

The impact of video communication technologies on sign language users and interpreters

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As the cost of using videoconferencing and telepresence technologies decreases, and their availability and accessibility increase, sign language users (people who are deaf) are exposed to a more rapid change in their hitherto closed culture and also in the application (register used) of their own language.

Evidence to date seems to suggest that deaf people visiting services with a videoconferencing access point are now less likely to bring along their hearing relatives or colleagues to assist with communication. This has a knock-on effect on family cohesion and other social issues such as control mechanisms within the family and workplace. Deaf sign language users are gaining independence and this presentation looks at the 'learning curve' and the impact it has on the deaf sign language user and their immediate environment including traditional service providers.

An increasing demand for immediate access to video interpreter services, especially from their home/office bases, is evident in the desire to communicate with others over the public telephone network. This has thrown up a whole set of challenges for all the parties involved in a telephone call, the deaf sign language user, the interpreter and the recipient of the telephone call (a hearing person).

In face-to-face situations, communication between hearing and deaf people mediated by an interpreter can be awkward and confusing, particularly for the hearing person. As soon as video communication technology such as video conferencing is added to this mix, important considerations and differences from face-to-face situations arise. Elements of this would probably be equally applicable to any interpreters working with people from minority cultures or language groups that have been traditionally excluded from the mainstream society.

A summary of the key issues and difficulties experienced by interpreters working through video communication technologies will be covered in this presentation.