

# **PRESS REVIEW 2020**

## **CONTINUATION OF COLLECTIVE BRAINSTORMING ABOUT THE JITSY PROJECT AIIC SWITZERLAND**

### **Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf? Random thoughts on the evolution of the office of conference interpreting**

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As we held our online assembly on May 3, 2020, some sharp contradictions in the address made by AIIC's president did not go unnoticed. No remote simultaneous interpretation service provider should be recommended nor would an agreement between AIIC and platforms be desirable. On the bright side, the creation of a Distance Interpreting sector is likely. Clear inconsistencies that mirror the angst and confusion interpreters nowadays struggle with. As some in our community started to grow comfortable with the prospect of a new way to practice our trade, hoping to be in control of an evolution that would be as gradual as it is fateful, the global pandemic thundered a new reality upon all those whose livelihood depends on the conference industry. To be honest, we are quite shaken! And to anchor ourselves out of this sweeping riptide, we should look for precious lessons we learned in the past when we built our profession.

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When interviewed during the making of « Les Interprètes : Perspective historique » (1996), Monique Corvington, the UN's chief interpreter then, rightly recalled that the trade of conference interpreter was mothered and reared by technology.

«In time, interaction between interpreters and participants became reduced. The practice went from consecutive, where both actors were practically side by side to simultaneous when delivery had to be made from a booth. We became less mindful of seating arrangements and at times we could not even see the speaker



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nor those who listen to our rendition. We are now inching towards an era where interpreters no longer need be in the same building but at a different venue. Although technically feasible, I wonder if it is humanely possible».

Should one deem this depiction to be commonly exact, one may draw two conclusions: Our profession is here to stay and no technology can threaten our existence. Positively, in spite of the discomforts and fears we want to do away with, technology and the ease of use it provides ushers brighter prospects we did not envisage in former years as potential patrons viewed interpretation equipment as burdensome and costly. Second, distance interpreting, a mode we used one way or another albeit at a much smaller frequency and scale, will not substitute for all other interpreting modes. Nowadays we no longer worked as we did during the meetings convened by the League of Nations. Consecutive interpretation was unscathed by the advent of simultaneous interpretation. Interpreting continues to be practiced in its different modes by specific professionals for a specific audience in a specific niche.

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Karl Marx referred to the proletariat - Excuse my paraphrase - as workers who were no longer masters of their production tools.

I have practiced during most of my career in Canada. In over twenty-five years, colleagues often voiced concern over the fact they no longer had access to clients who would prefer to deal with a single party, mostly an equipment provider, with all the consequences this had in terms of remuneration, team strength, access to documents, etc.

I could not understand why interpreters did not acquire their own equipment to compete against against such providers by reducing margins on fees while maintaining decent pay levels and working conditions for their colleagues. Simple, equipment is as costly as it is labor intensive. It requires maintenance, replacement and storage in addition to hiring at least a full-time technician to keep things in order. Was it worth considering?

The good news is new technologies now solve many issues. They are portable, user friendly and accessible to all.

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For years, we have interpreted speakers asserting the advent of a knowledge-based world where value is in content. IBM and HP were first to make this affirmation. Their empires were built on manufacturing hardware before they shifted to writing software and now creating content for they saw content to be the future.

Interpreting platforms may grow in number but are nothing but empty shells without the content interpreters create. Owners of major platforms know it and will continue to hypocritically court AIIC. For now, in technical terms, none may pitch at us ISO standards which are minimum in nature. As to content, they cannot claim to be the keepers of quality hence their continuous attempt to woo our association and membership.

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AIIC was always ahead and asserted a strong and tangible presence. An international association and not a federation of national organizations, AIIC secured covenants with intergovernmental organizations, created an online gateway to link interpreters with a global customer base. Our association lacks neither talent nor vision.

We now have to deal with a new reality brought about by technology. Interpreters should now be in control. It means having full command of our working tools. We need to take away from equipment providers and platform owners any material edge they may boast. The growth in the number of RSI platforms, as fast as hares breed, means the technology will be widely available and accessible to an ever-growing public.

Earnestly put, AIIC should heed the calls of many and answer the prayers of all by seriously considering to commit to the effort to design and develop a working tool by and for interpreters and their clients. Just as it did with the AIIC directory and website, it will make this tool available to members who would offer it to their



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clients in order to help membership gain or keep market shares. AIIC is a not-for-profit organization governed by the 1901 Act and may therefore make no profit. It may however operate on a cost recovery basis.

Unfortunately, or otherwise, the assembly scheduled for 2020 will now be convened in 2022 when debate will focus on distance interpreting. Rather than listening to members speaking of experiences, good or bad, it would be far more useful to request the Executive to chart courses for navigation. Our new website is almost completed and our finances are sound. Invest in our future for us to safely sail these rough seas.

Onward Captain!

