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POSITION STATEMENT

Free Access to Automatic Captioning for People with Hearing Loss

Summary: The Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA), the U.S. leader in advocacy for people with hearing loss, calls for all online video calling and conferencing platforms to offer free (no-cost) access to automatic captioning technology to people with hearing loss, at the same level that platforms offer to their paying customers. HLAA also calls for the establishment and adoption of performance standards for all forms of captioning used over the internet.

HLAA has fought long and hard on behalf of people with hearing loss for access to the highest quality captions across all media, from captioned phones and TV shows to internet content. Without this access to high quality captioning, many people with hearing loss—who often struggle to understand speech over electronic media—would be unable to access much mainstream communication.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for people with hearing loss to have access to captioning on broadcast media, including television, radio, podcasts, blogs, advertising website online streaming and digital journalism, as well as captioned phones and videoconferencing platforms. In addition, because one safeguard against COVID-19 is social distancing and self-isolation, a massive shift of communication methods for both personal social engagement and work occurred. Videoconferencing became our primary way of communicating.

However, many people with hearing loss have been left behind, unable to use these online video applications because captions are typically not available. While some services support the inclusion of captions by trained human speech transcribers—CART writers, the gold standard for captioning—the need for captioning vastly outstrips the availability of trained CART writers.

Some online conferencing platforms provide or support captions generated by automatic speech recognition algorithms (ASR captions). However, some services provide or support access to ASR captioning only to their “premium,” i.e., paying customers, such as places of employment and schools. While the free ASR captioning available on some services is too slow and/or inaccurate to be usable by people with hearing loss, better ASR captioning technologies do exist and are offered by many major providers. However, ASR captioning at this level is sometimes locked behind a prohibitively expensive paywall for many users with hearing loss.

HLAA calls for all video calling and conferencing companies to provide or support free (no-cost) access to their high-quality ASR captioning at the same level they offer to their paying customers, to people with hearing loss.

We want to be clear that accessibility is a legal obligation under various laws, including the Americans with Disabilities Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and other health laws as well as state and local laws. People with hearing loss are entitled to effective communication, including the use of CART, for distance learning, telehealth, and employment-related meetings. HLAA has a long history of supporting access to effective communication in educational, clinical and employment settings, and will continue to do so.

In addition, there is an urgent need to ensure quality standards for captioning in all forms. HLAA calls for the rapid development and implementation of performance standards of all forms of captioning, regardless of how they are produced or where they are displayed. It is well past time people with hearing loss can rest assured that the captions seen are an accurate reflection of what has transpired each and every time captions are used.

Social engagement, employment, education and health care are basic human needs of everyday life. In today's world these are often based in online video calling and conferencing platforms. Accordingly, people with hearing loss must have free access to automatic captioning on those platforms.

Adopted by the HLAA Board of Directors

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