

8th December 2014

**Submission to Senate committee regarding Broadcasting and Other
Legislation Amendment (Deregulation) Bill 2104**

I am writing this submission to voice my concern over the government's proposed changes to the current captioning requirements. It is easy to see that watering down the current requirements will result in poorer quality of captioning, and possibly fewer captioned programs.

I have an acquired hearing loss that makes it hard for me to hear and understand speech in many environments. I have a cochlear implant which is an enormous help in certain situations, but in order to watch television (and other media), I am totally reliant on captions.

The fundamental problem with these legislation changes, as I understand it, is that if television companies are no longer required to report on their compliance with the captioning regulations, then there is less incentive for them to do the right thing. This puts the onus on the consumer to complain, which is not only unfair, but also unworkable.

Imagine that you are hearing impaired, if you will – you are looking forward to an evening watching television, in particular some interesting looking programs. Then it turns out that something is not captioned, or maybe the captions are out of sync, or they just don't make sense – what are you meant to do? Ring up the TV station to complain, and go through all the usual difficulties that trying to hear on the phone brings up? Plus being put on hold because there are others waiting to complain too. Already the evening is spoiled. Or perhaps those with computer and internet access could further disturb their evening by sending an email of complaint. Of course in order to complain, notes will need to be made of the name of the program, time and date; and furthermore there is no guarantee that the TV station will take any notice of your complaint. It's hardly worth the bother. Easier to switch to another channel to find a captioned program or, failing that, turn the TV off and read a book. And feel angry that your hearing impairment has resulted, once more, in being excluded from "normal" social activity and involvement. This, to me, amounts to discrimination.

For myself as a hearing impaired person I already suffer from social exclusion. I can't go the movies (unless it's a foreign language film with sub-titles, or a rare captioned movie). I don't go to the theatre – it's too hard to understand what the actors are saying. And I tend to avoid social gatherings or even meals with friends, due to the impossibility of hearing conversation in a crowd of people, and with background noise drowning out speech. So many "normal" activities are extremely difficult, and therefore watching television at home becomes quite important in helping me feel that I'm part of the outside world.

Why has there been no consumer consultation? Why have the proposed changes been drafted only from the perspective of the television industry? With an estimated one in six Australians having some sort of deafness or hearing impairment, the number of people needing captions on television (and internet streaming, movies, and other media) is not insignificant. It is not a minority "splinter group" that will be affected. And if one in six Australians are forced to turn off their TVs, how will that affect ratings? I wonder if the television industry has thought of this.

I have welcomed captioning since it was introduced into Australia some years ago, and have applauded the increase of captioned programs over the years. However, I still find it frustrating, for example, to watch trailers for upcoming programs and not be able to understand them, as they are not captioned. Or to miss a program in a series – go to watch it on the computer later on and find it is not captioned. Or to switch off the TV when a favourite program has the captions so seriously out of sync that it is impossible to make sense of it.

I believe we need to be working towards 100% captioning as soon as possible – on all platforms. But if the proposed changes go ahead, we will surely be going backwards. This will further disadvantage an already disadvantaged group of people.

I beg you not to pass this new bill.

Thank you for reading my submission.