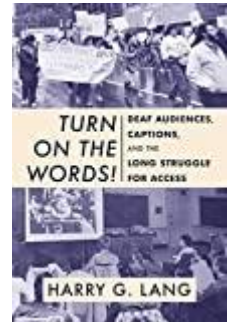


**Harry G. Lang.** *Turn on the Words!: Deaf Audiences, Captions, and the Long Struggle for Access.* Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2021. 328 pp. \$34.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-944838-84-3.



**Reviewed by** Rachel Garratt (University of Leeds)

**Published on** H-Disability (January, 2023)

**Commissioned by** Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

In *Turn on the Words: Deaf Audiences, Captions, and the Long Struggle for Access*, Harry G. Lang presents a sweeping history of media captioning in the United States, combining stories of technological advances with social activism and individual endeavors. Drawing on his own experiences as a D/deaf person trying to access both educational and entertainment media, this work is profoundly personal and thoroughly researched.

Ostensibly a history of the “Captioned Films for the Deaf” scheme, Lang frequently expands the remit of his work to explore developments in captioning and D/deaf life across the twentieth century. Beginning with a history of silent film and its benefit to D/deaf people, Lang explores the struggle for media access at the advent of “talkie” cinema. After briefly running through some of the pioneers of early captioning technology, Lang devotes four chapters to the initiation of “Captioned Films for the Deaf” in the 1950s and 1960s. He goes on to examine the logistics of the scheme as members encouraged teachers of D/deaf students to use visual aids, including their films, in teach-

ing. Moving into the 1970s, he oscillates between technological advances in television captioning and the D/deaf community’s activism in trying to improve accessibility. Lang then returns to the lack of captions in movie theaters, including the unsatisfying experiments with providing closed captions (captions that were optional to audience members) in the late twentieth century and the shortage of screenings that contained open captions (captions visible to whole audiences). Toward the end of the book, Lang delves into the impact of modern media, such as video streaming platforms, and the continued struggles D/deaf and hard-of-hearing people face.

The detail and depth of information that Lang supplies is extraordinary, especially given that it is a history involving technical developments, multiple institutions with ever-changing names, and a vast number of individuals. It is a considerable asset to scholars interested in D/deaf, disability and media history. Unfortunately, this detail sometimes obscures the points Lang is trying to make, as the book occasionally feels like a textbook,

littered with pictures and separate text bubbles offering additional information. Lang's argument—that the fight for media captioning is about both D/deaf people's educational *and* cultural enrichment—is only mentioned briefly in the book's introduction and elaborated on in his concluding chapter. This argument seems hidden in much of the book, and he gives little indication of any previous scholarship he is either using or building upon.

While predominantly focusing on D/deaf matters, some of the most interesting elements of the book come when Lang places his findings in the context of broader social, media, and disability histories. For example, he writes about the use of captioning for those with cognitive disabilities and the relationship between providing audio-description for blind people and captioning. He also promotes the benefits of captions to people learning English as a second language. *Turn on the Words* is also a helpful intervention in taking a multisensory approach to media, raising awareness of the impact of both audio and visual elements of technology and their impact on diverse audiences.

The book is also an excellent reflection on the evolution of the D/deaf community in the United States. In telling the story of captioned media, Lang reveals the passion of the D/deaf community in spreading new ideas and innovations through clubs, homes, and schools. The workshops that "Captioned Films for the Deaf" ran to share techniques of captioning and curriculum for teaching D/deaf children using visual aids are just one example of the way D/deaf people discussed and shaped the technology and its application. Toward the end of the book, the growth of late twentieth-century disability and D/deaf activism is an exciting backdrop against which Lang reveals stories of individuals and movements as they picketed television network stations and occupied movie theaters. He mentions how developments in media technology impacted the ways D/deaf people interacted with each other. For example, the introduction of talkies meant that D/deaf people congreg-

ated at clubs and institutions to watch captioned film screenings. However, as television captioning improved, fewer communal viewing experiences took place. While never drawing it out explicitly, Lang makes an important point about how the D/deaf community simultaneously shaped and was shaped by developments in media technology.

One of Lang's most effective revelations is the constant and disheartening apathy of hearing society towards D/deaf and hard-of-hearing people's accessibility needs. From television networks dismissing the need for captions to the film industry prioritizing hearing audiences' disdain for captions and twenty-first-century issues with online media companies, Lang's work is an important record of the struggle D/deaf people face.

Overall, Lang's work is a fascinating insight into the history of media captioning, encompassing technological developments, D/deaf innovation, and community struggle. While occasionally flawed in its execution, it is an important cultural work and an undeniable asset to anyone researching the topic.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-disability>

**Citation:** Rachel Garratt. Review of Lang, Harry G, *Turn on the Words!: Deaf Audiences, Captions, and the Long Struggle for Access*. H-Disability, H-Net Reviews. January, 2023.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=57644>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.