

# Death Comes to Town, Irreverent Humour, and Accessibility for the Blind and Low-Visioned

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**ABSTRACT** This article focuses on described video (DV), which makes television accessible to persons who are blind or who have low vision by providing voice-over descriptions of shows. The article highlights the lack of DV content in Canada and outlines the factors inhibiting more DV production, including policy, the commercial and organizational structure of television, and the established conventions that were developed for certain genres (e.g., documentary and drama). It uses the described version of the recent CBC mini-series *Death Comes to Town*, created by the comedy troupe *Kids in the Hall*, to illustrate how different genres of television, such as comedy, require unconventional styles of description to convey their full cultural meaning. Finally, it argues that true accessibility and participation in national media culture for people who are blind or have low vision, as mandated in Canadian and international law, depend on adequate DV.

**KEYWORDS** Blind and low-vision audiences; Cultural accessibility; Described video (DV); Television; Broadcasting policy

**RÉSUMÉ** Cet article porte sur l'audiodescription, service qui rend la télévision accessible aux aveugles et aux malvoyants en leur fournissant une description en voix off de ce qu'ils sont en train de regarder. Cet article souligne le manque de contenu audiodescriptif au Canada et indique les facteurs empêchant une production audiodescriptive accrue, y compris certaines politiques, la structure commerciale et organisationnelle de la télévision, et les conventions établies pour certains genres (par exemple, le documentaire et la téléserie dramatique). L'article porte une attention particulière à l'audiodescription utilisée pour la minisérie canadienne *Death Comes to Town* (« La Mort arrive en ville »), créée par la troupe comique *Kids in the Hall*, afin d'illustrer comment des types d'émission différents comme les comédies requièrent des descriptions inhabituelles pour que leur sens soit pleinement communiqué. Enfin, l'article soutient que l'accès à un service audiodescriptif adéquat est essentiel pour faire en sorte que les aveugles et les malvoyants participent à la culture médiatique nationale conformément aux lois canadiennes et internationales.

**MOTS CLÉS** Public malvoyant et aveugle; Accès culturel; Audiodescription; Télévision; Politiques de radiodiffusion

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Early in 2010, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) broadcast the comedy *Troupe Kids in the Hall's* new series, *Death Comes to Town* (Accent-KITH Productions, 2010). Set in the fictional town of Shuckton, Ontario, it parodies small-town Canada in classic Kids in the Hall style: with high irreverence. *Death Comes to Town* heralded the return of the comedy troupe to television after their cult show, *The Kids in the Hall*, ended in 1994.

The CBC also created an accessible “described” version of the series for the blind. “Described video” (DV)<sup>1</sup> makes television accessible to persons who are blind or have low vision by providing voice-over descriptions of shows. For example, in the premiere episode of the standard broadcast version, the character Death first appears accompanied by little or no dialogue. Consequently, the DV version introduces him with an additional voice-over read by an actor:

A panoramic view of the town nestled among forests and a river. A bus arrives, stops, and disgorges a solitary strange figure. Dressed in motorcycle boots, he opens his tattered, feathered black cape to reveal bare legs, a ridiculously oversized leather jock strap. A weathered leather vest, a large skeletal hand pendant, and single front tooth complete the ensemble. (Accent-KITH Productions, 2010, Episode 1)

DV must occur during the same span as the standard broadcast version so that persons who are blind can enjoy the show in the same time-slot.

We use *Death Comes to Town* to shed light on both the barriers that keep DV from wider availability in Canada and the barriers to making the content itself accessible. Despite the fact that DV exists, accessibility to television for blind persons is lacking. A few countries, like Canada, require broadcasters to offer minimum levels of described content. Many countries do not. Moreover, television governed as a commercial regime has minimized the described content produced and aired due to low business interest in small blind audiences. Also problematic is the fact that certain professional practices (conventions) have been established by the companies that provide description services, which are suited to some, but not all, television genres. Conventional DV is generally relayed in a third-person voice-over, describing visual events that are not communicated in the script, using an objective style that often undermines humour or other aspects of entertainment. As a result of these limits, which we explain further in this article, we argue that persons who are blind or who have low vision may be excluded not only from accessing television, but more broadly from popular culture, a crucial concern. Ultimately, television provides a venue for political participation through shows that draw content from the cultural milieu of everyday subjects.

The making of the *Death Comes to Town* described version signifies a shift in DV on several levels. Unlike most described content, it aims to maintain the piece's genre of comedy and make the humour accessible, as well as to convey the content of the show. It privileges entertainment over information, a new goal. *Death Comes to Town* functions to illustrate our discussion of participation in popular cultural phenomena when it comes to DV content.

There is limited research into how art pieces may be maintained and conveyed for blind and low-visioned television audiences. Philip Piety (2004) notes that DV (or

audio description, as it is also known) has yet to generate a theoretical literature. Though he states that it is extremely difficult to estimate with certainty the effects of language on listeners, Piety (2004) argues that the interpretive process inherent in DV makes it an important site of inquiry:

The range of options that are available to those who provide description in terms of which visual stimuli they will put into words, the words they will use and the way the words are assembled, and the interrelationships between the audio description inserted into gaps in the dialogue and other sound effects that could also be meaningful, as well as cognitive issues within the minds of consumers (the target area of this practice) are some of the perspectives that could generate meaningful research questions. (p. 454)

Though Piety acknowledges the many variables that affect DV's reception by blind audiences, he argues that further analysis of described content is needed.

This article attends to a disability studies issue with a deliberately multifaceted approach. Using a case study, it identifies the problematic treatment of a blind audience vis-à-vis a medium that is attempting to make television accessible to this audience. The notion of accessibility here, however, is complex. The medium (DV) exists, but it is faulty due to historical oversights in policymaking, the process of content creation, and the (mis)treatment of humour as a television genre when it is generated for DV. Our findings concentrate on the fact that DV has implications for cultural accessibility, and we argue that cultural accessibility must be seen to work in conjunction with entertainment. We explore the role of television in individuals' access to, and participation in, culture. Inclusivity needs to attend to the notion of full participation with national culture as it is realized in media such as television. Finally, we make the case that DV as an emergent medium needs to avoid censoring politically charged humorous content. In order to address our thesis from all sides, we approach the phenomena with a framework that draws on audience studies, policy studies, cultural studies, television theory, and critical theory.

Following in four parts, this article first identifies barriers to the production of described video in Canada in order to provide a background on the conventional manifestation of the medium. The second part addresses new developments in the field that seek to overcome some of these issues. It outlines three different content-delivery models for DV (see Table). The third part deals with how the content, and consequently the participatory experience and comedic value of DV, needs to be addressed and considered when it comes to the notion of accessibility. Using *Death Comes to Town* as a rich example, we argue that a person's access to a medium such as television impacts his or her more general participation in media, popular, and national culture. The CRTC defines television as a significant medium of cultural communication and mandates its universal accessibility. We concur, but add that this notion of accessibility needs to be explored much more fully. In order to argue this final point in the fourth part, we look to John Fiske's *Television Culture* (1987) and John Fiske & John Hartley's *Reading Television* (1996), because they treat "television-as-culture," dealing with it as "a crucial part of the social dynamics by which the social structure maintains itself in a constant process of production and reproduction: meanings, popular pleas-

ures, and their circulation are therefore part and parcel of this social structure” (Fiske, 1987, p. 1).

### Conventional DV in Canada

DV is emerging in Canada through conventions even though there are no universal standards for it (Connectus Consulting Inc., 2008). To a large degree, commercial conventions have shaped the medium. DV generally has a third-person voice-over describing visual events that are not communicated in the script. As such, conventional video description is done from an “objective” perspective. In other words, video description scriptwriters often adhere to the aim of providing a neutral and detached portrayal of events; they do not “offer any subjective assumptions, rather describ[ing] what a sighted person would see” (Westman, 2010). For example, Descriptive Video Works, a large Canadian provider, has produced a described version of the popular comedy show *Corner Gas* that demonstrates this objective style. In a sample scene, there is an apparent outbreak of pinkeye in the shop. During the scene, which features little dialogue, blind or low-visioned audiences of the broadcast version might only hear the sound of the character Brent grunting and snarling. In the DV version, an overlaid track provides a narrator specifying that “Brent unlocks the door. He pokes the broom at Wanda as he backs his way outside” (Descriptive Video Works, 2009). While the overlaid narration accurately describes the actions occurring onscreen, it fails to convey the slapstick-style movements or wacky faces of the lead actors.

Voice-overs like these certainly draw on conventions associated with radio drama, whereby an entire show must be delivered acoustically. However, with this article, we address DV as a separate audio medium that must broadcast during the same span as a standard broadcast television program so that blind persons can enjoy the show in the same time-slot. Writing for DV requires attention to time constraints, but also attention to different audiences.

One problem that surrounds DV is the fact that little described content exists. Policies do not necessarily yield an increase of DV in Canada as broadcasters are only required to provide a minimum amount of described television. The *Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission Act* (1985) only requires that major broadcasters provide four hours of described television per week; at least 50% of this must be “original” content (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, 2009b). The CBC is not subject to these conditions of licence, however, the CBC’s English-language television network offered an average of 16 hours a week of described programming in 2007/2008, exceeding the minimum standards. By contrast, the CBC French-language television network “did not report any hours of described programming in 2007-2008” (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, 2009b). The CRTC has submitted that broadcasters’ DV offerings are “in many instances ... inadequate” (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, 2009b). Legally, individuals can request DV content from broadcasters. Theoretically, the *Canadian Copyright Act* allows for “a person or non-profit agency to create an accessible copy, yet only at the request of an individual who is disabled and solely for enjoyment by that individual” (Udo & Fels, in press). However, Udo and Fels have noted that it is inefficient to rely on requests by individuals

to make programming accessible and “to place the burden of responsibility on individuals to prove that their accessible copy is for their sole enjoyment” (in press).

The U.S., a major exporter of media content, has had a profound impact on nations such as Canada when it comes to accessible content for blind persons because, until 2011, American standards for accessible content were basically non-existent. A 2002 American Court of Appeals case ruled that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) could not mandate commercial television broadcasters to offer minimum amounts of described content per quarter (Connectus Consulting Inc., 2008).<sup>2</sup> Until 2011, Americans and citizens of other nations who were blind or had low vision could not be guaranteed the same variety of American television content enjoyed by sighted audiences (Coalition of Organizations for Accessible Technology, 2009). The U.S. *21<sup>st</sup> Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act*, passed in February 2011, mandates greater accessibility for video distributed via digital television and Internet streams and, for the first time, establishes the right of the FCC to regulate broadcasters to produce greater quantities of described content (Robare, 2011). A Report and Order released in August 2011 further stipulates that, by July 2012, “full-power affiliates of the top national networks that are located in the 25 television markets with the largest number of television households must provide 50 hours per calendar quarter of video-described programming during prime time, or at any time if they are providing children’s programming” (Federal Communications Commission, 2011, Requirement).

These recent policy developments promise to ensure that a greater amount and variety of described content will be available to American audiences and by extension, global consumers of American television content. Historically, however, American broadcasters of popular programming were not required to make content accessible.

In Canada, the commercial model of television also results in less production of DV. A lack of interest by advertisers in the relatively small blind or low-vision audience minimizes the DV content aired. DV adds to the expense of a show’s production with little opportunity to generate additional revenue (Udo & Fels, in press). DV is added, or “retrofit,” into programs after production, either by the broadcaster itself or by a contracted company. As of 2010, DV cost approximately \$2,000 per hour of programming (Mediacaster Magazine, 2010). Arguably, the high cost of DV is exacerbated by it not being factored into the production workflow, but added in postproduction. The CRTC has recommended that producers and broadcasters try to incorporate described video into the production process, has made DV production eligible for tax credits, and has advised the Canada Media Fund to make described video a condition for funding (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, 2009b). In general, though, description remains expensive. Description companies must contend with bureaucracy and “several network people hav[ing] to approve the idea of the program being described” (Ingber, 2006). Other issues include obtaining syndication and other rights.

As well as the quantity of described programming being low, emergent content has been somewhat restricted to certain types and genres. Episodic television has been favoured, because it may allow for a recoup of description costs in repeat showings

and/or syndication (Connectus Consulting Inc., 2008). There has also been a perception that DV is not suitable for certain genres of programming. The CRTC has stated that certain programming “lends itself well to described video,” specifically “drama, documentaries and children’s programming,” and until recently it required broadcasters to prioritize the description of such genres (CRTC, 2009b). By contrast, we argue that the *conventions* of DV, rather than description itself, have not lent themselves to certain genres. In our previous article, “‘That Is One Big Wiener!’ Accessibility, Irony, and *Odd Job Jack*” (Pedersen & Aspevig, 2010), we argued that DV in its conventional form does not lend itself to an adequate conveyance of certain content to blind audiences. That is, the conventional style of DV does not maintain—and in some cases undermines—a program’s more general mood or meaning. For example, in some comedies, traditional, third-person, “objective” descriptions of visual events cannot convey the subtlety of ironic humorous situations, which are defined precisely by what is left unsaid (Pedersen & Aspevig, 2010). The argument for more variety and sophistication in approaches to described television has been made by other researchers. British researchers Pettitt, Sharpe, and Cooper (1996) reported on a field trial of AUDETEL (Audio DEscribed TELevision, as DV is known in the U.K.) for blind and low-vision television audiences. The researchers found that blind and low-visioned respondents tended to watch different programs compared with the general population, suggesting that description has an effect on audience enjoyment (Pettitt, Sharpe, & Cooper, 1996). The CRTC has recently extended flexibility to broadcasters, allowing them to describe content in the categories of variety programs and sitcoms (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, 2009b). As more description of comedy occurs, the conventions for describing it may become better suited for the conveyance of comedic subtleties. However, prevailing DV comedy has generally reflected a lack of attention to the maintenance of comedic styles. Historically, genre has been an issue that has contributed to exclusionary practices in DV production.

### **Creative team-based, non-conventional DV**

Researchers at the Centre for Learning Technologies at Ryerson University have contributed not only to DV research, but also to the production of alternative forms of DV. They have been working to maintain genre and address the art piece of programs (i.e., the comedic value, mood, et cetera). In order to clarify the categories of DV and to make salient these new endeavours by producers of the medium, we will refer to the table below.

With the help of the Centre for Learning Technologies, a creative team-based, non-conventional DV version of the Canadian cartoon *Odd Job Jack* was developed that preserved entertainment value above information; it was produced by the show’s actual writers. Featuring enhanced descriptions from the point of view of the main character, Jack, an alternative described script maintained the ironic perspective of the show instead of overlaying it with an “objective” narration of events as would be done in conventional described video (see Table). Once production was completed, two studies were carried out to assess audience reception. In the studies, sighted and visually impaired participants were asked to rate their “understanding and enjoyment” (Fels, Udo, Diamond, & Diamond, 2006, p. 297) of the show *Odd Job Jack* after watching

it with conventional description (i.e., done by the National Broadcast Radio Service) and the description enhancements that had been created by the producers of the show (Smiley Guy Studios). A finding from the first study was that the first-person narration appeared to be most effective in scenes “in which strong emotions” were expressed by the characters (Fels, Udo, Diamond, & Diamond, 2006, p. 302). A finding from the second study was that genre should inform description style, as it does in standard (pre-DV) television writing. “The results of the conducted study point towards a model of DV that uses more than one type of narrative style, as one style does not suit all types of content or all users. In fact, television content creators successfully use different narrative styles” (Fels, Udo, Ting, Diamond, & Diamond, 2006, p. 79). The authors suggest that, just as television content creators use different narrative styles, so too should describers, rather than being confined to prevailing conventions.

Following Fels, our paper on *Odd Job Jack* argued that this new character-based paradigm for DV effectively maintained the irony of the show better than conventional approaches. The creators of *Odd Job Jack* recognized that upholding their show’s central ironic attitude required not an “objective” description, but a transmission of the ironic “unsaid.” The creators’ maintenance of the show’s irony with the selective subtraction or addition of content (i.e., transforming visual irony into verbal irony), rather than an objective reporting of events, allows for comedic equivalence between the standard (non-DV) and DV versions. In that paper, we also argued that understanding humour, or “getting the joke,” leads to states of inclusion or exclusion for audiences, which has cultural ramifications. Echoing Linda Hutcheon’s (1994) theory of the politics of irony, we argued that ironic humour depends upon an already established participatory “discursive community” of those “in the know,” while those who do not get the joke are excluded. The unconventional DV version of *Odd Job Jack*, crucially, included blind and low-visioned persons in the show’s irony.

### **Third-party, non-conventional DV: A new content model for DV in Canada and *Death Comes to Town***

The reunion of the Kids in the Hall for *Death Comes to Town* signified a noteworthy cultural phenomenon in Canada. One *Toronto Star* journalist expressed this sentiment: “Count me one of the many who are just happy to see The Kids in the Hall back on Canadian television. The seminal sketch group has plenty of fans for its inspired brand of lunacy and many have been waiting for any new Kids content” (Mudhar, 2010). It was suggested to the CBC that it might provide a non-conventional described script: an overlay to the script that attempted to maintain the comedic flavour. A third-party company, Exposure Tactics and Talent, was hired to write and record a described version that maintained the comedy of the original script. The “retrofit” approach to description by an outside third party follows conventional practice; however, the stylistic break from a conventional “objective” description of events and the attempt to maintain the humour of the creative piece were a departure. *Death Comes to Town* was described for blind and low-visioned audiences using a third model of DV (see Table), which we are identifying as a promising way to transcend the current limits of the medium.

To summarize, the following table helps to explain how the *Death Comes to Town* DV version signifies a break with these other two approaches to DV (“conventional

DV” and “creative team-based DV”) and points to another alternative, “third-party, non-conventional DV.” As we have stated and will address in the latter half of this article, *Death Comes to Town’s* DV version is part of a growing trend that privileges en-

**Table: Three Described Video Models Relating to Television Comedies**

DV model	Conventional DV	Creative team, non-conventional DV	Third party, non-conventional DV
example	<i>Corner Gas</i>	<i>Odd Job Jack</i>	<i>Death Comes to Town</i>
who writes the description?	outsourced description company	original writers/creative team	outsourced, third party team (e.g., actors, show enthusiasts, perhaps amateur fans)
what do they write?	additions to the script retrofit in post-production	an accessible script	additions to the original script retrofit in post-production
narrative approach	third-person narration	character-based narration (first, second or third person; high potential for narration by one of the characters in the show)	third-person narration
narrative goals	report what a sighted person sees, maintain the integrity of the show’s plot, entertainment value is not as important as informational value	maintain the integrity of the entertainment or humour of the show; if necessary, add content to achieve this goal e.g., transform visual irony to verbal irony	maintain the integrity of the entertainment or humour of the show, emphasize/add humorous visual components with descriptions in keeping with the tone of the art piece
outcomes	most common production model; companies are fulfilling this model now; entertainment or humour compromised	uncommon model; entertainment and humour maintained	attempt at maintenance of entertainment and humour; new media tools or even social media venues (Youtube) might lead to fan involvement; fan involvement and user-generated content might lead to more DV for shows that are never described

tertainment over objectivity with a view to making *comedy* accessible. With *Death Comes to Town*, we can explore this third approach and the ways that it constructs the irreverent comedy of the piece through verbal cues.

This article has addressed many of the limitations that DV faces, including the lack of quantity and variety of DV due to historically meager policy standards, a lack of economic incentive, and prevailing stylistic conventions. Third-party, non-con-

tional DV may offer ways of circumventing these limits when it comes to distribution, due to the rising trend toward user-generated digital content and Internet file sharing. We will address this point toward the end of the article.

### ***Death Comes to Town's Canadian irreverence***

The Kids in the Hall's *Death Comes to Town* is predominantly "irreverent," a comic stance described by television-humour theorists Buijzen & Valkenburg (2004) as "lacking proper respect for authority or the prevailing standards" (p. 153). The DV version of *Death Comes to Town* also maintains the irreverent attitude of the show, allowing for the inclusion of all audience members in this irreverent discursive community.

Humour's relationship to social norms—its reflection, and sometime subversion, of common cultural assumptions—has made it a topic of discussion in communication studies. Various scholars have attempted to identify functional theories of humour and its effects. For instance, Berger (1976), Deckers & Divine (1981), and McGhee (1979) contributed to a theory of humour as "incongruity": the subtle violation of a predictable pattern or set of values that has the effect of highlighting the absurdity of taken-for-granted social norms. Meyer (2000) argues that theories of humour must incorporate more situational variables, such as audiences and rhetorical contexts, which affect the degree to which audiences experience identification with, clarification/enforcement of, or differentiation from the social norms being joked about. Meyer also argues that different humorous processes and effects can occur simultaneously. For instance, an audience that is familiar with and/or accepting of a certain brand of humour might readily identify with the perspective of the humour and differentiate themselves from the humour's subject of ridicule. This, says Meyer (2000), would be a situation of "mutually acknowledged differentiation humour" (p. 323). Such a situation might be observed, for instance, in *The Colbert Report*, which simultaneously engages audiences in identification while confronting the normative values of the conventional news and creating a sense of differentiation from these norms. *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* position viewers as insiders, while "challeng[ing] authoritative claims to the 'center' of ... official knowledge distributed by traditional news venues and information practices" (Meddaugh, 2010, p. 379).

The process by which humour is conveyed in the televisual mode requires further consideration. Buijzen & Valkenburg (2004) argue that audiovisual humour requires a different analytical approach than verbal narrative humour because audiovisual media, with its simultaneous images, dialogue, and sound effects, uses more simultaneous humorous techniques than verbal narratives (jokes, et cetera). In their study of humorous television commercials, Buijzen & Valkenburg distinguished 41 humour techniques in audiovisual comedy. Some of the techniques identified by Buijzen & Valkenburg (2004) which might be used within a single audiovisual piece include irreverence, satire ("making fun of a well-known ... situation," p. 162), absurdity, conceptual and visual surprise ("misleading the audience by means of a sudden unexpected change," p. 153), exaggeration, grotesque appearance, impersonation, parody, sexual allusion, and stereotype. Buijzen & Valkenburg argue that different humour techniques cluster into "higher order categories" (p. 152) of humour, and they suggest

that irreverence is a humorous technique that might contribute to a higher-order effect of comedy, such as satire.

For our discussion of *Death Comes to Town*, we diverge slightly from the Buijzen & Valkenburg model, arguing that irreverence is the highest order of comedy expressed by the Kids in the Hall. *Death Comes to Town* uses many of the techniques identified by Buijzen & Valkenburg. For instance, it satirizes the tawdry ambitions of small-town Canadian politicians. There are also countless absurd scenarios, such as the depiction of Death as a boozing slob with an uncontrollable penchant for low-class *zaftig* red-heads, or the portrayal of the local town abortionist as a cheery do-gooder who gives away free kittens with every procedure. Conceptual surprises include the undermining of genre conventions, such as the sudden, unsentimental disruption of schmaltzy song and dance numbers. There are also visual exaggerations, like the fat suit of the obese protagonist, Ricky. Grotesque elements include the local coroner's necrophiliac romance with the murdered mayor. Parodies of Olympic bids, allusions to sexual secretions, and the stereotyping of various groups, such as Rotary Club members, policemen, and those who make inflated claims of First Nations ancestry, round out the arsenal of humorous techniques employed by the creators of *Death Comes to Town*. Ultimately, the program as a whole cannot be categorized as a straightforward satire. Rather, the cumulative effect of the other humorous techniques, such as satire, parody, and exaggeration, is a prevailing attitude of irreverence.

The Kids' take on various contentious topics in Canadian culture, such as abortion, alcoholism, obesity, the Olympics, and death itself, ultimately conveys an irreverent—but earnest—exploration of some of society's most fundamental paradigms, sacred cows, and discursive clichés without projecting an overwhelmingly satirical or absurd frame as found in other seminal sketch comedy series, such as *Saturday Night Live* or *Monty Python*. As Beverly Rasporich (1996) wrote of the troupe's television series in 1996, "The ethos of the Kids in the Hall is absurdist in the style of Monty Python ... but it moves beyond ... projecting a world of comic dreamscape" with an internal logic of its own (pp. 92-93). With mischievous glee, *Death Comes to Town* takes on issues often deemed too sensitive or politically loaded for polite conversation—topics which, if discussed publicly, are addressed in courteous or officious tones. In contrast with this conventional political correctness, the discursive context into which the Kids invite their fans is bawdy, irreverent, and yet earnestly engaged in reflecting an alternative authenticity. Commentators on the original series noted the Kids' female masquerades as seeming to "go beyond" parody, into "subtle postfeminist portrayals with character counting more than gender" (cited by Rasporich, 1996, p. 94). This same earnest artistic exploration can be observed in the female masquerades of *Death Comes to Town*, as well as in the notably empathetic portrayals of the series' explicitly ridiculous characters, including Marnie (the victim of Alzheimer's disease), Ricky (the obese shut-in), and Crim (the White man who claims First Nations status based on a remote ancestor).

*Death Comes to Town's* irreverence and presentation of an often jarring alternate (albeit unlikely) world may present a potentially subversive humour. Colletta (2009) cites a latent subversive potential in other irreverent but earnestly intelligent comedy series such as *The Simpsons* (which also presents an alternate, internally logical world).

Arguing against critics who claim that *The Simpsons*, lacking a definite satirical stance, becomes purely aesthetic, she claims that its incongruous humour is inherently critical and subversive:

All theories of humour ultimately come down to incongruity, the sudden recognition that the world is not what we expected it to be. ... However, in a state of suspended efficacy, we may be forced to see things in a new way and to acknowledge alternative possibilities. This, in turn, could make viewers more tolerant of those who approach things differently, and thus inspire them to action that they have not yet considered. (p. 872)

Similarly, the Kids bombard their audience with incongruous, irreverent comedy. The Kids presume that their humour is reflecting latent audience sentiments, namely, irreverence toward accepted normative values and discourses surrounding gender, abortion, and death. As Rasporich writes, the Kids' "sympathetically drawn mini-universe ... has the effect of challenging the audience to accept its realities" (pp. 92-93).

We make the claim that this irreverent take on Canadian culture and politics should be accessible to all persons. DV needs to avoid censoring content by inadvertently avoiding some of the more politically fringe topics. Piety tells us that we need to think about the choice of "visual stimuli" (2004, p. 454) used in descriptions and the kinds of content/audience interactions that will result in full participation with television culture. Simply put, when television wades into controversial topics, the DV version needs to follow. In the described version of *Death Comes to Town*, most of the controversial content is maintained, but in some cases, politically charged, irreverent content seems to be left out. In the section that follows, this article features four examples of character descriptions to instantiate these claims.

### *Death*

The characterization of "Death" sets the irreverent tone of *Death Comes to Town*:

The hooded figure squeezes the pendant and a riderless motorized chopper bicycle appears adorned with the skull and bones of what must certainly have been a hound of hell. This can be none other than the Grim Reaper himself. He straddles his pimped ride, fires her up, and heads through town. (Accent-KITH Productions, 2010, Episode 1)

When the describer reads this passage, he stresses "hound of hell" with the drama of a haunted-house carny. The tone of voice establishes Death as the hero (anti-hero) of the series—but also that he is not to be taken seriously. The describer tells us that he is the "Grim Reaper," a fact never verbalized in the standard version, but one that is crucial to both the storyline and the ridiculous situations that will follow.

Later in Episode 1, the describer provides another account of Death, again to emphasize his silliness:

Looks like Death's got a date. He ... rises, a ghoul with a purpose. He's off to the bathroom to freshen up. First a shave with his trusty scythe blade, a quick blow-dry of the hair on his distended belly, a thorough flossing of his lone rodent-like front tooth, then out comes the angle grinder for a trim of his lengthy curving toe nails and jock-strap ... up with his hood out with his

scythe and in a language unintelligible to all he says, “Someone’s gonna die.” (Accent-KITH Productions, 2010, Episode 1)

Emphasizing as many of the grotesque visual details as the time interlude will allow, the describer maintains the same skewed portrait of Death that the standard version supplies. Subtle verbal cues such as “*Looks like Death’s got a date*” hint at the campy feel of the whole scene, which also features a little ditty playing in the background (sung by Death) that goes “I’ve got a job to do.” If the description had been conventional (fact-based), it would have unhinged the absurd elements of the narrative. The Kids in the Hall’s vision of Death is thoroughly ridiculous, and the audio description maintains this irreverence to Death.

### Ricky

Another character who is often described in much detail is Ricky, whose introduction makes clear his condition:

Suddenly we’re inside as a model train chugs along delivering a flat car of donuts around [a] track to a morbidly obese train enthusiast perched on a motorized wheel couch with a series of wooden grips suspended over him by ropes. As the payload moves to within his grasp, he stops the train and grabs a plain one. He’s watching a football game on TV. (Accent-KITH Productions, 2010, Episode 1)

Ricky represents one of the show’s more irreverent, politically incorrect spoofs. While the standard version relies on visual sequences to mock this character’s life, strained by obesity, the described version provides verbal cues to ensure that the text’s irreverence remains intact, often referring to Ricky as “obese train guy” or “obese man.” In another example, the description effectively conveys the events of the scene, but also, with a salty turn of phrase, Ricky’s pathetic grossness:

A letter falls through the mail slot. Ricky pulls a lever and starts up his couch. As it rotates around to face the front door Marnie jumps out of the way. With all his might Ricky pushes himself off the couch, as Marnie looks on, amazed. He cannot reach the letter. Marnie checks the letter. Ricky waddles back to the couch, defeated, with two cushions stuck on his ass. (Accent-KITH Productions, 2010, Episode 4)

Ricky, who usually moves about his living room on an electric couch using a complex set of pulleys, cannot pick up a letter off the ground. This scene mocks the extent of his immobility with pure irreverence. This description is echoed in a later episode:

Ricky steps into his pants and, with Herculean effort, pulls them over his belly. He weighs in—a scale for each foot. History in the making, Ricky “Balboa” goes out his front door and raises his arms triumphantly! The iron railing sways under his weight as he lumbers to the street. Morbidly obese Ricky attempts to run, in a way that only someone who hasn’t lifted his ass off the couch in years could! (Accent-KITH Productions, 2010, Episode 7)

The described version refrains from sanitizing the lambasting of Ricky, which would amount to censoring the text for blind and low-visioned persons. The visual portrayals

of Ricky are extreme. His balloon-like body bursts from his clothes to reveal his stretch-marked skin. He is relentlessly exaggerated. One might read his depiction as a relevant satire of a gluttonous society, or one might charge the Kids with being horrifically politically incorrect, mocking people with purely sophomoric relish. Regardless, the crucial argument of this article is that the full range of cultural commentaries must be extended to blind and low-visioned audiences, without a cleansing of content.

### *Big City*

*Death Comes to Town* is essentially a “whodunit” culminating in a court case. Like the character Death, the prosecuting lawyer, “Big City,” comes to Shuckton on a bus:

The bus rolls in with the big city prosecutor and his sexy boom-box-carrying assistant. (Accent-KITH Productions, 2010, Episode 4)

The court sequences that feature Big City are absurd:

The D.A. appears from behind a partition and grooves on the down the aisle. The audience sways to the beat. As he passes Crim he points at him. He does a shimmy for the judge, who likes it. He beckons a sweet young blond from the front row [and] they get jiggy with it. The audience approves. He dips her, spins her, and launches her back to her seat. (Accent-KITH Productions, 2010, Episode 5)

Big City satirizes Canada’s TV-audience adoration of American crime shows (e.g., the *Law and Order* series and spin-offs) and filmic lawyers (e.g., *A Few Good Men*), and perhaps, more widely, Canadians’ adoration for American “New York” culture itself. This smarmy, womanizing, big-city lawyer, brought up to small-town Canada to prosecute a seemingly Aboriginal Canadian, spoofs Canadian audiences who seem to consume his kind on so much TV exported to Canada. The joke is on us.

### *Crim Hollingsworth*

At times, the described text falls short of meeting the political subversion (or, at least, incorrectness) that the original writers intended. For example, the character “Crim” (implying “criminal”) Hollingsworth is constituted by a dizzying number of negative visual stereotypical signifiers, which are complicated by the fact that Crim claims that he is “First Nations.” Eventually, it is revealed that this character is not First Nations, meant by the Kids, perhaps, to alleviate the charged political situation. Ultimately, the Kids spoof the idea of a White subject masquerading as an Aboriginal person in the tradition of Grey Owl. The political connotations that surround this character are numerous and culturally troubling. However, we point out that the described version, in this case, is sanitized of the visual content to an extent. Crim wears braids and dons other visual aspects to portray a stereotype of a First Nations Canadian, and these purely visual cues are not described. In a sense, because a blind audience is denied the complete visual spoof, it is also denied the chance to “judge” the Kids independently for this political statement that may or may not be beyond the pale. Put simply, if the CBC deemed the show acceptable to be *viewed*, it must maintain the full range of the politically incorrect content in the described version for persons who are blind or have low vision.

### Participation, television culture, and accessibility

Much has been written about television in a cultural studies context, including major statements by Theodor W. Adorno in "How to Look at Television" (2001), Stuart Hall in *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* (1973), Raymond Williams in *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1974), and Pierre Bourdieu in *On Television* (1998). We turn to Fiske (1987), and Fiske & Hartley (1996), because they emphasize the cultural and participatory impact of television without denying the process of ideological coding that television engenders. Fiske (1987) writes that "television and its programs do not have an 'effect' on people. Viewers and television interact," (p. 15) and ultimately television works ideologically to "promote and prefer certain meanings," (p. 15) to "circulate" some others, and to "serve some social interests better than others" (p. 15). He goes on to write that television is intimately intertwined with culture:

Culture is concerned with meanings and pleasures: our culture consists of the meanings we make of our social experience and of our social relations, and therefore the sense we have of our 'selves.' Culture is deeply inscribed in the differential distribution of power within a society, for power relations can only be stabilized or destabilized by the meanings that people make of them. (p. 15)

Fiske's claims about television as culture accord with most major cultural studies statements on the topic. Nevertheless, within these very basic notions that Fiske deftly explains lies a space from which blind and low-visioned audiences find themselves excluded. Fiske stresses the exchange of "meanings and pleasures" in television and its reception. The interpretive processes of both description and blind audience reception require more investigation to ensure that blind audiences do not continue to be excluded from the meanings and pleasures of popular television.

Moreover, the inclusion of the blind in popular television is mandated in Canadian law, which considers television an important medium of "everyday life experience." According to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunication Commission (CRTC),

Television is a primary source of news, entertainment, and sports programming and reflects the wide range of ideas and perspectives that characterize Canadian society. It's important for people with visual impairments to be able to receive TV broadcasts in as complete a form as possible, so that we're all included in this 'everyday' medium. (2009a)

Policies such as the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (2005) also govern the development, implementation, and enforcement of "accessibility" in local and concrete terms. In this document, accessibility involves the removal of barriers. A

'barrier' means anything that prevents a person with a disability from fully participating in all aspects of society because of his or her disability, including a physical barrier, an architectural barrier, an information or communications barrier, an attitudinal barrier, a technological barrier, a policy or a practice". (Service Ontario eLaws, 2005, Accessibility).

Defined in this provincial statute, the word "participation" becomes much more specific and quite limited when equated with this metaphor of barriers and their removal.

The threat of excluded “Disabled E-Nations” (Goggin & Newell, 2004) due to technological or communications “barriers” (i.e., inaccessible hardware, software, and programming, including the visual prompts that were necessary to access S.A.P. on non-digital televisions, and now on new digital systems) is certainly real. But we argue that “barriers” can also take the form of exclusion from discursive communities and popular culture, particularly those conveyed in the everyday medium of television. As Goggin and Newell (2004) argue, “the role of information and communications technologies in the everyday lives of persons is widely seen as more central” (p. 417).

Indeed, the notion of accessibility for differently abled persons has begun to encompass the concept of participation in a much more rigorous and global fashion. According to the UN’s Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), ratified by Canada in 2010, “accessibility,” among other values, ought “to enable persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life” (United Nations, 2006, Convention, Article 9). Indeed one of the eight “guiding principles” of the Convention calls for “full and effective participation and inclusion in society” (United Nations, 2006, Convention, Article 9). In very clear terms, signatories to this international convention commit to values that rest upon enabling all citizens in their full participation with “life.”

### **Policy recommendations and recommendations to stakeholders**

The emergence of digital television technology has provided broadcasters with multiple audio channels; broadcasters can offer video descriptions as well as alternative-language content without alienating “mainstream” viewers. American policy researcher Joshua Robare (2011) has suggested that this digital transition will result in the growth of blind markets tuning in to the increasing accessible content. He suggests that in the meantime, the government contribute to the financing of video description services, “providing an incentive for major studios to implement the technology,” and that “the system would eventually become self-sustaining” (p. 578). This might also be a solution in Canada.

Another avenue for future research is also rooted in digital technology: the potential for third-party, non-conventional DV to make use of online social media. As this kind of DV relies on outsourced, third-party teams of actors, show enthusiasts, or even amateur fans, social media might become a viable way to transcend the current limits to DV. With the emergence of user-generated media and file sharing on the Internet through sites like YouTube, blind and low-visioned participants might be able to access more content, more easily from these third-party teams. However, research needs to be developed concerning the contribution by broadcasters and the subsequent policies that would have to follow to enable the maintenance of such a system.

### **Conclusion**

The goal of this article is not to deconstruct the sentiments and well-intentioned motives of texts such as the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*. The goal is to point out an ongoing gap when it comes to accessibility and participation with society: the issue of television entertainment. We have identified the historical policy and commercial barriers to the production of described video in Canada, addressed new devel-

opments, and outlined three different content-delivery models for DV. We argued that the participatory experience and comedic value of DV needs to be addressed and considered when it comes to the notion of accessibility. Using *Death Comes to Town*, we argued that a person's access to the discursive communities engendered by television programs impacts his or her more general participation in media, popular, and national culture. We are suggesting that persons who are blind or who have low vision continue to be excluded from humorous television, such as the irreverent comedy of the Kids in the Hall and the popular culture that surrounds it. We argued that accessibility must incorporate not only physical and communicational inclusion, it must incorporate entertainment value. Despite some unresolved questions, digital applications may present user-driven effective ways of overcoming the problems of accessibility and the lack of quantity, variety, and sophistication of prevailing described content due to the commercial regime of television. However, this article focuses on broadcast television and comedy because the combination of the continued popularity of the medium and the irreverent comedic genre make salient the fact that accessibility cannot be treated as an afterthought in policy. The equal cultural participation of Canadians depends on truly accessible media.

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### Notes

1. The CTRC makes a distinction between "audio description," for live, information-based programming, and "described video," for pre-recorded programs. It defines audio description as the basic voice-over offered by a news or sports host, describing the visuals that appear on the screen, whereas described video is for pre-recorded programs and uses a separate audio track, accessible via the S.A.P. channel (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, 2009b). This enhanced television is also sometimes known as "described video information" [DVI] or "described video service" [DVS] in North America. In Canada there is a movement to use the term "audio description" instead of DVI, with the idea that DVI overemphasizes the goal of imparting "information" rather than the "entertainment experience."

2. Jim Stovall, the president of the American Narrative Television Network (founded and run by persons who are blind or who have low vision, including Stovall) was cited in the American Foundation for the Blind's online journal before the passing of the *21<sup>st</sup> Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act* arguing that the biggest impediment to content variety was a lack of government mandates; he further argued that the FCC's lack of support for audio described content was undemocratic. He argued that the FCC should "begin mandating certain amounts of description, just like it does for captioning. Even people who are not big fans of government mandates or regulations need to understand that the airwaves are for everyone" (Ingber, 2006).

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