

## **Sign on Television: Analysis of Data**

**Based on projects carried out by the Deaf Studies Trust**

**1993 – 2005**

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# Sign on television –analysis of data

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The data reported here comes from a number of national and local studies where Deaf<sup>1</sup> people were interviewed and took part in discussions concerning their television viewing. The details of the studies are given in the Appendix. All studies were carried out by the Deaf Studies Trust. Wherever there were interviews with Deaf people, these were carried out in BSL by Deaf researchers.

Some of this data has been released into the public domain although there still remains a considerable database which can be used as a background resource for those working with Deaf people.

## In Summary

The data taken in aggregation indicates a clear preference by Deaf people for sign language presentation which they can understand. This typically means sign language content scripted and presented by Deaf people.

Access to television content is seen as a right, but satisfaction comes from Deaf-led and Deaf constructed programmes. In this case, there is evidence that deaf people would pay more for a Deaf controlled channel.

Television programmes which are interpreted by hearing people are rejected as being unsatisfactory and unintelligible.

Programme genres which are preferred and have highest priority are News and Deaf News.

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<sup>1</sup> Deaf means those who are culturally Deaf use sign language and are members of the Deaf community.

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## A starting point

In the 1990s, the major emphasis was on deliverable technology as a means to include Deaf and hard-of hearing people. The developments of subtitling in the 1980s had built a groundswell of support and demand for access to all programme content. We were commissioned by BBC and ITC to

- Discover the pattern of subtitle viewing
- Examine programme preference in the light of subtitles
- Consider a number of variable relating to subtitles themselves and to the ability of the viewer to extract information for the subtitles

Survey returns were obtained from over 2.500 people and interviews were conducted with 284 Deaf and hard of hearing people. Some of the relevant findings are briefly described – data reported relates to both Deaf and Hard-of-hearing viewers unless otherwise specified.

**Availability to view** although apparently trivial is of some importance in scheduling programmes and placing emphasis on provision. Deaf people’s availability mirrored that of hearing people and peaked in the 7pm to 10pm period each day. There was a marginal shift to earlier times of the weekends but mornings right through to 5pm had less than 20% of people available for TV viewing.

Programme Preferences showed some differences between Deaf and Hard of Hearing from survey data – Deaf vs hard-of-hearing was determined by self reporting (Table 1).

Table 1: “I like this programme type” (n=1951) % who like

	Deaf	Hard of Hearing
National News	84	92
Local News	68	83
See Hear	85	67
Films	80	40
Comedy	65	46
Nature	61	78
Soaps	56	30
Quiz	52	29
Sport	52	34
Current Affairs	44	55
Religious	18	32

Some of the programme preference differences is accounted for by the likely difference in average age of the two groups and the fact of their affiliations – Deaf are mainly members of the British Deaf Association and hard-of-hearing are mainly linked to RNID and Deafened groups.

When we interviewed people (Deaf n=114; hard-of-hearing n=161), the differences were repeated. Hard-of-hearing people are more likely to prefer “highbrow” programmes and Deaf people are more keen on popular programmes. Both claimed news as the highest priority for subtitling. Deaf people differed in their subtitling preferences, placing Deaf programmes more highly than national news

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and wishing to see subtitles in films, comedy, drama, quiz shows, sport and soaps much more than did hard-of-hearing people.

**Comprehension of Subtitles** however, tended to be poor. When we actually tested subtitle comprehension by showing programme extracts with subtitles (n=70), Deaf people were significantly poorer than hard-of-hearing people in retaining the information and typically had less than 30% correct answers to questions about the News after they had viewed it with subtitles.

Our **conclusion** in this context is that programme viewing preferences are clearly for *News* and subtitling requirements are expressed as *Deaf programmes* and *News*. However, the reality is that most Deaf people do not understand the text in the subtitles.

A **parallel study** conducted in 1991 by colleagues at the Centre for Deaf Studies in Bristol (Woll, 1991), focused on 57 sign language users. While their programme preferences tended to show the same priorities as the Switched On study, they also highlighted some differences when people were asked about which programmes should be signed. While over 70% of Deaf people said they liked recent films and comedy, only around 50% wanted these programmes to have signing. While half the group liked Sport, only 40% wanted the programmes to be signed.

After showing extracts of programmes with signing, the researchers concluded that

“the two extracts where the signers were both Deaf and presenting programmes from the Deaf, were rated significantly higher than those with hearing signers” p22

“In general, subjects wanted subtitles on programmes which used hearing signers or interpreters and saw less need on programmes which used Deaf signers.” p24

By far the largest group (89%) wanted signing on National News programmes.

In **Sign on Europe** (1997) the focus was on the status of sign language in Europe but there were some relevant questions about sign on television. There were interviews with over 300 Deaf people in 17 countries, using an age- and gender-balanced sampling procedure. Deaf people claimed that television programmes for Deaf people existed in their own countries in Scandinavia, Germany, UK and Ireland. Countries like Spain, Greece, France and Belgium did not believe they had provision for signing on television. Because the study was about status of sign language, we were anxious to know what people’s perceptions of the “purity” of the sign language presented was. In terms of TV presenters, Deaf people in Europe wanted Deaf presenters to “sign like Deaf” ie to use the native language (90% of respondents). This is consistent with the need to see one’s own language presented by native users of that language. However, this priority was not shared in the same way by the organisations mostly hearing –run, who responded to the same questions (Table 2).

Table 2: What kind of signing should be used in future? (% who said they should ‘sign like Deaf’)

	Deaf respondents (n>300)	Institutional responses (n>300)
TV presenters who are hearing	53	30
TV presenters who are Deaf	90	73

Deaf people see a much higher priority in being able to view their own language in its native form.

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## In this century

By the year 2000, the debates had moved on and the issues were no longer about subtitling but more about the use of and provision of signing on television. The presence of interpreters for news bulletins had been present in Bristol since 1981 and continues to be a feature of both BBC and ITV daily programmes. In Bristol, the news is interpreted by a Deaf translator working from the autocue – no longer by hearing people. However, this is unusual and arises from specific pressure by the Deaf community (Allsop and Kyle, 2007, for a description and analysis). For the most part, signing on television apart from that in Deaf programmes, is mainly delivered by the use of hearing interpreters. This is something which Deaf people dislike.

In **Deaf people in the Community** (2000) we interviewed 240 Deaf people repeatedly concerning their lifestyle. Data on television viewing tended to confirm what has already been said. Ninety percent of Deaf respondents said that a Deaf presenter was acceptable on television while only 60% thought a hearing interpreter was acceptable. The BSL information was a much higher priority (81%) than the appearance of the signer (13%).

When we asked about the programmes to subtitle, we found similar priorities to those already reported. News was the most important with Sport, Soaps and Films being less important (Table 3)

**Table 3: Which programmes are most important to have a signer on screen? (n>205) (percentages)**

Programme	Very important	Important	Not important
National news	63	22	15
Local news	58	26	15
Educational programmes	57	26	17
Documentaries	43	30	26
Current affairs	41	27	32
Weather	39	26	35
Comedy	34	28	38
Special interest	30	34	36
Drama	31	29	40
Recent films	26	27	47
Soap operas	23	20	57
Sport	20	18	63

One other finding of note at that time was that Deaf people were resistant to the notion of the use of a signing avatar – an artificial signer – which they tended to find insulting in the context of their search for recognition of their own language. It is still the case that extreme reactions are produced in any discussion of artificial signing.

## Deaf TV

In 2001-2, we went back to many of the same group and re-constructed the sample, controlling for the same variables of employment, age, gender and so on. In **Deaf People in the Community 2**, we were able to probe further and this time asked the direct questions about the demand for a Deaf channel and the nature of the programmes which would be watched. The responses are from 137 interviews with Deaf people, throughout the UK.

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We asked if Deaf people about a Deaf channel (Table 4) and about whether they would watch (Table 5).

**Table 4:** Do you want a separate Deaf TV channel?

Separate Deaf TV?	Women					Men					All
	18-29 years	30-44 years	45-59 years	60+ years	All ages	18-29 years	30-44 years	45-59 years	60+ years	All ages	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Yes	86	67	74	67	72	82	84	69	78	78	74
No	0	7	9	13	7	0	0	13	0	4	6
Not sure	14	27	17	20	21	18	16	19	22	18	20
<b>Base = 100%</b>	14	30	23	15	82	11	19	16	9	55	137

**Table 5:** Would you watch a separate Deaf TV channel everyday?

Watch Deaf TV everyday?	Women					Men					All
	18-29 years	30-44 years	45-59 years	60+ years	All ages	18-29 years	30-44 years	45-59 years	60+ years	All ages	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Yes	79	80	74	73	77	73	95	69	78	80	78
No	7	10	0	0	5	9	0	0	11	4	4
Not sure	14	10	26	27	18	18	5	31	11	16	18
<b>Base = 100%</b>	14	30	23	15	82	11	19	16	9	55	137

The findings are relatively clear cut: Deaf people want a Deaf channel and they would watch it.

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We considered whether Deaf people would pay for this service and over half of the respondents agreed that they would pay. When we asked if they would pay more if the channel was run by Deaf people, the largest group thought that they would (Table 6).

**Table 6:** Would you pay more for a Deaf TV channel if Deaf people controlled the channel and all programming?

Pay more for Deaf control?	Women					Men					All
	18-29 years	30-44 years	45-59 years	60+ years	All ages	18-29 years	30-44 years	45-59 years	60+ years	All ages	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Yes	50	43	52	40	46	45	42	63	56	51	48
No	21	20	9	40	21	36	16	6	22	18	20
Not sure	29	37	39	20	33	18	42	31	22	31	32
<b>Base = 100%</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>137</b>

People tended to say that they would like to see it first but the obvious conclusion is that they wish to have their own channel. We offered a programme schedule over a 24 hour period with programme suggestions in each slot through a typical day. We then asked which programmes would you *definitely* watch. This is a summary of what they said.

Most popular programmes would be Deaf Drama (75%), Deaf World (69%), Big Film (ie Deaf film) (69%), News (65%), Deafonation Street (65%) while least popular would be minority groups, music and play (these were adult respondents).

The pattern of results looks suspiciously like DeafBBC – which would be a perfectly reasonable response from a community wishing to assert their culture and language.

### Familiar themes and preferences

In a further study in 2003 (**See Hear Now**), we specifically examined the new See Hear – a programme led by Deaf staff and presented directly to the Deaf community. Our findings were very strongly supportive of the new See Hear format and in particular the Deaf drama, Switch. As before there were strong statements about the need to have Deaf content and Deaf presenters. There were 80 participants from Scotland, England and Wales. We conducted interviews but also showed programme clips – this led to a stronger response to subtitles than we have had previously. The clips were short and featured a range of signers. These would not all be immediately intelligible to all participants. Their responses regarding subtitles then seemed to reflect this.

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### Subtitles (or signing only)

There is no doubt that many Deaf use the subtitles as a support to their comprehension, but this impacts on their eye gaze and visual attention. For example, if there is a significant subtitle change on screen it will naturally draw the eyes down; when that occurs some sign language information is lost and then the subtitles have to continue to be read as they are still onscreen when the signing of that sentence is finished. There were many views expressed.

I hate to have to rely on subtitles. With that (*extract shown*) I had to rely on the subtitles because I wanted to be sure I could follow the story. It was an important story. I couldn't rely on the signing because it kept moving about so I just had to read the subtitles.

The sign language is very important because most Deaf people can't read the subtitles.

... English subtitles are pitched at a high level and inaccessible. ... If the signing is like mine then I understand it. But if the signing is different I don't understand.

The question of subtitles related to the quality of the signing on screen.

... sometime they are rubbish. If you have someone who is deafened, their signing is poor. You need to have a fully Deaf person, who signs fluently. Not someone who is deafened whose language usage is different from mine. Sometimes I look in the paper and see it will have signing, and then I found out that the signing is poor.

Issues about the quality of the signing still seem very important to the Deaf viewers.

### Interpreters

This is the old issue which recurs because of the lack of Deaf television and the simpler provision of translated news to allow the programme makers to "include" Deaf people. It is not usually thought to be as effective as Deaf presenters.

Viewers don't like the interpreter in the 'egg' because their eyes are always having to move between the main picture and the 'egg'. I don't like that myself. I prefer when the presenter in the main screen is Deaf and uses sign language to communicate with me directly. That's the balance.

Sometimes I watch the interpreter but I normally follow the subtitles. I sometimes find the interpreter difficult to follow so I ignore them and focus on the subtitles. Or if it's a Deaf presenter of course, they're easy to follow. ... But when there's an interpreter I usually ignore them and read the subtitles.

It's a Deaf programme so everybody should be Deaf – no hearing people involved. Get rid of them!

In a guided self completion questionnaire, participants were asked about their views on television in general and their aspirations for Deaf television.



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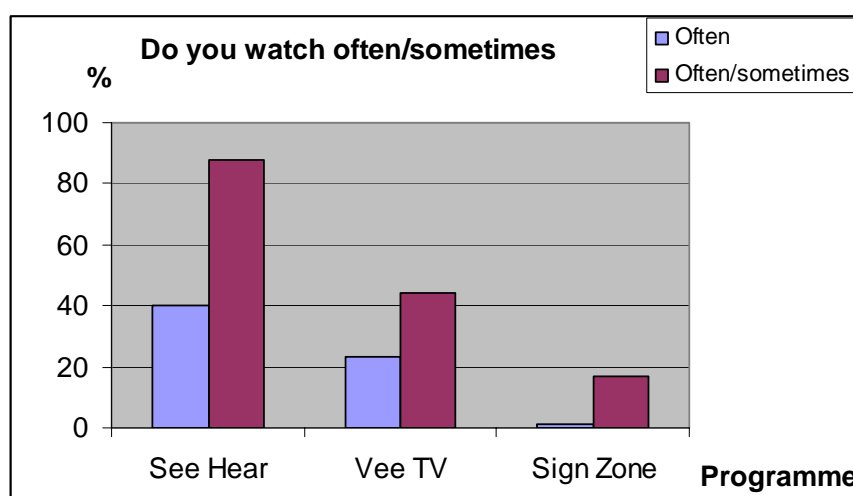
Eighty-three percent watch TV for relaxation, 74% for news (with highest percent of 83% for those over 61 years) and 65% for information (although 80% of the youngest group said they watched for information). Eighty percent had more than one television at home and 40% had three or more.

Only 24% said they watched only programmes for Deaf people – so the vast majority currently have an interest in mainstream programmes. However, 91% watched only programmes which had subtitles – implying that unsupported mainstream television was not an option. When asked about their favourite programmes, there was a range of responses but soaps were common and Eastenders had the highest number of fans.

In terms of specific programme types which were viewed, as can be expected, News was the most popular, with 61% viewing everyday. Older people were more likely to watch everyday (83%).

Twenty-three percent said they often watched VeeTV (compared to 40% for the same question applied to See Hear) with more among the youngest group (40%, and 45% See Hear). See Hear has a much broader appeal and has many more who watch sometimes (48% See Hear, 21% VeeTV). Very few people were viewers of the Sign Zone – interpreted TV programmes late at night (1% often, 16% sometimes). Deaf people do not stay up that late. However, it is also true that there are clear indications in this and other research that Deaf viewers want to see Deaf Signers not interpreters.

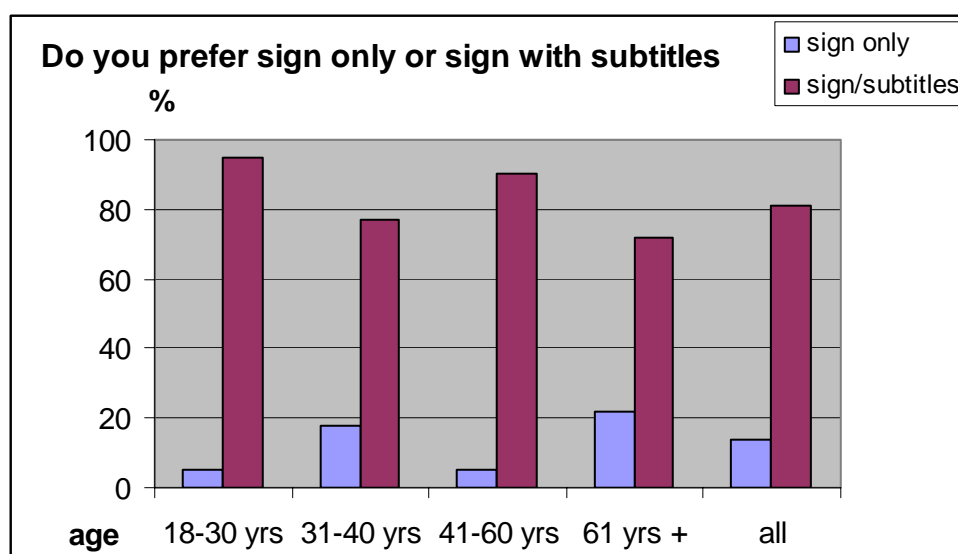
**Figure 1: See Hear is popular; Interpreted TV is not**



Sixty-six percent said they cannot watch ordinary television without subtitles. However, when asked specifically about Deaf programmes and despite the various complaints about subtitling on screen, the vast majority hedge their bets and want to see signing *and* subtitles.

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Figure 2: Most prefer signing and subtitles onscreen



Deaf people are often criticised for not making their views known. We asked them if they had tried to contact See Hear. Three percent had sent letters; 2% had tried text telephone; 8% had tried by other means (fax, videophone). In total, 81% had never tried to contact See Hear. To any outsider to the deafness field, this figure would seem extraordinary given the extent of comments and data reported above. Deaf people have strong feelings but rarely make them public in this way. Such a situation is not uncommon in minority groups but Deaf people as a result of their difficulties in written English have even fewer means to make themselves heard and are dis-inclined to expose their views to criticism by others. This leaves the programme makers in a very difficult situation unless a viewing panel is created and maintained.

Forty-five percent thought that Deaf people should have their own channel and 43% were unsure about this. Seventy-six percent did think that Television was part of the Deaf Way and only 5% thought Deaf people would be better off without TV.

### In Summary

Much of this study confirms the earlier findings and confirms the dislike of interpreted TV, preferring Deaf-led and Deaf originated content. At the same time, they are not yet prepared to give up subtitles – this is probably reasonable given the insecurity Deaf people feel in regard to the language and its recognition.

We found that people rarely presented their views to the programme makers – even the Deaf programme had almost minimal reaction from viewers. It seems as if market research has to be done proactively.

### In Scotland

A final study of relevance was conducted with Deaf people in Scotland. The **Investigation of Access to Public Services through BSL** interviewed 89 Deaf people including some from Shetland and from the Western Isles. Only a small part of the study dealt with TV directly but it again confirmed the findings we have described over the last 15 years. We asked about whether Deaf people could access information on television.

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This topic area is somewhat difficult as there is little sign language on television in Scotland at the present time. All programmes with signing come from England and there were frequent comments that the signing was not Scottish. A recurrent theme has been the need to have Deaf signing and not to have hearing people (ie interpreters) producing the news or other information. Some people claim to use subtitles as well as the signing and others say they prefer subtitles to the hearing interpreter signing.

*"..prefer Deaf use of signing as more correct and more interactive."*

*"Yes watch but I do not always understand if there are difficult long words. I prefer signing. I prefer Deaf signing as I am Deaf myself and it would be the same language."*

*"I prefer to have subtitles with signing as some signs are different and I can check. I prefer Deaf signers as I can understand better."*

The responses were uniform. Deaf people watched television with subtitles and relied on them to support their viewing. They watched signed programmes although clearly preferred Deaf people signing rather than hearing people – which would be natural for other minority groups as well eg Gaelic speakers would prefer native speakers rather than those who learned as adults in their 20s. There was a general dislike of in-vision signing which was distracting and unhelpful.

### Conclusions

There are several quite obvious conclusions:

- Deaf people want Deaf signers
- Deaf people do not want interpreted television
- There is a considerable demand for a Deaf TV channel
- Programme preferences are for News and Deaf programmes
- Signed programme preferences (ie Deaf-made programmes) are for Deaf drama and Deaf films as well as Deaf magazine programmes.
- Deaf aspirations for a Deaf channel would probably mirror current major channels – a DeafBBC.
- Deaf people do not spontaneously express their views and 'write to the programme makers', making it difficult sometimes to determine their aspirations

It is also true that there are differences in the studies and there is also an evolution in need. At this time and stage of development of Deaf culture and language recognition, Deaf people will benefit from an understanding of their need for self-determination in regard to Television.

## Appendix: Details of the Studies

1. 1992: **Switched On** – commissioned by the ITC and BBC (jointly) to examine viewers preferences and reactions to subtitles. The study examined responses from over 2,500 Deaf and hard of hearing people from all over the UK. There were interviews with 275 people. The important aspect for this paper is the programme type preferences as the primary focus was subtitles which are not under consideration here.
2. 1997: **Sign on Europe** – a study of the status of sign language in 17 countries in Europe. Interview and questionnaire data (collected in each national written and signed languages) was analysed from over 1,000 people.
3. 2000: **Deaf People in the Community** – a national census of Deaf lifestyle. This was based on a strictly controlled structured representative sample of Deaf people from Scotland, England, Northern Ireland and Wales. There were 240 Deaf people in the group and they were interviewed 6 times between 1998 and 1999.
4. 2002: **Deaf People in the Community 2** – a follow up study of a sample of the original, examining the reasons behind lifestyle decisions made by Deaf people. A total of 137 people were interviewed.
5. 2003: **See Hear Now** – a study of Deaf people commissioned by the BBC to examine programme specific content. As part of this study there is general data of relevance to this work. Eighty Deaf people from England, Scotland and Wales took part in interviews and group discussions.
6. 2005: **Investigation of Access to Public Services in Scotland using British Sign Language** – a study commissioned by the Scottish Executive Social Research. The researchers visited 89 Deaf people throughout Scotland, including Shetland and the Western Isles. In addition to individual interviews, there were group sessions. Data analysis was mainly qualitative.

Further details and references for the studies can be obtained on request

from the Secretary, Deaf Studies Trust, Vassall Centre, Gill Avenue, Bristol BS16 2QQ

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