Interpreting technology: AIIC welcomes the challenge

The AIIC blog talks to Thomas Binder, chair of the Technical and Health Committee, about remote interpreting and new technologies.

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Remote interpreting, new technologies... and even a bit of World Cup football! These are all topics that came up in conversation the other day when I met with Thomas Binder, Chair of AIIC’s Technical and Health Committee, to discuss the past, present and future of our profession. What follows is a summary of our chat.

MH: Thanks for joining me today, Thomas. First things first: it’s quite possible that some readers have never even heard of the AIIC Committee that you chair. Could you briefly tell us who you are and what you do?

TB: AIIC’s Technical and Health Committee (THC) does precisely what its name implies: It looks into our immediate physical working environment - booths as well as work-related health issues. It is made up of seven core members, with myself as chair, as well as an outer circle known as “TecNet”. These are AIIC members based all over the world who keep the Committee updated on technical developments in their regions, chip in on the THC’s work with their own technical expertise, and act as advisors to clients in their region with technical queries, carrying out site visits and advising them on technical requirements.

MH: So the Committee’s core mission is to advise users of interpreting (international organizations, architects, etc.) on the technical requirements that need to be met so that we can do our job properly?

TB: That’s only part of the story. We do field a lot of queries about the technical side of things, and I do indeed spend a good chunk of my time helping architects, institutional partners and others to meet established ISO standards and follow best practice guidelines for interpreting technology. The current standards are the result of decades of research and development – not to mention trial and error – and today’s users can benefit from the lessons learned. There’s no need to reinvent the wheel every time you build an interpreting booth, after all. So as chair of the THC, I am quite happy to do my bit to get the word out about what the current technical standards are.

But our Committee is more than just a channel for communicating guidelines. Over the years, AIIC, through the THC, has done much to actually define these standards and ensure that they meet the needs of both interpreters and our clients. When you think about it, it’s quite amazing that interpreters today generally don’t have to worry about whether their equipment will break down, whether the system will fail them... just a few decades ago, before the standards existed, you never
quite knew what to expect when you stepped into a booth. These days, when there are technical hitches, it’s not because the equipment isn’t up to par, but because there are maintenance issues or there has been some sort of human error (mikes left on, wires crossed, etc.).

This “comfort zone” of knowing that your technology will do what you need it to is one of the true achievements of the THC, as we’ve been working closely with equipment providers for over fifty years to define industry expectations and needs and ensure that they are met. To give you just one example of the close relationship we enjoy with industry: the other day I was contacted by the product development department of one major equipment provider, asking what innovations I was currently seeing on the interpreting market and whether I might have any ideas for new products. So they are actually coming to us for inspiration!

And, finally, we welcome queries from colleagues wishing to propose the best possible solution to a customer, but have difficulties choosing the appropriate technical option.

MH: That is indeed very satisfying, but in today’s fast-paced world, now is hardly the time to rest on one’s laurels. New technical developments are coming out every day that promise to impact our work as interpreters, and many of us wonder which technologies might help us do our work better and which might threaten our livelihoods. As technical advisors to the industry, how on earth do you keep up with it all?

TB: Good question. Technology doesn’t stand still, of course, and it’s our responsibility to ensure our guidance remains relevant to the profession. We are currently in the process of revamping our technical guidelines to take into account this rapid change. Whether it’s Skype-style chats, VOIP tools, or remote conferencing technologies, there’s a lot happening right now on the tech scene that can – and does – impact our profession, and we need to stay on top of it all.

As Committee chair, I like to keep my ear to the ground, and as a Committee we tend to find out about the latest developments through our TecNet and from other interpreters. But we’d love to hear from even more of you: we’ve put out a call to all conference interpreters to let us know about new technologies that they have encountered on the job, and to tell us about what works well and what doesn’t, so that we can feed the information into the new guidelines. So if you have, for example, done remote interpreting or used a new tech tool on a job, by all means tell us about your experience (technical-group@qz1rs.aiic.net). The more we know, the better we can do our job.

MH: It sounds to me like AIIC is taking a bottom-up approach in developing its technical guidance, feeding reports from the ground into the drafting of its guidelines. But some people might expect AIIC to take a top-down approach, dictating what technology is acceptable and what is not. What would you have to say to that?

TB: I would say that anyone hoping to get a “technology rule book” handed down from AIIC, black on white, is going to be disappointed. As Chair of the THC, I firmly believe that today you can no longer have a rule for every technical eventuality, and indeed, you shouldn’t. Our work as interpreters is guided by our Code of Professional Ethics, which states that we will undertake to ensure the best quality interpretation and endeavor to secure satisfactory conditions for our work. It is up to the interpreters themselves – whether as individuals or as consultant interpreters putting together a team – to determine whether the technical solution being offered will allow them to fulfil this undertaking or not. The technology is simply a means to an end.

Of course, this doesn’t mean it’s the Wild West out there. Whenever interpreters have a doubt about the technical conditions, they can count on us for advice. And as I said before, the more experience we garner, the better we will be able to assess where new technologies can serve our needs and where they might hinder us in our work - and all this will feed into new industry guidelines.
MH: Now might be a good moment to bring up remote interpreting, a tech topic that seems to be on everyone’s lips these days. Will remote solutions help us work better, and possibly make our lives easier by reducing travel stress? Or will the spread of remote interpreting spell the end of our profession as we know it?

TB: I’m glad you raised that point. It’s worth recalling two things at this stage in the discussion. First, remote interpreting has actually been with us for many decades, initially in the form of telephone interpreting. Telephone and other forms of remote interpreting are also rather commonplace in healthcare and community interpreting contexts. So the concept itself is not new; what is new is the format, which has changed with the advent of new technologies, and the fact that remote interpreting is moving into the conference sphere.

Second, this is not the first time that our profession has experienced a major upheaval in the mode of delivery. What happened when the world of diplomatic interpreting switched from consecutive to simultaneous in the 1950s? Interpreters were removed from center stage and relegated into little booths. With this “sidelining” of interpreters came a drop in the prestige linked to our profession: we went from being seen as quasi-equals with the diplomats we worked with, to being service providers at par with the other conference and catering staff.

With remote interpreting, interpreters are being taken off site altogether and turned into disembodied voices coming through little gizmos in delegates’ ears. This shift in physical position will most likely lead to another drop in status for our profession. I wonder, are today’s students of interpreting, who dream of rubbing shoulders with world leaders, aware that their future might have them working in something akin to a call centre?

Having said that, I don’t want you to think that I am against remote interpreting solutions. As a matter of fact, as Chief Interpreter for the FIFA, I helped implement a large-scale remote interpreting setup for the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. There, we had 45 interpreters working in 12 booths into a total of 13 languages at a single location in Johannesburg to interpret for press conferences held at all ten match venues across the country. We used state-of-the-art satellite technology for the hookups, and while interpreters’ reviews of the solution were mixed, we managed to provide the high quality service expected by the client.

Once again, it’s about seeing what new technologies have to offer and ensuring that they serve the underlying goal of offering a professional service. Let me be quite clear: some new technical concepts look a bit far-fetched. Still, they are to be welcomed, their potential explored and their flexibility and versatility possibly one day exploited to the benefit of all sides.

MH: That sounds like a take-home message if ever I heard one. To wrap up, could you tell us what the tech-curious among us should be on the lookout for in the months to come?

TB: There are a few things in the pipeline that might interest you. First, as I said earlier, the THC is currently working on new guidelines that will take into account the findings and experiences reported by our colleagues. They won’t necessarily include technical specifications related to bandwidth requirements or the like, since those are likely to become obsolete before they even hit the presses, but our guidelines will hopefully offer highly useful guidance nonetheless. We will be sharing the result of that work as soon as it is ready.

You may also be interested to hear that the remote interpreting solution implemented at the World Cup in South Africa will be repeated at the upcoming World Cup in Brazil 2014, only this time there will also be interpreting researchers on site to observe and measure interpreter performance as part of an academic field study. There will undoubtedly be some revealing findings arising from that work, so do keep an eye out for that.
Finally, you may want to watch the goings-on at the FIT World Congress in Berlin this August, “Man vs. Machine? The Future of Translators, Interpreters and Terminologists”. I will be joining industry mavens Nataly Kelly, Barry Slaughter Olsen, Esther Navarro-Hall and Alexander Drechsel on a panel called “Interpreting 2.0: Exploring the interface between interpreters and technology”. It promises to be an interesting exchange.

MH: Thanks for the tips! I will be in Berlin, and I most certainly will be in the audience for your panel on interpreter technology. Thanks for taking the time, Thomas, to tell us about AIIC’s Technical and Health Committee’s work and for sharing your views on the important subject of technology for interpreters.

TB: Thank you for your interest – and see you in Berlin!

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