



Submission to:
DEPARTMENT OF BROADBAND, COMMUNICATIONS AND THE DIGITAL ECONOMY
Access to Electronic Media for the Hearing and Vision Impaired

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FOR
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1. ABOUT ACCESS INNOVATION MEDIA

Access Innovation Media (Ai-Media) is a social enterprise founded in 2003 to develop and deliver innovative & affordable access solutions using digital technology. We specialise in introducing access solutions to markets where no access was previously provided.

We pioneered the large-scale introduction of captioning to subscription television in 2004 with a cost-effective and common-sense approach that has seen captioning on the platform grow to deliver 120,000 hours of captioned programming on over 40 channels in 2009.

Our R&D team is focused on executing a long term program to develop and extend the capabilities of our world-leading technology to improve the quality, reach, reliability, useability, efficiency and effectiveness of our access solutions – in a broadband-enabled society.

We successfully employ and contract people with disabilities and the modifications to our workplace and business processes that facilitate their inclusion have benefited all staff, and the company as a whole.

This submission deals with the issues of increasing access to electronic media from a supplier perspective.

2. Background & Related Developments

A. New Media & Technology

---Creating and delivering accessible media content has never been technologically or commercially easier.

Over the last few years the media landscape has dramatically shifted - transforming from a largely analogue linear television viewing experience to one where consumers now have choice among a multiplicity of digital electronic media options across various platforms and on many devices. This "New Media" landscape also offers consumers the freedom and flexibility to consume content at a time and place of their choosing.

Software can now be freely downloaded to allow any content producer to add captions or mix an additional audio track to render the media accessible. Producers and distributors can also choose among a number of competitive access service providers.

The benefits of providing access services significantly outweigh the costs.

Captioned and audio/video described content can be easily distributed via the Internet using modern web-browsers. Separate digital files with captions embedded and mixed audio/video description can be easily made available for those consumers who require these specialised access services without disrupting the enjoyment of content for consumers who do not need these augmentations.

New Media options will continue to proliferate as technological and business innovation delivers increasingly targeted niche products and services. Our core business is delivering access solutions for these new media environments.

There is no reason why New Media should not be fully accessible.

B. Social Inclusion and Social Innovation: Bridging the Digital Divide

---The solution has two parts:

PART 1: Build the infrastructure

PART 2: Make the content accessible

A key tenet of the Government's Social Inclusion agenda is that to be socially included, all Australians need to be able to play a full role in Australian life, in economic, social, psychological and political terms.

Part of the Social Inclusion agenda involves closing the digital divide by building a national high-speed broadband network to provide opportunities and access to the digital world for everyone.

The Digital Education Revolution contains specific initiatives including Fibre Connections to Schools and the National Secondary School Computer Fund to build the necessary digital infrastructure.

"Access to reliable, affordable, high speed broadband connections will strengthen the capacity of students, parents, teachers and the wider community to communicate, collaborate and access resources across system, State/Territory and national boundaries." - <http://www.digitaleducationrevolution.gov.au/broadband/> 13-06-08

The second part of the solution requires that the content delivered over the high-speed digital network be accessible to all to fully bridge the digital divide.

3. Recommendations

Although there are organisations that embrace change and drive innovation with a true desire to provide universal access regardless of whether such change and innovation results in increased short-term profits, there are others who regard access as simply a cost to be minimised.

Amendments to the DDA and the BSA that make it clear that the providers of content, in its various forms and as delivered in various means, should be required to also provide captioning and audio description, will go a long way to ensuring that the wealth of knowledge, opportunity, entertainment and joy that comes from experiencing such content is available to all.

Access Innovation Media makes the following specific recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Specify What Constitutes “Access to Media”

It should be specified in the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) and Broadcast Services Act (BSA) that electronic media is made accessible:

- ***for people with hearing impairment by providing captioning; and***
- ***for people with a vision impairment by providing audio/video description.***

Comment: We believe this clarity around what constitutes “access” will assist in compliance with existing legislation.

Recommendation 2: Reversing the Onus of Proof

Broadcasters who do not provide access to electronic media should file with HREOC and/or ACMA their justification for not doing so on a standard form that specifies why providing such access would result in unjustifiable economic hardship.

Comment: Compliance with the law would improve if the onus of proof is reversed to reflect the intent of the legislation (viz. access must be provided *unless* doing so would result in unjustifiable economic hardship).

Recommendation 3: Relax broadcasting rules to allow for innovative modes of access delivery where legacy platforms are ill-suited to the task

Broadcasters should be permitted to distribute accessible content over the Internet where providing access over existing legacy broadcast infrastructure is not feasible.

Comment: Existing free-to-air and subscription television infrastructure would require significant and costly investment simply to permit the delivery of audio/video description (in particular). The option of making audio/video described content available over the Internet would overcome many of the technological hurdles to delivering access to electronic media for people with a vision impairment.

Recommendation 4: All new television content be captioned from 1 July 2009

Comment: Significant savings would accrue to broadcasters if captioning is included as part of the routine production process, rather than as an ad-hoc programming decision and economies of scale would result in lower unit costs. Providing captioning over the entire service also makes marketing such content to captioning users much easier. This would reflect the situation in the US and the UK more closely.

Recommendation 5: Live remote captioning using speech-recognition technology be deployed to give access to a greater range of live television content

Comment: Speech-recognition technology will, for the foreseeable future, remain speaker dependent (viz. a trained speech captioner or voice-writer will be required to listen and “re-speak” what is heard). Nonetheless, training speech captioners is much quicker and cheaper than training steno-captioners. Speech captioning is currently the most viable way to quickly increase the amount of live captioned content.