



Photo courtesy of ITFC Ltd

SUBTITLING

Digital TV subtitles

As digital TV stations increase and digital switch-over approaches, there is a growing concern amongst deaf people that many of the new channels have too little or no subtitles.

A petition on the government petition website has even gone so far as to demand that “all digital TV channels add subtitles to all TV programmes”.

RNID has begun a campaign to encourage ITV3 and ITV4 to exceed their subtitles targets simply because they could easily do so since many of the

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TAG's newsletter about deaf people and telecoms, broadcasting and electronic communications.

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Digital TV subtitling

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programmes have already gone out on ITV1 with subtitles.

TAG fully supports the RNID campaign on ITV3 and ITV4, but has concerns about the ePetition calling for subtitles on all digital programming.

Ruth Myers, Chair of TAG explains: "While TAG understands the aspirations of the petitioners, we think that the petition's demands are unrealistic at this time. Subtitling on digital television is not currently under threat. In fact it is increasing year on year. The case for asking ITV3 and ITV4 to subtitle more of their programmes is, however, very realistic, sensible and probably quite a simple operation."

Ofcom requires digital channels with large enough audiences and income to provide subtitles. Currently this applies

to about 90 channels. The amount they must subtitle rises in stages from 10% in year one to 80% in year ten. Currently most must subtitle 35% of programmes, but many voluntarily exceed that amount.

The five terrestrial channels have higher subtitling targets and most now exceed the requirements. BBC has confirmed that it will subtitle 100% of its programmes by April 2008. We hope that other channels will follow this lead.

TAG believes that seeking 100% subtitling across the board with no timescale is unrealistic and infeasible. It would simply drive emerging digital channels out of business. We will continue to campaign and lobby in a constructive and credible manner for increases in subtitling.

Theatre captioning

Subtitling is also increasing in theatres across the UK. Last year STAGETEXT captioned 209 performances in 75 venues across the UK. In addition, 14 venues and companies provide their own captioning and that number is increasing.

STAGETEXT is also running a number of projects to help theatres in several regional centres to offer more captioning by sharing equipment and captioners. See www.stagetext.org.uk



Photo: Gerry Litman

When TV subtitling isn't perfect

Ruth Myers, TAG's chair, writes:

In my experience, most digital subtitling is trouble free but I know from my emails that not everyone is in the same happy position. With digital switch-over approaching, we need to be sure that the subtitles have a smooth transition too.

I hear about some curious faults: whole blocks of subtitling which fail to appear; live subtitling with the middle section appearing after the first and last words so that you need to be a quick reader to make sense of the information.

Because there is so much subtitled

programming to choose from, it is often easier to sigh and switch to another channel than report the fault which made you switch channels.

Please help TAG ensure subtitle users receive a top quality service and tell us about all the problems you experience when watching TV.

We need to know the date, channel, time, and what the problem was. Your feedback will help us to ensure that digital switch-over does not have a detrimental effect on access services.

Cinema subtitling – the statistics and the reality

By the end of 2007 more than 300 cinemas should have subtitling equipment. That's nearly 50% of all cinemas in the UK. According to Mark Morris of RNID's Access to Entertainment campaign, there are 1100 subtitled screenings every month.

But spare a thought for Simon Pearse of TAG who turned up at his local cinema for a subtitled showing of Borat, settled down with his bucket of popcorn and jumbo coke, only to find that the subtitles didn't materialise. He promptly complained asking why the advertised performance was not subtitled. He was then told that the machine was broken – although he had earlier checked separately with two



members of staff that the showing would have subtitles.

Fortunately his experience had a positive outcome as he enjoyed a free showing of Casino Royale at another cinema in the chain which was much better equipped for subtitles. This demonstrates the inconsistency within cinemas of the same chain – but at least that chain showed subtitles; some of the large chains do not.



SUBTITLING

Internet downloads and subtitles

Downloading videos and TV programmes over the Internet is increasing in popularity, but all too often subtitles are lacking.

At a TAG seminar last year BT admitted that although its BT Vision package would on its launch have subtitles for Freeview programmes, it would be less likely to have subtitles for other downloaded content for some time.

Similarly Channel 4's catch-up service, 4onD, does not currently include subtitles for downloaded programmes.

The situation with BBC's download-on-demand service, iPlayer, varies – some but not all material has subtitles.

Ofcom has no powers to regulate downloaded content under the existing Communications Act. TAG will be pursuing this at its next meeting with the regulator.

Meanwhile, there are a number of unofficial (and possibly illegal) websites that

enable users to download subtitles for a vast range of TV shows and films. Downloading is quick and easy, and it is fairly straightforward to add subtitles to already downloaded TV programmes or movies. However, the quality of these unofficial subtitles varies enormously (some subtitles are in a form of Pidgin English) and they can be difficult to synchronise perfectly with legally downloaded programmes.

So long as the official providers do not provide subtitles with their programmes it may be easier for individuals to obtain them through the controversial P2P (peer-to-peer) downloading network.

While TAG does not necessarily condone the downloading of unofficial subtitles, the issue does highlight the shortcomings of industry and the current regulatory powers in failing to address the needs of the deaf community.

Screenphone appeals

If you are deaf, deafened or hard of hearing and have good speech, have you tried the Screenphone?

TAG's Chairman found the Screenphone so helpful that she asked her local Social Services to exchange her textphone for the Screenphone. With a little persuasion, they agreed to the swap and are now considering the Screenphone for other users who need to switch easily between voice and text and be able to adjust the text fonts.



The Geomarc Screenphone

MOBILE PHONES

TalkByText and mobiles

TalkByText for Windows, a software-only alternative to textphones, has won a SustainIT 2006/7 National eWell-Being Award.



TalkByText for Windows is available as a business package for organizations that want to be fully accessible to deaf and hard of hearing people. A home version for individuals will be available in the Autumn.

RNID has also produced a mobile phone version of TalkByText, turning compatible phones into mobile textphones. However, there is no support from mobile operators at the moment, so deaf people who want to use TalkByText Mobile Edition have to install and configure it themselves and they will not be able to receive incoming calls. RNID advises deaf people wanting to use TalkByText Mobile to contact their network's support service. And to keep asking them if they don't get a satisfactory answer.

See www.ictmid.org.uk/talkbytext.html

Text tariffs – keep asking

Many deaf people are finding it difficult to find suitable data-only mobile phone tariffs. One deaf person recently complained to TAG that O2 had cancelled her tariff and that the new one they offered was costing her a lot more. TAG contacted O2 who found another tariff (for 250 monthly texts) and the customer was delighted.

IN BRIEF

Same old problem

In April, the US National Association of the Deaf began legal action because Chase Bank has refused to accept telephone calls from deaf relay services users.

Following TAG's intervention last year, UK banks should now be accepting calls from British relay users.

Emergency signs

Gloucestershire Council is informing its deaf residents about emergency planning in sign language clips on the web. The video produced by EqualSign can be viewed at: www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/emergencymanagement and www.equalsign.co.uk

TAG man moves on

Richard Vaughan, former Technical Services Manager



at NDCS and member of TAG since 1994, has joined Connevens as Customer Support Manager.



Deaf telecoms revolution 1986-1997

Tony Winstanley, founder-member of TAG and Chairman from 1992 to 1997, remembers some landmarks in deaf telecoms.



The years from 1986 to 1997 saw some of the most exciting and explosive events in the world of telecommunications and deaf people.

At the instigation of RNID, UK deaf organisations mobilised to form TAG (then the Telecommunications Action Group) to campaign for a functional level playing field on which deaf and hearing telecoms users would use the same services and equipment at about the same cost.

Mike Martin of RNID chaired TAG through its first sensitive and exciting years as the various deaf communities came to understand and accommodate the range of telecoms needs of people with different levels of hearing loss. In 1992 I became TAG's first deaf Chair.

TAG's formation came just two years after BT had been privatised and OFTEL had been created as the telecoms regulator. Both organisations were pleased to consult a single body that could represent the broad interests of deaf people and TAG was able to provide statistical evidence and disseminate and

gather information through its member organisations.

Textphones in the UK

In the 1980s, portable textphones revolutionised telephony for deaf people. First there were the Vistels introduced by Breakthrough Trust and then in the mid-1980s the Minicomms originating from the USA and then some very low-cost Qwertyphones which were distributed by TAG.

After some early compatibility issues of the Minicom III – frequently the subject of TAG debate – the Minicom V used EU protocols and could be used with Typetalk.

Because of their relative low cost and the willingness of many statutory agencies to fund their purchase, textphones came to be found in almost every deaf household in the UK, and in the offices of many organisations.

Rebate breakthrough

However, cost of using the telephone network was a huge barrier for deaf

people. TAG therefore campaigned for “functional equivalence” in terms of costs and provided statistical evidence to show that typing causes text calls to be seven times longer than voice calls. In 1989 the Text Users Rebate Scheme (TURS) was introduced. Funded by BT and administered by RNID, it gave cost parity between text and voice calls.

Typetalk

Throughout the 1980s the RNID and Breakthrough Trust had been providing text relay services generously funded from their own coffers.

After concerted lobbying, BT and OFTEL agreed that a fully fledged nationwide service should be established. Typetalk, funded by BT and managed by RNID, was officially launched in 1992 in Liverpool with a great fanfare.

Three major conferences helped set the agenda during this period. The first, at Heathrow Airport, was organised by BT and set target milestones, including a strong commitment from BT to work with deaf people to enable them to have better access to the telecoms network.

The second, in Rotterdam, turned out to be a showcase for BT and TAG demonstrating how a major provider and a lobby group can work together to achieve collective goals.

Landmarks 1980-2000

- 1981** UK's first textphone (Vistel) launched
- 1985** Relatively low-cost textphone (Minicom) introduced to the UK
- 1986** TAG formed
- 1989** TURS launched
- 1992** Typetalk launched
- 1995** Textphone Emergency Service launched
- 1997** TAG's better use of Network's Conference

The third, a TAG conference held in central London, spread the message to deaf people about its work, aims, goals and successes to date.

At an information conference near Edinburgh in 1995, a text payphone was first demonstrated to the public. In the same year the Textphone Emergency Service was launched.

Email levels one playing field

Amongst many firsts during those years were BT Telecom Gold pilots using the Vistel 2 textphone and Tandata videotext terminals. I was one of the pioneers and little did I foresee how email would later make a massive impact on the lives of Deaf PC users! Email has provided a true level playing field for deaf and hearing users alike – we all use similar equipment as opposed to dedicated technology that previously had to be developed for deaf people.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Signed website

BT has built a new website for sign language users: www.bt.com/btsign. A BT survey showed that 80 per cent of respondents wanted information about how to contact BT and 50 per cent wanted more information about products and services. So, the new site is designed to meet these requests. The BT Sign site is the final stage of a project which last year saw the launch of the UK's first product guide (about broadband) in BSL.



Your photos & stories wanted

Do you have any photographs or stories and memories about the development of deaf telecoms? If so, please tell us! To celebrate its 21st birthday, TAG is planning a special book part of which will outline the history of deaf telecoms.



Tony Winstanley tries out the first UK text payphone in 1995

So any interesting photographs you can lend us will be greatly appreciated. Please contact sequel@palam.co.uk



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