

How will we design our future as on-line interpreters?

by: Sharon Lee

My background

By way of introduction I will give you a brief summary of my background. I was born in Australia and moved to the United Kingdom in 1989 (aged 24). I started post graduate training as a British Sign Language Interpreter at Bristol University in 1991. In 1993 I got my first Interpreting post at DRT (Disability Resource Team) based in Camden, North London. This was a charity primarily funded by the London Boroughs Grants Scheme. There it was my remit to provide borough wide Interpreting services for the six London Boroughs contributing to the funding of the service. At DRT we established a successful agency for freelance interpreters to deal with the rising demand for Sign Language Interpreters. DRT supported me in completing my Interpreter training at Bristol, successfully in 1994. This was an extremely good foundation for understanding the profession, the role, the community and what I fondly call "my job!"

Technological changes

With technological changes come changes to the medium through which the role of interpreting can be carried out. Specifically I refer to video conferencing.

"The main role of a Sign Language Interpreter is to facilitate communication between users of British Sign Language and users of spoken English. Interpreters will use their skill and knowledge of the two languages and cultures to receive a message given in one language and pass it on in the other language." (CACDP -2000/01)

What was to happen after DRT was a significant turning point in my career. As the end of the financial year in 1993/94 drew closer, it unfortunately became evident that most of the funding boroughs would be pulling out, due primarily to Central Government's introduction of CCT (Competitive Compulsory Tendering). It became increasingly common to contract Interpreters individually and in a number of cases to employ in-house Interpreters on annual contracts. This, in turn, meant that my contact with colleague interpreters was more dispersed. Partly in response to experiencing similar changes interpreters set up various networking groups. With the web, interpreters now have the opportunity to communicate across the globe more flexibly than ever before, Interpreter training can be and in some cases is being delivered electronically. Are we making the best use of these resources?

"Someday, you will attend school classes only if you want to because much of your education and training will be available on Web video." (e-video, Alesso.)

With the closing of one door another opened. I was successful in getting a job at Camden Council (London) as the "Videophone Information Officer/BSL Interpreter", in June 1994. "If I knew then what I know now" comes to mind, particularly in relation to the mixing of interpreting and information provision to Deaf people and trying to adjust the situation, in order that the two different requirements could sit alongside each other and not take each other over! Quite impossible! Interpreters are impartial, good information officers interrogate.

The position of Videophone Information Officer/BSL Interpreter was created from European funding. The project was a transnational project under RACEII, called "TeleCommunity" and involved 10 member states. The UK project team comprised the London Borough of Camden, RNID and UCL (University College London). This was a very exciting project, as it was in the very early stages of the "rolling out of broadband" (the internet was not yet being talked about) and in this project we were testing the provision of visual services across a continuum of disability via the early fibre optic attempts towards broadband (ISDN 128kbps). In the United Kingdom we were focussing on Sign Language Users and in the Netherlands (IVD- the Institute Van Doven) were focussing on provision to Oral Deaf people. (see www.europa.eu). These days, narrowband refers to rates less than 1.5Mbps. ISDN2 essentially fits into this category and Broadband refers to rates beyond that.

"In parallel with deepening European co-operation on strictly economic issues, the EU has gradually become involved, in one form or another, in almost the full range of government policies. These were originally treated as 'appendices' of purely economic policy, but are today increasingly dealt with by the EU because they are important in their own right; they include social affairs and public health, education, training and youth policy, culture, development Cupertino and human rights." (EU Funding - Sluiter & Wattier)

The question relevant to those of us interested in Deaf Issues was "could video conferencing provide useful services to Deaf and Hard of Hearing people?". Obviously, in retrospect the answer is "Yes" as those of us in the Deaf community knew it would be then. Logically, of course a visual language will benefit from a visual communication medium - nevertheless we needed to prove it. I am curious as to the measurable outcomes and the social impact of other such projects - are we continuing the work and was the money well spent?

I remained at Camden until March 1997 and during that time I was involved in five differently funded and structured European Projects. I managed the testing of the service in a variety of technological, social and linguistic circumstances. By 1995 the web was available to the high street consumer and that added another dimension to my work. In 1996/7 I was able to test Sign Language Interpreting provision across interactive cable television, which offered 100% clarity of picture.

("Telecommunity". Sharon Lee 1994)

("Providing videotelephony services in Libraries to the Deaf Community"
Sharon Lee 1996).

("Phases of On-line Project Development" Sharon Lee 1997).

*"ISDN is not just another phone service. It's a radical evolution of the phone network."
(1998 Microsoft NetMeeting - Summers).*

*"The more demanding applications of entertainment media, such as Digital TV, require bandwidth capacity of 1.5Mbps to 6Mbps per channel. While these applications are a little beyond the last mile broadband 1.5Mbps expectations for the next few years, they are not so far beyond to prohibit some early experimentation."
(e-video, Alesso.)*

In terms of clarity of picture, many interpreters who have experienced video conferencing in recent years will be able to discuss in depth the difficulties associated with unclear picture transmission and delayed time frames and the additional stresses encumbered by the Interpreter during the interpreting process due to this. Many of you can comment on how that in turn impacts on how you feel about the job you do. Some may not consider there is a problem and that current image transference is sufficient for the job.

In 1997, I was very interested in the design of multimedia and the fact that many Deaf consumers at that time were experiencing difficulties in operating the variety of interactive video conferencing systems, both PC based and stand alone. In response, I began an MSc in Multimedia Authoring in order to understand design methodologies and creative solutions for improving product interfaces and training materials. It is interesting how many products on the market have basic design flaws in terms of human interaction. Many of us can express our frustrations in this regard.

("Using Videophones" - CD-ROM Author: Sharon Lee)

"How many times have you heard someone exclaim 'This software manual is horrible! I can't understand anything it's telling me to do.' Documentation is too often the forgotten or hurried step of program development" (Asymetrix Toolbook - Hustedde)

In 1998, I managed a project at the RNID called "SignLink" which involved the rolling out of 30 PCs with WINDOWS based videoconferencing nationally (UK). This project was funded by BT (British Telecom). Interpreting issues were at the forefront of the debate. The project was piloting remote access to an on-line interpreting service (also known as Video Relay/Remote Interpreting, VRI). A number of Interpreters experienced significant difficulties in operating technical equipment whilst trying to simultaneously provide an interpreting service. Deaf people expressed concerns that the majority of Interpreters were exhibiting a serious lack of confidence. This reportedly had a knock on effect, influencing some Deaf people who then also lost confidence in their own ability to manage the scenarios during the process.

Significant linguistic errors also occurred, some due to the lack of clarity of picture and at other times because there was already a linguistic weakness in a particular area and the on-line interpreting process exacerbated it.

("SignLink" Sharon Lee 1999)

"When you become a little more attentive to words in general and how to use them, you may begin to notice that others are making many errors. With continued attention, you may even see that you can count yourself among them."

(Brain Power - Savant)

I became increasingly interested in the combination of the two visual mediums, in the one role - Sign Language Interpreter/Computer operator. During the course of this project (six months) Interpreters often expressed their frustration at the psychological effect of trying to perform two sets of visual and mental processing functions in parallel. From my own experiences I could relate to many of the anecdotes.

I continue to be concerned about the Health and Safety elements of on-line working arrangements. The ergonomics (the way the human physically interacts with the technical and physical environment) of the work station) in my opinion is often under-resourced and not conducive to an interpreter working comfortably. I think it is fair to say that often project resources have not gone towards the interpreters' needs. I consider that most of the accomplishments of on-line projects, are down to the individual Interpreters' motivation to "learn on the job" and enthusiasm. That interpreters will continue with such goodwill is debatable.

The impact on the eyes, because of the picture resolution, and the difficulty in hearing because of poor quality sound cards, were other illustrations of less than ideal working conditions.

"True sound proofing - stopping outside noises from getting into a room, or keeping a loud mixing session from disturbing neighbours - requires special construction techniques. For the practical video producer, the best sound proofing is understanding: Know how to avoid situations where reflected or incidental sounds will interfere with what you're trying to do." (Great Sound - Rose)

Do we need to formalise any concerns as Interpreters? I think that we do. I refer to my report "On-line Interpreting Health and Safety Report" for the BDA (British Deaf Association), Sharon Lee 2000. Are poor physical conditions in terms of lighting and sound being unfairly imposed upon interpreters.

In general in the UK your employer has a duty amongst other things to:

"... give you the information, instruction, training and supervision necessary for your health and safety."

(HSE - Health & Safety Executive www.open.gov.uk/hse/hschome.htm).

I believe that on-line Interpreting raises Health and Safety issues that need to be assessed and addressed.

Added to this is the additional responsibility of making POTS (Plain Old Telephone System) calls on behalf of a Deaf videophone caller and operating a number of different technical products efficiently and effectively whilst simultaneously trying to get the meaning of the interpreted information across. I often found consecutive Interpreting worked best. What are your experiences?

Then there is the skill the Interpreter requires to control "virtual turn taking." It is relevant at this point to examine a number of the on-line interpreting models. I have highlighted some of the issues I recognise in order to encourage discussion.

1. The Interpreter is in a remote location. The Deaf person uses a videophone in their location and calls the interpreter directly, asking the Interpreter to make a telephone call to a hearing person on their behalf.

"Interpreters becoming call centre operators."

2. The Interpreter and the Deaf person are in the same location and use a videophone to make contact with a hearing person in another location.

"Maintaining physical contact with our Deaf colleagues is a positive thing"

3. The Deaf person and the Hearing person are in the same location and contact an Interpreter by videophone. The Interpreter is in the remote location.

"The Deaf person is more independent, does the interpreter feel any sense of redundancy?"

"Are all Deaf people's needs catered for in that remote location, has their journey been accessible? - How in turn does that affect their on-line experience? Is the Interpreting process in turn affected?"

4. The Hearing person and the Interpreter are in the same location and the Deaf person contacts them by videophone from a remote location.

"What about the power balance - how does the Deaf person feel? When the videophone is switched off the other two people (the Interpreter and Hearing person) have a shared physical space. Does this influence the building of a relationship which is not necessarily inclusive of the Deaf person?"

5. Multipointing. Everybody is in separate locations and arranges to meet in a virtual space where they can see each other on the screen. ("synchronous" - same place, same time)

Does the interpreter become the virtual "chair person".

6. Video messages are left for someone to retrieve later ("asynchronous". different place, different time).

"Deaf Interpreters. Will the demand for Deaf translators become even greater?"

I believe this dialogue is an essential part of the building of electronic services. Further, these services have the potential to be global services. I believe that Interpreters need to take a proactive stance in decision making. Only the medium may have changed hence, it is still a function of interpreting that is required. Yet, is it still the same job? Have we done the necessary flowcharting for on-line services?

"Flowcharting is an integral part of the interactive design process. It is done to communicate sequence, decision points, branching, and the flow of information in interactive media." (Designing Interactive Digital Media - Luppa).

In 2001 we are seeing the emergence of web streaming and the efforts of entrepreneurs with various projects, aimed at video storage and retrieval systems specifically for the Deaf community. Broadband E-Video is becoming more and more viable. Thus, information in Sign Language will be carried on the web without any of the crashes we know today, making Interpreting widely available via videotelephony from our television sets or computers or palmtops etc. Our use of the internet and the World Wide Web is commonplace. My interest in these developments influenced me to get involved in Independent Film Production. What does it make you feel like doing or make you feel that you need to do in terms of your own personal development and training? Some of us may want to run and hide! Others might not feel they need to do anything and yet others will want to embrace such changes. I am interested in the professional development my colleagues consider they need to be effective interpreters of the future.

"Electronic-Video, or "e-video" includes all audio/video clips that are played over the internet, either by direct download or streaming video. The problem with video however, has been its inability to travel over networks without clogging the lines. If you've ever tried to deliver video, you know that after heroic efforts on your part (including optimising the source video, the hardware, the software, the editing and the compression process), there remains a significant barrier to delivering your video over the web. That is the last mile connection to the client." (e-video, Alesso.)

The technological age is certainly pushing us in the direction of virtual service provision. Will Interpreters go kicking and screaming or willingly? When the last mile connection reaches us will the Interpreting profession be ready?

I think it is equally important to point out that there will always be a place for our traditional face to face (F2F) Interpreting, and for professionals who provide specialist

services across a continuum of service provision, including on-line. What interests me, however, is how much control do you as an interpreter feel you have in these changes? Do you get the impression that you have been at the forefront of negotiations in organisations where on-line changes are happening? Have you successfully negotiated working conditions which reflect the additional physical stresses you may encumber, have you analysed on-line interpreting demands? What are your thoughts on these changes?

We live in a changing world. "If things don't change they stay the same!".

Over the course of the next few days, let us take this opportunity which the web provides us, and examine what Interpreters and others in contact with the interpreting profession think about such changes particularly in relation to the job of interpreting. How do these changes affect our jobs if at all, and what do we think about any such changes to our jobs?

For example; for me a very attractive aspect of my job as a SLI is that I go to lots of interesting places and meet lots of interesting people and most of the time I have a co-worker. When I work across videoconferencing I continue to meet people face to face, but also meet them virtually. The emphasis changes, depending upon which comes first. I usually work without a co-worker on-line and do different types of interpreting assignments, some of which include form translations, which all vary in complexity.

Obviously the medium of videoconferencing, e-video, videotelephony, remote interpreting, relay interpreting, VRI, on-line interpreting, whatever we may wish to call it, lends itself to particular types of interpreting assignments. I support policies and procedures which specify the types of jobs that will and will not be done on-line.

"The Production cycle for a film is like a long train pulling car after car of equipment and passengers. Once the train leaves the station - which is equivalent to beginning principal photography on a film - changes in a schedule are almost impossible to make. The only time a director is free to alter the direction of a film without penalty is before considerable money and personnel are committed."
(Shot by Shot - Katz).

I feel this way, about interactive service provision in the Deaf Community . We need to get the foundations and infrastructure right as a community now, and minimise the wasting of resources by doing it badly and without negotiation.

I began my analysis of this relatively new interpreting dynamic by considering the questions; "why is television Interpreting apparently such an attractive, sought after job for an interpreter?" "Does on-line Interpreting offer any of the attractiveness of television Interpreting?"

Ultimately, I chose to become a freelance Interpreter and set up "Interpreters Direct" (**interpretersdirect@yahoo.com**) with a colleague in 1999. We consider these technological changes to be positive, yet we do not feel that we have had sufficient dialogue with our colleagues in terms of:

- How we will adjust our working lives according to new demands.
- How will we spend our downtime if we choose to telework?
- Will we be providing global services?
- How would this be facilitated and is it a viable option?

Finally, I'd like to ask you all:

"What are the issues for Sign Language Interpreters when services go on-line?"

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