Until recently, it was inconceivable for interpreters that they should be located anywhere else but in the very room where the event they interpreted actually took place – this seems to be changing (see AIIC’s Position Paper on Remote Interpreting, Communicate! 72, 2018). Recent advances in information and communications technology mean that it could be possible to provide simultaneous conference interpreting services remotely, from anywhere in the world. There are studies supporting the technical feasibility of remote interpreting (see Moser-Mercer, 2003; Roziner and Shlesinger, 2010).

In these studies, interpreters report feeling an increase in fatigue and stress and a deterioration of their performance. However, objective measures of fatigue, stress and performance, are largely the same as in non-remote environments. The studies conclude that remote interpreting may entail an additional psychological cost that is currently difficult to measure physiologically.

Pre-existing attitudes vs actual experience

In our study, we set out to explore to what extent this psychological cost might be influenced by a pre-existing negative attitude towards remote interpreting rather than interpreters’ actual experience. We analyzed the attitude and the experience of professional conference interpreters before, during and after the 2014 FIFA World Cup Brazil™.

During this global-scale sports event, a team of 31 conference interpreters covered 256 press conferences, 128 short interviews, and 31 daily media briefings, providing simultaneous interpretation into numerous languages. The interpreters worked from a remote-interpreting hub located at the Rio “Media Center” which was fitted with ISO-compliant mobile interpreting booths. Visual input was provided by one standard-sized computer screen located in each booth with the audio feed channeled through ISO-compliant interpretation consoles and headphones.

Data on interpreter attitude and expectations were collected using two online questionnaires, administered one week prior to and one week after the event, as well as on-site interviews during the event. Two thirds of the interpreters assigned to the World Cup meetings participated in the study.
Attitude towards Video Remote Conference Interpreting

Importantly, about 80% of surveyed interpreters had some previous experience with remote interpreting, whereas 30% were familiar with the setup used in Rio. However, these interpreters had worked no more than seven days on average in this modality during the previous calendar year. Half of the interpreters reported considerable reservations about remote interpreting before the event. The reasons given for these misgivings are supported by previous findings (Moser-Mercer 2003; Mertens-Hoffman Management Consultants Ltd, 2005; Mouzourakis, 2006; Roziner and Shlesinger, 2010; Braun, 2015): interpreters feel less immersed in the conference environment, they feel their work requires more effort because they are unable to see everything that goes on in the conference room, and they generally feel at the mercy of technology and of distant participants.

Despite these objections, interpreters said they were willing to accept remote interpreting provided the technology works.

The other half of the interpreters was much less critical of remote interpreting and expressed a willingness to accept this modality. In fact, they prefer remote interpreting when it replaces tedious travel or when it helps remove the interpreter from potentially negative scrutiny in the meeting room.

Overall, the surveyed interpreters seem to accept that remote interpreting is bound to become a part of their profession. While they would rather be part of the debate on remote interpreting in order to shape it, for the time being they are still far from enthusiastic about it.

Attitude towards Remote Interpreting at the 2014 FIFA World Cup™

Given interpreters’ general attitude towards remote interpreting, it was rather surprising that many indicate not having any particular expectations regarding the remote interpreting setup going into the event. Considering that many interpreters ultimately reported being pleasantly surprised by their remote interpreting experience in Rio, we conclude that they felt some initial apprehension.

This tacit apprehension might have been allayed by the actual setup. In fact, after the event, interpreters reported that the quality of the sound, the image and the technicians met or exceeded their expectations. However, whenever relevant visual information such as a speaker or a visual aid was not captured on the view screen, leading interpreters reported feeling alienated and experiencing a loss of control.

Attitude towards the Remote Interpreting work environment
The interpreters largely agreed that working from a central hub is preferable to working from different individual locations. The hub is seen as facilitating teamwork and as promoting team spirit. This is true even though the majority of the assignments were short enough to require no more than one interpreter per booth. Importantly, interpreters pointed out that the remote interpreting hub need not be constrained by the same limitations as an ordinary in-situ setup, and ought to be equipped to better meet conference interpreters’ needs. This should include the provision of office facilities to prepare for upcoming assignments as well as a dedicated area to rest during downtime.

Attitude towards the Remote Interpreting workspace

The actual workspace — the remote interpreting room — was equipped with ISO-compliant mobile interpreting booths arranged in a bracket shape. This layout provides all interpreters with an unobstructed view of the technicians’ desk (and vice versa) and was deemed a good solution by most interpreters. A semi-circle arrangement, however, would allow complete visibility of all booths from all booths whilst preserving the important direct view of the technicians’ desk. Moreover, interpreters felt that there was not enough room in the booth, with the view screen and the interpreters’ own computers taking up valuable desk space. Here, too, the dimensional and technical constraints of traditional interpreting booths need not apply and might allow for a more ergonomic layout. Concerns over the limited amount of visual input provided on the view screen, including calls for more active control over it, once more echo previous findings (Mouzourakis, 2006; Roziner and Shlesinger, 2010). The interpreters reiterated the call for multiple cameras.

Conclusions

Participants in the study were mostly satisfied with their working experience at the 2014 FIFA World Cup™. Despite an initial lack of enthusiasm towards remote interpreting, our findings suggest that the interpreters no longer necessarily and systematically perceive remote interpreting setups as more stressful, nor as detrimental to their performance. They suggest certain technical improvements to the current setup, chiefly the provision of additional visual input. Ideas range from one additional camera showing the public or the projection screen for slide presentations, to several fixed or mobile cameras for interpreters to choose from.

Participants in the study also suggested improvements concerning the ergonomics of the workspace, including the size and location of the viewing screen but also the use of integrated headsets to maximize the available room in the booth. The comparative advantage of these suggested improvements should be tested during the prototyping of new setups.

A very important finding of our study is that conference interpreters attach great importance to teamwork and generally agree that working in a “hub-to-venue” setup is preferable to a “home-to-venue” setup. Interpreters may have a more positive attitude towards remote interpreting in situations where they can work remotely as a team, physically located in the same place and able to engage
both professionally and socially. Such remote interpreting hubs need well-equipped working and resting areas for interpreters, which could offset some of the psychological stress associated with this setup.

Finally, our findings cannot be generalized to other types of Distance Interpreting and only apply to the specific remote interpreting setup we studied. It would appear, however, that the attitude towards remote interpreting experienced during the 2014 FIFA World Cup™ was overall positive, and issues such as lack of motivation no longer emerged as clearly as in previous studies (see Moser-Mercer 2005). If our findings can be replicated, this would indeed suggest that conference interpreters’ reservations and misgivings about remote interpreting could be allayed so long as conditions meet or exceed those described here, and take on board the suggested improvements.

References


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All photos courtesy of Sophie Hengl.

This is a summary of the report ‘Expectations vs. experience: attitude towards Video Remote Conference Interpreting’, by Kilian G. Seeber, Laura Keller, Rhona Amos and Sophie Hengl, currently in press in Interpreting.

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