

FOREWORD

Ernest E. Hairston

Why should a book on captioned films for deaf people be written? Why is it important that the story be told? Captioned movies shown in theaters nationwide and captioned television programs are now taken for granted. Originally, captioned films were produced in order that deaf and hard of hearing viewers could understand what was spoken on the screen instead of guessing or imagining what was being said. In fact, captions have always benefited a larger and varied audience, especially people learning English as a second language and patrons of noisy places such as bars and restaurants. But captions have empowered deaf and hard of hearing people. Access has led to increased success. And as Harry Lang has shown in his history of the TTY (*A Phone of Our Own*), many of the advances in both telephone technology and captioned films involved deaf people. As described in both books, deaf people should take pride in the roles they played in these technological advances.

Having lived through much of the early stages of the evolution of both telephony and captioning, I gave little thought to how important history is to education until I read Harry's books. New generations of deaf people have available a variety of captioning technology and other telecommunication devices available to them in their youth. Reading about how hard the previous generations worked to gain access to leisure time entertainment may provide them with the motivation to continue the legacy. Those who know this history may be inspired to enrich it further.

For older deaf people like me, who learned to enjoy and depend on captioned movies and captioned television the hard way, one small breakthrough at a time, we know well what it was like. But there are surprises for us, too, in this book. Many readers may not realize the extent to which the captioning movement spawned the rapid rise of visual media as valuable resources in the classroom. Even the deaf and

hearing pioneers we personally knew were often too modest to share the many challenges they faced—the resistance of Hollywood studios to support open captions in theaters, the attitudes of people about captions being “distracting,” and the months-long wait for a captioned film to become available are just a few examples.

What began as a small program called the Captioned Films for the Deaf to distribute 16 mm films to schools and the Deaf community has blossomed into a modern multimedia resource program that enriches educational environments, utilizing online streaming of films, YouTube, Facebook, and a website accessible anytime and anywhere.

Harry Lang has documented many aspects of Deaf history and Deaf studies in his various writings, and I am pleased that he has undertaken this challenge of describing the complex history of captioning as it pertains to films and television.

After more than forty years of federal service, all with the Department of Education (formerly the Office of Education within the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare), I often reminisce about my own role in implementing policies that helped bring access to myself and thousands of other deaf and hard of hearing people. I often have wondered if a book documenting the evolution of captioning and the roles of key players would ever be written while memory is fresh and readily available. Even though I managed the Captioned Media Program, as well as personnel preparation (teacher training) projects, research grants, and the National Theatre of the Deaf grant, I seldom thought about how the captioned films story was unfolding. This is it!

This book is thoroughly researched and will be a welcome addition to the growing collection of histories of the roles deaf and hearing people have shared together in applying technological breakthroughs to improve the quality of our lives.

AFTERWORD

Jason Stark

Thomas A. Edison, credited by Dr. Harry Lang in this book as developing the motion picture, challenged his staff with this slogan: “There’s a way to do it better—find it.”¹ In the chapters that followed, Harry has also documented the remarkable achievements of numerous individuals who followed the same mantra and found better ways to provide equal access to films and videos for deaf persons.

This has been the guiding principle of what is now known as the Described and Captioned Media Program (DCMP)—revolutionizing techniques for the development of captioned and described educational media, and for its delivery. This book articulates the modest start of Captioned Films for the Deaf, Inc. in Hartford, Connecticut with about thirty 16 mm films. Then, after several reorganizations and name changes, it leads us on the exciting adventure of the DCMP that has evolved into a highly successful federally funded project serving 124,000 members with a collection of over 8,000 accessible educational film titles (including 886 titles in Spanish). The most modern technologies have brought the project to this point, with over 95 percent of all DCMP user transactions being streamed media. There is now virtually no limit to the number of users who can utilize accessible educational media from the project.

Since 1991, seeking ways to “do it better” has resulted in a remarkable number of innovative accomplishments for the project, as documented in this book, and these include, to name a few: (1) the first-ever accessibility guidelines for both educational captioning and description (for blind and visually impaired students); (2) the first-ever streamed captioned (and later described) educational media; and (3) the first-ever fully accessible bilingual (English and Spanish) educational media.

An innovative spirit clearly was also possessed by many of the program pioneers, including Dr. Malcolm Norwood, who was a huge admirer of Edison. I suspect Mac knew the following words were uttered by the inventor to a beginning staffer who inquired about

research laboratory rules: “Hell there are no rules here. We are trying to accomplish something.”²

For it was in 1980 at a national conference on captioning held at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf that Mac reminded the audience how in the beginning there had been very little research done on the effectiveness of captioning as a means of providing verbal information to deaf persons. There were no specific rules or guidelines, and it was simply assumed that captions would be a valid alternative to the soundtrack. Mac smilingly referred to how, similar to Edison, he and others learned to “fly by the seat of your pants.”³ But, he indicated that everything done was based on what they knew the kids could do (later research proved the approaches to be correct). Mac noted also that Confucius once said: “The Cautious seldom err.” When rules don’t exist, dedicated, knowledgeable, and cautious experts have to create them.⁴

In asking me to write this afterword, Harry, in effect, requested that I develop the outline for my own “dream book,” similar to the one developed by John Gough in 1960 and briefly described elsewhere in this book. Over a half century ago Gough correctly predicted that a much broader media service would supersede CFD.⁵

Similarly, I predict that DCMP will continue to play a critical role, along with other organizations, in leading the country’s efforts in accessible media research and development. I am confident in this prediction as long as the government continues its long-held approach of generally selecting nonprofit sector entities (e.g., NAD, CEASD, AED, NFB) to provide leadership and administration for the project. The US Department of Education’s commitment to teaching and learning, and to nonprofit (consumer) knowledge of the needs of people with disabilities, will have an impact beyond current specific project objectives. Future leaders must, and will, develop new rules and guidelines for access when they don’t exist.

I’ve witnessed three major media format shifts during my career: 16 mm to VHS, VHS to DVD, and DVD to streaming. Each of these introduced a new era requiring that the project transition to the newer methods of generating media access. Of course, new technologies will continue to be invented, and I predict that DCMP will continue to be wildly innovative in its development of technology to increase sensory impaired access. For example, virtual, mixed, and augmented reality

(sometimes referred to as XR, X reality, or cross reality) content and 360-degree videos are finding their way into classrooms and will need to be made accessible.

In addition, DCMP will remain on the forefront in the utilization and development of technology to produce accessibility more efficiently. Text-to-speech engines are improving and their use to provide descriptions will become a more user-accepted alternative to the currently preferred human-recorded dialogue tracks. Also, automatic speech recognition coupled with machine learning techniques will continue to improve and be a viable tool to generating high-quality captions.

Until educational content creators see the market demand for producing media with descriptions, it simply will not happen. As such, I believe the DCMP should continue as the leading source of free, fully accessible educational media for the foreseeable future. The activities of content distribution are important and the project will continue to adapt new platforms as they are invented (such as the Roku and AppleTV channels). Further, DCMP will remain committed to following new trends in educational media such as short-form content on platforms like YouTube. In 2019, DCMP reached 2 million total views on its YouTube channel.

And, as my father, Bill Stark, once said during a newspaper interview about the impact of technology, we will continue to develop the internet so that one day it will be as friendly to deaf and hard of hearing people as TV is now.⁶

In addition to being the premier source of fully accessible media, DCMP has had a long history of providing extraordinary assistance to teachers in the classroom (and to families) in how to use media to improve results for students with disabilities. This work began decades ago with the generation of lesson guides and most recently includes the correlation of the media to state and national curriculum standards. Future innovations will build on the student account feature and allow for the creation of interactive lessons. These lessons can include videos, clips, and questions, and reinforce educational content by requiring the student to rewatch content if questions are not answered correctly.

Additional items in my “dream book” involve DCMP being a tool to support interactive approaches to learning. It is true that learning is a function of interaction, but video platforms present teachers with the

chance to increase engagement of students and script levels of interactivity previously unavailable.

My first dream is drawn from Dr. Lang's own research with his colleagues at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, called "Structured Online Academic Reading," in which students could click on terms in the online text and get definitions, explanations, in sign or text, photos, or links for further reading on the web. Using DCMP's existing interactive transcript feature, links to additional content could easily be added. These could be resources curated by DCMP's educational staff, or perhaps be added by a teacher or parent for use in the classroom or home environments.

Students sharing ideas by developing lessons of their own can make the dream of using technology to boost students' communication skills a reality. When students take ownership of their own learning they become more engaged. DCMP could provide existing clips, playlists, and content creation tools to allow students to create lessons and/or projects and connect with other classes, either in the same school or different schools.

Teachers will have greater flexibility with teaching methods, as lessons are created that consist of mixed media, gamified elements, videos, video clips, and more. Old and new resources can be combined into unique lessons plans that meet the special needs of the deaf and blind population. DCMP's upcoming lesson builder tool focuses entirely on DCMP content. With the proliferation of educational content available from other sources, DCMP could allow teachers to build interactive lessons, including self-created videos (assuming they are accessible), graphics, content slides, and other external resources.

As was written over a decade ago in a historical overview of the project posted on the DCMP website: ". . . the story of captioning does not end at this point, because it is still being written by advocates."⁷ This remains true today and certainly applies to description as well. Description for those who are blind and visually impaired is a relatively new field, and I cannot wait for breakthroughs that will occur over the next decades. There will be many new advocates, including men and women who benefited by learning through captions and descriptions, who will find ways to "do it better" and write new chapters in this fascinating story of access.