

**ORIGINS, ORGANIZATIONS, AND ISSUES IN VIDEO DESCRIPTION:  
RESULTS FROM IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS WITH MAJOR PLAYERS**

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**Organizational Study Report:  
Results from In-Depth Interviews with Major Players  
in the Field of Video Description**

**Introduction**

Video description is a relatively new field, available formally on television and videos only since the late 1980s. While there have been some articles published about video description (see "Selected Bibliography on Video Description" following this report), there is little information about how video description came about and how the formal services developed; even rarer is any record of leaders in the field regarding critical issues such as how consumer input is gotten and what are the effects of description. This report based on in-depth interviews with major players in the field presents that type of information, in a comprehensive, integrated fashion.

Between October 1994 and August 1995, the first author conducted face-to-face in-depth interviews with individuals we knew to be involved in an early stage of the development of the concept of video description, as well as those known to have had involvement with description for television or films. Those interviewed included: Gregory Frazier, AudioVision<sup>7</sup>; Margaret and Cody Pfanstiehl, The Metropolitan Washington Ear; Barry Cronin, Laurie Everett, Gerry Field, Raymond Joyce, Sharon King, and Tom Wlodkowski, Descriptive Video Service<sup>7</sup> (DVS<sup>7</sup>); Jim Stovall, Michael Brook, Narrative Television Network (NTN); Bert Hecht, Audio Optics. In addition, brief interviews were conducted with three members of DVS<sup>7</sup>'s Consumer Advisory Committee. Several individuals contributed to this report by writing additional paragraphs to add to or clarify initial sections of the draft report. We'd like to thank Ida C. Johnson (current Executive Director of AudioVision<sup>7</sup>), Margaret Pfanstiehl, Cody Pfanstiehl, Barry Cronin, Laurie Everett, Sharon King, Jim Stovall, and Bert Hecht for their written contributions. This manuscript refers to the key positions that people held at the time of the interviews.

This report emphasizes the two largest video description services in the United States -- Descriptive Video Service<sup>7</sup> and Narrative Television Network. The beginning section on history includes the development of several other organizations involved in description, either because they have had involvement with television and video, or because their history is so integral to understanding the history of video description. At the time of the interviews, DVS<sup>7</sup> had a larger full-time staff than NTN, including several individuals specifically involved in outreach activities, a fact reflected in the amount of space it required in our report. In addition, the amount of information and details provided in interviews drove some of the space used. The amount of

space given to each organization in this document in no way reflects a judgment about the quantity or quality of the work of the organizations. Due to limited space and time, this report covers only a fraction of the information shared by the people who were interviewed.

Gathering the information for this report had an important benefit, beyond the main one of being able to share it with others: the process provided the Project Director, Jaclyn Packer, who conducted the interviews at the beginning of the overall project, thorough immersion in the activities of description and the thinking of those who provide it. This immersion allowed a much more informed focus for working on other aspects of the project, particularly the two surveys conducted with consumers.

## History

### AudioVision<sup>7</sup> (Gregory Frazier)

#### Conceiving the Idea

Gregory Frazier began practicing audio description in the third grade when he described for Geno, his good friend who was visually impaired. The two remained friends throughout life, and it was at Geno's house in 1973 that Frazier conceived AudioVision<sup>7</sup>. The two were relaxing in front of the television set with Frazier describing a movie for his friend, as he had done hundreds of times before. He suddenly began to wonder if such a service was generally available to people who are blind or visually impaired.

. . . it was nothing new . . . We had done this many, many times. But at that time, that little light bulb went off, and I thought, gee, I wonder if anybody has done this in a formal way . . . I had never come across it in my studies in broadcasting, and I had never heard any other reference to it describing audiovisual media for the visually impaired.

At that time, Frazier was working on a Masters degree in Broadcasting at San Francisco State University (SFSU), so he immediately went to the library and began research to see if any work had been done on such a concept. He found that two major steps had been taken in this direction. The first was "Talking Books", invented by the American Foundation for the Blind in the 1930's and distributed through the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped of the Library of Congress; the second was the Radio Reading Services (RRS) for blind people which developed about 30 years later. These two techniques were designed to provide the blind community with access to printed material, but he could find nothing about description of audio visual media.

#### Testing the Concept

Nothing about audio description of film, television, or live theater had been documented up to that point. Frazier decided to use this concept of audio description for blind and visually impaired people as his Master's Thesis project. His goal was to narrate the visual elements of a movie without "stepping on" lines or interpreting visual information. He wrote a script and prepared an accompanying audio tape for an audio description of The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittmann, which was accepted as a Master's Thesis project. His degree was awarded by SFSU in 1975.

#### Audio Description as a Need and a Right

Frazier said that his interest in and commitment to providing audio description to blind and

visually impaired people centered on his belief that the blind community was a disenfranchised group who had been denied the right to participate in television entertainment. Frazier's philosophy was that all human beings have a basic need for entertainment and information; since so great a part of the general population watches television everyday, blind and visually impaired people were being denied the basic right of participating with family, friends, and colleagues in this activity.

From a practical standpoint, Frazier felt that a major problem for visually impaired people was mobility outside their homes; therefore, having entertainment and information brought into their homes was an important issue. He believed the solution was "simulcasting," in which the audio portion of the program was aired over the radio at the same time as the television broadcast. A person with a visual impairment could wear a set of earphones and be tuned in to the radio broadcast while watching television; thus, the person could watch a program with family and friends, and could receive description at the same time. Frazier believed this could be done by writing the script of the narration and recording the description onto the original program audio.

### **Attempts to Get Funding**

Early attempts to secure grant funding for AudioVision<sup>7</sup> were disappointing. Frazier feels that this was due to the fact that people did not understand what he was trying to do:

First of all, they didn't have any idea what it was. You had to start explaining to them . . . When I talked about the potential uses, of course, I spoke of film, spoke of theater. The day would come when this would be available in all this media, and a whole new profession would be established and so forth. But people would say, 'Television for the blind? Come on. You're joking. What's the punch line?' They really did think it was a joke. 'Television for the blind? Pictures for the blind? Why would the blind want to watch a movie? Why would the blind want to watch television?'

### **Meeting August Coppola**

Feeling that his concept was ahead of its time, Frazier shelved it until the mid-1980s. Frazier was teaching in the Broadcast Arts Department at SFSU when he learned of similar audio description techniques being used for live theater in Washington, D.C., a project started by Margaret and Cody Pfanstiehl in 1981. (see later detailed section on the Pfanstiehls). In March 1987, Frazier met with the Dean of the School of Creative Arts, August Coppola.

Coppola's practice was to meet with each faculty member to learn what they were doing. At their meeting, Frazier told Coppola about his audio description concept for blind people, which he called AudioVision<sup>7</sup>. Coppola took great interest in Frazier's work. Coppola had written a

novel about blindness (Coppola, 1978) based on his experience of having been blindfolded for a week or two. He had also developed the tactile dome at the Exploratorium, a science museum in San Francisco, for blind people to explore.

### **AudioVision<sup>7</sup> is Launched**

After Frazier went to Washington, D.C. to meet and talk with the Pfanstiehls, he and Coppola obtained a grant from the San Francisco Foundation and formed the AudioVision Institute in 1988. The Pfanstiehls were invited to San Francisco in March 1988 for a professional exchange and training workshop with a group of six SFSU faculty.

### **Using the Technique in Live Film and Broadcasting**

AudioVision<sup>7</sup> moved quickly from that point, presenting its first major project to the public in August 1988, a live description of a new film by Francis Ford Coppola (the brother of August Coppola, Tucker: a Man and His Dream. Frazier and another participant in the March workshop led by the Pfanstiehls provided the audio description via FM receivers held by 100 visually impaired persons among the general theater audience.

In the fall of 1988, San Francisco State University began to offer formal AudioVision<sup>7</sup> training for the first time. Frazier auditioned over 50 applicants, choosing six to participate in the 13 week class. By the end of the fall 1990, a total of 21 describers had been trained. Eight are still on staff with AudioVision<sup>7</sup>, Inc., a non-profit organization founded in 1991.

Frazier continued researching and testing the AudioVision<sup>7</sup> techniques in all types of media for further opportunities to make audio description available to visually impaired audiences. Nancy Foss, a describer from Frazier's first SFSU training class, did the first live theater audio description in San Francisco, a performance of A Christmas Carol, at American Conservatory Theatre (A.C.T.) on December 3, 1988. Margaret Shay and Jim Thomas described the first television movie, Miracle Down Under, simulcast via SAP (or "Secondary Audio Program") on KQED-TV and KQED-FM on December 22, 1988. The latter project won an SFSU broadcasting award. In April 1989, AudioVision<sup>7</sup> began work on a series of six Wonderworks films for KQED-TV.

(SAP is a separate audio channel that is now built in to most stereo televisions, and can also be accessed through a set-top decoder. When an alternate audio output is available through SAP, a listener may choose to hear it through the SAP channel instead of listening to the regular audio program.)

### **International Recognition**

Word of the AudioVision<sup>7</sup> project was spreading. An invitation to demonstrate audio description at the Cannes Film Festival was accepted, and in April 1989 two students and one teacher from the Sorbonne came to San Francisco for training. In May, these French describers

participated in the Cannes Festival under the direction of Gregory Frazier, describing two excerpts from the French movies La Diabolique, and Les Enfants du Paradis. Four excerpts from American movies were also described at the festival.

Frazier returned to France in October of 1989 to assist with that country's first public presentation of an audio described full-length feature film, Raiders of the Lost Ark.

### **Founding of AudioVision<sup>7</sup>, Inc.**

By the time the original research grant from the San Francisco Foundation was completed in 1991, Frazier had demonstrated that the concept of audio description which he created in 1973 made visual media accessible to blind and visually impaired people. At that time, Frazier left the university, and with Ida C. Johnson founded a non-profit organization, AudioVision<sup>7</sup>, Inc. At the time of this writing AudioVision<sup>7</sup>, Inc. has a 12 member Board of Directors and Ida C. Johnson is Executive Director.

Since 1991, six training workshops for describers have been held, and a total of 32 describers have been trained, including one from England and one from Wales. AudioVision<sup>7</sup> has also received six different grants for outreach to the community, and as of today, has implemented the service of audio description in 15 different venues in San Francisco and four counties of the Bay Area. In addition, with a grant from Pacific Telesis, AudioVision<sup>7</sup> conducted the first educational experimental research on the effectiveness of audio description in providing access to educational audiovisual media for blind and visually impaired students in high school. The current mission statement of AudioVision<sup>7</sup> is testimony to the direction that the organization continues to strive toward: to make description services as readily available and widely utilized as signing and closed-captioning are for deaf and hearing impaired people.

### **The Washington Ear (Margaret and Cody Pfanstiehl)**

Margaret R. Pfanstiehl, Ed.D., who is founder and president of the Metropolitan Washington Ear in Silver Spring, Maryland, believes that she and her husband, Cody, were the first to produce description on a formal basis. M. Pfanstiehl remarked:

. . . the idea of having things described is as old as the idea of reading to the blind, but doing it on a formal and regularly-scheduled basis, to our knowledge, had not been done until we originated the service.

They had heard that in the 1970s someone had described Star Trek programs on audio tapes and mailed them to visually impaired people, but were unable to confirm that information.

#### **Early Involvement**

In the 1970's, M. Pfanstiehl, who is visually impaired, visited a radio reading service where described movies were being broadcast. She thought about bringing that type of service to her radio reading service in Washington, D.C., but found that it was not legal to do so without first getting appropriate permission from those involved with the original film. She was, nevertheless, fascinated by the technique.

#### **Describing Live Theater**

In 1981, M. Pfanstiehl received a call from the manager of Arena Stage, a repertory theater in downtown Washington, which had gotten a grant to make productions at the theater accessible to disabled people. The manager had installed FM receivers for hearing impaired people, and wanted to have the productions described for people who were blind or visually impaired. The manager asked M. Pfanstiehl to look into this possibility. M. Pfanstiehl (then Margaret Rockwell) was acquainted with Cody Pfanstiehl, because as Director of Public Affairs for the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) he had briefed visually impaired people on safety in traveling Washington DC's Metro System. She asked C. Pfanstiehl if he wanted to become involved in this theater project. He agreed, and they conducted a trial performance in order to get feedback. Blind and visually impaired people, as well as executives from the Arena Theater, attended the performance. Feedback was positive.

Arena's management asked M. and C. Pfanstiehl to do regularly scheduled live descriptions; they agreed to begin doing so in the fall of 1981. M. Pfanstiehl combed her files, contacting people from the fields of journalism, broadcasting, and theater because they were likely to have good verbal skills. She and C. Pfanstiehl developed tapes for auditions, and developed their own training method. Eventually they obtained the services of ten volunteers; their first described production, in

1981, was Major Barbara.

According to M. Pfanstiehl, the service was so successful that they did not have to promote it; other theaters contacted them requesting the service. The Pfanstiehls began to recruit and train more describers.

### **Describing for Public Television via Simulcasting**

In 1982, while they were providing audio description for live theater, the Pfanstiehls began to think about producing description for television shows. M. Pfanstiehl contacted the president of Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) who was interested in adding description to the American Playhouse series. The Pfanstiehls received a grant in 1982 to accomplish this through simulcasting, in which the radio reading service, receiving the signal via satellite, would broadcast the description at the same time that the show was airing on television. A visually impaired person could thus turn on the radio reading service receiver at the same time as the television and get both the original show on television and the description from the radio reading service. M. Pfanstiehl remarked, "This was expensive to do and a cumbersome way of delivery. But that was about all there was at that time."

When the grant money ran out the Pfanstiehls could not continue simulcasting. "We were no longer able to afford to put it in sync with the program, so we fell back to just making it a glorified radio program and airing the show," M. Pfanstiehl stated. The added description plus original program audio was thus broadcast as a regular radio show, not in sync with the television program, and in fact was aired at a time and day different from the television show. M. Pfanstiehl added:

. . . so we then just took to airing the programs. We ended up doing Nova for a while, too, on a different night of the week, so that people wouldn't try to put it in sync with their television sets, because it was not in perfect sync.

### **Describing for Public Television via SAP**

Several years later, in 1984, M. Pfanstiehl received a telephone call from Barry Cronin, Director of Electronic Text Services at WGBH, the Boston PBS station, who was later to develop Descriptive Video Service<sup>7</sup> (DVS<sup>7</sup>). Cronin had independently come up with the idea of video description and had subsequently found out about the Pfanstiehls' work. M. Pfanstiehl explained the purpose of Cronin's call:

So they . . . said, 'We want to get a national service going. Will you work with us? You know the

art of how to do it, and you also know the blindness population.' So of course, we were thrilled. We knew the art and they had the technical know-how. Cronin said, 'This is a marriage made in heaven'.

Cronin asked the Pfanstiehls to train WGBH employees in the technique of description. The Pfanstiehls agreed and went to Boston to do so. They and their volunteers then worked with WGBH staff on several described Mystery! shows that were aired in the local Boston area and in 1988 worked with DVS<sup>7</sup> on a national test of described versions of American Playhouse over a one-year period. (See section on DVS<sup>7</sup> later for more details.) According to the Pfanstiehls, they and their volunteers found the work of providing descriptions for the series extremely intense and taxing because it had to be written with a computer, which was very different from their methods of working; they were glad when the series came to an end. As M. Pfanstiehl stated, ". . . it was a pioneer effort, but I did not want to continue this pace as a way of life."

The Pfanstiehls returned to Boston twice more to conduct additional training for DVS<sup>7</sup>. They continue to be involved with training people around the country and as far away as Australia, in addition to providing description service for major theaters in the Washington area. M. Pfanstiehl has formed a coalition of 17 national organizations which is currently involved in a major effort to convince the home video, television, cable, and film industry to provide description for people who are blind or visually impaired as they do for people who are deaf or hearing impaired via closed captioning.

### **Descriptive Video Service<sup>7</sup> (DVS<sup>7</sup>)**

In the mid-1980s, stereo television made its debut; there emerged from this development of stereo broadcast technology a third and separate channel called the separate audio program (SAP). The SAP channel was developed in conjunction with stereo television and considered appropriate for bilingual programming, but no study of the need for bilingual programming existed. There was no documentation of audience desire for second language programming or any analysis of the cost to produce a language track. Furthermore there was no entity identified as willing to pay the costs for producing bilingual programming. Nonetheless, when SAP was first introduced television manufacturers referred to it as the "bilingual channel."

### **WGBH Explores Uses for SAP**

WGBH began exploring the possibilities of offering described programming in 1985. Barry Cronin, Ph.D, joined WGBH's Special Telecommunications Department as Director of Electronic Text Services overseeing the Caption Center in 1984, when it was involved in developing technical aspects of closed captioning. That same year, WGBH was considering

adding stereo-transmitting capability to the station, and a task force was formed to determine the most expedient way to proceed. The task force brought together people from the various departments at WGBH including Cronin. There he found out about the SAP channel and the fact that it was originally intended for bilingual programming.

### **Conceiving the Idea of Described Programming**

Once WGBH began broadcasting in stereo, the task force began discussing other ways of using the SAP channel that would be consistent with WGBH's mission as a public broadcaster serving "underserved" audiences. Cronin's background in closed captioning made him more aware of people he felt were "disenfranchised and underserved." He went home one night, turned on his television set, and tried listening to a program without looking at the screen. Up to then he had been under the impression that television broadcasting incorporated enough audio to enable blind and visually impaired people to follow what was happening; he was surprised to find that he lost a good deal of program content. He remembered a television sports personality whom he had watched on television a number of years ago. The sports announcer used to describe in whispering words, so as not to distract the players, the play-by-plays during bowling tournaments. In the same way that the sports announcer whispered the play-by-plays in a sports activity, a narrator could be providing a running description of the visual aspects of the show for people who are blind or visually impaired.

### **Presenting the Idea**

Cronin remembers the reactions he received from his colleagues when he presented his idea of providing described programming: ". . . people thought that 'well that was interesting' but they still were bothered very much by 'do blind people watch television?' And does this make sense?" Cronin and his project assistant, Sharon Davenport, commissioned a study to find out if and how the SAP channel was being utilized. They found that there was some interest in Spanish, but that since 1984 SAP had not been used very much, and there were no immediate plans to use it. Davenport called the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) regarding the idea for described programming; the organization sent them the report of a study they had conducted in 1977 which indicated that blind people watch about as many hours of television as the general population (Berkowitz et al, 1979). Cronin concluded that television is as important a medium to people who are blind as it is to sighted people.

### **From Idea to Reality**

Davenport learned from AFB about the work the Pfanstiehl's were doing. They had been broadcasting described versions of PBS' American Playhouse and NOVA over the radio reading service in the local area around Washington, D.C. However the described versions were not

simulcast with the television program. Cronin and Davenport went to visit the Pfanstiehls who were delighted that there was interest in described programming by a public broadcasting station.

Cronin discussed ways in which using the SAP channel would allow the description to be available via the stereo television set at the same time as the program was on the air, thereby enhancing the viewing and co-viewing experience for visually impaired persons and their families. The Pfanstiehls encouraged Cronin to move forward. The visit with the Pfanstiehls confirmed to him that description was a useful tool to increase enjoyment and understanding of television and theater for blind and visually impaired people.

### **A Local Test is Conducted**

When they returned from meeting the Pfanstiehls, Cronin and Davenport applied for a grant from the Easter Seals Research Foundation to conduct a local pilot test of described programming in the Boston area. WGBH received a \$25,000 grant from Easter Seals to conduct the test. The Pfanstiehls came to Boston to train describers; four episodes of Mystery! were produced with narration. Cronin selected three organizations that serve blind and visually impaired people in the Boston area as the viewing sites: Boston Aid to the Blind, the Perkins School for the Blind, and the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind. Cronin reports:

Participants traveled to these three sites each week to watch Mystery!. I recall one night that it was pouring rain. The weather was so bad, we were sure that no one would venture out. We were surprised when there was a full turnout at each location.

After each broadcast, Cronin would go to one of the locations and ask for feedback. Viewers had very positive reactions to the description. In fact, Cronin had trouble getting anyone to say anything negative or to offer suggestions for improvement, as viewers were so excited about the prospect of watching television in this fashion. It took until the fourth week for viewers to begin to offer helpful, constructive suggestions for improvement. The test was considered successful and Cronin was encouraged to pursue the project further.

### **AFB's Commitment to the Project**

Cronin went back to AFB. Then Executive Director of AFB, William Gallagher, offered crucial support by approving the assistance of AFB's Director of Governmental Relations, Scott Marshall. Cronin recalls Mr. Gallagher stating that AFB was unable to offer monetary support for DVS<sup>7</sup>, but hoped that they could help DVS<sup>7</sup> with their legislative agenda. Cronin said:

It turned out that AFB's assistance with Congress was the most crucial help needed to

permanently launch the new service.

### **Creating the Descriptive Video Service<sup>7</sup>**

In the fall of 1987, Cronin's assistant relocated, just as Cronin realized that he would now need someone to be wholly responsible for the development of the project. Senior staff at the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) were interested in funding further research and development of DVS<sup>7</sup> under two conditions. First, any plans for a service had to be national in scope, and permanent in its vision. CPB felt that a business plan was needed to help realize this vision. In November, Cronin asked Laurie Everett to work with him on a temporary basis for a month to help write a formal proposal to CPB for research and development funds. Everett, an Emmy award winning television producer and experienced project administrator, had been at WGBH for nine years. Two months after the proposal was submitted, CPB funded a six month research and development phase of DVS<sup>7</sup>. In February 1988 Laurie Everett became the first director of Descriptive Video Service<sup>7</sup>.

In the meantime, Cronin felt it was time to launch a national test, but had very few resources to do so. The test would be critical to Everett's efforts to write a business plan. They went to the Pfanstiehls and found an elegant solution. The Pfanstiehls, through the Washington Ear, would provide the describers for the test. WGBH would oversee the production, and work closely with the staff at American Playhouse to provide description on its entire 26 week season. The Pfanstiehls and their describers were paid a small fee for each program described. The narration was also done by describers. While CPB funded Everett's work, WGBH funded the costs related to the test out of its project development funds.

The test was a success. No deadlines were missed; PBS worked closely with American Playhouse, the Pfanstiehls and the Washington Ear describers and DVS<sup>7</sup> to ensure that the described programs aired. By then, 10 PBS stations were SAP-equipped; this small number enabled DVS<sup>7</sup> to know more about the individual stations' concerns regarding SAP delivery of DVS<sup>7</sup>.

It was also a public relations success. WGBH launched a major publicity campaign that truly caught fire. Press attention was significant, and included a story aired in January 1988 on Peter Jennings' World News Tonight, in which Margaret Pfanstiehl and others appeared.

The test provided Everett with the perfect backdrop to create the business plan. She learned that initially it would take 40 hours of a describers' time to describe a one hour show (a figure that has dropped considerably since then). Everett reports learning from this test that blind viewers preferred a professional narrator, and she concluded that when the service was launched,

professional union narrators would be hired on a freelance basis to do the voice work, and describers would be on the DVS<sup>7</sup> staff to write descriptions. The business plan took into account the various technical and union implications of producing description on a national basis, the costs, an organizational chart for a start-up operation, job descriptions, plans for a national outreach campaign, mechanisms for continuous consumer feedback, specific plans to work closely with national membership organizations of blind persons, plans to ensure that blind and visually impaired persons were including in staffing, the creation of a national advisory board, and short- and long-term funding scenarios.

Beyond supporting these concerns in the business plan, the national test was useful in other ways. Cronin used the experience of the Washington Ear describers to figure out what sort of computer-based work station could be designed for describers to use for an ongoing national service on a daily basis. He worked with technical staff at WGBH's Caption Center (who had designed captioning work stations) to develop hardware and software for an efficient describer work station.

With the test completed in June 1988, the business plan was submitted two months later to CPB who quickly accepted it and agreed to provide six more months of funding for implementation. The next important step was the quest for permanent funding.

At AFB's suggestion, DVS<sup>7</sup> contacted the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), which invited DVS<sup>7</sup> to apply for an Access Grant. In early 1989, DVS<sup>7</sup> applied for a three- year Challenge Grant to make the arts (public television drama) accessible to an audience that had previously not had full access to the arts (the nation's blind and visually impaired citizens). Dramas were chosen initially because described television programming had evolved from live theater description, and was therefore designed to make drama accessible to people who are blind and visually impaired. Blind people too, had indicated a preference for described dramas; thus, this genre became the focus for DVS<sup>7</sup>' first descriptions. DVS<sup>7</sup> did not know whether the preference for described dramas arose from the nature of the genre itself, the fact that they contain more pauses and are thus more difficult to follow, or whether the preference was simply a higher interest. The grant, awarded in November 1989, would require WGBH to raise matching funds on a 3 to 1 basis.

In the meantime, Everett pursued federal legislation that would provide funds for description in the same manner that funding was available for closed captioning. She and Scott Marshall set out to include authorizing language in the Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA) (which has since been renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA) when it was up for re-authorization in 1990. Scott Marshall led the process of connecting with the

appropriate congressional committee members, filing testimony, providing early information, and applying for a certain amount of money. Together they visited with staff or members of Congress in both the House and Senate when EHA was being re-authorized. They argued that since description could now help blind people to have access to television programming, it indeed needed federal support, and new funds were required. Funds should not be taken from captioning to accomplish this goal, nor should they be taken from other services for blind persons. The committee agreed.

At the same time Everett and Marshall pursued a federal appropriation. Based on Everett's business plan, DVS<sup>7</sup> could create a minimum basic service of five hours a week with one million dollars per year. They worked with members of the House and Senate on Appropriations and requested that one million dollars be added to the Educational Services Division, Captioning Adaptation Branch, Office of Special Education Programs, at the U.S. Department of Education for the provision of making television accessible to blind persons.

During the appropriations process, the House did not fund description, however the Senate put one million dollars into its bill. The funds survived the conference committee, and in the same legislative year, the authorization and appropriations process were completed, making one million dollars available for description, which would then be available through the Department of Education in a competitive grant process. While appropriated in September 1989, the funds would not actually be available for competition until April 1991, and not be awarded until October 1991.

However by the fall of 1989, DVS<sup>7</sup> had two major pieces of funding in hand. The first was a one time start up grant from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, for \$360,000. The second was the NEA matching grant mentioned earlier, which awarded DVS<sup>7</sup> \$150,000 per year for three years, but had to be matched by DVS<sup>7</sup> with \$450,000 per year from non-government sources.

With these funds, DVS<sup>7</sup> launched its permanent service. The first person hired was Laura Oftedahl, a professional fund-raiser, who had successfully raised funds in the blindness field, most notably for the Columbia Lighthouse for the Blind and Ski for Light, Inc. Oftedahl who is visually impaired, moved from Washington DC to Boston, to become the DVS<sup>7</sup> development director. The rest of the staff then came on board, an operations manager, two describers, an outreach director, a unit manager, and a secretary. The service began broadcasting on public television in January 1990, just eight weeks after the full staff came on board.

### **WGBH: Pioneer in Captioning, Now in Video Description**

Part of the reason for WGBH's interest in providing description was its past legacy in

providing captioning. WGBH was the first captioning agency in the world, and began producing captioning in 1971. According to Everett, WGBH was and remains a place where projects are pursued sometimes because it's the "right thing to do." Cronin admits that his colleagues at WGBH were politely skeptical when he first presented his idea about DVS<sup>7</sup>.

But even with the skepticism, it was 'well, if you feel impassioned enough about this, fine. Go, try it.' When blind people began to respond, then it became a part of the fabric of the institution just like captioning.

Thus, Cronin feels that WGBH's legacy of serving hearing impaired individuals, which he feels does not necessarily exist in other broadcasting stations, was a major impetus in the creation and development of Descriptive Video Service<sup>7</sup>.

### **Response of the Deaf Community**

A key element in DVS<sup>7</sup> development was the reaction of the deaf community to the emergence of described programming. This reaction, according to Cronin, was due to the fact that deaf and hearing impaired people knew what it was like to be underserved by the media. They also understood the value of the technology that had brought them closed captioning, and what similar technology could do for blind and visually impaired people. Cronin remarked that if it had appeared that funds allocated for closed captioning might be cut down in order to provide funds for description, there might have been a different reaction. It was clear, however, that DVS<sup>7</sup> and AFB were asking Congress for one million dollars in "new" money and had no intention of taking funds from one set of services to provide for another. Thus, the deaf and hearing impaired community was, and continues to be, very supportive of DVS<sup>7</sup>'s efforts to provide described programming.

### **The Second Language Track**

Another hurdle that had to be overcome if DVS<sup>7</sup> was to survive was the perceived conflict over using SAP for description rather than as a second language channel. At the time, WGBH was developing a Spanish project. Cronin was charged with the responsibility of weighing the needs of people with disabilities and people who were Spanish speaking. To Cronin, this did not seem like a difficult problem in the technical sense because the programs are transmitted via local stations; the stations can record both versions and show them according to the schedule they set up. The problem, Cronin says, is "in people's minds in anticipation about the future. 'What are you going to do about Spanish?' And our answer at the time was, these are services that could co-exist even on a single channel."

In an attempt to alleviate the conflict, Cronin made the decision that WGBH would reserve the NOVA series for Spanish translation; American Playhouse, Mystery! and Masterpiece Theatre would be described. The decision was later made by WGBH to suspend development of the Spanish service because of insufficient funding. Cronin sees this as a temporary situation, since technology is moving toward developing more than just one audio track; thus, Cronin sees the conflict with Spanish programming to be ". . . an interim, a limited conflict problem."

### **Selecting the Appropriate Distribution Method**

While Cronin and Everett were open to considering other delivery methods, the SAP technology had some real advantages. Most significant was the fact that stereo television sets were soon to be a standard item in most U.S. households. Unlike captioning, which until 1993 required a decoder box to unscramble the closed captions, DVS<sup>7</sup> could come into the living room on a stereo TV. The caption decoder had serious limitations because of its cost, the stigmas attached to "handicapped device" or "adapted technology" and limited distribution in homes. The fact that SAP was a part of a "mainstream" consumer technology was its strongest appeal. Although it would take some years for the number of TV sets with stereo to increase in homes, it was literally only a matter of time before people replaced their old sets with new stereo ones. The bigger drawback to SAP was the limited number of PBS or other television stations equipped to send the signal from transmitter to the home. It would take nine years to go from 10 SAP-equipped PBS stations in 1988 to 143 SAP-equipped stations in 1997.

### **The Impact of Additional Funding**

When the Department of Education released the first Requests for Proposals (RFP) for described video in April 1991, Everett and her staff were ready to apply for the funds. While working with AFB on the authorization and appropriations effort, Everett and Cronin were well aware that they would have to compete for funding in a grant process. During the 18 month period between Congress's appropriation and the release of the RFP, DVS<sup>7</sup> was already exploring new venues for description, most notably home video. So when the RFPs were released, DVS<sup>7</sup> applied for two grants, one to expand the extent of described programming on PBS, and one to develop further their new venue, DVS Home Video<sup>7</sup>. Both were awarded to DVS<sup>7</sup> in October 1991, totaling one million dollars a year for three years.

### **Television**

Under a Cooperative Agreement, the U.S. Department of Education provided DVS<sup>7</sup> three years of funding from October 1991 through September 1994 to increase the amount of described programming on PBS and to continue its successful outreach campaign. New series were added, including Masterpiece Theatre, The American Experience, Nature, and Wild

America.

### Home Video

Also under a Cooperative Agreement, the U.S. Department of Education provided DVS<sup>7</sup> three years of funding from October 1991 through September 1994 to develop and provide a new home video service to blind and visually impaired persons through direct mail purchase. This grant enabled DVS<sup>7</sup> to expand on the preliminary work it had done to develop the home video project, which now needed full time attention. In May 1992, Raymond Joyce joined the staff as Director of Marketing for DVS Home Video<sup>7</sup>. Joyce came to DVS<sup>7</sup> with ten years of experience in corporate marketing and fundraising, and had recently earned an MBA with an emphasis on management in nonprofit environments.

DVS<sup>7</sup>'s interest in producing home videos had begun in 1990, based on feedback from consumers, input from DVS<sup>7</sup>'s National Advisory Board, and advice from the American Foundation for the Blind. Initially DVS<sup>7</sup> had expected to expand to commercial television, just as captioning had done. Cronin and Everett had approached the three commercial networks about expanding to commercial television, but met with resistance on technical and financial matters. Home video seemed to be the logical next step to address the audience's desire for access to popular culture. In 1990, 66% of U.S. households owned a VCR (Nielsen, 1993); by contrast, in 1970 when captioning began, VCRs did not exist. DVS Home Video<sup>7</sup> was also a way to provide video access to people who did not live near a SAP-equipped PBS station or who did not have a stereo television. Everett explains DVS<sup>7</sup>'s motivation to go into home video description:

We went into the home video business mainly to address the audience request for access to popular culture, so that blind people could talk about the same movies at the office water cooler or at a social function that sighted people do.

As early as 1990, Cronin and Laura Oftedahl had approached some movie studios to learn whether they would agree to have their movies openly described on tape, which meant viewers would not have to purchase special equipment, rather using their existing VCRs and televisions. Cronin and Oftedahl learned it would take significant funding to secure rights and launch a mail order business. This information helped to form their successful proposal to the Department of Education.

DVS<sup>7</sup> managed to reach agreement with executives from two studios, Paramount and Disney (Buena Vista Home Video). Both agreed to a six-month test of five movies each. For Cronin and later Joyce, contacting people in top positions at the movie studios proved to be a

difficult task. However, it is important to get to the top executives, says Joyce, because:

. . . it's a marketing decision but it's also a financial decision for studios . . . They're actually involved in the mixing . . . So, it's an expense that they don't have with any other distributors. We're actually requiring them to do some additional work to that tape.

DVS<sup>7</sup> continues to negotiate for rights to describe current movies; in addition to Paramount and Disney, MCA/Universal, FoxVideo, LIVE Home Video, Time Life Home Video, and others have come on board. DVS<sup>7</sup> has produced description for more than 150 movies, including Dead Poets Society, Pretty Woman, Mary Poppins, Forrest Gump, The Godfather, and The Lion King.

According to Joyce, the increase in awareness and the variety of described home video titles has allowed for a significant increase in sales. The greatest sales increase is from institutions, including libraries, schools for the blind, nursing homes, and video stores.

In total, about 35,000 videos were sold between 1991 and 1994. During this period 850 institutions purchased videos, with an average of 10 titles per order, while more than 4,200 individuals bought tapes, averaging more than 3 videos per person.

As DVS Home Video<sup>7</sup> expanded, consumers expressed high interest in renting videos. DVS<sup>7</sup> approached Blockbuster Video, who then conducted a test in 10 stores in 1995 to see what interest there is in described videos. In 1997, Blockbuster expanded to 500 stores nationwide, carrying at least 40 of the DVS Home Video<sup>7</sup> titles in each store.

#### Describing Nature and Science Programs

Although DVS<sup>7</sup> had described a number of dramatic series, staff continued to hear from consumers regarding other types of programs that needed description. Through regular meetings of Consumer Advisory Councils, one-to-one contact and focus groups at conventions, and other means, DVS<sup>7</sup> heard one message loud and clear. Consumers had expressed a strong interest in science and nature programs. After some experimentation, DVS<sup>7</sup> soon realized that the writing style for science and nature programs would be different than the style already developed for dramatic programs. DVS<sup>7</sup> applied to the National Science Foundation in 1991 and received a grant to study the art of writing description for non-fiction programs and to investigate more thoroughly the community's interest in science programs. This grant enabled DVS<sup>7</sup> to develop guidelines for describing non-fiction programs, and to add selected episodes from Nature, Wild America, and The New Explorers to the DVS<sup>7</sup> repertoire.

## Department of Education Increases Funds for Description

By April of 1992, DVS<sup>7</sup> was broadcasting to more than 61 public television stations in the country, with 52% of Americans able to receive described television programs in their households. By 1997 those figures had climbed to 143 stations, reaching 76% of U.S. TV households.

In April 1992, the Department of Education released a new Request for Proposal for the expansion of described television. DVS<sup>7</sup> again submitted two proposals, one for children's programming and one for historical documentaries to enter the home video market. Both proposals had strong outreach and marketing components, and DVS<sup>7</sup> was awarded both grants. This allowed for major expansion to a staff of 18 and increased programming.

### Children's Programming

A U.S. Department of Education Cooperative Agreement from October 1992 to September 1995, allowed DVS<sup>7</sup> to address the important issue of describing children's materials. DVS<sup>7</sup> attempted to find out how to improve their ability to meet the needs of blind and visually impaired children, both in school and at home. Until this grant opportunity, DVS<sup>7</sup> had not produced many programs or videos specifically for children. Tom Wlodkowski, DVS<sup>7</sup> outreach assistant explained:

In the beginning, I think the main emphasis for DVS<sup>7</sup> was to make public television accessible to the largest possible audience of blind or visually impaired people. As time went on, people realized that we needed to devote greater energy to children's programming. I think the educational value of description for children really hit home for everyone after a screening of Degrassi High we held for a group of blind teens at the Carroll Center for the Blind. After the show one of the kids said something like 'Thanks to the description I finally know what a high five (the hand gesture) is.' That statement helped spark the idea that DVS<sup>7</sup> should research potential benefits of description for children in addition to just making a show or movie more accessible. The widespread use of PBS programs like NOVA in the classroom also played a role especially since mainstreaming of blind kids is more the norm than the exception today.

From focus groups with educators, DVS<sup>7</sup> learned about the need to provide described programming not only for children who are blind or visually impaired, but for children with learning disabilities as well. Additional feedback from teachers indicated the beneficial effects of providing described educational materials to children enrolled in special education curricula.

DVS<sup>7</sup> began to investigate this new and challenging field. Thus far, the Department of Education's grant for family programming has enabled DVS<sup>7</sup> to produce selected episodes of children's programs, ranging from a Sesame Street prime time special to Mister Rogers' Neighborhood and the children's literature series, Long Ago and Far Away, as well as selected new family movies produced for the home video market.

### **Library Access to Described Shows**

In 1992, DVS<sup>7</sup> produced narrated versions of historical documentaries and home videos for use in public libraries throughout the country. A three year funding agreement between the U.S. Department of Education and DVS<sup>7</sup> from October 1992 to September 1995, gave DVS<sup>7</sup> the opportunity to bring its home videos to public libraries in the country, thus making description of such programs accessible to blind and visually impaired people free of charge. With the Library grant, DVS<sup>7</sup> was able to describe important historical documentaries such as The Civil War. When these documentaries entered the home video market, DVS<sup>7</sup> then had permission to add them to the DVS Home Video<sup>7</sup> catalogue.

### **Expanding to Cable**

Under a cooperative agreement from the Department of Education from October 1995 through September 1998, DVS<sup>7</sup> has now expanded into cable television programming. In April 1996, DVS<sup>7</sup> made its debut on the Turner Classics Movie (TCM) cable channel, presenting one described classic film per week.

## **Narrative Television Network (NTN)**

Jim Stovall, founder and President of Narrative Television Network (NTN) discussed a more personal impetus to provide described programming to people who are blind or visually impaired.

Stovall began losing his sight at the age of seventeen, due to a condition of the central eye called juvenile macular degeneration. By the time he reached his early twenties, he had become legally blind, and at the age of twenty-nine, he lost virtually all the remainder of his vision. He presently has minimal light perception. "At the very end I lost the remainder of my sight very quickly. I went from having some sight that was useful for mobility to get around, to functionally nothing almost overnight," he commented.

### **The Idea is Formed**

The sudden loss of remaining vision that he had relied on to get around, combined with the fact that he had not yet received any mobility training, left him fearful of leaving his home. Stovall had always enjoyed home videos, had an extensive collection, and relied on these for entertainment, since he remained at home much of the time. One day he put on a Humphrey Bogart film called The Big Sleep, a film that he had seen a number of times in the past. Being familiar with the story, he was sure that he would be able to follow the action. He explained what occurred:

. . . about an hour-and-a-half later somebody shot somebody, and somebody screamed, and a car sped away and I forgot what happened. I said, 'Somebody really ought to do something about that,' and that somebody was me . . .

### **From Idea to Reality**

Stovall began to think about the idea of providing described programming. In 1988 he met Kathy Harper, who had an extensive legal background; she taught paralegal and contract courses at the local University. Harper was legally blind but nevertheless could do limited print reading. Stovall and Harper began to explore the idea of making and selling described home videos that incorporated about three or four shows of a particular television series on each video. They incorporated later that year, calling their newly-formed venture "The Narrative Video Network."

They contacted some producers, syndicators, and distributors of television programs; eventually they got the rights, on a contractual basis, from Viacom, KingWorld, and Fourstar to produce described versions of the Andy Griffith Show, Gomer Pyle, Big Valley, Matlock, and a

number of movies. Their goal was to release several home videos a month of these series.

NTN uses freelance writers to produce scripts which are then read onto tape by a professional narrator. Stovall feels that contracting writers leads to a better product because "they are fresher, they are experts in certain areas. We have certain people that do war films, horror films, period pieces . . . there's some people that are more interested in certain movies or shows and they do a better job at it."

### **Dissemination**

Once the movies were narrated, Stovall and Harper mailed thousands of free videos and audio cassettes to organizations that are concerned with the needs of blind and visually impaired people, such as the National Federation of the Blind, the American Council of the Blind, the National Library Service regional and subregional libraries around the country, and state rehabilitation agencies that serve people who are blind or visually impaired.

### **Getting Advertisers and Sponsors**

The Narrative Video Network incurred all expenses at this point; however, the idea was that after the first mailing, Stovall and Harper would try to obtain sponsors for the videos. Sponsors' messages and/or commercials would be incorporated into the programming itself, during the normal commercial breaks. They obtained a few corporate advertisers, including Sears, AT&T, Kmart, Colgate-Palmolive, Proctor & Gamble, and American Express. They were selective about the kinds of advertising they would accept because they wanted to make sure they were sensitive to their audience; therefore, according to Stovall, book and automobile sponsors, for example, were not appropriate for blind and visually impaired audiences. This was actually a moot issue, since those kinds of corporations have never approached them. To get sponsors, Stovall has to "go after them" by developing proposals and presenting financial breakdowns to their agencies.

NTN currently receives funding from two grants from the U.S. Department of Education. These grants allow NTN to serve blind and visually impaired people in ways it otherwise could not, including production, promotion, and program guides. All other funding comes from affiliate and commercial sources.

### **Rethinking Distribution**

During this early period of the organization's development, Stovall and Harper were its only employees, except for some contract workers who worked in the studios they rented from different television production studios. The first video to be released incorporated seven shows. They received a very positive response from the libraries, agencies, and audience members who received tapes; however, it was becoming clear to Stovall and Harper from research conducted

on the home video market that they needed to rethink the problem of distribution. They saw four areas of concern in continuing with marketing videos.

The first was that the described home videos they produced had to be bought or rented by consumers, whereas watching television simply involved turning on the television set without incurring a cost. According to Stovall, cable service, which one pays for every month, is not seen as something that one has to go out and purchase at the moment one wants to watch; it is perceived simply as something that is there and available. He feels that if people had to go out and buy whatever they might currently be watching, they probably would not do it.

Second, going out and purchasing, renting, or borrowing a video is an investment in time; one has to make the effort to obtain it and then set aside two or more hours to watch it. As Stovall remarked, "They'll watch five hours of television, but they won't rent a video because they don't have two free hours to watch a movie."

Third, companies placing advertisements or sponsorships on home videos pay very little for the spot, from about five to fifteen cents per video. Stovall recognized that this was simply not profitable:

You can't survive on that kind of revenue per tape. Now, it's a great add-on if you're also renting or selling the tapes . . . But if that's all you've got, it's a major problem.

Fourth, Stovall recognized that he was focusing on a particular population who might not be fully informed about home videos: ". . . to have to buy or rent or borrow or somehow get these home videos, is quite a project."

### **Breaking Into Television: Local Cable Stations**

Stovall noted that the evolution of closed captioning started with local television, had gone on to cable and national television, and then into home videos for sale and rental. He saw this as a natural progression that should also develop with description, and he and Harper decided to put their efforts into getting description onto television, and at this point changed the name of the company to "Narrative Television Network" (NTN).

We started with a few cable systems using our first video project as our pilot and took it into them and showed them this is what we can do. They were intrigued and fascinated and we convinced them that there was an audience and that people would watch this.

In order to get the described shows to the local cable stations, Stovall and Harper had

the choice of sending them over satellite or delivering the tapes to them. They decided on the latter. Satellite is very expensive, according to Stovall, about \$2500 an hour for satellite and transponder time. On the other hand, although shipping the tapes is less expensive, it becomes very involved:

. . . this system wants it on Tuesday, this system wants it on Friday, this system wants it everyday and the next thing you know, you've got a major headache going here . . . we figured . . . the breakeven point was somewhere between eighty to a hundred systems -- it's cheaper at that point to get on satellite.

### **Breaking Into National Television - Tulsa Cable**

After working with the local stations for a while, Stovall and Harper set their sights on expanding and getting onto satellite, which was essential if they intended to grow.

Because Stovall was based in Tulsa, he had the opportunity to give a demonstration of his product to a representative of Tulsa Cable. The representative agreed to try running some described shows over a thirteen-week period. At the time, Stovall did not realize how big Tulsa Cable was; when he approached a second system, he was asked what system he was presently on. He remembered thinking that he was embarrassed over the fact that he had to reveal that he was on Tulsa Cable. Instead, he found that being on Tulsa Cable was a "big deal" to them. He later found out that Tulsa Cable is a huge system, larger than most metropolitan cable networks, with 212,000 subscribers, representing 600,000 people. Stovall feels that timing had a lot to do with their company being accepted by Tulsa Cable; at the time there was still some channel capacity available; today, cable systems simply do not have empty channels. Stovall needed only a two or four hour block:

. . . the way we've been able to get on is to say, 'Well, I know you don't have a twenty-four hour channel, let's find a hole somewhere in your programming where you can run [us] two hours a day.'

Thus, NTN "shares space" with 24-hour programs. As Stovall explained,

. . . channel 41 on the cable is Black Entertainment. Well, at certain times of the week it just quits being Black Entertainment, all of a sudden it's 'Welcome to Narrative Television Network' and our show starts.

## Nostalgia Television

By 1990, Stovall had gotten about a dozen affiliates and was looking for a station that had the kind of demographics that would complement the audiences he wanted to attract. He was also looking for a station that had good distribution and was part of basic cable systems (e.g., comes as part of basic cable service, without having to pay anything extra). Stovall became aware of Nostalgia Cable and was introduced to an executive from the company. Nostalgia agreed to give NTN a two hour a week block and agreed to a contractual arrangement which paid NTN for distribution.

Stovall feels that Nostalgia was attracted to NTN because of its classic film format; Nostalgia's audience consisted mainly of people who were in their fifties, sixties, and seventies. By this time, Stovall had built up a large library of described classic movies; there were four hundred hours of programming consisting of classic movies alone.

Stovall believes that what really set NTN apart from other stations that showed movie classics was that he often interviewed the star of the movie immediately preceding its airing. According to Stovall, this was a real crowd pleaser to viewers, who could hear interesting tidbits about the making of the film directly from the star of the movie. Stovall remarked, "Anybody can run a Katharine Hepburn [movie], but no one else had the interview with Katharine Hepburn before the movie, that was a big deal to them. And we were able to deliver that."

When NTN began its partnership with Nostalgia Cable, Jim Stovall was describing older classic movies such as It's a Wonderful Life, which were in the public domain.

Stovall saw the association between Nostalgia and NTN as mutually beneficial. What NTN got out of its partnership with Nostalgia, who had about 850 affiliates at the time, was that "instantly, at certain day[s] or certain times . . . we were on all those systems."

According to Stovall, the benefit to Nostalgia was that "Out of their 850 affiliates, there are probably 350 of them that carry Nostalgia to get to us . . . we have helped Nostalgia grow immensely."

Once Nostalgia carried NTN programming, the Family Channel, a large network in Canada, contacted Nostalgia, asking for permission to run NTN programming. Nostalgia contacted Stovall, and the three of them entered into a joint venture, in which the Family Channel buys narrated movies and broadcasts them when they want to.

A few years later, Kaleidoscope, a U.S. based network, formerly called America's Disability Channel, contacted NTN. An agreement was made between Kaleidoscope and NTN, in which Kaleidoscope pays NTN for its programming. The Narrative Television Network has

now grown to include over 1,200 broadcast and cable affiliates, capable of reaching over 25 million American homes. NTN is also aired in eleven foreign countries.

In addition to Nostalgia Television, Kaleidoscope Television, and the Family Channel in Canada, NTN is available on several hundred independent broadcast and cable affiliates throughout North America via its satellite signal.

## Audio Optics

Audio Optics, Inc. is a non-profit organization which has been involved with the production of description for live theater, as well as for television. Bert Hecht, owner of the company, had been a film and television producer before losing his sight. "I used to start with plain script and made pictures out of those. So today when I hear a script I see it in my mind" Hecht remarked. Hecht had been producing described shows at the PaperMill Playhouse in New Jersey in 1989, where Margaret and Cody Pfanstiehl came to train describers. Hecht explained why he became interested in description:

I knew how important the entertainment value of motion pictures and anything visual would be for visually impaired people . . . It's a terrible loss if you're interested in . . . theater and . . . television, not to be able to enjoy it.

In the early nineties, Hecht heard that WNET, a Northeast public television station, was planning to broadcast some popular shows and Hecht suggested that they describe them. He contacted Don Sussman and Nancy Tanney at the station and invited them to the PaperMill Playhouse theater in New Jersey to experience a described performance so they could see what the concept was about. Hecht says that they were very impressed; an agreement was eventually made to have Hecht's team of trained personnel describe some of WNET's shows. Three described shows were produced and broadcast: Showboat, Miracle in Rome, and Tailor of Gloucester. The descriptions for all these shows were broadcast over SAP. In addition, Hecht also produced, for the National Captioning Institute, a visually described version of Dirty Rotten Scoundrels and, for RCA/Columbia, a visually described version of Glory. These films were never broadcast on television.

Hecht's affiliation with WNET did not continue beyond these shows. He continues to be involved with the PaperMill Playhouse. Currently, Hecht's own organization, Audio Optics, Inc., has produced five feature films: It's A Wonderful Life, Man With The Golden Arm, Tim, Child in the Night, and The Third Man. In production now are the feature films Suddenly, starring Frank Sinatra, and Charade, with Audrey Hepburn and Cary Grant. Hecht and his Director of Personnel, Wade Miller, have also described two episodes of the television series All in the Family. All of the videotapes produced by Audio Optics, Inc. are available for sale.

## **Audience**

According to Sharon King, Outreach Director of DVS<sup>7</sup> from 1990 - 1995, the majority of people who watch DVS<sup>7</sup> described programming are blind and visually impaired. King does not believe that DVS<sup>7</sup> attracts a large number of sighted viewers; however, a small part of their sighted audience consists of people who are professionals in the field, those who have blind or visually impaired family members, and some people who came across it accidentally and liked it. Laurie Everett has heard from sighted parents of sighted children who watch in order to help their children with vocabulary, and students studying film production also watch in order to learn more about how to write a screenplay.

In contrast to DVS<sup>7</sup>, which attracts a majority of blind and visually impaired people, Jim Stovall of NTN says that 60% of the people who watch NTN programs on the Nostalgia Channel are sighted people. However, Stovall feels that many previously sighted NTN viewers are attracted to NTN programs because they like to watch classic films that they had seen before losing their sight. However, he said that the main purpose of his company is to serve blind and visually impaired people, and they will be focusing on this audience increasingly as technology changes.

Although Bert Hecht believes that blind people are his primary audience, he says that in addition to people who have multiple physical and cognitive disabilities, he does attract a small number of people who are sighted: ". . . women and relatives and friends who know someone who's got a tape . . . they work around the house and listen to it like a radio broadcast."

Gregory Frazier and AudioVision<sup>7</sup> have focused on blind and visually impaired people as their audience, believing that all people should have equal access to entertainment. He believes it is important that visually impaired people be brought back to the theater, many having abandoned it following years of frustration of not being able to follow unverbally action scenes embodied in the shows.

Similarly, Margaret & Cody Pfanstiehl's work in the field of description has also centered on the blind and visually impaired audience. Bringing described programming to this group ". . . places the visually impaired person in the position of having a shared experience on an equal social footing with someone sighted . . ." remarked M. Pfanstiehl.

## **Rules of Description**

Participants spoke about the guidelines their organizations follow during the description and narration process. The participants agreed with each other on most of the major issues; there were no areas where they disagreed sharply, but there were some "gray" areas. Below are the major rules discussed by the interview participants.

### **Narrator's Voice**

An important aspect of producing a successful described video is the quality of the narrator's voice. Gerry Field, DVS<sup>7</sup> Operations Manager, explained:

. . . contrast is one of the most important things. We . . . need to have [the] narrator's voice stand out, at least be clearly distinguishable from the other voices on the program.

At the same time, Field noted, "we work very hard to make sure that the volume of the voice is not standing out above the program, that it has to work with it." It is also essential that the combination of voices of the narrator and the program's characters blend well with each other.

. . . it isn't as simple as setting up a male/female contrast . . . if you just took the straight male/female contrasting voice idea, you could wind up with two voices that don't work well together. Tone and delivery of the narrator's voice are also important aspects of producing good video description.

### **The Art of Describing**

The idea of keeping the description flowing and not being redundant is also an important issue, one that Field has found to be "very tough," especially when describing certain episodes of Nature in which some activities (for example, behaviors among animals, or underwater scenes), are repetitive.

An aspect of the art of describing is understanding that there are differences among viewers as to the amount of narrative detail that is desired. According to the Pfanstiehls, the amount of narrative detail preferred often depends on whether an individual is congenitally blind (was born without sight) or is adventitiously blind (was born with sight but lost it at some point in life). M. Pfanstiehl explained the differences in preference:

The congenitally blind often have . . . little concept of how very visual the world is. People who have always been blind from birth and have never had useful vision, have a . . . poor idea

of just how much nonverbal communication is always going on . . . They will say, 'I don't need it. From the dialogue, I get everything I need. I can imagine all the rest . . . I want just the script description. If you're going to describe to me at all, I don't want you to say very much. Just a phrase here or there is sufficient to clarify things.' And then you have the adventitiously blind who are saying, 'I'd like as much detail as you possibly can give me.'

C. Pfanstiehl explained that people who once had sight ask for more detail because they can remember how they perceived things before the onset of vision loss. Stovall agrees with this concept:

People that have been congenitally blind--[have] never seen blue. I tell you something's blue, they never saw blue. People that went blind later in life, they know what blue is or they think they remember what blue is.

Therefore, knowing how much detail to put into a narrated program can be an art of trying to meet the needs of people with varying degrees of vision loss.

M. Pfanstiehl explained how they deal with this issue: ". . . what we try to tell people is you can't please everybody simultaneously. You try to strike a balance."

Michael Brooks of NTN acknowledged that they describe for people with different levels of visual impairment:

We always try to read signs on storefront windows or road signs or names of buildings or anything that we can read so that the unsighted viewer can . . . have the advantage of that.

We try to do timing as to when things happen . . . especially for our partially sighted viewers . . . so that if the partially sighted viewer can see something happening on the screen but isn't quite sure what it is, we can say what is happening when it happens, so it brings it all together for [that] particular part of our audience.

Thus, knowing the variability of vision loss among viewers and their individual needs of detail in narration, and knowing how to strike a balance so that every viewer derives maximum enjoyment of the program, are essential aspects of the art of description.

## Interpretation

M. and C. Pfanstiehl are very clear in their assertion that there should be no interpretation of characters' moods or emotions. "We want people to describe what they actually see. If you . . . look at a person, you know what makes you think that that person is angry or upset or happy . . ." remarked M. Pfanstiehl. C. Pfanstiehl was explicit in his view of what description should strive for. ". . . what goes in the eye comes out the mouth. You are nothing but a color television camera." M. Pfanstiehl gave the following example:

We . . . want the blind person not to be told the character is 'upset'. We'd rather that 'she's twisting the napkin back and forth and her lip is trembling'. We want not, 'he's angry', but 'his fist is clenched and his jaw tightens'. That's what we want them to hear, because we want them to know what sighted people see.

Another issue raised by M. and C. Pfanstiehl is that there should be no interpretation of the story line. ". . . it is not up to you to tell people why the plot is going the way it is." C. Pfanstiehl gave an example of what not to do: "She's angry because she just consulted her sister." M. Pfanstiehl summed it up: ". . . the describer is there to supply the missing vision and the visual elements. They're not there as a teacher, interpreter, or explainer."

Michael Brooks of Narrative Television Network (NTN) agrees that the description should not offer interpretation; however, he explained that this is not as easy as it sounds:

. . . we try not to interject any of our own personal opinions into a movie; let the viewers form their own opinions . . . it's . . . more difficult for some writers than others . . . to keep their opinions out. You formulate opinions, and sometimes you do it without realizing it, but you have to make a real effort to keep your opinions out. Just give them the facts as we see them and tell them what's going on."

Laurie Everett has seen some flexibility on this point over the years:

We used to be very clinical in our describing, to kind of just say exactly what you see, and people kept egging us on and saying, 'No, no, you can interpret a little bit. You can say that when she crosses her hands over her chest and taps her foot that she's doing it angrily, because now you're telling me what that means. But if you don't say "angrily," then you've just confused me with this description of what she's doing with her body that doesn't really

mean anything to me.'

The lessening of rigidity on this issue has come from feedback from consumers. However, Everett made it clear that DVS<sup>7</sup> was not advocating full-blown interpretation:

... it doesn't give you license to interpret everybody's actions. We still stand by the 'describe what's going on and let the viewer make up their own mind about the character of that person.' But there are times when you do have to go a little further.

Frazier concurs. He views description as "an evolving art." He is emphatic that there should be no judgments or opinions when describing. However, he sees interpretations as a "gray" area. He believes that in general, one should not interpret characters' emotions or actions, but leaves room for movies that he considers "dense." He gave as an example a scene from Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade:

... young Indie is running along the top of the circus train, and the bad guys are chasing him. And in a matter of ... five or six minutes, ... falls into a snake pit. He confronts a lion . . . if you try to describe that . . . after about two or three minutes, it sounds like a play by play . . . in that case, some interpretation is called for . . . you take the scene more as a gestalt, as a whole thing, and you interpret that dense action, and you don't describe every single thing, because it's impossible.

### **How Much to Describe?**

One of the main issues that invites disagreement is how much description to provide: Is it preferable to give as much description as one can fit into the moments when there are gaps in the dialogue, or should some pauses be maintained?

Everett noted that DVS<sup>7</sup>' style has changed over the last five years, that they are writing less during pauses. Her explanation of this is DVS<sup>7</sup>'s maturity.

I think when you're new at it, your instinct is to just fill up all the space, and then you realize that if you do that you're really trading one kind of frustration over another, because pacing and breathing are the audio equivalent of "white space" in print and both are extremely important to the aesthetics of the experience.

Bert Hecht, President of Audio Optics, disagrees:

. . . we'll do a little more description than is probably necessary, by some people's standards. But I usually like a little more than not enough. . . . a little more can't hurt. Not enough can hurt.

Frazier thinks along the same lines as Everett, that less is better:

It's better to do less and do it well, than do more just for the mere exercise of trying to cram in as much information as you can.

Frazier recognizes that the amount of information to provide is a subjective issue: some people want a lot of information, while others do not. Nevertheless, he has come to the conclusion that the main thing is to remain focused on the story and not get bogged down in superfluous details that are not pertinent to the story line. He gave as an example Humphrey Bogart's characterization of Rick in the movie Casablanca:

Usually I would never say a character lights a cigarette. Because what does that do for the story? . . . [but] in the case of Casablanca, you have Rick lighting cigarettes, and it's part of his character . . . it helps the characterization.

### **Description During Music**

Gerry Field explained DVS<sup>7</sup>'s guidelines for talking during music:

. . . we're trying to maintain as much of the lyric as we think is intended to move the story line along. In other words, typically with verses, we're going to try to stay away from verses as much as possible, but once a chorus is established it's fair game.

He reiterated that much depends on how important the music is to the story line. He cited The Lion King as an example.

There were instances . . . where we really were stepping back even further from the lyrics and letting the lyrics go to the point where we were losing some detail . . . we did it consciously because the music's so strong. If you hear any kid walking down the street

and singing the lyrics to "I Just Can't Wait to be King," you want to make sure that those still come across and . . . survive.

Michael Brooks of NTN commented that a cardinal rule for description is never to "step on" any lines of dialogue in the movie or on any important music or sounds. "We always try to leave pauses during the sound so that people can hear everything that they would have originally heard in the movie. That's quite a strict rule that we follow." A lot depends on how interwoven the music is with the script: ". . . during songs . . . there's appropriate times to put in narration . . . [for example when] the music is softer so that it won't overpower a narrator . . ."

C. and M. Pfanstiehl have also grappled with the issue of conducting narration during music. According to M. Pfanstiehl, ". . . our theory has been, if it's the main song you don't want to talk over it, because that's like spoken lines." C. Pfanstiehl added that narration can sometimes be added when the musical number reaches the third repetitive chorus. Margaret added: "If the chorus is singing and has a dance routine, even though they're singing words, and the words are kind of innocuous, like the main event is more visual than the music, then you should talk over it and tell people what's happening. . ."

Margaret summed the whole issue up: "good description is an art, and that's why it's very difficult to write a manual and tell people, 'now let's read the manual and go out and do it,' because . . . it depends upon judgment."

### **Race and Ethnicity Issues**

Hecht discussed one of the "gray" areas, identification of a character's race or ethnicity:

If there's a person in the script who is not normally of the race that the person watching the show normally would see . . . and it's not noted anyplace else . . . then I would make a comment about it . . . The blind person that's viewing a show that's described should know everything that's on the screen as a person with perfect eyesight knows . . . And if you don't do it, then you're cheating the audience.

Gerry Field says that at DVS<sup>7</sup> much depends on the context of the program. Field remembers a show in which the contrasting races of the characters was an important part of the story; in this instance, indicating the ethnicity of the characters was essential. Field summed it up: ". . . it's a very sensitive thing because you don't want to be making something out of what it isn't . . . the difficulty . . . is . . . trying to be both accurate and sensitive, and portraying what's really on the screen."

Everett stated that DVS<sup>7</sup> staff rely on a multi-cultural alliance at WGBH which helps them deal with these issues. Field and describers at DVS<sup>7</sup> have formed one-on-one phone relationships with people in the alliance during which they can talk over the problems. "So just as we try to have a network of people who can advise on the different kind of kites in the world, or the different kinds of jars that jam was made in the '20s, we look to our own work environment, the diversity of all the community, to make sure that we are doing that properly."

### **Age**

Field stated that DVS<sup>7</sup> has also received reactions from viewers when they have revealed a character's age. As with race, he sees age as a delicate issue:

Often, you want to be able to give an age, you want to be able to identify a character . . . as we do often in many of the Mystery! programs where you get a pretty good cast of characters in a room, and you've got to be able to distinguish the different age between characters . . . Names are helpful, but age can sometimes be a critical factor in the story.

### **Language Level**

According to Field, at DVS<sup>7</sup> there have been ongoing discussions regarding the level of language that should be used during description.

We heard real different opinions about that, about either being patronizing in the choice of your language, [or] being challenging in the choice of your language.

Although Field feels that he prefers the challenging route, a lot depends on the age of the target audience. When describing childrens' programs, challenging means using vocabulary that might be considered a little too advanced for a certain age group. He gave the example of Alice in Wonderland:

. . . when she goes through the tree trunk and she's falling, and she's going through [an] endless abyss, we used the word "abyss," and we got really called to task on that. Consumers said it was a word that was not going to mean anything, for two reasons, both for the age of kids, and then blind kids as well.

A program like Mister Rogers, however, presents less of a problem:

. . . it was a cleaner example in some ways, because we knew the age group that we were going after, and we were working with producers who knew that age group really well. We made some very clear decisions to speak in much simpler language in much more shorter, smaller, declarative sentences . . . it was very appropriate for that.

The difficulty occurs when there is a wide range of age groups watching a particular show. An example is The Lion King, which appeals to adult viewers as well as children. In these instances, ". . . you don't want to be too simple or be too complex." Tom Wlodkowski explained how they try to resolve this problem:

Our educators tell us that we should bring it [the language] down so that we meet the needs of the kids. While describers don't want to lose the adult audience, feedback from educators helped us to clarify how to meet the needs of the children first. Describers were seeking guidance on how to meet the needs of children and adults from both educators and consumers. The consensus from our local Consumer Advisory Council was that they think that if it's a predominantly kids' movie that we should aim for kids and that adults will understand.

Wlodkowski explained that DVS<sup>7</sup> has an Educators Task Force, made up of teachers of visually impaired students, which meets regularly, usually via teleconference, to focus on issues such as these.

## **Cost of Description**

The cost that various services charge for video description, according to AFB's interviews, ranged from \$1000 to \$3300 per finished program hour. The range of these figures is similar to that reported by the Federal Communication Commission in July 1996 (FCC Report 96-318, p. 106). These rates are, on average, somewhat higher than the cost for closed captioning, which ranges from \$800 to \$2500 per hour of programming, although captioning for live programs is estimated to be less expensive (FCC Report 96-318, p. 46).

M. Pfanstiehl believes that these costs are reasonable, as they are a tiny fraction of what producers generally spend for a production:

I want the motion picture industry to pay to have all of their first run movies described. You're doing it for the deaf, and you should do it for the blind. And the cost is just about the same. Certainly \$5000, when you spend millions on a film, is loose change.

Stovall stated that the true costs of describing a particular production vary quite a bit, depending on the content, so he charges based on average cost:

There are some movies we are going to lose money on. It's just a huge monstrosity that you have to narrate and it takes longer than you thought it would. There are some we're going to do real well on. So at some point you just have to say, this is an average. And everybody in the business does that.

Both Everett and Stovall stated that as the amount of work increases, the price of production gets lower. Stovall said:

You still have to write one script and have one narrator narrate it and have read through and one mix down [but] you're spreading that out over a vast base.

Everett stated that as the volume of work has increased, the actual cost per program has decreased dramatically. DVS's initial cost per hour was at about \$6000 per hour but has dropped in 7 years to \$3300 per hour. Efficiencies not only come from volume of work, but from more experienced staff, faster computer and workstation equipment, and state of the art audio production facilities. Everett added however, that:

Each program requires a lot of attention, and presents a new challenge to a describer. We do not feel that we're running a factory and mass producing products.

## **Peers and Competitors**

Cronin believes some people are trying to enter the description field under the misconception that it is a lucrative field, and they are trying to "break in." On the contrary, Cronin feels that the only significant funding available for the foreseeable future will be from government grants. There are, however, opportunities for additional description service agencies. Just as closed captioning has grown to over 25 organizations providing the service, the expansion of described television will create the need for more companies and organizations to provide that service.

Cronin sees Jim Stovall of NTN as DVS<sup>7</sup>'s only competitor, since they are both competing for the same grants. However, he made it clear that they pursue different genres of programming and distribution outlets. Cronin's concern is that if the one million dollars that is allotted from the government for work on described video would have to be split among four organizations, each recipient would barely have enough to cover its overhead costs. At the moment, though, Cronin sees only NTN as a serious competitor to DVS<sup>7</sup> for the federal grants.

Everett agrees with Cronin that NTN is DVS<sup>7</sup>'s only real competitor because NTN has been on the air for several years and "Jim is making it work." Everett emphasized that DVS<sup>7</sup> has had and continues to have a good relationship with Stovall and NTN. Everett remarked that from 1989 through 1993, DVS<sup>7</sup> had secured every federal dollar allocated for description, and this period of "no competition" had lasted much longer than either she or Cronin had anticipated. In 1994 when Stovall received a sizable grant from the Department of Education, he was considered a serious competitor because he was the only one successfully competing for federal funds. "As everyone in business knows", says Everett, "ultimately, competition is a good thing, as having a competitor has forced us to look at how we do business and how we can do it more efficiently".

Everett sees the people who are doing live description in theaters as peers; to her, providing live theater description is important because it serves people on a local level.

I think it's an extraordinary effort, and I think it's an important thing to have happen, and it raises the whole level of the business, and it helps blind people to have more expectation for more description and more venues.

Everett sees DVS<sup>7</sup> and NTN as the only major players currently in the description field because of their volume of output, national focus, and access to federal funds; she notes that there are others "doing things" but they are operating on a piecemeal basis because they have few funds at their disposal.

Everett feels that Stovall may push the description field ahead if he is able to secure significant private sector funding in the form of commercial sponsorship. While DVS<sup>7</sup> has had increasing success in securing non-federal funding from foundations and corporations and works for hire ". . . anybody who can start to get the private sector thinking about funding this is doing all of us a favor . . ."

Stovall recognizes only DVS<sup>7</sup> as a peer in the business. He is concerned with the fact that there are a number of people who, without adequate knowledge of or training in description services, call local stations stating that they can provide description for the station at a less expensive rate than NTN or another company of NTN's caliber. According to Stovall, the station executives who have been contacted, whether they be syndicators, producers, or distributors, do not take these people seriously: when they are questioned, they have no experience, training, equipment, etc., yet, this behavior reflects on the legitimate companies because the station executives tend to lump all of the description service providers together.

## **Closed and Open Description**

At the present time, described programming is broadcast on television through both open description and closed description. Channels that broadcast via open description require only that the viewer turn on the television and select a channel broadcasting a described program; this is done in the same way as one would pick any particular channel. The description cannot be turned off while hearing the rest of the program audio. Narrative Television Network uses the open description method.

Closed description means that in order for a person to receive the described version of a program being aired, the Separate Audio Program (SAP) channel or a special receiver must be accessed.

Barry Cronin explained how DVS<sup>7</sup> decided to broadcast closed description via SAP. He had been involved with closed captioning since its inception; one of the lessons he feels he learned from the experience was that the decoder box served as a stigmatizing agent to many people, who resisted the idea of having to go out and purchase this special piece of equipment in order to receive closed captioning. Cronin stated that the box never sold to the majority of older people, many of whom refused to admit they were losing their hearing. In addition to the stigmatizing property of the box, it was often difficult to find and was expensive (the original price was \$179; the price subsequently varied from approximately \$100 to \$200). When it came time to broadcast description, Cronin was reluctant to introduce yet another decoder into the marketplace. Therefore, based on what he and the others at DVS<sup>7</sup> felt had been learned from closed captioning, they concluded that they needed to find "consumer grade technology," that would be cheap and available, and capable of reaching a large audience.

Cronin saw all of these desirable features in SAP: SAP now came already built into TV sets; the costs attributed to SAP were incurred by the TV stations, not the consumer; and it could be conveniently accessed from one's own home.

Despite the fact that Cronin considers SAP the best distribution method at this time, he feels that it is only an interim solution, and that as the country moves toward a digital television system, the delivery systems for description will change. WGBH has been working with the Standards Committee for Advanced Television Systems "to ensure that captioning and description and multiple languages are all built in." As to the benefits of SAP, Cronin concluded:

. . . SAP is an effective technology because it's there . . . all you have to do is buy a new TV set or a new VCR . . . if it's bigger than 17 inches, it's going to have SAP and it's going to have

caption decoding. So it's an accessible TV set for the most part.

Cronin feels that open description is limited in the amount of time any station will grant it. Everett agrees:

It's been our experience that the commercial networks and major cable stations do not want to air open description. It's *because* of the SAP channel that PBS and its stations have been so willing to work with us to make PBS's programming accessible. While we have had limited success in orchestrating special events with open description, no network or broadcaster we've spoken to wants to commit to open description on an ongoing basis.

Everett explains that SAP is only one option for delivering description:

. . . SAP was the "audio highway" that enabled DVS<sup>7</sup> to begin this extraordinary journey of making television accessible to blind persons. SAP made this all possible, but no, it's not the only option out there. It led to openly described DVS<sup>7</sup> home videos, and then to description in a whole range of venues from large format films in museums and IMAX<sup>7</sup> theaters to video segments and other visuals on the Internet, to industrial and training films in the workplace, to films and video clips at national parks and their visitor centers. DVS<sup>7</sup> is committed to making video and film materials accessible to blind persons and will use any venue that is technically sound and that is accepted by the consumers of description.

Although NTN is broadcast in open description over Nostalgia cable, Stovall feels that in ten years, ninety percent of their broadcasting will be through closed description. He stated, however, that a part of NTN will always remain open, because that is what attracts people to the service. According to Stovall, the exposure resulting from open description has led to appearances on Good Morning America, CNN, CBS Morning News, as well as articles in TV Guide and Guideposts. He also explains that feedback from the majority of people they have contacted indicated they found NTN by "poking around the channels," which would not happen in a closed format.

Stovall explained how he would bring viewers from NTN's open format into a closed one:

. . . we will always have this block of programming that we do openly narrated and then during

that programming, we will explain to them, 'now if you would like more of this kind of programming call 1-800 . . .'

Stovall has a few reasons for believing that NTN will eventually operate mainly in a closed description format. He perceives that a number of people without visual impairments may not want to watch described programs; therefore, station management teams may be reluctant to broadcast many hours of described programming, for fear of losing a major portion of their audience. And as Stovall sees it, described programming must expand:

. . .at some point we've got to get parity to captioning . . . that is the short term goal or mark. And they do four hundred hours a week of programming. You cannot do four hundred hours a week of open narrative programming, it won't happen. You can't get the distribution.

Even though Stovall believes that closed description will become the dominant service in ten years, he noted a big advantage of open description. He explained it this way:

. . . they didn't have to go do anything, they didn't have to go stand in line or see a doctor, or fill out something that says "I'm disabled" or anything. They're just flipping around and there it is . . . So they can keep watching it without any stigma attached to it . . . They didn't have to buy anything, there's no special handicapped thing on my set, I didn't do anything, it's just there.

Stovall, speaking from his own experience of dealing with his own course of blindness, explained that adjusting to one's vision loss is a process; often, the first stage is denial:

. . . most people [who] lose their sight do it gradually. . . . So you're dealing with this adjustment of getting to be blind. And you do not want to identify yourself or have anyone else identify you as a blind person or as a visually impaired person.

Nevertheless, Stovall does not believe SAP is the answer. He noted that viewers often complain that the procedure for accessing SAP can be difficult and complex. According to Stovall, there are 8,800 cable systems in the United States, but less than a thousand have the capacity to broadcast over SAP. An alternative to SAP, in Stovall's view, is a digital delivery system, in which synchronization with audio carriers would not be problematic. In sum, Stovall

envisions closed description as the desirable distribution method of the future; however, he believes SAP will be replaced by an alternate distribution method, possibly a digital delivery system.

Cronin agrees that SAP will one day be replaced:

. . . it's not here to stay. It's an interim solution because the television system is going to change to a digital television system . . . what's clear is that it will not be the same as it is today.

## **Consumer Input and Outreach**

Although consumer input and outreach pursue different goals, the methods utilized to realize these goals can often be linked. Input refers to receiving feedback from consumers and others -- the purpose is to improve the product in order to meet the needs of its consumers. The purpose of outreach is to contact potential consumers, advising them that the product exists and the benefits they can derive from it. In some instances, consumer input and outreach can be obtained by implementing a single method. This is the case, for example, with attending consumer conventions, discussed below, which serve both as conduits of feedback and for attracting new consumers to the product. That and other methods to achieve the goals of input and outreach are discussed below.

### **DVS<sup>7</sup>**

Sharon King stated that DVS<sup>7</sup> has what she refers to as "a multi-faceted feedback approach."

### **Consumer Advisory Councils**

The regional and national Consumer Advisory Councils (CACs), which were created in 1990, are considered DVS<sup>7</sup>'s official critique panel. Laurie Everett explained the composition of the Councils:

The councils include people who are totally blind as well as individuals with low vision who range in age from late 20's to late 60's, and who are from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Our goal is to have as diverse a group as possible, those who belong to national membership organizations and those who do not, newly blinded persons, and people from a wide range of occupations.

Members making up the local CAC reside in and around Boston; national members are recruited from all over the country. DVS<sup>7</sup> meets quarterly with both these groups -- the local group in person and the national by phone. King calls them their "quality control people." Group members are changed each year in order to ensure diversity and to receive fresh input. Additionally, DVS<sup>7</sup> looks for a mix of people, some who are familiar and some who are unfamiliar with DVS<sup>7</sup> programming.

Membership in the CAC carries with it important responsibilities. People are asked to commit themselves to watching specific programs, then to call DVS<sup>7</sup> to give feedback. Additionally, members are sometimes asked to watch and provide feedback on specific video tapes that they are given.

King stated that DVS<sup>7</sup> gets new people for the CACs by asking members at the last meeting of each year for recommendations of people they believe would be good for the post, "because [the current CAC members] know what . . . we're looking for." Referrals are also obtained from blindness organizations. Another recruitment technique is through consumer conventions attended by DVS<sup>7</sup> staff:

At the national conventions, we take notes when we've talked to someone and we think that person would be really good on the National Consumer [Advisory] Council.

King described the type of person DVS<sup>7</sup> is looking for to serve on the Committee:

We want people who are outspoken and who don't mind being critical of us. We really look for people who . . . don't just say "you're doing a great job." A lot of people are kind of skeptical about some aspects of it . . . [we want] people who are not afraid to voice their opinions both ways and try to really tell us what they think.

Interviews with three people who were current CAC members focused on their role as committee members and any suggestions they had for improved input from the CACs. Bud Keith, a national CAC member, feels that the Councils are well-structured and informative. He noted that although a lot gets accomplished via large telephone meetings, it would be wise in certain cases to have teleconference participation with smaller groups (no more than four or five people at a time) in order to permit people to iron out issues that are controversial or involve differences in opinion. When telephone conferences take place with large groups of people, "it's very tough to do any brainstorming or any debate of issues," he explained.

Input from CAC members can deal with diverse areas, from technical issues to controversial ones. For instance, Keith suggested a way to solve the problem of not being able to provide enough detail when pauses were short: ". . . if they could actually stop the show and add the additional information that the normal moment of silence doesn't give enough time to do." Keith conceded, however, that there may be some legal aspects that could preclude the implementation of such procedures.

Regina Chavez, a local CAC member, remembers how the controversial issue of deciding how much description should be provided in a particular part of a film they were reviewing was resolved:

. . . at the very first meeting that I attended, there was someone [who] was giving the description of what was happening literally, but he also went into detail about the costumes. People felt that he was going a little bit too far out . . . with the details, with the description. And I've noticed that now . . . they've eliminated a lot of this.

Chavez believes, therefore, that Advisory Committee input is taken seriously; often, DVS<sup>7</sup> staff make revisions based on feedback from the Committee.

Rabih Daou is also a local CAC member. Daou believes that the Councils are effective in pointing out what works and does not work in description. Daou remarked that the members call the describers on a regular basis after having reviewed assigned videos; the describers often speak with him at length on details of his comments. A suggestion of Daou is that CAC members should be included in the preproduction aspects of description, meaning that feedback should be obtained from members not only following the completion of a narrated video, but during its production as well. Daou's belief is that Council members would then become involved in solving controversial issues and other description problems as they arise during the production process.

### **Focus Groups**

Another way consumer input is obtained by DVS<sup>7</sup> is through focus groups which are conducted in the Boston area between six and twelve times a year. Additionally, DVS<sup>7</sup> holds focus groups at Perkins School for the Blind and at the Carroll Center for the Blind, to find out how blind and visually impaired children and teenagers respond to DVS<sup>7</sup> programming targeted for their age groups.

### **National Conventions**

Focus groups are also held at national consumer conventions that DVS<sup>7</sup> attends; for example, when DVS<sup>7</sup> was thinking about describing Ken Burns' The Civil War, they held a focus group at a national convention, presenting a small piece of narration to see if consumers felt they were on the right track.

At the national conventions, DVS<sup>7</sup> sometimes offers "movie night," in which a recently described film is shown and feedback is solicited at its conclusion. For example, an attendee provided the following feedback on the described version of Honey, I Shrunk the Kids: ". . . I thought it was an excellent job but it might have been useful to have the size of a blade of grass given in the description."

The booths that DVS<sup>7</sup> staff operate at the national consumer conventions are also important sources of feedback. King described how it works:

We have people . . . tell us what they think . . . how we can improve. At the booth . . . we tend to get more suggestions of movies and programs we should describe. That's another form of feedback that's really important to us.

Both the booths and the movie nights at national conventions serve the important goal of outreach as well, as this is a way to reach large numbers of blind and visually impaired people who may not have previously known about DVS<sup>7</sup>.

### **Surveys**

King spoke also about obtaining consumer input from surveys:

Through our Guide we always ask people to write or call us with their comments and their thoughts about what we're doing and how well we're doing and what we could do to improve . . . we included [the surveys] in the [DVS<sup>7</sup>] Guide.

DVS<sup>7</sup> also encloses a short survey in its home videos, asking the purchaser questions about their preferences for movie titles they would like, and asking for feedback on the video they just purchased, rented, or borrowed.

King pointed out, however, that a drawback of the surveys is that DVS<sup>7</sup> has to rely on comments from only the small group of people who care to respond. Because of that limitation, King believes the consumer councils and focus groups to be a very important form of consumer input.

### **Letters and Telephone Calls from Viewers**

DVS<sup>7</sup> receives an average of 2,000 telephone calls per month to its 800 line and approximately 200 letters per month from consumers. Many of these callers and letter writers share their thoughts and suggestions with DVS<sup>7</sup> regarding description issues (e.g., what worked or didn't work in the description of a particular show) as well as their requests for television programs or films they would like to see described. Their input is another important part of the consumer feedback that DVS<sup>7</sup> incorporates into its work.

### **Internet**

The Internet serves the dual purpose of input and outreach. King explained the process:

We're advertising our address, our Internet address . . . and all of our materials that we send out and tell people to give us their comments, to ask us questions . . . We're also using it to

ask questions and to do little mini-surveys. For instance, we recently asked . . . what was most important about the [DVS<sup>7</sup>] Guide, which components were most important, and we got good feedback.

DVS<sup>7</sup> now has a web site that is visited an average of 4,000 times per month.

### **Libraries**

Many public libraries around the country that focus exclusively on serving blind and visually impaired people carry a selection of DVS<sup>7</sup> movies and documentary videos. Some mainstream public libraries also carry these tapes. DVS<sup>7</sup> sends participating libraries an outreach kit that includes a sample press release written by DVS<sup>7</sup>; the libraries can then simply fill in their name and send it to their local newspaper, informing the public that they have described videos that can be borrowed. The kit also includes a five-minute videotape that shows an interview with a librarian and explains how DVS<sup>7</sup> works. Librarians can either run the video in the lobby of the library for patrons to see or show it to the other staff so they will know how to answer inquiries. King stated that DVS<sup>7</sup> staff have been attending the American Library Association yearly conventions for several years; in 1997 there are about 1000 libraries (in all 50 states) carrying described videos.

### **Contact With People in Related Fields**

DVS<sup>7</sup> solicits input from teachers, film and television producers, librarians, and professionals in the blindness and geriatrics fields. For instance, library staff regularly provide DVS<sup>7</sup> staff with feedback they have received from people who use the described videos.

DVS<sup>7</sup> has also contacted professionals to help them with technical issues. King stated, "We actually described little bits of some shows and showed it to them and said, 'Does this work? Does it not work?'" For example, DVS<sup>7</sup> had a blind biologist view a described science show in order to solicit feedback.

### **Outreach to the Public**

King stated that outreach efforts are made through the press to the general public in order to reach visually impaired people as well as their family members and friends. For example, an article describing DVS<sup>7</sup> came out in an issue of Modern Maturity, the magazine of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) which resulted in 4000 calls and letters to DVS<sup>7</sup> in a six-week period. According to King, the national press is very important as an outreach method; thus, an aspect of DVS<sup>7</sup>'s 1995 Outreach/Publicity Plan was to "provide selected media with DVS<sup>7</sup> information and article ideas." In addition to the above methods, DVS<sup>7</sup> has a special outreach plan to reach older Americans: ". . . [to] develop contacts at all major organizations of

older people, [to] provide them with DVS<sup>7</sup> packets and [to] establish dialogues regarding the best ways to reach older Americans who can benefit from [DVS<sup>7</sup>'s] service."

Broadcasts over radio and television are equally important. As King stated, ". . . one thirty second . . . statement by Peter Jennings has a big impact."

DVS<sup>7</sup> also has created public service announcements which have aired over radio reading services and radio stations. In regard to public television, DVS<sup>7</sup> sends stations a 50-second spot which is aired regularly and helps reach people in their own communities. DVS<sup>7</sup> also encourages increased advocacy by optometrists, ophthalmologists, and other eye care professionals.

Other areas of outreach are the newsletters of blindness organizations and organizations for older persons. According to King, DVS<sup>7</sup> sends out several press releases every year to the national press and to newsletters of organizations.

King raised some of the barriers to effective outreach:

We have an idea but we don't really have a good sense demographically who's out there, who's our main audience . . . another barrier is . . . not knowing how to reach the unaffiliated [visually impaired] people, like elderly people.

### NTN

Many of NTN's outreach methods are similar to DVS<sup>7</sup>'s. Efforts are made to present articles in magazines and other press. Stovall gave as an example an article on NTN that appeared in Guideposts. In addition, Stovall maintains a busy schedule of speaking engagements. Most of his speeches are on the topic of NTN. Stovall explained the importance of this outreach effort:

. . . out of those quarter million people, a lot of those people are going to know a blind person. And sooner or later they are going to call. That, and just people flipping around the dial, has been the way we reach our audience.

### Letters from Viewers

In regard to consumer input, Stovall provides viewers with a chance to make their voices heard:

. . . in every show we air, we give our address for free program guides and we always ask for input for every one of those letters. And we get a lot of input from those letters.

Occasionally, I will call the people: 'What did you mean?' 'How could we have done that differently?' 'Why did you not understand?' 'Why did you like that or not like that?' or whatever the case may be. So audience mail is a big thing for us.

Michael Brooks of NTN recalled that a lot of mail they receive from consumers has to do with technical issues; comments such as "we're having a hard time hearing the narrator" are offered. Brooks remarked, ". . . we get a lot of input and we try to use it all . . . I'm sure it influences our opinions in what we do." NTN receives about 250 pieces of audience mail per month.

### **Formal Consumer Input**

As with DVS<sup>7</sup>, NTN has a national consumer advisory panel, with new people rotating on and off of it in regular intervals. Meetings are held by telephone; audio tapes are mailed out to them at regular intervals, asking for input on specific issues.

Stovall mentioned that he retains membership in a visually impaired support group based in Tulsa called Visually Impaired Seeking Technique Alternatives (VISTA), a group of about sixty to eighty members, which has also become a resource for NTN feedback.

Stovall, like staff of DVS<sup>7</sup>, attends the yearly conventions hosted by organizations associated with blindness and visual impairment, for both input and outreach purposes. He explains an important outreach method he utilizes:

[With] one of the closed circuit channels within the hotel, we ran 24-hour-a-day movies, narrative movies . . . in every hotel room at the convention, so that people could access our movies around the clock. That was a really great way for us to showcase our product.

Stovall feels that NTN needs to refine its input sources:

I think the biggest thing I would like as time goes on is to get a much more sophisticated advisory panel of people that have watched several hundred hours of our programming. . . If you drink a bottle of wine once or twice a year or three times in your life, I'm not going to put a lot of weight in your opinion. If you drink a bottle twice a week with dinner and drink all types of wine, I'm probably going to weigh your opinion much more heavily . . . we're trying to get more and more people that watch significant amounts of our programming.

Stovall spoke about the barriers to input and outreach that NTN has encountered:

If I had an unlimited source of money, we would do some huge targeted advertising. We just can't do that. And if I had an unlimited amount of time, we would seek significantly more publicity than we do.

On the bright side, at the time of the interview, Stovall said that his most recent funding from the Department of Education would enable NTN to hire someone on a daily basis to work on getting publicity for the organization.

## **Benefits of Description**

Cronin stated that the primary motivation for DVS<sup>7</sup> to deliver description was to make the programs understandable to blind and visually impaired people. However:

All of the other benefits are what I think make people react most and when people say "this is important to their lives" I think it's not important to their lives that they understood who killed who in this mystery program but that they support their lives because they can share it with a friend. They can relieve their family of the burden. That they can watch together.

King related a memorable emotional reaction a viewer had to a DVS<sup>7</sup> described movie:

. . . a couple of years ago we showed "Ghost" . . . At the end he's disappearing, because he's an angel, into this light and one person watching said it's the first time she ever understood the concept of light from the way we described it . . . it was just an incredible moment for us.

Everett agrees:

I think we came at it with kind of modest intentions, and I think we have affected people on an emotional level deeper than I ever dreamed.

Jim Stovall discussed what he believed to be the benefits of providing description for blind and visually impaired people:

. . . it's a socialization process. Television is the number one recreational activity in America . . . there are many areas that separate visually impaired people from the norm and this is a huge one . . . People all over America go to work in the morning and one of the first questions they'll ask is 'Did you see this last night?' That becomes a huge topic of discussion and if you are, by virtue of a disability, not included in that it becomes a much bigger barrier than it otherwise need be.

Thus, to Stovall, the social benefits of described programming for blind and visually impaired people outweigh even its entertainment value:

I think the biggest thing is to fully mainstream socially, I don't mean necessarily educationally or career-wise, but to mainstream visually impaired people, or any group of people, socially.

They have to have access to the pervasive media which is television. They have to. If you don't know . . . Jay Leno or Dan Rather, if you don't know those kinds of things, or if you haven't seen the most recent TV shows or movies, you are not a part of the culture, you are not socialized.

Gregory Frazier emphasized the importance of entertainment and information as a basic need of all people:

. . . my presentation of the need was mainly around the concept that we all as human beings have a basic need to be entertained and informed. And it's basic to all of us, no matter whether we're blind, deaf or whatever. It's just a basic need, and I argued for that . . . the visually impaired are no different than any other of us except they lack vision to some degree, totally or just to some degree . . . the visually impaired want to be entertained and informed just as much as everybody else. And in the popular media, such as television, if there's a movie on . . . and everybody was talking about it and experiencing it . . . the visually impaired people would want to do that, too, [would] want to be part of that.

Bert Hecht stated unequivocally that "pure entertainment" is the aim of his organization in producing described films. "I'm only interested in the entertainment of the blind and visually impaired" he remarked. "Pure pleasure." Using described videos for educational purposes is not Hecht's main goal; however, "if people want to use them for education and helping in certain cases where they can . . . that's fine" he stated.

M. Pfanstiehl felt that the "shared experience" was an important aspect of providing description:

. . . it places the visually impaired person . . . on an equal social footing with someone . . . rather than that the friend, husband, spouse or whatever, instead of just sharing the experience with you, must be the service provider for the description, which . . . is what happens in a lot of informal settings. So it increases this independence. It also means that if they can't be around, and you want to watch a different television program . . . you can watch it by yourself, and still be aware of the visual elements.

M. Pfanstiehl also pointed out the practical benefits of described programming: "You aren't left in the dark. Sometimes even plot and character development can be misleading." As for the social benefits, M. Pfanstiehl concurs with the other providers:

Everybody sighted would know, 'oh, yeah, I remember Joe Blow. He played the part in blah, blah, blah.' Well, we with blurred vision never knew anything about that, because we could never see the darned credits. That kind of information is now independently available to you. It means that you're laughing at the same time everybody else is laughing, or scared at the same time, because it's been described to you what is there. You get more of an idea of what the characters look like, and the visual effects, so if people say 'that was a stunning production', you'll have some idea of why they said it was a stunning production, even if you couldn't have seen it yourself. It's just a more complete experience that you have . . . You're aware of . . . clues, little things that people are doing that can even help to advance the plot or the character development that you would have otherwise been cut off from.

### **Conclusion**

Participants shared many of their observations about the importance of description to blind and visually impaired people, their ideas on the rules one should follow when describing programming, their thoughts on how best to gather and use consumer input, and their decision-making processes along the way.

The players in the field of video description who were interviewed by us provided useful experiential information that will be valuable for funders to evaluate video description efforts and for others seeking to develop or expand description services.

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