

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

THE AUTHORITY FOR TELEVISION **ON DEMAND**

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# **Provision of Video on Demand Access Services - 2014 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

The ability to enjoy a television programme or film can for many viewers depend entirely on whether or not it comes with subtitles, signing or ‘audio description’<sup>1</sup>. These “access services” are the key to making programmes accessible to everyone, including those with disabilities relating to sight or hearing. Over recent years, broadcast television has become increasingly accessible, but what about catch-up and video on demand (“VOD”) content? If I’ve watched the first episode of a series with subtitles on television, what happens when I try to watch episode two on catch-up?

This report gives an overview of “access services” provision across 90 VOD services. It details this year’s responses to ATVOD’s annual survey of VOD accessibility. ATVOD has a statutory duty to encourage greater accessibility of VOD services, and we welcome this role. This year we made the survey compulsory for all providers of VOD services notified to ATVOD, which accounts for a doubling in responses, up from 43 in 2013.

ATVOD believes that the report will have a number of uses. It can be used by consumers who want to know which VOD services are accessible to them. It can be used by service providers who want to know how they measure up to their competitors in accessibility. Perhaps most importantly, this year’s survey shows that things are getting better. Subtitles in particular are showing up on more services and on more devices. Last year, if you wanted to watch on demand content with subtitles it more or less had to be via a computer. This year you can watch (among others) Demand 5 on your iPhone, Digital Theatre on your tablet, or Curzon Home Cinema on your Connected TV.

This is not a time to be complacent, and in the report we point to large providers who could be making their services more accessible. ATVOD continues to work with a range of service providers to recommend technical standards which will make this easier to do.

### Key Findings in 2014

- Public service broadcasters (“PSBs”) like ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5 again appear to be making the most significant progress in providing subtitled VOD services.
- These accessible services are still most commonly available via a computer on own-brand websites (the 4oD website, for example). Provision of subtitles via such websites is steadily increasing.
- In 2014 we also started to see accessible services provided via other platforms, such as mobile apps. ‘Demand 5’ and the ‘STV Player’ are good examples of services available with subtitles this way.

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<sup>1</sup> Audio description is a service primarily aimed at blind or visually-impaired people. It comprises a commentary woven around the soundtrack, exploiting pauses to explain on screen action, describe characters, locations, costumes, body language and facial expressions to enhance meaning and enjoyment for blind or visually-impaired viewers.

- Providers continue to identify persistent barriers to the provision of subtitles and audio description. The biggest problem seems to be delivery of 'accessible' programmes to multiple platforms in multiple formats. A programme may have been broadcast with subtitles, but the VOD version of the programme can be available via a range of platforms (set top boxes, websites, apps, connected TVs, etc.) all requiring different technical formats for the subtitles to 'work'.
- Although barriers remain, the 2014 survey revealed many more conversations between content providers and platform operators, in attempts to overcome these barriers.

### ATVOD Response

- ATVOD welcomes the continued improvement of PSBs in the scale of their subtitle provision. We hope that ITV and Channel 4 will follow Channel 5's lead in spreading provision across outlets, from own brand websites to mobile and other platforms.
- ATVOD welcomes the work of commercial broadcasters who have provided access services in the last year, and encourages other commercial providers to put into action any plans for provision as soon as possible. ATVOD is disappointed that Sky's response to this survey records data in relation to only 5% of its VOD service. We encourage commercial providers with very limited access services provision to expand provision to their larger outlets.
- ATVOD encourages the major set top box platforms – Sky, Virgin and YouView – to ensure that their platform can process any subtitles supplied by their content providers. More than this, we urge platform operators to make sure that their platform's capabilities in this regard are known and understood by all their content providers.
- There remains much to be done especially for those with disabilities relating to sight. Encouraging the provision of on demand programmes with audio description will be a particular focus for ATVOD over the next year.

### Future work

- ATVOD continues to actively facilitate information sharing between service providers.
- ATVOD's working group on access services ("WGAS") is central to this aim. Established in 2013, the group has recommended a technical standard (EBU-TT) for subtitles provision which is now being adopted by VOD providers.
- In 2015, WGAS aims to recommend a technical standard for audio description, and will continue to provide a forum for information sharing and problem solving.
- Standard formats for access services will allow content providers (like Turner, Comedy Central, or Channel 4) to make their programmes available with subtitles / audio description on an ever increasing number of platforms (from iPhone apps to the Virgin Tivo set top box).

## 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 services<sup>2</sup>. 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.

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 a voluntary annual survey of current levels of provision of such ‘access services’.

On 26 February 2014, ATVOD published its Access Services Plan<sup>3</sup> (“the Plan”) setting out how it would encourage services providers over the period 2014-16. This plan stated that ATVOD would continue to conduct an annual survey of access services provision, but that from 2014 responses to the survey would no longer be voluntary. Instead, responses would be made compulsory by using a demand for information under s368O of the Act. A failure to comply with such a demand for information could ultimately lead to enforcement action by Ofcom, including the imposition of a financial penalty.

The decision to make this survey compulsory was taken in order to ensure that ATVOD can publish a full picture of the extent to which access services are being provided on regulated video-on-demand services. In previous years, the survey has given only an incomplete picture – for example, the response rate to the 2013 survey was just under 50%.

This report details the responses received to ATVOD’s fourth major survey of regulated service providers, which closed on 30 September 2014. All providers of one or more ODPS were required to complete the survey.

## The Survey

The aim of the survey was to provide information on current levels of provision of access services in On Demand Programme Services (“ODPS”), in order to enable stakeholders,

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<sup>2</sup> 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”

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.atvod.co.uk/uploads/files/Access\\_Services\\_Plan\\_2014-16.pdf](http://www.atvod.co.uk/uploads/files/Access_Services_Plan_2014-16.pdf)

including people with relevant disabilities, to identify which specific access services are being offered on which services.

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 purpose of this was to identify, at least in part, the extent to which access services were being provided on media outlets most likely to be used by consumers

A copy of the survey is provided as Annex 1.

## The Responses

Responses were received from ninety service providers. This is more than double the number of responses received in 2013 (when forty three service providers responded), and ATVOD thanks those service providers who took the time to provide the required information.

There were just three service providers who failed to respond to ATVOD's formal demand for information. They were: Harsh Media; Liverpool FC; and GRM Daily.

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

Please note 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.

## Services for people with disabilities relating to hearing

### Subtitles

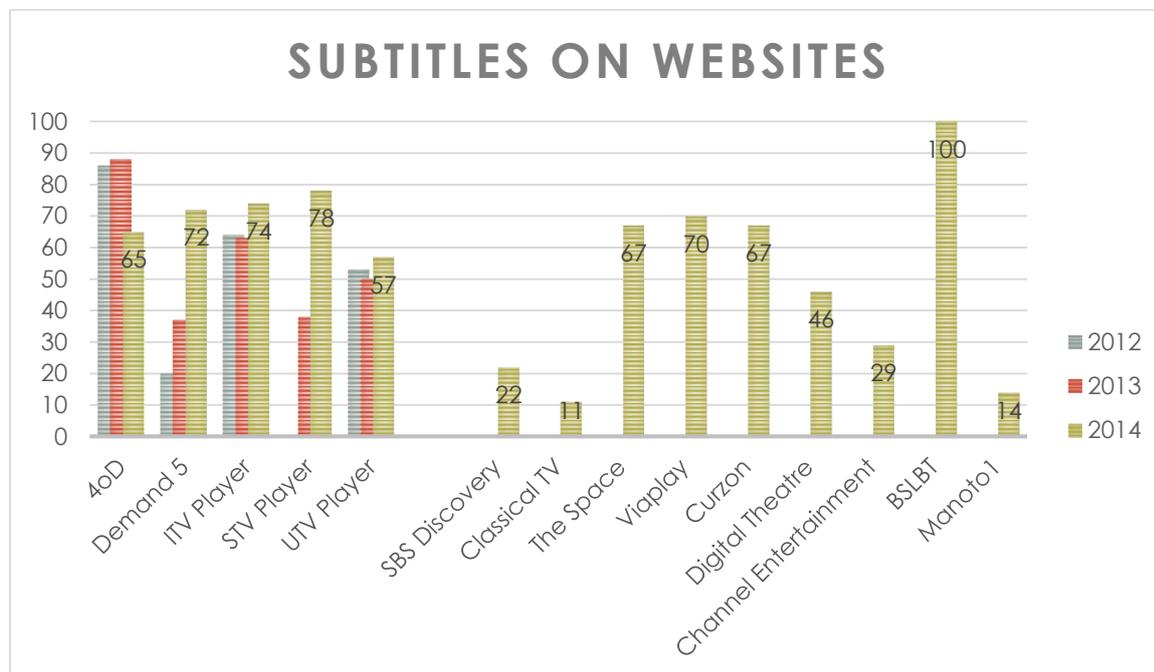


Figure 1: Provision of subtitles on **own brand websites** as percentage of total programme hours. 14 respondents provided subtitles on their websites.

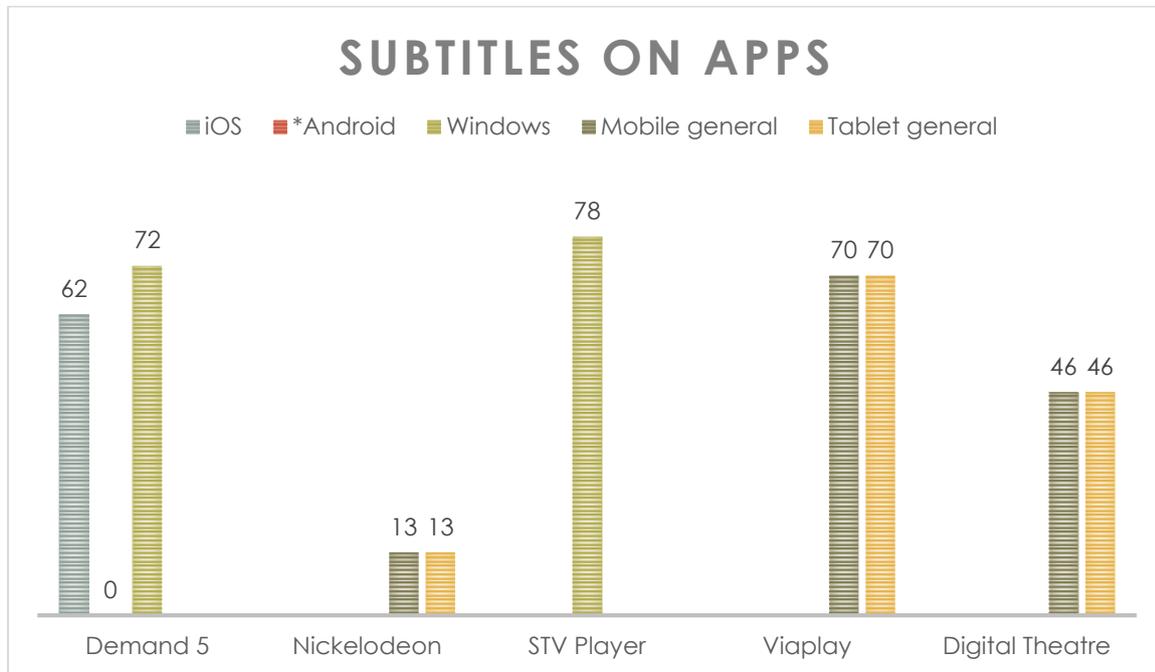
As can be seen from Figure 1, Service Providers continue to subtitle material on their own brand websites, with a consistent increase in such provision. The Demand 5 website has seen another significant increase in the percentage of total programme hours which are subtitled, with increases too for the ITV/STV/UTV Players. Although Channel 4's website provision appears to have decreased, the percentage of subtitled **programmes** has in fact increased from 92% in 2013 to 99% in 2014.

In line with the increased response rate in 2014, we can see that a number of other on-demand services are providing significant levels of subtitling. The figures obtained range from 11% of hours for Classical TV (which makes up 47% of programmes), to 100% for the British Sign Language Broadcasting Trust.

Several services offer subtitling of foreign language content, rather than as a specific access service. These include the Persian language service Manoto1, which subtitles 14% of programme hours. AETN also stated that they include foreign language subtitling on a number of their services that are targeted at other EU member states.

As in previous years, own brand websites show the greatest levels of provision. However, in 2014 we are seeing a move towards subtitling on other platforms such as mobile / tablet apps and set top boxes (see Figures 2 and 3). STV and Channel 5 in particular have expanded provision since the 2013 reporting period. Channel 5 now offers subtitles on 72% of programme hours available via its Windows app (62% via its iOS app). STV subtitles 78% of programme hours on its Windows app.

These moves to make services accessible on outlets other than own-brand websites are significant, as the services on such outlets can be larger than the website offering, both in terms of quantity of content and likely audience size. For example, while the 4oD website offered 6075 programmes, 13536 programmes were available on its iOS app.



*Figure 2: Provision of subtitles on **mobile / tablet apps** as percentage of total programme hours. 6 respondents provided subtitles on these apps.*

*\* We did not receive details of any access services provided via Android apps (although figures given for mobile apps in general may include Android apps).*

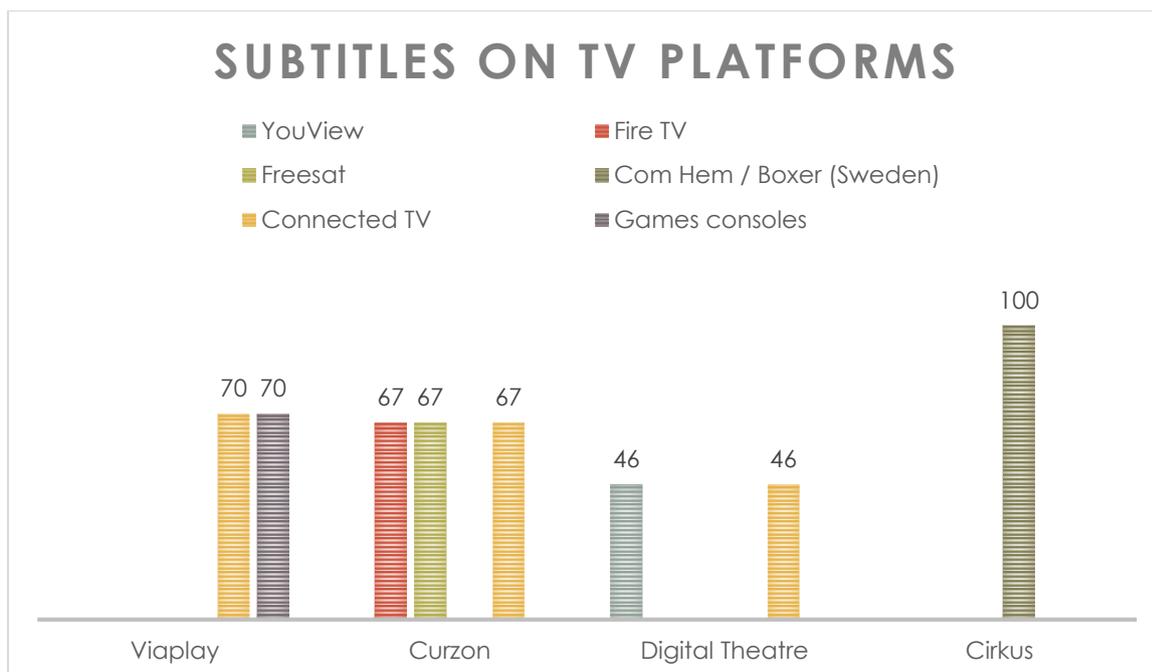


Figure 3: Provision of subtitles on **connected TV apps / games consoles / set top boxes** as percentage of total programme hours. 6 respondents provided subtitles via these outlets (see comments on Sky below).

ATVOD has been unable to include Sky's subtitle provision in Figure 3 above. This is because Sky's response gave figures only for its 'push content' via the Sky+/Sky+HD set top box (on which the proportion of audio-described programme hours fell from 73% in 2013 to 69% in 2014). While ATVOD was told that the push VOD content constitutes around 5% of the content on Sky's broader Sky On Demand service, we were not provided with figures on the total number of programmes / programme hours available via the Sky+/Sky+HD set top box and are therefore unable to estimate provision of subtitling on Sky's broader service via this outlet (the broader Sky On Demand service being available on other outlets such as the Sky Go website and mobile devices). However, we can estimate from the figures provided that 3.5% of content on the Sky On Demand service is subtitled.

Similarly, ATVOD has been unable to include Vubiquity's subtitle provision in Figures 2 and 3. Vubiquity's response gave an overall figure of 95% subtitled content across different platforms (including mobile and TV platforms). Vubiquity notes that its EU services are subtitled primarily in order to translate content from English into the local language.

A number of correspondents (Community Channel, Premier Christian Radio) drew attention to the availability of the YouTube captioning service, which means that 100% of their programmes on that platform can be watched with subtitles.

It is worth noting that different *types* of content also differ in terms of their accessibility. Whereas the majority of 4oD's archive material carries subtitles, they are not provided for material which has been broadcast live as the accompanying subtitles are not linked to the hard copy of the programme. ITV also drew attention to the financial and logistical problems which lead to a lack of subtitling on content originally broadcast and subtitled live.

### Future plans

Those currently providing subtitles on some of their platforms outlined any plans both for increasing the volume of subtitling on these platforms and expanding this provision to other platforms. Channel 4's intention is *"to supply subtitling where there is technical capacity to support it, in line with the voluntary commitments made for linear services – 100%"*. In 2014 it will be rolling out subtitles to accompany its online short-form video content, 4Shorts, and is conducting work internally to take forward provision of access services on mobile apps / tablet devices, although a timeframe for delivery has not yet been agreed. Channel 4 emphasises that as access service provision is a *"technically complex process which requires significant investment and resources...it is necessary for Channel 4 to prioritise its provision based on audience need and cost"*. Channel 4 has therefore focussed to date on its own platforms rather than the third party platforms on which its service is available (YouView, Virgin TiVo, Sky).

ITV reiterated its 2013 plans to extend provision of subtitles to mobile and tablet apps, and is also looking at provision on connected TV, Freesat and YouView. STV similarly plans to provide subtitles on Games Consoles, mobile and tablet apps.

Curzon aims to continue its 67% subtitling rate across its platforms in 2015, adding c1% annually and aiming to *"provide further closed captioning on the service as the original files/materials are available from our content suppliers in both Europe and beyond."*

Of those not currently providing subtitling there are some significant plans. Amazon Instant Video (formerly LoveFilm) expects roll out of closed captions on the service to commence in Q4 2014 across all its platforms (website, games consoles, mobile, tablet and connected TV apps, Fire TV).

Filmson state that they are *"looking to acquire/request content with subtitles from source vendors and producers where available for all our new contracts and therefore will look to make this available where possible as soon as we ingest such content."*

Other service providers (Turner, AETN) stated an intention to look at subtitle provision once their related linear channels start making available programmes with subtitles. Smaller providers (e.g. new service Videoondemand365) expressed a desire and intention to provide subtitles once their services became more widely available.

Some service providers emphasised the fact that subtitle provision requires input and cooperation across the delivery chain. Vevo stated that it was *"working on providing closed captioning to Vevo's web based applications, however the end user won't be able to view the closed captioning until we receive the relevant ingestion data from the record labels."* NBC Universal, UKTV and Fox emphasised their willingness to provide subtitles once these were supported by the relevant platforms (see 'Provision by platform' below). While UKTV expected to provide subtitles within the next 12 to 24 months on platforms under its own direct control (e.g. its own websites), it stated that *"delivery of access services for our VoD services with 3<sup>rd</sup> party platforms is subject to the finalisation of their own technical acceptance criteria"*. Fox stated that it is in discussion with Sky over providing subtitles via the Sky (pull VOD) platform.

The section 'Provision by Platform' below gives further details on Sky's plans with respect to 'pull' VOD content (whether their own or provided by a third party content provider). Sky are *"currently engaged with a major third party on demand content provider to make subtitles available for their pull VOD content."*

## Signing

As in previous years, signing remained significantly less widely available than subtitling. The British Sign Language Broadcasting Trust provides 100% signing of programmes on its website. Other than the BSLBT, it was again only ITV and UTV who provided signed programmes. 3% of UTV's programme hours were signed content (on its website and phone / tablet apps) whereas ITV's signed programme hours across its platforms ranged from 2.3% (on its website) to approximately 3% (YouView, Virgin TiVo, Sky pull VoD, games consoles, mobile/tablet apps, connected TV, and Freesat).

The Community Channel pointed out that it broadcasts approximately 75 hours of signed programming annually but does not make this available via its ODPS as BSL Zone programmes are made available through BSL Player. Other respondents (for example Channel4, NBC Universal, Comedy Central, Nickelodeon) referred to the fact that while they do not provide signing on their VOD content, they contribute to the BSLBT's fund towards the BSL Zone.

Specific plans to provide signed content were mentioned by only 3 respondents. Premier TV stated that *"our Radio producer and Content Coordinator are meeting with a group for hearing loss on the 24th September to discuss plans for green screen signing."* Filmon stated that it was *"looking to acquire/request content with Signing from source vendors and producers where available for all our new contracts and therefore will look to make this available where possible as soon as we ingest such content."* Curzon is *"aiming to provide Signing on the service once the original files/materials are available from our content suppliers in both Europe and beyond when the costs of integration become commercially viable"*.

## Services for people with disabilities relating to sight

### Audio Description

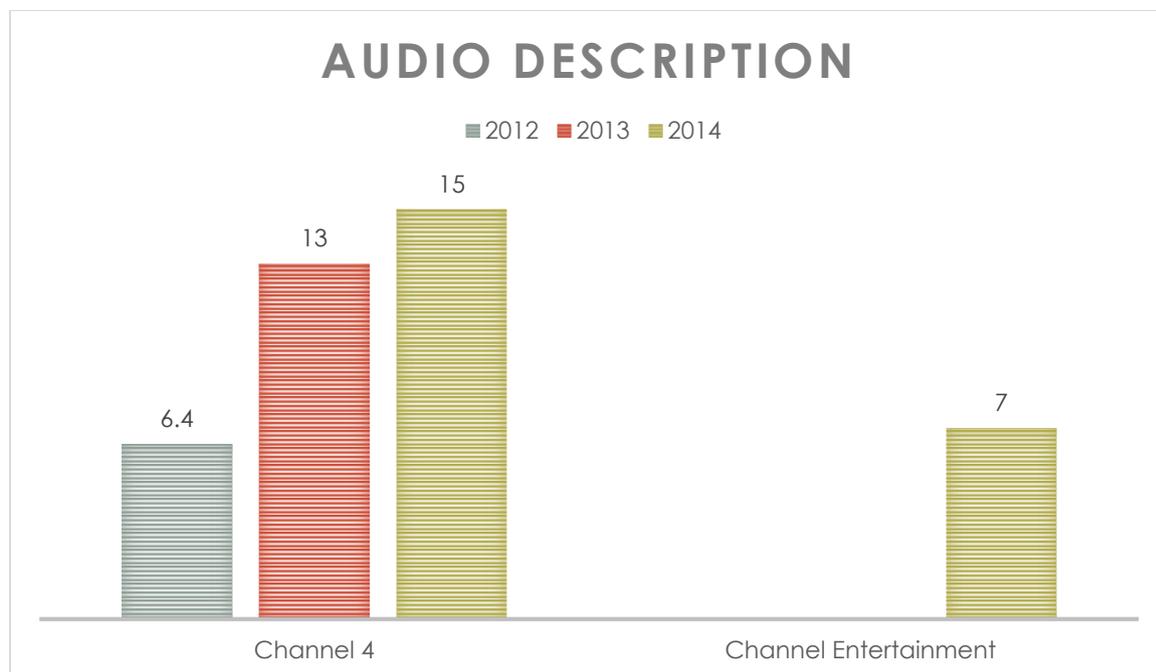


Figure 4: Provision of audio description on **own brand websites** as percentage of total programme hours. 2 respondents provided audio description on their websites.

Channel 4 continued to be the frontrunner in providing accessible services for those with disabilities relating to sight. 15% of the programme hours on the 4OD website (18% of programmes) carried audio description. The longer term 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%. In terms of provision across platforms, Channel 4 explained that in prioritising its provision based on audience need and cost, “discussion around provision of access services on third party platforms are focused on subtitling rather than audio description, although we envisage this being added over time.”

Again, the increased responses to this 2014 survey revealed another provider, Channel Entertainment, with audio description available on its service – in this case 7% of the total programme hours on its website. On its much smaller YouTube service, 50% of the content was audio described.

As with subtitling, ATVOD has been unable to include Sky’s provision of audio-description in Figure 4 above. This is because Sky’s response gave figures only for its ‘push content’ via the Sky+/Sky+HD set top box (on which the proportion of audio-described programme hours fell from 21% in 2013 to 8% in 2014). While ATVOD was told that the push VOD content constitutes around 5% of the content on Sky’s broader Sky On Demand service, we were not provided with figures on the total number of programmes / programme hours available via the Sky+/Sky+HD set top box and are therefore unable to estimate provision of audio description on Sky’s broader service via this outlet (the broader Sky On Demand service being available

on other outlets such as the Sky Go website and mobile devices). However, we can estimate from the figures provided that 0.4% of the Sky On Demand service carries audio description.

### Plans

Seven respondents gave plans for provision of audio description. Amazon Instant Video (formerly LoveFilm) is currently acquiring the rights to create Audio Description for its programmes across a variety of platforms. However unlike Amazon's subtitling plans (see above) there is no specific timeframe and the project is to be reviewed in 2015.

In 2013 both Channel 5 and ITV expressed an intention to begin providing audio description in 2014. Although at the time of this survey audio description had not yet been provided, both service providers again outlined plans to introduce audio description. Channel 5 plans to investigate provision of audio description on its website and mobile and tablet apps. ITV plans to introduce audio description on its website, YouView, Freesat, games consoles, mobile and tablet apps and connected TV. However, specific time frames are not given.

As with subtitling above, Fox is in discussion with Sky over inclusion of access services via its pull VOD platform – however Fox emphasises that it has only one show from its linear service for which audio description is available.

New respondent Filmon stated in relation to its website that *“we are looking to acquire/request content with Audio Description from source vendors and producers where available for all our new contracts and therefore will look to make this available where possible as soon as we ingest such content.”* Likewise, Curzon aimed to provide Audio Description on its service *“once the original files/materials are available from our content suppliers in both Europe and beyond when the costs of integration become commercially viable.”* The Live Pulse News service began after the end of the survey period, but the plan is that all programming *“will include audio description and pod casts of the programmes will be archived and available in audio only format.”*

## Provision by platform

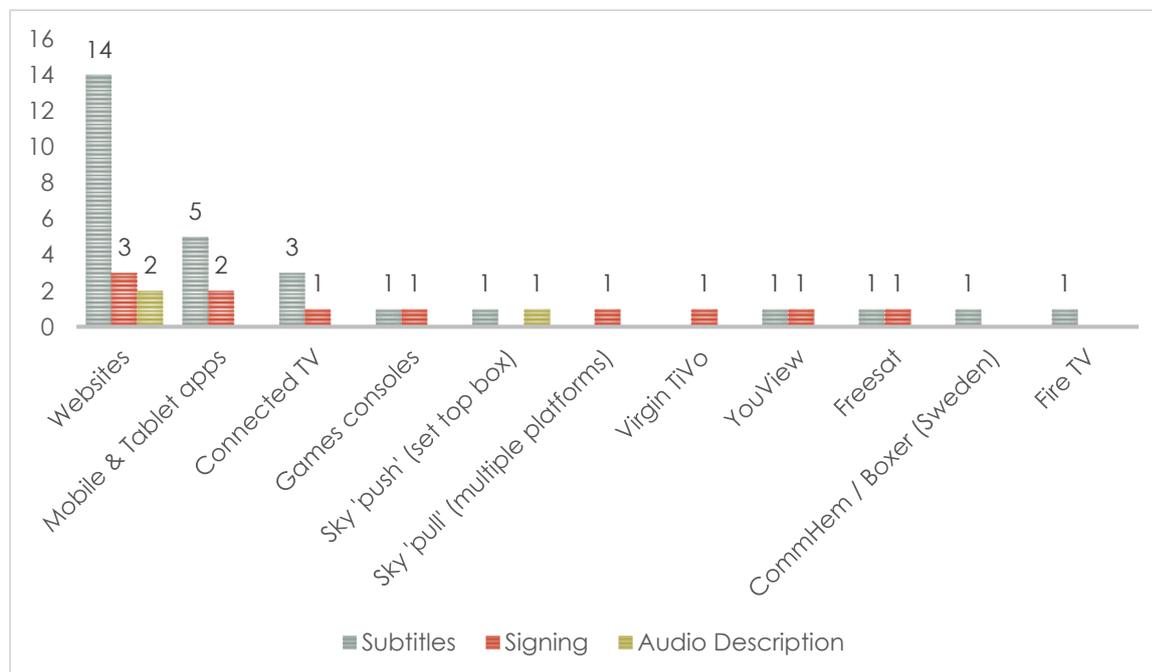


Figure 5: Provision of access services by outlet – number of services providing specified access service on particular outlets.<sup>4</sup>

As can be seen from the sections above, provision of access services is significantly greater on platforms over which the provider exerts direct control. As in 2013, during the reporting period this meant that access services were largely provided on own-brand websites. However, some access services are available on other platforms, with most progress being made in relation to mobile and tablet apps and connected TVs. See Figure 5.

The relative lack of provision on some of the major platforms – the Sky+ / Sky+HD Set top box (pull VOD), Virgin TiVo, YouView – merits some further scrutiny. These platforms are a key means by which consumers access on demand content, and the ability to provide access services depends significantly on the extent to which the platform supports access services and on technical compatibility issues.

Respondents to this survey included major platform operators who operate their own VOD service and also carry third party VOD services on their platforms. As the 2014 survey was a formal 'demand' for information, these respondents were asked only about their own ODPS,

<sup>4</sup> **Those providing subtitles on websites:** Channel 4; Channel 5; ITV; STV; UTV; SBS Discovery; Classical TV; The Space; Viasat; Curzon; Digital Theatre; Channel Entertainment; BSLBT; Manoto1

**Providing subtitles on mobile/tablet apps:** Channel 5; Nickelodeon; STV; Viasat; Digital Theatre

**Providing subtitles on TV-platforms:** Connected TV – Viasat, Curzon, Digital Theatre (Connected TV); Viasat (Games Consoles); Sky (Sky 'push' set top box); Digital Theatre (YouView); Curzon (Freesat); Cirkus (CommHem); Curzon (Fire TV).

For details of those providing signing and audio description see sections on 'Signing' and 'Audio Description' above

and were not questioned in their role as platform operator. Nonetheless, the platform operators themselves volunteered information on this role.

### Virgin Media

Virgin stated that as its (small) ODPS comprised content (children's material) which did not necessarily lend itself to subtitles, *"we are focussing our efforts on ensuring as many third party content providers provide subtitles to our customers. Our focus is on ensuring the mainstream entertainment channels which currently provide such access services on their linear TV programmes provide the subtitled version of the programme to Virgin Media."* Virgin also states that from a platform perspective it is *"fully set up to support the inclusion of subtitling in VoD assets"*.

Despite this focus and capability, no respondents provided services with subtitles on Virgin's TiVo platform. In some cases, this appears to be a matter of priorities, with Channel 4 stating that it has to date focussed on its own platforms rather than third party platforms such as Virgin. However, in other cases there appears to be a belief on the part of the content provider that the Virgin platform does not readily enable subtitle provision. For example, ITV state that *"Virgin would need to deliver the implementation of subtitles around ITV content on this platform"* and Broadcasting Gaia note that *"is actually made available by Virgin to their customers so we do not know whether Virgin add subtitles nor would we have any control over that (though we will push for this)"* NBC Universal states that upon support by the platforms, subtitling *"will be made available for Universal channel content which has Subtitles available on the linear service."*

There appears to be a problem here with communication between Virgin Media and the content providers whose ODPS appear on its platform. Virgin Media appears to acknowledge this in its response to the survey, including that it is currently:

*"1) Communicating with the other PSBs (ITV, C4, C5) to make sure they are fully aware of the technical capabilities of the cable platform to ensure greater provision of subtitles of their most popular content 2) Including in our standard form agreement for VOD a requirement for assets to be provided with subtitles and an obligation on Virgin Media to facilitate the making available of the VOD content with subtitles. 3) Working with the non-PSB content providers to encourage them to take advantage of the functionality of the VM platform. For example, we are currently in discussions with a major content provider about the provision of subtitles on their ODPS."*

### Sky

Sky is *"currently working to ensure that the Sky+HD Box is 'access services ready' meaning that it can play-out subtitles for pull VOD content (as well as for push-VOD content)".* Sky's response makes clear that this process *"requires joint development work between Sky and content providers"*. In line with this, Sky is working with *"a major third party on demand content provider"* to enable subtitles on their pull VOD content by the end of 2014, paving the way for subtitling of other content on this platform.

Sky's response also details a pilot being launched in November 2014 with the RNIB, to trial an audio description app which will *"allow users to access audio description files on secondary devices that sync with the VOD content they are watching"*.

In relation to Sky’s platform, we note the response from Fox, who say that they are “currently awaiting a resolution for provision of subtitles on Sky On Demand content” (pull VOD).

YouView

YouView does not provide any ODPS notified to ATVOD and therefore was not required to complete the survey. However, ATVOD has met with YouView to discuss the platform’s capabilities with respect to access services, and several respondents referred to YouView in relation to future plans for access services provision. Channel 4 is currently “engaged in active dialogue with YouView regarding the feasibility of providing subtitles for Channel 4 content, although a timeframe for delivery has not yet been agreed.” ITV hopes to “refresh the ITV Player on YouView in late 2015 in a manner that will enable us to add subtitles to our YouView roadmap. However, this is dependent on changes to be made by YouView to the overall platform.” STV state that “no solution has been identified to date” with respect to providing subtitles via their YouView app. BT states that “other players on the YouView platform (such as the BBC’s iPlayer) offer these features but it isn’t currently possible to link these players within the BT Player.”

**Barriers to provision of access services**

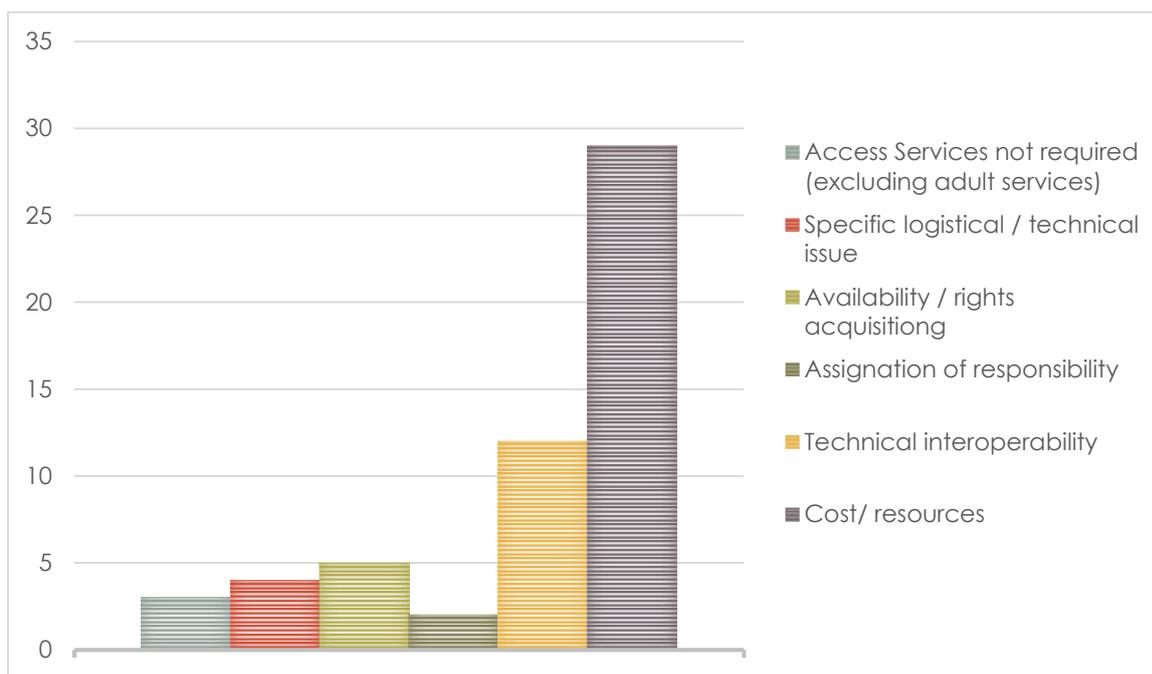


Figure 6: What are the barriers to access service provision?

Respondents continued to identify a range of issues which hinder the provision of access services on video on demand services:

Access Services not required

Some respondents gave reasons which were quite specific to their service, or type of service. For example, most of the adult service providers commented that their content did not lend

itself to access services, and that there was no consumer demand evident for access services in relation to adult content. Other non-adult service providers also commented that certain access services were inappropriate in relation to their content – Classical TV and Vevo, for example, both commented that as a predominantly music channel, signing and audio description were not obviously needed. Plato Media and TalkTalk (Scamp) did not see subtitles as an appropriate access service for their pre-school audiences.

Other providers with small services argue that access services are not required until they meet the threshold for compulsory access service provision on their linear services. For example, SciFi Channel comments that *“if and when it does meet the criterial to provide access services in a linear environment, we would automatically make those subtitles available via VOD.”*

#### Specific logistical or technical issues

Both Channel 4 and Channel 5 pointed to the challenges of providing on-demand access services for programmes which have originally been broadcast live.

Other providers pointed to the limitations of their existing technical infrastructure (Plato Media, STV) As well as referring to their *“legacy systems which are awaiting an upgrade”*, STV points to the fact that some of their apps use core technology from suppliers who did not support access services off the shelf at the time of implementation (notably their iOS and Android players).

#### Availability / acquiring rights

While some providers refer to the difficulties of sourcing content with access services (Filmon, Community Channel, Chrominance), others raise the issue of rights acquisition (Amazon, STV). STV comments that programmes which are broadcast with access services on television often do not have catch-up rights.

#### Issues of responsibility

A small number of service providers continue to regard access service provision as entirely the responsibility of the platform, although ATVOD notes that in 2014 there were fewer respondents citing issues of responsibility as a barrier to provision.

Of this year’s respondents, Vubiquity commented on barriers to provision that the content provider is in *“control”* of provision.

FilmFlex has in the past worked on projects with service providers to process TV content with subtitling and audio description. These projects reached the initial evaluation, analysis, pricing stage and testing stages. The current status of these projects is 'On Hold' and could be reinstated as 'Active' at any time, but any such move needs to be in agreement with the platform operators.

#### Interoperability

As in previous years, one of the key issues identified was the technical difficulties to arise from a diverse range of content providers attempting to provide access services to a diverse range of platforms. Many service providers in their responses referred either to the ability of platform

operators to handle access services (Cirkus, Premier, NBC Universal, TalkTalk, Viasat ) or to the issue of multiple file delivery formats / platform requirements and the lack of technical standards for file transfer (BT, AETN, UTV, ITV, Disney). In commenting on the latter, Sainsburys suggest that *“to help push the industry and this initiative forward, it would be useful for ATVOD to assist us in getting the studios and content providers' cooperation to deliver the necessary files in a standardised format and included with mezzanine files as standard.”* Disney also comments that ATVOD’s technical working groups should help to achieve *“consistent technical parameters throughout the industry”*. See ‘Discussion’ below for an outline of ATVOD’s ongoing work in this regard.

Comedy Central /Nickelodeon, in acknowledging these issues, are in discussion with their affiliates in this regard, and say that *“at our routine meetings with the Platform Providers we have asked the question of when they will have the ability to provide Access Services on On Demand content. In each case we have encountered a similar response along the lines of it is something that cannot be provided at the moment but is on a technical road map to be delivered sometime in the future.”*

### Cost / resources

ATVOD once again notes that the obstacles outlined above are all generally associated with cost implications. In 2014, many service providers specifically acknowledged these resource implications (Localbuzz, Community Channel, Channel 4, Cirkus, CSC Media Group, Journeyman, Amazon, Mustard TV, The Space, UTV, ITV, Greystone Media, Arsenal, Videoondemand365, Chelsea, Bay TV Liverpool, Versus Media, Scripps Network, Channel Entertainment, Digitaltheatre.com, Curzon, AETN, Estuary TV, We are Colony). In its capacity as platform operator, Virgin comments that subtitle provision will require content providers *“to provide source material with subtitling included and for publishing organisations (the companies that convert the content to platform ready formats) to process this additional information at a significantly increased cost.”*

These costs are generally associated either with creating access services from scratch, (e.g. Community Channel) or assigning technical resource to overcome some of the issues identified above and to adapt workflow (e.g. Blinkbox). Creating access services can be seen as a disproportionate expense for small service providers (e.g. Chrominance TV).

Universal Pictures Subscription Television Ltd adds that it is currently undertaking cost analyses to derive the appropriate resources and budget required to implement some access services functionality across multiple applications and systems, focussing on existing subtitling. As budgets for existing allocations are largely allocated, steps towards providing access services will be taken in Q1 2016.

## **Discussion**

ATVOD considers that the responses to this year’s survey give a comprehensive picture of access service provision in ODPS. It is encouraging to see progress being made both in terms of accessibility of services on particular outlets (notably websites) but also in terms of

an increasing breadth of provision across different outlets (for example mobile and tablet apps).

There are also promising plans for late 2014 / early 2015, including the roll-out of subtitles across Amazon Instant, and the introduction of subtitles to pull-VOD content on the Sky platforms (albeit starting with just one provider's content).

ATVOD does note that such plans need to become reality. A note of caution is inevitable given the failure of some of the plans mentioned in the 2013 survey to result in the expected progress this year, and the fact that 36 respondents (excluding providers of adult websites) did not provide any access services on their ODPS via any outlet<sup>5</sup>.

There are indeed some significant barriers to provision of access services, not least the problems of delivery to multiple platforms and the associated costs. However, ATVOD's view is that these real problems should not be used to obfuscate issues of simple communication and will. It is concerning that the confusion between Virgin Media and its content providers over the capabilities of the TiVo platform, which was identified last year, has continued into 2014. ATVOD very much hopes that in the forthcoming year a real effort will be made by Virgin to disseminate information on its platforms and respond to content providers who wish to make their services on the TiVo platform accessible. There are some signs that Virgin is now putting in place mechanisms to address these issues. ATVOD welcomes these moves towards increased communication, and the proactive approaches that have been made by, for example, Comedy Central and Nickelodeon in this regard.

Based on the responses to this survey, it appears to ATVOD that a similar confusion exists over the capabilities of the YouView platform. It is to be hoped that YouView also engages in proactive measures to communicate with its content providers on the issue of access services provision.

These issues of communication and interoperability have been at the heart of ATVOD's work over 2014, and will continue to be its focus. The WGAS group's 2014 report<sup>6</sup> identified and recommended a technical standard for subtitle exchange, delivery, and presentation, which it is hoped will ease considerably the complexities of workflow which currently preclude subtitle provision. A large number of service providers (including platform operators and technical specialists) have participated in this working group<sup>7</sup>, indicating to ATVOD an increasing willingness to share information and appetite for progress in this area which is there to be harnessed.

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<sup>5</sup> Excluding adult websites, those respondents not providing any access services were as follows: BBCW; Blinkbox; BT; CBS Chellozone UK Channels Partnership / JimJam Television Ltd / Zone Media Broadcasting / CBS Chellozone EMEA Channels Partnership; Chrominance; Comedy Central; CSC Media Group; Discovery; Estuary TV; Greystone Media; Journeyman; Local Buzz; Mustard TV; MUTV; MTV; NBC Universal Global Networks UK Limited / E! Entertainment; Northern Visions; Sainsburys; SBTv; SciFi Channel; Universal Pictures Subscription Television Ltd; Disney; UKTV; Vevo; Virgin; Videoondemand365; Arsenal Broadband Ltd; Scripps Network (on Virgin); Chelsea; Turner; Bay TV Liverpool; FilmFlex.

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.atvod.co.uk/uploads/files/ATVOD\\_WGAS\\_Report\\_2014.pdf](http://www.atvod.co.uk/uploads/files/ATVOD_WGAS_Report_2014.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Participating service providers to date: BBC Worldwide, BT, Channel 4, Channel 5, Community Channel, Discovery, Fox, ITV, Screen Library, Sky, STV, TalkTalk, Turner, UTV, Viacom channels, and Virgin Media. The group has also included those with technical experience in this area (BBC, the chair of the EBU XMLSubs group, the DTG), disability groups (Action on Hearing Loss, RNIB, Sense), access services providers (IMS, Ofcom, Red Bee Media, Screen Subtitling Systems, Technicolor), and Ofcom.

The WGAS report recommendations can be summarised as follows:

Service providers should:

- Prioritise long-form content in the short to medium term
- Prioritise future platforms over legacy platforms
- Adopt EBU-TT at all relevant parts of the delivery chain
- Provide audio description using the simplest practicable method for each platform
- Use available access services (even if sub-optimal) in preference to none

ATVOD should:

- encourage content owners and distributors to make subtitles and audio description available with all content, in the recommended format and free (or at a nominal charge)
- work with others in Europe towards mandating that pre-existing access service components for acquired AV content be free at the point of exchange and that those components are catalogued
- encourage platform operators, equipment manufacturers and browser writers to support the extraction and presentation of in-stream access service components

## Next steps

ATVOD will continue to support the work of WGAS as an active forum amongst ATVOD service providers and others for the sharing of experience and current practice in implementing subtitles and audio description.

ATVOD supports the recommendations of WGAS, with the following comments /clarifications:

- ATVOD is pleased to note that some providers - such as NBC Universal - are already switching to EBU-TT as a standard file format for subtitles, taking advantage of system refreshes to make this change. ATVOD urges other providers to consider the WGAS recommendations when undergoing any major systems refresh. NBC Universal comment that EBU-TT is an open standard, supports the widest range of foreign language characters & glyphs, is human readable and can be easily manipulated within their automated media workflow.
- Regarding content priorities, ATVOD recommends prioritising complete programmes over clips. This may often mean prioritising long-form content, but not always (for example in the case of shorter form – but nevertheless complete – children's programming).
- ATVOD will encourage content owners and distributors to make subtitles and audio description available with all content, in the recommended format and free at the point of exchange. Should an appropriate legislative mechanism emerge, ATVOD will consider arguing that free exchange is mandated.

Therefore work planned for 2014/15 includes:

- Sharing understanding about EBU-TT and providing input to other relevant bodies in order to speed the development of test scenarios and content files of EBU-TT data, designed to validate service provider implementations.
- Identification of an equivalent technical standard for audio description
- Addressing the issue of subtitling for live streamed content
- A review ATVOD's 'Best Practice Guidance' relating to access services provision.

From a public policy perspective, ATVOD will further encourage and facilitate communication between content providers and platform operators, aided by the standardisation work of WGAS.

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