

Video Descriptions and the Digital Television Transition

IF YOU USED VIDEO DESCRIPTIONS TO ACCESS ANALOG TELEVISION PROGRAMMING, YOU SHOULD BE AWARE OF THE FOLLOWING REGARDING DIGITAL TELEVISION (DTV):

- All full-power television stations have stopped broadcasting in analog, and now broadcast only in digital.
- The DTV transition provided broadcasters with a greater number of audio channels with which they could provide voluntary video description.
- Digital-to-analog converter boxes are not required to process all associated audio services broadcast by a DTV station, so consumers should check with manufacturers and retailers to learn more about whether specific digital-to-analog converter boxes are able to provide video descriptions. In particular, the WGBH National Center for Accessible Media, located in Boston, Massachusetts, has found that two specific digital-to-analog converter boxes – the Digital Stream DTX 9900 and Insignia NS-DXA1 – have demonstrated the capability to pass through video description.ⁱ
- Although televisions with digital tuners should be able to process the audio services associated with DTV signals, consumers should confirm that a particular digital television includes this feature by checking with the appropriate manufacturer or retailer.
- If purchasing a digital television or digital-to-analog converter box, consumers should ask the manufacturer or retailer how audio streams are accessed, and whether the remote control and on-screen menus are accessible to individuals with vision disabilities.
- Consumers using multi-channel video services (e.g., cable or satellite) should ask their service provider for additional information about the availability of video description. To the extent that such providers receive programming with video description, those video descriptions may be delivered to the consumer.

Video Description Background

Video descriptions are a way to inform people who are blind or have other vision disabilities of what is happening on the television screen. Video description is the insertion of verbal descriptions about the setting and/or action in a program when information about these visual elements is not contained in the audio portion of the program. These descriptions supplement the regular audio track of the program.

In July 2000, the FCC adopted rules to make television more accessible to people with vision disabilities by mandating that a certain amount of programming contain video description. These rules were vacated by a federal court in November 2002, but in 2010, Congress directed the FCC to conduct a rulemaking (www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-111publ260/pdf/PLAW-111publ260.pdf) to make any necessary updates, and then reinstate the rules. On August 25, 2011, the FCC adopted rules to implement the video description provisions of the Twenty-First Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act of 2010 (CVAA) (www.fcc.gov/guides/21st-century-communications-and-video-accessibility-act-2010). These rules became effective **July 1, 2012**.

Section 79.2 of the FCC's rules (http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/cfr_2010/octqtr/pdf/47cfr79.2.pdf) requires that emergency information provided on television be accessible to individuals who have vision disabilities. This means that broadcasters must orally describe any emergency information that is shown on the screen (e.g., weather map showing tornadoes) and must accompany any emergency information that is not orally described (i.e., information presented in a crawl or scroll) with an aural tone which instructs individuals with vision disabilities to turn to a radio or another source for more information.

Impact of Digital Television Transition on Video Description

With digital television, broadcasters have more audio channels on which to provide video description. Because digital television encodes audio in a different manner than the encoding used in analog television, digital television does not utilize a second audio programming ("SAP") channel to transmit video descriptions. The digital television standards provide for two types of main audio service and six types of associated services, including associated services for people with vision disabilities. The standards also permit the transmission of secondary language programming. So while there was one option under the old analog TV service (i.e., the SAP channel), broadcasters now have more audio channels to provide this voluntary service. However, we note that inserting video descriptions into digital programming that was not created by the distributor may involve additional expense for broadcasters; for this reason, consumers should contact their local broadcasters to determine whether video description is offered.

Accessing additional audio program streams (including video description) typically occurs either through a designated button on the remote control or through an on-screen menu. Unfortunately, if the controls on the television or digital-to-analog converter box are not accessible to people with vision disabilities, it may be a challenge to obtain the descriptions. In such cases, the consumer must know which audio stream the video description is on in advance, as well as how to access this channel. We therefore urge consumers to ask the manufacturer or retailer how audio streams are accessed prior to purchasing a digital television or digital-to-analog converter box. In addition, the consumer should ask whether the on-screen menus – as well as the remote controls that are used to access the on-screen menus – are accessible to individuals who have vision disabilities. Finally, the consumer should contact local television stations to see if they are transmitting video descriptions, and if so, for which programs.

Consumers using cable or satellite services should ask for additional information about the availability of video description from their service providers. To the extent that cable systems, satellite systems or other multi-channel video programming distributors receive programming with video description, those video descriptions may be delivered to the consumer. As with broadcast television, subscription-based television consumers must ensure that their television is capable of displaying available video descriptions and that video description functionality may be accessed by people with vision disabilities.



Consumer Help Center

For more information on consumer issues, visit the FCC's Consumer Help Center at www.fcc.gov/consumers.

Accessible formats

To request this article in an accessible format - braille, large print, Word or text document or audio - write or call us at the address or phone number at the bottom of the page, or send an email to fcc504@fcc.gov.

ⁱ WGBH's National Center for Accessible Media (ncam.wgbh.org) is not affiliated in any way with the FCC, nor is this an endorsement of either the Digital Stream or Insignia digital-to-analog converter box by the FCC. The FCC does not endorse any particular converter box. We also note that this is not intended to provide an exhaustive list; other digital-to-analog converter boxes also may have the ability to pass through video description.

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