Visible, accountable, professional – the truth behind White House interpreter reports

Rebuttal on behalf of AIIC to a piece by Deborah Giustini in The Conversation

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Deborah Giustini’s piece entitled “Confusion of Donald Trump’s Italian interpreter goes viral – why some jobs are meant to be invisible” dated October 22, 2019 in The Conversation contains serious inaccuracies regarding both the specific incident referenced and the interpreting profession in general.

If the author had done the homework of viewing the entire impromptu press conference in the Oval Office or reading the transcript, she would have known the video had been doctored. It shows the interpreter’s image inside the Oval Office while playing the sound of a statement made two hours later during the official press conference. The statement referencing the Roman Empire was actually made later, not in the Oval Office. The image of the expression on the interpreter’s face taken in the Oval Office therefore could not be in reaction to that statement. The video inserted into Ms. Giustini’s article is a montage of non-sequential moments.

Elisabetta Savigni Ullmann is a seasoned interpreter who has worked for four US presidents and served the White House for twenty years. She has been a member of AIIC since 1995. She stands as an example for all of us. As on so many occasions before, she did the brave work of interpreting alone at the highest level in front of the cameras doing long passages of note-taking for an extended period. Add to that the current frazzled political climate and tension. The commensurately greater concentration and intense effort required is what we see in her expression. No more.

A video montage, a fake, was made to produce a specific political effect. The video was doctored to associate sound to images taken two hours earlier. The purpose was to use the interpreter’s facial expressions to support the film’s message. We are saddened that Ms. Giustini did not do sufficient research to uncover the above. She shows some knowledge of our professional ethics and we congratulate her on that. Yet she seems to fall for the video when she appears to actually believe such a solid and experienced interpreter would turn amateur when the going gets tough. Believe me, you have no idea how tough it can get. We are experienced conference interpreters. Please leave this to us. Elisabetta performed a supremely professional interpretation while remaining perfectly neutral both verbally and in her manner.

Ms. Giustini furthermore wishes to tell readers what “[r]esearch shows” about our profession. For example, our “invisibility…protects [us] from being held accountable for [our] mis-interpretations.” This is utterly false. We are held strictly accountable by our clients and are actually quite visible. The closest we come to “invisible” is behind a soundproof window in conference rooms, seen by all and ready to account for any mistakes. Often we stand before large audiences scrutinized by many.
Enough people are getting hurt in the current climate. We interpreters would like to continue serving through faithful, accurate and professional interpreting without being misrepresented, as in this article, nor used for political purposes, as in the fake video.

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Note: The Conversation has since revised the article to remove at least one of the erroneous statements.

Recommended citation format: