to use best endeavours to provide access for the hearing impaired and visually impaired by means of captioned and audio described theatrical screenings and DVDs.

Nevertheless, while Screen Australia encourage the inclusion of AD on theatrical release and cinematic DVD distribution through their marketing and budgeting policies and Terms of Trade, only 25% actually include an AD track compared to 55% with captions (Media Access Australia 2012). There does not seem to be a strong reasoning for this – the estimated cost of providing both captioning and AD for films was estimated to be only $6000–$8000 per film, in the context of an industry where 78% of Australian feature films shot between 2010 and 2016 had an overall budget in excess of $1 million (Screen Australia 2018). Furthermore, provision of this service would bring Australia into line with the UK and US markets, where strict requirements for captioning and AD already apply (Calder 2011). Yet, despite all this, now that the iview AD trial has concluded there remains no AD television content provided on the ABC. Our study shows that despite the creation of AD content as a result of Screen Australia funding requirements, the ABC does not make it available to audiences.

Investigation into available AD content on Australian broadcast television

In an attempt to discover to what extent existing AD content is being withheld from Australian audiences, we conducted an analysis of Screen Australia funded dramas shown on the ABC primary and digital multichannels during prime-time (6 pm to midnight) across a 1-week period from 31 October 2017. We also noted the most popular content being accessed via the ABC's catch-up portal iview during the same period. Funding information for each program was identified through a search of the Freeview TV guide. This information was then cross-checked with the screen guide on the Screen Australia website and with the list of AD television content we had received, the DVDs' accessibility information on the JB Hi-Fi and ABC websites, as well as using the DVD ISBN/Cat No. to find the Trove library records. We discovered a significant number of the ABC's screened dramas had AD tracks available – indeed, the tracks had been created as part of Screen Australia's aforementioned funding requirements – yet, through a lack of infrastructure and innovation, these are not being made available to Australian audiences.

This brief investigation focused on the public broadcaster the ABC because it was identified during interviews as being of significance to Australians with blindness and vision impairment. Significantly, the ABC charter pledges a commitment to providing news and entertainment to *all* Australians. Further, internationally, public broadcasters take responsibility for providing accessible content such as AD (Kubitschke et al. 2013), and their willingness to do so has a significant impact on its availability and subsequent legislation. For example, as noted by the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in 1999, AD had been made available on the public broadcaster for almost a decade by the time they introduced their notice of regulation (FCC 1999). In the UK and Canada, public broadcasters regularly exceed legislated AD quotas, and in Italy and New Zealand where there is no legislation, AD is nevertheless made available by the public broadcaster.

In Australia, by comparison, our research shows that, despite AD tracks being created, they are not broadcast. As **Table 1** illustrates, of the nine Screen Australia funded dramas screened on ABC1 during this 1-week period, four had AD tracks available and, of the three dramas screened on the multichannels, none had AD available. The results from the iview investigation were even more troubling (**Table 2**), finding AD available for two of the four 'best dramas', one of the two 'trending on iview' shows, three of the six 'discover new shows', and one of the six 'watch the complete series'. We also discovered one further Screen Australia funded program available on iview that had an available AD track. However, although available, none of these AD tracks were actually broadcast on terrestrial television nor via catch-up portals. This confirms that a substantial back catalogue of AD content is being withheld from the free-to-air broadcast platform.

Alternative Delivery of AD Via Apps

AD is usually provided via a secondary or alternative audio track that users can activate instead of, or in addition to, the original audio track. As outlined above, these can be accessed via a number of different 'traditional' formats – via terrestrial broadcast television or through over the top catch-up television. However, they are also available via a few secondary apps available for download onto a smartphone and tablet – these include Disney Movies Anywhere, MovieReading, Actiview, and BAM-Describe – which use auto-syncing technology via the ambient audio on the device's microphone. While most are not available in Australia, BAM-Describe is. BAM is an Australian company that seeks to provide AD access as an app for people who are blind, vision impaired or with ASD in order to enhance their enjoyment of watching television. CEO Stefan Carey aligns his service with the notion of full media access being a human right of all Australians (philsandberg 2016):

Table 1: Audio described content on Screen Australia funded dramas on the ABC.

Channel/Program	Viewing times	AD track available?	AD broadcast
ABC1			
Australia's great war horse	Tuesday 11:17–12:17 pm	**Yes**	No
Rosehaven (series 2)	Wednesday 9:08–9:34 pm	No	No
Rage 30 – The story of rage	Wednesday 11:35–12:30 pm	No	No
The Ex-PM	Thursday 8:33–8:58 pm	**Yes**	No
Bucket	Thursday 8:59–9:26 pm Repeated Friday 3 Nov 12:40 am	No	No
Upper middle bogan (series 3)	Thursday 9:52–10:22 pm	**Yes**	No
Classic countdown (series 1)	Sunday 6:02–7:00 pm	No	No
Dr Blake (series 5)	Sunday 8:30–9:30 pm	**Yes**	No
The divorce	Sunday 11:02–12:37 am	No	No
ABC2			
Prisoners and pups	Wednesday 9:26 pm–10:26 pm	No	No
ABC3			
Little lunch	Tuesday 6.37–7 pm	No	No
Barney's Barrier Reef	Daily 7:31–7:59 pm	No	No
ABC24	–		

> Our aim is to try and get our offerings as close to what all consumers can choose from when they want to be entertained. We don't think that is an unreasonable goal. Why should someone not have access to popular shows just because they have low vision?

BAM launched their 100 shows over 100 days project on World Sight Day, 13 October 2016 – the initiative provided 100 days of AD for Australian children's television on the two channels supporting the initiative – Nickelodeon and Discovery Kids (BAM 2016). The response to the availability of 100 shows was so favourable that BAM exceeded their target (philsandberg 2016) and have further goals for expansion.

Access to BAM-Describe is simple. Once the user has downloaded the free app on their phone or tablet, content can be secured in two ways. First, BAM have created a database of AD files called On Demand. When a file is uploaded to the system it goes into the On Demand library – consumers can access this at any time, rather like a video on demand service. Second, an entertainment guide lists all shows that have a live AD broadcast for that 24-hour period on both Australian and international networks. To operate this feature, users hold their device up to the television program they want AD for and press the 'SYNC' button on their phone – after 30 seconds the phone will provide AD for the appropriate show. In addition, in recognition that a number of people who most desire AD do not have access to the internet nor smart devices, BAM have developed a fixed line phone option whereby audiences can access AD via their landline. Currently the main target group remains children aged 4–18 years, and AD programs therefore include preschool, children's and teenage programming such as cartoons (philsandberg 2016) – the word KIDS is displayed in large letters above the link to the Apple store where the app is available to download. A similar app is available for Australian movie goers – the MovieReading app detects the point at which the movie is at, via the smartphone's microphone, and streams AD to the user (Stitt 2017). Disney Movies and Actiview are not available in Australia.

Apps such as BAM-Describe therefore have the potential to offer an innovative solution to the issue of the Screen Australia funded back catalogue of AD languishing in archives instead of being made available to television audiences that require – or just want – it. However, again, the recurrent themes of industry resistance to change, not to mention the lack of government legislation, mean that even with such technology readily available, accessing AD content is proving challenging. One of the main reasons for this is television licensing agreements, that is trying to decipher who owns the content and, consequently, who is able to share it with AD creation companies such as BAM. For example, while the ABC may initially screen a drama series such as

Table 2: Audio described content on Screen Australia funded dramas on ABC iview.

Category/Title	Genre	AD track available?	AD broadcast
Best dramas			
Glitch	Drama	**Yes**	No
Dr Blake	Drama	**Yes**	No
Pulse	Drama	No	No
The warriors	Drama	No	No
Trending on iview			
Dr Blake	Drama	**Yes**	No
Rosehaven	Comedy	No	No
Discover new shows			
The Ex-PM	Comedy	**Yes**	No
The letdown	Comedy	**Yes**	No
Upper middle bogan	Comedy	**Yes**	No
Wham bam thank you Ma'am	Comedy	No	No
The edge of the bush	Comedy	No	No
The Kettering show	Comedy	No	No
Watch the complete series			
The house with Annabelle Crabb	Documentary	No	No
The warriors	Drama	No	No
Get krack!n	Comedy	No	No
Pulse	Drama	No	No
Glitch	Drama	**Yes**	No
Rosehaven	Comedy	No	No
Ronny Chieng: International student	Comedy	**Yes**	No

The Dr Blake Mysteries, the licence is later sold to pay tv provider Foxtel. So while AD may have been created for the shows screened during the iview trial, the ABC can no longer show the AD because the rights to screen this program have moved to another network. As Stefan Carey explained to us in an interview:

> The hurdles are quite substantial. Trying to gain content from networks and productions companies can sometimes get lost in a 'legal jungle' of who owns the rights and what copyright laws are applicable. Attitudes to these issues seem to be heading in the right direction but there is still a lot of work to be done.

Indeed, this same legal jungle of media rights – as well as lack of innovation – has also delayed other advances in the industry, namely the introduction of pay television and subscription VOD in Australia. However, if app-based technology companies such as BAM can overcome these hurdles, be they legislative or institutional – for example the reluctance to relinquish the mutually (financial) beneficial relationship between politicians and television media barons (see Tate, 2015) – and if they can expand their offerings beyond children's television and onto free-to-air television, this will begin to facilitate change in the Australian television landscape. As Carey explains, innovation in the delivery of AD is not only important in a new media environment, it is also potentially a way to evolve the status of AD more broadly in Australia (BAM 2016):

> ... audio description through 'traditional' means has hit a roadblock that is close to unmovable... We believe the answer must be advancements in technology. To put it in perspective, no advancements have been made through traditional means probably since the ABC trials. ... We have already started

developing full voice activation, a fixed phone line solution and automatic language translations. This is with limited funding. Technology is the only way forward.

Conclusion

Although Carey calls for technological solutions, we also propose innovation, creativity and interpretative flexibility as the way forward in this debate, particularly with reference to the back catalogue of AD Australian drama currently airing on the ABC. A significant amount of Screen Australia funded Australian television drama has an associated AD track but no mechanism from which to broadcast it. The Australian television industry considers AD a 'closed' artefact, as something benefitting only a minority audience, and has therefore not prioritised developing or outsourcing its delivery to developers such as BAM. However, we remain hopeful of change.

While this paper offers a detailed study of the Australian context at a particular moment in time, drawing on the concept of interpretive flexibility in particular, illustrates the way this study expands existing theories of disability and media. Returning to Ellcessor's description of the preferred television user introduced at the beginning of the article, when the alternative formats she identifies – captions and audio description – are activated, the construction of the preferred user shifts – allowing disability to therefore be considered as an alternative user position.

When these accessibility features are offered to the mainstream, both creative uses and entirely new media formats and industries result. Alternative features and formats therefore hold significant potential for a broadening of what is available as a user preference, yet at the same time not reducing accessibility for people with disability. Instead, this idea of access for all, of a truly inclusive universal design, could dynamically change the makeup of the idea of the 'preferred' user. Indeed, if accessibility features or alternative formats are incorporated as a user preference that the mainstream of users can opt into for a variety of reasons, they will become more widely available.

As diverse television audiences are increasingly using, and even beginning to expect, easy access to all types of content, the demand for those apps providing AD content should also increase. Importantly, these apps are not just designed to be beneficial for the blind – sighted Netflix audiences report accessing AD tracks to obtain more information about the shows they are watching, and other social groups such as the elderly, people with ASD and those learning the language also report benefits of the feature.

Yet at this stage, many will not know what AD is or how it can be used because unlike captions it is not as widely available. Therefore it is crucial AD is offered on both broadcast and streaming television so that these social groups who may potentially benefit from AD, along with blind and vision impaired audiences who already understand its potential, gain exposure to it via broadcast or streaming channels. This will facilitate a period of change with different relevant social groups driving a renewed period of interpretive flexibility.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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