

CART AND BROADCAST CAPTIONING: WHERE WE NEED TO GO

Mark Golden

MARK GOLDEN: I always have to start my presentations by explaining what the heck a 100-year-old organization of courtroom reporters has to say that you would be interested in. And that is the sum and substance of my presentation. I would like to explain why. And the basic answer is that court reporting is not just court reporting anymore. Over the last 20 years, technology and skills have developed in parallel to make it possible for the traditional court reporting skill of capturing the spoken word and translating it into text to enable us to do the same thing in real-time. That is, instantaneously take what I am saying through the combination of a skilled practitioner, and good software, and have text come up on a screen almost as quickly as I say them.

Now, that advent of real-time capacity created a whole new demand for skilled court reporters. This is true both in the traditional markets of capturing the record in a courtroom, as well as in taking depositions. And this has created whole new opportunities in the areas of captioning and CART. We've had a lot of help from the government in fueling the demand for services. Starting in 1990, the ADA, which created that right for accessibility, the 1990 decoder act started us down the roads of captioning. In 1996, the Telecommunications Act established deadlines so that by 2006, all television programming must be captioned, and in 1997, there were amendments To the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act expanded and clarified the rights that individual students had for access to education.

So we now have a great deal of demand, and we need professionals to provide it. But right now as I am sure most of you are aware the pool of captioners is a fraction of what is needed. We can barely meet today's standards. There are too few providers. You will never get rich being a CART provider, but you can earn a very comfortable living and it is rewarding work. People who are trained in it have a lot of opportunities to cross over and participate in many different areas. So you would think people would flock to this profession.

The public perception is different about court reporting and captioning and CART. A year ago TIME Magazine published an article on a list of obsolete professions, and described court reporting as a dying profession. So the net result is we have an increasing demand, but we don't have enough providers available and are not able to provide the services that you need and deserve. More seriously from the Association's perspective, we have seen far too few people entering training in this skill. It takes several years to produce a good CART and captioning reporter. So that is a significant issue and Problem.

I would like to describe things that we are doing and what you can do to assist us. We need to work to change the image of the profession so that it is recognized by the public and will attract top students. We are engaging in a lot of student recruitment. This is important, but we're also engaged in a significant project to completely to change how court reporters and captioners are educated. And we're making the efforts to make it easier for students to get into training, learn the skills and get out.

First of all we are repositioning the profession. In the past virtually all students trained court reporters, and then went into captioning. Well, today, and if we meet the needs of the future, we need to attract people who have no interest in court reporting, but want to provide cart. We need to see court reporting but as an information technology, and as a range of opportunities That includes the traditional judicial reporting area as well as CART, broadcast captioning, real-time captioning and internet captioning for the web. There is a program called Tech Prep, which is operated by the Department of Education. We are working with their help to go into the 10, 11 and 12th grade classes to offer classes to students that they can take to postsecondary education and get credit for it, and they get a head start. We're also engaged in a range of print and television advertising activities to promote the profession, such as TV

advertising, brochures to high school counselors and magazine articles, as well as participating in career days whenever we can. There is also a website that is organized specifically for someone interested in the profession as a career called bestfutures.com.

Now all of these are important and helpful, but one of our problems is not so much recruiting students, but ensuring that we can educate them and get them out quickly and so we're looking at reinventing how we train real-time reporters. We are reworking the education process to recognize specialties, so that someone who intends to go into broadcast captioning is trained specifically in the types of skills and knowledge that they need to be successful in that arena without burdening them with unnecessary knowledge in other areas. We need to rework the certification process. NCRA has been providing professional certification which is used in the traditional judicial setting for nearly half a century and while they are useful in telling you something about the skills of a provider, there are no specific certifications for CART or captioning. And we are taking efforts to change that.

I could go on for days about how we are reinventing education, but trust me, we are. But it is a very expensive proposition. So last year we began a very ambitious federal initiative. We were able to get a pilot grant of half a million dollars for the University of Mississippi for a captioner and CART reporter education program. This year we are in the final throes of working to support individual grants for each of the 18 schools that teach captioning skills. The money will be spent on recruiting students, curriculum development and redevelopment, infrastructure to equip schools with things like broadcast television studios where they can practice live or simulate the actual situation that captioners face, as well as scholarships.

And we are making sure that this momentum can be sustained as long as it takes to get the job done. So, simultaneously, we are working on a bill, it is HR 2527, which would make it possible to get funding for five years. We are hopeful that it will pass the house sometime in the next week to ten days and be taken up in the senate next year. It is pretty obvious what it means to you as consumers. It is really a long-term fix to provide for your needs well into the future. And we've had lots of support from deaf and hard of hearing Consumer organizations. I participate in a group called the Council of organizational REP Representatives. It is an informal coalition of deaf and hard of hearing consumer groups as well as professional and technical associations that share a common cause with you. And what members have told us, regularly, and repeatedly, they understand the justice and righteousness of our cause, but when I go around asking for money it can be difficult. What we have found helps the most and is most compelling and most credible is when people like you contact them to talk with them about how important this project is.

So, what can do you? We ask you to contact your legislators. If you go to our website, which is ncraOnline.org, you look for the button with Uncle Sam on it. It will describe all of this. We've even set up templates to make it easy for you to generate letters and write them.

I also want to talk about quality assurance issues. Most certified real-time writers write with an accuracy rate of 98% and higher, which is really very good. Some of the better ones write consistently at something closer to 99% and even a little above. But, that still leaves a 1% for silly or strange words to come up. So we cannot ever promise perfection, but we can and are doing a lot of work to ensure that the quality of service you get is good. We have in the past year to year and a half completed cart provider guidelines as part of our ethics and professional standards to make people understand what their obligations, if they put themselves forward as professionals, are. So, we have engaged in a large amount of effort to make providers understand that their primary ethical and professional opportunity is to ensure that the person sent to do a job is competent, prepared, for the job they have been sent to. Some meetings are easier to cart than others. You don't send even a good basic CART reporter to a highly technical scientific conference with a lot of foreign speakers. You have to send the right person for the right job. We are trying to emphasize that and make the profession understand the different demands of different situations.

We have some resources available to you as consumers as well to help you locate a cart provider and provide tips on the types of questions and things you want to work out with a CART reporter to Be sure

the job is performed well. As I mentioned, there are no specialty certifications for CART yet. There will be, but it is a slow and arduous process. We are in an 18-month project to do that. There are two places on-line that you can go to look for an individual CART provider. We provide what we call NCRA's professional service listing or PSL, which is an on-line database of our entire membership. There is also a voluntary organization called "cart wheel." It also provides a listing.

When you work with CART providers there are a few things to remember. Unfortunately, We are not to the stage yet where you don't have to ask specifically if the reporter has the equipment and the technical expertise to, for example, project on the screen. A lot of CART is provided on one on one basis in educational setting where you have a laptop computer next to the individual who is using the service. So be sure you describe your exact needs, and make sure they know and can demonstrate the technology to do it. Arrange all details of service in advance so there are no misunderstandings, such as: expectation that the text will be saved to a disc and provided to you? Is there an expectation that post service will be provided?

These are things to ask up front. Always get references. And if you have a provider that cannot or will not provide references, that probably means you should go down the list and find someone else. Also remember that CART providers need to do a certain amount of work up front. They need to know something about proper names. Are there any special technical terms likely to come up in the presentation so they can be prepared for it?

Often people who arrange or CART don't understand the service. We provided CART service for a very large technology conference for the courts. And they wanted to have the CART providers seated back stage behind the drapes. And we had to keep explaining to them that they couldn't do it from there.

Why do we sometimes have poor quality captioning? This is the one -- captioning is a major area of focus, and often so little of it is under the control of the captioning company. Lots of things happen that make the captions, which come up on the television gibberish. There is Potential Editing where they have shows and content that are designed for particular ages, children and young teenagers, they will edit the captioning so it is easier to read. So you will see a complete disconnect because it is being done intentionally. Non-verbatim captioning sources happens a lot on some local news stations. Some of them have met their bare bones requirement by broadcasting what is coming up on the teleprompter, without regard for changes that may have been made since the original script was written.

There are transmission and reception problems. Believe me, every captioner that ever suddenly saw the black band go gibberish and freeze is freaking out and more upset than you will ever be. That is because something happened to the technology at the broadcast studio that they can't control. And again sometimes you will have a captioner who is not qualified or whose skills not up to advance for a particular job.

Another thing we deal with is the headline news stations now where you have got two speakers, three charts, stock quotes, all of this stuff on the screen. I am a fully hearing Individual. I can't follow what is going on. Too much Information. And lots of time those will block out or interfere with captions. Broadcast industry is not currently fully committed or even aware of what they need to do to make it work.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Who, if anyone, is monitoring broadcast captions besides the captioner himself or herself?

MARK GOLDEN: Captioning is increasingly being provided remotely. So for example a program will be fed from wherever it is originating to a captioner somewhere. So the captioner is very aware of when something is happening to disrupt service or when there is a problem. In most cases, not all, but in virtually all, it will be the captioning company that has the contract to provide who is monitoring and following and will work with the broadcaster to correct a problem if it occurs.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: There have been times when I am watching a show that is normally captioned but is not done so. I to call the station and they tell me there is nobody in tech right now. What can we do about this?

MARK GOLDEN: This is why educating decision makers is so important. I have worked with a lot of people in the broadcast industry. They are all decent compassionate caring people. They don't just don't realize or understand how important these services are. So the real issue is to make sure they understand. And the reason it is so important is that it is these people very often, not the cart provider or the captioner, who control the decision of how access is made. They simply don't understand why they cannot just run what is on the teleprompter. We spend huge amounts of time fighting with schools about CART. They want to provide a note taker as opposed to full interpreter services. I am talking about professional educators and saying to them: "If you were teaching a Shakespeare course you wouldn't hand them the Cliff Notes." Because that is what they are trying to do. They are the people who stand in the way of getting the decisions you want. You want to find the network or production company, not the local If you are having a problem with the captioning on the Weakest Link, and it is shown on channel 4 in your area, calling local channel 4 is not going to get you help. You need to go back to where the programming originated. Who was responsible for providing it to the affiliate? You also want to work a lot with the public relations department. You don't need to be, and as a matter of fact I recommend against being belligerent or demanding, And often the public relations department will understand much more quickly than some programming exec the positives and negatives of service. It is all going to take time.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: How much clout does the public relations department have?

MARK GOLDEN: Often it has a whole lot because they are the same department that deals with advertisers. And if advertisers are hearing something negative about a lack of cooperation, a lack of sensitivity, potential consumers, it gets you a lot. On the CART side-- for universities or colleges there is often an office of access. They are unfortunately more likely to understand the need of a person with a mobility disability than with a hearing disability. But they are getting better. So look for the office of support services or disability services. If you are working to provide CART for a child, there is in each of the states an office for ADA. We have a list on our website as well.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Is it worth it to contact a company that may be funding captioning for a particular program?

MARK GOLDEN: Absolutely. If the program carries a notification that the caption is brought to you by they are providing a grant. They are providing money. They have no direct involvement to provide the service. If there is a named sponsor, you absolutely want to tell them. Contact both the station and the sponsor and say we appreciate your support. I want you to be aware of the problems and technical issues. There is also the FCC. What they need to do is build a substantial record because that's what is going to get a high level -- dealing with individual complaints is not going to change the world for them. If the FCC can build a record which shows there is a substantial and Persistent problem, which means collecting thousands of individual stories that's what is going to get things changed.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I am manager of corporate Development at WBGH. The advertisers who provide money are my clients. And yes, they need to hear that you appreciate that they provide the money to do this. It is very difficult to get that money for the most part. Because they have no obligation to provide it. Producers, networks, broadcasters have obligations but not the advertisers. They are doing it from the goodness of their heart. I am telling you, especially now after September 11th it is not easy to get corporate money, and it is better if before you go to the advertiser and complain to go to the captioning agency. We have a monitoring system and I am sure that other captioning agencies do as well. We will help you try to track down that problem. Most of the time it is not the captioning agency, it can be the broadcast, the transmission, your own cable company. I beg you to spare the advertisers unless it is absolutely necessary.

I want to talk a little bit about CART in the classroom. CART in the classroom not only makes what is going on in the classroom accessible to the student who is using it, but allows independent learning. Simply providing a student with notes taken by a note taker removes that student from actively participating in how learning occurs and results in sub par education. CART allows the student to understand what questions their peers are asking, understand why suddenly everyone in the room is laughing and creates equal access. The events of September 11th are an important example. September 11 created a huge strain. We had captioners who were essentially working 12 to 18 shifts and sleeps on cots to try and keep captioning going. Every station went into 24 hours news and information. What kind of informed active citizenry can you have if you are cut off from the information? There are so many benefits to captioning. Hearing children can use it to learn to read. Their reading comprehension is improved. We have a number of studies, which demonstrate this. People trying to learn English-as-a-second-language benefit. And also, which is one of the things I am trying to explain people, everyone on Capitol Hill goes to a gym in the morning and it is too noisy and they use captioning to watch the TVs. These are services that have value. Be proactive. It will take you I guarantee less than 20 minutes to go on our website and fill out these letters and send them in. I wish, I wish, I wish, there was a simple one-year solution to any of these problems. There is not. You have to keep at it. Stay informed. Understand what is going on. The FCC disability group has a list serve. They will send you e-mails whenever anything is happening at the FCC that they think might be of interest to a person with a disability.

Finally paying for services -- our cart and broadcast: how are they paid for? The first thing I need to start with is that, broadcasters who provide captioning, and schools and Universities that are holding a meeting are obligated within the ADA to provide these services. There is an obligation, but still how do you pay for it? The production company generally pays for captioning. There are some grants federally from the Department of Education which subsidize some of the costs for captioning on the air—private contributions, these sponsorships that we were talking about. They go out and get people to provide sponsorship dollars, as well as private contributions. These are all sources that go into trying to underwrite the cost of making the service available. For CART, there are sometimes grants and donations. NCRA for the last five or six years has donated money to ALDAcon to help provide the costs for cart providers. Often a business will sponsor it as well. If push comes to shove, the association needs to use its own money. Our resources are right now. It is a chicken and egg situation. There is money out there but the problem is trying to get the money and resources to be able to get after it.

AUDINECE MEMBER: I would like to say that you have made a lot of things very very clear. You have done a beautiful job. The people who actually do the captioning, real-time and otherwise, I cannot tell you how hard they work. On September 11th, and I have been in the Caption Center for 20 years and I have never seen what I saw on September 11th. People were doing the captioning and leaving the studios sobbing and praying and then going back in; and again and again and again for hours and hours. The work that they do is an art. These people deserve the money that they earn. They are the highest paid among our staff. The most important thing is that we find the money to pay them well.

One of the things that is helpful is one of our strategic alliance partners is the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf. They have worked with us closely to expand the awareness and availability of funds. We are trying to expand and create within our foundation a specialized CART program to create a clearinghouse for information and contacts. So if you have a problem, getting CART service, we deal with that on an ad hoc basis now. We deal with a call from a parent who is trying to get service for a child. We occasionally have to find them a good local advocate. Alexander Graham Bell Association has just put aside a fairly significant amount of money to try and find test cases to take to court. We are working with them to fine a good CART case that would demonstrate what the rights are under the law. If we can get some additional grants we will make it a more formalized program. There will be a clearinghouse to get more information and connections.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: In the beginning you mentioned an article about court reporting becoming obsolete. But was because of computerized speech and text.

MARK GOLDEN: Voice to text software is improving dramatically. There is a huge debate within our profession about how soon and how quickly, but it is a fact of life. It is out there. This not going to go away. Two points: first, such software requires that it be trained to recognize a single voice, a particular voice. At this point translating even a single voice is a challenge. Dealing with multiple speakers and ambient noise is not going to happen soon. Second, and very controversial within the profession, the technology is improving to where at some point in the not too distant future it will be possible for the captioner or reporter to dictate and have it translate rather than type as they do now. There are already some experiments in real-time. I think the results are marginal, but it is improving. The point we keep trying to make when we talk to the public is that for the foreseeable future, regardless of the technology and skills, there needs to still be an individual intelligence running the technology to provide the service the deaf and hard of hearing people need.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: We Should be aware that this current administration is not as friendly to consumers as we have experienced before in some others. But we need to change that. A lot of your comments and questions earlier in relation to TV and captioning on television within the FCC are still under the Disability Rights Office and that is very very important to us. If we write mail, about having captioning problem and difficulties and send it to the DRO and the FCC, they are going to have more evidence to show that these problems are very real, and it would make them much more likely to attempt to resolve them. You have got to put these comments in writing. Get the documentation to the FCC, and act as a group with such organizations as NAD, SHHH, ALDA, and TDI.

Mark J. Golden is the Executive Director of the National Cart Reporters Association. An active member of the Council of Organizational Representatives, he has focused much of NCRA's resources on developing an adequate supply of trained broadcast captioners and CART providers. MGOLDEN@ncrahq.org