

Ofcom Signing on Television Consultation, May-June 2007

Response by Becoming Visible

Becoming Visible is a not-for-profit charity run by Deaf people, based in North East England. We will respond briefly to Ofcom's consultation via the online web form, but we do not feel that format allows us to give the kind of broad view on current and future requirements for BSL television for the Deaf community that needs to be given. That is why we are providing this broader response.

Becoming Visible welcomes the proposed move towards more original BSL programming. This will certainly be a much better public service to the Deaf community than the current arrangements. However:

1. We question whether it goes far enough.
2. We feel it is not good enough just to spend money on programmes presented in BSL unless the editorial policy is determined by appropriately qualified and experienced Deaf people; and unless Deaf people have the maximum representation possible at all levels of production and technical operation.

Public Service Channels

Ofcom does not propose to exclude public service channels from the current arrangements. It says:

"From a legal perspective, Ofcom is not satisfied (having regard to the criteria in section 303) that any of the PSB channels would qualify as a special case. In any event, from a policy perspective this would deprive analogue-only viewers of access to signed programmes and retention of the current arrangements would ensure that viewers on all platforms continue to have access to a wide range of signed programmes on channels accounting for two thirds of viewing."

We believe this overlooks the fact that what most public service channels are delivering for BSL users at the moment is 'public service' only in the most tokenistic sense. With some honourable exceptions, programmes are shown in the middle of the night, at times decided without any meaningful consultation with Deaf viewers. It is said that Deaf viewers may 'set their recorders', but this is an unreasonable expectation that other minorities do not have to accept. It is also most difficult for those analogue-only viewers who, Ofcom says, must not be excluded.

This is not a good public service.

With the exception of the BBC, the size of the BSL interpreter on most channels is too small for comfortable, intelligible viewing.

This is not a good public service.

At a time when there is a critical shortage of BSL/English interpreters, a considerable number of the most highly qualified spend all or most of their time interpreting programmes which are not seen by most Deaf viewers. Good interpreters would provide a far better public service to the Deaf community by being available for community work; work in employment, educational and legal settings; and, especially, life-or-death situations in the medical field.

To have highly-qualified BSL/English interpreters interpreting television programmes watched by a handful of people at 3 o'clock in the morning, when many Deaf people are not receiving adequate medical attention at the time they need it because of a shortage of interpreters is not a good public service.

Indeed, this is the reverse of a good public service: it is a grave disservice to some of the most excluded, vulnerable and disadvantaged people in our society.

The excellent report produced by Deafworks for Sky in 2006, 'All About Access to Television through Signing', cited this concern by Deaf people about the use of hearing interpreters:

"Hearing interpreters should concentrate and fulfil their commitment and do their jobs in society where they are most needed."

However, the report also made it clear that there are widespread concerns about the quality of BSL interpretation across all service providers, including the quality of many on-screen Deaf interpreters. Two representative comments among many were:

- "I can't understand the signing hearing interpreters, sometimes signing and subtitles don't match."

and

- "Deaf IVS (*in-vision signers*) are clearly taken off the street, signing often out of context, their signs are not matching on drama programmes."

These views are confirmed by members of Becoming Visible, who have frequently complained that they do not understand the on-screen interpreters on television programmes here in the North East.

It is obvious that the hearing broadcasters who commission BSL interpretation are not qualified to judge the quality of what they commission, or to impose appropriate quality controls. They would know immediately if the English

being spoken was bad, sloppy, ungrammatical, inaccurate, poorly delivered or, indeed, legally contentious. They are not aware that, too often, this is exactly what is happening with BSL interpretation. If similar levels of inaccuracy were broadcast in English, there would be a host of complaints.

This is not a good public service.

Finally, none of the public service broadcasters has used the obligations introduced under the Communications Act 2003 and, before it, the Broadcasting Act 1996, to initiate, increase or improve its provision of BSL programming. In fact, those who did provide some BSL programming in 1996 have slipped back since then.

The BBC has recently announced budget cuts on the only remaining BSL-presented programme on national TV, See Hear! These cuts coincide with a reduction in length from 45 to 30 minutes and a move from a Saturday lunchtime slot to Wednesday lunchtime. The overwhelming response from the Deaf community has been hostile to this move. There have been strong criticisms also of the fact that editorial control is said to have moved away from the first ever Deaf editor, Terry Riley, back to a hearing executive producer. The growing lobby suggests that this is resulting in programming that is less geared towards – and in many ways less respectful of – the Deaf community than it has been, at least during the relatively short tenure of the Deaf editor. Strong objections have been made against the fact that a number of recent See Hear! programmes have not been fully accessible in BSL.

In 1996, the year of the Broadcasting Act, Channel 4 had a long-running programme for Deaf people, Sign On, which was regarded as the most culturally Deaf and strongest in BSL of all the programmes for Deaf people. The very next year, Sign On was de-commissioned, amidst a wave of protests from the Deaf community. Although it was brought back for two short series in 1998 and 1999, Channel 4's priorities had obviously changed since the public service ethos of its early years. 3 series of The Vibe (for children) and 6 series of Vee TV, aimed at young Deaf people, did not see any coherent strategic development of BSL programming, and both were much more driven by the agendas of their hearing production executives than Sign On or its predecessor, Listening Eye. In 2006, Channel 4 finally announced that it would discontinue the commissioning of BSL programmes altogether. Instead, Deaf directors and 'aspiring film-makers' were invited to submit proposals, along with disabled directors and film-makers, for a new series of one-off documentaries, with no guarantee that any of these would be in BSL. Even if successful, all Deaf film-makers might expect to receive is "a director's bursary of £3000" (rather than proper paid jobs or contracts) to work with "an experienced team including a Series Producer and APs to help develop the selected ideas, support the research process, and set up and assist on shoots". Of course, this 'experienced team' would consist of hearing people, thereby casting aside the twenty years of experience gained by Deaf programme-makers. The downward slide and seemingly deliberate strategic move away from strong BSL and culturally Deaf programming on Channel 4 is well documented in a contribution by Dr Paddy Ladd to the recent publication

'Minority Language Media' (Editors Mike Cormack and Niamh Hourigan, Multilingual Matters Ltd, 2007).

In our own region, North East England, in 1996 Tyne Tees Television had a weekly year-round 30-minute news review, 'Newsweek', shown at lunchtime on Sundays. 'Newsweek' was presented by one Deaf and one hearing presenter in BSL, with English voice-over and subtitles, and with all news reports interpreted into BSL by experienced Deaf interpreters. In fact, there were two separate editions of 'Newsweek', one for the north and one for the south of the Tyne Tees region. In spite of the establishment of the SignPost unit in 2000, Tyne Tees not only failed to build on its strong track record in BSL programming, but in fact cut back on its commitments. In 2002, against the advice of its then Deaf staff and without consulting viewers, Tyne Tees dropped 'Newsweek' and replaced it with a two-minute summary of news headlines during daytime, from Monday to Friday, when fewer Deaf people would be available to watch even this reduced service. In 2006, even this was completely removed not only from analogue but also digital output, and made available only online. Given that one of the reasons Ofcom gives for not allowing PSB channels to change the current arrangements is to protect the interests of Deaf analogue viewers, it is ironic that some of the public service broadcasters themselves clearly do not share this priority.

In all of the above examples, public service channels are failing to provide a good public service and are often going against the wishes – and interests – of Deaf viewers.

In short, we are not convinced that public service broadcasters should be exempt from the proposed changes.

In this and other areas, we would strongly recommend a closer reading of the excellent Deafworks report for Sky quoted above. This was the most comprehensive survey of Deaf viewers' wishes for BSL on TV conducted in recent years. Members of Becoming Visible took part in a focus group meeting connected with this survey in Newcastle, but the results from all over the country support the views we have put forward both above and in the rest of this response. We believe it is a great shame that Ofcom has not taken on board more of the findings of this report, which are reflected by our own experience and other surveys carried out by the British Deaf Association, the Deaf Broadcasting Council, the Centre for Deaf Studies at Bristol University and others.

Other Channels with 1% or more Audience Share

Many of our comments on the failure of public service channels to provide an acceptable public service to Deaf BSL users would also apply to other channels with 1% or more audience share. We do not believe that these channels should be exempt from the proposed changes, unless they can positively demonstrate that their current arrangements are preferred by Deaf viewers.

Excluded Channels and the Proposed Community Channel Scheme

Becoming Visible welcomes these proposals as far as they go. We believe that the initiative of Sky and the Community Channel that led to the proposed Community Channel Scheme was a highly commendable step in the right direction and we supported the proposals of the Sign/Community Channel Working Group. However, we would like to reproduce our message of support in full, as it makes very clear how we think this positive development fits in with the ultimate essential objectives for Deaf BSL users:

“Becoming Visible supports these proposals, as the beginning of the move towards a Sign Language Channel run by Deaf BSL users and creating maximum opportunities for Deaf BSL users at every level of production, operation and management. This is the only way to produce the kind of television service that Deaf BSL users want.”

Once again, we would cite extracts from the Sky report that demonstrate the widespread view in the Deaf community that what matters to the Deaf audience is not only what they see on screen. They believe the quality of what they see is and must be largely determined by the extent to which Deaf people are involved at all levels of production and decision-making. Here are some quotations from the Sky report:

“We... found out that control over programme content and employment opportunities in programming were just as important as access service provision.”

“Strong views were expressed that a Sign Community Channel would provide employment opportunities and give control over programming to Deaf people.”

“The control of this channel should be with Deaf people who could manage the content and encourage Deaf presenters to be employed.”

“Some deaf people were... sensitive about the fact that most signed TV productions are not deaf-led, and that major decisions were reached by hearing people without any real understanding of deaf people’s needs.”

“A very large majority of respondents voted in favour of a dedicated sign language channel. Deaf programme-makers have been denied for far too long opportunities to produce their own programmes presented in BSL...”

The following quotations from the report are taken from the section about the views of stakeholder groups, including the British Deaf Association and the

Deaf Broadcasting Council, which came from a discussion event held on 26th April 2006:

“275. There are currently not enough Deaf people working in television, particularly presenters, and this should be addressed. Many requests have been received from Deaf people wanting to work in the media, particularly television production.

276. More training opportunities should be provided to Deaf people who want to work in television, both in front and behind the camera.”

We believe that the Community Channel Scheme is a great step forward, but in order to achieve its objectives, it must take on board these strongly and widely held views in the Deaf community.

Likewise, if some channels do not go along with the Community Channel Scheme, but are required by Ofcom to broadcast sign-presented programming, then the commissioning and production of these programmes MUST take on board the desire of Deaf people to use this opportunity to create employment opportunities for Deaf people, and for Deaf people (preferably working for Deaf production companies) to make the kind of programmes Deaf people want to see.

Otherwise, this change in the requirements will be a lost opportunity for both the television industry and the Deaf community and in years to come Deaf people will once again be saying that the arrangements do not meet their needs or wishes. Just as the promising starts made in the past by the BBC and Channel 4 have suffered from the lack of a comprehensive, coherent and continuing strategic commitment to the development of Deaf people as programme-makers, so this step forward will not lay the essential foundation for Deaf people to build their own unique contribution to television in the way that S4C is doing for Welsh speakers.

Speakers of Welsh, Gaelic and other minority languages have always had opportunities to cut their teeth and develop their skills working on English-language programmes. The television industry has totally failed to make opportunities of this kind available to Deaf people in any meaningful way (see Dr Paddy Ladd, op.cit.).

The Community Channel Scheme proposes that the management of funds should be “decided by a BSL Board consisting mainly of Deaf BSL users and representing, as far as can be achieved, a fair spectrum of the Deaf BSL-using community.”

This is a great step forward, offering for the first time the possibility for Deaf BSL users to control commissioning policy on Deaf/BSL programmes. However, this will not lead to the best long-term development of programming for the Deaf community unless this control is extended – in a planned, rational way – into the production process itself. We recognise that this must involve hearing people in many ways. The fact that there is not a suitably prepared cohort of Deaf programme makers ready to step in and do this straight away

is not because Deaf people are incapable of doing it. It is because of the failure of the television industry to offer appropriate career development opportunities to Deaf people, as we have cited above.

It would have been unthinkable for anyone in 1982 when S4C was set up to say that Welsh language programming and production should be controlled by English speakers who knew no or little Welsh. It should be equally unthinkable for BSL programming and production to be controlled by people who know no or little BSL. That is the position towards which the present proposed changes should be helping to carry us.

We believe that in all editorial, production and technical areas, the teams involved should include:

- The **maximum** possible representation of Deaf BSL users, in line with the requirements of the production, broadcaster quality requirements, etc.
- The **minimum** number of hearing people necessary to meet the requirements of production, etc.

Given the small scale of the resources likely to be available for BSL programming in the foreseeable future, we believe this is the only approach that will do justice to present and future generations of Deaf programme makers.

In addition, we believe that hearing people involved should be expected to have shown a previous commitment to learning BSL to a standard where they can converse properly with Deaf people, so that they learn about, absorb and accept Deaf culture as a distinct and valuable culture in its own right; and to respecting the wishes of Deaf people to develop their own distinct television and other media cultures, which may differ from hearing media cultures in significant ways. It seems to us that this is in line with the best practice of other minority language television productions in the UK, such as Welsh and Gaelic. It is what should be expected for British Sign Language, which was recognised as a language by the UK Government in 2003.

There must always, of course, be scope for Deaf commissioning bodies and producers, subject to controls, to seek the involvement of hearing practitioners with no previous knowledge of Deaf people or BSL, where they have experience that is necessary to develop new areas or new angles on Deaf/BSL programming.

Becoming Visible June 2007

NOTE

Becoming Visible is a Deaf-led organisation based in North East England. We originated as part of NewcastleGateshead's bid to become European Capital of Culture, 2008. We were selected by NewcastleGateshead as the

emblematic community bid because of the strength and depth of our proposals. Since 2002, BV has carried on to become a charity and a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee. We run a highly valued professional language booking agency, including BSL/English interpreters, Deaf translators and interpreters, lipspeakers, note-takers, speech-to-text operators and others. We have staged a number of cultural and sporting events, including Deaf Film Days, and arranged cinema screenings with on-screen Deaf BSL interpreters.

Becoming Visible Media is the arm through which we aim to develop opportunities for Deaf people in film, TV and other media. We have produced videos for North Tyneside Disability Forum, Tyne and Wear Museums and other clients. In 2007, Becoming Visible Media has produced 'Rory's Teeth', a short animated film by the Deaf animator Paul Miller, for Northern Film & Media and the UK Film Council.

For more information, contact:

Becoming Visible Communication
Newcastle Deaf Centre
2 Summerhill Grove
Newcastle upon Tyne
NE4 6EE

Voice: 0191 2330999
Fax: 0191 2331334
Minicom: 0191 2331335

Email: communication@becomingvisible.org.uk