

MEDIA ACCESSIBILITY, A RIGHT FOR ALL

AUSTRALIANS WITH HEARING AND VISION IMPAIRMENTS OR FROM NON-ENGLISH SPEAKING BACKGROUNDS NEED ACCESS TO FILM AND TV. **GENEVIEVE TAIT** FOUND THAT IT'S NOT JUST A MATTER OF PRINCIPLE, BUT ALSO A GOOD BUSINESS.

IT IS CURRENTLY ESTIMATED THAT ONE IN SIX Australians has a hearing impairment; a figure expected to increase 20% by 2050. And by 2020, there will be approximately 600,000 blind or vision impaired Australians.

With such projections, it's clear why over the past two years there has been a push to increase media accessibility for this segment of the population; captions and audio description can allow them to access films and television. Captions are a transcript of the program's audio track, displayed on screen. They also convey audio effects such as music and sound effects through text. Open captions are displayed for everyone to see (cinema), while closed captions are only played when an individual selects the option (DVD and television).

Audio description is designed to assist the vision impaired, but is noted to also service those with print learning disabilities such as dyslexia. Audio description verbally describes what is happening on screen; visual clues such as settings, costumes, body language and sight gags are spoken between the periods of dialogue. The audio track is streamed through headphones, meaning it can be provided without disturbing other viewers. In Australia, audio description in film is currently only available through DVD. The UK is even beginning to produce DVDs with audio menus, which describe the options on the DVD menu, allowing the user to select audio description without assistance.

The number of people needing accessibility services is difficult to measure, however with an aging population these services will only become more important.

"Several official statistics suggest that well over 10% of the Australian population is either hearing impaired or deaf. It is a smaller percentage for blind or vision impaired, but if you combine the two it's probably around the 15% mark. That's just people registered as deaf or hearing impaired, but you've also got those who, as they get older and start to lose their hearing, don't tell anybody. There is also evidence to suggest that people who are not native English speakers also have



JANE CAMPION'S *BRIGHT STAR* WILL FEATURE AUDIO DESCRIPTION.

the captions on, which enables them to learn the language a lot quicker," said Michael Gold, Marketing Manager for Red Bee Media.

"I am disadvantaged when it comes to going to the movies, because I only have one choice – the movie that is captioned. Usually these are not the ones I want to see, or screen at a time when I can't see it, so I do not go. I wait with anticipation for the DVD of the movies I want to see – I rent it and when to my dismay, it's not captioned, I cannot watch it," said Alex Jones, Chairperson of the Deafness Forum of Australia.

PRODUCER AWARENESS

Captioning is a common practice in the UK and the USA, and audio description is increasingly in use in those territories. While still insufficient, local efforts have been led by access lobby groups and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC).

Mandatory captioning for cinema and DVD has been introduced for all films approved and supported by the

former Film Finance Commission from 1 July 2007 and by Screen Australia from 1 July 2008. In addition, an awareness campaign, *A Guide to Cinema Captioning*, was produced and is available on the agency's website.

The use of accessibility services is currently regulated by The Disability Discrimination Act 1992. This legislation prohibits the prevention of the individual's ability to access goods, services or facilities because of a disability. To utilise the protections of the Act the individual must lodge a complaint with the HREOC.

According to the general manager of the recently created Omnilab subtitling/captioning company The SubStation, Linda Baker, industry may dispute a complaint by claiming that to provide those accessibility services was an 'unjustifiable hardship' – usually meaning it would be too expensive given the market. Access groups and providers question the legitimacy of this claim.

"Captions can feel expensive. The reason for that is they haven't anticipated the cost upfront at the

beginning of the production. Particularly when you're talking TVCs, you can spend anywhere from \$200 000 to a million dollars, and if you can spend \$300 on cappuccinos on the shoot day, you can also spend \$200 on captioning and reach up to three million more viewers.

"The audience is there. It's brand-enhancing; you're showing viewers that you're treating them seriously – that you're not ignoring them – and statistics from the US show that if you do that, 63% of people will be more inclined to buy your product," said Baker.

The argument that captioning re-pays its own costs is shared by many stakeholders in the accessibility debate. Alex Varley, CEO of Media Access Australia, says the problem is that broadcasters think there is no audience for it.

"Or they can't measure the audience and therefore, they think it is just wasted money. The issue for free-to-air television is that they measure their audience not through actually looking at individuals, but through the ratings system. Individuals don't actually matter to them, who they are and what they are; they're only interested in aggregate audiences.

"With pay TV, everyone who buys a subscription is a customer and a real person with real buyer-behaviour that can be tracked. They are now able to see a real increase when they introduce captioning on different

channels. On subscription television, where you have an agreement that they caption 20–25% of their content, some, like the movie channels are getting close to a 100%. If you ask them why, they'll say they've worked out that more people watch their content when it's captioned, so it's a good business model."

Even if the use of accessibility services can increase audience and profitability, the argument is made that it should not be a matter of profit, but of principle.

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"It should not be a 'cost' but viewed as an inclusivity issue. Captioning is not only accessible for those with a hearing loss; it could enhance reading skills for children or those from a non-English speaking background. If the pub or gym is too loud, captions can still be read by anyone. A shift of thinking needs to occur in Australian society by asking ourselves how we can include our fellows," said Jones.

TECHNOLOGY AND TALENT

Australian cinemas currently only have the technology to provide open captions. Cinemas use the DTS Access System, in which the captions are synchronised through

the DTS timecode track on the print. A data projector is used to layer captions stored on a CD-ROM onto the main screen. This use of a separate media file and projector means the cinemas can still use the standard release print and only project the captions when necessary – scheduled caption screenings. The DTS technology also supports 'Rear Window Captioning', which provides captions in mirror image through a screen mounted on a rear wall. Viewers receive a plastic panel they can place in the seat cupholder, where the captions are then reflected. This system is yet to be used in Australian cinemas.

Audio description appears significantly behind the proliferation of captioning.

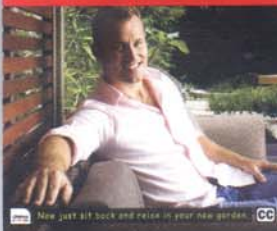
According to Varley, only two per cent of DVDs released in Australia offer audio description. Some film festivals offer audio description screenings, but cinemas do not offer the service despite screening films that have a track available. The introduction of audio description to Australian cinemas is a current issue for the Blind lobby.

Whilst accessibility services provide a functional benefit, there is also an artistic element to their use and design. Captions can simply articulate the film's audio accompaniment, the use of text to capture an aural medium also offers the opportunity to develop a different creative aspect.

STORY CONTINUES ON PAGE 25

AUSTRALIA'S LEADING CAPTIONING PROVIDER

Closed Captioning



Open Captioning



Transcripts



Foreign Language Subtitles



Karaoke Style



Audio Description



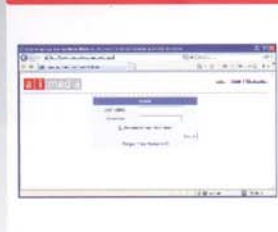
LIVE Stenocaptioning



LIVE Remote Speech Captioning



LIVE Webstreaming



LIVE Transcripts



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STORY CONTINUES FROM PAGE 08

ROUGH CUT

There are plot parallels to this classic film, and *Whisky Galore*, and *Sheer Hell at St Trinians* and *Cockleshell Heroes* and *The Dambusters*, and though it is at the end a jest, and a grab-bag of the nineteen sixties, it maintains enough focused reality (like Curtis's other trawl through history *Black Adder*) to maintain both audience joy and suspense throughout.

Richard Curtis, responsible for *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Notting Hill*, the two Bridget Jones movies and *Love, Actually*, should now be hailed as a master of his craft. Part Preston Sturges, part Kingsley Amis, part Woody Allen, PG. Wodehouse, Coward, Chekhov and Shakespeare, his films have abundance, humanity, verbal agility and up-to-the-minute moral consciousness ('Don't buy drugs! Become a rock star and get them for free!') that, in the Bard's fine words, bring delight and hurt not.

Watch especially for the film's multiple climaxes, and the placement of sixties standard classic songs over particular sequences.

Ken Branagh (Dormandy) is truly remarkable as the kind of genial moustachioed sadist bastard one finds in any bureaucracy. The British are done best, it seems by foreigners. The Irishmen Sheridan, Shaw, Wilde, Milligan and Branagh, the Americans Frank Oz, Robert Altman and John Curran, the Canadian Terry Gilliam and the Australian Blakemore, the New Zealanders David Lowe and Curtis and the Czech Tom Stoppard nailed them as their native writers (the Amises, the Waughs, the Pythons) rarely did. What a joy this film is.

NO MATCH FOR CRUZ

This is less true of *Elegy*, an adaptation by Nicholas Meyer of the Philip Roth novel *The Dying Animal*, directed by Isabel Coixet. Beautiful to look at, and featuring and emphasising Penelope Cruz's magnificent breasts (they are part of the plot, and it is hard indeed to criticise this), it suffers a bit, I fear, from the over-familiar plotline (world weary professor fucks, discards and regrets eager ethnic pupil, whose subsequent mastectomy wonderfully focuses his mind) and the inappropriate casting.

To match Cruz you need, well, Peck or Grant in their sixties. Or Connery now. Or Finney. Or Chris Cooper. Or Kevin Klein. There is something about Ben Kinsley as a seasoned, fagged-out womaniser that just doesn't click. His dark defiant eyes gleam with rectitude. They are not bedroom eyes. A Gandhi, yes. A Byron, no. One can imagine Cruz obsessively in love with Javier Bardem, Ingmar Bergman, Tom Stoppard, Woody Allen but not prim, poker-faced, hair-shouldered Ben. Patricia Clarkson is superb, as always, as the professor's intermittent rich cluey lover and Dennis Hopper, amazingly, as his sardonic, dirty-minded squash buddy. And the continuing Philip Roth hand-on-pud self-analysis, now in its sixth decade, wearies us a bit, like incessant viagra. A beautifully written and managed film, but wrong in its core. ■

STORY CONTINUES FROM PAGE 15

CAPTIONING

"Captioning pays full homage to the intricacies of the script," said filmmaker Sarah Tracton (*White Sound*), who went profoundly deaf in her twenties. Similarly, audio description also allows for artistic investment. "You want access to the emotion or whatever experience the film is offering. We want to stimulate discussion about the possibilities of audio discription, because it is currently being delivered in a way that renders it soulless, in the sense that it's a purely functional description of what was happening on screen. The audio description, like all components of the film, should serve the vision of the film," said Rick Randall, director of The Other Film Festival, an event by, with and about people with disability.

PAVING THE WAY

The future appears to be moving quickly, with accessibility services on the agenda of several government bodies. Accessible Arts, the peak NSW body representing arts and people with a disability, is working with the Sydney Film Festival and Screen Australia to spread the use of accessibility services. The Sydney Film Festival has introduced audio description and captioning for a selection of films and Screen Australia is working toward the inclusion of audio description as a mandatory addition to receive Screen Australia approval.

"Screen Australia aims for Australian screen production to reach bigger Australian audiences and we are very proud that films like *Mary and Max*, *Bright Star* and *My Year Without Sex* have been captioned and are available for hearing impaired Australians to enjoy," said Screen Australia CEO Ruth Harley.

Currently the uptake of audio description appears dependent on financial investment; the technology is available, it is a matter of purchasing it. Many films have audio-description available, so it is a matter of cinemas updating technology, an issue about to be lobbied by the Blind groups. The Deaf and Blind organisations want to introduce quotas to help regulate and bring our standards up to the US and UK standards. Blind Citizens Australia is releasing a series of lobby efforts this year to sponsor the use of audio description.

All bodies involved in the use of accessibility resources acknowledge that the spread of the services is as dependent on technology as it is on mindset and awareness. "Awareness has to come first, but also you have to have the technological capability to deliver it. When we started, Foxtel wasn't even digital, and now it's all digital. This allows us much more easily to add extra layers to your digital assets, it's much easier to associate a caption file or an additional audio track that might be mixed with that digital asset, and then find ways to play it out," said Tony Abrahams, Access Innovation Media CEO.

Within weeks Justine Elliot, the Minister for Aging, will announce the location of twelve local cinemas that are going to deliver both captioning and audio description services; there will be at least one in each state and territory. Red Bee Media is currently captioning and audio

describing the Screen Australia funded films *Bright Star* and *Mao's Last Dancer*.

"Ultimately it's about reducing the barriers of exclusion that we have for people and including them in the economy and in society. The final piece of the puzzle is technology, then you're talking about awareness, which we can deal with," said Abrahams. With continued pressure from lobby groups and the HREOC, combined with the continued innovation of accessibility services by groups such as The Substation, Red Bee Media and Access Innovation Media, these barriers will slowly crumble, and if not, we'll find a really tall ladder. ■

STORY CONTINUES FROM PAGE 17

WOLVERINE

"Our cast, including Hugh Jackman and Liev Schreiber, are amazing at it. They have this inner sight that allows them to perform in a totally believable way with nothing around them but green. It's a total act of faith." McAlpine says that there were a number of reasons why the production chose to shoot primarily in Australia, including a relatively advantageous exchange rate and the proximity to Jackman's home. "There are so many variables that enter into a decision like that and people smarter than me sort all those things out," says McAlpin "I've experienced the joy of working in Hollywood, where there are massive advantages for me and my craft, including an incredible depth of talented people and an amazing array of equipment available on a daily basis. But the truth is, today you can find talented people to make good movies anywhere. "One of our main locations was Cockatoo island in the middle of Sydney Harbour, including a closed shipyard," says McAlpine. "We worked that location at night because the rusted-out roofs let in too much night during the day. It was a wonderful experience, steaming under Sydney Harbour Bridge at sunset on the way to work and then again at dawn on the way home." McAlpine says that his next project will be *Main Street* The director is John Doyle, known for directing the revival of *Sweeney Todd* in his feature film debut. ■

FREEBIES CORNER

Courtesy of Icon Film, we will take you to the slums of Mumbai in the ultimate feelgood film of the year, Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire*. Winner of 8 Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Director, it's the story of Jamal Malik (Dev Patel), an 18 year-old who is just one question away from winning 20 million rupees on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*. Arrested on suspicion of cheating, he tells the police the incredible story of his life on the streets, and of the girl he loved and lost. We have ten copies on DVD for our readers.

We also have five copies of *Brideshead Revisited*, Julian Jarrod's recent adaptation of Evelyn Waugh's novel. Whilst at Oxford University, an encounter with the charming and decadent Sebastian Flyte (Beh Whishaw), son of Lord and Lady Marchmain (Michael Gambon and Emma Thompson), draws Charles Ryder (Matthew Goode) into the exclusive world of British high society. Sebastian takes Charles under his wing and when he's invited to 'Brideshead', the Flyte family's magnificent ancestral home. Charles becomes infatuated with Julia (Hayley Atwell), Sebastian's beautiful sister.

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The questions you must answer will be included in the newsletter on May 2

