

## **Caption this! How subtitles became the only way to watch TV – for viewers of all ages**

Netflix found that more than 80 per cent of members used subtitles or closed captions at least once a month



Killing Eve is one of the many TV shows grabbed and shared online – and subtitles make such programmes even more shareable (Photo: BBC)

**By Louis Staples**

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It used to be a sure sign of being properly middle-aged: when you start complaining that people on television are “mumbling” (they definitely are), and whacking the volume up to antisocial levels – or turning on the subtitles.

But now more people are using subtitles to watch TV than ever before. A 2019 [study](#) by Netflix found that more than 80 per cent of members used subtitles or closed captions at least once a month on the streaming platform.

And their use is particularly high among younger people. A recent [report](#) by deaf-led charity [Stagetext](#), which campaigns to make culture accessible for all, found that young viewers are four times more likely to switch on subtitles than older viewers: 80 per cent of 18 to 24 year-olds regularly watch television with the subtitles switched on.

But why are younger viewers so much more likely to watch TV with subtitles, compared with viewers aged between 56 and 75? After all, the latter age group is almost twice as likely to be deaf or hearing impaired. In fact, helping these groups access television was the original purpose of subtitles, which is why ITV and Channel 4 are [required](#) to provide subtitles for 90 per cent of their programming hours by law, while most BBC channels must offer subtitles for 100 per cent of their programmes.



The Strictly Come Dancing Blackpool special gets the subtitle treatment (Photo: BBC)

In June, [Ofcom found](#) that Channel 4 breached its licensing conditions after viewers were unable to fully access subtitles on its programmes for two months, following technical issues.

The channel’s “lacklustre” response was condemned by campaigners, including Liam O’Dell, who [wrote](#) in *The Guardian*: “Deaf and disabled people should not be waiting for access, and yet they are. In some instances, we miss out on programmes completely, with them disappearing from our screens and streaming services before they have a chance to be subtitled.”

The surge in young people driving the popularity of subtitles suggests their popularity is about more than people using them for necessity.

Television writer and critic Scott Bryan, host of BBC 5 Live's [Must Watch podcast](#), thinks that young people might use subtitles because they are watching TV differently in a fast-paced world.

"I think so many young people are distracted by their phones now that they can't give television undivided attention," he says. "Subtitles can help to close that gap."

Martin Rayner, senior team leader at [Red Bee Media](#) – which is responsible for subtitles on ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5, the BBC and BT Sport in the UK, plus many more channels worldwide – also thinks that changing viewing habits are increasing the demand for subtitles.

"The increasing demand we're seeing is largely down to video on-demand and the rise of streaming," he says. "I've been doing this job for about 20 years, and it used to be just linear TV. But now entire box sets with hundreds of episodes are on-demand, and viewers expect to be able to watch subtitles on all of them."

The streaming era has vastly diversified the content we have available at our fingertips too. Subtitles becoming less of a taboo reflects, but has also contributed to, English-speakers being more open to watching films and TV shows in different languages.

"Everything is now available, isn't it? Programmes from Korea, Japan, Italy, Brazil, they're all there if you want to watch them," Rayner says.

It doesn't always go to plan. An unfortunate subtitle gaffe at Princess Beatrice's wedding (Photo: BBC)

In 2020, [Korean horror film \*Parasite\*](#) – written and directed by Bong Joon-ho – swept the Oscars. "Once you overcome the one-inch tall barrier of subtitles, you will be introduced to so many more amazing films," Joon-ho even [said during his acceptance speech](#) for Best Director.

A year later, Netflix's dystopian series *Squid Game* became the platform's [most-watched show ever](#). "Years ago, we might have been distracted by subtitles," Rayner says. "But now we find that they are integral to our viewing experience. We wouldn't be able to watch these shows that are part of the zeitgeist, that everyone is talking about, without subtitles."

The combination of images and text – both moving and still – has become widespread on social media, whether it's in annotated TikTok videos, or Gif and memes. Out of Context TV Twitter meme accounts – like [Out of Context Succession](#) and [House of the Dragon](#) – are hugely popular, providing an endless stream of viral reaction memes for any mood.

GIFs and memes are now a publicity tool for movie studios and TV networks. Meg Lewis, senior social media manager at online GIF database Giphy, once told me that memes are being increasingly used as part of the advertising strategies of some shows.

“Reality TV shows like *Real Housewives* and *Jersey Shore* were the original pioneers of making viral, meme-able moments, but dramatic shows are now trying to get in on that conversation too,” she said.

“*The Good Place*, *Succession* and *Killing Eve* have great Gif presences online, even when they’re out of season. Without even trying, these shows are continually in the conversation of their audience.”

Subtitles streamline the process of creating a fun reaction meme. (Instead of manually adding text, people can simply screengrab the show as it’s playing on their laptop).

It is a bit of a leap to theorise that posting memes and Gifs is driving the popularity of subtitles for anyone other than a very small minority of people. But it’s undeniable that memes, Gifs and annotated social media videos have normalised the combination of images and text, whether we’re watching TV or scrolling on our phones.

Posts about TV and films in particular have made subtitles less of an aesthetic taboo, helping to turn the combination of text and image into a visual shorthand that most of us easily understand.

It’s hard to see the downside of subtitles making TV more accessible, sharable and enjoyable for viewers, whether we’re using them out of necessity or ease. Rayner thinks that more and better-quality subtitles represent the future of television. “Almost all TV providers are keen to make their content more accessible, and most already go above and beyond what they are mandated to do to meet the demands of viewers,” he says.

“There are now new technologies and innovative ways to increase accessibility. Across all broadcasters, they’re very keen to make use of them to make even more subtitles available.”