

## Help Needed on Closed Captioning

Imagine watching *NCIS* without faces because the closed captions obscured them. You could only identify the characters by their hair.

Under the Federal Communications Commission's closed-captioning order, there are no standards on how captions are to be provided. The quality varies tremendously — from excellent to execrable.

For this reason, it is essential that the FCC implement closed-captioning standards for television. These are issues of direct communication. Issues include misspelled or garbled words; omitted letters or words that are missing entirely; paraphrasing instead of verbatim rendition of the storyline; lack of description of sound effects or music; and lack of identification of speakers. There are also issues regarding ease of communication. These include the use of upper-case letters (which are harder to read) rather than mixed-case letters; inappropriately using roll-up captions rather than pop-on captions; and the placement of captions in locations that obscure relevant

### ACCESS



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works to disseminate information and promote their shows or branding. But it pushes the captions to the upper third of the screen, covering the actors' faces.

Television credits, which were traditionally listed vertically at the end of a show, now often appear at the beginning and tend to flash one name at a time, which can continue for up to eight minutes into the program. The various guilds' contracts require that credits not be blocked, so the captions cannot obscure the credits. This again pushes the captions upwards over the actors' heads. The FCC needs

to likewise ensure that relevant information or people on screen are not obscured by the placement of captions.

Studios, production companies and networks aren't required to monitor captions. Shows are in compliance with FCC regulations as long as captions appear throughout the them, somewhere on the screen.

Many contracts for captioning are bid without defining the captioning quality. They tend to be bid solely



Examples of bad (l.) and good closed-captioning techniques.

information such as people's faces or descriptive banners.

Previous organized efforts had no impact on correcting this issue. More than seven years ago, five leading organizations for people who are deaf or hard of hearing filed a Petition for Rulemaking with the FCC "to establish additional enforcement mechanisms to better implement the captioning rules and to establish captioning quality standards to ensure high quality and reliable closed captioning." This petition has languished through the tenure of three FCC chairmen.

Captions benefit not only the more than 36 million people who have some form of hearing loss but also people learning English as a second language; people who do not want sound on in the room, perhaps because someone is sleeping; and people in noisy public venues such as airports, bars, gyms and restaurants. While poor-quality captioning may be an inconvenience to the latter group, it is exceptionally frustrating to people who are deaf or hard of hearing, who rely on captions to enjoy television and receive vital news information.

Networks now routinely advertise upcoming shows or place banners or logos within the lower third of the television screen, where captions traditionally have been placed. This location is excellent "real estate" for the net-

based on price — as if captioning were a commodity, something interchangeable between companies without any consideration regarding standards. There is no incentive for captioning companies to upgrade technology and software when captions are bid in this manner, since improvements cost money.

To be sure, some television shows provide excellent customer service to all their viewers and do offer quality captions, demonstrating that this caliber of captioning is obtainable. But when this is not the case, people who are deaf or hard of hearing have no recourse, since they have little market force and there are no captioning quality standards or regulations.

Since the FCC has failed to respond, the White House and Congress need to intervene to make sure the requested captioning standards are developed and implemented in a timely manner — or we need to ensure that no actor in a show has the same hairstyle. □

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