

UK Audio Description – a quiet evolution

The availability and growth of Audio Description services in the UK should be the envy of the world, says **Peter Blatchford**, sales & marketing director, Starfish Technologies



Peter Blatchford: Access service provision can be controversial

The UK broadcast industry should be justifiably proud that it leads the world in providing an Audio Description service on a significant and growing percentage of programmes transmitted via digital TV platforms. Audio Description is the provision of a complementary narrative audio service for people that have difficulty viewing TV programmes – such as those who are blind or partially sighted.

Europe and the USA have been trialling AD services for a number of years, but the UK now has a mature and efficient infrastructure for supporting TV channels that wish to offer this additional service to its customers. The AD service can be accessed via DTT TVs and set-top boxes, or the Sky satellite service. Many TVs are now supplied with integrated AD decoding (you will notice an AD button on the remote control of an increasing number of new TVs sold in the UK).

The provision of an access service such as AD or closed captioning can be controversial, as it brings no direct additional revenue for the broadcaster, and in tough economic times such as these, budgets are increasingly under scrutiny. AD implementation may be desirable, but typically only government mandates tend to drive an increase in the service.

Starfish began working on AD technology with the BBC over 10 years ago, and our customers have helped us develop a specialised and fully featured product range for creating, processing and delivering AD. The major providers of AD services in the UK have increasingly sophisticated workflows to help with efficiency, and the quality of AD being pro-

duced is of an extremely high standard.

We have sold systems in France and Germany recently, and the Greek state broadcaster ERT purchased a complete Starfish AD system to offer the service on its new digital channel.

At IBC this year we are demonstrating our complete range of AD products and expect to see a growing interest from European and US broadcasters. In the USA, the provision of an AD service by major broadcasters has

recently been mandated by the US government. (The service is known as Video Description or VI in the USA.)

The availability and growth of the AD service in the UK has been a quiet evolution, and if you don't have a friend or family member with impaired vision, you can be excused for not even being aware the service exists. However the evolution of the service will continue and we

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expect to be developing ever more sophisticated products to service this market. **2C18**