Caption

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Abstract

When Malcolm Fraser opened The Australian Captioning Centre in 1982, he emphasised the importance of changing technology in improving the provision of captions:

there is always going to be new technology coming forward, there will always be better ways of doing it if you wait a while. This has been delayed a long while already and I don't believe that there is any excuse for further delay by the ABC or by commercial stations on the grounds of technology.

New captioning technologies are coming forward at a rapid pace. In the time we have been preparing this issue, Facebook announced it would offer users the ability to have live videos captioned, a group of fansubbers in the Netherlands were found to be engaging in illegal activities (see Hollier et al this issue), the Australian copyright Act was amended to allow the creation of accessible versions of content to address any form of disability, and The National Center for Accessible Media in the US launched a free Caption and Description Editing Tool (CADET) following a crowd funding campaign.

Captions are most often associated with making audiovisual content accessible to people who are D/deaf or hard of hearing; however, with technological advancements, people are increasingly finding mainstream benefits for captions, whether as a learning tool in education, or to capture the attention of Facebook users quickly scrolling through their news feeds, or to watch television in a crowded or noisy area such as bars and gyms. Captions have also taken on a central role in popular memes, social media, and Web-based creativity. Historically, the mainstream benefits of captions have been integral to their increasingly widespread availability (Downey). This issue of M/C seeks to investigate the changing uses of captions in media and culture.

We begin with a feature article from Catherine Burwell exploring the use of captions in Al Jazeera Plus (AJ+) news videos created in response to Facebook's autoplay feature. Analysing two recent AJ+ videos, Burwell shows how captions add new layers of meaning to the already multimodal form of the video, and how they change the way that news stories are communicated. The broader role that captions play in audience engagement, branding, and profit-making extends these textual interpretations, and the paper ends with a brief enquiry into the implications of captions for our understanding of literacy in an age of constantly shifting media.

Melissa Merchant, Katie Ellis and Natalie Latter offer a historical progression of the availability of captions on television—using the cooking genre as their case study—to identify three stages of caption availability and quality. These can be broadly summarised as early yet inconsistent captions, captions becoming more widely available and accurate—often as a direct result of activism and legislation—but not yet fully verbatim, and verbatim captions as adopted within mainstream augmentative uses.

Mike Kent, Katie Ellis and Gwyneth Peaty take up the shifting concept of literacy and the potential uses of mainstreaming captions to consider what happens when captioned online university lectures are made available to the entire student population. Their article reports findings of research assessing the usefulness of captioned recorded lectures as a mainstream learning tool to determine their usefulness in enhancing inclusivity and learning outcomes for the disabled, international, and broader student population.

Beth Haller's essay reflects on the *Switched at Birth* all American Sign Language (ASL) episode *Uprising* to consider what happens when captions are opened to and utilised by the majority of the population. The US cable television show *Switched at Birth* (2011-2017) broke new ground within mass media by hiring numerous deaf actors and allowing those actors to perform using sign language rather than vocalizing English. The show's honouring of Deaf culture and language reflects a new openness from television executives toward integrating more people with a variety of visible and invisible physical embodiments, such as hearing loss, into television content. This article looks at the cultural inclusivity fostered by the show.

Gwyneth Peaty's article likewise considers the interplay between silence, sound, and text in the horror film *Hush* (2016). Within this film, deafness is utilised as a source of tension and empowerment for the main character, and offers a reworking of the 'Final Girl' trope in horror. Text and captioning are subtly woven into the film, and function to create character development and narrative cohesion. The use of both sound and silence in this film also convey complexities in audience and text relationships.

While Haller and Peaty offer some contemporary examples of captions and reflect on the ways ASL and captioning can be used in new and innovative ways in audio visual media, Scott Hollier, Katie Ellis and Mike Kent argue commercial providers are not always meeting their legislative or best practice requirements in the provision of captions. Their paper explores an interesting mix of activism, volunteer effort, and hacking whereby Netflix users compile instructions to allow users to upload their own captions and make content accessible by essentially hacking into secret caption files in the Netflix media player. They conceive of this user-generated practice as a conflation of the hacker and the acknowledged digital influencer, but caution that copyright restrictions may drive this practice of sharing information for accessibility underground.

Katy Galiardi brings together two key concerns explored throughout this issue—social justice for people with disability and the use of captions in online communication. The paper redefines Facebook comments as a form of cultural captioning to explore critiques and examples of what disability activists describe as inspiration porn. The paper offers critique and analysis of the ways comments on an Autism Speaks Facebook post about a young man with autism fit the inspiration porn narrative. Through quantitative and qualitative analyses of comments on this post, this paper argues language use and over-disclosure are two contributing factors to the discrimination inherent within inspiration porn.

Nicole Erin Morse also considers the role of captions in social media but with a focus on Instagram. Within social media visibility campaigns, selfie captions usually work to produce coherent identity categories, linking disparate selfies together through hashtags. Furthering visibility politics, such selfie captions claim that authentic identities can be made visible through selfies and can be described and defined by these captions. However, selfie captions by the trans-artist Alok Vaid-Menon challenge the assumption that selfies and their captions can make authentic identity legible. Through hashtags, emojis, and punning text, Vaid-Menon's selfie captions interrogate visibility politics from within one of visibility politics most popular contemporary tools, demonstrating how social media can be used to theorise representation.

The final paper in this issue by Katie Ellis, Mike Kent and Kathryn Locke explores a discrepancy between the provision of captions and audio description on Australian broadcast television and video on demand. While audio description as a technology, like captions, was developed in the 1960s, it remains largely absent from current Australian television. In the current media climate of multiple platform and content delivery options, it was envisaged that television would become more accessible. However, despite multiple audio description trials on both broadcast and catch-up television, and an increase in political and advocate attention, the availability of audio description is still nowhere near the level of captions.

"To caption" is to take, catch, seize, capture, subtitle, title, and/or translate. The articles collected in this issue demonstrate the increasing potential of captions to augment communication and highlight a range of emerging issues, practices, and focal points. The use of captions as a vital accessibility feature for people who are D/deaf or hard of hearing is acknowledged throughout all of the papers. The role of captions in activist efforts of people with disability is also emphasised—from criticisms of inspiration porn, to hacking the back end of Netflix, to recent calls to raise the importance of audio description to the level of captions in the *Australian Broadcasting Act* (1992). The mainstream use of captions to augment visual imagery, memes, television, and video is also recognised throughout this issue as a vital tool for expression, identity formation, and personalised learning styles. Collectively, these articles demonstrate the changing uses of captions in media and culture, examining the ways they are also increasingly used by larger portions of the population.

Acknowledgments

References

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