

Manager
Media Diversity Section
Australian Communications and Media Authority



By email: captioning@acma.gov.au

7 December 2023

Dear Sir/Madam

Draft captioning quality guidelines

The Special Broadcasting Service (**SBS**) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Draft Broadcasting Services (Television Captioning) Standard 2023 – Captioning quality guidelines (**'the guidelines'**).

Background

SBS takes extremely seriously the need to ensure its services are accessible, and that those accessibility features are of the highest possible quality. With this in mind, SBS recently provided a submission to the ACMA's Consultation Paper *Proposal to remake the Broadcasting Services (Television Captioning) Standard 2023*.

In that submission, we noted the very strong supportive feedback gathered by the ACMA from caption users about the quality of SBS and other free-to-air broadcasters' captioning services, the very low level of complaint received by SBS regarding captioning quality, and SBS's strong compliance record, and submitted that this provided scope to consider changes to the way quality is assessed.

In particular, SBS noted the importance of observing a balance between appropriately upholding captioning standards on television, while acknowledging that a significant proportion of captioned content is now consumed on non-broadcast digital services which are not covered by the rules. SBS was in favour of changes to ensure that the rules do not constrain broadcasters from innovating (including potentially in alignment with digital services) where that innovation is of benefit to audiences.

Whilst SBS was therefore disappointed that the ACMA's response to the review of the quality standard was to remake the standard without changes, we welcome the release of the draft guidelines as an opportunity to further understand the ACMA's approach to enforcement.

The draft guidelines

The guidelines as drafted will be a welcome addition to broadcasters' and captioning service providers' understanding of ACMA's approach to assessing compliance with key quality concepts. Industry was previously reliant on collating relevant guidance from separate investigation reports for such guidance, and there is benefit in having this information centrally available.

In terms of the specific guidance provided, SBS notes its continuing concerns with the approach to 'distinct program segments', a matter on which SBS provided submissions during the recent review of the quality standard. SBS does not view this approach as aligning with the experience of the 'ordinary reasonable viewer'. Instead of artificially dividing a program, SBS maintains its view that the ACMA should assess a program in its entirety, and that this should be reflected in the guidelines.

SBS does, however, welcome the draft guidance regarding the comprehensibility of captions, and in particular, the guidance regarding identifying and distinguishing speakers. SBS has previously expressed concerns regarding the risk of non-compliance arising from methods of distinguishing speakers other than through change in the colour of the closed captions. The concern was that the only acceptable method of distinguishing speakers was through colour change, which had presented SBS with adverse risk considerations when deciding whether to pursue and adopt new captioning technologies (which denote a change in speaker through methods such as hyphens, chevrons or other punctuation marks).

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This was of significant concern to SBS, given these alternative methods of denoting different speakers are widely used in captions on other unregulated platforms or in captions supplied from overseas. We expressed concern that this may prevent the adoption of newer, more efficient methods of captioning, or the re-purposing of existing caption files supplied with overseas content (both of which would permit SBS to make its captioning budget 'go further', to the benefit of viewers).

We welcome and encourage the ACMA continuing to review its approach and guidance where newer methods of captioning are becoming prevalent on non-regulated platforms and are delivering a quality outcome that is accepted by viewers. Ongoing industry consultation as part of these reviews will remain important.

A focus on removing or minimising barriers to innovation will have direct benefits for caption users. As noted previously, the focus of feedback received by SBS in relation to captions is not in relation to a poor quality experience, but is instead focussed on the possibility of increasing the amount of captioning provided.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide comment on the guidelines, and for the ongoing consultation with industry regarding issues of captioning quality. If you have any queries or require further information, please contact me (clare.oneil@sbs.com.au).

Yours sincerely,

Clare O'Neil
Director, Corporate Affairs