



# Captioning in Australia

**Robert Scott, Chief Executive, Australian Caption Centre**

**T**he Australian Bureau of Statistics estimated in 1993 that 999,800 people living in Australia have significant hearing loss. Other studies, such as the 1991 *South Australian Health Omnibus Survey*, indicate that 15% of the Australian population have a significant hearing loss. This includes people from all walks of life, and encompasses profoundly Deaf people as well as people who have experienced hearing loss due to industrial causes, disease or old age. To most of these people, television - a medium hearing people take for granted - is inaccessible, unless it is captioned.

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## What are captions?

Captions are text displayed on a television or video screen to assist viewers who are Deaf or hearing impaired in understanding the program. Captions are different from foreign language subtitles in that they are coloured and positioned to indicate speakers, they transcribe relevant music and sound effects, and they are English to English.

'Closed' captions are broadcast on television, encoded into the television signal as teletext data, and may be decoded free of charge by anyone with a teletext television or teletext VCR on teletext page 801. The service is available on all three commercial networks, the ABC and SBS.

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## How much television is accessible to Deaf people?

Only 13% of all Australian broadcasts carry closed captions. This compares with 45% of UK broadcasts and 90% of American broadcasts. The United Kingdom's *Broadcasting Act* stipulates that 50% of all commercial broad-

casts must be captioned by 1998. The USA's *Telecommunications Act 1996* stipulates that everything must be captioned.

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Australia's *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* recommends that television stations, in framing their codes of practice, make some provision for closed captioning. FACTS has included in its *Code of Practice* a commitment to 'endeavour to increase the amount of closed captioned programming', and since this code was established the amount of captioning shown on commercial networks has more than doubled. The *Disability Discrimination Act* may provide a legislative platform ensuring that captioning is mandatory, but it is yet to be tested in this regard.

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## The Australian Caption Centre

The Australian Caption Centre is a not-for-profit public benevolent institution started by two tenacious and dedicated individuals, Alexandra Hynes and Adam Salzer. The Centre was officially opened in 1982 by then Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser. Seed funding was provided by the Department of Communications, and the Centre has since been self-sufficient, relying on commercial enterprise from its Supertext captioning operations for over 95% of its revenue. The Australian Caption Centre has offices in Sydney and Melbourne, and employs staff in every state and territory of Australia.

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## Lobbying for captions

In 1991, the National Working Party on Captioning was established. This group comprises Deaf and hearing impaired consumer representatives from each state and territory, representatives from each of Australia's Deaf and hearing impaired organisations, and invites participation from the commercial networks (FACTS), the ABC and the SBS.

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The NWPC provides information to the Australian Caption Centre which assists in framing standards (such as reading rates, colouring and positioning), however its greatest function is to lobby government and television networks for increased captioning. Their lobbying efforts were instrumental in persuading the federal government to commit \$7 million over four years to caption the ABC and SBS evening news bulletins - a service which has until now been inaccessible to Deaf and hearing impaired people in Australia.

The NWPC has a mission to see all prime time programming captioned by the year 2000, and all programming captioned by the year 2010. Their immediate concern is to ensure that the Sydney Olympics will be captioned.

**For more information on the Australian Caption Centre or the Supertext captioning service, phone or TTY 02 9212 5277, or email at [infoserv@auscap.com.au](mailto:infoserv@auscap.com.au)**