Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission

Conseil de la radiodiffusion et des télécommunications canadiennes

Video Relay Service Public Opinion Research

Executive Summary

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Canada

Executive Summary

The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) regulates and supervises broadcasting and telecommunications in Canada. The CRTC's mandate is to ensure that both the broadcasting and telecommunications systems serve the Canadian public.

The CRTC commissioned Sage Research Corporation to conduct a qualitative public opinion research study with users of the Video Relay Service (VRS), a basic telecommunications service that enables persons who are Deaf, deafened, hard of hearing or have a speech disability who use sign languages to communicate with voice telephone users. The service is offered in American Sign Language (ASL) and Langue des signes québécoise (LSQ). The sign language user makes or receives a video call to connect to a VRS operator using Internet-based videoconferencing. The operator then connects via a voice telephone call to the other party and relays the conversation from sign language to voice and vice-versa, for example from ASL to English or from LSQ to French.

In Telecom Regulatory Policy 2014-187 Video Relay Service, issued in April 2014, the CRTC determined that Video Relay Service (VRS) must be offered in Canada. VRS was launched in Canada in September 2016 and, since November 2017, the service is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. VRS is implemented and overseen by the Canadian Administrator of VRS (CAV), an independent and centralized administrator.

The CRTC committed to reviewing the VRS regulatory framework three years from the launch of the service. This research will support the review by ensuring that objective insights into the views and experiences of Canadians who use VRS in Canada are on the record of a public proceeding, the timing of which has yet to be announced.

The overall objective of the research was to collect the user experiences of registered VRS subscribers to help determine what is working well, how VRS should be improved and how the service might be extended.

The specific research objectives for the study were to explore:

- Quality of service (for example, the time it takes a VRS operator to pick up the call, quality of interpretation)
- Technical quality (for example, quality of video, ease of use, data usage, platforms used to access the service)
- Education and outreach
- Customer service (for example, are questions/concerns/complaints dealt with appropriately)
- How VRS is used/purposes for which VRS is used by customers
- Suggestions for improvements
- How could/should VRS be extended
- Experience of accessing 911 services using VRS

Sixteen online video interviews with one or two participants using a video meeting/collaboration platform and three individual telephone interviews using VRS were conducted between March 20 and April 16, 2020, across Canada. The online video interviews consisted of the interviewer, a sign-language interpreter and one to two VRS users. Thirteen online interviews were completed with participants who communicate using ASL and three with participants who use LSQ. The individual telephone interviews were conducted with participants via a VRS ASL operator.

The target group was individuals who are registered with SRV Canada VRS and who registered for the CRTC's Accessibility Research List Database. This opt-in database was developed specifically to generate a sample for research that the CRTC might decide to undertake in 2020.

Twenty-six ASL and six LSQ VRS database registrants participated in the research.

This research was qualitative in nature, not quantitative. As such, the results provide an indication of participants' views about the topics explored, but cannot be statistically generalized to represent the full population of VRS users. Moreover, it may be that not all types of VRS users are represented in the research. Qualitative research does, however, produce a richness and depth of response not readily available through other methods of research. It is the insight and direction provided by qualitative research that makes it an appropriate tool for exploring participants' experiences and opinions with respect to VRS in preparation for the subsequent public proceeding.

Perceived Value of VRS

All participants said VRS is a very important service. One word often used to summarize the value of VRS was "independence." There are several dimensions to how VRS is perceived to facilitate independence:

- Wide breadth of usage
- Do not have to depend on others to make a phone call
- Clearer/more accurate communication
- Better than TTY (Teletypewriter) or IP Relay (Internet protocol relay); note that both of these are a form of Message Relay Service or MRS, and are text-based services rather than sign language services
- 24/7 availability

Devices Used

VRS is used on mobile smartphones, computers and tablets. Almost all participants, at least sometimes, use VRS on their smartphone. Reasons for using VRS on a computer or tablet included: larger image size helps with seeing the video interpreter (VI); especially when using a computer, the ease of a comfortable way of positioning the webcam; and for some participants a stronger/faster Internet connection.

Quite a few participants who use a Mac computer did not like the Waterfox browser required to run the VRS app, and expressed concerns about security and being prone to freezing up. This limited use of their computer for VRS calls, and led several not to use their computer at all for VRS calls.

Getting Information about VRS

Social media and communication within the Deaf community were very important sources for learning about VRS for all the participants, and these continue to be important for learning about new developments.

Some participants had previous experience using a VRS service in the United States and thus they were familiar with VRS. This is noteworthy because all of these participants felt that the U.S. VRS services are technologically more advanced than Canadian VRS in terms of features and functionality. They suggested Canadian VRS should look to the U.S. VRS services for ideas on how to improve Canadian VRS.

CAV Information Sessions

Those who attended CAV information sessions found them to be very helpful for learning about VRS and for installing the VRS apps.

Several participants said they believe VRS is now well-known in the Deaf community, and because of this suggested that the CAV should invest less in broadly targeted outreach activities, and more in activities specifically targeted to non-users. The latter would include those not aware of VRS – which they thought to be a small group, and those aware of VRS but who do not use it – which they thought to be the larger group.

CAV Website

Most participants do not regularly go to the CAV website. Instead, it appears that proactive communication by the CAV is better accomplished through electronic newsletters, email and the CAV's Facebook pages.

While some said the website was fine for their purposes, some others were critical. The main criticism was that they felt the website is too text-heavy, not always written in a simple way and that it needs more sign language videos. The Frequently Asked Questions section was singled out in this regard.

Customer Service

Many participants had some experience using VRS customer service, albeit typically not frequently. The majority of these participants said their experience was a good one, but some were less positive. Those with a positive experience in particular usually commented on the personal interaction: the customer service representative was helpful, understanding and patient. The minority with a less positive experience were not satisfied with the interpersonal interaction with the customer service representative. There were two main types of comments: (1) the person did not appear attentive, engaged or interested, and (2) the person was impatient or expressed frustration with the caller.

Some issues and suggestions each noted by several participants:

- In the case of complaints to customer service about perceived bugs or design issues, there does not appear to be any follow-up by the CAV to fix the issues. It was suggested the CAV needs to do better in using the learnings from customer service calls to identify and implement improvements to VRS.
- Customer service should be available during evening hours. One participant suggested it should at least be possible to leave a message after hours.

Perceptions of the Interpretation Service

Participants said that most of the video interpreters (VIs) are good, and the large majority of interpretation experiences are good. So, overall satisfaction with the interpretation service is high.

That said, there can be occasional issues with a VI or an interpretation experience. Some of these include:

- *Some VIs are less experienced or not very good*: Participants appeared generally understanding of accommodating newer VIs, but several suggested there should be stricter standards for who can be a VI.
- *Situational suitability*: This was cited in two contexts:
  - The VI may not be familiar with the general subject matter of the call, and as a result may not be adept at signing certain words or concepts.
  - The VRS user may prefer a certain gender for certain situations – this appeared mainly to involve certain sensitive medical situations. In this context, it was suggested the caller should have the option to request a female or male VI.

  A suggestion was to provide a capability to choose a VI in some circumstances.
- *Participant suggestion*: make it easier to provide feedback on a VI: Some participants said it should be made easier and quicker to provide feedback on a VI after a VRS call. To facilitate this suggestions included incorporating a feedback mechanism into the app, and making it easier to access the VI's identification number.

- *Use of American interpreters*: Several participants said that some of the VIs are American, and this can lead to problems because they may not be familiar with Canadian expressions, Canadian city names, or Canadian programs of interest to the Canadian Deaf community.
- *Use of deaf interpreters*: Some participants suggested there should be deaf interpreters available for certain VRS users. These could be VRS users who are new to Canada and not fluent in ASL or LSQ, or who are not fluent for other reasons. They said VRS does not currently appear to use any deaf interpreters.
- *Switching interpreters during a VRS call*: Some participants said that a change in interpreters during a call can be disruptive: the switch can happen in the middle of a thread in the conversation, or the new interpreter does not have important context from the conversation up until the switch. The main issue was that the switch can happen too abruptly without sufficient warning. The suggestion was to provide more advance warning, so that the ongoing conversational thread can be completed prior to the switch or so at least that the caller can prepare for the switch.
- *Wait time for an interpreter:* Generally, this was not perceived to be a problem. Two contexts that were more problematic:
  - The VRS user needs to make a call at a specific preset time, e.g. for a job interview.
  - The participants using LSQ appeared to be somewhat more dissatisfied with wait times for an interpreter.

Issues Pertaining to Using VRS

Hearing party does not accept a VRS call: All participants had experienced a hearing party not accepting a VRS call. There were two major reasons for call refusals: the hearing party is concerned over security and privacy, and the hearing party suspects the call is telemarketing or a scam of some sort. A third context was simple lack of familiarity with VRS resulting in a hang up. Participants suggested there should be a communications program to inform and educate businesses, government agencies and the public about VRS so as to reduce the incidence of hearing parties not accepting a VRS call.

VI introduction: Some participants suggested providing an option to skip the introduction the VI provides to a hearing party. Reasons included:

- This can give the VRS user more control over the call.
- It can reduce the likelihood of the hearing party perceiving the call as telemarketing or as a scam.
- The party being called may already be familiar with the caller.
- The VRS user may not want the other party to know they are deaf.

Calling 811/311: Some participants complained particularly about the inability to dial 811 using VRS. They recommended that given the importance of these 3-digit phone services, it should be possible on VRS to dial these services using the 3-digit code.

Extending ways of using VRS: The most notable suggestion was to implement a communication program to increase awareness and understanding of VRS among business and the general public, as this would substantially benefit businesses staffed with individuals who are deaf.

VRS App

A general comment about the VRS app made by quite a few participants is that while it works, it is somewhat dated in functionality and design. All participants familiar with VRS in the U.S. said the U.S. VRS services are better in terms of the app features. A general suggestion from participants was that the VRS app should be updated, and updated more often, and that U.S. VRS services provide models for how the app should be improved.

The most widely mentioned issue with the app involved notification of incoming calls. Many participants said they miss a lot of incoming calls. A comment was that "you have to be staring directly at the app" to know there is an incoming call. Participants suggested there needs to be much more prominent notification of incoming calls, such that a person knows there is an incoming call even if they are using other apps or are not looking at their device at all. It was suggested there be a flashing light and/or vibration (for a smartphone).

Data Usage

Almost all participants at least sometimes made VRS calls using their smartphone. In this context, most had data plans where they had to pay attention to their mobile data usage in order to avoid excessive overage charges. Participants were able to manage their data usage, but to varying degrees it did affect when and how they used VRS. Many participants suggested the CRTC should work with the telephone companies (telcos) to encourage – or require – them to offer data plans tailored to the needs of individuals who are deaf. Participants said that because an individual who is deaf is not using voice services, it is reasonable and equitable for telcos to offer individuals who are deaf better data pricing than is available to hearing customers.

Using VRS for 911 Calls

The majority of participants had not made a 911 call using VRS, and so could not comment on this. Two participants said they had not known that one can make a 911 call using VRS, suggesting there is still some awareness building to do. Among those who had made a 911 call, most said the call went fine, and they were connected quickly.

The main issue several participants had with their 911 experience was that the VI refused to stay on the line when the police arrived and continue interpreting because that would be a VRI service, which is not allowed on VRS. Participants suggested that VRI should be available in a 911 emergency context to ensure effective communication when first responders arrive.

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I hereby certify as Senior Officer of Sage Research Corporation that the deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the *Communications Policy* of the Government of Canada and Procedures for Planning and Contracting Public Opinion Research. Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, and standings with the electorate or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.

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