

# Listen up, newsdesks

Hearing-impaired freelancers face many barriers, from ignorance to rudeness, says Andrew Don

It is September 11, 2001, and two planes have just flown into the World Trade Center. You are working on a national newsdesk. Your telephone rings and when you pick it up an operator tells you a deaf freelance is on the line using the Ttypetalk TextDirect relay service.

After an explanation of how the deaf-to-hearing-person relay service works, your usually courteous phone manner wears thin.

Now the World Trade Center is collapsing on-screen before your eyes. The deaf freelance has an exclusive angle to the story that is unfolding. She types it into her textphone for the operator to relay to you.

But by now your patience has snapped and you've already slammed down the phone. An extreme example, but one that many hearing-impaired journalists will recognise.

Marion Bull, a freelance journalist, who has a total acquired hearing loss, describes in the current issue NUJ publication *The Journalist* how, when she phoned the *Daily Express* with a news story in March, she was referred back to an irate woman, who said, "Because deaf people have distorted voices, we can't understand you, so we ask you to send a fax, or write in". Then she hung up.

Bull has normal speech — in English and five other languages — and finds the idea of writing to a newsdesk laughable. She says news can be too urgent for e-mails, which often don't get a response.

Another time she contacted a newsdesk about a plane crash in the Sahara desert in which she was the only Briton on board. The operator relayed word for word what the hearing person said: "I can't understand these arseholes pretending to be deaf and getting someone to ring on their behalf."

Bull tells *Press Gazette* about her experience when she tried to contact *The Lady* about a year ago. "They were not ladies at all. Some prima donna slammed down the phone and was rude to the operator."

Lyndsay Fulcher, editor of *The Lady*, says: "We occasionally get complete weirdos calling and people who have had one too many. If we did not know someone was deaf and their voice was distorted we would not have a very long conversation. I'm sorry she had that experience."

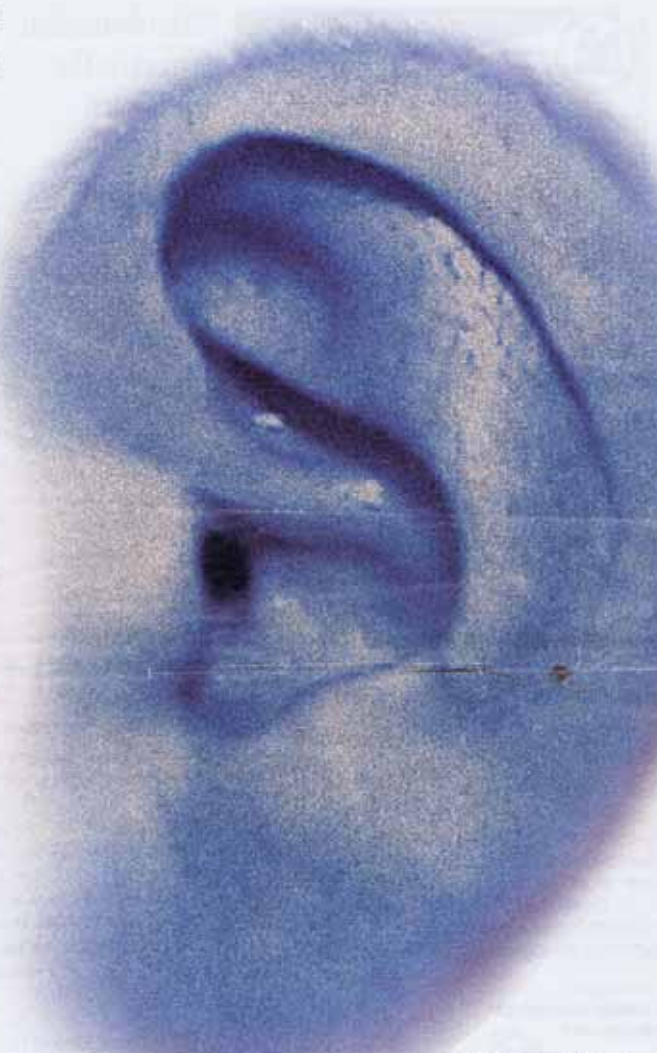
David Leigh, head of news at the *Daily Express*, says no one on his newsdesk would be discourteous to a deaf freelance and suggests the short shrift that Bull says she received might have come from elsewhere in the building.

"There are so many different factors. It depends what time of day the call is. If I'm rushing into conference, if there is a strong news story ongoing... sometimes we have more time to speak to people and sometimes we don't. We treat all callers with courtesy and it certainly wouldn't make any difference if it was explained there was a deaf person using this [relay] service."

THERE ARE ABOUT 8.7 million deaf and hearing-impaired people in the UK, according to the Royal National Institute for the Deaf (and hard of hearing). About 673,000 of them are severely or profoundly deaf; 420,000 cannot hear well enough to use a voice telephone, even with a device to make it louder. More than three million people of working age are deaf or hard of hearing and 153,000 of these are severely or profoundly deaf.

The NUJ estimates that 7 to 8 per cent of disabled journalists are deaf or hearing-impaired — that is about 120 of its members. But Kit Wells, chairman of the union's disabled members' council, believes the real figure is much higher because many do not like to disclose their disability.

One deaf freelance, who did not want to be named because he feared he would not work again, complained



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overcome the communication barrier".

He says deafness is still a stigma in some quarters. "I twice had a serious discussion with my editor and brought an interpreter with me. The features editor, [John Caruth] faxes me when needed and all the post is sent to my home. They know how to deal with me."

Caruth says he does not take calls via TextDirect. "I find it hard to use. There's a time delay and you don't have the patience to wait. By and large, newsdesks are bloody rude to journalists. You treat deaf people like any other journalist."

Chris Elliott, managing editor of *The Guardian*, says he would want deaf and hearing-impaired callers treated sensitively. "If it was a call out of the blue and on the day of the World Trade Center attacks, the reality is the journalist might get a response they would not want. We would hope that would be a rarity."

Richard Spencer, news editor of *The Daily Telegraph*, says: "I would like to think that if an operator came on and explained to me what was happening, they would not get a more unfair hearing than any other hearing journalist."

Robin Esser, executive managing editor of the *Daily Mail*, says the newspaper's policy is to judge journalists and their stories on editorial criteria.

"We don't care if they are red, white, blue, pink, male, female, young, old, visually impaired or as fit as Lennox Lewis. A good journalist is a good journalist. I think the key to it is talent and you just have to put whatever problems or impairments anyone has to one side. But I can see why busy newsdesks don't [always] have the opportunity to do that."

He says his newspaper gets about 45,000 calls a week and 2,000 e-mails a day, so it is not surprising if staff's human failings sometimes get the better of them.

The RNID's legal team says freelancers would probably be covered by the Disability Rights Act 1995, which makes it illegal to discriminate against them unless someone is able to justify doing so.

Meanwhile, busy newsdesk journalists who can get a bit frazzled, remember this the next time a deaf or hearing-impaired freelance calls: the most common cause of acquired hearing loss is ageing. So it could be you.

Andrew Don is a freelance journalist

## WHISTLING WHILE YOU WORK

I have little hearing in my left ear and slight hearing loss in my right, but it does not affect the quality of my work nor my ability to report news and communicate with my clients. I'm a good lip-reader and if I'm interviewing someone in person who mumbles, I politely ask them to speak up.

It is not an issue for me on the phone because I use my strong ear. But there can be the occasional embarrassing moment. Proud of my new digital hearing aid, I was interviewing when my bit of gadgetry began to whistle like Dick Van Dyke's Toot Sweets in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. My poor interviewee didn't have a clue where the noise was coming from. "Can you hear that?" he asked. "Hear what?" I asked back. I'm sure he thought the pressure of work had made him delusional. I quickly left his office, worried the whistling might have attracted the local dogs. I have since given up on hearing aids.

Andrew Don