

# Written evidence submitted by Dr Ryan Bramley

## Call for Evidence - British Film and High-End Television Inquiry

My name is Dr Ryan Bramley, and I am a Lecturer in Education at the University of Sheffield. I am writing to you in response to your call for written evidence in relation to the current challenges faced by the British film and high-end television industry.

The evidence provided below primarily addresses the question, **'What can the industry and Government do to ensure British film and high-end television can adapt for the future?'** In particular, this written submission will focus on what needs to change to ensure the industry is supporting inclusivity and sustainability - especially in relation to D/deaf audiences. **D/deaf people are underrepresented in research, and often overlooked by the film and TV industry. It is my hope that this evidence submission will help to encourage change in both regards.**

For clarification, the term Deaf (with a capital 'D') "is used to denote people who identify as culturally and lingually Deaf and thus who use British Sign Language (BSL) as their first or preferred language" ([Bramley, Evans, Liddiard and Rhodes, 2022](#)). The term deaf (without a capital 'd') typically refers to the medical condition of hearing loss. This submission predominantly focuses on Deaf communities and Deaf culture, so the term Deaf (with a capital 'D') will be routinely used throughout.

## Introducing myself

I am a lecturer, filmmaker and arts-based researcher, and have studied the role of film and television in society extensively over the past several years. My doctoral thesis, 'In Their Own Image' ([Bramley, 2021](#)) explored the use of film as a social and cultural representation tool within a non-profit media organisation in West Yorkshire, where volunteers have been creating news programmes and documentary films about their local area since 2011. As a lecturer, I continue to use film and TV in my teaching - including directing an undergraduate module, 'Children and Digital Cultures', where students are asked to work in groups to create short films which explore contemporary issues around digital literacy, culture and education.

Whilst I myself am a hearing person, I have led on two recent research projects which have explored the (in)accessibility of film and TV for Deaf audiences:

1. **'Rethinking Deafness, Film and Accessibility'**: working with **Dr Kirsty Liddiard** ([University of Sheffield](#)), **Beth Evans** ([SUBTXT Creative](#)) and **Jon Rhodes** ([Paper](#)) to explore how Deaf British Sign Language (BSL) users experience suspense in film;
2. **'Animating Inclusion'**: our research team (Bramley, Liddiard, Evans and Rhodes) worked with a film animator, **Josh Slack** ([Inertia Creative](#)) to create a short animated film which could communicate the findings and recommendations of 'Rethinking Deafness, Film and Accessibility' to both public and media industry audiences.

Both projects involved working closely with Deaf experts, as a means of effectively embedding Deaf-centric approaches in our work. For 'Rethinking Deafness, Film and Accessibility', we worked with two Deaf Advisors: **Dr Celia Hulme** and **Dr Tyron Woolfe** (more details can be found [here](#)). Subsequently, the creation of a short animated film for 'Animating Inclusion' was supported by Deaf Animator and Consultant, **James Merry** - whose previous work includes a short animating film for NHS Deaf CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service) on language deprivation (which can be viewed [here](#)).

This submission summarises the experience of working with Deaf participants and experts over the course of these two research projects to better understand barriers to accessibility for Deaf audiences of film and TV, as well as exploring the social impacts of media inaccessibility (e.g. poor or inaccurate closed captions) for Deaf people in everyday life.

### **Contextualising Film and TV Accessibility for Deaf people**

The Covid-19 pandemic revealed the everyday inequities that Deaf people experience – often with damaging, and in some cases even fatal consequences. A research study in the US ([Panko et al. 2021](#)) found that “participants who are deaf had 4.6 times higher odds of reporting difficulty in accessing COVID-19 related information than participants who are hearing”. Similarly in the UK, the Deaf community as a whole (of approximately 70,000 people) were found to have had “little access to public announcements [during the COVID-19 pandemic] due to a lack of the daily updates being translated into British Sign Language” ([Shard, 2020](#)). Access to (and engagement with) public service announcements is vital, not just in a time of international crisis (i.e. COVID-19), but in everyday life as well - for both Deaf and hearing people (i.e. another of my recent research projects, '[Evaluating Trespass Prevention](#)', has explored the importance of youth-orientated, anti-railway trespass campaigning as an effective response to recent increases in railway trespass incidents in the UK).

Unfortunately, the barriers to accessing vital public service information for Deaf people were exacerbated by fundamental failings by broadcasters during the pandemic. In 2021, [the Channel 4 subtitles outage](#) left Deaf people without access to subtitled programmes for several weeks. [According to RNID \(2021\)](#), there were technical faults with subtitling and audio description services on BBC and Channel 5 during this period as well. Additionally, the Government's “failure to provide British Sign Language interpreters during live Covid briefings” was found by a high court judge to be discriminatory, as well as a breach of the 2010 Equality Act ([Siddique, 2021](#)). Whilst the subtitles outage of 2021 [was investigated by Ofcom in 2022](#) - who found that Channel 4 “breached license conditions over subtitle problems” - the damage had already been done. [As Liam O' Dell, a deaf and disabled journalist, put it](#): “the trust Channel 4 has built up with deaf and disabled subtitles users will take much longer to rebuild”.

Even when subtitling services are working, our recent research into Deaf audiences' experiences of film and TV has found that the quality of those subtitles is often inadequate. As explained in detail in the following section, the importance of having adequate access to subtitles does not only apply to public service broadcasts; poor, limited, or absent captioning has significant implications for how Deaf people experience the world and view themselves

in relation to society as a whole. As one of the Deaf participants we worked with on the 'Rethinking Deafness, Film and Accessibility' project put it:

"I don't feel like I'm equal. I feel like I'm not an important person to society. Do you know what I mean? The Deaf community have the right to watch things at the same time as the hearing community and other people." (translated from BSL to English)

## **Rethinking Deafness, Film and Accessibility: Is British Film and TV accessible to Deaf people?**

The initial idea for a small scale research project exploring how Deaf people experience suspense when watching a film came from Beth Evans ([SUBTXT Creative](#)), who has a professional background in languages, subtitling/captioning and translation; [Evans has written extensively](#) about where the idea for the project originally came from. Working with [Paper](#), a service design company - and with funding support from the [Sheffield Innovation Programme](#) (part-financed by the European Regional Development Fund) - Dr Kirsty Liddiard and I worked with Evans - as well as Jon Rhodes from Paper - to design a qualitative, participatory research project that could draw on the experiences of Deaf audiences in a meaningful way.

We interviewed 8 Deaf people with the support of a registered BSL interpreter. Each interview was conducted online (we gave participants the option of online or face-to-face interviews; all eight opted for online) and took approximately 90 minutes. As outlined by [Evans \(2023\)](#), we asked each participant to watch 3 film clips from the opening scenes of:

- 1) Jaws (1975) - using the Netflix version and its captions
- 2) A Quiet Place (2018) - using the Netflix version and its captions
- 3) The Hunchback of Notre Dame (1996) - using the Disney Plus version and its captions

We were particularly interested in how Deaf people experienced suspense in each film clip, and whether or not the captions for each film were effective in their view. We also asked each interviewee to describe their own experiences with film (including cinema) and TV more generally, to better understand broader aspects and issues with media accessibility for Deaf people.

[As detailed on Paper's website](#), the three key findings of the 'Rethinking Deafness, Film and Accessibility' project were:

- 1) [Detailed descriptions of sound helped build suspense](#)  
Deaf participants told us that descriptions of sound are really important when watching a film. Descriptions of sound added to the feeling of suspense for participants because they see sound in captions.
- 2) [Poor captioning stopped Deaf participants feeling suspense](#)  
There were multiple factors that caused participants to stop feeling suspense. If the captions were confusing, distracting, or too complex, the participants had to work harder to understand what was happening, which interrupted their feeling of

suspense.

3) [Deaf participants felt excluded from the cinematic experience](#)

Good quality captioning was vital for people to feel suspense and to get the full experience of a film. Without good captions people felt excluded. They felt like they were not being treated equally to hearing people. This feeling had a negative emotional impact on the participants.

### **Animating Inclusion: Six Recommendations for Change**

Supported by a University of Sheffield Public Engagement Funding grant, the original team behind 'Rethinking Deafness, Film and Accessibility' (Evans, Bramley, Liddiard and Rhodes) have been working with Josh Slack ([Inertia Creative](#)) to create a short animated film to communicate findings across different contexts:

“to engage both the general public (in particular, members of the Deaf community) and various branches of the media industry with the important themes and findings that emerged from this participatory research.” ([Liddiard and Bramley 2023](#))

The animated film, which will premiere in Sheffield as part of the ESRC Festival of Social Science on [17th November 2023](#) (and be made publicly available online shortly after), presents Six Recommendations for a more accessible and inclusive film and TV industry:

1) [Captions should be co-designed](#)

Captions should be designed collaboratively by captioners, filmmakers and Deaf consultants. The design of captions should happen throughout the filmmaking process, and not as an afterthought.

2) [New, creative methods should be explored to solve common captioning challenges](#)

Creative captioning should be explored to reduce the effort Deaf viewers have to make to understand and feel immersed in the film. Filmmakers should rethink and redesign how audio is presented visually for Deaf audiences.

3) [User research should be conducted to test captions before release](#)

Captions should be tested with Deaf audiences before a film's release to highlight any miscommunication in the captions and ensure people are getting the intended experience of the film.

4) [There should be more personalisation options for captions](#)

Personalisation of captions should be explored to allow people to choose the style (for example, font, colour, size, placement) of captions, and the level of description or creativity used within captions to suit their preferences.

5) [Accessibility and inclusion in UK cinemas need to be improved](#)

UK cinemas need to be more accessible for Deaf people. For example, cinemas should offer more frequent and more convenient screening times for captioned viewings, and improve the accessibility of venue and marketing materials.

6) [Accessibility must be commercially viable](#)

More investment and allocation of budget is needed to fund innovation in captioning to create more accessible and immersive cinematic experiences for Deaf people.

[As written by Beth Evans](#), without whom neither of these research projects would not have been possible:

With the right attention from the media industry, and through working with experienced Deaf media consultants, we are hopeful that these recommendations will become a reality.

I hope that any discourse around the challenges (and solutions) for British Film and High-End Television will consider increasing accessibility for Deaf audiences as a key priority.

If you have any further questions about this written submission, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Dr Ryan Bramley  
Lecturer in Education, University of Sheffield