

“Working at a distance from everybody”: challenges (and some advantages) in working with Video-based Interpreting Platforms

HEIDI SALAETS AND GEERT BRÔNE
KU Leuven

Abstract

The recent pandemic has unmistakably changed the way conference interpreters perform their work: the transition from the traditional booth with participants in a conference room to the fully online booth at the interpreter's home came suddenly and under the pressure of (inter)national health regulations. Although developments in interpreting technology are not novel and have been addressed since the 1990s, with first announcements like “conference interpreters in the electronic age” (Moser-Mercer 1992), the pandemic has speeded up the ongoing technological process, which now receives increasing scholarly attention (Fantinuoli 2018a, 2021; Corpas Pastor 2021). What still needs more scrutiny, however, is how these solutions are implemented in the daily interpreting business and how interpreters evaluate their use. In this study, funded by AIIC (Association Internationale des Interprètes de Conférence), we report on how interpreters experience the use of remote interpreting (RI) through video-based interpreting platforms (VIP), including virtual booth setups, in their professional life. The findings of interviews that were conducted with 10 professional interpreters show that interpreters experience a lot of challenges, like technological and communicative problems, greater fatigue, alleged lower interpreting quality online than onsite. At the same time, however, the forced shift to remote interpreting during the pandemic has helped them to discover some advantages of VIP solutions as well – especially when an online booth is available.

Keywords

Conference interpreting, COVID-19 pandemic, RSI (Remote Simultaneous Interpreting), technology, VIP (Video-based Interpreting Platform), virtual booth, work environment

Introduction

When the AIIC Research Committee (RC) in 2021 launched its call for research for the second time, prioritizing - amongst other topics - Remote Simultaneous Interpreting (RSI) (modalities, contexts, cognitive aspects, perception, equipment, ethics, etc.)¹, it was clear that the RC's interest in technology was triggered by the pandemic and the massive tele-working business for interpreters.

Ironically, the global health crisis, which speeded up the technological process, made interpreters also aware of the fact that their own health – mainly the auditory sense – is at risk when working at a distance², for instance when working with Video-based Interpreting Platforms (VIPs) that were multiplying from April 2020 on. Ball (2021) stresses that the bad sound quality in these systems is detrimental to interpreters' health:

If participants do not understand properly, they can ask questions or it can go unnoticed. If interpreters do not understand properly, they cannot interrupt to ask questions, as they are not delegates in the meeting. [...] For interpreters working with sound quality that is compromised may be worse than tiring and painful, it may prove dangerous to their health. Andrea Caniato posits that interpreters' report of tinnitus, hyperacusis and even hearing loss are the result of a problem more complex than acoustic shocks, but rather the result of poor sound quality. (Ball 2021: 265)

In the present contribution, after a brief state of the art (§1), we present the aim of our study, which is to learn about the challenges and advantages linked to RSI when using VIPs (§2). This information was achieved through interviews with 10 professional interpreters (§3). In the following paragraphs (§4 and 5) the findings of the interviews are presented, before the discussion and conclusion (§6). We focus on participants' perception of working at a distance from everybody (meaning conference rooms, conference participants, interpreter colleagues etc.). In our study, 'working at a distance from everybody' is considered as working physically alone in the home office (only one of the respondents had worked in a hub). In presenting this study, we address the concern voiced by the Task Force on Distance Interpreting (TFDI) of AIIC that "further research is also needed into DI impacts in real-life situations with quality, health and wellbeing as paramount."

1 <https://aiic.org/document/10248/AIIC%20Research%20grant_%20application%20form.pdf> (last access December 22, 2023).

2 See the following reports on health implications (acoustic shock and hearing impact) due to distance interpreting: <<https://aiic.org/uploaded/web/Acoustic%20Shocks%20Research%20Project.pdf>> and <<https://medien-hd.ued.uni-heidelberg.de/wordpress/rsi-hearing-impact/>> (last access December 22, 2023).

1. State of the art: a short overview

With this study, we tie in with Constable (2015), who set up a hierarchy of modes, going from maximum sensory input to least sensory input. When applying this hierarchy to the interpreting reality, he indicates face-to-face interpreting as interpreting with maximum sensory input, while he defines Audio Remote Interpreting as a way of interpreting with the least sensory input.

In his description, he stresses in what sense the differences between modes matter:

Despite the fact that interpreters would agree that a video-mediated view of participants is better than none, the fact is that cameras do not function in the same way as the human eye and camera operators make their own choices, not those of each individual interpreter following the event. Interpreters may experience that it is more tiring, it can cause eyestrain, that the multiscreen mode can be distracting and that the faces of individual participants cannot be seen as clearly as a direct view. (Constable 2015:11)

The importance of the interpreting mode and the amount of sensory input relates to how humans construct meaning: in face-to-face interaction, for instance, paralinguistic features and kinesics observed in a live setting are more likely to help construct meaning than interaction at a distance, without even seeing each other (for example, over the phone). As Constable formulates it:

Humans use multi-sensory inputs, processed simultaneously, in order to form understanding. Generally speaking, the more inputs are available simultaneously, the greater ease we have in constructing meaning. The fewer sensory inputs available to us, the more effort is needed to do so, and the more likely it is that input be misconstrued. (Constable 2015:7)

However, in 2015 nobody could foresee the rapid technological (r)evolution triggered by the pandemic that started in February 2020: it caused a spectacular increase in the development and use of web conferencing platforms like *Google meet*, *MS Teams*, *Webex* and *Zoom*, but also of multilingual event/web conferencing platforms like *Interactio*, *Interprefy*, *Kudo*, *QuaQua*, *VoiceBoxer*, amongst others, which offer remote interpreting options. Virtual booths that are available on platforms such as *cAPPisco* even allow interaction among the interpreters, and in this way imitate the co-located experience of the interpreter. A key question, however, is whether these systems provide a realistic and feasible alternative and what their impact was (and is) on the professional lives of conference interpreters.

1.1 Remote interpreting and technology

It is safe to say that the pandemic has caused a shock wave (or *seismic shift*, as expressed by the TFDI of AIIC³) in the interpreter's technological landscape. Although technological solutions for remote interpreting were already announced and discussed

3 <<https://aiic.org/site/TFDI>> (last access December 22, 2023).

in the nineties (Moser-Mercer 1992), and more recent studies mapped out the potential of technology in various interpreting settings (Mouzourakis 2006; Moser-Mercer 2011; Braun 2015), interpreters have always been reluctant towards using it (Fantinuoli 2018b; Downie 2020). Lack of interest is not only assigned by Fantinuoli to practitioners but also to scholars and to the academic debate “judging by the small number of studies on technologies published to date” (Fantinuoli 2018b:155).

At this point, however, we need to distinguish several types of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), following Fantinuoli who distinguishes *process-oriented* and *setting-oriented* technologies, depending on the level at which they interact with the interpreter and the interpreting task (Fantinuoli 2018b). *Process-oriented* technologies are designed to “support the interpreter during phases of an assignment, i.e. prior to, during and possibly after the interpreting activity proper, independent of the modality” (Fantinuoli 2018b: 155), whereas *setting-oriented* technologies “comprise ICT tools and software ‘surrounding’ the interpreting process proper, such as booth consoles, remote interpreting devices, training platforms, etc.” (Fantinuoli 2018b:155). This means that Computer Assisted Interpreting (CAI) tools belong to the first group, while VIPs belong to the second.

While defining terms, we need to keep in mind from the start that, until now, ICTs did not have the same major impact on interpreting as on other professions, as confirmed by the fact that the manner in which interpreting is performed today has basically remained the same over the years (Fantinuoli 2018b:154). As a matter of fact, the impact of ICTs on the interpreting profession has been slow and sometimes marginal, but has increased exponentially since the pandemic.

As far as the reluctance towards CAI tools is concerned, it could be explained in part with the fact that their use may “raise doubts about the pure intellectual activity of interpreting” or because, from an economic point of view, “interpreting plays a marginal role in the language industry” and CAI tools represent “much less a cost-cutting factor than CAT (Computer Assisted Translation) tools” (Fantinuoli 2018b:163). Since this is not the focus of our research, we will not go further into the description of specific CAI tools.

Regarding remote interpreting platforms, the “feeling of being there” (referring to being live “on scene”) and the impression that working with a screen deteriorates interpreting quality (Roziner/Shlesinger 2010) possibly has made interpreters reluctant to go remote, while remote interpreting training, as far as we know, has received very little to no attention at all. Moreover, not only in practice, but also in research and in the academic debate, there seemed to be a lack of interest, “judging by the small number of studies on technologies published to date” (Fantinuoli 2018b:155), taking into account that the publishing year lies 2 years ahead of the pandemic.

Finally, terminology is not always transparent and the use of a panoply of acronyms does not reduce confusion in this regard: Video-Mediated Interpreting (VMI), VRI (Video Remote Interpreting), VCI (Video Conference Interpreting), RSI (Remote Simultaneous Interpreting) and Video-based Interpreting Platforms (VIPs) are of interest to this contribution. Following Braun (2020), VMI is the ‘overarching’ term that refers to a new modality of interpreting, thanks to new videoconferencing technology in distance communication. It has different configurations depending on “the distribution of the primary participants (co-present or in different locations) and the

distribution of the interpreter(s) in relation to the primary participants” (*Ibid*: 47). VCI is used to indicate that interpreters are co-located with one of the primary participants, although they may be in a third location (Braun 2007 in Braun 2020: 48) while VRI refers to the configuration where the interpreter(s) is (are) physically separated from all of the primary participants (*Ibid*: 48).

VIPs in reality are Remote Simultaneous Interpreting (RSI) platforms that substitute and complement hardware equipment. They can be used for online events and webinars as well as regular onsite conferences with interpreters connecting remotely from their homes or specially equipped studios or hubs.⁴ They became very important during the pandemic, especially in times of complete lockdown, where all participants were forced to interact from separate sites (in most cases every individual from their own home).

As stated above, the lack of – academic and professional – interest in the topic of ICT has drastically changed during and after the pandemic: the number of academic publications on remote simultaneous interpreting has increased (Fantinuoli 2021; Chmiel/ Spinolo 2022; Buján/ Collard 2023, to name just a few). Research projects such as the research of Chmiel and Spinolo⁵ and Buján and Collard (ESIT project), which aim to examine the impact on the working conditions of interpreters, have been shooting up like mushrooms. While Chmiel and Spinolo have conducted a survey to “inform the design of the experiment aiming to investigate the impact of various remote interpreting settings on the interpreter’s experience and performance” (Chmiel/Spinolo 2022: 257)⁶, the survey launched in April 2021 by Buján and Collard “was aimed at quantitatively understanding the experiences of conference interpreters with remote simultaneous interpreting (RSI)”⁷ and was completed by 946 conference interpreters. Results showed that interpreters had less work and fewer clients, that sessions were shorter (shifts with colleagues quicker), that 75% worked from home at that point in time and that only 26% preferred to do so. The study also revealed that teamwork in RSI matters, since 77% sometimes or always helped boothmates. As far as quality of the performance is concerned, 50% of the respondents thought they performed worse and 67% reported that working conditions were worse, while 83% considered RSI more difficult⁸. We must notice, however, that the survey was completed after a year of mostly complete lockdown.

The pandemic shift finally is also reflected in interpreter training: recent studies finally have revealed an increase in online interpreter training (Crezee *et al.* 2023).

4 <<https://www.atanet.org/tools-and-technology/six-remote-simultaneous-interpreting-platforms-and-zoom/>> (last access December 22, 2023).

5 See the AIIC blog about the first AIIC research grant, awarded to Agnieszka Chmiel and Nicoletta Spinolo at <<https://aiic.org/site/blog/the-virtual-booth>> (last access December 22, 2023).

6 This survey informed the experimental design about the most frequently used platform (Zoom) and generated insights into two independent variables, namely booth mate presence and type of multimodal input.

7 <https://aiic.org/viewEvent.html?no_header=true&productId=390> (last access December 22, 2023).

8 <<https://knowledge-centre-interpretation.education.ec.europa.eu/en/news/esit-research-project-remote-simultaneous-interpreting>> (last access December 22, 2023).

1.2 The feeling of “being there” and teamwork

(In)visibility has always been a much-discussed topic in various kinds and contexts of interpreting, including conference interpreting (Bavelas *et al.* 2008; Wadensjö 2008; Ozolins 2016; Pöchhacker 2020). The concept has at least a double meaning: physical (in)visibility, but also the more metaphorical indication of agency and power of the interpreter in the encounter, or the lack thereof (Ziegler/Gigliobianco 2018). Technology has inevitably played a role in both kinds of understandings and interpreters feel more excluded from the interaction or the event if they are not physically present, even if at physical meetings interpreters are also “separated” from the floor in their booths. Additionally, teamwork seems to be of paramount importance amongst conference interpreters and is considered more difficult in an online setting (Ziegler/Gigliobianco 2018; Seeber *et al.* 2019).

These studies stress the importance of interaction with colleagues, joint briefing and debriefing sessions and the preference to work in a ‘hub-to-venue’ setup rather than in a ‘home-to-venue’ setup. Seeber *et al.* (2019: 30) suggest that “working remotely, but as a team from the same place rather than individually from home, could have a substantial impact on interpreters’ attitudes towards RI.”

2. Aim of the research

Starting from Seeber’s (2019) findings, we pursue to examine whether specifically designed video-based interpreting platforms (VIPs) can provide a valuable proxy for the real-life experience of interpreting teamwork and reduce the feeling of working literally at a distance from everybody (colleagues, clients and audience). For our data collection and for a second part of the study (an eye-tracking experiment during interpreting assignments), we used *cAPPisco*⁹ which imitates the real world (virtual booths with consoles and virtual lounges). The tool allows to visually communicate with other interpreters and may thus create the idea of real collaboration in the booth during a remote, individual and ‘solitary’ workflow. The question is whether the ambition to approach a real-life situation is indeed realistic.

The aim of the study is twofold, namely to get a grip on both the social and the cognitive impact of working with state-of-the art technology, like the VIP platform *cAPPisco*. As stated above, in this contribution we report on the perception of interpreters who have worked (during the pandemic) and still work with VIPs, which means we focus only on social impact and perception of the interpreters (through interview data) on the use of VIPs. As a follow-up of this qualitative study with the results of the interviews, the findings of the focus group meeting as well as the description of the cognitive impact through an eye-tracking experiment will be reserved for another report.

9 <<https://cappisco.com/en/>>.

3. Methodology

We used qualitative research methods (interviews and a focus group discussion) to answer the main research question of this study: What is the impact of RSI (through VIPs) on the wellbeing of the interpreter and the quality of the interpreting performance?

- The main research question can be broken down into the following sub questions:
- what are the challenges and advantages of technology in RSI?
- what are the challenges and advantages for human contact and teamwork in RSI?
- which set-up of hardware and which software tools are used during RSI?
- are preparation time and teamwork impacted through RSI?
- can tools designed to have virtual booths and lounges for meetings and teamwork replace physical presence?

As stated before, we will report only on the interview data for reasons of conciseness.

3.1 Participants

Participants were recruited through a snowballing method, by sending our request to a number of professional interpreters in our own network, who then forwarded the request to colleagues, to AIIC-members and free-lance interpreters.

For the current study, which was conceived primarily as a pilot, we aimed to collect ten interviews and organize one focus group meeting. Collecting responses from even a relatively limited number of interpreters proved to be challenging. This was due in part to the fact that interpreters are generally under considerable pressure (also to participate in various kinds of research), especially during and after the pandemic, and in part to the fact that an interview and a focus group represent a considerable time commitment (compared to, for instance, a survey). Nevertheless, we managed to gather a diverse and very committed group that provided substantial input during the interviews and the focus group meeting.

The demographics show that this diversity is reached as far as age and experience is concerned (namely very experienced, experienced and rather new interpreters in the field) in a 30 to 63 years age range, although experienced interpreters are predominant. As far as gender is concerned (3M/7F), the distribution represents the global interpreter population¹⁰. It is interesting to notice that five out of ten respondents are also interpreter trainers, which maybe explains why they were interested in participating in the study to begin with. None of them – except one – had relevant experience with online interpreting on VIPs before the pandemic. Four participants were members of AIIC.

10 <<https://www.troubleterps.com/10>> (last access December 22, 2023).

3.2 Semi-structured interviews

After ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of KU Leuven¹¹ and after having received all signed informed consents from the participants, the semi-structured interviews were conducted according to the following set of scripted questions/topics to be addressed:

- Demographic information: age, gender, education, professional occupation, experience in interpreting, experience in online interpreting
- Challenges to tackle during “forced” remote interpreting (RI) with (a) questions about technology and (b) questions on interactional aspects (social and co-presence with colleagues)
- Advantages of RI: technology and interactional aspects
- The switch from onsite to online: training or learning-by-doing?
- Use of devices in remote interpreting: desktop, laptop(s), screen(s), tablet, mobile phone, headset ... in preparation of and during interpreting
- Use of tools during interpreting
- Preparation for an online assignment
- Teamwork: how do you collaborate with the boothmate who is situated elsewhere?
- Do virtual booths help to imitate and/or replace a real-life experience?
- Self-perception on the quality of the interpreting performance online
- Conclusion: when looking back at pre-corona times, what can you conclude concerning interpreting via VIPs?
- Conclusion: does post-corona mean going back to live settings/stay online/mixed assignments?

The interviews were conducted in September 2022, held in Dutch and translation in English has been provided for this contribution.

3.4 Analysis

The interview recordings were transcribed for the purpose of this research. We opted for a basic transcription with only verbal information and no para-verbal or non-verbal annotations.

The process of data analysis involved a thematic analysis with an inductive approach to identify overarching themes (see section 4, findings) in the data, followed by a content analysis to select representative quotes to elucidate various themes (Hale/Napier 2013: 103).

The analysis was done manually on an Excel file, following the described structure of the interviews: each topic of the interview was noted on a different Excel sheet while the participants in the interviews received a row in each sheet numbered from 1 to 10. Within each excel sheet/topic, overarching themes were detected (see appendix for the thematic tree structure; see also section 4 findings).

Triangulation of data was carried out by the researchers themselves through independent coding put next to each other.

11 The reference number of the GDPR assessment is G-2022-5470.

4. Findings

The overarching themes that will be treated in the following paragraphs (4.1 to 4.8) concern technology (4.1) and the social and human aspects (4.2) of the online working condition, but also the sudden switch from onsite to online (4.3). The setup of devices was another recurrent point of discussion (screens, tablets etc., see 4.4) as well as the characteristics of VIPs (4.5). Other recurrent themes were individual preparation before the assignment (4.6) and interaction amongst colleagues during the assignment (4.7), as well as self-perception of interpreting performance quality (4.8) to conclude with reflections on the post-Corona era (4.9).

The subthemes mentioned by the participants have been highlighted through *italics*.

4.1 Technology

As far as the technology in VIPs is concerned, the most challenging elements at the start of the pandemic seemed to be *the lack of experience* (except for # 3), *the unreliability of the technology itself* – and most notably the *internet connection*, a challenge some interpreters solved by using a cable connection to avoid Wi-Fi problems – and *the lack of technicians*. While using VIPs, all interpreters, next to being a professional interpreter, are forced to fulfill the role of technician as well.

The need for suitable hardware (laptop, tablets, smartphones, headsets but also a separate microphone) and the resulting *distribution of attention* over multiple screens were described as challenges as well.

Sound quality of the floor is indicated as the most problematic item, while interpreters themselves as professionals try to offer good sound through professional materials (headset and microphone). One interpreter explains that online working is a *health threat* for all distance interpreters:

It is because they limit everything to a very tiny bandwidth – they manipulate a lot of stuff – that everybody who only works this way, after a certain period, has problems with their ears, like tinnitus, because this little technology thing, this manipulation enters your ears all the time, in the same spot in your ear. (#10)

Despite these challenges, interpreters do see some *advantages* in their work through VIPs, like the fact that working online is convenient for short assignments (not for a whole day) and that they learned *new skills*, like learning to work with new platforms and with the virtual booth. One respondent stressed the fact that the technology has an impact on the international character of events. Somebody confirmed that in an online setting there are *fewer disturbing elements* (that mostly come from the conference room) and that in a *virtual booth* one can see the colleague-interpreter in a way that is similar to a real-life setting. However, one interpreter indicated that he was more easily distracted by the context he was working in (the home office) because he could see cars, persons, even birds and all kinds of movement that can distract from the interpreting task (# 5). It was also mentioned that VIPs, due to the pandemic, *were forced to improve* and one interpreter mentioned that sound quality on a VIP is much better than, for example, when working with a *bidule* in a real-life setting (e.g. during guided

tours or company visits). Some interpreters indicated that working online is *cheaper*, *time saving* and that it offers *more work* and multiplies the number of assignments one can plan in one day (e.g. have five meetings instead of two).

4.2 Social and human aspects

The *lack of small talk and feedback* and the feeling of *loneliness* are mentioned by all interpreters. Interpreter #5 summarizes these feelings as follows:

When it [the pandemic] started to last or when after the first ‘loosening’ initiatives, all measures became more severe again and we were forced to work again more or completely online, it became hard to sit in front of a screen, to talk to a screen all the time without feedback from the client or colleagues.

As far as wellbeing is concerned, almost all interpreters confirmed that online interpreting is *exhausting and stressful*, amongst other things because the interpreter is mostly ‘powerless’ when there are technical and communicative problems. One interpreter clearly formulates this idea this way:

Honestly, in the beginning I have asked myself: ‘if this is going to work this way from now on, do I still want to be an interpreter? If I have to work this way for the rest of my days, I am not going to cope another 20 years’. (# 3)

An observation worth mentioning in this context – especially because it was formulated by an experienced interpreter – is that it was *more difficult for young interpreters to enter the market during the pandemic*, and more specifically the online market. The interpreter most likely noticed this because (s)he is also a trainer and has a close connection with novice interpreters. This idea could also be linked to another statement about the fact that *networking is quite impossible* online, which is of crucial importance for novice interpreters who are seeking to find their way into the market.

As far as *advantages* are concerned, it is suggested that the use of technology may contribute to a better work-life balance. All interpreters agree that the fact that one doesn’t have *mobility* problems (trains, cars, even planes) is a great asset. Related to this point is a perceived *relaxed attitude* “where I can even interpret in my pyjama pants, as long as I am dressed up for the visible part”. (#3)

The above-mentioned reduced mobility issues related to working from the home office (which was also linked to better rest because one doesn’t need to get up very early in the morning) also allows interpreters to *carry out other tasks* (childminding, shopping, etc.) or even to execute simple domestic tasks inside the house during breaks from interpreting: interpreters confirmed that they need to get away from the screen from time to time and they use this time for specific tasks. They mostly do this following the meeting in their (wireless) headphone to remain informed of the development of the discussion(s).

4.3 Switch from onsite to online interpreting

All interpreters except for one confirmed that the *switch* they had to make towards VIPs was abrupt, unprepared, and thus *without any training or structural education*. One interpreter ‘happened’ to receive a full-day online training in 2019 from a tech provider, which also facilitated the whole event by offering a high-quality headset to the interpreter.

For all others, there were some ‘onboarding’ initiatives or short demos/tutorials/workshops offered by the platforms themselves (*cAPPisco, Interactio, Interprefy, Kudo, Zoom*). All interpreters stated that *personal research* and starting on a *trial-and-error* basis was the only way forward. However, one interpreter trainer added that this is not the case anymore for *young interpreters who are trained* to work with online platforms, tools and devices during their *education*.

4.4 Setup of devices

The *setup of devices* is rather *complex* for most interpreters: only one interpreter stated that she preferred only one computer, while all others sit in front of at least one computer, preferably two (desktop and laptop or two laptops), but certainly with multiple screens. Some have a third screen through a tablet and/or use their smartphone to contact colleagues in case of emergency, if the VIP shuts down or when problems of all kinds appear. All participants stressed the importance of a high-quality headset and microphone. Two interpreters purchased an extra microphone (radio-quality) to put on their desk.

4.5 VIPs and tools

The VIP platforms that were mentioned during the interviews and focus group meeting are *cAPPisco, Eyebriidge, iBridge, Interprefy, Quaqua, Teams, Voiceboxer* and *Zoom*.

Tools for terminology management and glossaries consist mostly of personal terminology lists prepared by the interpreters themselves but they also referred to *InterPlex* (mentioned by only one participant) or online terminology tools like *IATE* as well as (automatic) translation tools like *Linguee, DeepL, Reverso* and *Google Translate* (mentioned by all participants).

What is remarkable is that all interpreters, except for one, were acquainted with the VIP platform *cAPPisco*. All were very positive about the application since

You really have the impression that we are working in a room where we sit next to one another. We even hear the colleagues during their interpreting task, if you don't want to hear them you have to press a button. So, you hear them like when they are sitting next to you in the booth in the real world. And if you are making noise, you need to press a button too, to mute, otherwise they hear you while they are working. It is really like in a real booth, it is the closest thing to the real experience, that's why I think it is fantastic. (# 4)

A virtual booth (meaning one that is imitating the real booth where colleagues are sitting 'next' to each other and have consoles like in a 'real' booth) is generally appreciated, thanks to several factors: the fact that users can see and hear each other and that interpreters can more easily brief and debrief separately (without the client present) and are more inclined to do so. Debriefing can even be done in a virtual lounge.

Handover between interpreters is also experienced as more comfortable in a virtual booth setting in comparison to, for instance, a message through smartphone or a countdown timer. These timers make handover unnatural since handover happens when the interpreter decides that an idea has been expressed or an argumentation has been closed.

However, respondent #4 is the only one to conclude that VIPs including virtual booths are able to replace the 'real' contact. All others say such applications are the closest to the real booth and the real-life experience, but it could never replace the 'real world', because the online experience cannot take over the social contact with colleagues and clients.

4.6 Preparation for online assignments: content and technique

Preparation time in terms of the content of the assignment for all interpreters is guided more by the *kind of assignment* than by the online-onsite format. All interpreters also stress the *importance of receiving documents well in advance*, preferably a few days before the assignment, which again is independent of the interpreting mode. If the reception of documents beforehand is not possible, then it is still preferable to receive documents through the platform rather than not receiving anything at all. Some participants confirm that PowerPoint presentations are interesting for proper names, numbers and the like, especially when they have to interpret reports and sales or profit figures.

Positions diverge as far as the *technical preparation* is concerned: some say that they need more time since they act as technicians in their home office and need to prepare everything well in advance; others say that technical preparation time is comparable to the traditional booth setting: interpreters come in at least 15 minutes before, and do the same for an online assignment to test the technical equipment with the client (who sometimes asks to be there half an hour in advance).

4.7 Interaction during online assignments

The reported feelings of *loneliness* described above are confirmed in the assessment of the working environment and conditions: all interpreters state that they mostly work *online at home, alone*. There are some exceptions, for example when they work physically together (sitting next to one another) with one or two colleagues for a symposium or conference. Some reactions confirm what has been said about the virtual booth not being able to replace the real-life situation (see section 4.5), as we can read in this quote:

For assignments where the content is more complex, like a conference for instance, you make an appointment with a colleague and decide together: “wouldn’t it be better to sit together”. Because then you can help each other more easily when you actually sit one next to the other. (#1)

Cooperation and *teamwork* are considered by all interpreters as *more difficult* in this remote setting. This is explained by the fact that online they listen less carefully to their colleague (e.g. because they are doing other things in the meantime, such as domestic tasks) and communication amongst interpreters not physically present in the same room is more difficult anyway. One interpreter adds the dimension of experience: for this interpreter, teamwork online is pretty much the same as onsite, but it depends more on the degree of experience of the colleague, since experienced interpreters depend less on colleagues. In practice, interpreters’ teamwork is done through the *platform chat* or via an external chat (*Whatsapp*) to be sure not to be read by the client.

Handover is perceived as more difficult because of the different ways in which VIPs handle this; the most irritating is the already mentioned countdown system, but also a technician who takes over the organization is perceived as intrusive as far as handover is concerned. The most practical one is the one where one can see and hear the colleague in the virtual booth and just do the “thumb up” gesture to say one is ready to take over.

4.8 Self-perception on interpreting quality

When asked about *self-evaluation*, six of the respondents report that they presume their *quality is better onsite than online*. One interpreter even states that (s)he feels like demotivated: “I am inclined to work less. I just want to give up because my head is exploding” (# 3). Three others mention that they can reach the same quality if the conditions are equal (onsite vs. online), referring mostly to sound quality and the discipline of the participants (mute and unmute, background noise, asking to take the floor with the “raising hand” symbol, closing the “raising hand” symbol after the intervention and so on). Only one interpreter claims (s)he can deliver better quality online, provided that the above-mentioned conditions are met.

Causes for this alleged reduced quality are external factors: *poor sound quality, poor connection and freezing images/ delay, stress due to technology failure (connection breaking down completely, a software update in the middle of a meeting etc.), background noise of unmuted participants, shorter attention span, the fact that signaling a problem takes more time, impossibility to interpret/translate the chat messages, distraction factors (garden, people passing in the street)*. Only one interpreter states that she is less distracted because

I am monitoring myself much better. I cannot do anything else, except looking at the screen. While onsite, I put more energy in looking at different things that surround me and that way my self-monitoring is less accurate. (#7)

The online work and the presumed quality loss have a serious *impact*: *weariness* is mentioned most, while three interpreters indicate their mood at the end of the assignment as “*frustration*”.

4.9 Post-Corona times: Fall 2022

As far as post-Corona times are concerned, all interpreters clearly indicate they mostly *returned to onsite events*. However, the duration of an event may make organizers decide to have online meetings instead (e.g. for a short meeting of one or two hours). Almost all interpreters agree that it is a good evolution to have short meetings online, which generates an obvious gain of time. All interpreters, except one, prefer the *'hybrid' way of working* with most assignments onsite and some assignments online, e.g. shorter meetings, or 'one to many' meetings with no or few interaction from the audience. Only one interpreter prefers the online way of working. She expresses what all interpreters confirmed, namely that online assignments are 'here to stay' but:

I think that onsite meetings will never fully disappear. You can feel that. That people say 'no, this kind of meeting must be done on site because online it is not going to work'. So, I think onsite will always be there, but meetings that are administrative, not personal, not delicate, that can easily be organized online, just to agree on some topics, for those kinds of meetings I think online is the future, yes. People are sick of travelling for hours and have now got used to teleworking, you see? (#6)

When interpreters are asked a retrospective opinion on the initially forced online interpreting, they are all generally positive and thankful for the occasion that was offered, despite the unpleasant conditions of a pandemic. All interpreters state that after years of *non-existing* RSI this has become a *regular way of working*, from which they learned a lot and which they consider an *enrichment*. These working conditions have taught one interpreter more *'resilience'*, while another repeats that it is very *dangerous for the auditory senses* of the interpreter.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The findings of the interviews, reported in this paper, allow us to gain insights into professional interpreters' stances towards VIP-solutions in the first post-pandemic phase.

The reluctance of interpreters towards technology (Downie 2020) has undergone some changes, and this could even be viewed as a "positive" consequence of the forced lockdowns during the pandemic. Indeed, before the pandemic, most of the interviewees had no experience with RSI (except one interpreter who had had one experience).

The most striking positive response to the use of VIP-solutions is that mobility stress is significantly reduced, and that one can combine domestic tasks with the interpreting assignment (see also Chmiel/Spinolo, AIIC blog). Unfortunately, the mobility stress related to onsite interpreting assignments has been replaced by technology stress. The idea that besides performing the interpreting task, the interpreter must be "their own" technician causes additional stress. However, participants indicated that they got used to the new set-up and that the primary cause of stress are bad connections (because they are out of their control) and the attitude of clients who seem to forget about the interpreter.

This observation is closely linked to what we have found in the literature on the “feeling of being there” or the “sense of presence” (Roziner/Shlesinger 2010; Ziegler/Gigliobianco 2018; Seeber *et al.* 2019;). The ‘dehumanizing’ effect of online work weighs on the interpreters, especially because of the loss of personal contact with both the client and the boothmate.

Body language was also indicated to be of paramount importance in this sense, but participants pointed out that it remains difficult to get full access to it online. However, this can be partially solved by a VIP with virtual booths and lounges that can imitate the real-life situation – at least as far as interpreter colleagues are concerned – although it cannot fully replace the real world, precisely because of the fact that there is no live human interaction online like in the booth. A (limited) advantage of these kinds of VIPs with a “real” virtual booth, is that one can see and hear the boothmates, which is very important for hand-over or for teamwork and, again, body language.

While the solution of interpreting hubs seems to be satisfactory by some interpreters (Seeber *et al.* 2019; Chaves 2020), participants in this study do not seem to view this as a preferred option, despite the “lonely” way of working at the home office. This probably has to do with the fact that the mobility issue comes in again, since one has to move towards the hub.

A comparison with the findings of the ESIT survey (Buján/Collard 2022) is hard to perform because of divergent methodology and formats, namely quantitative research with surveys and a large number of respondents, against qualitative research with interviews with a limited number of participants. Moreover, our research was conducted after the pandemic, while the ESIT survey was sent out during the pandemic. However, it is interesting to see that the claim that online interpreters have less work was denied by participants in this study. On the contrary, they even indicated that they could accept more assignments. This again seems to be connected to the time gain of not having to travel. Another observation based on the ESIT survey, is that 75% of interpreters work at home, while only 26% prefer to do so, cannot really be confirmed either, because times have changed. The survey was carried out during (mostly) lockdown period(s) in 2021, while in 2022 and 2023 (the period in which this study was conducted), most meetings went live again. However, there is a clear distinction between complex, multilingual meetings and short, administrative meetings: the former will nowadays take place onsite, the latter mainly online.

We cannot confirm the self-assessment of the interpreting quality either: while the survey states that 50% of the participants feel their quality is lower with online interpreting, in our discussion opinions seemed to be shifting.

The fact that the majority (83%) indicates that online work is more difficult is confirmed throughout the discussions and is attributed to multitasking, technological stress, disrespectful clients and a feeling of loneliness in front of the screen, without real contact with the client or colleagues.

What we need to stress is that new generations of interpreters since Covid are trained to work with VIPs (Cheung 2022; Crezee *et al.*, 2023), which is a “luxury” none of the participants had: the sudden transition towards online work made them all “self-made” technicians and online practitioners in only a few weeks or months.

Finally, given the limited number of participants in the study, we do not make any claims on generalizability for the entire profession.

By way of conclusion, we can state that RSI on VIPs is likely here to stay, but in a reduced way: while only one interpreter indicated his online assignments had been reduced to practically zero, all others described a hybrid way of working, mostly on-site but still consistently online. Actually, this hybrid way of working was considered as a positive evolution, since the alternation offers advantages like the fact that the interpreter can stay at home a few times a week.

Since RSI and VIPs are here to stay, this contribution can serve as a call for more research on this way of working for instance on cognitive load through eye tracking, but also on the introduction of CAI and the importance of the human factor in a society where AI will claim more space.

Acknowledgement: this research has been funded by AIIC. There is no conflict of interest since the researchers are not members of the organization.

References

- Ball M. (2021) “Distance interpreting and the risk of alienation”, in K.G. Seeber (ed.) *100 Years of Conference Interpreting: A legacy*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 262-269.
- Bavelas J. / Gerwing J. / Sutton C. / Prevost D. (2008) “Gesturing on the telephone: independent effects of dialogue and visibility”, *Journal of Memory and Language* 58/2, 495-520.
- Braun S. (2015) “Remote interpreting”, in F. Pöchhacker (ed.) *Routledge Encyclopedia of Interpreting Studies*, London, Routledge, 346-348.
- Braun S. (2020) ““You are just a disembodied voice really”: perceptions of video remote interpreting by legal interpreters and police officers”, in H. Salaets / G. Brône (eds) *Linking up with Video: Perspectives on Interpreting Practice and Research*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins, 47-78.
- Buján M. / Collard C. (2023) “Remote simultaneous interpreting and COVID-19: conference interpreters’ perspective”, in K. Liu / A.F.K. Cheung (eds) *Translation and Interpreting in the Age of COVID-19*, Berlin, Springer, 133-150, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-6680-4_7>.
- Chaves S.G. (2020) “Remote simultaneous interpreting hubs or platforms: what’s the best option?”, <<https://www.atanet.org/tools-and-technology/remote-simultaneous-interpreting-hubs-or-platforms-whats-the-best-option/>>.
- Cheung A. K. F. (2022) “COVID-19 and interpreting”, in A.K.F. Cheung (ed.) *Teaching and Practice of Distant Interpreting in the Pandemic Era*, Special Issue of *INContext: Studies in Translation and Interculturalism* 2/2, 9-12, <<https://doi.org/10.54754/incontext.v2i2.26>>.
- Chmiel A. / Spinolo N. (2022) “Testing the impact of remote interpreting settings on interpreter experience and performance: methodological challenges inside the virtual booth”, *Translation, Cognition & Behavior* 5/2, 250-274, <<https://doi.org/10.1075/tcb.00068.chm>>.
- Constable A. (2015) “Distance interpreting: a Nuremberg moment for our time?”,

- <<https://aiic.ch/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/di-a-nuremberg-moment-for-our-time-andrew-constable-01182015.pdf>>.
- Corpas Pastor G. (2021) “Technology solutions for interpreters: the VIP system”, *Hermēneus. Revista de Traducción e Interpretación* 23, 91-123, <<https://doi.org/10.24197/her.23.2021.91-123>>.
- Crezee I. / Ester O. / Lai M. (eds) (2023) *Educating Community Interpreters and Translators in Unprecedented Times*, London, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Downie J. (2020) *Interpreters vs Machines: Can Interpreters Survive in an AI-Dominated World?* London, Routledge.
- Fantinuoli C. (ed.) (2018a) *Interpreting and Technology*, Berlin, Language Science Press.
- Fantinuoli C. (2018b) “Computer-assisted interpreting: challenges and future perspectives”, in G. Corpas Pastor / I. Durán-Muñoz (eds) *Trends in E-Tools and Resources for Translators and Interpreters*, Leiden, Koninklijke Brill, 153-174.
- Fantinuoli C. (2021) “Conference interpreting and new technologies”, in M. Albl-Mikasa / E. Tiselius (eds) *Routledge Handbook of Conference Interpreting*, London, Routledge, 508-522.
- Hale, S./Napier, J. (2013) *Research methods in Interpreting. A practical Resource*, London/New Dehli/New York/Sydney, Bloomsbury.
- Moser-Mercer B. (1992) “Banking on terminology: conference interpreters in the electronic age”, *Meta* 37/3, 507-522, <<https://doi.org/10.7202/003634ar>>.
- Moser-Mercer B. (2011) “Remote interpreting”, in Y. Gambier / L. van Doorslaer (eds) *Handbook of Translation Studies Volume 2*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins, 131-134.
- Mouzourakis T. (2006) “Remote interpreting: a technical perspective on recent experiments”, *Interpreting* 8/1, 45-66, <<https://doi.org/10.1075/intp.8.1.04mou>>.
- Ozolins U. (2016) “The myth of the myth of invisibility?”, *Interpreting* 18/2, 273-284.
- Pöchhacker, F. (2020) “‘Going Video’. Mediality and Multimodality in Interpreting”, in H. Salaets/G. Brône (eds) *Linking Up with Video. Perspectives on Interpreting Practice and Research*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins, 13-45.
- Roziner I. / Shlesinger M. (2010) “Much ado about something remote: stress and performance in remote interpreting”, *Interpreting* 12/2, 214-247.
- Seeber K.G. / Keller L. / Rhona A. / Hengl S. (2019) “Expectations vs. experience: attitudes towards video remote conference interpreting”, *Interpreting* 21/2, 270-304, <<https://doi.org/10.1075/intp.00030.see>>.
- Wadensjö C. (2008) “In and off the show: co-constructing ‘invisibility’ in an interpreter-mediated talk show interview”, *Meta* 53/1, 184-203.
- Ziegler K. / Gigliobianco S. (2018) “Present? Remote? Remotely present! New technological approaches to remote simultaneous conference interpreting”, in C. Fantinuoli (ed.) *Interpreting and Technology. Translation and Multilingual Natural Language Processing 11*, Berlin, Language Science Press, 119-139.

Technology

CHALLENGES

- Software
 - No knowledge
 - No experience
 - Safety of software
 - No external help
 - Unreliability of technology
 - fear for connection failure (wifi)
- Hardware
 - Eventual purchase of (new) hardware
 - Laptop(s)
 - Screen(s)
 - iPad or tablet
 - smartphone
 - Extra cable to replace (if needed) wifi-connection
- Sound quality of the floor
- Health threat

ADVANTAGES

- New skills
 - Learning to work with new platforms
 - Learning to work with virtual booth
- Less disturbing factors
- More international
- Enhanced (technology in) platforms over time
- Contact with colleagues with virtual booth
- Online has become an extra (work) opportunity
- Cheaper
- Time saving
 - More opportunities to work (5 meetings instead of 2)

Social/human aspect

CHALLENGES

- Social interaction
 - No small talk, no interaction
 - Loneliness
 - No feedback
 - Meeting new colleagues is strange
- Less work
 - For young, novice interpreters
 - Because networking more difficult

- Wellbeing
 - Tiring mentally
 - Tiring physically
 - Eyes
 - Ears
 - More stress
 - Powerless (if there are problems)

ADVANTAGES

- Better work-life balance
 - No commuting/traveling stress
 - Time saving
 - Domestic chores can be done (during pauses)
 - Better rest (getting up later)

Transition

- Learning by doing
 - No training or education
 - Short demo's /onboarding initiatives
- Training (1 respondent!)

VIPs setup of devices

- Computer
- Laptop(s)
- Screen(s)
- Tabled/iPad
- Smartphone

VIPs Tools

- Platforms
 - cAPPisco
 - iBridge
 - Interpretfy
 - Quaqua
 - Teams
 - Voiceboxer
 - Zoom
- Terminology
 - Interplex
 - Internet
 - IATE
 - Linguee
 - Google Translate
 - Dictionaries
 - DeepL
 - Reverso

- Own terminology lists
- Own written notes
- Documents from the client
- Notepad and pen

Perceived quality of performance

- Better on site
 - Reasons
 - Poor sound quality
 - Poor connection (freezing images)
 - Background noise
 - Due to unmuted participants
 - Signalling a problem is slower
 - Stress due to technology failure (wifi, software update in the middle of a meeting etc.)
 - Attention span
 - Distraction factors (windows home office)
 - Impossibility to interpret/translate the chat
- Impact of (perceived) worse quality
 - Frustration
 - Weariness
 - ‘Overloaded’ head
- Less easily distracted (one participant!)

Preparation (content)

- Even greater importance of documents received beforehand
- If documents not beforehand, then at least via platform
- Preparation time
 - Not depending on onsite vs. online
 - Depending on theme/topic

Preparation (technical)

- Longer
 - No technician available at home
 - Technical testing (by interpreter him/herself) is necessary
- Same (online vs. onsite)

Interaction

- Working place
 - Alone at home office
 - (Physically) together in one home office
 - If difficult task
- Teamwork
 - Perception
 - More difficult online
 - Less listening to colleague

- Because of household chores in the meantime
- Same
 - Depending on the experience of the colleague
- Practice
 - Chat
 - Smartphone (Whatsapp)
- Handover
 - Perception
 - More difficult
 - ‘Handover button’ different in different VIPs
 - Due to countdown system of some buttons
 - If technicians take over and organize handover
 - Via smartphone (Whatsapp)
 - Via chat function on VIP
 - More comfortable
 - In virtual booth (colleague is visible)

cAPPisco with virtual booth

- best alternative for seeing and hearing each other live
- not a fully-fledged valuable alternative for live interpreting

POST-CORONA (Fall 2022)

- format
 - return onsite
 - some online (short, compact)
- perception
 - short events better online
 - long events better onsite
- preference
 - hybrid way of working (online and onsite)
 - find balance between online- onsite
 - find balance between advantages/challenges
- advantage
 - working remotely as enrichment of skills