

PRESS REVIEW 2020

CONTINUATION OF THE COLLECTIVE BRAINSTORMING ABOUT THE JITSI PROJECT AIIC SWITZERLAND

RSI: calling a spade a spade

by Aymeric de Poyen Bellisle | 23.11.20 | English
version by the author, revised by Maxwell Crisp



1. For or against RSI?

Before deciding whether AIIC should create its own remote interpreting platform, members should clarify their position on remote interpreting itself, as this will then determine our next course of action, starting with our communications strategy, which should be decided before we even start looking into IT solutions.

Recent debates have shown very contradictory feelings on RSI: on the one hand, members are generally hostile to the mainstreaming of VoIP, given the inherent difficulties and occasionally dangerous conditions. On the other hand, they are also looking for the best ways to beat commercial platforms on their own turf by offering the exact same service for a much lower fee, without having to take the cut that our competitors need to survive as a business.

Several months into the "new normal", it is clear that this contradictory position is no longer tenable and that it must be resolved before we go any further.

2. We need a communications strategy

To avoid falling into the trap of this confusion, which both clients and employers will be quick to pick up on and exploit, we must define things as they really are.

Let's start with the example of the acronym RSI itself, remote simultaneous interpreting: this is a fairly neutral, and even positive spin on the audiovisual hell we occasionally find ourselves immersed in during virtual

meetings. The term "RSI" passes VoIP interpreting off as something equivalent to traditional simultaneous interpreting (SI), with the sole distinction of being performed remotely (R). Although that description perfectly fits the marketing strategy used by commercial platforms, which claim to offer "the same services"- but without any geographical constraints, it completely ignores the interpreters' perspective. For us, the fundamental difference between traditional simultaneous interpreting and remote interpreting is VoIP itself: sound, which is our source material, becomes slightly garbled at best, and utterly unusable at its worst, compared to the sound quality with which we usually work with on local, in-person systems. Given the current state of technology, and for as long as those virtual meetings will be attended by participants whose connection depends on the fragile infrastructure of another continent, and who are reluctant to use a proper headset with an acceptable microphone, corrupted sound will remain the main challenge with using RSI. Therefore, I believe that talking about, say, "interprétation en mode dégradé" (IMD) – (crisis-mode interpreting in English?), is a much more telling and descriptive acronym for what this truly means for us than the trendy and alluring « RSI".

If we are going to truly control our message and come up with an effective strategy for an IMD solution that reflects our principles, it is absolutely necessary that we work with communications professionals.

The very first point to get across should be that any no interpreting platforms currently on the market offers anything more than IMD (crisis-mode interpreting) services. It is crucial that we tear down our competitors' claims that the quality of service is equivalent to that of traditional simultaneous interpreting. Once the record is set straight, AIIC will find itself on a level playing field with its competitors, and be able to get ahead of the game on two fronts: its members' proven professionalism, and a platform that would cost its users less, as it would not be for profit.

3. A platform that reflects our principles

One possible thing to ask ourselves is whether it would be possible for AIIC to offer an IMD platform exclusively for meetings which otherwise could not be held physically?

If we managed to develop such a platform and operated it as a not-for-profit endeavour, with fees aimed at simply recouping the initial investment and operating expenses (pursuant to Swiss law on associations), an employee could be tasked with establishing the "eligibility" of requests from clients, who would be required to produce some sort of evidence showing why the meeting has to be held virtually. A list of criteria could be drawn up to demonstrate that if such meetings are not held virtually, they simply would not be held at all. Those criteria might include official travel restrictions, quarantine upon arrival, a lack of available venues or equipment, rejected visas, etc.

The underlying idea would be to present this solution as a last resort available to those clients who truly need it.

Again, a professional communications strategy is paramount to ensuring that clients understand that IMD can never be an ideal solution, but that AllChas set up an IMD protocol in order for its members to be able to serve their clients' needs and support them in times of crisis, restrictions, or other hardships (which will certainly crop up again, particularly given the WHO's predictions of other pandemic in the future).

I should point out that the concept of «mode dégradé» (or crisis mode), the idea of making do with and getting on with it as far as our methods and protocols are concerned is quite common in France within the health, utility, military and institutional sectors, and that the departments which implement them have managed to frame things in a way that eases peoples' minds by letting them know that even in times of crisis, they will not be left in the lurch. AIIIC might be able to achieve this as well, so long as we work with communications professionals.

4. A platform that protects our health

Professional communications will allow us to give this exceptional service the appearance of a favour we are offering for our clients at a competitive price. This kind of strategy would make it easier for us to organise work on our own terms: for example, meetings would be limited to 4 hours with one or more breaks,

systematic disclaimers at the beginning of each meeting regarding the lower sound quality, the increased risk of errors or omissions, etc.

If these terms seem too restrictive to clients, this will simply highlight the advantages of physical meetings and reinforce the exceptional nature of this solution as nothing more than an effective stopgap.

Finally, a word about possible concerns about losing clients because of working conditions. It should be kept in mind that our clients have always accepted our usual working conditions (two interpreters per booth, no more than 30 minutes on mic at a time, breaks, etc.) as the norm, despite the fact that less "demanding" providers are nothing new have always been lurking in the shadows.



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