Description Timeline Highlights

With the advent of description, people who are blind or visually impaired gained an important tool with which to broaden their understanding and enjoyment of the unique visual nature of films and other visual media. Though a relatively new phenomenon compared to captioning, which established its roots more than 60 years ago, there have been many notable developments in the history of description.

100,000 B.C.E.–50,000 B.C.E.

- Scientific research identifies this period as that during which humans develop the capacity for consistent spoken language in order to convey observations and information to others; thus, "description" is born.

1964

- Chet Avery, a U.S. Department of Education administrator who is blind, suggests to several consumer groups affiliated with the blind and visually impaired that they apply for funding to describe educational media, much in the same way that organizations affiliated with the deaf are applying for funding to caption films for the deaf and hard of hearing. At this time, however, advocacy groups are more focused on employment issues for Americans who are blind or visually impaired, but Mr. Avery's perspective serves as the proverbial "glimmer on the horizon" for description as it is now known.

1969

- Minnesota Radio Talking Book (RTB), the world's first radio reading service for the blind and visually impaired, begins broadcasting. While not technically the same as description, RTB and the many radio reading services like it are important players in the early days of accessible media. Through the use of such services, people who are blind or visually impaired are able to receive the same up-to-the-minute news, opinion, and entertainment information as are their sighted peers.

1972

- Gregory Frazier, a professor at San Francisco State University, begins working on the concept of described theater performances to benefit people who are blind or visually impaired. He establishes his nonprofit company, AudioVision, in 1972 to explore the concept of making media and live performances more accessible to people who are blind or visually impaired.

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Revised February 2010

1980

- The Arena Stage Theater in Washington, D.C., calls upon Dr. Margaret Pfanstiehl—founder of the Metropolitan Washington Ear Radio Reading Service— and Chet Avery, among others, to conduct a discussion concerning methods to make live theater performances more accessible to people who are blind or visually impaired. Dr. Pfanstiehl has since been credited as a pioneer and tireless activist for description in broadcast and educational media and live performances, and has trained many of the professional describers employed by the various agencies today.

1982

- Dr. Pfanstiehl and her husband Cody train volunteers to describe episodes of the PBS series *American Playhouse*, which are then simulcast on the Metropolitan Washington Ear along with the programming on the local PBS affiliate. These experiments mark the first time that the concept of description was applied to a regularly broadcast television show.

Cody and Margaret Pfanstiehl (Photo: washear.org)

1983

- The Japanese Nippon Television Network Corporation (NTV) becomes the first commercial broadcast network to air description simultaneously with its own programming. The description was presented primarily during off-hour programming, and was mixed into the standard program audio, making it a form of “open” description.

1984

- The National Television Systems Committee (NTSC) adopts Multichannel Television Sound (MTS) as a standard, introducing the American television market to the Secondary Audio Program (SAP) feature. SAP would eventually become the primary means for transmitting description to analog television customers. Prior to SAP, description was limited to live theater events (typically employing special FM or infrared receivers and transmitters), closed-circuit signals of radio reading services, or “open” description programs.

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1985

- PBS affiliate and pioneer of accessible media, WGBH (Boston, MA) conceptualizes the nationwide application of description in PBS programming. WGBH begins research into facilitating such an application.

1987

- Based on positive feedback received during research of described media's possible application, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting awards funding to WGBH for what will eventually become Descriptive Video Service (DVS).

1988

- WGBH, in conjunction with the Metropolitan Washington Ear Audio Description Service, launches the first test of its DVS system on ten PBS stations during presentations of *American Playhouse*.

- Narrative Television Network (NTN), founded by Jim Stovall, begins providing "open" described films on its cable network. By the end of the year, described programming represents about four hours per week on NTN.

1990

- Dr. Pfanstiehl is awarded an Emmy by the National Academy of Television and Arts Sciences for her leadership in the field of accessible television for viewers who are blind or visually impaired. Also awarded Emmys are PBS, Jim Stovall, and Gregory Frazier for their work in making programming accessible to people who are blind or visually impaired.

- Beginning with the season premiere of *American Playhouse*, DVS becomes a permanent fixture of accessibility on participating PBS stations, carrying the described audio programming on the SAP channel.

- Congress passes the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which includes comprehensive civil rights guarantees to Americans with a wide range of disabilities.

1992

- The Described and Captioned Media Program (then called the Captioned Films and Videos Program), in conjunction with the National Captioning Institute (NCI), perform a study to determine whether funding should be provided to establish a free-loan library of described educational media to accompany its library of captioned media. The results of the study overwhelmingly supported the establishment of a national, free-loan library for educational media.

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- WGBH's Media Access Group launches MoPix, a service that would eventually provide accessibility to moviegoers who are deaf, hard of hearing, blind, and/or visually impaired through the use of closed captioning and description.

- Sixty-two PBS stations broadcast regularly scheduled DVS programming, reaching 50% of U.S. households.

1993

- A study conducted by the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) and WGBH, and funded by the National Science Foundation, finds that consumers who are blind or visually impaired prefer to have access to description on television, and those who were able to hear descriptions could recall more of the program content, especially with regard to science programming.

1994

- National Television Video Access Coalition is founded and coordinated by Dr. Pfanstiehl to work with Congress on the passage of statutory requirements for described programming on commercial broadcast television. The AFB and National Association of the Deaf (NAD) are among the twenty-five coalition members.

1995

- Bills passed by both houses of Congress require the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to study the use of description for people who are blind or visually impaired. Following the study, the FCC was empowered to regulate, to a necessary extent, accessible programming.

1996

- According to an FCC report, the U.S. Department of Education provides $1.5 million per year for described media, which equates to $0.19 spent for each American who is blind or visually impaired. The American Council of the Blind (ACB), AFB, and Metropolitan Washington Ear are among respondents who join the FCC in urging Congress to allocate more Federal money to described educational media.

- DVS programming reaches 71% of U.S. households and is broadcast on 130 PBS stations.

1997

- The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the nation's prevailing special education statute, is amended to include, among other items, more federal funding of described and captioned educational media.

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- The World Wide Web Consortium recommends the use of SMIL 1.0 (Synchronized Multimedia Integration Language) as a standard for producing streaming video and other visual media. This technology provides a framework for closed captioning and description of internet media. As of 2007, most of the widely used streaming video programs (RealPlayer, QuickTime, Ambulant, and even Windows Media Player) support SMIL (as of 2007, version 2.1) features.

- *The Jackal*, released in November, becomes the first feature-length film to be both closed captioned and described at the time of its release. The film premiers at the General Cinema Theater in Sherman Oaks, CA, which is the first U.S. theater to be equipped with MoPix Rear Window captioning and DVS description equipment.

2000

- The FCC adopts its proposed rule that the top 5 commercial television broadcasters in the top 25 television markets introduce a nominal amount of described prime-time and/or children's programming to begin in 2002. The adoption of this rule elicits a great deal of backlash from the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) and the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA).

- The National Center for Accessible Media (NCAM), created by WGBH, releases MAGpie (Media Access Generator) 1.0, a free and widely distributed tool for creating captions and descriptions on digital media.

2001

- Seventeen major motion pictures are released to theaters in the United States that are immediately accessible via description in equipped venues to consumers who are blind or visually impaired.

2002

- On November 8, the U.S. Court of Appeals (D.C. Circuit) overturns a lower court ruling that upheld the FCC's description regulations. The court found that the FCC did not have the authorization of Congress to enact such a policy, and "forcing" such a policy on broadcasters created a First Amendment conflict. Prior to the court's ruling, little, if any, effort had been made on the part of commercial broadcasters to implement the FCC's rule regarding described content, although several notable programs were available with DVS.

2003

- Bills are introduced, at the urging of the National Television Video Access Coalition members, by both houses of Congress to reinstate the FCC rules regarding description on broadcast networks. Both bills stall in House and Senate subcommittees. Similar initiatives are drafted every year from 2004–2007, each

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Revised February 2010

time with increasing cosponsorship and support by legislators, but no action has been taken at the time of this writing to reinstate the FCC rules.

- WGBH launches Teachers' Domain, a web resource for educators and students, which includes captioned and described streaming video among its offerings. In addition, its content conforms, and even refers to, national curricular standards to assist teachers in selecting appropriate media. The service is free to registered members.

- NCI partners with the nonprofit educational organization Sesame Workshop to provide descriptions for Sesame Street for the first time in the program's 34-year history. The longest-running children's program becomes accessible to over one million children who are blind or visually impaired.

2005

- Stevie Wonder's "So What the Fuss" becomes the first-ever described music video. WGBH's West Coast office coordinates and voices the description track.

2006

- As part of a new cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education, the Captioned Media Program (CMP) becomes the Described and Captioned Media Program (DCMP). The DCMP announces a partnership with AFB to produce and implement guidelines for describing educational media productions. These guidelines will be the first in the U.S. to address description for children and students specifically, and they will establish criteria for the evaluation of description agencies that wish to be placed on the U.S. Department of Education's Approved Description Service Vendors list.

- The U.S. Department of Education awards three "Emerging Technologies" grants to explore the use of innovative description and captioning techniques to improve accessibility to educational media. Narrative Television is awarded one of the grants. Minnesota-based CaptionMax, one of the leaders in the field of media accessibility, is awarded the other two. The DCMP partners with CaptionMax to distribute media produced with these new tools through its existing free-loan network.

A voicer records description in a modern studio. (Photo: CaptionMax)

- Sixty-three major motion pictures are released to theaters in the United States that are immediately accessible via description in equipped venues to consumers who are blind or visually impaired.

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2008 and Beyond

- The *Description Key for Educational Media*, a set of guidelines and preferred techniques regarding how to describe educational media, developed by the AFB and DCMP, is completed and published in October 2008. The document overviews how to describe educational media, what to describe, and the technical elements that are part of the description process.
- Innovations continue to develop, thanks to the efforts of many description agencies and companies, in the field of improved accessibility for people who are blind or visually impaired. Among these are applications for providing more in-depth information for educational and other media (called "eDescription" or "expanded description") and audible navigation menus to improve the means by which users who are blind or visually impaired can access description in the media of their choice.
- Advocacy organizations continue to urge Congress to enact new and more comprehensive legislation to reinstate or strengthen rules for media producers to conform to the universal design concept when creating new products.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thom Lohman is the communications services specialist for the Described and Captioned Media Program. A former social worker dedicated to child advocacy, as well as a volunteer at various nonprofit organizations, Thom has made it a personal and professional goal to make sure all students have equal access to curricular content and that the public has a general understanding of the history and future of accessibility. He can be reached at tlohman@dcmp.org.

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Revised February 2010