

Ofcom may publish a response summary:

Yes

I confirm that I have read the declaration:

Yes

Additional comments:

As a deaf viewer, I would like to raise the following ongoing problems with subtitling provision in general:

1. UNSUBTITLED CHANNELS

Although broadcasters have had the ability to subtitle for at least 25 years now, some combinations of channel and TV provider remain completely unsubtitled. For example, I have never seen subtitles on the SyFy channel or Bloomberg News (both through Virgin Media).

I have no idea where the blame lies for this - the various organisations involved have a nasty habit of blaming each other instead of addressing the problem - but in this day and age, it is unacceptable.

Sometimes, the excuse I get is that the programme in question is imported, so that the supplier is not obliged to provide subtitles. This excuse has become less and less plausible as more countries require subtitling or "closed captioning" provision.

Although subtitles may not be provided as standard in the formats used in the UK, suppliers should certainly be able to provide text files with dialogue that can quickly be pasted into the software used to prepare UK-standard subtitles.

2. LACK OF SUBTITLING FOR NON-PRIMETIME BROADCASTS

I have noted that programmes which are broadcast at less popular times - such as during the night - are often left completely unsubtitled. Particular offenders in my experience are the BBC's US news broadcast at around 3 a.m. on the News Channel, and Sky News for most of the night (again through Virgin Media).

Given that broadcasters obviously consider it worthwhile to make these programmes available to audiences with normal hearing, they should be making them equally accessible to people with hearing losses as a matter of course.

No doubt the broadcasters would try to excuse themselves by saying that the subtitles are only needed by a small part of a small audience, so they are uneconomic. However, this does not take account of the many people who record such programmes to view the following day, nor does it satisfy their legal duties under the Equality Act 2010.

3. MISSING SUBTITLES ON PREVIOUSLY SUBTITLED PROGRAMMES

I have often seen programmes broadcast without subtitles on one channel, where another channel has previously managed to broadcast them with subtitles. This constitutes solid proof that the subtitles are available, yet these channels persist in failing to provide them.

For example, BBC 2 were broadcasting Star Trek: The Next Generation with subtitles 20 years ago, yet the SyFy channel are failing to provide subtitles for that programme right now. Another example would be the various CSI programmes, which are always broadcast with subtitles on Channel 5, but often left unsubtitled when repeated on 5 USA. (Again, I receive these channels through Virgin Media.)

SUMMARY

I consider these failures to be utterly inexcusable, especially when remembering that subtitling technology has been widely available for the last 25 years.

I understand that live subtitling will never be perfect, and some room for error will always be needed. However, this is not an excuse for the vast majority of programming, which is pre-recorded.

I would like to ask Ofcom to require that broadcasters transmit pre-prepared subtitles for all pre-recorded broadcasts, with no exceptions. The broadcasters have had literally decades to sort themselves out, yet they never do.

Instead, we get excuses ranging from the 25 year old "it will take time to subtitle our inventory of old programmes" through "we have to convert everything for the digital switchover" to the recently-popular "our suppliers from abroad don't give us the subtitling data we need".

Question 1: Do consultees agree with the proposal to require broadcasters to measure and report every six months on the average speed of live subtitling in a variety of programmes, based on a sample of segments selected by Ofcom? :

Yes, as long as appropriate safeguards are put in place to prevent broadcasters focusing their efforts on segments which they expect Ofcom to select.

For example, inspecting the 6 o'clock news every evening might tempt broadcasters to focus their highest quality subtitling effort there, at the expense of other programmes.

Instead, Ofcom could randomly select a breakfast segment one day, an evening broadcast the next day and the lunchtime news the day after that, without telling the broadcasters in advance.

Given that broadcasters have to retain recordings of their output in any case, for legal reasons, I do not believe that it would impose an additional burden on them for Ofcom to declare the day's test selection after the fact. The recording will always be available for the broadcaster to go back and measure the quality of subtitling.

In addition, broadcasters should be required to report their performance for each segment individually, not just as an average across all segments. This would prevent broadcasters hiding periods of poorer performance by making a special effort later on and averaging their

failures out of sight.

It would also allow Ofcom to determine whether a low average was due to a catastrophic problem during one segment (which might be excusable) or a more deep-seated failure to provide the necessary resources (which would require corrective action).

Finally, Ofcom should audit the final effect of broadcasters' subtitling efforts by recording the selected broadcast segments at various stages in the broadcast process. For example, recordings could be made as the broadcast leaves the broadcaster's premises, as it arrives and departs the telecom companies' premises, and as it arrives in the homes of sample customers of each telecom company.

This would allow Ofcom to ensure that the subtitles remained intact at all stages of the process. It would also allow Ofcom to answer, once and for all, the question of who is at fault for missing subtitles when, say, Virgin Media and 5 USA blame each other after a customer complains about them.

Question 2: Do consultees consider that broadcasters should be asked to report separately on different types of live programming? If so, do they agree with the suggestions in paragraph 6.19, or would they suggest different categorisations, and if so, why?:

I agree that broadcasters should report separately on different types of live programming. This would allow comparisons of subtitling accuracy under different conditions. It would also permit Ofcom to set future quality targets to match the relative difficulty of subtitling each programme type.

As an initial measure, I agree with the suggestions in paragraph 6.19, provided that Ofcom sets a clear schedule for adding further programme types at later dates as the broadcasters build up their reporting capacity.

I believe adding further programme types later on will be necessary to avoid creating a hierarchy of subtitling qualities where the Ofcom-inspected types improve over time, but the other types - such as sporting broadcasts - are left to languish in an unsatisfactory state.

Question 3: Do consultees consider that the guidance on subtitling speeds should be reviewed? Do consultees agree that, for the time being, it would not be appropriate to set a maximum target for the speed of live subtitling? If not, please explain why.:

I do not believe that the guidance on subtitling speeds needs to be reviewed. When the subtitling system is working correctly, I find the subtitling speed to be quite satisfactory.

I also agree that it would not be appropriate to set a maximum target for the speed of live subtitling. I would far rather have fast subtitles showing every word than slower subtitles giving a simplified summary.

The only time I have ever found myself unable to keep up with the subtitles was when pre-

prepared subtitles had fallen behind the programme, and someone was manually fast-forwarding through them to get them back in sync.

Question 4: Do consultees agree that it would not be appropriate at this stage to set a maximum target for latency? If not, please explain why.:

I do not agree. Latency is much more of an issue for me than subtitling speed. It is incredibly frustrating for me when subtitles are lagging behind on a programme like the news.

I end up having to absorb the current imagery whilst trying to match the subtitles up to images I have already seen, or worse still, missing out altogether as the subtitler simply skips a segment in order to get back in sync.

I should also point out that pre-prepared subtitles can sometimes lead the content they are supposed to describe. One could consider this to be "negative latency," since it is equally disruptive to the viewing experience.

The upshot of all this is that there should definitely be maximum targets for latency, in two forms:

1. absolute latency - the number of seconds of offset between the subtitles and the spoken word, whether leading or lagging; and

2. relative latency - the percentage of subtitles for a segment which appear during the wrong segment. In a 25-second segment, if 5 seconds' worth of subtitles lag into the next segment, the relative latency would be 20 per cent.

Both of these targets should be kept as close to zero as possible, with a maximum permissible deviation from that ideal. For example, absolute latency could be set to a maximum of plus or minus 2 seconds, while relative latency could be a maximum of 5 per cent.

The definition of "segment" for relative latency would be different for different programmes. For example, it might be a single interview, or a single voiceover, or a single short story summary, so that a long news story might have several segments. In sport, it could be a single phase of rapid play, whereas in entertainment, it could be a single scene.

Question 5: Do consultees agree with the proposal to require broadcasters to measure and report every six months on error rates, on the basis of excerpts selected by Ofcom from a range of programmes?:

Yes, provided that Ofcom takes steps to discourage broadcasters from becoming lazy or complacent, in a similar vein to the steps I suggest in my answers to Questions 1 and 2.

Question 6: Do consultees have any views on the advantages and disadvantages of scrolling versus block subtitles for live-subtitled programmes? Taking account of both the advantages and disadvantages, which approach would consultees prefer, and why?:

I generally prefer block subtitles, because I can absorb an entire block at once, then return to looking at the programme until the next block appears. In contrast, scrolling subtitles require me to spend more time waiting for the next word, leaving me with less time for looking at the programme itself.

However, I do understand that in circumstances where live subtitling is truly necessary, it is better to use scrolling subtitles so that each word can appear on screen as soon as possible.

For example, in a news broadcast, pre-prepared segments should be broadcast with block subtitles, but live interviews should be broadcast with scrolling subtitles. In subsequent rebroadcasts, the recording of an originally-live interview should be updated with block subtitles.

Question 7: What are the factors that might facilitate or hinder the insertion of a delay in live transmissions sufficient to improve the quality of subtitling? Ofcom would particularly welcome the views of broadcasters on this question.:

I am unable to comment on the engineering aspects of inserting such a delay, but it does occur to me that the acceptability to viewers of inserting a delay would depend on the type of live programming in question.

For example, I see no particular problem with delaying a news broadcast by even as much as five minutes, because most of the content in such a programme will be in the form of recordings and pre-prepared materials which are already older than that.

Even live content such as a speech or an interview very rarely needs to be live. On the rare occasions when it really does, an exception can be made by cutting from delayed content to live content and back, so that the viewer only has to tolerate lower quality subtitling for that one critically important live segment.

On a related note, I would like to note that it is possible to simultaneously film material for more than one segment to follow on from a critically important live segment. For example, the critical speech could be shown live, followed by a live interview, followed by a section of analysis which was prepared while the interview was in progress.

The speech and the interview would have to be subtitled live, but the analysis segment would be visible to its subtitler a minute or two before it was required for broadcast, allowing the delay for higher-quality subtitling to be reestablished.

Similar considerations apply to things like entertainment programmes, where there should be hours or days of lead time between delivery and broadcast, even if the delivery was delayed by enough time to preclude the preparation of a normal time-coded subtitling file.

On the other hand, delaying something like a live sports event might be less acceptable to viewers, especially if someone else is screaming about the latest score they've heard live on the radio while the TV viewer is still waiting for that phase of play to appear on screen.