

The logo for The Authority for Television On Demand (ATVOD) features the letters 'ATVOD' in a bold, white, sans-serif font, centered within a solid black rectangular background.

ATVOD

THE AUTHORITY FOR TELEVISION **ON DEMAND**

Provision of Video on Demand Access Services - 2015 Report -

A report on the level of provision by On Demand Programme Service providers of subtitling, audio description, signing and other services for people with disabilities relating to sight or hearing or both

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Executive Summary

Each year, ATVOD carries out a survey of how accessible Video On-Demand (“VOD”) services are to people with disabilities relating to sight and/or hearing. This means whether they have subtitles, signing or ‘audio description’ (collectively, “access services”).

Broadcast television services must supply a certain amount of accessible content, but there are no such obligations on VOD services and VOD content is simply nowhere near as accessible as broadcast television. ATVOD hears from affected viewers who have followed a series with subtitles on television (for example) but are then frustrated to find that they can’t watch episodes via catch-up TV.

Although ATVOD has conducted the survey since 2011, last year it became compulsory for all providers of ‘On Demand Programme Services’ (“ODPS”) notified to ATVOD. This year we got 90 responses, and the key findings were as follows:

Key Findings in 2015

- Accessible programming can now be found on an increasing range of devices (from connected TV apps to games consoles) but there continue to be large gaps in access service provision on the major television platforms such as Virgin, Sky and YouView.

Subtitles

- Those already providing subtitles (notably the Public Service Broadcasters) continue to provide them in slowly increasing volumes but with a more rapidly increasing spread of accessible platforms. For example, Channel 5, who previously provided subtitles only on its website and mobile apps, now offers a significant amount of subtitling (70-80% of programme hours) on games consoles (Sony Playstation, Xbox), Connected TV apps, YouView and other set top boxes (e.g. Roku, EETV, Fire TV and Freesat).
- There are also some significant entrants to providing subtitles, e.g. Amazon. Other film services (such as Sainsbury’s, and the BFI) also now offer subtitles, although this may be partly as a result of foreign language subtitling.

Signing

- Signing continues to be provided on only a limited number of VOD services: BSLBT, ITV and UTV, with the addition in 2015 of STV.
- Other VOD service providers (e.g. Sky, Channel 4, Disney, Nickelodeon, NBC Universal) point to their contributions to the BSLBT fund

Audio Description

- Audio Description for the blind and partially sighted continues to lag behind subtitles. As with subtitling though, those few already providing AD on a particular platform continued to provide it, and other providers are beginning, slowly, to explore audio described VOD content:

- ITV – AD available for 0.4% of content (its most popular programmes like Coronation Street and Downton) on its Android app (launched in 2015). ITV plans to roll out AD to other popular programmes and to more platforms.
- Channel 5 – AD now available on its website and iOS and Android apps (starting after the survey reporting period)

Barriers to provision

- Providers continue to point to barriers to accessibility on VOD, including technical issues in converting subtitles for multiple platforms, and the associated costs. Content providers (e.g. Fox) continue to disagree with platform operators (e.g. Virgin) over whose responsibility it is to make content accessible, and there is a lack of clarity over platform requirements and/or capabilities. However, more platforms appear to now support access services, and more content providers are working with platforms to get accessible content through to consumers.

ATVOD Response

- Progress is being made, but ATVOD continues to receive complaints from consumers who cannot access content on the major television platforms.
- ATVOD recognises that there are technical obstacles and that in some cases accessibility has to be introduced to coincide with more general systems upgrades.
- ATVOD therefore welcomes the news from key content providers and platform operators that many such upgrades are planned and that accessibility will be factored in.
- ATVOD urges platform operators to ensure that their platforms support accessibility and that content providers are kept updated of technical requirements, including upgrade roadmaps which may affect any access requirements.
- ATVOD notes that costs of implementation of access services across different platforms is again a key obstacle for service providers and would encourage platforms to work together and with service providers in this area.
- Although the complexity of the situation (in terms of proliferation of platforms and technologies) may simplify as the market matures, we urge providers to be proactive now, in order to avoid retro-fitting accessibility to future technology. Accessibility needs to be a routine part of contract discussions and systems upgrades.
- ATVOD again urges all service providers to consider audio description alongside subtitling rather than as an optional extra. The industry focus appears to date to have been on subtitling, with relatively little progress made in the quantity of audio described VOD available.

Next Steps

- In January 2016 the regulation of VOD passes from ATVOD to Ofcom. ATVOD very much hopes that Ofcom will continue working towards more accessible VOD in the UK, building on ATVOD's work of the past five years.
- ATVOD thanks all those service providers, disability groups, and individuals who have engaged with ATVOD over the last five years to help make VOD more accessible.

Introduction

ATVOD is designated by Ofcom as the appropriate regulatory authority for editorial content on video-on-demand (“VOD”) services that meet the definition of an On Demand Programme Service (“ODPS”), as defined in section 368 of the Communications Act 2003 (“the Act”). In performing that role, ATVOD is committed to encouraging service providers to make their services more accessible to people with disabilities affecting their sight and/or hearing at a key time in the development and use of on-demand services¹. Making services more accessible will normally mean providing programmes with subtitling, audio-description or signing. We refer to such techniques as “access services”.

While certain television broadcast channels are subject to statutory quotas for access services, ATVOD has no powers to compel VOD providers to become accessible.

On 26 February 2014, ATVOD published its Access Services Plan² (“the Plan”) setting out how it would encourage services providers over the period 2014-16. One way in which ATVOD encourages provision of access services is through the collection and publication of information showing where access services are, and are not, provided on video on demand services, and detailing the nature and scale of any such provision. Since 2011 ATVOD has conducted an annual survey of current levels of provision of such ‘access services’. Since last year (2014) this survey has been compulsory for providers of ODPS notified to ATVOD, using a demand for information under s368O of the Act. Failure to comply with such a demand for information could ultimately lead to enforcement action by Ofcom, including the imposition of a financial penalty.

This report details the responses received to ATVOD’s fifth major survey of regulated service providers, which closed on 30 September 2015. All providers of one or more ODPS were required to complete the survey.

The report looks at why VOD is different to broadcast television, and poses new challenges for accessibility. It looks at what has changed since last year: who is now providing subtitles, audio description, and signing, and on what platform, from own-brand websites to mobile apps. We look at which of last year’s plans have been carried out, how obstacles have been overcome and how in many cases the barriers continue to make themselves felt.

This year, in Annex 3, we’ve set out the responses received in a way which makes it easy to check whether a particular service, or a particular platform, carries subtitles. Importantly, we have shown how these figures fit into the ‘bigger picture’ of Video On-Demand in the UK, indicating where the largest quantities of catch-up and archived content are to be found, and whether these bigger services are – or are not – accessible.

¹ Under Paragraph 5(v) and Paragraph 7(xx) of its Designation, ATVOD is required “to encourage Service Providers to ensure that their services are progressively made more accessible to people with disabilities affecting their sight or hearing or both”

² http://www.atvod.co.uk/uploads/files/Access_Services_Plan_2014-16.pdf

Why are there gaps in this picture? Service providers point to technical and cost issues which are outlined and interrogated in this report. There is no equivalent of Annex 3 for audio described services as the level of provision is simply too small – this too is something we address in the report.

The Survey

ATVOD required all providers of ODPS to indicate the scale of provision of each type of access service, together with any future plans for access service provision. Service Providers were asked to detail their provision of access services across each of the platforms on which their ODPS were available (including, for example, their own websites and apps, and third party platforms).

The standard reference period used was the 12 month period from 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015, although some service providers indicated that they had used a different period (for example the 2014 calendar year).

A copy of the survey is provided as Annex 1.

The Responses

Responses were received from ninety service providers. Although completing the survey was compulsory, ATVOD appreciates that compiling this information is not always a straightforward task. ATVOD thanks those service providers who took the time to provide the required information.

There were just two service providers who failed to respond to ATVOD's formal demand for information. They were: GRM Daily (for the second year running); and Paul Raymond Media.

For a full list of those service providers required to respond, see Annex 2.

It is worth noting that respondents to this survey were giving figures in relation to their own 'On Demand Programme Services'. That means that respondents such as Virgin and Sky, who operate platforms which host a variety of services, were only giving figures for a small part of the overall content hosted – the part over which they hold editorial responsibility (as defined in the Act). Nonetheless, these platforms have informally commented on their role as platform operators and the extent to which their platforms can support the access services of other content providers.

Please note also that the BBC iPlayer is not regulated by ATVOD and for that reason is not included in this report. Services such as Netflix and iTunes, which are provided by companies established outside the UK are also excluded as they do not fall within ATVOD's remit.

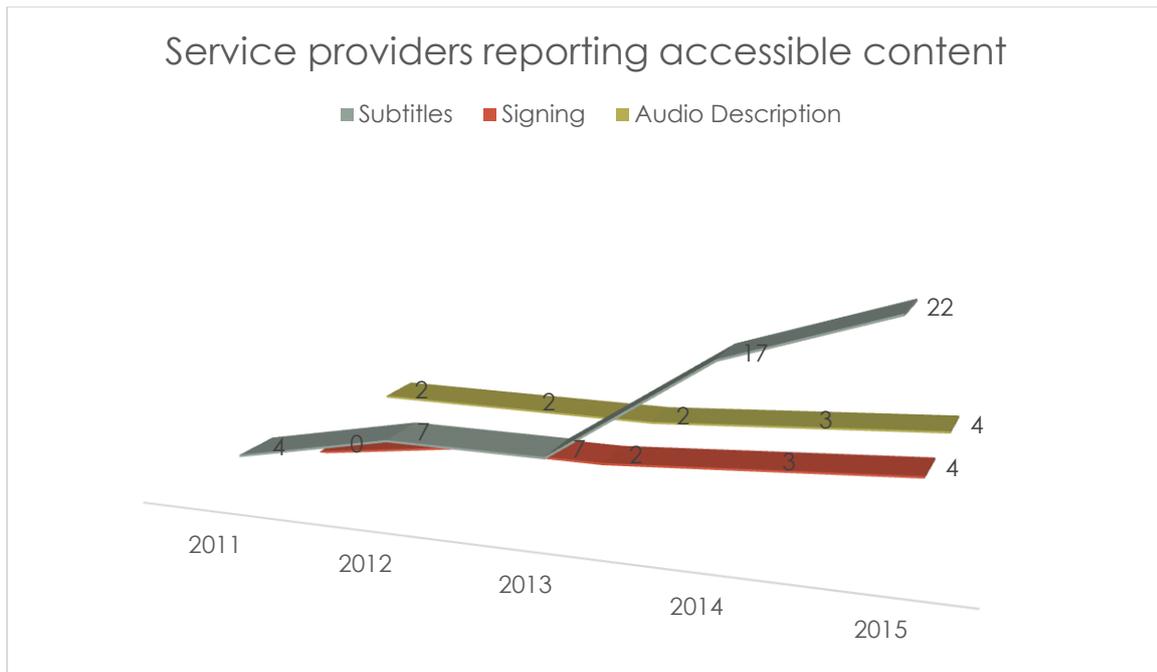


Figure 1: Numbers of service providers reporting subtitles / signing / audio description from 2011-15. Note that ATVOD's survey was made compulsory in 2014 hence there were double the responses in that year compared with 2013, although in previous years respondents were self-selecting and therefore more likely to provide access services.

Barriers to Provision

This year the report aims to put figures into context by first addressing any barriers to accessibility. Why should VOD be any less accessible than broadcast content? We know that many linear television providers are required to make a certain proportion of their content accessible³ which means that many programmes already have associated subtitles, signing or audio description. Why should they not make it onto the catch-up services?

Here's what the survey respondents told us:

³ See Ofcom's Code on Television Access Services: <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/broadcasting/broadcast-codes/tv-access-services/>

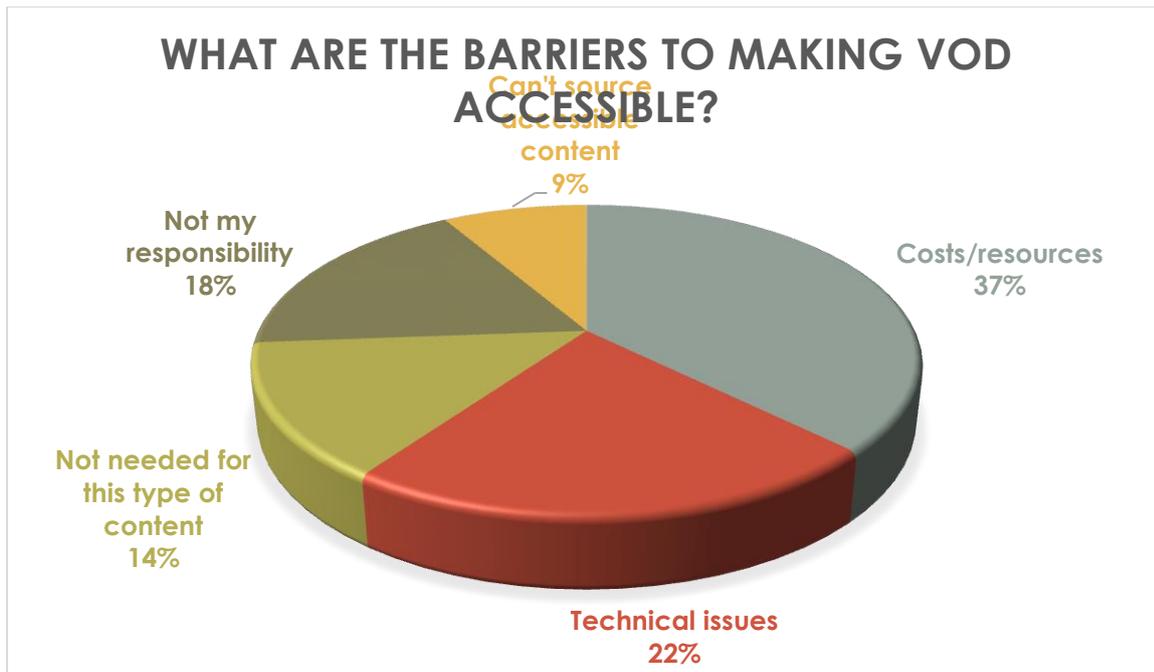


Figure 2: Number of times a particular barrier was mentioned as a percentage of all barriers mentioned

ITV's survey response summarises the unique issues facing VOD services providers, referring to an "exceptionally fast moving" on-demand market when compared with the mature linear broadcast market with "technologies and services that are standardised" and "a supplier landscape that is very simple": "On demand services are based on emerging and fast-changing technologies with proprietary technologies and no consensus on standards, and they are delivered by a highly fragmented range of suppliers.....There is also a significant difference in the number of platforms and file types required for on demand as opposed to linear....Our analysis shows that there are 97 different permutations of on demand video stream types and platforms."

Respondents drew attention to several **technical issues** relating to the emerging VOD landscape. Firstly, existing access services (originally made for broadcast programmes) require editing to be made available on-demand (e.g. advert breaks removed), as stated by Sky. Content providers (e.g. Channel 4, Channel 5, Columbia, Discovery, STV, ITV, UTV) told us that they might have to make any given programme available in multiple technical formats for it to be accessible on each platforms. Content aggregators (e.g. BFI) also point to the inconsistency in technical standards across video players, and BT mentioned "restricted or inconsistent subtitle presentation standards". Curzon cinemas pointed to the impact on their brand of inaccurate subtitle translation tools.

Some service providers had specific issues with Audio Description, such as the BFI ("multi-track late-binding for AD for pre-existing content", problems with "selectable audio tracks on playback") and Modern Times Group / AETN ("our current technical set up is not compatible").

The first and second reports⁴ from the ATVOD ‘Working Group on Access Services’ make clear that there are no insuperable technical obstacles to the provision of VOD access services. Technical issues ultimately boil down to issues of **cost and resources**, as acknowledged by many respondents. However, that is not to say that these are not significant issues.

There is a cost benefit analysis implicit in the responses of those running **small services** (e.g. Chrominance, Bay TV Liverpool, Community Channel, Greystone Media, Estuary TV, FilmDoo, Speedy Bee, Joybear, Localbuzz, Mustard TV, Notts TV, Picturebox, Northern Visions, Premier Christian Media Trust, Scifi, Scripps Networks, Sundance, The Horror Show, Shakespeare’s Globe, Levant TV). ESTV, for example, states that “[i]f and when the channel achieves 0.05% of total viewing Ofcom’s access code comes into force - we will then consider proving access services”. UTV states that delivering “accessible programmes from linear broadcast to multiple On Demand platforms in multiple formats is expensive and is the key barrier...especially for regional broadcasters operating within small territories”.

This is also true of **particular genres** where it is asserted that subtitles, signing and/or audio description are of less relevance to audiences. Examples of the latter include pornographic services (e.g. 965TV, Matthew Forrester, Playboy TV, Portland TV, RHF Productions, WMIT), music services (e.g. Classical TV), children’s content (e.g. Plato Media, BT Scamp), sport (e.g. BT, Arsenal FC, MUTV, Rangers) or live programming more generally (fewer access services available, plus ITV / STV point to the limited audiences for catch-up of most programming designed to be watched live).

However, for other respondents there is an issue of who has **responsibility** for ensuring that content is accessible. Content providers (such as AMC Networks, CBS AMC, Broadcasting Gaia, JimJam) assert that responsibility rests with the platforms, or that their role and influence is limited as the platforms control playout and can have issues ingesting particular content (Fox, Cirkus, ITV, MTV, Nickelodeon, Comedy Central, FilmFlex, Universal Networks International, Walt Disney, Journeyman Pictures). UKTV states, for example: “We continue to ask our platforms partners for details of the technical specification that are working to for access service provision but they are not providing us with an answer, so we are continuing with a solution for our own platforms.” NBC Universal says “Universal Channel UK subtitles most of its content and these files are available to any of our distribution platforms. Currently none wishes to receive them”. Disney states that “whilst programme files containing subtitles and audio description already exist for many of the programmes made available in Disney’s on demand services, the technical constraints of platforms which carry Disney’s services has continued to prevent such access service files being offered to the platform’s subscribers. Disney is continuing to engage in technical and commercial discussions with the platforms in an effort to resolve these difficulties”. Other providers such as the BFI faced specific issues relating to DRM restrictions on some mobile and tablet devices.

On the other hand, we have platform operators stating that access services are not **made available** by the content providers (BFI, FilmOn, Sainsbury’s, Videoondemand365, We Are Colony) or not provided in the right format. Virgin’s response states: “The current Virgin

⁴ http://www.atvod.co.uk/uploads/files/ATVOD_WGAS_Report_2014.pdf
http://www.atvod.co.uk/uploads/files/ATVOD_WGAS_Report_2015.pdf

Media platform is fully capable of hosting subtitles, audio-description and signed programmes and we have invested and continue to invest in this functionality. As part of our contractual process we have sought to have subtitles included and provide the relevant technical specification (and indeed have clarified technical specifications where requested) but to date we have not received a positive response from content providers.” Sky too states that its discussions with content providers have stalled, due to technical obstacles or provider issues with cost / workload.

It is clear that none of the stated barriers to accessibility can be considered in isolation. Content providers say that it’s the platform operators’ responsibility to make their content accessible, but platform operators say they don’t receive content with access services attached – someone has to pay for the subtitles (for example) to be put into the right technical format for each platform. Technical problems require money and time to overcome, and certain types of content (e.g. adult) less obviously benefit from access services, making the expenditure less worthwhile.

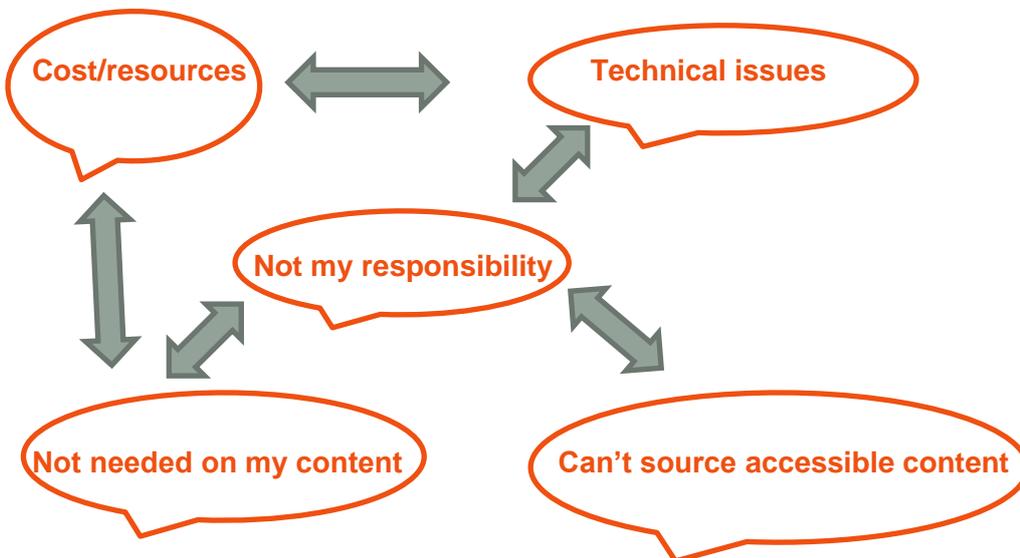


Figure 3: Interrelation of barriers to accessibility

The next section looks at what service providers are currently doing to overcome these barriers, where access services are on the increase, and which areas need further work.

Subtitles and Signing for people with disabilities relating to hearing

Subtitles

Annex 3 sets out subtitle provision by service and by platform. It also indicates which platforms each service is available on, and how large those VOD services are.

Generally speaking, those providing subtitles (notably the Public Service Broadcasters) continue to provide them in slowly increasing volumes, but with a more rapidly increasing spread across different platforms. For example, Channel 5, who previously provided subtitles only on its website and mobile apps, now offers a significant amount of subtitling (70-80% of programme hours) on games consoles (Sony Playstation, Xbox), Connected TV apps, YouView and other set top boxes (e.g Roku, EETV, Fire TV and Freesat).

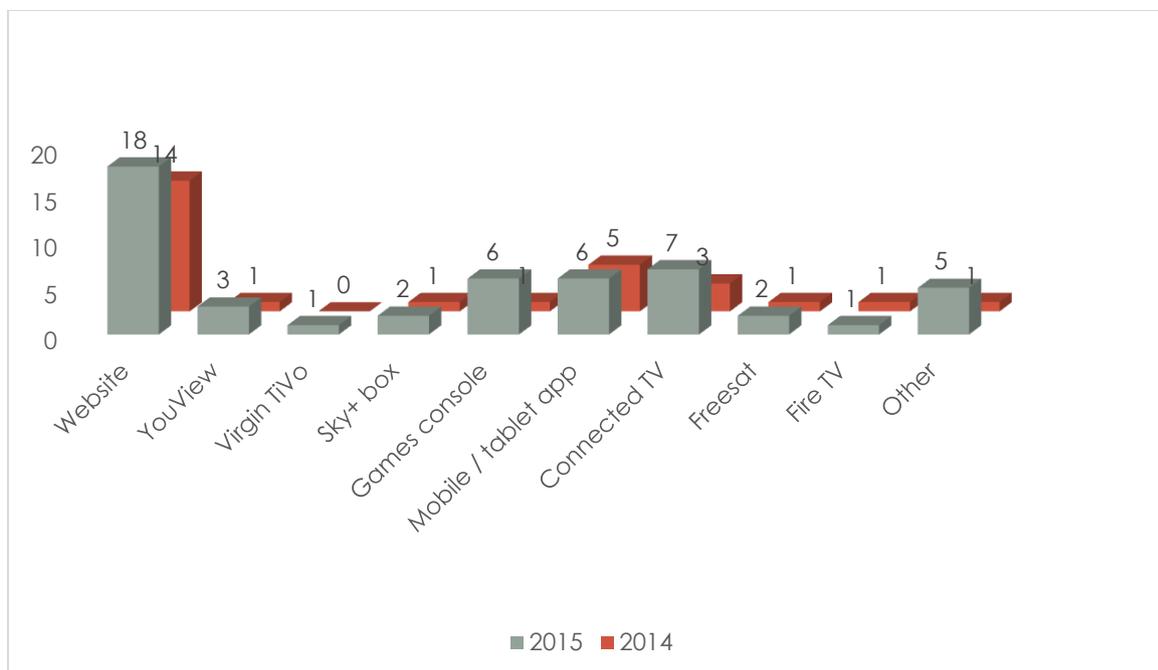


Figure 4: Number of services providing subtitles on a range of platforms 2014-15⁵.

In line with the barriers to accessibility outlined above, the provision of access services is significantly greater on platforms over which the provider exerts direct control, such as own-brand websites. However, if in 2014 we were starting to see subtitles appear on mobile devices, in 2015 the spread is to games consoles and Connected TV apps.

Websites

⁵ YouTube does not appear in this chart as the basis for comparison is not clear. In 2014 many respondents mentioned the ability on YouTube to create automatic captioning for all content. This year respondents detailed two services on which a specific proportion of content was subtitled.

Own-brand websites are the easiest place to make subtitles work. The number of people providing subtitles on their websites has risen slightly since last year (17 as compared with 14 services) but the proportions of subtitled material remain broadly comparable. The following shows subtitle provision in 2013/14 on the larger services (more than 1000 hours of VOD content):

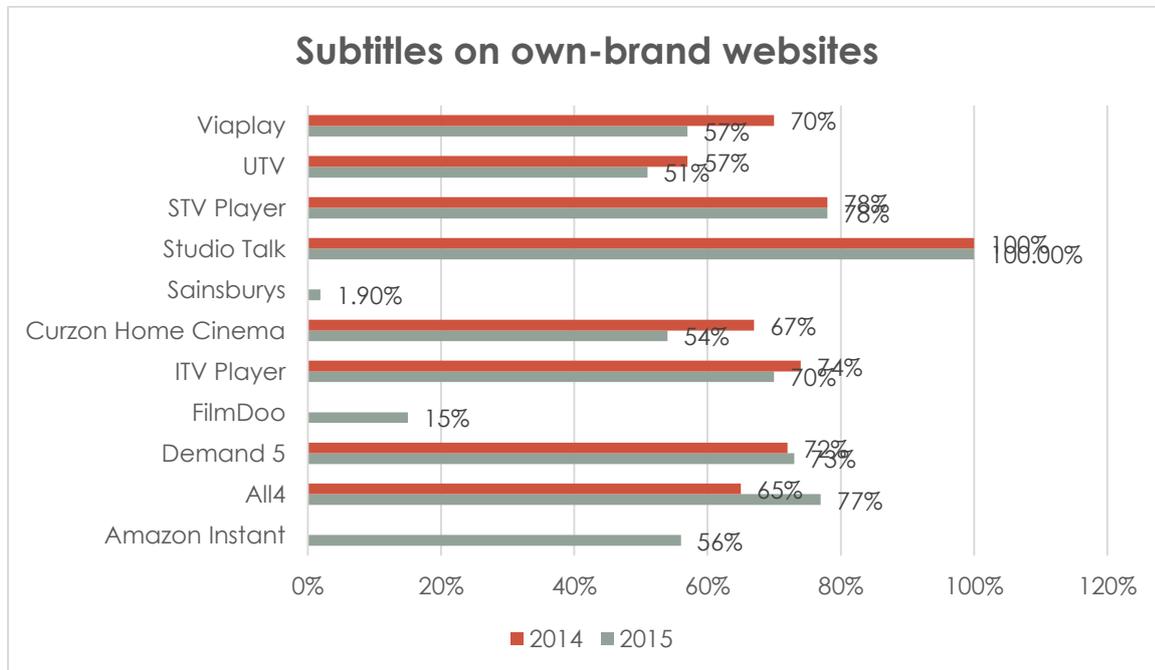


Figure 5: Provision of subtitles on larger (>1000hrs) service websites as a percentage of total programming hours.

It seems that we can see ceilings emerge for some services, often related to the type of content as discussed under 'barriers' above. ITV and UTV commented that the decreased proportion of overall content subtitled is due to an increase in live programming, and gave figures illustrating the very low 'catch-up' audiences associated with most programmes designed to be viewed live. However, there are some notable entrants to subtitling such as Amazon Instant Video. Having told us last year of plans to introduce subtitling, Amazon now subtitles over half its content.

Smaller services to carry subtitling on their websites in 2015 included the BFI Player (29%), BSL Zone Player (100%), Classical TV (11.5%), Globe Player (37%), The Horror Show (15%) Northern Visions (5.5%) and Animax (62%).

In 2014, UKTV told us that it expected to provide subtitles within the next 12 to 24 months on platforms under its own direct control (e.g. its own websites). This does not appear to have materialised to date.

Apps on mobile devices, games consoles and Connected TV

After websites, it is these apps which appear to be most under the control of service providers wishing to make their VOD content accessible. Hence last year a number of service providers told us that they planned to make their content accessible on these apps. Channel 4 was conducting work internally to make its mobile apps accessible; ITV told us of plans to extend accessibility to mobile/tablet apps and also to Connected TV, Freesat and YouView; and STV planned to extend to more mobile apps and to games consoles. Of these providers, only STV appears to have made concrete progress with respect to subtitles, now subtitling 78% of its content on games consoles as well as mobile apps. STV comments that it “relaunched both its STV Players for iOS and Android in Q2 2015. These were “ground-up” rebuild, aimed at bringing up to date the STV Player codebase. This paved the way for the inclusions of subtitles within the next major versions of apps, due early Q4 2015. The feature is currently under test and validation.”

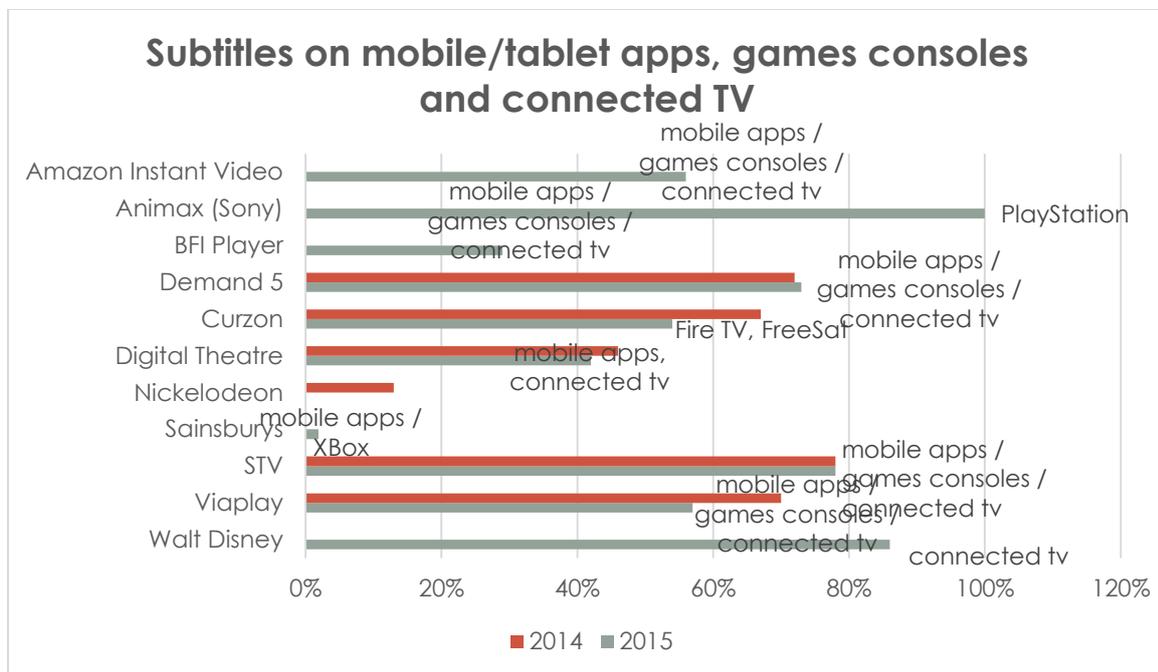


Figure 6: Provision of subtitles on Mobile / tablet apps, Games consoles, and Connected TV, as a percentage of total programming hours.

While the proportions of subtitled content have not risen drastically on those services already providing it, what has increased is the range of devices offering accessible content. In 2015, Demand 5 has offered subtitled content on games consoles and connected TV in addition to its mobile/tablet apps. Likewise STV’s subtitles are available on games consoles as well as mobile devices. It is to be noted however that as the makeup of a particular service changes, it may not be available on an outlet that was accessible in 2014 (for example Curzon Home Cinema on games consoles). This doesn’t necessarily affect the overall picture of increasing accessibility across platforms.

Major third party content aggregators

This is the area where the barriers to provision start to make themselves felt. 2015 has not seen great advances for subtitle provision on the major platforms such as YouView, Virgin and Sky.

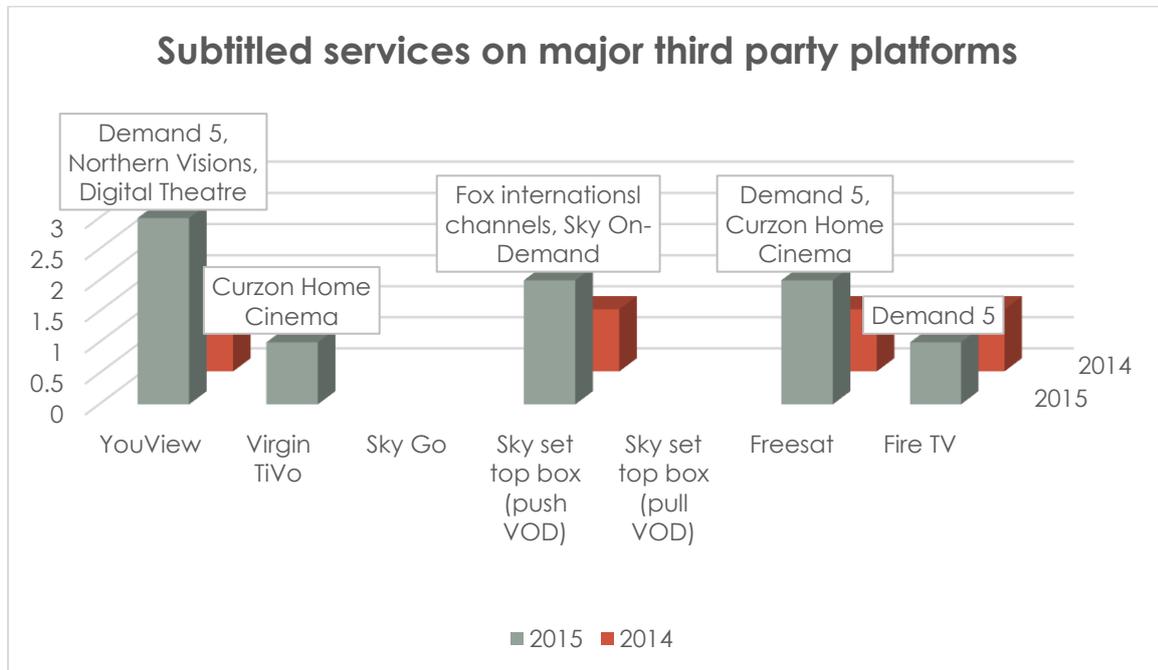


Figure 7: Number of subtitled services available on each major UK third party platform

As described above in 'barriers', there continues to be something of a stalemate between content providers and platform operators regarding responsibility for VOD subtitling. Many content providers (e.g. NBC Universal, UKTV, Fox, Nickelodeon) maintain that they have large catalogues of material with associated subtitles available which are not currently supported by the platforms. ITV has *"written to Sky and Virgin to request that they provide us with details of how we can deliver access services in relation to our VOD on these platform"*. AMC Networks comments that VOD content is delivered to each platform with subtitles if specified but that as each platform may have a different file specification they do not know if any subtitles will be operational / available via that platform.

On the other hand, major platforms such as Virgin and YouView maintain that their platforms are fully able to support all three main access services, and suggest that they are not being offered content with subtitles, or that their technical specifications are not being met, or that content providers are unwilling to shoulder the costs of providing and converting access services. The situation with Sky differs slightly in that talks with content providers aiming at trialling subtitle provision have stalled due to issues with assigning responsibility for costs and resources allocation.

In its 2015 survey response, STV summarises a position which seems to hold true for other content providers and other platforms: *"The Youview platform had, up until recently, very limited options for subtitle support. Combined with STV's limited technical resources to*

create the required format, STV did not provide any programme hours with subtitles in the time period.”

There are a number of ways in which this stalemate is being addressed:

Communication

There has been a notable increase in communication between platforms and content providers on this issue. Sky still says it is looking to work with third party content providers to jointly develop, test and establish a blue print for other third party providers to provide subtitles on the Sky platform. Some content providers (e.g. Disney) point to ongoing discussions with platforms over technical aspects of access service provision. FilmFlex is trialling subtitling on its Virgin Media ‘Movies’ content, and working with Virgin to include subtitling for the next release of Virgin’s ‘TV Anywhere’. FilmFlex is also working with a confidential new partner to agree technical specs and volume of subtitled content. ITV tells a positive story of engagement with Freeview with the result that *“the newly launched Freeview Play has adopted the new European technical specification for IP distribution formats, which will provide for accurate and reliable delivery of subtitles with video on demand”*.

Content provider upgrades

Content providers such as NBC Universal are beginning to adopt the EBU-TT technical standard as recommended by the ATVOD WGAS group, which should simplify content exchange, making it easier for content providers to transfer subtitled assets. STV states that the *“creation of subtitles for our ODPS is currently handled through systems coming end of life in late 2016. One of the business requirement for their upgrade is to address the technical limitation STV had to date with the creation and management of subtitles, in order to deliver them on as many programmes as possible. Therefore it is expected that the systems’ replacements will result in an increased number of programme featuring subtitles.”*

Platform upgrades

As elaborated below under ‘Discussion’, some of the major platforms such as Virgin are conducting significant upgrade work on their platforms which should make provision of subtitles easier. Virgin comments that its *“current VOD platform is 10 years old and needs upgrading. We are rolling out a new IP platform. The platform will include standard ‘timed text’ as a subtitle format for play-out of video files. We have every confidence that such a standard will reduce time slippage and therefore reduce the need to repurpose every asset to ensure the subtitles are aligned with the video. This will allow Virgin Media to host significant volumes of subtitled assets and should reduce the costs of provision for content providers. However, we will still be reliant on content providers giving us the assets in the first place and to work with us to provide content to our new platform. We are currently in dialogue with content providers about the new platform.”*

With these developments in mind, the following plans were outlined in 2015 survey responses. Please note that providers who did not indicate any plans are not included in this summary.

Subtitle Plans

Service Provider	Platform	Details	Timeframe (blank if none given)
AETN	Virgin, Sky Go	Will need to comply with mandatory broadcast percentages of access services as linear share of viewing increases, and aim to make this content available on VOD outlets too.	
AMC Networks	Websites	Licensed materials to be delivered with separate subtitle track to enable accurate data on access services made available	2016
BBC Worldwide (BBC Store)	phone/tablet app	The current trial service is being wound down, to be replaced by BBC Store, which will provide a significant amount of accessible content.	
BT	Not stated	Funding agreed to develop access services.	Financial year 2016/17
BFI	Website, mobile app, connected tv app	Content licensors now instructed to provide subtitles wherever available. All feature titles should therefore have subtitles	As of Oct 1 2015, increase on features to 80%
Channel 4	Prioritising YouView and mobile apps, also Sky+HD set top box (pull VOD), games console and mobile apps, connected TV	Aim is supplying subtitling, where there is the technical capability, in line with the voluntary commitment of 100% made for linear services. Having engaged in a dialogue with Sky, plans are being finalised for subtitle provision.	YouView within next 6 months Sky+HD set top box (pull VOD): beginning 2016 iOS apps: end 2015 Android apps: 2016
Chrominance	Connected TV	Add subtitles to a selection of titles.	Next 12 months
Curzon	Website, Virgin, connected TV, Freesat, Fire TV		Website: Q3 2016, Virgin, connected tv, Freesat, Fire TV: 5% increase p/a
Digital Theatre	Website, Mobile/tablet apps	Plans to increase proportion	
Discovery	Website, Virgin		
E! Entertainment	Website, Virgin		

Service Provider	Platform	Details	Timeframe (blank if none given)
FilmDoo	YouTube	Around 500 programmes subtitled	Within a year
FilmOn	Website, phone/tablet app	Looking to source content that comes with subtitles from vendors and content owners going forward - where available	
Fox	Virgin, Sky Go, Sky+HD set top box (pull VOD)	Currently awaiting a resolution for provision of Subtitles on Sky On Demand content; in discussion with Sky.	
ITV	Virgin, iOS apps	Investment in new way to package and stream content which will in future allow introduction in access services across platforms in more streamlined way.	iOS – H1 2016 Freeview Play - 2017
Joybear Pictures	Website, YouTube	Once the new site is live, plan to survey existing members and new visitors to see what access requirements they may have. Based on that feedback will then implement plan to make a proportion of the content accessible to those with hearing and/or sight impairments.	
NBC Universal	Website, Virgin, Sky+HD set top box (pull VOD)	Working with Virgin to make existing subtitles available.	
Nickelodeon	Virgin, Sky Go, Sky+HD set top box (pull VOD), phone/tablet app	The Nick Mobile App is able to support subtitled programming and has previously included subtitled programming on the App. Intend to have subtitled all the linear programming on the main Nickelodeon channel by the middle of 2016 and will look into making this available for on-demand that is provided on the Nick Mobile App.	
Sainsbury's	Website	Working with our back-end partner to include subtitles for our film titles (provided they are made available by the film studios).	End Q1 2016
Sky	Sky+HD set top box 'pull' VOD	Enable subtitles on Sky content. Working towards enabling on Now TV also.	Summer 2016

Service Provider	Platform	Details	Timeframe (blank if none given)
STV	YouView	Subtitles on YouView	YouView Q4 2015
	Website	Increased subtitle provision on website as the result of systems upgrade	Late 2016
	Mobile apps	STV relaunched both its STV Players for iOS and Android in Q2 2015 following ground-up rebuilds. This paves the way for the inclusion of subtitles within the next major versions of apps.	Q4 2015
UKTV	Website, YouView, iOS and Android apps	Subtitles on website and iOS and Android based apps is on plan for 2016	2016
UTV	phone/tablet app	Exploring opportunities on iOS - this will depend on robust "out of the box" third party technical solutions that could become available to UTV in the future.	Next 12-18 months
Vevo	Games console, phone/tablet app, connected TV	After technological overhaul of Vevo.com and apps.	
Walt Disney	Virgin, Sky Go, Sky+HD set top box (push and pull VOD)	<p>Technical discussions have continued with Virgin Media to enable existing subtitle files to be accessed by Virgin's platform.</p> <p>Technical discussions have continued with Sky in an attempt to enable existing subtitle files to be accessed by Sky's platform. Disney has participated in a BETA test with Sky and is hoping that the subtitle files can be made available by Sky to its subscribers shortly.</p>	
We Are Colony	Tablet app		Q3 2015

Figure 8: Plans for subtitle provision as indicated in 2015 survey responses (respondents with no plans are not included).

Signing

As in all previous survey years, signing remains less widely available than subtitling, provided in smaller quantities on only a limited number of VOD services - British Sign Language Broadcasting Trust (“BSLBT”); ITV and UTV – in similar quantities to last year. The key change in 2015 is introduction of signing on STV’s VOD services.

	BSLBT	ITV	STV	UTV
Website	100%	1.8%	1.1%	2.9%
YouView	100%	1.9%	1.4%	
Virgin		2%		
Sky Go		2.2%		
Games consoles		1.9%	1.1%	
iOS app		2%	1.1%	2.9%
Android app		1.9%	1.1%	
Windows app		1.8%	1.1%	
Connected TV app		1.9%	1.4%	
BT Vision		2.1%		
Freesat		1.4%		
Now TV / Roku		1.7%		

Figure 9: Provision of signing by platform as a percentage of total programming hours

British Muslim TV also provides limited signing on its website and aims to provide more. Other VOD service providers (e.g. Sky, Channel 4, Disney, Nickelodeon, NBC Universal) point to their contributions to the BSLBT fund towards BSL Zone programmes as made available through the BSL Player.

In relation to the relatively small number of signed programmes, STV comments that its catch-up service inherits signed programmes from its broadcast service, and therefore VOD programmes are only signed if “*the programme has a signed version available on broadcast*” and “*the signed version of the programme carries catch-up rights*”. There are notable editorially-led exceptions such as the Scottish Independence Debates where STV created signed versions of the programmes for its VOD service.

While FilmOn and Curzon stated in 2014 that they were aiming to supply signed content once available, this has not materialised to date. FilmOn again this year indicated plans to include signed content, along with Plato Media and BBC Worldwide, via mobile apps.

Audio Description for people with disabilities relating to sight

In previous years, Audio Description (“AD”) was provided on only a very limited number of VOD services; those run by Channel 4, Sky, and Channel Entertainment (no longer operational).

In 2015, as with subtitling, those already providing AD on a particular platform continued to provide it, with some increase in quantities.

Of perhaps more significance is the appearance of audio description on a greater range of outlets, largely due to two providers new to VOD audio description. As planned in 2014, both Channel 5 and ITV had introduced audio description by the time of this year’s survey. These were plans with concrete time frames – those with more general plans in 2014 (such as Amazon, Fox, FilmOn and Curzon) have not yet begun audio-describing VOD content.

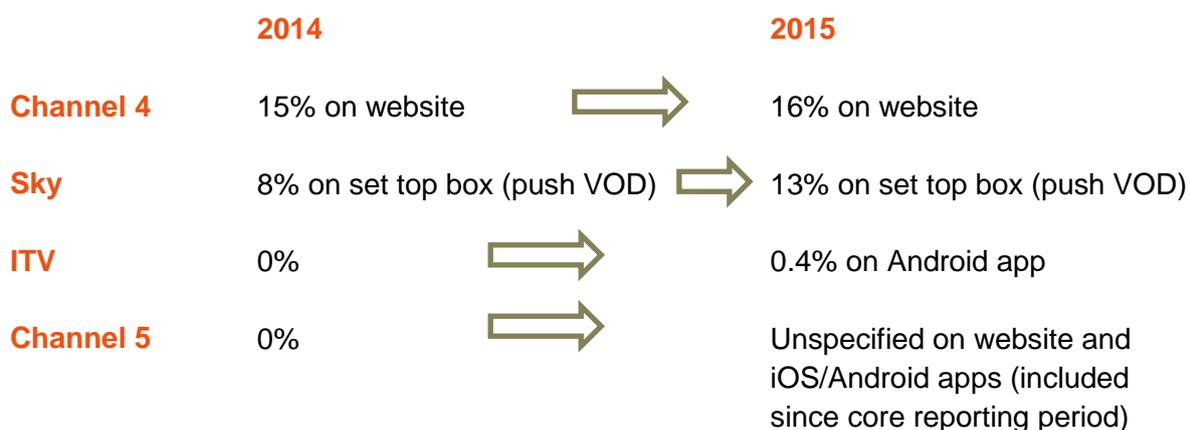


Figure 10: Audio Described VOD content in 2014 and 2015 as a percentage of total programme hours.

ITV’s approach to introducing audio description has been to prioritise its most popular programmes such as Coronation Street and Downton Abbey, with plans to roll out AD to other popular programmes and to more platforms. Other plans mentioned in 2015 are outlined below (providers who did not indicate any plans are not included).

Audio Description Plans

Service Provider	Platform	Plan	Timeframe
AETN	Virgin,		
BBC Worldwide	Mobile apps	Current trial service is being wound down, to be replaced by BBC Store, which will provide a significant amount of accessible content.	
BFI	Website, mobile apps, connected tv	Currently investigating a technical solution to enable multi-track late binding functionality on transcodes which would make AD possible without having to create entirely new assets.	Provisional: Q1 2016 for development, beginning roll out in Q2 2016
Channel 4	YouView, Virgin, Sky set top box, mobile apps, connected tv	<p>Conducting internal work at this stage</p> <p>The intention is to supply audio description, where there is technical capacity to support it, in line with the voluntary commitments made for linear services (20%)</p> <p>Plans to provide audio description across different forms of programming by trialling audio description on foreign-language content.</p>	
Comedy Central	Sky Go,	Working with platforms and Action on Hearing Loss to find a solution.	
Curzon	Website, Virgin, connected tv, Freesat, Fire TV		Q3 2016

Service Provider	Platform	Plan	Timeframe
Discovery	YouView, Virgin,	Subtitles are however a priority	
Disney	Virgin, Sky Go, Sky set top box	<p>Technical discussions have continued with Virgin Media to enable existing audio description files to be accessed by Virgin's platform.</p> <p>Technical discussions have continued with Sky in an attempt to enable existing audio description files to be accessed by Sky's platform. Disney has participated in a BETA test with Sky and is hoping that the audio description files can be made available by Sky to its subscribers shortly.</p>	
FilmOn	Mobile apps	Looking to source content that comes with Audio Description from vendors and content owners going forward - where available	
Fox	Virgin, Sky Go, Sky set top box		
ITV	YouView, others	Plan to continue to roll out AD to popular programmes and more platforms	

Service Provider	Platform	Plan	Timeframe
Joybear Pictures	Website, YouTube	Once the new site is live, plan to survey existing members and new visitors to see what access requirements they may have. Based on that feedback will then implement plan to make a proportion of the content accessible to those with hearing and/or sight impairments.	
Nickelodeon	Virgin, Sky Go, Sky set top box, mobile apps	Investigating (with relevant platforms) the possibility of providing content featuring audio description	
NBC Universal	Virgin, Sky set top box		
STV	YouView, mobile apps, connected tv	Will impact assess the provision of Audio Description as part of system upgrades	2016/17
UKTV	YouTube, YouView		
UTV	Mobile apps		Longer term
Vevo	Website, Mobile apps, connected tv	Aim to provide access services after current technological overhaul.	

Figure 11: Plans for Audio Description provision as indicated in 2015 survey responses (respondents with no plans are not included).

The technical challenges to delivering Audio Description on VOD differ from those facing subtitling. It is arguably a more straightforward process to provide pre-existing Audio Described content in some form on a VOD service. A key challenge for AD on VOD is posed by the functionality of the user-equipment as it has been designed, which often offers no easy route for a blind or partially-sighted person to select their preferred content nor easily to choose a described version of it if available. These issues are discussed in the 2015 of the ATVOD Working Group on Access Services referenced above.

There remains some confusion over whether the platforms can support Audio Description, and in what form. Nickelodeon comment that “[b]roadly we understand that Virgin is unable

to support audio description on its on demand platforms but we aim to work with Virgin to investigate the possibility of providing content featuring audio description on the My Nick Jr TiVo App." NBC Universal Global Networks UK stated that 1,314 hours of AD files were available over the survey period, but were not carried by the platforms.

On the other hand, Virgin states that its platform supports Audio Description. Although Sky told us that it provides audio description on its smallest service only (the 'push' set top box content), it has been working with the RNIB to trial an Audio Description app for companion devices (such as phones or tablets) which provides AD synchronised with programme sound.⁶

One of the barriers to providing Audio Description appears to be the availability of pre-existing AD tracks to use on VOD services. Sainsbury's, for example, stated that AD provision is *"dependent on the rights holders making available programmes with Audio Description"*. Channel 4 told us that where there is insufficient time to create audio description for programmes received very close to broadcast there are no AD files to use on All 4. Fox pointed out that it has only one broadcast who (NCIS) for which audio description is made, which would represent only 22 hours per year of its VOD content. It is worth noting in this regard that the linear requirements relating to Audio Description (as outlined in Ofcom's Code on Television Access Services) peak at 10% of programmes (compared with 80% of programmes for subtitles). That said, we are clearly not seeing all audio described linear content making it onto VOD in accessible form.

Discussion

ATVOD has again been encouraged by the scale of response to the survey and the progress that is being made on the increasing breadth of accessibility across outlets (including mobile and tablet apps, connected TV, and games consoles).

It is apparent that most of the major TV platforms now appear to support accessible content. However, it also seems to be the case that none of these platforms make it easy for content providers to make their content accessible. It is particularly concerning to see that the confusion over Virgin's platform capabilities continues for a third year. ATVOD urges platform operators to use the established lines of communication to reinforce their technical requirements for provision of access services with content.

ATVOD also urges further work towards supporting accessibility on the part of Sky, as above, and TalkTalk, whose 2015 response states that *"would be a complex task to develop access services for TalkTalk's YouView TV platform, due to the need to ensure that the software for the on-demand player is fully compatible with the YouView platform software, and potentially also the firmware and hardware for each YouView set-top box"*.

However, it is also ATVOD's opinion that it is not good enough for some content providers to maintain that accessibility is not their responsibility and is out of their hands. Where elements of access service provision are outside content providers' control (for example, those by platforms), content providers should be prepared to be more pro-active (for

⁶ <http://www.rnib.org.uk/new-app-brings-vod-blind-and-partially-sighted-people> and <http://www.rnib.org.uk/audio-description-app>

example in seeking technical information on subtitle formats). For some content providers this may mean a greater willingness to invest resources into accessibility. . By way of parallel, the recent introduction in the US of rules for subtitling Internet video sees responsibility shared between content provider and platform.⁷

In relation to audio description in particular, service providers are failing to use the increasing quantity of audio described content made for linear television to make their VOD services accessible to blind and partially sighted customers.

ATVOD recognises that the necessary systems changes cannot be made in isolation and often have to be combined with wider technical upgrades. Therefore it is welcome that several respondents (both content providers and platform operators) plan to use forthcoming upgrades to improve accessibility. For example:

- Virgin states, as above, that it is rolling out a new IP platform with a subtitle standard which will make it easier to relay subtitles to VOD audiences.
- Sky has committed funding to address its current inability to carry access services data together with content on its 'pull' VOD outlet. However, Sky also points out that even where they hold an existing copy of a subtitled programme, further investment is required to edit that programme to make it suitable for on-demand.
- STV is *"still going through the upgrade of its legacy systems therefore not all limitations are lifted but the expectations are that all of its ODPS will feature subtitles by mid-2016. The fragmentation of file format (e.g. variants of TTML, webVTT, etc for subtitles) is also a barrier to switch delivery across the platform. Improvements in standardisation around EBU-TT are expected to ease delivery. STV has however noticed significant improvement from both solution suppliers and platform providers (e.g. Youview). This has facilitated the recent introduction of subtitles on various apps, such as the STV Player for Amazon Fire TV and on Xbox 360."*
- Turner is *"currently undergoing a lengthy process of converting all content to a purely file based system with our transmission partner, Arqiva. Once this has been complete we will be able to work with our partner VOD platforms to supply the access service files in the format that they require."*
- TalkTalk adds a note of caution on the time-scales involved, stating that that there is *"a very substantial backlog of software development due to take place for TalkTalk's YouView service, generally running to in excess of a year. As such, even if the various issues outlined above could be overcome, there would be a considerable time lag before access services could be introduced."* In line with this, Digital Theatre comments that subtitles have only been available via TalkTalk (on YouView) on those production with burnt-in subtitles, as TalkTalk do not currently host closed captions (which can be switched on and off).
- ITV provides a more general optimistic note in its hope that the *"complexity in online content delivery will simplify as the market matures, just as it did with linear broadcasting, and so over time we anticipate the process becoming easier and faster."*

⁷ <https://www.fcc.gov/guides/captioning-internet-video-programming>

Next Steps

ATVOD's role as the co-regulator for the editorial content of on demand programme services will come to an end on 31 December 2015, and from 1 January 2016 Ofcom will act as sole regulator for on-demand programme services.

ATVOD is working closely with Ofcom to manage a smooth and seamless transition. Ofcom has indicated that it will review its approach to the regulation of on demand programme services, with a consultation in early 2016.

ATVOD strongly encourages Ofcom to take forward its work on accessibility of VOD services, making use of the information gathered by ATVOD in its annual survey and the work done by the ATVOD Working Group on Access Services ("WGAS"), which met for the last time in December 2015. Any recommendations relating to future work to arise from that meeting will also be carried over to Ofcom.

In addition, ATVOD encourages Ofcom to review the existing 'Best Practice' guidelines available in relation to both linear and non-linear access service provision.

In the interim period, ATVOD continues to support the following key recommendations:

- Service providers should prioritise content for which linear access services already exist
- Content providers should consider adopting EBU-TT as a standard file format for subtitle exchange
- Platform operators should ensure that their platforms are able to support access services and that their technical requirements are understood by their content providers
- All parties should prioritise an increase in audio described VOD content.
- All parties in the supply chain should keep access services in mind when revising contractual arrangements or technical systems.

ATVOD would like to thank those service providers, disability groups, and access service providers who have engaged with us so constructively in our work encouraging accessibility. We have appreciated the extent to which service providers in particular have been willing to share their technical problems and innovations. We hope this work translates in the near future into On Demand services which can be enjoyed by everyone.

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