



[Closed Captioning]

WARNING: What is printed is not always what is said.

by Nancy Johnston

I watch television with closed captions. Although I am not hard-of-hearing, I read captions to share the company of deaf and hard-of-hearing friends. Ironically, while I am not the target audience for captioning, I find myself in the position of consumer and critic of captioned television. Since I have high literacy skills and full access to spoken English and oral culture, I can also assess how successfully closed captioning reproduces the nuances of an aural text.

Closed captioning transcribes the aural portion of a programme, whether a television broadcast or a video rental, into a line of printed text that can be decoded with a captioning decoder box, which resembles a cable converter. Captions appear as white characters and symbols against a black or grey bar at the bottom of the television screen. Ideally, closed captioning makes television accessible to all viewers by providing a near transcription of a television broadcast or a commercial film.

The problems inherent in closed captioning make it a political issue for many users. I was aware from my casual TV watching that captions sometimes distracted from the visuals (by covering the best bits of naked bodies), that they sometimes increased in pace to unreadable speeds, and that often captions missed significant off-screen sound effects such as song lyrics. However, I had not recognized this as an issue of cultural censorship and access until five years ago, when I sat down with a hard-of-hearing friend to watch the captioned TV premiere of the movie *Robocop*. At that time captioned TV movies were a rare enough phenomenon to warrant excitement.

The following scene from *Robocop* occurs in the street with a group of villainous gang members welcoming their compatriot Emil, recently released from jail. For some unexplained reason the captioned dialogue for the following scene was omitted altogether:

"Hey Emil! How was the Crow Bar Motel?"

"Not bad, they let me keep the shirt. Nobody popped my cherry."

"Hey!"

"Emil, how are you doing, man?"

[At this point, the men begin to wrestle over the possession of an immense gun.]

"Fuck!"

"Give it up, faggot!"

"Let a man handle it."

"No, asshole, get your own."

"I'll get you, faggot!"

Until I pointed out the blank textual space and what the captions had missed, my hard-of-hearing friend did not register the absence. The scene was either too short or the faces too obscured by the night scene for lip reading. At the time, I wondered if a commercial captioner had censored the scenes arbitrarily, eliminating profanity and provocative dialogue throughout the movie, or if the expurgation was some consequence of the broadcaster's discretion. In any case, my friend was adamant that she had the right "to see the swearing." As a cable subscriber she wanted to make the choice to tune out or tune into a programme that might offend her. Her choices were already so limited that she resented any further censorship or limitations imposed by the television broadcaster.

Closed captioning is not free; nor is it a service guaranteed through Canadian affirmative action or equity rights legislation. Deaf and hard-of-hearing consumers pay to view captions by subscribing to a local cable service (or by erecting an exceptionally good antenna) and they must own or rent a closed caption decoder to descramble the signal. The price of commercial decoders has plunged recently in Ontario largely as a consequence of the importation of American televisions with captioning capacity. With the passage of the American Disability Act (1993), American manufacturers are now required to accommodate the needs of potential consumers by incorporating the technology into

new televisions. By requiring that any manufactured or imported television sold in the U.S. measuring over thirteen inches be equipped internally with decoder circuitry, the U.S. law makes the conventional decoder box obsolete. If Canadians cannot afford these new televisions, a "free" decoder can be obtained, on loan for a deposit, directly from Ontario cable companies.

When closed captions flicker out in a cliffhanger episode or turn into incomprehensible garble across the bottom of the screen, as they do all too frequently, it is hard to believe that anyone in the broadcaster's studio is checking the quality of the service. Given that closed captioned television was not even available in Canada until the early 1980s, it is perhaps not surprising that it still remains poorly monitored. The Canadian Radio and Television Commission (CRTC) ensures access to captioning by allocating a cable band (line 21) for the exclusive display of closed captions. Recently, in response to lobbying by consumer groups, the CRTC has begun to require that broadcasters increase the overall percentages of captioned programmes. Previously, the CRTC did not monitor closely the use of captioning technology by Canadian companies or the on-screen quality of captioning in the television industry. A broadcaster could then claim that the six o'clock news-cast would be "closed captioned for the hearing impaired" when only the news headlines (such as KILLER STORM or POLITICAL UPSET)—as little as 2% of the overall programme—were actually captioned. An active lobby by the Canadian Association of Captioning Consumers and other organizations for the deaf and hard-of-hearing, armed with comprehensive studies of broadcaster services and quality, has been urging the CRTC for years to strengthen industry standards. Acknowledging the problems in the television industry and the research of lobby groups, the CRTC under Commissioner Gail Scott announced this summer that broadcasters will have to meet a target of 90% captioning of their programming by 1998.

Forget TV guides and newspaper listings. TV channel-surfing is probably still the most accurate method for caption consumers to find closed captioned television programming. Of the estimated 31% of the overall daytime broadcast schedule captioned in Southwestern Ontario, only 51% of the actual captioned program-

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ming schedule is accurately indicated in these guides. In the remaining programmes, the garbled, partial, or disappearing captions are very familiar to deaf and hard-of-hearing consumers. I suspect that the regular disruption of captioning in rerun programmes, especially Star Trek, may be the result of the subtle speeding up of the taped programme to accommodate additional commercial time. Elsewhere, gaps in captioned dialogue, especially the final dramatic dialogues and off-screen comments, may be a consequence of last-minute editing after captioning has been coded. In any case, hearing TV viewers are not expected to tolerate a blank screen during the final scenes of "Northern Exposure" or an on-air apology that sound was unavailable for a broadcast of "Hockey Night in Canada."

Even renting a video is a gamble. If your tastes run to alternative films or anything produced outside of the major American studios, you may be out of luck. It goes without saying that what dialogue exists in a pornographic film won't be closed captioned. Even if Zippy Video has what you want and it carries the closed captioning logo, there is still a good chance that you have blown your three bucks on an uncaptioned video.

Closed captioning functions much like a translation, from one source language into a target language. It is often intended to circulate the contents of a given work and to make it available to wider audiences. It is much more than a simple mechanical process; it involves value judgments, accommodation to publishing standards and print technologies, and a certain amount of creativity. In the case of commercial captioning, captioners are restricted by practical considerations such as the literacy of their audience and the capacity for print absorption by the average reader. This is especially true for children's programming where the captioner must determine whether captions should be verbatim or condensed to conform to a child's understanding of linguistic complexity. Average adult literacy allows for a comfortable reading speed of 200-250 words per minute, but must account for a drop to 120-140 words per minute when a television screen is animated with background visuals. Unlike reading a book or newspaper, reading a captioned TV programme does not allow reviewing a complicated sentence or looking up an unfamiliar word. For these reasons, commercial captioners are sometimes compelled to smooth the syntax in order to retain clarity. Children's programming, for example, is often completely rewritten to accommodate the reading levels of young viewers and to make explicit the inferences of vocal tone that are suggested to a hearing viewer. In the process, subtleties of tone, humour, and cultural differences within spoken English are often sacrificed for what is deemed to be the more important overall message. The captioned text of a children's programme also promotes a cultural conformity and blandness reminiscent of Reader's Digest Condensed Books.

The limitations and cultural knowledge of commercial captioners create another serious problem. During live broadcasts and taped programming, these highly trained individuals are not always briefed with the spellings of proper names for individuals and are expected to caption accurately highly specialized vocabularies. More seriously, most captioners are not adequately prepared by broadcasters or producers to discern subtle linguistic variations within spoken English. In "real-time" captioning, a high-quality captioning produced simultaneously on-air, captioners are at a serious disadvantage. Although the best captioners are highly qualified and flexible practitioners, the act of transcription is a

process which produces as well as captures meaning.

Frequently, captions are riddled with unintentional "Floydian slips" (as a caption for TVO's "Imprint" once read). For example, when the singer Della Reese appeared on the Arsenio Hall show, the first late-night talk show to offer captions, she was very animated in her description of "signifying" with the late comedian Redd Foxx. It was apparent by the context of her story that, by "signifying," she referred to word-play which has its origins in the African American community. To signify, according to Roger D. Abraham, is to play the trickster and to "talk with great innuendo, to carp, to cajole, to needle, and to lie." Reese described a spontaneous session of outrageous insults flying back and forth between Foxx and herself and, to underline the excitement of the verbal sparring, Reese remembered how comedian Richard Pryor encouraged them by shouting, "Signify, signify!" Any subtlety in this exchange was lost as the captioner repeatedly misrecorded her phrase as "Satisfy, satisfy!" Despite the narrative context, the captioners mediated the story by supplying those words that were "heard" or which made the most sense in their understandably limited experience. Rather than criticize the captioners, I would rather point to the limitations in the practice itself. Captioning, like translating and editing, is an ideological practice which has the potential to smooth over cultural difference and distinctions. This dimension is largely unmonitored. In the past, the work of advocacy groups and the CRTC has focussed on the larger problems of consumer access and on the quality of closed captions in general. Very little has been done to foreground the ways captioning, as a form of cultural mediation, influences and intervenes in the acts of television viewing for deaf and hard-of-hearing consumers. Satisfy, indeed.

Note

All statistics are quoted from the only comprehensive Canadian study on the quality of closed captioning:

The Canadian Captioning Development Agency.
Canadian Captioning Profile: "The Monitor Project."
Toronto: CCDA, January 1993.

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WATCHING WTN

The Women's
Television
Network

purports to
be for women,
by women,
and about
women.

IS IT?

by Julia
Creet

"No!" shrills girlfriend. "Don't stop there." My thumb on the clicker, clicks again. The Women's Television Network disappears into the continuum of mostly unwatched and unwatchable channels. The response is visceral. The thumb clicks on in its inexorable impatience. But what if we lingered a moment longer? Would we see something we want to watch? Would we see ourselves? Is the channel not for us? Named after us? Does it not call out to us by name?

"Come Women. Come watch." Does it not hail us in our cozy living room from its cozy living room set? "No!" says girlfriend, "I don't care if you have to write about it, watch it when I'm not here."

It was a lucky thing then—I guess—that I had lots of free time this summer, days to idle away, or I would never have been able to write this article. I would never have been allowed to watch enough WTN to write something based on more than second-and-a-half slices, speakers cut off in mid-sentence, complaints half-articulated but entirely predictable.

That's where it started, this aversion to WTN. It started with the immediate impression that its feed was a litany of troubles presented live and in person. Unlike the day-time talk shows, which openly thrive on the exploitation of sorrow, misery on WTN lacks entertainment