

Transcript from *How accessible are Toronto movie theatres for deaf people?* CBC Metro Morning (Radio 1) Interview with Vanessa Wells, February 23, 2018. You can stream the audio file on CBC: <http://www.cbc.ca/player/play/1168502851697/>

Matt Galloway: *Black Panther*, as you know, opened to record crowds around the world this weekend. One of the excited moviegoers was Nyle DiMarco. He is an artist and Deaf activist in the United States. Really wanted to see this film. Ten minutes into it, though, walked out of the theatre, took his disappointment to Twitter, said the experience made him feel—his words—“so disabled” because the closed-captioning device that the theatre provided kept skipping lines and missing scenes. Not good if you’re trying to see this movie. It’s led to hundreds of other D/deaf people tweeting about their own movie-theatre frustrations. Vanessa Wells runs a company called Reel Words. It is a company here in Toronto. It reviews and edits captions and subtitles for different films. She also has a medical condition that affects her hearing, so she chooses to use captions. She is with me in studio now. Good morning!

Vanessa Wells: Good morning, Matt!

MG: This tweet: it got a lot of attention—

VW: It did!

MG: —led to a big conversation. What was your reaction to his comments about the negative experience he had in seeing this film that so many people wanted to see?

VW: Well, sadly, it’s nothing new. This is a problem that’s been called out for almost 30 years now. It started with Guy Lively, in Ontario certainly, advocating for captions. Mr. DiMarco’s a wonderful spokesman for the Deaf community, and I think that’s why he got so much attention brought to the issue.

MG: What is your own experience? You have, as I mentioned, a medical condition that affects your hearing. You choose to use captions.

VW: Yes, I have some hearing conditions that impact my hearing, although my hearing loss is pretty minimal, so that’s not really an issue. I just choose to use captions at home. That’s how I got interested in caption editing, and the more I looked into it, I thought I should start doing some checking out of the Deaf community’s experience with the equipment and accessibility technologies that are available in cinemas.

MG: So you contacted just about every movie theatre in Toronto—

VW: I tried to, yes!

[both laughing]

MG: There are a lot!—to find out about accessibility and to find out what sort of options they have in terms of captioning. What did you find?

VW: Well, certainly I found the most willingness to deal with the problem with the independent-cinema owners, but because they're small businesses that model doesn't really allow for a lot of flexibility in what they offer. Certainly the larger, corporate multiplexes have more options *available*, but the reality of that availability is something quite different, and then, even if the technology is available, they run into things like Mr. DiMarco did with things not functioning.

MG: What is the technology? I mean, what did Nyle DiMarco have in his hands or in front of him that would allow him to enjoy the movie as he wanted to?

VW: With someone with more profound deafness, he had a technology that—one brand name is CaptiView, and that's a tool that you take in to your seat, and it displays the captions a couple of lines at a time right in front of your visual field, and it sticks in the cupholder. But in my experience it wasn't terribly easy to use.

MG: So you're still looking at the big screen?

VW: Yes.

MG: But you're able to look at the captions as you're looking at the big screen?

VW: Yes, but you're also flicking your attention from the very small green digital text up to the the larger focus further away. It's tiresome for the eyes.

MG: His concern was that it kept skipping lines and it was missing scenes. It would drive you around the bend if you're trying to watch a movie!

VW: Yeah, exactly.

MG: How common is something like that?

VW: Apparently *very* because when I tried it out, it went pretty well for the first half an hour of the film, but then I did start noticing lines repeating, missing lines, aside from the normal caption-editing problems.

MG: The other issue, as you said, is whether the technology's actually there or not. What sort of planning, if you're going to a movie, do you have to make to ensure that that technology's available for you?

VW: Well, I'm lucky because I don't have to deal with this stuff at this point, but if you are in the Deaf community or using captions for various other reasons, it takes a lot of planning: you can't just go "Hey, guys, let's go to the movie!" They've got to search it out—even though, if you go online and look up theatres, you have to go through every single movie to see if they offer any closed captions and, if they do which theatres, what showtimes,

and you need to call ahead because just because they have the technology in the cinema does not mean it's available.

MG: Is it reasonable to expect that the cinemas—the theatre owners, operators—would have that technology available for anybody who wants it?

VW: It's reasonable to expect it, but that's not what's happening, and—

MG: I just wonder—I mean, there are obligations in terms of accessibility. They would say that, you know—“This is a cost; this is something that we have to try and wrap our heads around,” so that question of whether it's reasonable or not comes from their perspective, I suppose.

VW: Yes, but the other thing that they're missing out on is—this is a very loose number but—generally people say that there are about 10% of the population have hearing challenges: they're missing out 10% of the population attending movies so—

MG: So people are going to come, they're going to buy popcorn, they're going to spend money on tickets, and—

VW: Yeah! There's opportunity for profit, so that argument doesn't really hold.

MG: The other part of it, as I said, is accessibility. The CRTC requires television broadcasters—all TV broadcasters—to provide closed captioning with 95% accuracy.

VW: Yes.

MG: I don't know whether it hits that or not.

VW: No, it does not.

MG: You watch the closed captioning: you always see the mistakes. Is there a need to further enforce accessibility rules so that anybody can experience the movie, no matter what ability level they have?

VW: Yes, absolutely, and that's a lot of the work I advocate for. The difficulty with captioning on TV is that the timeline is extremely quick. The captioners are under a lot of pressure—

MG: It's live.

VW: Yeah—well, live is a whole other story! I'm just talking about preprogrammed captioning. For movies, in Canada, there isn't really anything set in law about making those movies accessible closed captioned, let alone open captioned.

MG: Is that something you'd like to see?

VW: I would love to see that! I think a lot of people hear that, and they think *Oh, I don't want to see captions all over my screen! I just want to see the movie, and I'm into the aesthetics.* But if you look at other accessibility means—I mean, we don't say to people in wheelchairs “Well, you can use that to sidewalk-curb ramp Mondays from 1 to 3,” and that's the reality for

some people in other places: they may have showings for the Deaf community with captions at lousy hours!

MG: You said 10% of the population has some sort of a hearing [indistinct].

VW: Actually, guesstimates range from 5 to 20% depending on where you're getting information from.

MG: It's a big constituency.

VW: It is.

MG: Vanessa, thank you very much.

VW: Thank you, Matt!

MG: Vanessa Wells, an advocate for better accessibility for D/deaf people. She runs a Toronto company called Reel Words. It reviews and edits movie captions and subtitles. If you've had any exper— [fade out].

More information about this and other issues can be found online at <https://reelwords.ca/>, and Reel Words Subtitle and Caption Editing can be emailed at info@reelwords.ca.