

Last week, Capital Captions co-owner, Jodene Antoniou, had a great conversation with Larry Mantle of AirTalk in California about closed captioning services and the subtitling industry. Topics covered included automated captions, the use of subtitles for Generation Z and some of the technical elements of what goes into working for a closed captioning company. For anyone and everyone that missed it, here's our full transcript of our chat...

Larry Mantle: It's AirTalk on LAist 89.3. Younger Americans are really into subtitles and captions, much more so than previous generations. Millennials, GenZ leading the charge and the question is why. I mean, one of them is obvious – they are watching a lot of international productions so unless you know the language that's being spoken onscreen, you need to have subtitles to follow along, or dubbing. Dubbing is not as popular in the US as it is in some other countries where that is typical for how people consume international fair.

But there's subtitling, of course, and even captioning of things that are in English, but still, people like having the captioning along the bottom of the screen.

To talk with us about it is Jodene Antoniou, who is Owner of Capital Captions, a UK based company specialising in subtitling, closed captioning and transcriptions.

Jodene, thank you very much, it's good have you with us.

Jodene Antoniou: Yeah, thanks for having me and good morning over there.

Larry Mantle: Yeah, we appreciate it. It's about 10:42, here in Southern California. So, share with us about this growth in both subtitling which again, is translated, written on the screen, and captioning which is just putting in writing what's being spoken same language onscreen.

Why are we seeing such a growth?

Jodene Antoniou: Well, especially for younger people, I would say what's precipitated it really is watching videos remotely. So, tablets and phones that people will go on the train or they're sitting as a passenger in a boring car journey, or they're even just sitting in the living room, somebody else is watching TV and they're watching their phone. And obviously, you'll keep the sound off to not disturb other people and the best way to still engage with the video content is to use subtitles.

Larry Mantle: And have subtitles evolved in the way that they're displayed? I mean, in recent years, you can typically with a streaming service, select from out of many colours. Some people, I kind of like the yellow, optic to yellow. Others would prefer the white or other colours. There are also all kinds of different fonts that can now be used. How much has that changed over the years?

Jodene Antoniou: Well, that's hugely different. I mean, you can tell the difference in how subtitles are formatted since years ago. If you even just put on an episode of Friends on Netflix and in the past, you would get all capital letters for the captions and the captions would be very short and there wouldn't be as many words allowed per shot, sort of thing, for each sentence.

So yeah, captions are really written in a way now that makes sure that it's not only easy for the reader to read the captions but it's also nicer to view and using colours instead of always just placement of captions moving to the left of the screen if the speaker is on the left or the right for you know, another speaker.

So yeah, it's a nice way to jazz it up.

Larry Mantle: Now, with your company, Capital Captions, are you largely using freelancers who do this work at home or do you keep this in-house and do it with a full time permanent staff?

Jodene Antoniou: We have some permanent staff, but a lot of, especially our translation work, is done remotely. Obviously, that's quite good for time differences and when there's quick turnaround times for captions being needed, you know.

If you've got a live event and you want to put it online, you don't want to be waiting very long for those captions to be translated so we use translators from around the world really which is nice that people get to work from home and live where they want to live, and have access the work as well.

And it keeps the quality high and it means that you can share out the work in a way that nobody is having to work in the middle of the night and be exhausted either. So it just works perfectly for everyone really.

Larry Mantle: And how closely do you work with the production companies on this? I'm thinking if there's a translation, there might be some questions about the specifics of a translation or how you characterise musical interludes. Is that the sort of thing where you'll often be consulting with the client or do you typically make all of these decisions and they're accepted by your clients?

Jodene Antoniou: So, it is quite a collaborative process. Often, we will receive a script so we'll get the shooting script and then we'll make captions based on that. If it's translation, sometimes we get some questions on that but translation tends to be done by the translator and then it gets QC'd by a second translator.

But where it's really interesting is on writing closed captions for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing because we will often write in descriptions of what the sound is, and we try and use the script to get the general tone of if there's suspenseful music or anything like that. And sometimes our clients will specifically want to use words to describe what's going on in the sound because it can make a big difference. You know, music especially in films, really creates a big chunk of the atmosphere and if you describe it wrong then it'll really have an impact on the difference between a Deaf or Hard of Hearing viewer's experience of that film and everyone else's.

So it's quite artistic really, some of the description and it's important to get it right.

Larry Mantle: Yeah, so true. We're talking with Jodene Antoniou who is Owner of Capital Captions, a company specialising in subtitling, closed captioning and transcription.

If you have questions for her about how this is done, you can give us a call at 8668935722 or email us at ATComments@LAist.com. Please include your location and your first name.

Now, much of this work would seem to be adaptable to artificial intelligence and I know with live captioning, for example, that some of that goes on. It's not necessarily a human typing ultrafast, covering a news event or a sports event, for example.

But is AI making its way at all in descriptive programming?

Jodene Antoniou: AI is there, that really the problem with AI and the reason that we don't emphasise the use of AI and we trust in human subtitles and professionals to work on captions is because all too often, AI will transcribe everything that is said, word for word. And it's important with captions that you allow time for viewers to actually be able to read what's said and if you listen to the way people speak, they'll put in a lot of filler words like, 'Kind of, sort of, you know,' and all of that gets thrown in with AI and it can't make an intelligent decision on when is best to remove that and when is best to leave it in.

So the writing process to us is really what makes the best quality captions and you know, AI can't really describe how a sound makes you feel. And most of the description of things like music, it's not to describe the instrument that plays the music, it's the feeling that you get from the music and AI can't do that. So yeah, we always trust in people ourselves, but the voice recognition side of it is improving but it really needs a human writer to make proper decisions on grammar and you know, the way things are said.

Larry Mantle: And as we see, those of us that have captions on when we watch live programming, you see the high rate of mistakes and words that are misinterpreted. It's pretty common.

Tim emailed us, 'As the father of three millennials, captions use is probably due to this generation's large consumption of anime. They prefer to watch the programmes in their original Japanese dialogue but then watch the subtitles to understand what's being said.' That's Tim.

We'll continue our conversation, we have a second guest on the topic of subtitles and captioning, and why they are so popular, particularly among younger viewers. We're at 866935722. We'll be back in one minute.

[AD BREAK]

Larry Mantle: Right now, we're talking about subtitles and captioning of the productions we see on streaming services and on television networks, and the popularity of those, how it's grown and the business of that with so many more productions that are made every year, has commensurately grown as well.

Joining us from Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, a Professor there at the Private Graduate School, Max Troyer. He teaches a

subtitling for streaming course that gives video producers the basics on how to create subtitles. Professor Troyer, thank you for joining us.

Max Troyer: Well, thanks for inviting me.

Larry Mantle: What are a few of the things that are central to the course that you teach, to helping people understand the nuances and the challenges of subtitling?

Max Troyer: Well, I think one misconception that I'd like to start with is just the fact that often, the subtitles or captions are not a direct transcription of the dialogue that is being said onscreen. This is something that people often complain about, "Oh, I can tell that the subtitles are different." And this is by the fact that people cannot read as fast as they can understand someone talk, so we have to basically simplify the dialogue so that it can be understandable in the time that they have to read on the screen.

Larry Mantle: Interesting, I didn't realise that. So that's why people feel like they're missing something. So that's an artistic call in many cases. How do you help producers make that call?

Max Troyer: Well, it's something that I cover in my course, how to train the subtitlers; it's not something that you can take someone off the street and just do subtitling. You have to learn all the best practices for how to take dialogue and transform it into a subtitle. There's obviously transcription involved in that, converting the dialogue to written text and then doing what is called 'spotting', which is taking that dialogue and placing it on the timeline, chunking it up into the individual subtitles and simplifying the text as necessary to comply with the studio's reading speed requirements.

Larry Mantle: And share with us with live captioning, where we're watching a news or sports event, a news conference, an awards show where it's not scripted, it's happening live; how is that done?

Max Troyer: Well, in many cases, live broadcasts are fully scripted. News programmes are scripted and even if you look at the Emmys and the Oscars, a lot of the content is scripted and the subtitlers have access to that. There is definitely live content though, and the captioners who do that live captioning are actually more closely related to courtroom stenographers who are using those specialised keyboards to quickly type what appears onscreen. And that's when those errors are introduced because they are literally flying by the seat of their pants and trying to keep up with the dialogue.

And you will notice sometimes when you're seeing the stenographer type captioning, that it's delayed by a couple of seconds or even an entire sentence behind.

Larry Mantle: And also, speaking of that issue of pace, I know that with the subtitle, you're trying to make it match with what's being said onscreen. You don't necessarily want readers to get to the punchline before it's being said by the person onscreen. The timing is important. So in the work that you do with your course, how do you help producers understand how to time out, the ways that the

subtitles are displayed, and also make that work with the reading rate of the typical viewer?

Max Troyer: It's a really good question, and in my course, I focus on the Netflix Subtitling Guidelines. They are published and they are really well written and easy to understand. And Netflix recommend that the subtitles follow the rhythm of the video and there is definitely an art to that.

And when you are chaining multiple subtitles together, it's up to the subtitler to decide where to split sentences that keep logical ideas together, that don't split up names on multiple lines, keep adjectives with nouns, things like that.

Because as you know, most subtitles are limited to one or two lines; we never go onto three lines. And they are almost always at the bottom of the screen, which is called the lower third part of the screen, except if there is an onscreen title or something like that, then the subtitle is allowed to move to the top of the screen temporarily.

Larry Mantle: We're talking with Max Troyer, who is Professor at Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey. It's a Graduate School and he teaches a Subtitling for Streaming course there. Sophia in Highland Park says, 'How do you transcribe someone with a thick accent who may be hard to understand? How do you know that you're being accurate?' Max?

Max Troyer: That's a really good question and most of the transcription is now done using AI. AI has gotten good enough to handle most dialogue, but I do agree with Jodene, a human definitely needs to intervene and whip that dialogue into shape for subtitling purposes. But any time there is a super thick accent, there needs to be a human in the loop and even possibly, entirely handing the process over to a human who can understand that speaker.

Larry Mantle: Janet in Culver City emailed, 'I was recently on a plane, watching the movie, Game Night. Closed captioning was on and when the actors swore, the swear words were replaced audibly with non-swear words,' so in other words, they were dubbed with non-swear words. 'But the closed captions still had the actual swear word spelled out. It sort of defeats the point, doesn't it?'

Max, have you ever seen that happening?

Max Troyer: No, but I do know that the airline industry has special requirements for any movies that appear on an aeroplane and I'm not familiar with that specific case where the subtitles had the swear words and the dubbing had that replaced, but there's obviously a disconnect because probably, the subtitles should have been edited as well, in my opinion.

Larry Mantle: And I want to go back to our guest we were talking with earlier from Capital Captions, Jodene Antoniou. Jodene, just before we go, clearly, this has benefits for kids learning to read, doesn't it, to closed caption and subtitle even children's programming?

Jodene Antoniou: Yeah, I mean when you watch subtitles, it just generally increases the amount of focus that you have on the content that you're watching. I've had conversations before, I have a son who is ten years old and he actually wears hearing aids so

he always uses the subtitles anyway, but we found out recently, most of the children that he goes to school with also watch subtitles.

And some of them watch shows like Friends or other sitcoms that are probably a bit older, that I remember when I was younger, I would get away with watching but they're asking quite uncomfortable questions to their parents.

Larry Mantle:

And no one would hear it play. Thank you so much, Max and Jodene. I appreciate it. Have a terrific rest of your day from all of us at AirTalk. I'll be back with you tomorrow at nine.