



Learning From Our Members

BY LISE HAMLIN

Often, accessibility provides the lifeline to a better quality of life for people of all abilities and ages—as well as being the way to include people with hearing loss.

A Global Meeting Place on Accessibility

Every year, the M-Enabling Summit Conference and Showcase offers a global meeting place for accessibility professionals and leaders. It focuses on promoting technologies and environments that'll enable older people and those of all abilities to access digital content and services more easily and in altogether new ways.

At this year's June Summit—Accessibility: Transforming Users' Experience—HLAA joined the panel discussion, “Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR) as the New Tool for Captioning Services.” We gave the consumer perspective on ASR with respect to IP CTS (Internet Protocol Captioned Telephone Service) and live newsroom programming. This was HLAA's eighth year as a supporting organization of the Summit.

ASR uses computer hardware- and software-based techniques to identify and process human voice, according to Techopedia.com. It's used to identify the words a person has spoken and convert them to computer text.

This is no easy task. Until just recently, available ASR computer software required a person to train the ASR system by storing speech patterns and vocabulary into it. Now, as the result of a recent breakthrough, artificial intelligence is creating ASR software that doesn't need to be trained by one person. And its ability to store vocabulary into the system is much greater.

Asked to provide information on what consumers were thinking about the accuracy of ASR, we decided to reach out to our members and supporters directly. We ran a 10-day survey—from June 3 to 13—on newsroom captioning specifically, and received 935 responses.

Not All Captioning Is Equal

Not all local live newsroom captioning is the same. If you watch your local news in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston or anywhere that's in the top-25 TV markets, you'll have access to realtime captioning. (This is when a caption writer is listening to the audio, providing captions virtually simultaneously.)

Some companies such as Microsoft and Google are working on solutions to make ASR a product that's more usable and robust—and that holds great potential for people with hearing loss.

About IP CTS Captioning

Full ASR captioning for IP CTS (Internet Protocol Captioned Telephone Service) isn't yet available. Most IP CTS providers currently use trained caller assistants who use ASR software production of captions. But they've been trained in how to use the software, and they're on hand to correct mistakes in the captioning on the fly. There's one provider of IP CTS that uses CART writers to provide captions. All IP CTS providers are looking at ASR, and some may roll that out sooner rather than later. But as of June 2019, none had been certified to provide IP CTS via ASR alone.

But if you live outside these top-25 markets, it's not so certain. If you live in San Diego, Salt Lake City, San Antonio or many other cities not in the top-25 markets, you might be watching realtime captioning. But it's also possible that the captioning is coming directly from the teleprompter—called ENT, for Electronic Newsroom Technique.

With ENT, whole chunks of the newscast can be excluded, such as weather, sports or live reports from outside the newsroom. Anything that's not scripted and entered into the teleprompter in advance might be produced without captions.

Then there's the possibility that you might be watching Enhanced ENT, a technique that scripts the entire newscast in advance. So weather, sports and on-the-street interviews all are broadcast with captions. But last-minute additions might not be.

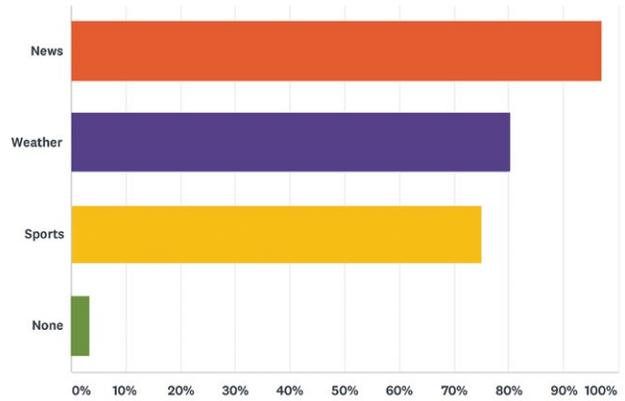
The latest twist is this: Some local TV news stations are starting to use ASR to caption their live programs instead of—or in addition to—Enhanced ENT. So some consumers may have experience watching ASR captioning on TV.

What Our Members Told Us

Those who responded to the HLAA survey said they do depend on captions (91%), and they watch regularly—daily or several times a week (93%). Most were from the smaller, local markets, with about 17% from the top-25 markets. That means that many of the survey respondents are seeing ENT, Enhanced ENT or ASR captioning—not realtime captioning.

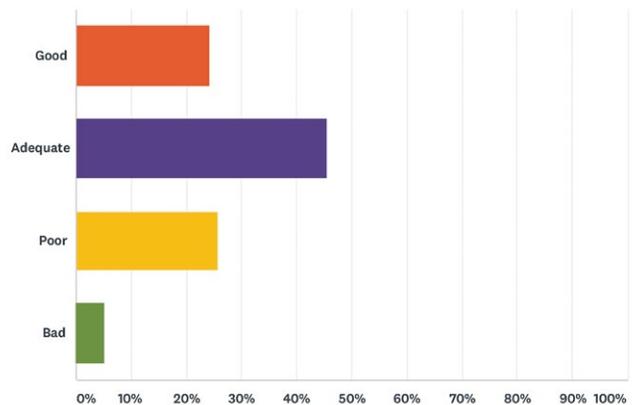
The following graphs provide a visual overview of what we found:

What does your local news station caption?



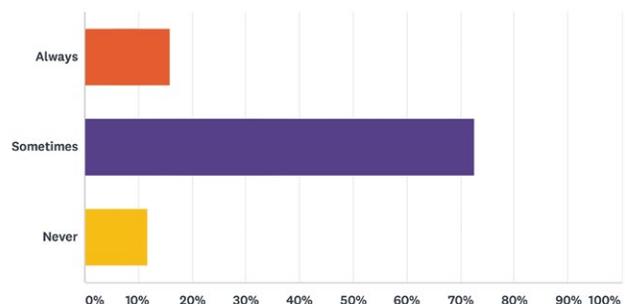
News: 97% • Weather: 80% • Sports: 75%

What do you think of the accuracy of the captioning for your local news?



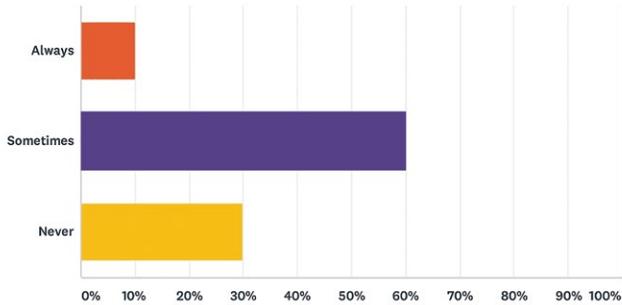
Good: 24% • Adequate: 45% • Poor or bad: 30.5%

Do you find that the captions identify the speaker?



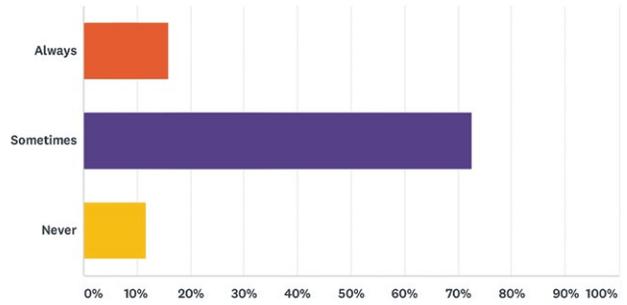
Always: 11.5% • Sometimes: 61% • Never: 27%

Do you find that the speech is in sync with the captioned words?



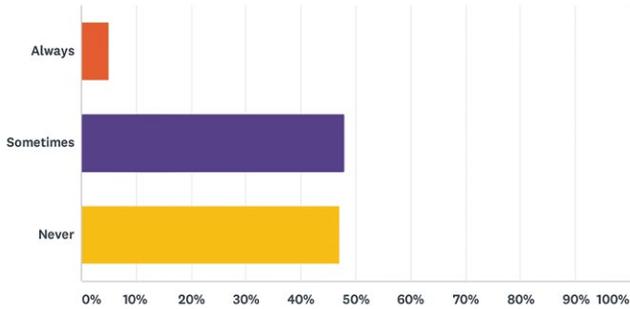
Always: 10.5% • Sometimes: 60% • Never: 30%

Do you find the captions are placed over important information or over someone's face?



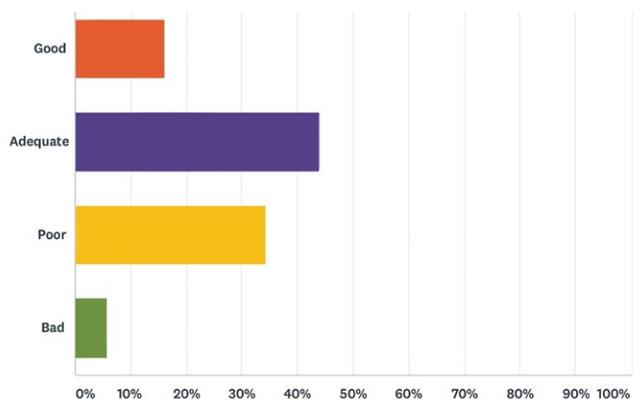
Always: 16% • Sometimes: 73% • Never: 12%

Do you find that background noises, like sirens, dogs barking, etc., are identified?



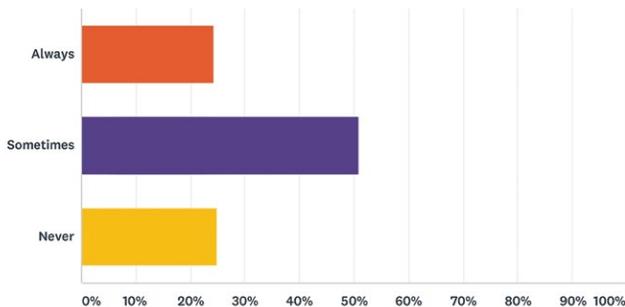
Always: 5% • Sometimes: 48% • Never: 48%

What do you think of the overall quality of the captioning, including the accuracy, delay, placement and completeness of the captions for your local news?



Good: 16% • Adequate: 44% • Poor: 34% • Bad: 6%

Do you find that the news programs are completely captioned, from the beginning to the end of the program?



Always: 24% • Sometimes: 51% • Never: 25%

Some Candid Comments

More than 500 of the 935 survey respondents answered our open-ended question, “If you have any other comments or concerns regarding your local news captioning experience, then please provide it.” Here’s what they told us.

The Positive

I am so grateful to those who sponsor captions. I am completely dependent upon them. I like watching local news and the captions enhance my understanding of local events. —*Sarasota, Florida*

The major Denver TV networks do a good job overall with news captioning, for afternoon and evening. Better than some bigger cities. And improved from a few years ago. Generally pleased with quality. —*Boulder, Colorado*

They do a very good job. —*New York City*

The Resigned

I answered “adequate” to a couple of questions. That is relative. I’ve been relying on captions for 20 years. The state of affairs isn’t good, but I’ve learned to deal with it, which is why “adequate.” I pity people who are just starting out. —*Kirkland, WA (suburb of Seattle)*

Bad as it is, it is better than nothing. —*San Diego*

We really rely on it. Especially in breaking news events, where usually the captioning is crappy at best. —*Merion Station, Pennsylvania*

The Dissatisfied

Only 16% of those who responded thought their captioning was good. Most thought the captions were adequate or poor. Their comments reflected their dissatisfaction.

It would be a more pleasurable experience to watch the news if they had good captioning, and I would not have to rely on my spouse or the internet to fill in what I missed. What would happen if there was a real emergency that I needed to be informed of and missed because of poor captioning?

—*Layton, Utah (a suburb of Salt Lake City)*

The very bad captioning or none at all occurs during news, as this is what I watch... our very local stations are the worst, and I have emailed my concern... and been told they use an “equipment” for captioning and cannot get it to work properly... I have given up watching my local news on TV... Thank you!

—*Santa Barbara, California*

The weather is hardly ever captioned or is poorly captioned. Emergency weather is never captioned, which is really a travesty. Since moving here in 2017 from the Detroit metro area, it has been my experience that the greater northern Michigan area in general is NOT Deaf-friendly at all. It is a big disappointment to me. I have contacted two of the stations that operate out of the same building and have never gotten any response from them. I would hope that this survey will push them to recognize and service the Deaf community as any other responsible business would. Very disappointed with the station ownership and their attitude toward the Deaf community in the northern Michigan cities.

—*Traverse City, Michigan*

Making It Better

So, it seems we hit a nerve with this survey. We’re often told that if people don’t complain it must mean that everything is OK. Well, we can see here—that isn’t always the case.

We found that people do respond when we reach out to them—935 people took the time to take the survey and provide input. We heard from people who filed complaints but feel like those complaints got them nowhere. We heard from people who’ve been living with lousy captioning for so long they no longer have any expectation that captioning can or will get better. And we even heard from people who think captions are getting worse.

Rest assured, this survey is just the beginning. We’ll continue to push for captioning that is good all the time, in every location—because we believe that no one should have to settle for captioning that’s “crappy at best.” **HL**

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