

Interview with Barry S. Olsen and Katharine Allen of InterpretAmerica

The interpreting profession has really advanced into the limelight this year, to the degree that we were the subject of a decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in the case of *Taniguchi vs. Kan Pacific Saipan, Ltd.* Thus I thought it would be apropos to interview two visionary entrepreneurs in the field about their insights into the industry. Barry Slaughter Olsen and Katharine Allen founded InterpretAmerica in 2009 with the express purpose of raising the profile of interpreting. Since 2010, InterpretAmerica has organized a yearly Summit on Interpreting, which brings together leaders from across the interpreting industry, individual interpreters, and end users of interpreting services. The 4th Summit on Interpreting will take place just outside Washington, D.C., in Reston, Virginia, on June 14-15, 2013.

1. What trends have you identified in the interpreting industry after the first three summits?

[InterpretAmerica] More than anything else, we have seen a growing desire for information about the interpreting industry from all of its players—interpreters, professional associations, technology providers, agency owners and end users. We think this is why the research and white papers we have commissioned and published as a service to interpreting over the last three years continue to be downloaded, studied and cited.

This desire for information has dovetailed with increased awareness and acceptance amongst the diverse stakeholders in our industry. The 1st Summit marked the first time that leaders from many sectors sat in the same room and got acquainted with each other and with the complexities each interpreting sector faces. At that time, the lack of mutual awareness across sectors, and even an element of suspicion and skepticism as to the validity of the challenges other sectors face, were notable. As a profession, interpreters have been careful to qualify the kind of interpreting they do and where they do it, leading to an often incorrect assumption that interpreters never cross over from one environment to another.

At the recently-concluded 3rd Summit, that atmosphere had completely changed. There is now a marked and growing interest in improving communication and collaboration among the various sectors of the interpreting profession (e.g. conference, medical, legal, signed language, etc.). Research, including the Interpreting Marketplace Study commissioned by InterpretAmerica for the 1st Summit, has clearly proven that there is a desire to collaborate. Professional associations have realized this. In fact, The ATA recently initiated a monthly conference call with interpreting association leaders in an effort to increase communication among professional leadership.

The rapid integration of technology into most interpreting sectors is also very evident, and something that we have tried to highlight and educate about at the Summits on Interpreting. In particular, the increasing adoption of social media tools by the profession at all levels, from individual bloggers and LinkedIn accounts, to companies embracing Twitter and Facebook as powerful marketing tools and professional associations moving heavily into online options for education and networking, such as webinar training sessions. We have observed a growing awareness that as an industry, we must embrace and attempt to channel technology to our own best interests, rather than shy away from it in fear.

2. Do you see an interest/willingness among stakeholders and the different vertical industries related to our profession to work with our sector, and are the leaders of our sector willing to work with one another and the former?

[InterpretAmerica] Absolutely! One of the most gratifying aspects of the Summits on Interpreting process has been the response of diverse stakeholders in our field. The willingness and interest are there. The 21st century so far has been marked by a trend toward collaboration. Interpreting as a whole stands to benefit greatly from the collaborative efforts of all the players in the profession and industry. One excellent example of this is the workgroups that have convened at the Summits on Interpreting for the last two years. Competition and rivalries will always exist in a free market, but the need for language services continues to expand. We believe the work undertaken by these workgroups is serving as a foundation that that entire profession and industry can build upon.

That said, one of the realizations that has come from the Summits is how much work we still have to do to educate the rest of the world about interpreting and how it fits into related industries. For example, how do we, as an industry, successfully interact with the big technology companies that provide global communication solutions to encourage them to integrate features that make simultaneous interpretation possible when using their products and do so before they go to market? The professional workgroups on advocacy and public relations held at the last two Summits have helped to define that process. We are very much looking forward to the publication of the White Paper on this year's workgroup, *One Profession, One Voice: Selling the Interpreting Profession to the Public*, led by PR expert Spencer Critchley.

3. Can we overcome the much touted fragmentation in our industry?

[InterpretAmerica] We are optimists. So, our answer is a definite “yes!” InterpretAmerica was born out of a deep frustration of how our industry’s fragmentation was holding the entire profession back. The success of the Summits on Interpreting comes from the fact that we were not alone. There is a great desire for a stronger, more cohesive frame knitting the profession together, so that each specialized sector can continue to provide the unique expertise required for the settings they tend to – be it medical, legal, conference, etc. – but from within a broader context where interpreting in general is better recognized, better paid, and has the resources necessary to produce capable and competent professionals across the board. At each successive Summit, we see less fragmentation and more collaboration and synergy. Furthermore, the growing trend for individual interpreters to practice across sectors is helping to bring an end to this fragmentation, as are the technological breakthroughs of the last 10 years, which have given us access to more information about interpreting than ever before. Twenty years ago, it was difficult to even find out much about the profession, much less meet actual interpreters outside of your own workplace. Web 2.0 and social media have changed all that. Specialization will always exist, and interpreters will always have their preferred work environments and areas of expertise. However, that does not mean that we cannot work together to address issues that affect us all.

4. Interpreter training is such an important requirement to ensure competent services. Are there new viable training options for those who cannot afford the time and money that a formal degree program requires? Are there any vetted online courses being offered that you know of?

[InterpretAmerica] The development of interpreter training and education has been a focus of the Summits from the very beginning. Numerous institutions with interpreter training programs have participated in the Summits, from on-line course providers to accredited institutions of higher learning with undergraduate and graduate degrees in interpreting. We can say with certainty that the number of offerings is growing, particularly on-line training courses. We expect these only to increase in number and variety, given existing continuing education requirements set by certification schemes and professional association rules. There is currently no single organization or process for vetting these courses. Traditional academe does not move quickly, and the creation and approval of new interpreting degrees at accredited universities and colleges take a great deal of time and effort. Even so, several new programs have been launched and there are several more in the works in the United States, Canada and Mexico. Clear paths into interpreting that pass through institutions of higher learning are one of the best ways to “professionalize” what we do, but higher education is going through radical change brought on by technological change and the new learning models it has enabled. Even so, these degree programs, particularly at the MA level, continue to be the “gold standard” for employers in many areas of interpreting. One thing is for certain, interpreting needs clear standards for training and education. It is our hope that the workgroup on the creation of a national consortium of interpreter trainers that met at this year’s Summit will provide a roadmap forward. It was facilitated by two well-recognized trainers of interpreters of both signed and spoken languages.

5. There has been much talk about technology from OPI and VRI to devices used by individuals on the job, such as the iPad, iPhone, MP3 recorders, the Smart Pen, etc. Have you seen any of them break out of the ranks and dominate a particular field?

[InterpretAmerica] Any technology that makes it easier and more cost effective to deliver quality interpreting services will find a solid foothold in the market. This is why over-the-phone interpreting and video relay interpreting have grown into a billion-dollar industry.

It’s interesting to note that all of the technologies you mention were designed for mass markets, not specifically for interpreters. Individual interpreters (usually the technophiles) find these new tools and then figure out how to apply them to their professional activity to increase quality, performance or productivity. Interpreting is a comparatively small industry and few if any technologies have been developed specifically with an interpreter’s needs in mind. But when you couple new platforms like the tablet computer and smart phone with the relatively low cost of developing customized “apps” there is an amazing window of opportunity for enterprising interpreters and computer programmers to finally focus on designing and producing programs that can be created to meet interpreters’ specific needs.

Tablet computers—like the iPad— have already given interpreters access to information and resources that were previously unavailable in many work environments. In conference interpreting, these devices will probably be the gateway toward a “paperless booth” for interpreters. This shift won’t come without difficulty and will require adjustments, but the interpreters that adapt to this new technology-enabled environment will remain relevant, while those who require printed documents only to do their work will see their opportunities diminish.

However, the real technology to keep an eye on as the 21st century progresses is cloud computing. Although not possible yet, “the cloud” has the potential to deliver high-quality video and multiple channel audio across multiple platforms, making simultaneously interpreted videoconferences widely available around the world. Once this becomes a reality, it will have a dramatic effect on the interpreting industry across all sectors.



6. What topics are you considering for the 2013 InterpretAmerica Summit in Washington D.C.?

[InterpretAmerica] Anyone who has attended the Summits on Interpreting knows that we take a unique approach to programming. Each Summit allows us to take the pulse of the profession and present the most relevant and up-to-date information to a broad cross section of stakeholders. Based on feedback from this year's Summit, it is safe to say that the various workgroups will be back and that technology and innovation will be an important component of the 4th Summit. Attendees have made it clear that the unique mix of representatives from across the interpreting profession and industry make the Summits a valuable place for networking. So we are planning on increasing the time and opportunities provided during the Summit to network.

We will be shaking things up for the 4th Summit as well, with new presentation formats and activities. Be sure to visit the InterpretAmerica website in the coming weeks.

A sneak peak at next year's programming includes:

- * A new forum for those most effectively promoting our profession via social media forums, including bloggers and those highly active on Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn.
- * A continued focus on specific technologies impacting the field.
- * A follow up look at interpreting in conflict zones
- * Interpret-Talks – A new segment for individuals to present big ideas for the field in 10-15 minute presentations.
- * Bringing end users into the fold – from business clients to immigrant communities to the deaf
- * Heeding our history – gleaning lessons to be learned from the development of translation and interpreting field

7. What would you like to see five years from now as positive outcomes initiated at InterpretAmerica?

[InterpretAmerica] A more unified profession with a stronger framework for practitioners and stakeholders, and which is better recognized by the general public.

We would also like to see a much higher degree of technology literacy and advocacy among interpreters so that we can be leveraging these critical tools to best promote our profession.

Tell us how you feel about these insights and what you would like to see on the agenda at future Summits! August 28, 2012

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