

Access to radio for people with hearing loss

Policy statement

People with hearing loss are unable to access many programmes broadcast on the radio. Programme makers must ensure that speech is clear and background noise is minimised so that people with mild or moderate hearing loss are able to access the radio. Radios should also be compatible with assistive listening devices, such as loop systems. We encourage broadcasters to provide transcripts for relevant radio shows and investigate providing subtitles.

Introduction

This policy statement outlines the main issues for people with hearing loss when listening to the radio. It includes our stand on the issues and suggests what actions need to be taken to improve access to radio for people with hearing loss.¹

We use the term ‘people with hearing loss’ to refer to people with all levels of hearing loss, including people who are deaf, deafened and hard of hearing.

Background

Radio is widely available and popular among the general population. People with mild to moderate hearing loss can face difficulties listening to the radio. People with a severe to a profound hearing loss will generally not be able to hear the radio, but they could benefit from a transcript or subtitles.

Digital radio was introduced into the UK in 1998, and the delivery of radio is now changing from analogue to digital. Digital radio is available from a variety of different platforms, including DAB digital radio, digital television (Freeview, Freesat, Sky, Virgin Media), and via the internet, including through computers and mobile phones. Radio programmes are also available on the BBC iPlayer Radio after they are broadcast and as podcasts.

Transcripts and subtitles

Some broadcasters will provide written transcripts of their shows when requested. Transcripts are generally most suitable for non-music shows and we would encourage broadcasters to respond positively to these requests for transcripts.

We have received numerous requests from people with hearing loss for subtitles for radio programmes. There have been some experiments with subtitling radio broadcasts in the USA. However, providing subtitles for radio is relatively expensive and therefore broadcasters are reluctant to provide this service. We encourage broadcasters to develop technology to enable subtitles to be provided quickly and efficiently for radio broadcasts.

Accessibility of radio receivers

Manufacturers of audio equipment, including personal and portable radios, are bound by an EU regulation limiting the audio output from headphone sockets. This means that the

¹ Please note that, like many policy documents, this statement reflects the issues relevant at the time of writing. Over time this may be subject to change, such as new legislation, and we may review and amend the document.

volume on headphone and earphones will not be as loud as on older radios, although this can be overridden.

Some DAB radios have a 'record' feature that might help some people with hearing loss, as you can replay a section if you mishear it. Where this is provided, it would be useful to provide the option to replay the speech at a slower speed. Freeview and Freesat set-top boxes also have a 'record' function that allows you to record radio as well as TV. The advantage of listening to the radio via the TV is that some people with hearing loss will have a room loop or personal listening system to enhance their listening experience.

Background noise

Background noise, such as music, sound effects and ambient noise, can make it difficult for people with hearing loss to follow dialogue during a programme. This should be minimised and radio producers should be encouraged to follow the guidance provided by the BBC Academy. Please see the television policy statement for further information.

Quality

FM has a better quality signal than nearly all stations on DAB radio; however, a new internationally agreed system, DAB Plus, will improve the quality of DAB radio. Good quality radio is available on Freeview, Freesat and Sky, which might be a viable alternative for some in the home. Listening to the radio via the internet is another possibility.

In the longer term, Digital Radio Mondiale™ (DRM) is a worldwide initiative that will use analogue AM radio for digital sound. DRM should vastly improve the sound quality of AM broadcasts on short, medium and long wave.

Evidence

In a 2010 report, Ofcom estimated that there are 70 to 80 million radio sets in homes and a further 34 million radios in cars and commercial vehicles, making a total of up to 114 million radios across the country. The report found that digital listening is less common among those aged 65 and over, and much less common among listeners aged over 75. DAB digital radio is the most widely-used means of listening to digital radio services, accounting for almost two thirds (63%) of all digital listener hours in the first quarter of 2010. Digital TV was the second most popular choice (17%), with streaming over the internet ranking third (13%).

Recommendations

We would like to see:

- Programme makers reduce background noise and ensure that audible commentary and music are kept separate.
- Greater awareness of viewers' rights to complain about background noise to the broadcaster.
- Alternative non-audio media used alongside radio to disseminate important information; for example, school closures in bad weather, so that people with hearing loss are not excluded.²
- The quality of DAB radio to be improved to at least a similar level to FM.
- The inclusion of a tone control function on all radio sets, particularly one that enhances the higher audio frequencies in speech to emphasise 'F' and 'S' type sounds

² DAB radios could provide this information on the rolling electronic screen.

- Manufacturers should give more consideration to 'shared listening' from portable radios. On almost all portable radios, the (built-in) loudspeaker cuts out when headphones or an assistive listening device (such as a neck loop) is plugged into the headphone socket, this can be a problem for mixed hearing / hearing loss households.
- Broadcasters to provide transcripts for radio programmes when requested.
- Broadcasters to investigate providing subtitles for some radio shows

Alongside the above specific requirements, we also want radio broadcasters and associated organisations to promote greater involvement of listeners with hearing loss and groups who represent their needs in planning, reviewing and development.

References

Consumer Expert Group (August 2010) *Digital Radio Switchover: what is in it for consumers?*

Ofcom (2010) *The Communications Market: Digital Radio Report*