Letter from the Editor: Being there

Interpreters often go unnoticed but to what extent is that a good thing?

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Interpreters are often the forgotten party at meetings and conferences, their very invisibility customarily taken as a sign that their work was good. Who has ever read a news report that mentions the excellent job the interpreters did? Competent work goes unnoticed (dog bites man), but slip-ups are news (man bites dog).

Feeling curious about how interpreters are depicted by the media, I decided to do a bit of online research. What I found have been more a sign of the times than anything else, or perhaps just indicative of what interests international press agencies. My search yielded 20 references to interpreters in Iraq and 14 to court and legal cases. The next most popular reference was to interpreters for professional athletes – yes, Hideki Matsui plays left field for the New York Yankees and has a personal interpreter.

There are surely some individuals out there who envy Matsui’s interpreter, who after all not only gets to bask in the media limelight on a routine basis ("Speaking through an interpreter, Matsui said..."), but also gets to see all 162 Yankee games! Though unperceived, he is there!

And “being there” is part of the job description, as well as one of the great pleasures of our profession. Interpreters get to pass through doors closed to most people. One of my most memorable assignments was a seminar on restoration of the stained glass of the Cathedral of Leon in Spain. Morning discussions among a score of specialists were a horror of technical terminology, but the afternoons were a different story all together. After lunch, we got to climb hidden stairways and traverse narrow passages to find close-up views of the windows. And later we even had the privilege of crawling out onto the tile rooftops to examine the glass from the outside - and steal sidelong glances of the city down below. Fascinating! And something I would never have been able to do if I hadn’t become a conference interpreter.

This issue of Communicate looks at various facets of what it means to “be there”. We start off with two articles on remote interpreting, for which “being there” actually means being somewhere else.

In “That Feeling of Being There: Vision and Presence in Remote Interpreting” Takis Mouzourakis examines the repercussions of working in a virtual environment. And to further delve into the consequences of this new technology, we also present “Remote Interpreting: Assessment of Human Factors and Performance Parameters”, in which Barbara Moser-Mercer reports the results of a joint study carried out by the International Telecommunications Union and the School of Translation and Interpretation of the University of Geneva. If your interest is aroused, come back here to connect to “Notes on Videoconferencing” prepared by AIIC’s Technical and Health Committee, which also
contains links to other related articles on our website.

The following three articles should give you a visceral feeling of actually “being there”. As our regular readers will know, Michel Lesseigne is preparing a collection of articles on interpreters’ real-life experiences to mark the 50th anniversary of AIIC. In this issue Michel himself weighs in with a story of the day he was “The Lady’s Voice”. No “speaking through an interpreter…” mentioned here, although that is indeed what happens in all its emotional clarity.

AIIC and Communicate! are proud and honored to be able to offer our readers an excerpt from All Rivers Run to the Sea, the autobiography of Elie Wiesel, esteemed writer and recipient of the 1986 Nobel Prize for Peace. Mr. Wiesel lets us in on how he discovered the world of conference interpreting – or how it found him – just prior to a meeting of the World Jewish Congress in Geneva. We have been fortunate to receive permission to run the French version of this piece for three months, and we hope to be able to do the same with the English version at a later date.

Our “history section” ends with an article on the role of staff interpreters in the founding of AIIC and the contributions they continue to make today. Claude Durand, Chairman of AIIC’s Staff Interpreters Committee, reminds us of the importance of staff interpreters “being there” next to their freelance colleagues.

Later this year a television documentary will give a larger public an inside view of conference interpreters. The Bureau of AIIC here announces the imminent filming of “The Whisperers,” especially appropriate as we gear up for our anniversary celebrations. Along with the announcement, you will find a few words of introduction from the producers, gebrueder beetz filmproduktion. Webeditor Vincent Buck complements this information with an interview of David Bernet, one of the directors.

The AIIC Training Committee and ARTE recently organised a workshop on media interpreting. Casha Davis sped to Strasbourg to be there for Communicate! and her “Of Wine Corks and High-speed Trains” will surely motivate many of you to do the same for future editions of the seminar.

With so many articles already under your belt, you may be feeling “UNarmed, UNable, (and) UNeasy”. So take a short break with Phil Smith’s review of We Did Nothing. Linda Polman’s inside look at UN missions. It must have been while Phil was taking a break from his books that he prepared another piece for us called Reading. Follow the link he provides to see the results of the BBC’s search for the UK’s best-loved novel.

This summer issue comes to an end with another article in AIIC’s First Contract Series, designed to help interpreters find their way around international organisations. After reading The Hague, Conference City you should know where you need to be at a number of the major organisations in the Dutch meeting hub.

Since many of you last checked in, the AIIC website has incorporated a user registration system that helps you keep track of content and services and enhances your browsing experience based on your interests and language profile. You can find out more about “My aiic.net” by clicking here.

Publishing five issues per year means that we put Communicate! online at irregular intervals. To make sure you know when a new issue is up, subscribe to our mailing list. This issue will be around for the next three months, so read it at your leisure over the northern summer or southern winter, as the case may be. It will continue ‘being here’ – at least until September.