

Closed Captioning Services - Event Transcript

Opening

Lori Litz

Hi everyone! Welcome to today's Accessibility.com event, Closed Captioning Services. If we haven't met before, my name is Lori Litz. I am the Director of Conferences here at Accessibility.com. We're so excited to have you here today. We have a great lineup ahead for you. First up, we'll have our President, Mark Shapiro, speaking with Darlene Parker, who is currently on the FCC's Disability Advisory Committee.

She retired from the National Captioning Institute as a Director of Partnership Development. And... and this is really amazing. She was the sixth person in the country to do real-time closed captioning. She's just a wealth of knowledge about closed captioning. I've had some really interesting conversations with her and I am so excited for you to meet her, if you haven't before, and hear what she has to say about closed captioning.

From there, we'll have our friend Lily Bond, who's the Senior Vice President of Marketing at 3Play Media. She'll dive into 3Play a little bit more to give you a little bit more in-depth look at a closed captioning services company. We'll have some questions and answers. Please type your questions into the Q&A. If we don't get to them today, we will follow up with you.

Today's event is recorded and will be available this evening for your viewing pleasure. You'll get an email from me at some point this evening with instructions on how to access the recording and transcript. And without further ado, here we are with Mark and Darlene.

Presentation

Mark Shapiro

I'd like to thank everyone for joining us today. Today we're going to be talking about closed captioning. I'm Mark Shapiro, President of Accessibility.com. And i'm here today with Darlene Parker. Darlene currently serves on the FCC's Disability Advisory Committee and was a Director at the National Captioning Institute where she worked for 40 years. She was the sixth person in the country to provide real-time closed captioning for TV and coauthored several books on real-time captioning.

Darlene, welcome. I appreciate you coming on board and helping us understand about closed captioning.

Darlene Parker

Thank you for having me, Mark.

Mark Shapiro

To start with, what is closed captioning?

Darlene Parker

It's the text that is displayed on a screen of the audio portion of the program. And the reason we call it closed captioning is because when it first came about in the broadcast world, the captions were open, meaning they could not be turned off. They were big white letters across the screen. And I will talk about that more a little later.

And to view closed captions in the early days a set-top decoder box had to be connected to your TV set. And starting in 1993, it was mandated that every TV sold or manufactured in the U.S. must contain a decoder chip which made the decoder boxes unnecessary.

Mark Shapiro

Are there different types of closed captioning?

Darlene Parker

Yes. Until a few years ago, live captioning was always done by a person, either by a standard type machine or a voice writer repeating what they heard. And prior to becoming a stenocaptioner, that person was required to graduate from court reporting school. The voice writers may have had prior training or were more likely trained by the captioning company that hired them.

The screening process to become a voice writer is rigorous. One must have great recall be able to punctuate on the fly and stay calm under pressure. Just because somebody can talk, doesn't mean they can be a voice writer. Eventually captioning expanded to online content onsite conferences, college courses and meetings with stereocaptioners that were often called CART writers. CART stood for, and still stands for, Computer Aided Real-Time Translation and they provide captions for the Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals.

I'd like to pause for a second here and say that the correct term to use is always Deaf and hard-of-hearing and not hearing impaired.

Mark Shapiro

Great point. When do you see closed captioning actually being used?

Darlene Parker

It's used to make any content accessible to anyone in any setting. Broadcast, online content, business meetings, college courses, conferences, etc..

Mark Shapiro

So for Zoom meetings would that be a place you'd see people using it?

Darlene Parker

Yes, absolutely.

Mark Shapiro

Are there any specific laws requiring closed captioning?

Darlene Parker

Well, my understanding is that the ADA, the Americans with Disabilities Act, says captioning must be provided in places of public accommodation which are public or private businesses that are used by the public at large. And private clubs and religious organizations are exempt. And aside from the law, providing captioning is a good business decision and it's the right thing to do.

Section 508 requires all federal government agencies electronic content to be accessible. And lastly, the FCC oversees broadcast television.

Mark Shapiro

Okay. Darlene, what should we look for when we're considering a vendor?

Darlene Parker

Well, you want to look for somebody, obviously, that has experience in the particular type of captioning that you want to do. And you can certainly ask them what their experience has been.

Mark Shapiro

How are these vendors providing their closed captioning services?

Darlene Parker

For live events online, the client provides to the caption company a link to their website and a good quality audio source. Captions are sent to a closed caption encoder or an IP address or a standalone widget. And for broadcast captioning, it's delivered based on each client's workflow requirements. And even though many online meeting platforms have their own built-in automated captioning, they can also allow human captioners to provide captions by being assigned as a third party. So their captions would override any captions that the meeting platform might provide automatically.

There are also many captioning companies and tech companies who provide ASR, Automated Speech Recognition, captions to the various online meeting platforms.

Mark Shapiro

When I'm hiring these vendors, what's a reasonable accuracy rate that I should be expecting?

Darlene Parker

Well, experienced vendors will have a higher accuracy rate. But the accuracy will depend on the quality of the audio and the difficulty of the content. And across the industry, considering all different types of live captioning, accuracies could range from the low nineties to the high 90%

range. So from, like 92% up to 99%. That's live. Post-production captioning is more accurate and verbatim than live captioning and it really should not have any errors at all.

Mark Shapiro

If I'm running a live event and I'm at 92% accuracy, does that cause major problems or is it more of an inconvenience?

Darlene Parker

I think it can cause problems. I think it can impede comprehension. Yes.

Mark Shapiro

And do vendors actually guarantee a specific number? Like they would actually say, we will be at 95% or we'll be at 90%.

Darlene Parker

Many vendors do guarantee a number. Or a range.

Mark Shapiro

What are you seeing as kind of the traditional turnaround time or what should be my expectation when I'm hiring a vendor in terms of turnaround? Time for post-production closed captioning?

Darlene Parker

Well, it depends on the volume. Standard delivery is 3 to 5 business days, but it can be turned around the same day or the next day if necessary. The client just needs to make their needs known as soon as possible to the captioning company.

Mark Shapiro

Budget is obviously a question that's going to come up in everyone's mind. What's a reasonable budget for closed captioning? How would it even be charged? Is it... is it hour? By word? How do most of these companies look at billing out?

Darlene Parker

Yeah, it depends on if it's live or if it is post-production. If it's live, it's going to be charged by the program. If it's a 30 minute program, for instance. Or by the hour, if it's an hour long program or a several hour long program. For post-production, it can be charged by the minute if it's a short piece or it may be charged by the hour.

And the rates are dependent on many variables. You know, like I said, is a live captioning with humans? Or is it with ASR, automated speech recognition? If it's ASR that can cost 50% less than a human captioner. Post-production captioning is also referred to as prerecorded or offline captioning and that costs more than real time captioning because it actually takes longer to accomplish than the real time captioning which just last as long as the event lasts. And also the accuracy standards for post-production are higher because they have the time to make sure that everything is correct.

And when setting a rate, captioning, companies may take into consideration certainly volume. Is your event just a one off event? Will it occur daily, weekly, monthly, once a year? Those are all factors that need to be considered. And are you looking for multiple languages, perhaps? And that would increase the rate as well. And if it's post-production captioning, if you need a quick turnaround, then that will be a higher rate.

Mark Shapiro

What's a reasonable lead time for securing services.?

Darlene Parker

Again, the word volume comes up. It depends on volume. Is the job several events over a period of time? Is it one event lasting 3 hours? For shorter events, a week's notice is fine and even less than that if you can't find out sooner than that that you need to provide captioning. I would like at least a week's notice, especially if there's a lot of volume. For larger events such as live multiple concurrent sessions during a conference, as much notice as possible is preferable. A month would be great if possible. The reason is because that captioning company is going to have to provide more than one captioner for each hour of that job. And certainly I know the client doesn't always know a month in advance what's happening, but as much notice as possible is always the best way to go.

Mark Shapiro

Should I assume when I get my transcript back that it will be accessible? When I get it back from the vendors?

Darlene Parker

Well, when using a captioning company, you shouldn't expect a transcript to be delivered automatically. Certainly, if you need one, it's best to make that request in advance. There's no problem providing that. And if you forgot, just make the request as soon after the event as possible.

Mark Shapiro

Darlene, like to thank you for helping us understand about closed captioning. Appreciate it.

Darlene Parker

You're very welcome. It was a pleasure to be here.

Mark Shapiro

We're now going to do a deep dive into a company that offers closed captioning services. We have with us today Lily Bond. She is a Senior Vice President of Marketing at 3Play Media. Lily, I want to thank you for allowing us to do this deep dive into your company.

Lily Bond

Thank you. Really excited to be here.

Mark Shapiro

To start with, can you share with us the background of your company?

Lily Bond

Sure. So 3Play Media was founded in 2008 out of MIT. It was founded by four people that were trying to solve the problem of how to make recorded captioning faster and cheaper for businesses. And they ended up developing kind of a proprietary editing technology that combined best in class ASR and speech recognition well before anyone else in the industry was using that with human editing to produce extremely high quality output at a fraction of kind of the traditional cost of captioning.

So, very early to the space of ASR and captioning, but really with the angle of how we can use humans along with ASR to produce extremely high quality enterprise-level outputs.

Mark Shapiro

Cool. So how does this translate into different products and services that you guys offer?

Lily Bond

Yeah. So today, you know, our first product was, was recorded closed captioning and today we offer a suite of other video accessibility services all focused on this combination of technology and humans. So we provide closed captioning, transcription, live captioning, subtitling and translation, and audio description for for Blind viewers.

Mark Shapiro

How much advance notice do... would you expect from companies? What's reasonable? Is that a week? A month? A day?

Lily Bond

Yeah. We don't need any notice at all. You can just upload any time and we'll be able to process captioning for you immediately. Any individual customer can submit 40 hours of content to us in a single day and we'll be able to get it back to you within the guaranteed turnaround time. For live captioning, ideally we ask for 24 hours notice, but we have a scaled marketplace of live captioners and typically they'll... they'll assign themselves to an event within 5 minutes of it going online.

Mark Shapiro

What would you say sets you apart from... A lot of people would consider using independent contractors or even your competitors. What would you say sets 3Play apart?

Lily Bond

Yeah, I would say that we're... we're an enterprise solution. So if you are a business that is looking for a scaled approach to video accessibility or that centralized approach that I talked about, we're going to be able to give you that level of service. We're going to be able to give you

the SLAs on turnaround, all of the guarantees on making sure that your files are back and captioned and have all of the quality SLAs in place that you care about for your brand risk.

We have a full service platform where you can order any of these services in one place. So it kind of sets you up for what you need immediately, but also what you might need in the future. Really, what sets us apart is this this this partnership approach for enterprise organizations that are looking for a full service centralized solution.

Mark Shapiro

That's great. Lily, Thanks for allowing us to do the deep dive. Appreciate that. That's really helpful for our audience to understand what, you know, especially something that's new to it, what companies offer.

Lily Bond

Happy to be here.

Mark Shapiro

And if you can stick around, we're now going to do our Q&A session. Got a bunch of questions. First question, are their best practices a company should follow when putting closed captioning on their videos. Darlene, why don't you take this one?

Darlene Parker

Yes. Even when providing captioning for a nonbroadcast client, the FCC's 2014 order enumerating best practices for prerecorded programs will most likely be followed by captioning companies. In addition, experienced companies will also have their own rules and guidelines. A quick synopsis of the best practices of the FCC for offline, also known as prerecorded programming, is that captions will be accurate, synchronous, complete and as appropriately placed as possible.

Those captions should be verbatim. Captions should be error free, punctuated correctly so as to facilitate comprehension. Captions should be displayed with enough time for them to be read and they should not obscure visual content. They should include speaker IDs and a complete representation of the audio. And that means ambient noises and other nonspeech information.

Mark Shapiro

What are the legal requirements for closed captioning? Lily, can you take this?

Lily Bond

Sure. So there are several laws in the U.S. that apply to closed captioning. The very first was the Rehabilitation Act of 1978. This is... there's a section in there, section 508 that is basically the first broad nondiscrimination act for people with disabilities. This applies to government and federally funded programs and requires equal access to video content through closed captioning.

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 applies to public entities and also places of public accommodation and requires closed captioning for video. This one has... This is the law with the most litigation because it was written in 1990 before technology and the web is kind of as prolific as it is today. But in almost all cases the litigation points to closed captioning and kind of digital-first experiences being covered under the ADA.

And this would apply to, you know, any organization that provides a public accommodation. So lots of, you know, higher ed, lots of businesses, anyone that is kind of like providing business online. And then in the media space, the FCC has very strict quality standards for closed captioning and very strict requirements. And then the CVAA is kind of an extension from the FCC to apply to streaming media that previously appeared on television.

So that's when you're thinking about your, you know, your Netflix or your your Disney Plus. Those are all covered under the CVAA. And there are... so these laws all kind of require captioning for different industries. And then kind of the overarching standards I would say are covered under the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines or WCAG, which says exactly what an organization must do to be compliant with accessibility standards.

So the ADA might say you have to be accessible and WCAG is going to tell you what you have to do to be accessible. All of this covers closed captioning.

Mark Shapiro

Next question. What are open captions? Darlene, why don't you take this one?

Darlene Parker

Sure. Open captions are always displayed like subtitles. For closed captioning, however, you have the ability to turn the captions on and off. I like to provide just a brief history of how we got here. In 1972, the French Chef with Julia Child was the first open captioned program. Big white letters across the screen that could not be turned off.

In 1973, ABC World News Tonight with Frank Reynolds was the first regularly scheduled news program. They recorded the 6:30 feed, got it onto a big eight inch floppy disk, and then at 11:00, they punched out on a computer keyboard line-by-line what Frank Reynolds had said at 6:30. And that's all there was for the news until 1982 when it became real-time.

So eventually it was felt that, you know what we need to have closed captions. We don't want them always open. We want to be able to turn them on and off. And the National Bureau of Standards had been working on this, on closed captioning. And in 1972 they demoed closed captioning of the popular TV show at the time, The Mod Squad, on a specially equipped TV set.

And this was at Gallaudet University. And it was eventually decided that a nonprofit organization was needed to provide the closed captioning. So in 1979, the Federal Government, several networks, established NCI as a nonprofit. The first prerecorded captions were on March 16,

1980, for The Wonderful World of Disney. And then NCI provided the first live real-time captioning in 1982 for ABC's World News Tonight.

Mark Shapiro

What's the difference in quality? When you say quality, isn't it just, you know, typing out what somebody's saying?

Lily Bond

So yes, but the level of accuracy that people are typing that out with varies. So you know, when you're looking at the dollar a minute range, you should expect a lower accuracy rate because there's less kind of checks and balances in place to ensure that the quality is over a 99% accuracy. I think in the \$2 to \$3 minute range, you're getting extremely high quality over 99% accuracy.

And then when you're in the \$5 a minute plus range, there are some additional standards that are required by streaming media that incur extra costs. It's not about the accuracy of the word for word at that point, but it's about including elements like being able to format for different commercial breaks and including, you know, music notes and very specific, you know, lyrics based on on kind of difference standards by streaming platform.

Those are just much more extensive requirements that are less about the accuracy of the transcript and more about the specific standards of the streaming platform.

Mark Shapiro

Okay. What should I expect is an accuracy level, let's say from a company like 3Play?

Lily Bond

3Play Media, we guarantee over 99% accuracy on every file. We measure at 99.6%, and we have an SLA in place to guarantee that quality on every file.

Mark Shapiro

Okay. This is a really good question. Why shouldn't we just use automatic speech recognition? Zoom has it built right in. Is there anything wrong with just using that? Is there a benefit to actually paying a firm to go through for a live event?

Darlene Parker

Again, this depends. In my capacity at NCI, I was part of the team that conducted analyses of ASR versus live human captioning. The decision to use ASR or a human captioner will depend on the content, the difficulty of the content, and if good quality audio can be provided. To obtain the best possible results with ASR, it is imperative to have good quality audio. ASR technology has come a long way in the last few years.

ASR with good quality audio and generic content is extremely accurate. If the vocabulary is challenging and can be provided in advance, the ASR system can be programmed with that

specific vocabulary to help increase the accuracy. ASR strength is verbatimness. It is more verbatim than humans. The downside is that ASR can misinterpret words. Human captioners can use their critical thinking skills and take their best guess at what was said if they're not sure.

Another downside to ASR at this time, I say at this time because it's always evolving, is that it does not capture song lyrics well. The music obscures the lyrics. If there is a good deal of singing in an event, captions may be absent or spotty for that portion. And with most other programming though, ASR can be on par with humans.

ASR is more accurate in captioning videos and live programming because it can take much more time to interpret what was said. With live captioning, time is of the essence because you have to ensure that captions appear on the screen as soon as possible.

Mark Shapiro

Great. That's all the time we have for the question and answer. If anybody has any other questions, just send them in and will get them answered.

Closing

Lori Litz

Thank you, Lily, Darlene and Mark for such an engaging conversation on close captioning services. Today's event was recorded and will be available later this evening. I'll send you an email with instructions on how to access it and the transcript. So if you had to step away, got here late, you'll be able to reconsume the content that's available. Today

is not over yet though. Out in the lobby or if you're already viewing this from the lobby, up next is 3Play Media's own Lily Bond is back for "Quick Start to Captioning." So you can learn a little bit more about what's involved with working with a closed captioning services company and how to get your content closed captioned. You can also head out to the Expo Hall and visit with 3Play Media.

And coming up next for Accessibility.com on March 12th is PDF Remediation Services. So that's an interesting one. If you've ever tried to make your PDF accessible or need to make your PDFs accessible, that's a great event to come back for on March 12th. As always, thank you all for attending. We're so happy to have you here and we'll see you next month.