

# Freelancers and the crisis in British subtitling

**Subtitling seems glamorous, but there are no glittering prizes as rates are forced down. Kenn Nakata Steffensen outlines a campaign that has set out to reverse this trend**

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Interlingual subtitling is an often-overlooked and little-recognised activity. It was once an attractive area of specialisation for those interested in cinema and television. Although incomes were relatively lower than in translation generally, it was possible to make a living from translating subtitles in the UK. This is becoming increasingly difficult, as economic and technological changes are restructuring the industry globally. Subtitling in the UK is at a critical juncture, where the continued survival of many established freelance subtitlers and subtitling companies is uncertain. Similar trends are also affecting colleagues in other European countries, such as France, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden.

## Industrial restructuring

Over the last decade Los Angeles and London became the two hubs of a global industry providing subtitles for mainly English-language video material watched by audiences all over the world. Subtitling in the UK was historically a means of providing access to audiovisual media for the hearing-impaired. Until the late 1990s, the British subtitling industry mainly supplied a domestic market concentrated in the broadcasting sector. After the introduction of DVD technology in 1996, London was well positioned to become a global centre for DVD subtitling due to the existing infrastructure, legislative

developments, and the city's sociological characteristics. The regulatory environment set statutory targets for the subtitling of TV programmes, which created a demand for private-sector subtitling companies to supplement the output produced by the in-house subtitling departments of broadcasters. These companies were able to draw on the availability of linguistic talent in London and expand into foreign-language subtitling to the extent that translation became the main business for the majority. They predominantly rely on the outsourcing of services to freelance subtitlers, especially for translation from English into foreign languages.

Before the widespread dissemination of broadband technology and subtitling software, the subtitlers tended to be based in the London area, translate off-site and perform editing and quality control work in client offices. As geographical proximity has become less of a necessity, freelancers can in principle be based anywhere in the world. Much of the work previously carried out by British-based

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freelancers is therefore increasingly being sourced in lower-cost countries, carried out by unpaid student interns or by new entrants to the industry willing or able to work for very low pay.

Subtitling companies are restructuring, merging and diversifying, some have closed, and many freelancers are leaving the industry or supplementing their income by work in other areas. Of the 13 major companies in the country, six have changed ownership since 2001, one has ceased to trade, one is the object of speculative interest by 'activist investors', three have merged with companies in neighbouring sectors, one has ceased to operate in the UK, and one has partly relocated to Greece. The corporate acquisitions have been by five US private equity funds and hybrid investment funds/media operators and by an Australian investment bank. The acquisitions have in all cases resulted in restructuring, integration into larger media conglomerates and cost-saving measures, which have affected freelancers. The effects felt have been more restrictive contracts and significantly reduced rates. The industry is undergoing radical structural transformation, and many subtitlers fear that if present trends continue, the outcome will be to the detriment of subtitlers, subtitling companies, the audience and, ultimately, the studios and broadcasters who are driving the trend towards lower prices.

The simultaneous centralisation and decentralisation of the industry on a global scale also mean that the UK's position as a centre in this part of the global media industry is under threat. Operations are being centralised in Los Angeles, and

subtitles are increasingly sourced in lower-cost countries. For some languages there are no savings to be made by sourcing translations elsewhere. In an ironic twist on the familiar outsourcing phenomenon, one company recently advertised for European translators willing to relocate to Manila for a minimum of one year. Travel expenses to and from the Philippines would be paid by the company, but the subtitler would be paid by number of programme minutes translated. In principle, this could mean not being paid for long periods of time. Outsourcing to lower-cost countries usually means tapping into an existing human resource base. In the case of subtitling, the novel solution being experimented with at present is to export not only the jobs, but the workers as well.

### Less work at lower rates

Subtitlers are doubly under pressure. On the one hand, there is a lower volume of work available than in previous years, and, on the other, the rates paid per programme minute have fallen by up to as much as 50 per cent in the past year and typically by 25 per cent. Rates had remained stagnant for a decade but began to fall in 2005. They were already lower than in the 1980s, but this was arguably compensated for by a large volume of work due to the DVD releases of the vast back catalogue of films. Some five or six years ago a freelance subtitler could earn a sustainable income by working for just one or two clients. But the DVD boom years are now over, and perhaps the ascendancy of London as a production centre in the global subtitling market is also a thing of the past. It has therefore become increasingly difficult to make a living from subtitling in this country.

Subtitling rates tend to be calculated per programme minute rather than by number of words. As the amount of dialogue varies, earnings per source word are variable. Some films have more dialogue than others. Comparison with incomes in other fields of translation is complicated by the rate structure, but interlingual subtitling rates are generally far lower than rates for other types of translation,

and still they are declining dramatically. Subtitling a 90-minute feature film to an acceptable quality takes an average of three working days. This is the equivalent of £6.37 per hour at the lowest rates currently offered. A typical 23-minute episode of a comedy series of around 300 subtitles has some 2,000 to 2,500 words. At £1.70 per programme minute this equates to £15.64 per 1,000 words. Some subtitlers report hourly earnings of less than the minimum wage when working on particularly demanding projects. Few professional translators in the UK can afford to take on work at that level of

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remuneration. Audiovisual translators are therefore finding themselves diversifying into other areas of translation or entirely different professions. As a consequence, subtitling quality suffers. Subtitling companies seem aware that subtitling quality is likely to decline, and have in most cases kept their rates for quality control work unchanged. Experienced UK-based subtitlers are therefore spending longer correcting work of a lower quality and losing income, although the pay per programme minute is unchanged.

In the short term, the new owners of subtitling companies and their clients, the studios and broadcasters, make savings. It remains to be seen in the long term whether these financial savings are worth the alienation of film-makers and audiences and the less tangible damage to the reputation of companies in foreign markets.


### A lack of professional recognition

Subtitlers are a heterogeneous group and the profession is extremely unregulated when compared with, for instance, translation and interpreting in general. There are no industry associations of subtitling

companies nor any certification schemes to ensure quality or adherence to minimum standards.

Subtitling is linguistically as demanding as other fields of translation. In addition to the skills of a translator, the interlingual subtitler has to master complex technical skills in order to create text that follows the auditive and visual rhythm of the film and fluently conveys the message of the film in two lines at a readable speed. Interlingual subtitling is a highly specialised activity, which cannot be carried out competently by just any bilingual person. However, the payment subtitling companies now find themselves pressured to offer their freelance providers is comparable to the wages paid to unskilled workers. The value placed on the work by Hollywood studios and broadcasters indicates that the needs of their non-native audiences have a low priority and that they consider subtitling an unskilled profession. There seems to be a lack of recognition of the importance of localisation of audiovisual content and of the skills required.

### What can be done?

A group of freelance subtitlers concerned with developments in the British subtitling industry have recently formed SUBTLE: The Subtitlers' Association. The association aims to promote the recognition of subtitling as a profession, to encourage the use of skilled subtitlers by the film and television industries, to establish regulatory mechanisms to ensure professional standards, and to promote fair rates and working practices for subtitlers. The initiative originated from an online discussion forum, where since the summer of 2005 debate had turned more and more to problems of deteriorating working conditions and declining rates of pay. It became evident that a more formal organisation was needed to voice concerns felt within the profession and, eventually, to take joint action to address issues affecting subtitlers as a professional community. 

**For more information on SUBTLE, or to contact the association, please visit [www.subtitlers.org.uk](http://www.subtitlers.org.uk).**