

# "Silent" Films Revisited: Captioned Films for the Deaf

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## Abstract

The silent films of the early 1900s had a huge audience, hearing and deaf, for public entertainment and instruction. The advent of "talkies," however, excluded deaf people from this means of access to mainstream American culture. In response to a new need for both captioned educational and entertainment films for deaf people, Congress passed Public Law 85-905 in 1958, which established Captioned Films for the Deaf as a federal program. This article addresses the history of the Captioned Films/Videos for the Deaf program, the kinds of films and videos available, and the procedures for borrowing them through educational and theatrical captioned film/video libraries. Also discussed are the various captioning processes and the implications of the availability of these materials for librarians who are concerned about the special needs of the deaf community.

## Introduction

There has boomed suddenly into our midst an innovation called the Talkie, which reproduces the human voice, music and all sounds. The producers and exhibitors have scrambled after it headlong, spending hundreds of millions with a lavish hand. Though far from perfected, the device, like a mother-in-law, is likely to remain with us. Now that oral speech has reached the screen it is expected to help the box office. It may for a time - but will it last? Will the success be permanent? I doubt it. (Ballin, 1930, pp. 110-11)

At the beginning of the twentieth century, technology and art merged to form the movie industry. The silent films thus created, resulted in a huge mass audience for public entertainment. And, for a brief time, people who were deaf could fully participate in this popular cultural form, as "the silent film era inadvertently included deaf people to an extent unknown today. Deaf people participated in the industry as equal members of an audience, as pedagogical beneficiaries at school, as actors on the screen, and as subjects for film scripts" (Schuchman, 1988, p. 21). While Hollywood had not planned to accommodate deaf viewers, this was the result of silent films. Thus, when technology advanced and films developed sound, no provisions were made for deaf people to "hear" the talkies. Movies had become one of America's more important cultural products, but talkies excluded deaf people from the mainstream of American society.

According to Schuchman (1987), the value of silent films for deaf people was not in the use of captions, which were written in standard English and often poorly understood by general audiences, deaf and hearing alike. Rather, audiences appreciated the silent films principally for the action and the expert use of facial and body expressions for communication by many actors and actresses. Silent films told a story or made a point visually with little or no dependence on the use of words. This explains the success of Charlie Chaplin who conveyed whole sentences with the twitch of an eyebrow. Chaplin never opened his mouth to utter a single syllable; his subtitles were few and short, and his pictures never needed translation. Indeed, Chaplin, who was never an advocate of "talkies," is quoted by Ballin (1930):

You can tell 'em I loathe them .... They are spoiling the oldest art in the world - the art of pantomime. They are ruining the great beauty of silence. They are defeating the meaning of the screen . . . the vast popularity of the whole - the appeal of beauty... It is beauty that matters in pictures - nothing else. The screen is pictorial. Pictures . . . I am not using the talkies in my new picture. I am never going to use them. For me, it would be fatal. (pp. 112-13)

Thus the silent film era (1893-1929) represented one high point in the cultural history of the American deaf community, as well as a time of cultural equality with hearing people—a time when deaf people could go to the movie theatre and enjoy a film without interpreters, captions, decoders, or elaborate sound systems.

Statistics on the size of the deaf population in the United States vary with time and location. There is no reliable incidence data on deaf people in the United States (Schein, 1987b), largely because of the reporting procedures. However, an estimate of the deaf population in 1930 was 47/100,000 in the general population (Schein, 1987a).

The number of people with hearing problems seems to have increased substantially over time; currently, roughly 10 percent of the United States population has some degree of hearing loss (roughly 21.2 million people in 1985 [National Center for Health Statistics, 1987]). Of this large number of deaf persons, the best lip-readers, those who watch the speaker's tongue movements, mouth movements, and facial expressions to understand what is said, generally comprehend only one-third of verbal communications (Davis & Silverman, 1978, p. 337). Rapid speech or obstructed lip movements (a hand covering the mouth, a mustache, the speaker turning his back, or off-camera voicing) decreases understanding that much more.

Thus, most deaf people were excluded from access to American-made films when the movie industry began producing "talkies" (1927-1929). Deaf citizens then watched foreign films with subtitles or tried to lip-read or guess at the context of talking films. However, this was, at best, a poor substitute for the excellent silent films they had previously enjoyed, and so people in the deaf community turned to deaf organization lectures, skits, plays, dances, and viewings of old silent movies - until films deteriorated and projectors advanced beyond the stage where they could be used for the older films.

Silent films had been valuable in classroom teaching at schools for the deaf because they provided information that teachers could use as a base for a transition to the English language for deaf children (Schuchman, 1984). These schools continued to use older silent films both for educational and entertainment purposes, but the advent of "talkies" impeded the flow of new information about the world to deaf students. Thus not only was the potential for English language development of deaf students through the use of silent films lost, but these same students were also further isolated from the culture of a hearing American society (Schuchman, 1988).

## The Caption Era

Emerson Romero, a deaf Cuban actor who played in several Cuban and American silent films, along with several other deaf actors, became unemployed with the advent of "talkies." Romero moved to New York, became active in establishing a professional deaf repertory company, and attempted to produce captions for the now inaccessible talking movies. In 1947, Romero purchased a number of sound films, spliced in dialogue cards, and rented the resulting "captioned films" out to deaf organizations and

churches (Bangs, 1987). This method of captioning was unsatisfactory because it interrupted the flow of action of the film and that of the dialogue of the actors. It also considerably lengthened the movie. However, it did provide access for deaf Americans to some of the modern movies being produced.

In 1950, with the encouragement of the Convention of American Instructors of the Deaf and a grant from the Junior League of Hartford, Connecticut, Captioned Films for the Deaf was established as a nonprofit organization. Eventually Captioned Films for the Deaf acquired, captioned, and rented out a library of thirty captioned films (Gannon, 1981, p. 267). When operation and maintenance of this film library on a private basis became too expensive, its sponsors petitioned the federal government to oversee this project. In 1958, Congress passed Public Law 85-905 establishing Captioned Films for the Deaf as a federal program. The program was to be administered by the then U.S. Office of Education, with John A. Gough, principal of the Kendall Demonstration School for the Deaf and chairman of the Department of Education at Gallaudet College, hired to administer the program. The original Captioned Films for the Deaf in Hartford disbanded and transferred its collection of films to the government program (Gannon, 1981, p. 268).

During the 1960s, the Bureau of the Handicapped was established in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Under its aegis, Captioned Films for the Deaf, which had been founded to provide entertainment films for deaf adults, was now expanded to include the educational needs of deaf children (Gannon, 1981, p. 317). The passage of Public Law 87-715 increased the scope of responsibilities of the program to include acquisition and adaptation of movies, research and development into new captioning technologies, production and distribution of captioned films, and training of staff (Gannon, 1981, p. 269). Soon to follow was the institution of five theatrical media centers and sixty educational film depositories around the United States.

Film producers were initially reluctant to lease their better films, fearing that the freely distributed captioned versions would cut into profits at movie theaters. However, over time their fears were assuaged, and Captioned Films for the Deaf began leasing an increasing number of the more popular films. After each film was leased, rights to caption it had to be negotiated with the producer.

## The Captioning Process

Captioning is the visual presentation of spoken words onto a screen, or, as Braverman (1980) defines it, "digital display of the audio message in words" (p. 1). Parlato (1985) offers a clearer definition: "A captioned film (or videotape) is one, produced for hearing audiences, that adds captions or subtitles to make its message clear to hearing-impaired viewers" (p. 17). Captioning exists in many forms.

Open captions appear superimposed over the picture on the screen, are visible to all viewers, and require no special equipment for viewing.

Closed captions are transmitted to the television receiver. The television signal on American television is made up of 525 lines, which includes both the picture and vertical blanking interval. This vertical blanking interval is the black bar which rolls up or down on the screen when the television set is not properly adjusted. The bar consists of twenty-one lines, and digital information that is input (or coded) onto one or more of these twenty-one lines can be transmitted to television receivers to be interpreted (or decoded) and displayed. In December 1971, the National Bureau of Standards showed that this technology could be used to provide captioning, and approximately one year later PBS began work to make the system a reality. The system developed used only the twenty-first line of the vertical blanking

interval and thus is known as the Line 21 System (Okrand, 1987, p. 265).

WGBH of Boston led the way in developing new technologies for closed captioning of television programs, and nationwide closed-captioning service began in 1980 on ABC, NBC, and PBS, with captioning produced by the newly founded National Captioning Institute. A closed captioned program is broadcast the same way any other program is broadcast, but when a decoder is attached to the receiving television, the decoder can "open up" the closed captioning, making it visible on the screen. Closed captioned programs that are recorded off air onto videotape will contain the hidden Line 21 captioning, which can then be made visible using a decoder (F. Kruppenbacher, personal communication, July 26, 1991).

Pre-recorded captions are used for programs on videotape. Captions are usually prepared before viewing time and made part of the tape. The captioner views and listens to a videotape of a program, prepares a transcript, edits the script into chunks of communication (at the same time editing out extraneous material), types the new script into a computer, and decides where and when the captions should appear on the screen. A "captioned" tape is created by playing the program on one machine, the captions on another, and integrating the two into a new tape that contains audio, video, and captions.

Real-time captioning is for live programs for which no script exists - press conferences, emergency news bulletins, and special events. Captions may be created as the event unfolds. These captions are typed into an electric stenotype machine, similar to those used in courtrooms. A computer reads the stenocaptioner's shorthand and translates the words into captions, which are then projected on the screen (National Captioning Institute, n.d.). As this captioning occurs "live" and relies on a vocabulary stored in the software of the computer, misspellings and errors can and do occur during transcription.

In instructional captioning, the language of educational videotapes is modified to the reading level of the intended audience. This may mean restructuring the language of the film in as straightforward a way as possible for individuals who may not have a comprehensive grasp of the English language (Panara & Schragle, 1984). Nonessential information is eliminated and vocabulary is often adapted to present a clearer meaning while retaining the continuity, style, and intent of the original program. Verlinde and Schragle (1986) have developed a comprehensive manual that describes one approach to restructuring language for deaf viewers. On average, a sixty-minute captioned program can require a combined team effort of twenty-five or more hours of work (R. Verlinde, personal communication, July 25, 1991). One consideration for the captioner is the experience in use of captions by the intended viewer who must process the information in the captions and watch the program picture at the same time (Areson, 1985).

## The Captioned Films/Videos Program

Public Law 85-905, "An act to provide in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare for a loan service of captioned films for the deaf," was approved by the President and the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare. It delegated to the Commissioner of Education the functions vested in him by P.L. 85-905 for the administration of the Captioned Films for the Deaf program. The purposes, as set forth in the law, are threefold.

- (1) to bring to deaf persons understanding and appreciation of those films which play an important part in the general and cultural advancement of hearing persons;
- (2) to provide, through these films, enriched educational and cultural experiences through which deaf persons can be brought into better touch with realities of their environment; and

- (3) to provide a wholesome and rewarding experience which deaf persons may share together.  
(Catalog of Captioned Feature and Special Interest Films..., 1991, p. v)

Under the provisions of P.L. 85-905, Captioned Films for the Deaf was authorized to

- (1) Acquire films (or rights thereto) by purchase, lease, or gift.
- (2) Provide for the captioning of films.
- (3) Provide for distribution of captioned films through State schools for the deaf and such other agencies as the Secretary may deem appropriate to serve as local or regional centers for such distribution.
- (4) Make use, consistent with the purposes of this Act, of films made available to the Library of Congress under copyright laws.
- (5) Utilize the facilities and services of other governmental agencies.
- (6) Accept gifts, contributions and voluntary and uncompensated services of individuals and organizations." (Catalog of Captioned Feature and Special Interest Films..., 1991, p. v)

The Captioned Films/Videos for the Deaf program consists of two parts, captioned entertainment films (captioned feature and special interest films and videos) and captioned educational materials. Currently, funds for purchase, captioning, and administration of the program are provided by the Captioning and Adaptation Branch of the U.S. Department of Education, but the Captioned Films/Videos for the Deaf program is contracted to the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) and Modern Talking Picture Service (MTPS—Metropolitan Toronto Police Service) in St. Petersburg, Florida. The NAD selects and captions educational videos; MTPS distributes educational and theatrical films and videos. An organizational chart of this arrangement is presented below (adapted from Catalog of Captioned Educational Materials, 1991, p. ii):

Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services  
Robert Davila, Ph.D.  
Assistant Secretary for Special Education and Rehabilitative Services

Office of Special Education Programs  
Judith Schrag, Ph.D.  
Director

Division of Educational Service  
Nancy Safer, Ph.D.  
Director

Captioning and Adaptation Branch  
Ernest Hairston  
Chief

Modern Talking Picture Service, Inc.  
Donald A. Zink  
Captioned Films/Videos Project Director

## Feature Films

Captioned films are generally not available for deaf audiences until long after they have been available to hearing audiences. This occurs because purchase or lease of theatrical films by the U.S. Department of Education and captioning of these materials is such a lengthy process. There can be a lag of many months between the time a feature film first appears in movie theaters around the country and the time that it is available for loan through Captioned Films/Videos for the Deaf. Some movies, of course, will never be made available through Captioned Films/Videos for the Deaf - because the producer will not agree to captioning, the leasing/purchase costs are too high, or a number of other reasons.

All requests for loan of feature films should be directed to the St. Petersburg office although films are actually housed and distributed from Chicago. Because of commercial restrictions on certain types of films, captioned feature films are restricted to use by deaf persons, and only groups that include three or more deaf persons may qualify to receive free loans. Borrowers must establish an account with Modern Talking Picture Service before being eligible to borrow captioned feature films. No fee is involved in establishing an account. Captioned Films/Videos for the Deaf has an extensive catalog of currently available 16mm films and videos (Catalog of Captioned Feature and Special Interest Films and Videos for the Hearing Impaired, 1991), which includes all information necessary for ordering these free-loan films and videos. Copies of the catalog are available by calling Modern Talking Picture Service, 1-800-237-6213 (voice/TDD).

Producers are beginning to recognize the potential market for close-captioned videos of newly released movies. In addition to members of the deaf community, people who are hard of hearing and people for whom English is a second language can benefit from the use of captioned feature movies and special interest programs. The visual display of English words together with the spoken words also can reinforce reading skills for children and adult learners. Close-captioned videos are identified by a "CC" logo on the video box; to use a close-captioned video, currently users must own a separate decoder to open up the captions. However, the "Decoder Circuitry Act of 1990" mandates that by July 1, 1993 all televisions sold in the United States with a screen 13" or larger must contain a decoder chip; the decoder chip bypasses the need for a separate decoder and allows users to use a regular VCR and TV monitor to disclose closed captions on the screen. This new technology will greatly increase the demand for close-captioned media.

## Educational Films

Under Public Law 87-715 in the 1960s, the Captioned Films/Videos for the Deaf program was expanded to include acquisition, adaptation, production, and distribution of captioned films, and the training of staff. Workshops and institutes were held annually around the country to introduce and train teachers in the use of media and other instructional materials. In 1962, only one of the 300 schools registered with the program employed a person knowledgeable in the use of media. By 1969, more than 700 schools had at least one person on staff who was familiar with instructional media, and by 1974 more than 15,000 teachers of deaf students had received some kind of training in its use (Gannon, 1981, p. 269).

Until October 1991, media judges from twenty-five of the nation's schools for the deaf convened annually to select the few productions of the thousands of educational videos available in the marketplace which were suitable for captioning and distribution to deaf children (Parlato, 1977). Captioned Films/Videos for the Deaf stopped purchasing new 16mm films for the depositories because of the massive movement toward the videocassette format in recent years (D. Zink, personal

communication, August 1, 1991). Before a video was even subjected to scrutiny at one of these judging sessions, it had to be directly or indirectly endorsed by other educators of deaf students for its suitability in deaf education. The educator-judges, all highly respected master teachers of deaf children, looked for materials which would complete the instructional curriculum from pre-school through adult education; major considerations and criteria in the selection process are outlined by Parlato (1977). Based on these "Validation Workshops," the Captioned Films/Videos for

the Deaf program coordinator submitted purchase recommendations to the Captioning and Adaptation Branch of the U.S. Department of Education. Orders are then placed with the media producers for purchase of approximately 100 titles, which were captioned and deposited in the regional libraries for circulation to schools for the deaf and other eligible audiences without charge.

Adaptation of videos for the Captioned Films/Videos for the Deaf Program included creation of teachers' lesson guides, written by thirty master teachers at a national workshop each summer. The lesson guides, prepared for each title, provided teachers with objectives, activities, and reproducible teaching graphics, enabling them to address the needs of deaf learners. At the annual captioning writing workshop, educators of deaf persons who were particularly strong in language adaptation prepared caption scripts for each video.

In October 1991, however, the National Association of the Deaf was awarded a three-year contract for video selection and captioning of educational videos by the U.S. Department of Education. Distribution is, as before, under contract to MTPS. Working with staff from Gallaudet University, a project director in South Carolina, and using the services of the National Captioning Institute (NCI), NAD proposes to screen and caption educational videos in a shorter time frame than was possible through the annual video judging-validating-captioning workshops (Stark, 1991, p. 2). This might imply verbatim captioning of educational videos in the future rather than caption writing with language adaptation for deaf children; during this contract period, educators will be carefully monitoring the quality of captioning from NAD-NCI to determine how the captions meet the educational needs of deaf schoolchildren.

Educators with at least one hearing-impaired learner in their classes, or professionals in the field of deafness, can request bookings for any of the educational captioned titles (videos and 16mm films) through their regional depository library (see Appendix for a list of these depository libraries). Captioned productions cover all levels of instruction between preschool and adult education, encompassing all major areas of the curriculum, and come with teachers' lesson guides that summarize the content of the films or videos, highlight vocabulary, and suggest classroom follow-up activities (Parlato, 1985). However, although each regional depository library currently has approximately 2,000 titles in its collection, this represents only about 10 percent of the teaching media on the market available to hearing students (Parlato, 1977; D. Zink, personal communication, August 1, 1991).

## Beyond Captioned Films/Videos

While Captioned Films/Videos for the Deaf has been the primary source of captioned materials (both educational and entertainment) for some years now, today hearing-impaired people and library media specialists can select from a number of open-captioned productions available from several producers. Parlato (1986), suggests many additional sources for captioned or nonverbal media. Some of these sources are nonprofit organizations that offer their productions at low or no cost. Others provide media for purchase or rental. It is best to contact each source for its catalog and for additional information.

In addition, Esteves (1982a) suggests that library media specialists should consider collecting or borrowing captioned foreign films and silent classics. Such films or videos, made available either through home loan or through programs at the library, provide entertainment both for general and hearing-impaired users.

## Implications for Librarians

Public librarians who are attuned to the needs of the handicapped community, and school librarians who are involved with integrating the exceptional person into regular classroom programs, must be aware of the special requirements of the approximately 10 percent of the American population who are deaf or hard of hearing and for whom oral communication is particularly difficult (Esteves, 1982b). For the 1 to 3 percent who are profoundly and pre-vocally deaf (deafened before the age of 19), reading is also often an insurmountable challenge because it involves interpreting symbols of speech (Esteves, 1982a). Furthermore, as the American "baby boom" generation ages, and health services increase the life span of adults, librarians will also be called upon to serve an older and larger deaf or hearing-impaired population. These hard-of-hearing or late-deafened adults will have increased needs for captioned entertainment films and videos, and, as many look to career changes or adult education, increased needs for more captioned educational films or videos as well.

A third "special population" group that could be well served by access to captioned feature and educational materials are those who are learning English as a second language, young children who are learning to read and write, and functionally illiterate adults. In 1978, Parlato emphasized the significance of libraries acting as agents for programming, scheduling, and screening captioned presentations. While this has not happened, librarians should consider acquiring close-captioned versions of videos, when available, and consider promoting these materials actively in their areas. Modern Talking Picture Service, for example, has promotional materials which are available to libraries. Also, libraries that have "storyhour" or film sessions for children should consider incorporating captioned or nonverbal films as part of this program - thus making available to hearing and hearing-impaired children alike the information or stories.

Librarians also should be aware of the need to "advertise" their close-captioned holdings. If a video is close captioned, this information should be indicated on the video itself, the video box, and in the library's catalog to assist users in locating these special materials. Decoders should be available in all media or audiovisual centers for previewing by deaf patrons, and, when new television equipment is considered for purchase, librarians should examine television monitors with decoder chips.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 served as the first step in breaking down the barriers that kept people with disabilities out of the American mainstream (In the Mainstream, 1990, p. 6). The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 goes a step further in providing that "no individual shall be discriminated against on the basis of disability in the full and equal enjoyment of the goods, services, facilities, privileges, advantages and accommodations of all programs, activities or services of state or local governments, regardless of the receipt of Federal financial assistance." The spirit of this new law empowers librarians and libraries to reach out to the hearing-impaired and deaf segment of the population through alternative means - one of which is the use of captioned media to entertain and to teach.



## Conclusion

Approximately 10 percent of the American population is deaf or hard of hearing. For these individuals, access to entertainment films that the general American public enjoys, or to the wide range of educational films and videos available to hearing students, is severely limited. The Captioned Films/Videos for the Deaf program and other providers of captioned films and videos seek to address these limitations by providing loan and sales of captioned entertainment and educational films and videos to groups of deaf persons. Public and school librarians who work with deaf people can act as facilitators in providing access to captioned films and videos.

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