

Submission to DCITA Discussion Paper

***Broadband Connect and Clever Networks:
Supporting investment in sustainable broadband infrastructure***

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1. Introduction

The Australian Caption Centre welcomes the Government's initiatives in providing Broadband services to regional, rural and remote Australians and the planned use of those services to deliver community and educational services. However an important component in the delivery of such services, particularly audio-visual services, is the provision of access.

Our response addresses the questions in the Discussion Paper that relate directly to access and we confirm that there are no barriers to providing these services as they are already being provided in a variety of forms everyday in Australia by a range of providers.

2. Broadband Connect

Response to Q1 How can the design and delivery of Broadband Connect be optimised to achieve long-term sustainable quality broadband solutions for regional, rural and remote Australians?

We note that the policy objectives of Broadband Connect include:

“Support equitable access to broadband services for residential, small business and not-for-profit consumers across regional, rural and remote Australia,” and “ensure that high quality services are delivered and maintained.”

The Clever Networks initiative is expected to deliver health, education and other essential services.

An important component of ensuring access and a high quality service is to include captioning for audio-visual communication and the development of basic service standards for captioning at the outset. Captioning is the recreation of the spoken word or soundtrack in text form. It can be provided on both prepared audio-visual material and in real time.

Captioning is already broadly used as an access tool in the community and appears on: free-to-air television; pay television, television commercials; DVD and video; computer games; the Internet; cinemas; theatre; presentations; lectures; and meetings. In the case of the Internet, a decoder is not needed to access the captions.

Captioning is mainly used by Deaf and hearing impaired people (representing approximately 10% of the population) and is also used by English as a Second Language speakers. ESL users often find reading English text much easier than listening to the spoken word, particularly when accents are involved.

If captioning is stipulated at the onset, then it will become part of the standard set up and expectation and can be easily incorporated, rather than a more expensive future add-on.

There are a number of initiatives already in place that utilise similar technology and deliver similar outcomes to those that would be required under Broadband Connect. These examples are discussed in detail at our response to Q12 below.

3. Clever Networks

Response to Q12 What strategies could be incorporated into the program design to ensure that investment under Clever Networks provides the greatest holistic community benefit?

It is noted that the policy objectives of Clever Networks include:

“support development and use of innovative broadband applications that deliver improved health, education and other services;” and

”assist communities to develop skills and capabilities to realise the social and economic benefits broadband can provide.”

As we discussed in our response to Q1, if the access issues are incorporated (such as captions being provided on audio-visual material or with live interaction), then the cost of access will be lower than adding it on at a later date.

With health and education and other services the audio-visual could be both prerecorded (such as health messages, presentations on health prevention, video versions of texts being studied) and live (such as patient consultation, discussion groups, lectures and presentations). In both circumstances access services such as captioning can be provided.

With prerecorded material thousands of hours of material is captioned each year and is readily available for rebroadcast or conversion in a web format. This includes popular programs (such as free-to-air television programs, DVDs and videos) and Government/community information (such as Government commercials, community service announcements and training materials).

Similarly, live captioned access is commonplace. Both free-to-air and pay television provide live news/current affairs and sports captioning and live captioning is used in meetings, classrooms and for performing arts. There are a number of companies offering these services.

The Australian Caption Centre is very experienced in delivering both forms of captioning, but of particular note is the use of remote real time captioning for Internet-based applications such as lectures and meetings. These services are already commercialized and can be offered anywhere in the country that has access to quality Internet and a phone line.

4. Examples of remote captioning and access strategies already in use

- a. The Australian Caption Centre already provides remote captioning access using a combination of telephone lines and the Internet. In conjunction

with IBM it provides a secure captioning service for meetings and teleconferences. The captioner dials into the meeting/teleconference using an ordinary telephone connection to receive the audio of what is being said at the meeting and then the live transcript of the meeting is provided in real time on a specially set up website. The website is password secured to allow proper security. A new feature is being incorporated where the Deaf and hearing impaired participants can use a chat facility to talk to each other (independent of the meeting participants) or interacting with the meeting chair. All of the meeting participants can have the website displayed. The system allows for multiple users and has been used to connect people both nationally and internationally.

- b. A similar system is being developed with Melbourne University to allow real time transcription of lectures. Captioning within a lecture theatre/classroom already takes place, but is limited by the availability of a captioner in the geographical location of the classroom/lecture theatre. The new system will allow remote captioning. The captioner picks up an audio feed of the lecturer from the lecturer's lapel microphone. The transcript is then displayed on a website with the student logging in via a laptop/computer in the classroom/lecture theatre. This allows the student to also see the overheads and other visual aids used by the lecturer and to interact with other students and the lecturer.

These existing systems can be easily adapted for use in providing real time captioning for remote and regional areas as part of the Clever Networks/Broadband Connect strategy.

- c. TAFE Television in WA uses a similar service whereby the Westlink satellite network connecting TAFE colleges in remote WA delivers a range of community services and some of those are delivered with captions. The advantage of Internet based services is that various components of the service can be delivered from various locations, thus captioning can be provided on live services remotely, removing the need for a skilled captioner locally.

5. Conclusion

Access is an important issue for the 10% of the population that are Deaf or have a hearing impairment. The main form of access used for this group is captioning. Captioning can be provided on Internet-based programs and services and is already provided on a widespread basis in Australia.

The program for Broadband Connect and Clever Networks should include access provisions to ensure that users' needs are met.

6. About the Australian Caption Centre

The Australian Caption Centre is a not-for-profit, public benevolent institution (PBI) that promotes captioning and provides a comprehensive information

service to the public, industry and Government. Although the Australian Caption Centre is Australia's largest captioning organisation, it has recently sold its captioning and other business operations to Red Bee Media (the former BBC Broadcast). This sale is expected to be completed in early February 2006. The surviving PBI will operate under the name Media Access Australia and will be expanding the information services about, and promotion of, media access.