When Technology Meets Simultaneous Interpreting:
A Glimpse into the World of Webcast Interpreting

By Cristina Silva

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Until very recently, conference interpreters worked exclusively in conventional settings, such as meeting rooms and convention halls, and all participants (client, audience, and interpreters) were in the same venue. However, with improved and more reliable high-speed Internet and the development of telephone conferencing centers and web conference applications, we are now at a turning point where conference interpreting is feasible remotely from just about anywhere via webcast interpreting. This article will provide a basic overview of this fascinating and evolving area of interpreting.

Webcast? Web and Phone Conferencing? Remote? Distant? What?

A webcast is a multimedia presentation streamed over the Internet, broadcasting audio and video content to many simultaneous listeners/viewers. Webcasts can be streamed live (simulcasts) or be available on-demand. Webcasts are made possible because of web conferencing services, which allow conference events to be shared. These events are called webinars when referring to more interactive presentations and online workshops. Oftentimes, webinars and webcasts also include a telephone component in which listeners can access the presentation by dialing into a local number and listening to the audio feed from the event. This is made possible by telephone conferencing systems. Close proximity to speakers is not necessary in order to interpret for these events because they make use of Internet protocol-based technology.

Webcast interpreting is slightly different from video remote interpreting (VRI), a video telecommunication service that uses devices such as web cameras or videophones to provide sign language or spoken language interpreting services. In traditional VRI, interpreters are seen, whereas in webcast interpreting they are mostly heard.

Not Quite a New Idea

Remote interpreting has actually been around for a few decades, with many improvements along the way. The first major institutional remote interpreting experiment of relevance to webcast interpreting was carried out in 1976 during the 19th General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which was held in Nairobi over a period of five weeks. A satellite link (referred to as the Paris-Nairobi *Symphonie Satellite*) to the UNESCO secretariat in Paris permitted officials, delegates, interpreters, journalists, and others to interact with those physically present in Nairobi.[1]

Since then, many other remote and distant interpreting experiments have been conducted by several organizations, including the United Nations (UN) in 1978 (between New York and Buenos Aires during the UN Conference on Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries in Buenos Aires), the European Commission in 1995 (Studio Beaulieu), the International Telecommunication Union in 1999, and studies conducted by the European Parliament in 2000 and 2001. Some of these were not webcast interpreting studies per se, but addressed the issue of video-mediated interpreting and the fact that the interpreters and participants were remote.

The most well-documented remote interpreting research study dealing with human factors and performance in remote interpreting, and of relevance to webcast interpreting, is the 1999 joint project between the International Telecommunication Union and the École de Traduction et d'Interpretation, Université de Genève. The findings of this study are discussed in Barbara Moser-Mercer's "Remote Interpreting: Assessment of Human Factors and Performance Parameters." Moser-Mercer's 2003 paper concludes that: "Remote interpreting has demonstrated that, for the same group of interpreters, working live in a conference room is psycho-

logically less stressful (according to interpreters' self-reports), less tiring (as evaluated via performance indicators), and conducive to better performance overall."[2]

To mitigate factors such as stress and fatigue, which may decrease interpreter performance, Moser-Mercer recommends shorter interpreting times for interpreters working in a remote situation, as well as a thorough analysis of interpreters' visual needs during the interpretation.

It should be noted that most webcast interpreting events today can take advantage of audio and video technologies, allowing interpreters to take in as many audio and visual cues as possible. Because of advancements in audio and high-definition video components in today's technologies, interpreters can rely on visual information, such as observing a speaker's body language, which is essential to good interpreting.

What Does a Webcast Interpreting Project Look Like?

Best practices in webcast interpreting events call for two interpreters per language and one project coordinator/manager. Just like at face-to-face events, conference interpreters working simultaneously will take turns and have rest periods. The difference here is that the interpreters are generally physically remote to the event and to each other, so the fact that the interpreters are not in the same booth will require more coordination between them in order to achieve seamless turn-taking.

Many web conferencing systems, such as Adobe Connect[3] and Webex,[4] have a chat window in which interpreters can communicate with each other regarding terminology questions, sound quality and volume

checks, and the coordination of breaks and turn-taking. For example, this technology allows me to work from Colorado, whereas my booth mate is in Texas, and our project coordinator/manager is in New Jersey.

The project coordinator/manager should not only interface with the client and request materials in advance,[5] but also monitor the incoming and outgoing sound, sound quality, and volume in a conference, just as a sound technician would. Similarly to the interpreters, the project coordinator/manager can also be remote to the client site and use the chat window to send instant messages to the interpreters.

Home Office Setup

Advances in residential broadband Internet and web conferencing programs have allowed interpreters to work from a well-insulated home office, where we will usually find:

- Robust and up-to-date computer systems
- Reliable high-speed broadband Internet
- Two phone landlines (one line receives the incoming sound, the other the outgoing sound)
- Binaural headphones for the incoming sound from the computer
- Binaural headphones for the incoming sound from the telephone

In a possible scenario, the incoming sound comes both from the computer (after having joined the web conference) and from the telephone line (after having joined the telephone conference). Such redundancy means that if the incoming sound from the computer is not good enough, the interpreter has the ➡

option of switching to the telephone line, or vice versa. Depending on bandwidth, the number of listeners, time of day, and any factors that are difficult to quantify (e.g., the actual broadband delivery, the computers and phones used), the incoming sound from the computer may be incredibly crisp and clear, compared to the incoming telephone sound, or vice versa.

The redundancy and combination of different technologies (phone conferencing system, web conferencing platforms) also highlight the need for integrated, seamless technology that allows interpreters to focus on what they do best, rather than having to add technology management to the coping game that interpreters play.

Of course, central to this discussion is the reliability of Internet bandwidth, which is necessary for the entire conference to work. I am curious to see additional options other than the traditional offerings, such as Adobe Connect and Webex. I am already excited about new developments in wideband and multiple channels, which will allow switching language directions on the fly and the ability to use more integrated products such as ZipDX.[6]

Typical Projects

As far as topics are concerned, most of my events have been in one of these major fields:

- Clinical trials
- Mergers and acquisitions, quarterly earnings meetings
- Employee briefings and communications
- New products and services
- Multi-level marketing
- Work safety

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Most events have been about two or three hours long, with a few six-hour events. I have also interpreted in events where as many as four languages were involved, as well as in events where the only language was Portuguese. Most of these events use only unidirectional interpreting (for example, one event is exclusively from English into Portuguese, followed by another event exclusively from Portuguese into English). This means that interpreters cannot switch the direction into which they are interpreting, because there is no channel switching mechanism or any hardware available to listeners and presenters that would allow listening to different channels.

A Unique Challenge

Currently, the big questions associated with webcast interpreting are how to obtain reliable high-speed bandwidth, how to work with an integrated, seamless solution, and how to measure quality or success in webcast interpreting events. Besides the interpreter's delivery, the listener's understanding of the content matter, and orchestrating seamless turn-taking among interpreters who are not able to communicate visually with each other, we also have the technology factor to consider. When we solve the challenges of Internet connectivity and providing crystal clear sound on a consistent basis, we will have made quantum leaps in this field. If you ask me what I like most about webcast interpreting, I will tell you that, as an interpreter, I live on adrenaline, so webcast interpreting gives me my daily rush without going through the TSA screening lines at the airport! ■

Notes

1. "A Teleconference Experiment" (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1977), http://bit.ly/UNESCO-teleconference1976.

2. Moser-Mercer, Barbara. "Remote Interpreting: Assessment of Human Factors and Performance Parameters" (International Association of Conference Interpreters, 2003), http://aiic.net/page/1125/#biblio2000.

3. Adobe Connect, www.adobe.com/products/adobeconnect.html.

4. Webex, www.webex.com.

5. "Guidelines for Speakers in a Webcast Event" (European Commission), http://bit.ly/EC-speakerguidelines.

6. ZipDX, www.zipdx.info.