New look, same values

Technology, new business models, globalization - all are part of the challenge that professional associations such as AIIC face today.

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AIIC was born in the aftermath of the Second World War. The future was different then. It moved more slowly. How is AIIC standing up to a future that seems to be crowding in on the present - especially when it comes to information and communication, the stock-in-trade of the conference interpreter?

Future tense

AIIC has been aware of the challenges facing the profession of conference interpreting since the association was founded in 1953. The need to define the modern manifestation of one of the oldest professions and the need for an international organisation like AIIC to do it was recognised almost immediately after the Second World War. The Nuremberg trials and the formation of the United Nations called for reliable, highly skilled, and trustworthy professionals. And a group of forward-thinking interpreters understood the potential of an organisation that could guarantee the integrity of the profession and represent conference interpreters.

Thus AIIC was born and set about meeting those goals. Today it has some 2500 members in more than 80 countries. It is recognised by the European Union, NATO, Interpol, World Bank, the United Nations, and most other major international organisations as the leading representative of conference interpreters and a valid negotiating partner.

However, even as the profession has taken shape much along the lines AIIC envisaged, the world has not ceased to change. The conference market has grown and the "language industry" has become big business.

A growing number of universities have opened training programmes throughout the world, turning out more and more trained interpreters. Technology has evolved at an ever-faster pace. And today there is a growing feeling within the association that AIIC needs to keep moving to stay in front of events.

This is not because AIIC has been moribund. Quite the reverse, as the European Commission has found recently to its cost. AIIC showed its teeth during the dispute over representational rights within the EU and the payment of EU taxes by freelancers working for EU institutions.

Nor has membership fallen off. AIIC is still the only truly international body of its kind. It commands the respect of its members and of the organisations that use their services; and it is still the association that most up-and-coming conference interpreters want to join.
Nevertheless, it has to be recognised that the profession has changed much since the early days, and
AIIC has to change with it. After the war, interpreters were few in number and thus an elite by
definition. International meetings took place at the highest level and were mostly political in nature.
The interpreters servicing those meetings had often acquired their language skills by virtue of
background and upbringing.

The combination of association with world leaders and an unusual ability joined to form a curious
public image. The interpreter was seen as a bit of an oddball, a bit of an artist, with the associated
view that he or she is born and not made.

Today, we are very firmly in the world of the professional interpreter. World development over the
last 40 years has opened university education to millions; television and tourism have made the
world smaller. More people than ever are able to study languages, and there is a recognised career
path for interpretation, with all that entails in terms of qualifications and experience.

Meetings now take place at all levels, from Heads of State to members of European Works
Councils. Nor are the meetings solely diplomatic. Today it is common for all kinds of groups to
sponsor international encounters - labour unions, boards of trustees, professional associations, sports
federations. The globalisation of the economy means that a vast range of subjects have to be
covered, both from the commercial point of view, with the growth of transnational corporations; and
from an institutional point of view, as the need for international standards and conventions increases.

Add these changes to the financial pressure faced by the EU - still by far the biggest corporate user
of interpreters - and you have a clear need for a drive by AIIC both to defend professional standards
and to defend the salaries and working conditions of its members.

In practice?

What this means in practice will be determined by AIIC and its members. But there are some clear
patterns of thought emerging within the association as to the areas of concern. And there have
already been some changes to the way AIIC does business.

A debate is currently being engaged about entrance requirements and procedures. The change might
be one of style rather than substance, but there is nevertheless a strong desire to open up AIIC’s
ranks and make a real effort to get all qualified interpreters to join.

The association has beefed up its communications strategy. AIIC wants members to identify with
the central association as much as with their regional office; and we want more potential users to
recognise the AIIC trademark.

There is a more thorough approach to setting policy on defending interpreters at work. As hours and
working conditions have come under threat, AIIC has defended them with a vengeance and is now
sponsoring solid research in ergonomics, health and safety and work-related stress to back current
standards, and to press for more rigorous ones. And a major project to get international recognition
of those standards is underway.

AIIC is forging close relationships with international trade organisations such as Public Services
International, and the International Federation of Journalists. The association's representative role
could well assume greater importance given present trends, and it is vital to seek out people who can
give the right advice and provide the right support.

What all this betokens most of all is a much more inclusive approach. AIIC has opened its doors to
new people and new ideas. AIIC members have helped train new interpreters, and they have helped
change the way interpreters are trained. We're keeping up with new technology so that we can use it
to raise standards rather than looking at it in a narrow way.
Like any association representing a high-skill profession, AIIC's reputation depends on the quality as much as the quantity of its membership. It has to remain true to its status as a recognised professional body that can set standards, and maintain them. Unless it does, how can it insist on high-quality salaries and conditions? AIIC's message to the companies, organisations and institutions who use and value its members is based not on cost, but on value. Crudely put, in commercial terms AIIC is saying that you can get it cheaper, but you can't get it better.

Membership criteria will continue to be high, and to be strictly maintained, but AIIC is ready to invite all meeting those criteria to join. Retrenchment behind barriers to protect perceived interests is not an option for the future, as many a trade union has come to recognise. A more inclusive and confident AIIC is well capable of meeting the challenges facing it and the profession it represents.

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