

Information is power

How television can empower blind and partially sighted people

“ Audio description, to me, is the greatest thing since sliced bread. It gives you your independence. You don't need to have people tell you what's going on. You're up to date. Not even so much about the news, it's the shows and plays and things like that. It's like somebody reading a storybook to you. It's really great. If the government doesn't make audio description available to everybody who needs it when they switch over to digital, they'll be letting us down, big time. The technology's there. It would be like telling a deaf man that he's not going to get a hearing aid or someone who's lost a leg that they can't have an artificial one. ”

Trevor, 65, Hampton, Middlesex

Inaccessible information is a major barrier facing blind and partially sighted people, massively restricting life chances and quality of life. Approximately two million people in the UK have a sight problem, of whom approaching 400,000 are registered as either blind or partially sighted. This number is set to rise as the population ages, emphasising the need to include people with sight problems in the planning and provision of services at the national, regional and community level.





Accessing information on television

Television is a cornerstone of modern society. The past few decades have seen television outpace most other types of media, both in terms of reach and importance. But while most people can easily access television programmes, people with sight loss often find themselves left out of the loop.

An RNIB survey found that 94 per cent of blind and partially sighted people used television as a key source of information, news and entertainment. However, three-quarters of them said they had difficulties in following programmes at one time or another.

One solution is a technology called audio description, which provides an additional commentary that helps people to picture the on-screen action, body language and facial expressions. Audio description was developed in the 1990s, but broadcasters have been slow to provide it. Despite its popularity amongst people with sight loss, availability is still severely restricted.

BSkyB began broadcasting audio description on some of its satellite channels in 2001, and all major public service broadcasters now transmit some programming on their digital channels. But only a limited number of programmes are available.

As the UK moves towards the nation-wide switch to digital television between 2008 and 2012, concerns are mounting that people with sight loss will be left on the margins of the new technology.



Even before the digital switch, blind and partially sighted viewers say they are being disadvantaged as they try to access the same programmes as others. Although Sky customers can get audio description, and Virgin Media deliver audio description across the country, Freeview users who want audio description are disadvantaged. This is important, because the cheapest option for anyone to get digital television is via Freeview. Currently, people who want Freeview with audio description have to pay up to 24 times the £25 cost of a standard box – £600 or more – because the only Freeview box available is a specialist product, rather than a mainstream product.

Digital technology itself presents problems for blind and partially sighted people. It is extremely difficult, or impossible, for people with sight loss to install a set-top box. However, even after setting up, using a remote control to select options from an on-screen menu is next to impossible without voiced menus.

Current plans are for the proportion of audio described programmes on the new

digital television system to reach 10 per cent. RNIB and other campaigning organisations say this will limit the amount of broadcasting people with sight loss will be able to access and are calling for 20 per cent of programming to be audio described.

The government has promised a targeted help scheme to ensure older and disabled people are provided with the necessary equipment to receive digital TV by the time of the switchover, but it is still unclear that this programme will be universal or robust enough to provide a sufficiently accessible television receiver with talking menus and talking programme guides for all viewers who need it.

Blind and partially sighted people are pushing for additional steps to ensure that adequate provisions are in place to ensure everyone is able to enjoy the benefits the digital switchover offers. Audio description offers the chance to bring a huge improvement to the lives of television viewers with sight loss, and it is an opportunity that should not be missed.



5 ways to make things better

- The government should increase audio description targets to 20 per cent of all programmes and broadcasters should strive to exceed these.
- The government should provide equipment enabling people with sight loss to access audio described programmes and navigate through voiced programme guides and voiced on-screen menus.
- The government should ensure no blind or partially sighted people are left behind during the national switch to digital television.
- Manufacturers should build accessibility into all equipment with audio description and talking alternatives for essential on-screen information.
- Retailers should be ready to advise customers with sight loss on the best radio and television equipment for their needs.



To find out more contact RNIB on **0845 702 3153**, email **seeitright@rnib.org.uk** or visit **www.rnib.org.uk**