

# A submission in response to Ofcom's *The quality of live subtitling* consultation paper

July 2013

Media Access Australia congratulates Ofcom for producing a comprehensive report on the issues surrounding the quality of live subtitling (which is called captioning in Australia). This submission comments on Ofcom's proposals from an Australian perspective, and provides information about the new regulatory system which has just been put in place in Australia.

## **About Media Access Australia**

Media Access Australia (MAA) is Australia's only independent not-for-profit organisation devoted to increasing access to media for people with a disability.

Access to media, enabled through technology, empowers people to be independent, gain knowledge, make their own choices and be active members of our society.

We promote inclusion by providing information and expertise on the accessibility of mainstream technologies to government, industry, educators, consumer organisations and individuals.

We work as a catalyst for change across television, video, cinema, the arts, education, digital technology and online media, with a primary focus on people who are blind or vision impaired, or Deaf or hearing impaired.

## **Caption regulation in Australia**

The first captioned television programs were broadcast in Australia in 1982, but there was no regulation of captioning until digital broadcasting commenced on 1 January 2001. From that point, the *Broadcasting Services Act* (BSA) required all channels broadcasting on digital to caption all programs between 6am and midnight, and all news and current affairs programs. The BSA did not, however, define captions or include any requirements regarding caption quality. There was also no mechanism for increasing caption levels.

Increases in the amount of captioning over the next decade were driven by a series of agreements brokered by the Australian Human Rights Commission between the television networks and disability advocacy organisations. During this period, as in many countries, there was an increase in live captioning. This was originally performed by 'stenocaptioners' using stenographic keyboards, with the first voice recognition or 'respeaking' captioning commencing in 2005. The latter method is the one which is now most commonly used for live captioning.

In recent years, broadcasters have moved away from the original model for captioning news programs. Sometimes called the 'hybrid' method, this involved captioners preparing block captions for segments of news programs from scripts and video prior to the program being broadcast, and these would be cued out as the program went to air. Only genuinely live elements were captioned by a stenocaptioner or 'respeaking' captioner. This model has now been abandoned by broadcasters in Australia, with the exception of one commercial network (the Seven Network).



These developments resulted in a perceived decline in the quality of captioning. Almost all complaints about caption quality received by MAA from consumers relate to live captions, and advocacy groups have lobbied for the introduction of captioning standards.

In December 2010, the Australian Government responded to these concerns in the final report in an investigation it had conducted into access to the electronic media for the hearing and vision impaired.<sup>1</sup> Two of the report's recommendations were that the BSA be amended to include a reference to captions "of adequate quality", and the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) "develop criteria that the ACMA can use when assessing the quality of live captions". Amendments to the BSA (which also included new caption quotas for free-to-air and subscription television) were passed by parliament in June 2011.

Subsequent to this, the ACMA held a series of meetings with consumer representatives, broadcasters, caption suppliers and MAA to develop a Caption Standard. During these meetings, consumer representatives argued for the inclusion of metrics in the standard (specifically, a caption error rate of no more than 98%, and a target of a maximum of 3 seconds for the time lag in live captions). Broadcasters and access suppliers argued against the introduction of metrics.

Throughout the consultation progress, MAA acknowledged that metrics have a place in the the evaluation of caption quality, but argued strongly that the most practical and efficient way to improve the overall quality of captioning is to keep the amount of live captioning to an absolute minimum. This means, in Australia, a return to the previous 'hybrid' method of captioning news programs, and caption suppliers ensuring that they have adequate resources at hand to deal with fast-turnaround programs. We strongly support Ofcom's statement that that 'day topical programs' (produced up to 24 hours before broadcast) should not be live captioned. MAA's predecessor, the Australian Caption Centre, used to regularly pre-prepare fully-timed block captions for programs completed 5 hours or less before broadcast time. This was achieved by having several captioners working on segments of the program simultaneously.

Ideally, we believe that broadcasters should have to justify the live captioning of any program which is not genuinely live.

The ACMA ultimately decided not to include metrics in the final version of the document, the 'Broadcasting Services (Television Captioning Standard) 2013'<sup>2</sup>, which came into effect on 5 June 2013. Instead, it states that when determining the quality of a captioning service for a program, or a distinct segment of a program, the readability, accuracy and comprehensibility of the captions must be considered. The document then goes on to list factors that determine quality in these three areas. The ACMA is now using this document when investigating complaints made by the public about poor quality captions on individual programs.

We believe that the ACMA's standard is consistent with MAA's position that live captions should be kept to a minimum, as they are inherently inferior to pre-prepared block captions in terms of readability, accuracy and comprehensibility. However, this approach has not been properly tested through the complaints process yet.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.dbcde.gov.au/television/television\\_captioning/media\\_access\\_review](http://www.dbcde.gov.au/television/television_captioning/media_access_review)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.acma.gov.au/theACMA/Consultations/Consultations/Completed/captioning-quality>



## Responses to Ofcom's questions

*Q1. 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?*

MAA agrees with this proposal, although we believe that the average speed of live captioning is often more closely related to the speed of the speakers within the program than the skills of the captioner or the live captioning production process. In our experience of consumer complaints about live captioning, speed is less of an issue than error rates or latency.

*Q2. 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?*

MAA agrees with the proposal to report separately on different types of programs, and with the categories suggested.

*Q3. 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*

MAA does not believe that it is appropriate to set a maximum target for live captioning as this is largely out of the control of live captioners. Setting a maximum target could also mean that important information, in a news bulletin for example, could be left out.

*Q4. Do consultees agree that it would not be appropriate at this stage to set a maximum target for latency? If not, please explain why.*

MAA believes that the statement on Ofcom's 'Code on Television Access Services' that "the aim should be to keep the inevitable delay in subtitle presentation to the minimum (no more than 3 seconds) consistent with accurate presentation of what is being said" is reasonable as this is an achievable target. However, from consultation with access suppliers, and our own measurements of the timing of Australian live captions, we believe a delay of 3 seconds is probably a 'best case scenario' (in the absence of the broadcast being delayed to accommodate captioning). The actual average delay on live captioning in Australia is around 5 seconds.

We also acknowledge that the delay in live captions is to some extent outside the control of the captioner, and will be influenced by the speed at which people are speaking, the number of people speaking (and if they are speaking over the top of each other) and the complexity of the content.

Nevertheless, as confirmed by Ofcom's research with consumers and the complaints which MAA receives, latency is major factor in caption quality. Any delay longer than about five seconds can push the captions for one story in a news bulletin into the next, while a commercial break can mean the final captions for a segment are lost entirely. We therefore believe that that a maximum *target* of three seconds is appropriate, while acknowledging that it will not always be achievable in practice, but would add the proviso that a consistent average delay of greater than 5 seconds will severely compromise quality and indicates deficiencies in the caption production process which should be addressed.

*Q5. 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?*

MAA believes it is appropriate that broadcasters be required to report on error rates on a range of programs selected by Ofcom, and has argued for a similar approach to be taken in Australia.



We acknowledge the difficulties in applying metrics to caption quality, as noted in Ofcom's consultation document. A word being omitted may have no effect on comprehensibility of a caption at all. A substituted word which is a homophone, or very close to the actual word, may have similarly little effect. But a news story in which the captions are close to 100% accurate may be completely incomprehensible if the name of the story's subject is incorrect.

We also note that, until some sort of automated caption evaluation process is perfected, as the National Centre of Accessible Media (NCAM) is attempting to do in the U.S.<sup>3</sup>, the process of counting errors in caption files is laborious, and will only ever be applied to a limited number of programs. Nevertheless, we feel that metrics *can be useful*, especially in situations where viewers have identified recurring problems with a channel's captioning. If, for example, complaints are made about several editions of a network's main news bulletin, a tally of errors (falling into the categories of substitution, deletion and insertion) for these programs could be made relatively easily, then compared to the results for equivalent programs on other networks.

In general, we believe that regulators should take note of serial errors and other problems in captioning on a channel, or particular programs on a channel, that may indicate systemic problems in the caption production process.

*Q6. 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?*

MAA does not have a view on this as we believe it is up to captions consumers to state their preferences.

*Q7. 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.*

MAA cannot comment on the technical issues that would facilitate or hinder this. However, the fact that one Dutch broadcaster is already doing it shows that it is possible, and as it would mean a significant, instant improvement in the quality of live captions which would not increase captioning costs in the long run, we believe that this is an option which should be explored vigorously.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://ncam.wgbh.org/invent\\_build/analog/caption-accuracy-metrics](http://ncam.wgbh.org/invent_build/analog/caption-accuracy-metrics)

