

ACCESS TO CINEMAS – FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

WHAT IS CINEMA ACCESS?

Cinema access is where Deaf and hearing impaired people can access captions on the movie screen. These captions are an English-language text version of the movie soundtrack. The other component of access is audio description, which is where the important visual information is presented in an audio format so that people can listen to it whilst the movie is playing. This is mainly used by blind and vision impaired people.

What is the access system being used in Australia?

The current system is the DTS access system which is also used in the UK, USA, Canada, New Zealand and some other European countries.

This system consists of a hard drive/processor which is installed in the projection room of the cinema and a data projector for beaming the captions onto the cinema screen. The audio description component is delivered via a sound system that plays into individual headphones or a personal listening device. It is not usually heard by the entire audience and only the audio description itself is played through the headphones. The standard soundtrack of the movie is accessed through the cinema's sound system (this stops potentially annoying echo effects).

Whilst the system is not fixed permanently, it takes more than a few minutes to shift the projector from one screen to another, so it is usually installed on one screen and that becomes the dedicated access screen.

The access information is stored on an access disk which is then loaded onto the hard drive. Some newer versions of the equipment download the access information from the Internet (via a special secure server). The access information is coded to the movie and reads the timecode (which is just a special code imprinted in the movie which tells equipment how far into the movie that frame is). So it can start automatically and match itself to the correct movie. A standard movie print is used.

What are other access systems being used in the world?

Dolby produces a similar access system to the DTS system, and this is in use in the UK and USA. The DTS disks work with Dolby but not the other way around. The Dolby system supports both captioning and audio description.

There is a captioning system called "Rear Window" which projects the captions onto an adjustable Perspex screen that the user puts into the popcorn holder. This then reflects the captions that are projected onto an LED screen at the back of the cinema. This system means that only the people wanting captions see them but it only works well in part of the cinema (where the reflecting screen is accessible). Rear Window is only installed in significant numbers in the USA. Rear Window also provides audio description on some movies (also known as "descriptive narration" in the USA).

The older system of access was the use of open-captioned prints (and was used in Australia until 2005). This is where the captions were burnt into the film print itself,

like a subtitled movie. This is less popular nowadays as it requires a special print to be produced and then distributed to the cinemas. It also does not support audio description.

How many DTS accessible movies are there being produced?

It is now at the levels of 150 per annum, with both captioning and audio description. These movies are generally large-scale entertainment titles destined for international release. Arthouse and “fringe” movies tend not to be included in this.

Are Australian movies accessible?

The distribution and exhibition industries are sorting this out with support from the Film Finance Corporation (who funds most Australian feature movies). This is expected to be resolved by the end of 2006.

What does the system cost?

The system costs around \$15,000 to buy. The total cost is dependant on the set up in the cinema, particularly the sound system for the audio description. This is a capital cost, so the cinema would normally depreciate this over 4/5 years.

The DTS access disks are produced overseas and distributed to the participating cinemas. We understand that there is no effective additional charge for this to the cinemas, outside of the normal distribution arrangements.

WHO ARE THE MAIN USERS OF CINEMA ACCESS SYSTEMS?

Deaf and hearing impaired people. There are around 2 million Deaf and hearing impaired people in Australia, representing 10% of the population. If you live in a regional area you are likely to have a higher proportion this group as hearing impairment is something that increases with age and regional areas tend to have older populations.

Blind and vision impaired people. There around 500,000 blind and vision impaired people (not counting the 51% of the population that have vision problems). Again this increases with age and will be higher in regional areas where there are older populations.

What is the current agreement and how does it work?

There is a Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) agreement covering cinema access. This was negotiated as a result of a complaint by a WA man, Dr John Byrne. This agreement originally covered the 8 capital cities, but was extended in 2005 to include Newcastle and Maroochydore.

The agreement stipulates that there must be three (3) captioned screenings each week. The times of the screenings are 10.00am Wednesday, 6.30pm Friday and 3.00pm Sunday (slight variation is allowed on these timings to fit in with local programming and scheduling). Audio description is not included in the agreement

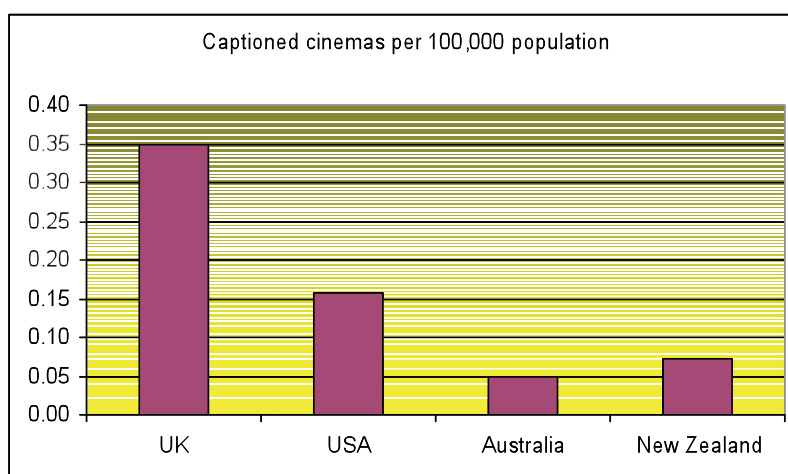
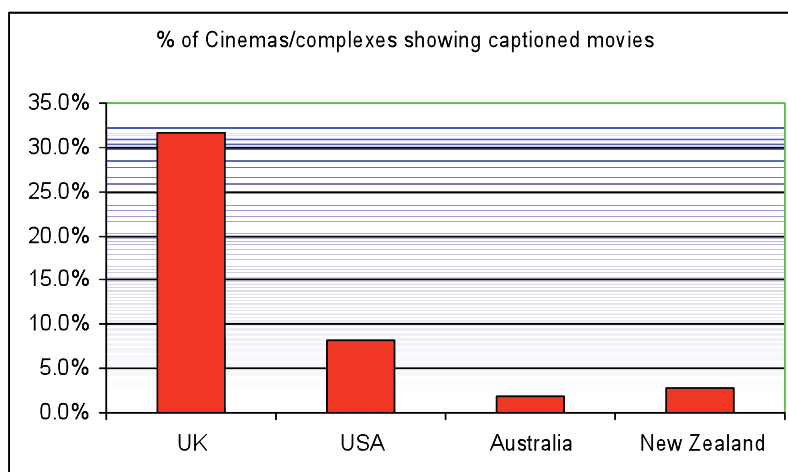
and as at October 2006, none of the 10 cinemas had the audio description module fitted. The blind organisations are undertaking a campaign to rectify this.

Who does this apply to?

The parties are Deafness Forum and Australian Association of the Deaf, but this does not stop anyone from pursuing complaints about other cinemas, including DF and AAD.

WHAT IS THE ACCESS SITUATION OVERSEAS?

As at October 2006, the USA had 472 accessible cinemas (all captions, most AD), the UK 209 accessible cinemas (all captions, almost all AD) and New Zealand had 3 accessible cinemas (captions only). The % and per head comparisons are shown in the charts below.



On the basis of fair comparison (taking into account no of screens, distance between cinemas and population size) you would **expect Australia to have around 70 accessible cinemas.**

WHY INSTALL AN ACCESS SYSTEM?

Apart from the basic right of people to be able to access movies, there are lots of good economic reasons to install an access system:

- **People watch captions** – captions are available on free-to-air television, subscription television (Foxtel and Austar), DVDs, videos and computer games. Around a million Australians watch captioned television on a regular basis. Putting captions in cinemas means that they can enjoy the movies on a big screen, rather than waiting for it come onto DVD (which is not the same experience).
- **Empty cinemas during the daytime** – if you talk to any cinema operator about how busy their cinema is during the daytime they will tell you that apart from school holidays, the cinemas are pretty empty. Some old people prefer to go to the cinema during the daytime and old people have sensory impairments, so a captioned/audio described session would be a good attraction.
- **Seniors are a big target audience for access systems.** The cinemas have recognised the power of this group by creating “Seniors’ Clubs”, they could build this audience and get them to come along to the cinema using access as a marketing tool.
- **Provides a new audience development tool.** Cinemas generally seem to follow a standardised formula for promoting their service. They put an advert on television and then back it up with listings in the local paper and on the Internet. The attractions that they compete with, such as museums, galleries, fun/theme parks and zoos/wildlife parks all target particular audiences, including seniors. Access provides the cinema with an opportunity to target particular audiences at a local level.
- **Great for Cry Baby/Babes in Arms sessions** (where the cinemas allow parents to take babies and children into the cinema and it is accepted that it will be noisy). Just turn on the captions and everybody can enjoy the movie, even if the kids are making lots of noise.
- **Audio description is a non-impact service.** The audio description can be accessed at any time and has no impact on other audience members, so it is available for every session of the accessible movie. This represents additional ticket sales.
- **Seeing a movie is a social experience.** It allows deaf and blind people to go to the cinema with their families and friends. Going to the movies is a social experience and most people who are deaf or vision impaired don’t live with other deaf or vision impaired family members, they just don’t go with them to the cinema anymore. Access allows them to enjoy this shared social experience, which is likely to mean that the rest of the family and friends go to the movies more often.
- **In financial terms it is not very expensive.** As the access system is basically a one-off capital cost, the cinema needs to sell only one or two tickets each day to pay for it.

EXCUSES FOR NOT PROVIDING ACCESS

Many excuses (reasons) have been put forward for not providing access. Here are a few more common ones and the arguments against them:

There is an accessible cinema in your city. So why does the cinema chain bother building all of the other cinemas if one cinema would meet the needs of the population? After all if it's reasonable to ask a hearing impaired or vision impaired person to travel across the city to see an accessible movie, then it must be reasonable to expect everyone to do that. Similarly, why do they bother building cinemas in regional areas, when you could travel to the nearest capital city to see a movie?

Nobody comes to accessible sessions. The attendance at an accessible session depends on a number of factors: the popularity of the movie (a dud movie is not going to be popular just because it is accessible); the time it is screened (the Friday and Sunday sessions are more popular); the proximity to an audience (see the need for more than one cinema above); how soon it is scheduled compared to the non-accessible release (ie has it gone to DVD?); and how it has been marketed to the target audience. Tens of thousands of people go to captioned screenings every year. There is nothing to say that most of the accessible sessions can't be in the daytime when nobody else is attending, as long as it is promoted properly.

Old people won't come to the cinema – that is unless you target them. Other attractions, such as museums, galleries, theme/fun parks, zoos and wildlife parks all target their marketing to seniors and reap the rewards of a loyal and appreciative audience that generally likes to attend when the other audiences are less interested (such as daytime).

It costs too much to provide access. The system costs around \$15,000 capital cost. That means that it is depreciated over 4 or 5 years. The daily cost of the system is one or two extra ticket sales. If the service is marketed properly it will easily cover the cost and bring new audiences to the cinema.

The rest of the audience finds the access (especially captions) distracting and will stop coming to the cinema. If you schedule the sessions for quieter times, what audience is being distracted? Also, people who use access come up with other family members and friends. Research by the cinema chains has found that seniors are quite happy watching subtitled films (and that's really what captions are – just like subtitles).

It's too difficult trying to market to deaf and blind people. The competitors of cinemas do it quite well (busloads of seniors going to attractions) and they don't have the assistance of organisations like Media Access Australia who provide listings and marketing assistance to anyone who is trying to make media accessible. Local media is also very interested in organisations that care about disadvantaged people. There are also many community and voluntary organisations looking after the interests of these groups that can be approached for assistance with targeting an audience.

It is accessible on DVD? They can just watch it then. So why not close all of the cinemas down because everyone could watch it on DVD? The point of the cinema is the big screen experience and the social event of going out.

BUILDING AN ACCESS CAMPAIGN

It is important to involve others in your desire/campaign to make your local cinema accessible:

- **Show local interest** through a petition and gather a group of people who are prepared to support the campaign. Media Access Australia has produced some free postcards that people can sign and send to the cinema.
- **Involve local media** – local newspapers and radio are very interested in issues that affect their communities. It is better to make the angle personal and then to broaden the impact. For example, an old woman who used to go the movies but can't anymore because she has become hearing impaired. Caption access will give her that back and the other 10% of the district's population that is hearing impaired.
- **Involve Council and politicians** – they are supposed to represent you and get very nervous about being on "the wrong side" of a community issue. Many politicians have had their personal lives touched by disability through a family member or themselves.
- **Approach the cinema in the first place** – you should make sure that the cinema is fighting you on access. If the manager is willing to take up the cause then you should discuss ways in which you can support the manager.
- **Contact local blind, deaf and seniors organisations** – the more people involved, the stronger the voice and the bigger the market for the service when it is introduced.
- **Contact Media Access Australia** – we exist to make media (like cinema) accessible. We can help you with policy advice, information about the cinema systems, the political process, facts and figures and promoting the service.

FOR MORE INFORMATION AND USEFUL LINKS

Media Access Australia sites

www.mediaaccess.org.au
www.audiodescription.com.au

Australian sites

www.deafnessforum.org.au
www.aad.org.au
www.visionaustralia.org.au
www.bca.org.au

Overseas sites

www.dts.com/cinema/dtsaccess/
www.yourlocalcinema.com
www.captionmovies.co.nz