

SUBTITLES TRANSLATION IN THE GREY ZONE

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Abstract

This paper offers an account of the current state-of-affairs of Audiovideo translation, in particular amateur translations of subtitles of pirated films and TV programmes in four fan translation and subtitling communities in the grey zone, who are threading the thin line of legality - illegality due to loopholes in copyright in different jurisdictions. The author, who explored these communities as a volunteer translator and subtitler, describes and discusses the communities striving for quality in translation, conventionalization of best practices in subtitling by use of European and international standards as well as personal experience and usability. The paper discusses translators' mistakes, collaboration in these fan subtitling communities and members' contribution with software development, advice and support. It concludes with the latest developments in audiovisual content delivery in Ultra HD and the Open Translation movement.

Keywords: audiovideo translation; subtitling; transcribing; fansubbing; grey zone; fan translation

Audiovideo Translation (AVT) has seen a tremendous development since the mid 90s (Díaz-Cintas 2003, 192) and is 'at present taking breathtaking speed' (Anderman & Rogers 2003, 8) with 'an increasingly large proportion of translation activity' (Díaz-Cintas 2003, 193). While translation and subtitling are not new, user-generated translation of films have gone a long way since Díaz-Cintas and Sánchez's (2006) article on fansubbing for anime and manga. User-generated subtitles are now of a quality close to professional practice. Fan film translators and subtitlers have formed communities with strict rules and roles, and can often rival well-established professional services. With the emergence of p2p networks and torrent sites fan film translators work in the grey zone translating pirated films long before they reach the cinema screens; or they translate foreign television programmes which have never been intended for a particular locale. This article discusses and explores the current state-of-affairs of fan film translation and subtitling in the grey zone in Bulgaria.

The Grey Zone

DVDs and Blu-Ray disks often contain subtitles in several languages. It is common practice in the industry to ship them to certain locales later than to others, much to the disappointment of cinema-goers. Even if film fans have bought a DVD online, or paid a subscription to film and television websites, they are very often not able to watch these films translated in their own language.

A similar case may be with much older films. An example may be the recent release of the seventh episode of Star Wars - younger audiences may not have seen the very first three episodes released in the 70s and 80s, and may be only familiar with the animated series. Cases where sequels are produced with a longer time span between the first and the subsequent films are not a rarity in today's film-making industry. So subtitles for the older and classic films may be very difficult to obtain.

Hence, such a niche for films with translated subtitles is naturally filled by people who illegally record television programmes or rip DVDs to send them to friends who could translate the programme or the film. The niche is also populated by others who know the source language but would like to watch the latest programme or film translating it in exchange. Users sharing films have created p2p networks and, as user demand increased, torrent trackers emerged.

While downloading and offering ripped films is illegal, translations may be not. The grey zone in question is that translations, by law, are usually authorized or commissioned by the author or copyright holder. In these cases, the translation is considered 'work for hire' and therefore the translators do not become automatically authors, nor do they become copyright holders. However, translators may claim that they have translated the film by ear from their own legally purchased copy of a film for their own use, which renders the whole activity legal. When such subtitles are shared with friends online, they become part of a re-distribution of a pirated film, which is again a breach of copyright law. The above demonstrates that these translators practice across the fuzzy legal-illegal border. Whether such practice is ethical is not the discussion of this paper.

The following section explores and discusses the structure and practices of four fansubtitling communities in Bulgaria.

Communities of practice

Pirated releases of films vary greatly in video quality, but these releases can be broadly categorised in three groups: first releases (for example recorded in cinemas with cameras), middle releases (for example recorded while viewed on the internet) and latest releases (for example high definition Blu-ray rips). At the various stages from the first to the latest release there may be more than one person involved in the translation and subtitling. Due to the demand and the number of released films, translators cannot cope with all the work required to produce subtitles. Naturally, teams have formed and whole communities collaborate towards a good translation. With the first releases the translators act as spotters and synchronise the subtitled translation. In the mid releases, where time code is available in the subtitles in the original language, some of the work is taken on by other people who edit and proofread the translations and still others may synchronise the translated subtitles for several different releases, for example a 2-CD rip and a one-disk HD Blu-ray rip. The self-organization and work distribution of such communities is discussed in the following subsections.

Teams

The amount of work has made it necessary for a natural distribution of roles among the members of the subtitling communities and various teams have formed delegating different kinds of work to members with the specific skills that are required in the production and post-production of fan translations. They collaborate and support each other in the process. Examining four such communities, we have seen their members forming teams. Three of them are translation and subtitling communities and one not directly related to translation and subtitling, but recommending and acquiring subtitles from the three others. One of these communities, which has existed since 2005, has over 70 actively involved members grouped in ten teams. Some of them specialize, for example in a particular language (team “Russian Roulette” for translations from Russian, less common languages - Korean, Japanese), older and retro films (team “Retro mania”, team “LosT in TransLaTion”), animations and anime (team “Anime”), children’s films and TV animation series (team “League Of Extraordinary Gentlemen”). Team “Partisans wtf” specialize in grammatical correctness, while “Hell Crew Team” aims to become the best in spotting, and team “Re-Vision” deals with proofreading and

correcting stylistic mistakes. The team members take different roles in the different teams according to their best skills, thus there are team leaders, members who source subtitle tracks, translators, editors, proofreaders, spotters, synchronizers, interns and masters, general editors and QA teams. Unlike what Díaz-Cintas & Sanchez (2006) noted about fan-subtitlers of anime, these community members have a range of skills – for language transfer, spotting and subtitling. All members are involved in the various stages of production and post-production and have created community rules thus bringing the Grey zone subtitling work to near-professional level.

Rules

The self-regulating communities have drawn on professional expertise and good practices in the trade to monitor, maintain and evaluate internal quality. Some of the subtitling rules adopted in the four communities are presented in a comparative table in Appendix 1. These are in the form of recommendations for good practice along with written guides, video tutorials and help manuals made available in the community forums.

In the forums of “Translator’s Heaven”, one can find references to the European Association for Studies in Screen Translation (ESIST)¹ and the British Institute of Translation and Interpreting (ITI)². The best practices have been summarized in a 19-A4-page long standard and used by the community for creating subtitles. This is a clear indication for the striving of the community to produce quality subtitles. Furthermore, users have drawn on personal experience and usability and have argued that reading speed should be measured by words per line, not characters per line. By way of an example, “Translator’s Heaven” was featured in the national daily “SEGA” in 2013. Also, the same community were commissioned in June 2015 by the producers of a TV series to create the intralingual subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing (SDH). One of the forum members has commented: ‘I like the initiative and I would gladly free up some of my time (I only have to learn how to make such subtitles or what is added to them).’ (goranovab, 2011); another translator replies ‘It’s very important for such people to maintain a connection with the real world and very important for their survival! I myself am hard of hearing and I know what that means!’ (atilasokolov, 2014). (my translation)

¹ www.esist.org

² www.iti.org.uk

Other useful guides created by community members, both users and translators, refer to language, punctuation, describing and explaining in plain, accessible language stylistic and grammar rules; use of dialects in translations drawing on formal grammar books and also years of experience of the most common mistakes made in translations which are worth addressing because of reoccurrence. They also address cultural transfer and contain recommendations for domesticating idioms and metaphors.

Most valuable of all are the recommendations for an essential film translation skill: compression. These guides contain plenty of examples from translated subtitles with explanations for both beginner and advanced fan translators.

Quality assurance

The communities' sites have rating systems in place so better translations are rewarded, which motivates better production and post-production of subtitles. These communities often compete against each other for recognition, which further encourages the quality of translation, while users of the subtitles provide the external evaluation by voting on and rating translated subtitles.

Another feature is the integration of donations through PayPal or bank card payments on the pages with the subtitles. Whether such payments are made, we could not find, but the fact that a subtitle file has 21,447 downloads leads us to believe that some donations are being made.

Taking ownership

The communities also feature warnings not to remove the credentials and not to plagiarize translated subtitles nor to host them on other sites. There are recommendations for displaying the site credentials and the translators' nicknames. Some examples of credentials in subtitles, which may appear in the first subtitle, the last one, or sometimes both at the very beginning and the end, are:

1
00:01:02,521 --> 00:01:06,569
превод и субтитри: maishka

3
00:00:27,017 --> 00:00:30,390
<i>Превод: Ledenata
SubsTeam bukvi.bg ®</i>

989

01:29:22,530 --> 01:29:28,151

Превод

Old SChool

990

01:29:28,310 --> 01:29:33,231

UNACS TEAM 2014

444

00:54:45,873 --> 00:54:49,573

Превод и субтитри: liolly1954

subs.sab.bz

Wider community involvement

Other members have contributed in different ways, for example software creation. One such particular program is for ripping hard coded subtitles from DVDs; another member has created a custom spell-checker. Other members contribute with links to subtitle sites, create video tutorials on how to work with subtitling software, write guides or offer help with language or provide support with translation difficulties. Some guides, for example, list and explain ranks and insignia of the army of the Third Reich, or those of the Red Army, the Russian Emperor's army and the Soviet Army; translation and transliteration of proper names of people, places and institutions. All these users operate under a nick-name, for example StraightEse, GnoMM, gpym4e, Tigermaster, beljata, Dzvera, dieselboy, E-Tle, hag, Soler, m00n to mention a few.

Factors affecting the quality of translation

We will now elaborate on the factors which influence the quality of translation and subtitles created by fan users.

Sourcing, formats and audio/video quality

One of the factors affecting the quality of the translations and the subtitles is the sourcing of the film and the various formats of such film releases. Appendix 2 features a summarised list from Wikipedia of the most popular formats of pirated releases. (Pirated movie release types, n.d.).

First releases, like CAM and Telesync are films of low video quality. Subtitles are not yet available and therefore fans translate by ear. While this requires very good auditory skills and command of the language, it is also very demanding and time-consuming. Additionally, it is very easy to mis-hear and misunderstand. Translations and subtitles for such releases are often not translated in full, with partially translated or missing lines in the subtitles.

Middle film releases, for instance WEB-DL and WEBRip, are usually of a better quality. Subtitles in the original language are often already available from specialized sites for subtitles. Translations are then of a better quality - linguistic mistakes are fewer and are largely not so much due to not knowing the language, but to the lack of formal translation training. The resulting mistakes are clearly linguistic in nature.

Latest releases, for example DVDRip, HDRip, Blu-ray rip, are of the best video quality and translators have already had time and have acquired the original subtitles translating directly from them. So far in the process, there often exists more than one translation of a film for the different releases. Translators may have worked to edit and improve on previous translations and it is often the case where translators edit and rework their own translations thus releasing an edited and corrected better version. Several translations exist also because certain releases may have been cut or extended.

Lack of specialized, formal training for fan translators of films

Most of the translators in the grey zone are not professional translators, although they may be fluent in one or more foreign languages. They may have started due to other reasons to translate and to subtitle films and they lack formal training in translation. Although comprehensive guides are available in the subtitling communities, it is evident that they are not written by linguists for linguists, so lack of training gives way to a number of linguistic mistakes in the fan-produced translated subtitles.

Below are some examples of such mistakes. Due to space restrictions here we will discuss only two examples which illustrate the types of translation mistakes.

The first example is from the film *Chéri* (Frears, 2009).

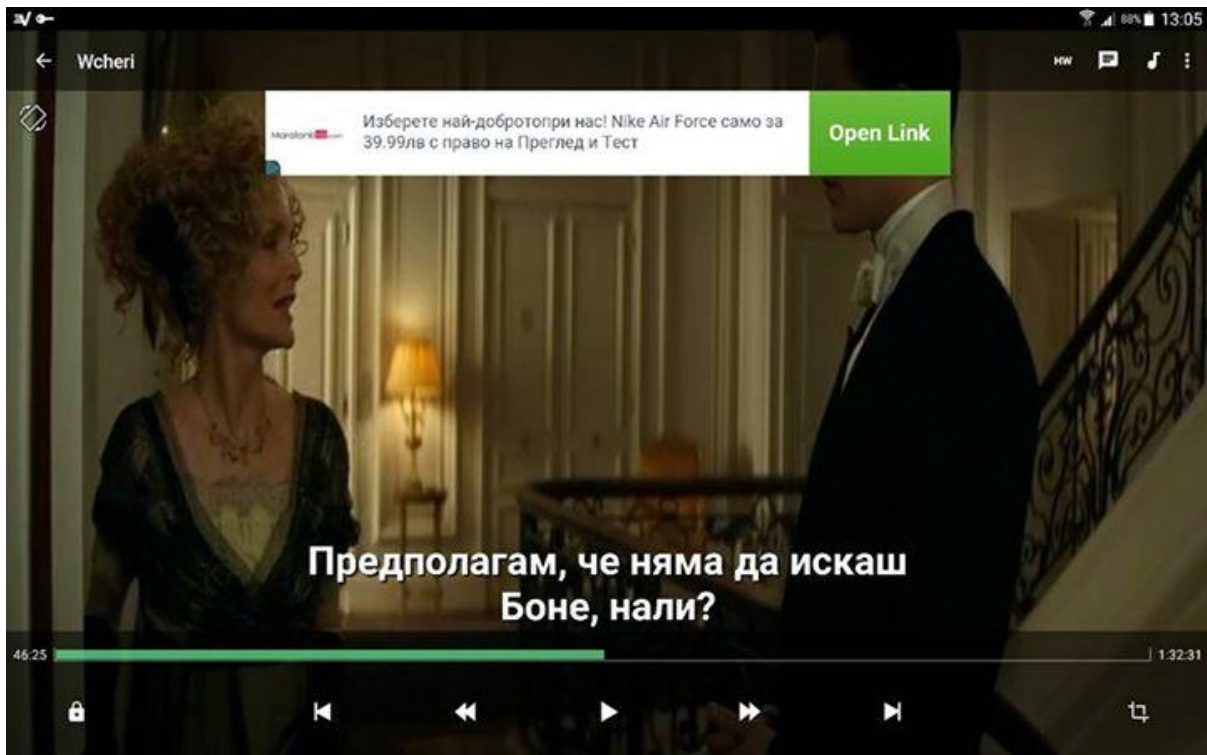


Figure 1. Screenshot from the film *Chéri* (2009)

The English subtitle (LeapinLar, 2009) reads:

667

00:46:22,606 --> 00:46:26,369

I don't suppose you'd care
for a **nightcap**, would you?

The Bulgarian translation (lotus_lili, 2009) is

659

00:46:22,606 --> 00:46:26,369

Предполагам, че няма да искаш -> (back translation) I suppose you wouldn't want
Боне, нали? -> (back translation) a **bonnet**, would you?
(my emphasis)

The mistake here, in addition to the capital letter, comes from the idiom *nightcap* (Nightcap, 2008), which the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines as 1) 'an alcoholic or hot drink taken at the end of the day or before going to bed'; and 2) 'a cloth cap that people used to wear in bed in the past, also synonymous with *bonnet*' (Bonnet, 2008). The translator is obviously not familiar with the first and more contemporary use of the word, despite its relatively high frequency compared to the meaning of cloth cap worn in bed, and translates literally *nightcap* as *bonnet*.

Other researchers (Shiptchanov, 2013) have also analysed translator's mistakes. Figure 2 represents one such mistake with realia.



Figure 2. Screenshot from the film Troy (2004)

The original English subtitles (Mvsubtitles, 2004) read:

67

00:10:52,068 --> 00:10:55,446

The ruler of Thessaly carries this scepter. (US spelling in the original)

68

00:10:57,240 --> 00:10:58,574

Give it to your king.

The translator of the Bulgarian subtitles (bratched, 2004) has written:

{13137}{13200} Владетелят на Тесалия...-> (back translation) The ruler of Thessaly ...

{13201}{13270} носи този меч. -> (back translation) carries this sword.

{13270}{13351} Дай го на своя крал. -> (back translation) Give it to your king.

What is clearly audible in the scene (and also in the original English subtitles) is “this sceptre” and it is clearly visible in the above still that the object is a sceptre. The translator has written “carries this sword” (my back translation). The first mistake, as mentioned above, is with realia, substituting sword for sceptre. The second mistake is more of a cultural transfer nature, confusing king and *tzar*. The title *king* is predominantly used in Western Europe, while the cultures in South-East Europe and Russia have never had kings; they had *tzars*. Therefore, the correct translation must be *tzar*.

In a much later release of the subtitles these lines were edited and corrected as follows:

{15636}{15717} Това е скиптърът|на владетеля на Тесалия.

{15760}{15800} Дай го на своя цар.

The back translation is:

{15636}{15717} This is the sceptre|of the ruler of Thessaly.

{15760}{15800} Give it to your tzar.

These corrected subtitles are clear evidence that the communities have monitoring and evaluation systems in place. They are able to and aim to produce quality translations and quality subtitles.

Interestingly enough, Díaz-Cintas and Sánchez (2006) observed similar mistakes in fansubs for anime nearly ten years ago. However, unlike the fansubbers described in their article, the teams described here strive for perfection and do not exhibit any of Ferrer Simó's 'fansubbing' characteristics cited in Díaz-Cintas and Sánchez's article (2006).

By way of a conclusion

Technology for audiovideo translation has been evolving quickly and is the major drive for developments in the field. At the same time and equally rapidly the technology for high quality digital content has been developed with the support by different stakeholders. With the increasing emergence of more and more pay-per-view and video-on-demand (VOD) services and their global distribution over the Internet, the demand for translation of films and television programmes increases.

Recently, there have been discussions on the torrent trackers and subtitling communities about the possibility of 4K Ultra HD releases which may vary from 50 to 100GB. 4K broadcasts have resolution of 3840×2160px with the already available h265 decoders. YouTube and the television industry have adopted UHD-1 as its 4K standard and UHD-2 for NHK/BBC R&D's (BBC Research and Development) 7680x4320 pixels UHDTV 2 (Cotton, 2013), and it was used in the London 2012 Olympics³. On April 11, 2013, Bulb TV, created by Canadian serial entrepreneur Evan Kosiner, became the first broadcaster to provide a 4K linear channel and VOD content to cable and satellite companies in North America (Marketwired, 2013; Nastic, 2013) and 'is also the first to announce its plans to launch an 8,000-pixel version of the channel when technology permits'. (Marketwired, 2013) The channel is licensed by the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications

³ BBC R&D has been collaborating with NHK (The Japanese national broadcaster) Science and Technical Research Labs on SHV (Super Hi-Vision). NHK themselves have been developing the system since the mid 1990's. Their aim was to produce a TV system where the resolution exceeds that of the eye and where the screen is big enough to fill one's field of view

Commission to provide educational content. However, 4K content is becoming more widely available online including on YouTube, Netflix and Amazon.

8K resolution or 8K UHD is the current highest ultra-high definition television (UHDTV) resolution in digital television and digital cinematography. 8K refers to the horizontal resolution in the order of 8,000 pixels, forming the total image dimensions of (7680×4320). The hunger for even higher resolutions has brought '8K full-dome with a resolution of 8192×8192 (67.1 megapixels) and is the resolution of top-end modern projection for hemispherical full-dome theatres often seen in planetaria' (8K resolution, n.d.). Soon we will witness 4K and 8K Ultra HD rip releases and with such a demand, the demand for translations and subtitles will be strengthened.

Part of the user-generated translation has moved on to open translation and subtitling platforms. As recently as 2009 TED.com launched their Open Translation Project (OTP) as a global volunteer effort to subtitle TED Talks (TED, n.d.). They have described the process, provided extensive help and guidelines with subtitling⁴ in their OTPedia, the TED Open Translation Project wiki⁵. Special attention is paid to how to break lines and how to compress subtitles⁶. They have also provided free video tutorials on a YouTube channel (TED Translators, n.d.), one video in which is how to transcribe TED Talks⁷. TED uses Amara Subtitle Editor⁸, crowd localisation, crowd translation and crowd subtitling SaaS (software as a service) and there are video tutorials how to transcribe talks, how to translate and sync subtitles with Amara (Amara Subtitles, n.d.). However, only TEDx talks are allowed for volunteer translation, but a quick check shows that at the time of writing this article there are nearly 6,000 new volunteer translators, up from 20,492 in 2016 to now 26,375 translators in the beginning of 2017 who have contributed 108,412 translations (up from 88,424 a year before) in 114 languages. More recently, TED expanded to include translation of TED-Ed lessons, the localization of TED's Android app and the translation of content distributed by worldwide partners that help grow TED global impact.

⁴ <http://www.ted.com/participate/translate/guidelines#h2--subtitling>

⁵ http://translations.ted.org/wiki/Main_Page

⁶ http://translations.ted.org/wiki/How_to_Compress_Subtitles

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ckm4n0BWggA&list=PLuvL00YxuPwxQbdq4W7TCQ7TBnW39cDRC&index=6>

⁸ <http://www.amara.org>

So far there have not been many open translation and subtitling projects, but TED is becoming a trend-setter with their OTP. TED has already started to conventionalise best practices in transcribing and subtitling. The scale of such a project will certainly drive translators and subtitlers out of the Grey zone to open translation platforms. Volunteer fan subtitlers will bring in their experience and skills; they will no longer hide behind nicknames but will receive due credit for their volunteer effort for the benefit of the global community.

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Appendix 1

Table 1

Comparative table of subtitling rules in four fansubbing communities

	Unacs	Translator's Heaven	Bukvi	Arena
1-2 lines	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Max chars per line	38 (40 exception)	38	40	38-39
Chars per second and reading speed	15 chars/sec, (exceptions 18-20 chars/sec for documentaries)	European and International Standards. Different for children's films	15 chars/sec	- 1,5 sec. - up to 10 chars - 2,0 sec - up to 30 chars - 2.3 sec - up to 35 chars - 2.6 sec - up to 40 chars - 2.9 sec - up to 45 chars - 3.2 sec - up to 50 chars - 3.5 sec - up to 55 chars - 3.9 sec - up to 60 chars - 4.2 sec - up to 65 chars - 4.5 sec - up to 70 chars - 4.9 sec - up to 75 chars
Min duration per subtitle	2 sec (1.5 sec for words shorter than 10 chars)	2 sec	1.5 sec	2 sec (1.5 sec for words shorter than 10 chars)
Max duration per subtitle	6.8 -7.0 sec	3 sec per 6-7-words line	No mention	6.7 sec
Delay Between subtitles	Min 100 milliseconds	Max 250 milliseconds sec	Min 100 milliseconds	Min 150 milliseconds
Dialogue (dash)	No dash on first line	No dash on first line, European and International Standards	No dash on first line	No dash on first line
Languages	No mention	No mention	One language only	No mention

Acronyms and abbreviations	No mention	Yes – European and International Standards	Consistent use	No mention
Spell check	Avoidance of mistakes recommended	Avoidance of mistakes recommended	Compulsory	Avoidance of mistakes recommended
Machine translation	No mention	No mention	Explicitly forbidden	No mention
Bold/Italic/Underline	Off-scene speech, music	Off-scene speech, music and other languages; Avoidance of bold and underlined text	No mention	Off-scene speech, music
Font face	No mention	san-serif, Helvetica and Arial recommended	No mention	No mention
Punctuation	Used only according to the rules of the target language	Used only according to the rules of the target language	Used only according to the rules of the target language	Used only according to the rules of the target language

Appendix 2

Pirated movie release types (n.d.)

First releases

WORKPRINT (WR) - Each frame of the film is copied from celluloid (or another source), and the quality can vary greatly. These are sometimes incomplete films as there may be missing scenes, sound or extra scenes. The 'workprint' releases are rare and may be of interest to collectors only.

CAMERA (CAM) - This type of release is recorded by someone in a cinema with a camcorder. There is usually background noise recorded from the camcorder microphone, so quality of sound and image is usually poor. The best CAM releases are recorded in empty cinemas.

TELESYNC (TS) - In practice, the same as a CAM release, it is also recorded in a cinema, usually from the projection booth and normally with a high-end camera and a separate audio source which is often captured from the FM microbroadcast provided for the hearing-impaired. This does not guarantee good sound quality because some background noise is also recorded.

TELECINE (TC) - Done in a number of ways, all from taking directly from the reel. These releases are ripped in either widescreen (letterbox) or in full-screen (pan and scan) with good audio and video. The most common way is to have a device that is attached to the reel that generates a VHS tape of the reel (called a telecine machine, but there are other machines that generate a digital output of both audio and video that are then put into a VCR, laptop or PC, and made into a VCD).

SCREENER (SCR) - usually recorded from a promotional VHS video tape which is sent to censors and film critics. The quality varies greatly. Often a copyright message appears on the screen.

DVD-SCREENER (DVDscr) - the same as SCR, but from a DVD, unlike SCR, which are sourced from VHS.

Middle releases

TVrip - releases sourced from analogue television with a TV-Tuner Capture card.

R3 and R5 - The R5 is a retail DVD from region 5. Region 5 consists of Russia, the Indian subcontinent, most of Africa, North Korea, and Mongolia. R5 releases differ from normal

releases in that they are a direct Telecine transfer of the film without any of the image processing. If the DVD does not contain an English-language audio track, the R5 video is synced to a previously released English audio track. R3 is the region of Korea, Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia.

DVDRip - A final retail version of a film, typically released before it is available outside its originating region. Often after one group releases a high-quality DVD-Rip, the "race" to release that film will stop. The release is an AVI file and uses the Xvid codec (earlier DivX) for video, and mp3 or AC3 for audio. Because of their high quality, DVD-Rips generally replace any earlier copies that may already have been circulating.

WEB-DL - This is a film or TV show downloaded via an online distribution website, such as iTunes. The quality is quite good since they are not re-encoded. The video (H.264) and audio (AC3/AAC) streams are usually extracted from the iTunes or AmazonVideo file and then remuxed into a MKV (Matroska) container without sacrificing quality.

WEBRip - This is a file ripped from a DRM-free streaming service, such as Hulu or pay-per-view networks. The quality is sometimes comparable to WEB-DL, but bitrates are usually lower to save on streaming bandwidth and quality is also involved. The file is often extracted from the RTMP protocol and losslessly remuxed from an MP4 or FLV container to MKV (Matroska).

HDTV (High-Definition Digital Television) and **PDTV** (Pure Digital Television) – the formats can be viewed on different screen resolutions: 720p (progressive), 1080i (interlaced), 1080p (progressive). HDTV sets capable of 1080p resolution are called Full HD, while those capable of displaying only 720p or 1080i are called HD Ready.

Final releases

Blu-ray Rip - a new generation of rips, offering better quality than DVDRip. Two sub-categories exist:

- **BDrip** (Blu-ray Disc Rip) - come directly from the Blu-ray source. In most cases with a High Definition 1080p mkv (Matroska) container;
- **BRRip** – usually a subsequent re-encode from a 1080p BDRip suitable for lower resolutions, like 720p.