Audio description in Australia

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1. Introduction

As a relative newcomer to the world of professional audio description (AD), Australia has had the distinct advantage of being able to consider best-practice from around the world and to adopt and adapt various elements of what others are doing to best suit the specific Australian context. This chapter provides a brief introduction to AD in the modern era and an overview of current AD training and practice in Australia, predominantly for the performing arts, following reference to three recent government-initiated trials of AD for broadcast television. As-by-state mapping of AD activity follows, with an overview of two current academic research projects underway, as well as new developments in AD training. The chapter concludes with suggested future directions in research and training, along with some suggested further readings.

The development of AD in the modern era is acknowledged to be based on the ground-breaking work of Cody and Margaret Pfanstiehl with the Metropolitan Washington Ear and the Arena Stage in Washington DC, developing AD for live performance (Snyder in this volume). Collaboration between the Pfanstiehls and the National Theatre of Great Britain was instrumental in establishing AD for live theatre in the UK. Some of the audio describers trained through the National Theatre development established VocalEyes, a leading AD service provider and AD trainer in the UK, in the late 1990s (Cock and Fineman in this volume). AD for film and television was developed later in both the US and the UK, based on the work of Gregory Frazier in San Francisco in the 1970s (Frazier, 1975; Fryer, 2016; Snyder, 2014).

AD was initially developed as an “enabling” service for people with impaired vision, providing social benefits such as equality, inclusion and community integration (Fryer, 2016; Holland, 2009; Snyder, 2005) and is therefore, at its heart, closely connected to disability rights, social justice, access and equality. In Europe, where multiple language translation requirements are a daily practice enforced by legislation, AD has developed as one of many translation-based media access practices, where “access to service provision is a right, not a privilege” and is therefore mandated by government policy, albeit to varying degrees across the continent (Maszerowska et al., 2014: 1–3).

AD in Australia differs from the European context in two main areas: firstly, there are no practical requirements around language translation for services, so it is unsurprising that the
basis for the development of AD practice is not translation-based media access practice as was the case in Europe, and secondly, there are no legislative requirements around the provision of AD in Australia at all, again unlike the situation in Europe (Ellis et al., 2018; Ellis et al., 2019b). These two factors have contributed to the somewhat organic development of AD services at different rates and with varying degrees of service delivery standards in cities and communities across the country, as will be demonstrated later in this chapter. AD services in Australia have been based on disability equity and access provision, with early development being closely aligned to that of AD in the modern era.

2. AD training in Australia

2.1 Early practical training

Access2Arts (A2A) is the South Australian peak body that advocates on behalf of people living with disability to secure the support necessary for them to access the Arts. It is committed to expanding best practice in arts and disability to remove barriers to arts and arts opportunities, while acknowledging people’s rights to full participation as citizens. Due to its pioneering role in the establishment of AD in Australia, the A2A organisation will feature strongly in the following discussion. It is one of the founding member organisations of Arts Access Australia (AAA) (www.artsaccessaustralia.org), the national peak body for arts and disability, established in 1992. AAA work to increase national and international opportunities and access to the arts for people with disability as artists, arts-workers, participants and audiences, with a vision for full and equal opportunity for cultural participation and contribution by all Australians. AAA provides information and advice, research and development and leadership and advocacy. In 2011 A2A engaged Willie Elliott, an audio describer and AD trainer working with VocalEyes in the UK, to provide the first professional AD training in Australia. Those trained were either theatre or dance practitioners themselves, or engaged in performance-related roles within the broader Arts community and only three describers from that first group continue to describe professionally in 2021. A second round of AD training was conducted in 2013 and only two describers from that group continue to describe professionally. In late 2015, A2A conducted a third round of AD training, run by one of the describers trained by VocalEyes four years earlier and included South Australian participants and a contingent from DADAA, formerly known as Disability in the Arts Disadvantage in the Arts Australia, the organisation responsible for providing disability access to museums, art galleries and live performances in Western Australia. The training focused on AD for both live performance and for static art, such as art galleries and museums. While AD for digital media (film, video, TV broadcast, YouTube, etc.) was briefly introduced in that AD training programme, there has not been any in-depth training for such AD applications in the country. A2A has separately provided in-house AD training programmes, based on earlier VocalEyes training, for staff and volunteers engaged with galleries and museums as well as for disability support organisations, both in South Australia and nationally (see full list on their website: www.access2arts.org.au).

2.2 Professional training

A2A professional AD training includes general disability awareness training and the basic principles and practice of human guiding. This element of A2A training has been adopted from VocalEyes’ approach and reflects disability access best practice. A recurring theme in many conversations that Lara Torr, an A2A-trained describer, had during her access study tour...
to the UK and US, was just how important it was for staff responsible for delivering access services to be well trained and to ask those using the services what they wanted (Torr, 2016: 55). A2A AD training, based on the original AD training from VocalEyes describer, Willie Elliott, teaches sighted describers how to prepare description with the blind/vision-impaired end-user in mind. For example, a general description of an item may become confusing if the describer later changes or clarifies details that were not part of the first description that enabled a particular mental image to be created in the hearer’s mind’s eye. An example of this is if a describer uses the term “wagon” a hearer may picture an open cart. If the describer later mentions “a covered wagon”, the hearer may be confused. The blind/vision-impaired end-user can get “stuck” with a wrong picture that is hard to change when more or different details are added later and the first image may clash with other descriptions and images of action. A2A trainers teach how to build vivid images through the imaginative use of interesting and appropriate vocabulary and how to choose which visual elements to highlight to build a picture or scene from the blind/vision-impaired AD end-user’s perspective, using basic mapping principles – from large to small and from the general to the specific (Holsanova, 2016; Vercauteren, 2012). Learning how to describe movement is a particularly challenging skill for sighted people because they often rely heavily on gesticulation to augment their oral explanations (see Snyder and Geiger in this volume). Finally, one of the most important elements of high-quality AD is to know how to choose not only what to describe, but when to describe it and how to describe it.

2.3 Recent training developments

To date, there has not been any formal, nationally-accredited training in AD offered in Australia. A South Australian based Registered Training Organisation (RTO) has recently won a federal grant to develop the first ever nationally-accredited AD training course. The course content will draw on work done by the Audio Description: Lifelong Access for the Blind (2011–2014) project, (ADLAB) and the Audio Description: a Laboratory for the development of a new professional profile (2016–2019) project, (ADLAB PRO). Among several significant outcomes, ADLAB developed consistent AD practice guidelines and ADLAB PRO developed a high-quality AD training curriculum, neither of which currently exists in Australia. The ADLAB PRO curriculum content was developed under Creative Commons and is therefore freely available, with appropriate acknowledgements. The writer and the Australian RTO are currently in the process of adopting various elements of the ADLAB PRO curriculum and adapting other elements for the Australian context. The training content targeting language translation, which is imperative in the European context but not required in Australia, may be omitted.

3. AD practice in Australia

AD in Australia has followed a similar journey to that of the UK and the US, in that AD was first developed for static art and live performance, with AD for film, television and digital application developed later. While AD for static art and for live performance continue to be the locus of most AD practice to date, both content and technology are available to provide AD for television, film and digital services in Australia. However, unlike the UK and all other English-speaking countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), there is still no legislation requiring the provision of AD in Australia.
3.1 AD for performing arts

AD for live theatre has been available in several major Australian cities since 2011, but there are two ongoing critical issues in relation to AD for the Performing Arts in Australia. Firstly, there is a general lack of awareness of AD amongst both the mainstream public as well as across the blind/vision-impaired community which is exacerbated by the fact that there has been no AD on free-to-air television, apart from three trials (2012, 2016 and 2020). Secondly, there are no national standards or accredited training, as previously mentioned. This has resulted in a wide disparity in the AD services available across the country, in terms of both quality and quantity. The professional training and description services provided by A2A follows best-practice and consistently delivers high quality description. Although the aforementioned report focusses on AD for television, a major finding of the focus groups surveyed was that the “quality (of AD) is very important” and that a “one size fits all” approach to AD is not acceptable (Ellis et al., 2019b: 65–66).

Some organisations that rely on volunteer describers do not provide comprehensive or professional standard AD training, resulting in AD services that are well-meaning, but often of low quality. Some volunteer describers are very capable and do deliver an excellent service, but the very nature of a volunteer-based service without a highly selective training process results in widely varying experiences depending on the particular describer’s capacity. Vision Australia (www.visionaustralia.org), a “national not-for-profit provider of blindness and low vision services to more than 25,500 people of all ages and life stages who live with blindness or low vision”, provides volunteer-based description services in several states of Australia (Queensland, New South Wales, Australian Capital Territory and Victoria). They do not offer AD services in South Australia, where A2A is the peak AD body, nor in Western Australia, where A2A-trained describers work through DADAA. DADAA, previously known as Disability in the Arts Disadvantage in the Arts, is a not-for-profit community arts and cultural development organisation focussing on creating significant positive social change and opportunities for people with a disability or a mental illness. Some AD end-users who have experienced AD for live performances separately described by Vision Australia volunteers and A2A-trained professional describers, have reported a significant difference in the quality of the AD services. Participant responses noted in a recent report (Ellis et al., 2019b: 67) expressed the strong preference for AD to be delivered by qualified practitioners.

There are around 20 A2A-trained and currently active professional describers unevenly distributed across Australia, including 13 describers in Adelaide, South Australia, where A2A is based. Most of those 13 describers are females, aged between 35 and 60, with either an arts practice, research, or administration background and about half of that group have five or more years of professional AD practice.

A2A provides ongoing professional development for all A2A-trained describers and acts as a broker for description work, contracting it out to professional describers to work across a number of different genres, from dance to theatre, cultural events, conferences, visual art and more. A2A is often engaged to provide AD services interstate as well, including a number of annual or biennial cultural events such as Unbroken Land, held in Alice Springs, Northern Territory and The Vivid Festival, held in Sydney, New South Wales. A number of disability arts conferences also engage A2A to provide description. This includes: Meeting Place (www.meetingplaceforum.org/), presented by Arts Access Australia, which is an annual national forum created in 2012 to build stronger linkages and collaboration between artists with disability together with industry leaders in an accessible and supported space, to present, perform, discuss and debate the latest developments in arts and disability; and Arts Activated (www.
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3.2 AD for television

A recent report (Ellis et al., 2019b) acknowledges that blind/vision-impaired citizens have been lobbying the Australian government for more than 20 years, yet very little AD has been provided on free-to-air television in Australia, beyond the three trials between 2012 and 2020. A companion website (http://audiodescriptionau.com.au/) to the recent Report on AD in Australia (Ellis et al., 2019b) states its purposes as being “to raise awareness of audio description, promote existing services and campaign for its addition to broadcast television in Australia” and “to be an online resource that raises the profile of audio description (AD) in Australia”. An article posted on the website in early April 2020, during the global Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, identifies one of the core areas of interest for the Curtin University research team behind the site as being the potential benefits of AD for television viewers who do not necessarily identify as being blind/vision-impaired (http://audiodescriptionau.com.au/).

The report indicates that the lack of AD “is a Catch-22 situation – mainstream users don’t know what it is because it’s not on television and it’s not on television perhaps because people don’t know what it is or how to use it” (Ellis et al., 2019b: 72). However, once sighted audiences were made aware of AD through advertising spots on television stations providing AD, they were interested in using the service and “showed a preference for higher quality AD” (p. 73). A blog on the audiodescriptionau.com.au companion website states:

As millions of people around the world are confined to their homes during the Covid-19 pandemic, the potential benefits of audio description for mainstream audiences have become even more important . . . especially multitasking while performing daily activities. . . . With schools closed and many people working from home, tools that assist with multitasking are more valuable than ever.

(Peaty, 2020)

The website collates several technology-related ways to access AD in Australia, including at the cinema, on the internet, on flights and on DVDs, whether purchasing outright or borrowing from local libraries. Some Apps are listed but most are either not available or only have limited content available in Australia. However, there is not much information about AD services for activities that are not technology- or online-related. In fact, both the Report and the companion website have considerable gaps in their mapping of AD in Australia, particularly in relation to the performing arts.

The first two trials delivered AD across two national television station platforms, namely the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) and the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), for between three and six months, in 2012 and 2016 (Ellis et al., 2018; Ellis et al., 2019b). The most recent television broadcast trial was run in the latter half of 2020, during the global Covid-19 pandemic. Given national quarantine and shut-down measures, many more sighted television viewers experienced AD than identified in the previous two trials. Positive feedback has seen the provision of AD continue beyond the latest trial period, due to have concluded at the end of December 2020. At the time of writing, the AD services pages, on both the ABC
website (https://help.abc.net.au/hc/en-us/articles/360001554676-ABC-audio-description-services-) and on the SBS website (www.sbs.com.au/aboutus/audio-description-services), indicate AD content for up to 14 hours of programming a week, across multiple channels for each broadcaster. At 14 hours a week, AD programme content on Australian television is less than 9% across just two broadcasters, while other free-to-air broadcasters in Australia do not provide any AD content at all. This is despite earlier trials indicating strong viewer support for AD services on television (Ellis et al., 2019b).

It is interesting to note that closed captioning, an access service to enable d/Deaf and the hard of hearing audiences to access television content, has been a legislated requirement for all prime-time television content in Australia since the Broadcast Services Act 1992. It is widely acknowledged that many viewers who are not part of the d/Deaf community access that service, yet this level of media access is unavailable for blind/vision-impaired Australians.

A European Commission report on television content accessibility noted that legislative requirements drive the development of access services (Kubitschke et al., 2013). In Australia the provision of captioning on all prime-time free-to-air television content is mandated in the Australian Broadcasting Services Act 1992 (BSA) and the D/deaf community is increasingly provided with either captioning or sign interpretation in live settings such as conferences and performances. However, even though Blind Citizens Australia’s current Board President, John Simpson AM, recommended that AD be implemented at the time that Australia transitioned to digital television in early 2001, this did not eventuate (Simpson in Ellis et al., 2019b). There is no legislation in place mandating the provision of AD in any setting, including for free-to-air television nor for subscription streaming services in Australia. Although funding body Screen Australia announced in 2011 that all films and TV programmes made with their investment must provide both captioning and AD, AD is not broadcast on free-to-air television in Australia at this time, apart from a small percentage of broadcast content on the two channels identified earlier. This has led to the situation where shows like the popular Australian TV soap opera, Neighbours, are produced with an AD track which is broadcast when released in the UK, but the AD track is not available when broadcast in Australia. Even though AD content exists in programming imported into Australia and in Australian programmes exported for international broadcast, AD is not broadly available on Australian television broadcasts (Ellis et al., 2019b). Current digital technology can readily accommodate the provision of AD content, yet Australian broadcasters claim technical and financial barriers prevent them from providing that AD content (Ellis et al., 2018). This has contributed to the general lack of awareness of AD in Australia, across both the mainstream public as well as the blind/vision-impaired community.

4. The professional AD process in Australia

4.1 Live theatre

The professional AD process in Australia, aligned with best practice and adapted to suit the local context, uses two trained describers, contracted through A2A, to work together to deliver AD for live performance. Outputs include the Pre-Show Notes, sometimes called Introductory Notes. These are – a brief summary of cast, characters, costumes, setting, set and synopsis (see for example Snyder and Geiger in this volume) – similar to the information often provided in a printed programme booklet for sighted audiences to read in the theatre prior to the commencement of the performance, but with more detail of visual information that is important for understanding the performance. The Pre-Show Notes also include ticketing and venue access information and public transport options for patrons. The describers often share the Pre-Show
Notes duties with one preparing the script for cast, characters and costumes, the other prepping the script for set, setting and synopsis. One of the pair collates and edits for consistent terminology and then produces the Pre-Show Notes which are uploaded on the website of the theatre company presenting the performance as well as the A2A website, as both an MP3 audio file and as a document in a format that screen readers can easily access. Many blind/vision-impaired Performing Arts patrons access the Pre-Show Notes prior to attending the performance. However, the describers also read a shortened version of the Pre-Show Notes live, for those blind/vision-impaired patrons who prefer to get that information at the theatre, which is more aligned to the experience that a sighted patron has in attending theatre.

The next output is the AD script for the performance itself. This task is often shared equally, with a delineation between Acts one and two, or in the case of a single Act play, the describers agree on a natural division about halfway through, often at a change of scene. Once the full AD script has been developed, the describers undertake a Dry Run. That is, a full delivery of the AD script, during a public performance, but with only one or two in the audience receiving the AD service, specifically to provide feedback on the AD. The Dry Run is, wherever possible, attended by at least one blind/vision-impaired expert who has been trained by A2A to provide feedback on the AD content, delivery and timing. Sometimes a sighted expert, usually another trained describer, also attends the Dry Run to provide further feedback and offer suggestions for any challenging parts of the performance. The contracted describers take on board this feedback and adjust their AD scripts accordingly. This Dry Run also provides an opportunity to test the equipment for broadcast levels, dead spots in the auditorium, or any other technical issues, to ensure these are sorted ahead of the formal AD performance.

On the date of the AD performance, the describers run a Touch Tour, sometimes called a Sensory Tour, in the theatre, one hour prior to the scheduled performance time. This tour usually includes a meet and greet with the cast, who often describe themselves, their character/s and usually deliver a line or two in their character voices. This is especially helpful for blind/vision-impaired patrons to hear the different voices of multiple characters played by the same actor. Sometimes the blind/vision-impaired patrons are able to handle unusual costume pieces or interesting props. These items may be described in some detail in the Pre-Show Notes, or may be described during the performance, depending on the time available in dialogue gaps during the performance. Depending on the Theatre Company and the configuration of the set for a particular production, the Touch Tour often incorporates a visit on stage, providing a physical orientation to the location of specific set elements. If, for example, a stage set includes a hidden panel through which actors appear/disappear quickly during dialogue, when there is no time to describe the mechanics of their movements through the set, the describers may choose to describe the set element and direct the blind/vision-impaired audience members to touch it during the Tour, so they understand actor movements during the performance.

At the end of the Touch Tour, the describer delivering the Pre-Show Notes live returns to the bio box, to commence reading the abridged Pre-Show notes. The other describer assists the blind/vision-impaired patrons with their AD equipment and ensures they take their allotted seats. The Pre-Show Notes live delivery commences approximately 15 minutes prior to the performance. The same describer provides the AD for the first half of the performance, with the second describer taking over at the appointed spot. At the end of the performance the second describer closes out by acknowledging the theatre producers and the describers and provides information about exiting the theatre and returning equipment. When collecting AD headsets from patrons who used the AD service, both describers ask for feedback about end-user experiences of the performance and the AD service, which is incorporated into a final
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Show Report provided to A2A, along with details of the number of patrons taking the AD and any technical issues.

This basic approach applies in all A2A live performance description work, with minor variations such as there being no Dry Run possible when describing a live parade and the timing of the delivery of AD content being less critical when describing a static exhibition as opposed to a dynamic performance. However, A2A always contracts a pair of describers to work on any project and ensures end-user feedback is sought and either incorporated before the public description is delivered or noted if provided following an event/performance.

4.2 Street parades

The basic approach to preparing and delivering AD for street parades is similar to that used for live theatre. However, there are no Pre-Show Notes prepared and the describers are often engaged to host a guided Touch Tour of some elements of the parade, such as floats and costumes. This is usually delivered up to a week ahead of the day of the parade, rather than an hour before the event (as is the case with theatre performances).

The Adelaide Christmas Pageant, established in 1933, is held annually and includes some 1,700 volunteers, more than 60 floats, 15 bands, 160 clowns, dancing troupes and walking performers. The parade is attended by more than 325,000 people who line the 4 km route. About a week before the Pageant, a visit to “Santa’s Workshop” is arranged for a group of children from the South Australian School for Vision Impaired (SASVI). During that behind-the-scenes visit, the describers, each fitted with a headset mic, lead the children and their carers between the floats, describing as they go. The children wear headsets to hear the descriptions of costumes and floats. They get to feel different fabrics, they can touch the floats and get a sense of their dimensions and they can ask questions of float designers and craftsmen. The visit to the costume storage is always of great interest, where they can feel the different textures of materials used to create the various character costumes worn by the volunteers.

On the day of the Pageant, live description is provided by two describers who are positioned at a single point along the parade route, usually in an elevated location, such as a second-storey window of an office building. The elevation enables the describers to see the approaching floats and, while one is describing the float, or marching band, or the antics of the clowns immediately in front of their broadcast position, the second describer can check that the approaching scene aligns with the programme or to adjust their commentary accordingly. The office building location allows for the setting up and testing of the broadcast equipment before the day of the Pageant and blocks out the noise of the parade and the crowds from spilling into the broadcast signal during the event. The audio description is broadcast live on a local community radio station, which enables blind/vision-impaired people to find their favourite spot anywhere along the route, with their family and friends and to tune in via their own radio, rather than having to congregate in a single access location in order to hear a narrow-cast. There is also a television broadcast of the Pageant, but that is delayed and without audio description. The live radio broadcast of the audio description also allows people unable to attend the Pageant in person to join in from home and hear a description of the colour and action, in real time.

While there is a run sheet for the parade, there is no script as there is for a theatre performance. There are also many more “moving parts” requiring spontaneous description, more akin to a live radio broadcast of a sporting match. During a parade, a float may be out of the programmed order, a performer may stumble, or a prop may fail and all the while the describer needs to “say what they see” for those listening. However, preparing information about the
floats and the performers ahead of the event provides a safety net and a good resource to call on, especially if needed quickly. Sometimes a float or performing group may be delayed and a describer can fill in time with interesting statistics or anecdotes, much like a sporting commentator during a lull in the on-field action.

**Personal anecdote**

A few years ago, I had the privilege of providing live description for the Adelaide Fringe Festival Opening Night Parade. My co-describer and I were describing from an elevated makeshift Perspex booth, built to shield out some of the street noise, but also to raise us above the crowd so we had an unobstructed view of the parade approaching from our right. A raised wooden platform to our left had been constructed for wheelchair users and their families to access. After the parade, a mother with her blind son approached me, in tears, to thank us for providing the live description. She told me it was the first time the family had been able to stay for a whole event. Such occasions usually ended with the family leaving early and in tears. The mother always tried to describe for the boy, but she told me she was slow in finding the right words and her son asked questions and in pausing to respond, she got further behind the action in her description. She was also distracted by having to look after her daughter and the whole experience became frustrating for all the family.

This was the first time that her young son, who uses a wheelchair and is vision-impaired, had audio description at a public event. She could simply enjoy the parade with her family, with the children (one sighted, one vision-impaired) both enthralled by the sights and sounds. Her son was exclaiming, “Mum, look at the stilt-walkers! Mum, check out the fire twirlers”. She told me his face lit up when he could feel the heat at the same time as hearing the description of the fire floats passing by. He was even pointing things out to his sighted sister and sharing information he heard from the description, such as the name of the marching band or the formation of the dance troupe. Audio description completely changed this family’s experience of a public event. It enabled not only the vision-impaired boy to experience the parade in real time, in the middle of the large crowd, along with his family, but audio description allowed the whole family to create memories together, as part of a large public event – for the first time. The Fringe Parade is a topic of conversation in Adelaide for days after the event and audio description enabled this family, for the first time, to be part of those conversations, not just hearing second hand reports, but sharing their own experiences of attending. While physical access to a dedicated viewing platform was helpful for the family, it was the audio access that completed the picture.

5. Mapping Australian AD – State by state

The number of Australian blind/vision-impaired people parallels the global average of just under 3% of the population, with around 575,000 people who are blind or vision-impaired. However, with an ageing population, it is expected that this percentage will rise (Vision-2020Australia, 2020).

5.1 South Australia

The A2A website states that A2A “developed Australia’s first professional live audio description service and are the provider of live professional audio description training”
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A2A provides ongoing professional development for sighted describers to extend and hone their AD skills in relation to different art forms and mediums, from live events to visual art, theatre to video/film and active participation experiences such as large-scale promenade performances. This writer has provided description for blind/vision-impaired participants attending parkour training (the sport of traversing environmental obstacles by running, climbing, or leaping, to navigate one’s environment by movement around, across, through, over and under its features) and even for a high ropes course (a challenging outdoor obstacle course used for personal development or team building, usually consisting of high elements constructed at elevation, often in trees or made of utility poles, requiring safety harnesses).

In line with AD best-practice, A2A also offer training for blind/vision-impaired end-users already familiar with AD who are interested in being actively involved in shaping the AD service they receive. This training ensures that the blind/vision-impaired end-user better understands the AD process and is then able to provide informed expert feedback to describers during a dry-run performance. A2A has been working with the State Theatre Company of South Australia for many years, providing high quality professional AD for all performance seasons since 2011. When the Adelaide Festival Centre (AFC) was built in 1977, it was the first cultural centre in Australia with several performance venues, galleries and outdoor spaces but it was not disability accessible. An upgrade to the AFC in 2003 included significant access changes, including: the installation of tactile ground surface indicators; the installation of AD equipment and the instigation of a (volunteer) AD service; the implementation of a Companion Card scheme and, Disability Awareness Training for all staff. To ensure ongoing access needs are met, people with disability are encouraged to offer feedback and suggestions for improvement (Hutchinson, 2005: 35–38). A2A describers use in-house AD equipment installed within the AFC and at venues run by AFC, including Her Majesty’s Theatre. A2A also has portable AD equipment that can be used by A2A describers when contracted to provide AD for smaller companies or when performances are in different venues and outdoors.

In some countries, there is a greater demarcation of distinct jobs and roles in the development and delivery of AD from scripting to voicing and even translating to/from different languages. In some instances, this is because of pre-existing labour agreements regarding voice artists, particularly when dubbing foreign films to the local language. However, AD practice in Australia has adapted this demarcation approach. With such low numbers of trained professional describers practicing across Australia, it is not practical to engage separate people to script, voice and produce supporting material, so most describers will be engaged to both prepare the script and to voice it, along with producing the pre-show notes and conducting a touch/sensory tour. Duties are shared between the pair of describers contracted to any one job, but the division is usually by each preparing half of the pre-show notes and then each also preparing half of the performance script and each voicing the halves they prepared. The describers discuss and collaborate to establish consistent terminology throughout the description for any one job.

Where possible, A2A endeavours to engage describers who have expertise or experience in specific genres within the Arts, including, for example, a trained professional describer who is also a professional dancer and dance trainer. This describer would be preferred for dance/movement jobs over other describers without this specialist knowledge. This provides genre-specific expertise with an understanding of movement and process, as well as ready access to a broad vocabulary with which an “expert” audience would be familiar. The description endeavours to strike a balance between being technically correct and still being accessible by non-expert audiences who may be unfamiliar with specific terminology. Often the describing
team will explain complicated movements in a pre-show briefing, sometimes using articulated models that blind/vision-impaired patrons can touch in order to comprehend body placement or movement of the performers. This pre-performance briefing is also used to explain terminology or short-hand description for repeated motifs. By pairing a dance-expert describer with another professional describer, the whole process is effectively a professional development opportunity for the non-dance-expert describer who will then start to develop their own genre lexicon. This approach is also used for physical theatre, visual art, cultural events, musical theatre and more, stretching and strengthening the breadth and depth of experience on which to draw for future AD engagements.

Many of the professional audio describers currently based in Adelaide have also described professionally in other states and territories across Australia, including Alice Springs (Northern Territory), Canberra (Australian Capital Territory), Sydney (New South Wales) and Melbourne (Victoria). A2A provides foundational AD training, with options to specialise in AD for museums, art galleries, theatre, live parades and more. They offer bespoke AD training for in-house staff teams and have delivered AD training for staff at cultural institutions including the Art Gallery of South Australia and the South Australian Museum, as well as for various theatre companies, venues, film festivals, arts access organisations, cultural events, local councils, banks and more, across the country.

After a person has completed basic AD training with A2A, they are apprenticed to work alongside a more experienced, “Lead” describer on several engagements, to receive on-the-job mentoring and development, before they are deemed competent to tackle a describing job as either a co-describer or lead describer in their own right. A2A has adopted VocalEyes’ (UK) approach to AD training which is delivered by a sighted describer as well as a blind or partially sighted AD trainer. A2A has instilled this approach in all of its AD training, both in Australia and more recently with the Singapore Repertory Theatre, insisting that at least one participant is from the blind/vision-impaired community. This is to ensure that blind/vision-impaired AD end-users, who are engaged to provide feedback on the AD service they receive, understand the technical processes and challenges behind the preparation and delivery of AD. This ensures that they can provide informed and constructive feedback to the describers who are able to adjust their AD script and delivery accordingly. This process engages the end-users, ensuring their voice is heard, and this becomes embedded in the process of shaping the AD service they receive. It also provides invaluable ongoing professional development for the describing team, to better understand the needs and preferences of those for whom they are describing.

A2A’s commitment to this principle of end-user feedback was reinforced during an interview with Kirin Saeed that Lara Torr, an A2A-trained describer, undertook during a study tour to the UK in 2016. Kirin is an independent access consultant, trainer and advocate and is blind. During discussions with Lara, Kirin specifically raised the importance of feedback from disabled patrons, suggesting that it is critical to not only ensure that people have the ability to give feedback in accessible ways but also that there is a clear understanding of the potential implications of giving feedback. For example, a patron who wants to critique the quality of description . . . may choose not to give feedback if there is concern that a complaint could lead to a service being taken away, rather than improved.

Similarly, if end-user feedback does not result in any change, “there is limited incentive for people with disability to share their thoughts” (Torr, 2016: 50). The importance of enabling end-user engagement was echoed in another context in the same report: “don’t underestimate
people’s ability to engage deeply when the right support is in place” – Mary Jane Knecht, Manager of Creative Aging Programmes at the Frye Art Museum in Seattle (Torr, 2016: 13).

As well as engaging a blind/vision-impaired person in AD training and ensuring sustainable ways for end-users to provide feedback, A2A engages a pair of describers to work in tandem for any professional Description job. This is another adoption of best practice principles and embeds a number of benefits such as: a second set of trained “eyes” can provide suggestions and/or advice regarding the language, intonation and timing of the AD script and delivery; and an immediate back-up during any description in case of equipment failure or describer issues (such as coughs or sneezes, or losing the place in the script, etc.). This process deepens the engagement of the blind/vision-impaired audience members who actively shape the AD services they receive by providing constructive critiques of description to both describers. It also provides ongoing professional development for all describers and opens conversations between the service providers, the service receivers and also staff at the performance venues that support disability access to the Arts. Without this active end-user engagement, services may not improve, venue staff may not be aware of the access opportunities available for patrons and blind/vision-impaired patrons will continue to have restricted access to the Arts.

5.2 New South Wales

Vision Australia volunteers provide much of the AD service in Sydney. One notable exception is the Sydney Opera House, which provides AD in-house by volunteer describers led by a staff member who undertook volunteer AD training with Vision Australia. There are a variety of AD experiences provided in and around the Sydney Opera House (www.sydneyoperahouse.com/visit-us/accessibility/audio-description-content.html), including: “Badu Gili” – a seven minute projection at sunset on the Opera House’s eastern sails (https://youtu.be/JV-ewW4zTd8); "Lighting the Sails" (https://youtu.be/4P6kNh8msmg) sound and light projection show illuminating the iconic Opera House Sails as part of the annual projected-light festival; Vivid Sydney (www.vividsydney.com/) and “Audio Creatures” (https://youtu.be/5R5MeaVI5h4), an immersive virtual reality (VR) experience based on one of the creatures from the “Lighting the Sails” projection show. All of these experiences are described by Vision Australia volunteers who both script and record the description which is then made available for blind/vision-impaired patrons by way of a small portable audio player with a headset.

Another part of the Vivid Sydney Festival that is audio described is a series of light installations. Pre-recorded AD to accompany blind/vision-impaired visitors attending the iteration of the light installations was provided by The SubStation, an AD provider that specialises in AD for digital applications such as film, video, online and television content. The AD described visual elements of the various installations but also considered the timing of the Vivid Sydney Festival, which is held in autumn each year. The describers were mindful that these installations would be accessed outdoors and at night time when temperatures can drop considerably after sunset. Keeping descriptions to just two to four minutes per installation was a practical consideration for the audience. The AD also considered the artist’s stated intent in published material supporting the artworks, as well as any visual theme across all installation artworks, which suggested a relevant lexicon. For example, where a nautical theme was evident it was reflected in the AD script. In line with best-practice, technical terms were either explained or avoided to ensure any non-expert audience members accessing the installations were not confused by specialised or “expert” terminology.

Some performances of the Australian Ballet (https://australianballet.com.au/) are described, but in most cases the describers are engaged in each city, rather than travelling on tour with
the Company. This is also the case for the large touring musical theatre productions that come from overseas, such as West Side Story. However, A2A is endeavouring to get the international touring companies to change this approach and to engage one pair of describers to work with the show for the full national tour. That way only one AD script would need to be developed and the two describers would become more proficient at their delivery as the tour progressed.

The current approach engages new describers in each city who have to “re-invent the wheel”. At present, many of the big shows, with only short seasons in each city, often choose to simply not provide AD for the tour performances outside of Sydney and Melbourne. This is another reason that A2A is encouraging larger touring companies to change their approach and to take one pair of describers for the full national tour. If only delivering one or two described performances per city, the describers could easily fly-in/fly-out, without having to be engaged for the entirety a full three-month a national tour.

5.3 Victoria

AD is also available for the performing arts in Victoria. Working alongside Arts Access Victoria, Description Victoria (https://descriptionvictoria.com.au/), was established in early 2017 and is headed up by an A2A-trained describer. Arts Access Victoria provides an AD Fact Sheet on their website (www.artsaccess.com.au/assets/Uploads/Audio-Description-Updated-9-March-2018.pdf) which promotes the AD services provided by Vision Australia nationally (www.visionaustralia.org/community/events/audio-description-services). The Arts Access Victoria website also lists venues and companies in Victoria that offer AD at their performances and events, including: Malthouse Theatre (www.malthousetheatre.com.au/your-visit/access), The Melbourne Theatre Company (www.mtc.com.au/your-visit/access), The Victorian Opera (www.victorianopera.com.au/accessibility) and Opera Australia (https://opera.org.au/accessibility). Some of these AD services are provided by in-house, venue-based describers, while other AD services are provided by either professional (paid) describers contracted through Description Victoria, or by volunteers through Vision Australia. Descriptor engagement is determined by a number of factors, including limited production budgets, limited AD awareness among venue access staff and also availability from a small pool of trained describers. AD in Victoria has also been undertaken by A2A describers from time to time.

5.4 Western Australia

5.5 Queensland

The Queensland Performing Arts Centre (QPAC) (www.qpac.com.au/) in conjunction with Arts Access Australia and Vision Australia volunteers, supports AD for a range of arts events, including dance, theatre, live performance and visual art. Queensland Theatre (www.queenslandtheatre.com.au/) also team up with volunteers from Vision Australia to offer AD for selected performances of their annual production season. Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA) (www.qagoma.qld.gov.au/) offer disability access tours conducted by volunteer docents. Auslan interpreted tours are conducted by a volunteer gallery docent accompanied by an accredited Auslan interpreter. The QAGOMA website offers AD tours, as long as they are booked at least 15 days in advance, but does not indicate whether the AD is provided by an AD-trained in-house volunteer gallery docent, or if a separate describer joins the volunteer gallery docent on AD tours.

5.6 Northern territory

A2A has run a number of specialised AD training programmes in the Northern Territory (NT) specifically for describing Visual Arts. One fully-trained practicing describer has recently moved from the NT to Adelaide, leaving one describer with some basic A2A AD training based in the NT. A2A in South Australia continues to provide AD services in the NT from time to time, working with Incite Arts, a disability performance company working with local Indigenous communities, to describe Unbroken Land (http://incitearts.org.au/unbroken-land-2018/) and supporting national conferences from time to time, such as Meeting Place (https://artsaccessaustralia.org/project/meeting-place/).

Personal anecdote

An AD-trained blind/vision-impaired end-user provided invaluable feedback to my fellow describer and me in relation to our description for an outdoor promenade performance of Unbroken Land, held in the Alice Springs Desert Park, in the Northern Territory. The event was held at night, in the desert, quite some distance away from the closest town and before the moonrise. The lack of ambient light meant that the night sky was like a dark sapphire dome pierced by thousands of bright white twinkling diamonds. It quite literally took our breath away. “Surely something as visually arresting should be included in the AD”, we two sighted describers said to each other. We discussed an appropriate placement of the description of the stunning night sky and decided to provide it during one of the promenades from one performance spot to another, when there was no other action taking place. However, after the dry run performance, the blind expert suggested we shorten the description of the night sky significantly and then say nothing until arriving at the next performance site. We asked for clarification and our blind expert explained that there were two reasons for this suggestion: firstly, this was so that the blind/vision-impaired AD end-users (at the following performances) could experience the quiet togetherness and hushed, almost reverent snatches of whispered conversations between the (sighted) audience as they walked, en masse, to the following performance site. There were also night noises of the bush – crickets and frogs nearby, dogs afar off. All of these were part of the natural soundscape yet these were overwhelmed by the lush description of the night sky, interrupting the blind/vision-impaired patron’s experience of simply
being present with an audience that was physically and palpably moved to near-silence by the vast open sky, the darkened desert landscape, the mesmerising camp fire beckoning us to the next performance space in the distance and the noises of the desert in between. Without that feedback, we two sighted describers would not have had any inkling of the redundancy of our description of the surrounding location, which was being perceived by the AD end-user through the silent presence of the hushed audience and the sounds of the desert nightlife. Secondly, it was because of a technical issue with the equipment that causes a loud and distracting click each time the describer turned their equipment on and off. This added distraction made it quite impossible for the AD end-user to “tune out” of the description if they had wanted to focus more on the night time desert noises.

5.7 Tasmania

There is currently no professional describer based in Tasmania, although the Audio Description in Australia website reports that the State Cinema in Hobart offers some AD film sessions. These utilise the AD soundtrack provided by the movie production company, rather than a description provided live in-cinema. (http://audiodescriptionau.com.au/?page_id=517).

5.8 Australian capital territory

There is currently no professional describer based in the Australian Capital Territory and although Australia’s national capital, Canberra, is almost 300km from Sydney, A2A have undertaken a number of description contracts in and around the nation’s Capital, including providing training for staff at the National Portrait Gallery (www.portrait.gov.au/). A2A continue to oversee the development of scripts and provide blind/vision-impaired expert feedback to the AD staff at the Gallery to ensure this service continues to be end-user focused.

5.9 AD for digital content

The Media Access Australia website (https://mediaaccess.org.au/about/captioning-audio-description-and-transcription-suppliers), lists the following organisations which specialise in AD for digital content, such as television, movies, video-on-demand and including WCAG2.0 compliance:

- Ai-Media (www.ai-media.tv/products/recorded-content/audio-description/);
- The Captioning Studio (https://captioningstudio.com/audio-description/) and
- The SubStation (http://thesubstation.com.au/).

6. Companion card

A National Companion Card Scheme (www.companioncard.gov.au/), an initiative unique to Australia, is operated by each state and territory across Australia. Although this is a voluntary scheme, Companion Cards issued in any state or territory are valid nationally. Venues and organisations can choose whether to participate in the Scheme and to what extent. Some offer Companion Card access to all ticketing levels under the Scheme, while others may exclude some ticket tiers such as their Premium or A-Reserve ticketing. People living with a disability who have a lifelong need for attendant care support in order to participate in community activities and attend venues can apply for a Companion Card and then quote their assigned Card.
Number when purchasing tickets to live events. If the organisation participates in the Scheme, the Companion Card holder will receive another ticket to the same value, free of charge. Some performing arts companies, such as State Theatre Company of South Australia, also provide reduced priced tickets for blind/vision-impaired patrons, as well as the Companion Card scheme, significantly lowering patron ticketing costs further. And in all instances, AD services are provided at no extra cost to the patron.

7. New approaches to AD

7.1 Disability

The Social Model of disability (Goggin, 2014; Oliver, 2009) is a vital “prism through which one can gain a broader understanding of society and human experience” (Linton, 1998: 117) and frames disability in terms of social and physical barriers that are more disabling of people than any disability itself. Siebers’ conceptual approach to disability extends that Social Model to claim disability as a minority identity (2008), picked up in Critical Disability Studies in its considerations of political and cultural issues, including conceptions of citizenship (Garland-Thomson, 2018; Goodley, 2013). Since the 1960s, one of the purposes of the disability movement has been to promote the full inclusion of people living with disability into society (Campbell & Oliver, 1996), including participation in politics, art and culture. Critical Disability Studies foregrounds the lived experience of people living with disability, without treating them as objects (Ellis et al., 2019a; Smith, 1988). Rather than approaching AD as an audiovisual translation practice, the Australian context calls for a new way of thinking about AD. Critical Disability Studies provides a rich framework from which to consider AD as a disability access or an enabling service, within the disability arts sector.

7.2 End-user voice

As AD is an “enabling” service, AD research from a Critical Disability Studies framework, which considers elements of disability studies as informed by politics and cultural studies, will provide a rich and productive site for current and future work in and on this growing field. Critical Disability Studies foregrounds the imperative to include people living with disability in the shaping of research and in providing feedback concerning the services they receive in order to shape future services. “Inclusion implies a level of equal ownership within the project or endeavour. Inclusion is investment” (Barton-Farcas, 2018: 12). Inclusion needs to be at the heart of this new approach to AD, engaging end-users in conversations about their experiences of the AD service they receive, with a view to sustaining their input into shaping future services.

7.3 Disability and media

Disability is now an accepted part of everyday life and is widely acknowledged as a social, cultural and political issue. Many countries, including Australia, are signatories to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html) acknowledging disability as a human rights issue, including rights to access and utilise the Media and the Arts. Contemporary society is powerfully influenced by media and much of the cultural life of Australians takes place through the media. This is especially true in the realm of disability
(Ellis & Goggin, 2015). There is a growing interest in the way that Arts and media representation shape the lives of people who live with disability (Hadley & McDonald, 2019), where media plays a central role in culturally embedding the profound sense of otherness that people who are living with disability experience (Goggin & Newell, 2005). A number of researchers have been working in the space at the intersection of disability and media, considering both the “great potential of digital technology” (Ellis & Kent, 2011: 1) and also the growing “digital divide” between abled and disabled communities in relation to accessing media (Ellcessor, 2010; Goggin & Newell, 2003).

7.4 Disability arts

Disability Arts can help foster inclusion and innovation in the Arts and in the society that the Arts seek to reflect, and in Australia “references to disability, disabled artists and disabled arts practices have become a regular part of theatre training, production, policy, funding and critique” (Hadley, 2017). Yet access supports for disabled audience members, such as AD for blind/vision-impaired patrons, remain largely unresearched or at best under-researched. Academic research concerning AD in Australia has been primarily focused on the lack of AD for free-to-air broadcast television, with the most recent Report, Audio Description in Australia and companion website (Ellis et al., 2019b) both briefly mentioning AD on other digital media formats and platforms including DVDs, movies and on demand streaming services, but providing very little information about AD for the Performing Arts, even though this has been the locus of most AD activity in Australia to date.

8. Future directions and recommendations

AD in Australia is challenged by a lack of supporting legislation, with the consequent low and uneven availability and awareness of AD and inconsistent quality, standards and describer skills in the provision of AD services nationally. Further research into AD in Australia is needed to better understand what proportion of the blind/vision-impaired community and the sighted community are aware of AD, in all of its applications.

The development of nationally-accredited industry standards and curriculum content for describer training and delivery, as well as for the process and practice of AD, is a high priority and is the current focus of a federal training grant. There is also a strong case for developing AD as a pedagogical tool for mainstream (sighted) education (Kleege & Wallin, 2015). As the quality of AD services has been shown to be very important to end-users (Ellis et al., 2019b) an evaluation of the quality of available AD services, across different locations and applications is needed, requiring both national guidelines and data on end-user experiences, each of which are the focus of current academic research projects.

Legislation that underpins the provision of AD, aligned with the requirements for the provision of closed captioning, will address the current lack of consistency in providing disability access to media.

9. Conclusion

Australia has adopted and adapted a number of the worlds’ best practice approaches to professional AD for the Performing Arts, but continues to lag behind all other English-speaking OECD countries in the provision of AD for free-to-air television broadcasts and online streaming services, due predominantly to the complete lack of any legislative requirements for the
provision of AD. Professional AD practice in Australia is developed and delivered by a team of at least two describers, and supported by a trained blind/vision-impaired end-user to provide feedback. Sometimes another sighted describer also provides feedback prior to delivery. At the time of writing, there are no industry standards in place for AD or for describer training, and general awareness of AD remains very low. The provision of quality AD for television broadcasts would begin to redress the disparity between media access services provided for the D/deaf community and the blind/vision-impaired community and bring us into line with other English-speaking countries in the OECD. AD on television would also immediately begin to raise awareness of AD across the broader community. As awareness increases, so will interest in AD training and service provision in wider applications. Nationally-accredited training in AD is currently being developed, based in large part on the work of ADLAB and ADLAB PRO, albeit adapted to suit the Australian context. AD as a proven mainstream pedagogical tool should be further investigated as part of the broader awareness and use of AD for both the blind/vision-impaired and sighted members of Australian society. The mapping of AD services across the states and territories of Australia highlights the disparity of quantity and quality, exacerbated by the lack of national guidelines or accredited training. Moving away from approaching AD as an audiovisual translation, the framework of Critical Disability Studies foregrounds end-user voice and considers AD in terms of access and equity as political and cultural issues including concepts of identity and citizenship. These provide a rich ground for future AD academic research and will inform the development of national guidelines, training and practice.

10. Further reading

11. References


12. Acknowledgements

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