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MONDAY, MAY 16, 2011

Interpreting and the Digital Revolution

InterpretAmerica Co-President Barry Slaughter Olsen recently spoke to the members of the [National Judiciary Interpreters and Translators Association \(NAJIT\)](#) at their 32nd Annual Conference in Long Beach, California. We post his remarks here.

Original Audio:



Interpreting and the Digital Revolution

NAJIT Keynote Speech by Barry Slaughter Olsen, Co-President of InterpretAmerica Delivered on May 13, 2011, in Long Beach, California

"I am both humbled and honored to be with you today. I wish to thank the NAJIT Board of Directors and the Conference Committee for inviting me to be with you in Long Beach today. Having been asked to speak to a distinguished group of judiciary translators and interpreters, knowing that I myself am not one, is a responsibility that I take seriously. As my CV attests, I am a conference interpreter. And although we conference interpreters don't often think about this, the genesis of our profession is actually in legal interpreting. In large measure, conference interpreting is what it is today because of the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg. So, in a sense, I stand before you today speaking to my professional roots.

"Events that play out in courtrooms across the country, and around the globe for that matter, have significant and lasting consequences for individuals and societies. The weight of those consequences warrants that all parties involved understand the proceedings. And you are there to make that happen. I honor and respect your work.

The Digital Revolution

"But I have not come today to speak to you about the importance of quality language services in law enforcement and legal proceedings. You understand that better than I. I have come today to speak with you about the profession of interpreting as a whole and its incipient relationship with the flood of new technologies that have revolutionized modern communication.

"The introduction of new technologies for the delivery of translation and interpreting services is growing at an ever increasing rate in legal and other settings. However, just how this trend affects our professions will largely depend on how translators and interpreters react to these changes...and which battles we choose to fight.

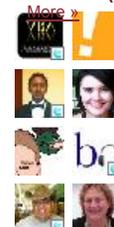
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"In today's new media landscape, television companies, newspaper companies, and telephone companies; have learned this lesson and morphed into "media companies" and "communications companies." They understand that their value is derived from the services they provide (voice communication, text messaging, e-mail service, etc.) or the content (television programs, news, entertainment, movie schedules, etc.) they deliver. Describing themselves by the infrastructure they use to provide their services was holding them back and making them anachronistic.

"Old means of disseminating information (newspapers and broadcast television, for example) are being displaced by websites, blogs and streaming video. Old ways of doing things have fallen by the wayside. For example, how many of you flew to attend this conference? How many of you booked your travel on line? How many of you worked with a travel agent?

"Another example: How many of you speak with friends or relatives who reside outside the United States? How many of you use a voice over IP application such as Skype to communicate with them?

"There are many other examples: photography, video rentals, even the postal service has had to adapt to new technologies over the past decade. Suffice it to say that digital technologies have touched almost every aspect of modern life to some extent. One example that hits closer to home is translation. Word processing software, translation memories, and machine translation have radically changed and will continue to change the way translators work. And I don't think any translator longs for the days of translating with nothing more than pen and ink or even a typewriter.

"Interpreting, however, is not as far along in its courtship with new technologies. Make no mistake, automation and computers will not replace translators and interpreters, they have changed and will change the way and where we work. Pioneering efforts are underway to introduce new ways to deliver interpreting services. And some sectors or language combinations like English/ASL have been delivering interpreting services remotely for some time now. Many of you here today may have already worked with technologies such as video relay interpreting over the internet, telepresence, or voice over IP, not to mention over the phone interpreting, which has been around for a couple of decades now. And I would wager that your experiences have ranged from good to downright unacceptable. But the important thing to remember is that, in essence, these technologies are simply the infrastructure that is used for us to deliver our services (Remember the example of television companies turning into media companies in order to adapt?). The interpreting task is essentially the same as it has always been, regardless of whether we are standing next to those who need our services in a triadic formation, working from an ISO standard interpretation booth in a conference room, or in an adequately equipped interpretation studio across town or across the country.

Two Questions

"This leads me to two basic questions that may be on your minds as well.

"The first question: What will be the impact of technological developments on the future of face-to-face or on-site interpreting?

"Let me try to answer the first question this way. Over the last 50 to 60 years, the basic modalities of interpreting (consecutive, simultaneous and sight translation) have not really changed, nor has the technology used to provide them. That means that professional practice, in broad terms, has remained more or less static for several decades. Think about that for a moment. During that same period, written and oral communication have become virtually instantaneous, we are slowly but surely moving to a paperless environment, photography has gone digital, and book, music and video distribution has gone on-line and now wireless. And while many in our profession continue to maintain that interpreting cannot be done unless the interpreter is physically present in the same room as meeting participants, depositions are being conducted via telepresence, business executives on different continents meet via video conference, and webinars reach out to tens of thousands of interested participants around the globe. And it doesn't stop there. Digital

technology has changed the way doctors practice medicine and the way lawyers practice law. It has changed the way politicians run for office and the way we shop from everything from food to clothing. So can we honestly expect technology not to have a profound influence on the way we do our job as interpreters when virtually every other area of human endeavor has been touched in some way by new technologies?

"I think we can safely say that technology is already radically changing the way we deliver interpreting services, and translation has been transformed over the last decade because of technological innovation. That same innovation has created more work than ever before for translators.

"That said, face-to-face or on-site interpreting will not disappear. The circumstances in which it is warranted will become more defined and clear cut. Economic and other forces will dictate when and where it is used. It will be seen as one of several delivery modes.

"Tele-interpreting or distance interpreting use will increase as delivery technologies become more user friendly and robust. By that I mean, the technology will be dependable enough for us to do our job and we will be able to adequately hear and see the participants of an interpreted interaction, and they us. It is interesting to note that modern communications technologies are increasing interaction across cultures and borders, which has the potential to expand the use of interpreting. For example, the number of on-line meetings using web-based meeting services is growing rapidly, with different entities holding tens or hundreds or perhaps even thousands of on-line meetings each month. Granted, most of these meetings are monolingual, but interpreters' services are already being retained for on-line meetings and webinars. I expect this only to grow.

"However I am concerned with the lack of involvement of the interpreting profession as a whole in the development of these technologies which we will eventually be expected to use, if we have not had to use them already. To my fellow interpreters, I invite you to take an interest in these new technologies. We must understand what they can and cannot do and be able to communicate clearly the working conditions we need to do our job well without detriment to our health and well being. To the technology developers I say, bring the interpreters into your discussions about product development. Consider how your current technologies being used in mainly monolingual environments can appropriately be adapted to facilitate multilingual communication in consecutive and simultaneous modes. Familiarize yourselves with existing technical standards for video and audio transmission for the purposes of interpretation. And let us help you build the tools that we need to do our job well and help people from different languages and cultures communicate like never before. If the motivation behind the introduction and use of technology is limited to a desire to cut costs, then interpreters, users of interpretation, and agencies are in trouble. I don't want to beat the proverbial dead horse of "client education," but that is what it will take.

"If we fear technology and its impact on our profession, we will become a victim of it. If we embrace it wisely, we can shape it to our own benefit and to the benefit of those we serve. I laud NAJIT's efforts to prepare position papers on a number of important issues facing judiciary interpreters, in particular the need for team interpreting and the use of telephonic interpreting. And I would encourage your Association to consider drafting a position paper on new technologies and modes of delivery such as videoconference interpreting and remote interpreting.

"In Europe, the **AVIDICUS Project**, which conducted some of the first research into the use of videoconference interpreting in criminal proceedings, is an excellent example of how interpreters, academe, government, professional associations and the private sector can work together to study the impact of new technologies on professional practice. Similar efforts in the United States would be a step in the right direction.

"Now, let me try to answer **the second question**. Where do our strengths as interpreters lie in this new landscape?

"Our strengths as language professionals lie where they always have. That is, in our

knowledge of languages and cultures and our ability to facilitate cross-language and cross-cultural communication better than any technology can. Speech is perhaps the most human of all forms of human expression. And that is what makes human interpreters essential.

"In an increasingly interconnected and multilingual world, the demand for professional language expertise will only grow, in some cases exponentially, which is why there is such a push to find technological solutions to help deliver more efficient and more cost effective language services.

"Our strength lies in our ability to define who we are as a profession and to help society understand that definition. We do ourselves no favor as a profession by remaining fragmented and isolated based on where we interpret or who we interpret for. Bringing interpreters, technology providers, educators, and users of interpreting together to discuss the future of our profession/industry was the idea behind the creation of the [North American Summits on Interpreting](#). In June of last year the 1st North American Summit on Interpreting took place in Washington, D.C. More than 160 interpreters from across the profession, end users of interpreting services, institutional employers of interpreters, agencies and solution providers met for one day to take stock of interpreting in North America and to envision its future.

"One of the notable outcomes of the Summit was the publication of "[The Interpreting Marketplace: a Study of Interpreting in North America](#)." This 89-page market study prepared by Common Sense Advisory is the first of its kind and seeks to capture a snapshot of interpreting in the United States, Canada and Mexico that gives us an idea of where we stand as a profession and can serve as a point of reference for future studies. InterpretAmerica has made this study available free of charge as a service to the profession. Copies may be downloaded from the interpretamerica.net website.

"Our strength as a profession lies in unity and coordinated effort. Sector-specific professional associations for interpreters have existed for years. There are international, national and regional associations for conference interpreters, legal or judiciary interpreters, medical interpreters, and interpreters for the deaf. They all serve specific and important purposes. However, Coordinated efforts to represent the interpreting profession as a whole, in my view, would be a welcome development. Through the Summits on Interpreting, we seek to encourage dialog among the many interested parties from the interpreting profession and industry. And I hope to see many of you at the 2nd North American Summit on Interpreting next month in Washington, D.C.

"In sum, my message today can be distilled into two main points: First, interpreters must embrace technologies that will be used to deliver our services in order to shape them to our advantage and benefit. And second, interpreters must find ways to come together, crossing over sector-specific lines that we ourselves have drawn, as interpreting has expanded to different venues and parts of society. This does not mean our differences will disappear. But interpreters must have a unified voice if we hope to be recognized by society for what we do.

"At a National Foreign Language Summit held in Washington, D.C., in late 2010, current CIA Director and soon-to-be Secretary of Defense [Leon Panetta](#) spoke of what it will take to improve the foreign language proficiency in the United States. His words reflect what I believe it will take for interpreting to adapt to the 21st century and to the new technologies that are reshaping much of human endeavor. He said: "[A significant cultural change needs to occur. And that requires a transformation in attitude from everyone involved: individuals, government, schools and universities, and the private sector.](#)" I couldn't agree more.

"Thank you for your attention."

Posted by InterpretAmerica at 10:39 PM

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