

PRESS REVIEW 2020

CONTINUATION OF COLLECTIVE BRAINSTORMING ABOUT THE JITSI PROJECT AIIC SWITZERLAND

The dangers of doublespeak

**by Guillaume Wherlen | 05.10.20 | English version by
Rebecca Van Horck**



Should AIIC develop a Jitsi based remote interpretation application? The arguments against outweigh those in favour.

First, the background. An organisation asked us, not officially as an Association (AIIC) but informally as interpreters, whether we knew of any alternatives to the better-known platforms. Jitsi having been mentioned during the RSI webinars held earlier this year, we wondered whether it might be an option.

As it stands, the application does not have the functionalities required for a multilingual meeting, although they could be created through the Application Programming Interface (API) provided by the Jitsi developers, allowing the application to be extended to meet these requirements. We verified this by taking it up to the proof of concept stage.

In other words, the organisation in question could have made the adaptation itself, and then hosted it on its own server. It does have a competent IT service that has already developed other software applications, but they considered this solution to be overly cumbersome and so discarded it.

We went on to consider whether Jitsi could be adapted to other contexts, in particular on the private market. There are two possible scenarios with different levels of AIIC involvement:

1. AIIC creates the adapted version of Jitsi but does not provide a videoconferencing Platform as a Service. The client would be responsible for providing the Jitsi service. They provide a high-performance server on which they install the Jitsi-based software, enable connections for meeting

participants, then connect the consoles located in the interpreting booths, and ensure that they function properly.

2. AIIC develops and hosts the multilingual videoconferencing platform on its own server, and becomes just another platform on the market.

It seems to me that scenario 2, the more extreme of the two, has to be ruled out for a multitude of reasons. Let us bear in mind that we are a professional association, not an interpreting agency.

As for scenario 1, it could only be suitable for large clients that have their own premises and skilled staff and are prepared to take care of any technical issues in-house. In this scenario, what would be the role of the interpreter? Simply to inform the client of the existence of a fairly sophisticated and freely available application that has undergone sufficient testing to be declared fit for conference use. By way of comparison, this would be like recommending Firefox rather than another browser without being responsible for any of its shortcomings. Free software has a status that makes this separation possible, assuming that the client understands the philosophy behind it, which is far from certain.

We are talking about something that does not yet exist. Someone will have to make the adaptations required for Jitsi to be used in a multilingual setting. While AIIC could commission such a project, it should not take over the running of it nor assume liability for it. That would fall outside of the scope of our association. To do so would mean that AIIC would fund the programming work, carry out the many reliability tests that would be necessary, and then make the adapted functionality available to the world free of charge, without asking for anything in return. AIIC would then be left praying that, despite its status as free software, its reputation would remain unscathed in the event of any technical problems.

Last but not least, the fact that it is possible does not mean that we should do it. Is the perceived short-term benefit in developing such an application in the long-term interests of our profession? Any discussion about this project necessarily ties in with the more general debate about AIIC's position on remote interpretation. In this respect, I would like us to avoid conflating two notions: agreeing to work remotely to prevent clients being lured away by the more aggressive service

providers, especially in the context of a health crisis, is not the same as advocating remote work.

It is too early to write-off our profession as we have known it until now. The health crisis will obviously leave its mark, and we do not yet know which meetings will remain virtual and which will be in person again, nor what the proportion of remote participation in hybrid meetings will be. It will certainly be higher than in pre-crisis days, but lower than at the height of the crisis. Some markets will undoubtedly suffer more than others. However, at this stage, it would be a mistake to give up on advocating face-to-face meetings wherever possible while accepting remote interpretation only as a last resort. We won't be able to go back if we give up.

If AIIC were to commission or develop a remote interpretation application, even if it did not claim proprietary rights, it would undoubtedly become associated with that application in the minds of our clients. This would be interpreted as a complete reversal of our position and of the reservations we have expressed hitherto. Not only would we contradict ourselves, or appear to do so (with the same effect), we would also forego any remaining chance of getting our more nuanced message across. Consequently, if this project is to be undertaken with the laudable aim of keeping the wolf away from the sheep (while perhaps merely replacing one wolf with another- a debate for another day!), it is important that it be done without any AIIC backing and without AIIC being associated with it in any way.

Finally, let us recall one obvious fact: remote interpretation, when it is provided via an internet connection, even in a hub, is a poorer quality of interpretation because the sound is of poorer quality. I am astounded by and take issue with any argument suggesting that it is up to the interpreters to "train" to work at the same level under these new conditions. Would anyone dare ask a radiologist to "train" to reach the same diagnosis with fuzzy imaging? That would imply a staggering inversion of responsibilities. Jitsi is an internet videoconferencing application. Its only virtue is that it does not belong to one of the large providers, which I will not name, but the quality of its sound is no better than that of other platforms. Would associating AIIC with it not mean lowering our quality standards? Did AIIC lower its quality standards to try to hold on to the considerable portions of the market it has



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lost all over the world in recent decades? Would it have kept them had it done so? Well before the current pandemic a very well-established colleague, and I hope he will forgive me for quoting him, summed up the situation in these words: "the only way that interpretation will be saved is if it is outstanding." Will being outstanding be enough this time around? That remains to be seen. But what will AIIC have left to sell if it gives up on excellence?



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