

It is perverse that the TV production industry should allow subtitling to slide into poor quality

# Substandard subtitles: who's bothered?

## Guest Opinion

By Andrew Lambourne,  
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How often do you watch TV and encounter clicks on the sound, poorly executed edits, grainy pictures, bad white balance, visible microphone booms or other issues which shout 'poor quality'? We take it for granted that broadcast channels commission productions that are budgeted to eliminate such crass errors.

Now watch TV subtitles on recorded programmes for a week using Teletext and see how often you spot a spelling mistake, a wrong word, a subtitle that could not be read in the time allowed, subtitles not formatted so as to make them easy to read, or similar annoyances.

It's perverse, and patronising to viewers, that an industry that prides itself on its production values should allow an adjunct such as subtitling — which is clearly a part of the overall viewing experience — to slide into poor quality. What's even odder is that the cost of producing these subtitles is a fraction of a percent of a typical production budget. How has this been allowed to happen?

The main reason is that the responsibility for subtitling has been left to (or perhaps in their view 'dumped on') broadcast channels rather than programme producers. It therefore tends to be viewed as an unwelcome cost, and as lobbying leads to legislative pressure to increase subtitling quantity, prices have been forced down to the extent that a whole section of the broadcast production chain is in danger of collapsing.

This is no joke: part of our industry is hurting, and hurting

badly. Skilled, professional subtitlers are being let go because the downward price spiral is such that the subtitling houses that employ them are being forced into a cut-throat bidding war for each contract by their broadcaster customers. The inevitable result is loss of quality, since technology — which has made huge advances — simply cannot yet deal with the toughest challenges.

Look at Google AutoCaps. Submit your media file and see it create automatic captions. The quality and accuracy varies from the sublime to the ridiculous but if you're deaf you may not be able to determine which is which. When there is invasive background noise, or if two people are speaking simultaneously,

**This is no joke: part of our industry is hurting, and hurting badly. Skilled, professional subtitlers are being let go because of the downward price spiral**

or if there is a heavy accent, singing, or out-of-language words are used, an automated speech recogniser is not going to cope — and should not be expected to. So the industry should not expect the subtitling houses just to plug in an automatic module and halve the prices yet again. Something has to change.

Is it worth making a fuss? Who are all these people using subtitles? Well, depending on whose figures you take, at least one in 10 benefit from subtitles because of hearing difficulties, and some (RNID, European Captioning Institute) put the figure higher than that. Countless others use subtitles to help them with language difficulties — and in an age of population migration the cultural benefit cannot be ignored.

have a half-hour window to do maintenance most nights, when it rebroadcasts CBS News, and it can play off tape specials during the night if necessary.

The broadcaster didn't use a systems integrator for the project as Sky

Half of the issue is being addressed — for example in Europe by 'encouragement' from the European Parliament to the Commission to lean on member states to legislate for increasing levels of subtitling. Many states have done this and in the UK, for example, the BBC provides 100% coverage, and other channels have regulated targets set by Ofcom. There are anomalies though.

Jonathan Buchanan, a member of the RNID campaigns teams, says, "Although quantity is regulated pretty well on the whole, there are issues with new technology developments. HD is a prime example: channels from multiple broadcasters have launched without subtitles.

"While they have active plans to change this, it is very disappointing and means that some people have purchased TV sets and subscribed for services that they can't make use of." However, the other half of the issue which is not being adequately addressed is the issue of *quality*. Why should viewers put up with substandard subtitles? Mandating increases in output without addressing the issue of funding or benefit will inevitably drive price and quality down.

So how is subtitling quality effectively monitored, using the UK as a typical example? Well, to put it bluntly, it's not. UK regulator Ofcom says on its website: "Broadcasters should regularly monitor the quality of their access services. Focus groups

has its own internal Projects Team — although Sony did install the EVS kit, racks and cabling as an SI.

Sky had rebuilt the studio set about 18 months before and then installed Grass Valley LDK8000 series HD cameras during the



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and feedback from individual viewers can be helpful indicators of quality."

Buchanan of the RNID adds, "The quality issue is a very real problem. It's a concern. We meet with Ofcom regularly and it's something that needs to be raised more, especially regarding live subtitling.

"We get vast amounts of complaints, especially about live subtitling. Really what's needed is to have some sort of quality target, which doesn't currently exist in the UK. Output needs some form of monitoring, though we haven't had this discussion in depth to date. It's something that needs to be talked about and addressed. It's reasonable to say that charities like ourselves and the audience out there are currently the monitoring systems."

## Editorial responsibility

I would argue, based on 30 years' experience, that live subtitling is a special case — in

the same way that a live OB may not meet the production standards of a studio piece. Setting this aside for now, the key question is how to underpin quality in prepared subtitles for recorded programmes. Buchanan's beef usefully demonstrates the distinction between technical quality of subtitling (is it present? does it fail?), and editorial quality (is it to a sufficient standard?).

Again, I suggest that one part of the answer is to give the responsibility for editorial quality back to the programme producers. They are the ones who spend the production budget, who market and sell the programme product which also has 'editorial' as well as 'technical' quality — so why should subtitles be 'tacked on' later?

Secondly, I'd advocate the formation of a subtitling trade body 'by the industry for the industry' that accredits subtitling companies and in-house teams with a level of professional competence and seeks to put a floor under quality. This body should then put 'in your face' arguments to the purchasing chain to demonstrate clearly and unequivocally that short-changing 10% of your audience for the sake of 0.1% of your production budget simply does not make sense.

And if governments agree that subtitles are a valuable social commodity, then get them to underpin the costs for the sake of the cultural benefit. There are many ways out of the conundrum: what it needs is some leadership with the courage to speak out (subtitled, of course).

including upgrading trucks, helicopter and flyaway kits, the Washington and Jerusalem bureaux, ENG cameras and upgraded kits, higher-capacity P2 cards, Final Cut Pro laptops, graphics and connectivity. [www.skynews.com](http://www.skynews.com)


## Making HD news

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During the transition to HD, they put a Portacabin in the car park fitted out as a stand-alone gallery for six months. The HD installation took three months, with the rest of the time used for training and rehearsals. Training began in January, with 10 super users, and 400 people were trained in all.

All the equipment was tested in SD first for about a month (rehearsing the general election programme at the same time), followed by two months of rehearsals and shakedown, to spot and rectify any problems and make changes to the workflows.

"We haven't had any unscheduled outages since our HD launch," Gibson says. Sky does



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