



# Interpretation on the Internet

You have just been asked to interpret on the Internet and you are unsure, even anxious, about it.

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**You thought you had seen and done all kinds of interpreting**, having escorted, whispered, worked both small gatherings and prestigious assemblies, worked with jerry-rigged facilities and the ultra-modern equipment of convention centres. You have interpreted at bargaining tables, in a booth, over a telephone hook-up, on radio and for television. The Internet does not particularly impress you, since you wonder how you could have ever lived without a computer; you have 2 or 3 e-mail addresses; you download glossaries and documents unearthed from archives in cyberspace or a client's web site. But... you are still perplexed: What should you expect? How to prepare? Should you even accept?

It is this sort of question that I will attempt to answer in what follows. It is based on the experience gained in "Internet interpretation" by a few Canadian practitioners over the last three or four years.

## **The virtual conference room**

Canada has seen the dawning of a new, highly active generation of professional conference organisers who are occupying a new niche which has opened up with the globalization of markets combined with the convergence of diverse technologies. For the original client, the new technology holds out the promise of virtually immediate, world-wide dissemination of conference proceedings; for the computer-owning public, they offer the opportunity to log into deliberations on the other side of the world. What does all this mean, in reality?

To avoid any misunderstanding and to clarify the limits of this innovation, it should be mentioned that conferences over the Internet and, by extension, their interpretation, are only, at least in the present state of affairs, a matter of broadcasting and storing a meeting on a web site, the meeting itself having unfolded in the most traditional manner.

In its simplest form, for which certain major international conferences have opted in order to reach a wider public, retransmitting or "webcasting" a conference, in whole or in part, over the Internet is only another variation on the theme of recording interpreters' work. The audio



or video records of a conference produced and displayed on a particular web site are from that point on available to anyone interested in them.

In a second scenario, more relevant to our purposes here, insofar as the implications are more serious for our profession as a whole, Internet webcasting is an integral part of the conference planning and logistics. A hierarchy in conference-goers is established: The first group - speakers and principal participants - are gathered together in a conference room, while a second group can follow the discussions, and even intervene as the case may be, via a telephone link. A third group has the option of meeting up in the virtual conference room, one specially designed for the general public. This is the approach which a number of large, high-technology companies (Bell Canada Entreprises, Teleglobe, Bombardier, Spar Aerospace, etc.) have opted for, in communicating with investors, financial analysts and the press.

The virtual conference room is normally accessible to anyone having the appropriate computer hardware and software. The room displays the company logo in addition to the conference agenda, speaker biographies, background documentation as well as the prepared presentations and discussions. It is even possible to download the software needed to receive the conference sound free of charge.

If the contracting company is so inclined, the conference can be webcast in full video, complete with all the graphs and visual aids used. Transcription of all presentations and discussions, as well as the interpretation, can also be downloaded as a further option. A list of conference "participants" (i.e. visitors to the web site) can also be drawn up. All that is needed is to include a password allowing admission to the virtual conference room, and to record the number of hits on the site. The conference usually remains posted during 2 or 3 months.

### **The interpreters' role**

Now that we have looked briefly into this new form of conferencing, it seems appropriate to take a preliminary look at its implications for the practising interpreter. There are three typical cases that occur:

- The first, less important for our purposes, is where Internet interpretation providers simply offer interpretation services for multi-language telephone conversations, phone links over the Internet being exempt from long-distance charges;
- The second, where international conferences are stored on the Net, do not warrant any particular comment if the interpreters are working under their usual conditions and at the physical site of the conference. Here, their interpretation is recorded for broadcasting purposes as are the original discussions;



- The third case, the most problematic, is that of conferences featuring different levels of participation, where the interpreters are closeted in sound studios, condemned more often than not to work from a telephone hook-up. Even if these conferences are short, they nonetheless manage to compress all the drawbacks of teleconferencing into their twenty to forty minutes.

In this third scenario, the interpreter is not only physically cut off from the conference, its atmosphere, speakers and listeners, but she is also dependent on a long string of intermediaries (the sound technicians for her studio, themselves dependant on the technical crews at the conference site), besides being at the mercy of the telephone services available. Even where, technically, conditions are optimal and the sound is clear (it *does* happen), the dice are loaded against smooth communication. The time and space of the real conference event are out of phase with the time and space of the later webcast. When hearing interpreted speech in these conditions, listeners are deprived of all the normal requisites of communication situations - the original speakers' voice with its rich content of intonation, hesitation pauses where they occur, and delivery characteristics. Restoring full meaning to words heard is difficult without the full panoply of non-verbal, visual elements, signs and signals which contribute to the communication process for both speaker and listeners. It is even more difficult for someone with only a computer screen to stare at.

Another problem lies in the fast pace characteristic of these meetings. Reports are read in rapid succession, with their figures, percentages, acronyms, and names tumbling out in a rush. It is essential, therefore, to have a copy of all press releases and written presentations before the interpretation. Even taking into account that we make a point of arriving at least two hours before the beginning of the meeting, to look over any documentation available, even to scribble down a complete written translation of the presentations to be read out (if we are lucky enough to get them), the stress level is always very high. That is why, first of all, we felt it important to lay down as a principle that two interpreters are needed, regardless of how short the assignments are.

Notwithstanding all the foregoing and the fact that we are not yet dealing with interpretation on-line, via the Internet, we must realize that webcasting and storing Internet conferences and their interpretation will inevitably become widespread. It is, therefore, essential to seek out ways to help improve the quality of our interpretation, on the one hand, and to preserve our mental and physical balance, on the other. Anything AIIC can do to provide guidelines for interpretation during teleconferences should cover webcasting as well. As there exists no established tradition in this area, we need also, as a profession, to think over its implications, in terms of our professional-liability as well as our intellectual-property concerns.

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