

NAJIT'S LISTSERVE REFLECTS THE INTERPRETER COMMUNITY

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In mid-2003, NAJIT began an open online discussion group for matters related to court interpreting. Member and non-member interpreters throughout the country took to it immediately, with daily messages numbering in the dozens. In September 2007, the NAJIT board decided to limit listserv participation to NAJIT members only. (A later survey revealed that many more members signed up to the listserv when it was a members-only forum.) In a message to new listserv participants, NAJIT Chair Isa Framer wrote, "We can discuss almost anything (less interpreter fees and the naming of interpreter agencies, for legal reasons) related to the interpreting and translation profession. Some of these issues can be in regard to, but are not limited to, sharing expertise with one another, sharing information and resources such as glossaries and more; exchanging terminology, discussing ethical and professional dilemmas, and discussing transcription and translation standards." The NAJIT listserv is regulated by rules posted on the web site and is monitored by members of the organization's board. Currently 302 members have subscribed and the listserv is alive and well.

Listserv software (spelled without the final e), is defined as an automated mailing list manager, and was first developed in 1985 by a computer engineering student in France. Since then, the software's sophistication has increased and e-mail discussion groups in every conceivable field of endeavor have become commonplace. Listservs are now an important tool for professional organizations, academia, and hobby and fan groups of every stripe.

Historically, judiciary interpreting has suffered from a lack of uniformity both in practice and in the standards that are understood within and outside the profession. Until the advent of the NAJIT listserv, the only way active interpreters could contribute their ideas to the community at large was by writing for our quarterly journal, *Proteus*, and by participating in the national conventions. Neither provided sufficient opportunity for members. Once the listserv came into being, we had a 24/7 forum for any issue an interpreter wanted to discuss related to the never-ending development of our craft. The word deluge might describe the members response.

While the online forum has provided an outlet for the many concerns and frustrations of working interpreters, it has also demonstrated our progress in understanding and appreciating our profession. Undoubtedly, we are better interpreters as a result of

following the discussions posted on the listserv. The service the judicial system receives has been improved as well, I believe, as a result of our ability to share our collective wisdom.

The listserv is a good place to post queries, get an overview of nationwide working conditions, or discuss ethical quandaries. (One small issue that has arisen is the need for accurate use of the subject line. The volume of the members' contributions is so high that busy people need to choose which threads to follow because

they don't have time to follow them all.) It also provides a practical service to members, informing them of job and training opportunities as well as other information useful for professionals. Finally, the listserv is a highly attractive tool to win new members, who will strengthen the organization and the profession as a whole.

There are several means by which one might measure the impact and effectiveness of this tool: the number of participants, the number of contributions, or the number of new

contributors. One might also summarize the various subjects that participants write about and respond to, for the breadth of subjects will reveal the multitude of concerns expressed by professionals in the field.

Given the code of ethics' importance to our profession, it's not surprising that many discussions of ethical issues are among the most central to the listserv. Undoubtedly, the most significant discussion last year revolved around the immigration raid in Postville, Iowa. Erik Camayd-Freixas, a listserv and NAJIT member (as well as a professor of interpreter ethics), who worked in Postville in the aftermath of the raid, had written an essay describing the legal environment in which the raids were conducted, and many NAJIT members reacted to his contribution. It was genuinely controversial, eliciting strong agreement and disagreement among NAJIT members. The passionate debates made us sharpen our views on professional ethical issues—I know it made me think and reconsider mine. But it also showed we could carry out such a discussion without damaging the listserv or the organization. While spirited, and occasionally acrimonious, the debate never broke the spirit of collegiality. The topicality of the immigration issue was such that the *New York Times* published a front-page article on the subject. Though this was the most prominent example of timely issues being debated on the listserv, other ethical concerns often

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come up, from experiences inside and beyond the courtroom, if only for members to vent frustration over interactions with court personnel who don't always understand or agree with us on our role. Many difficult situations that interpreters confront are raised, with valuable advice coming from colleagues, including more experienced ones.

Perhaps the most frequent subject on the listserv is terminology: how best to translate a particular word or expression, colloquial or legal. Responses are varied, interesting, and always helpful, often including references to legal terminology in other countries. Here it must be mentioned that while the listserv includes interpreters of many languages, this feature is almost exclusively used by Spanish-English interpreters. Although members in other language combinations are always welcome to post queries as well, few have availed themselves of the resource.

Practical discussions regarding court procedures are common, and can be very useful. Interpreters don't work in a vacuum, but in concrete surroundings with varying rules and procedures. It's great to know that one is not alone. Over time, we may acquire more uniformity in dealing with many situations, with thought-out choices as the norm.

News from around the world concerning court cases involving interpreters, special-interest articles about interpreters, and media or political commentary on the need for, or lack of, interpreting services, is a daily offering, more often than not from the ever-vigilant John Estill, NAJIT's Outreach Committee chair. These are frequently included verbatim, with a link to the source.

The listserv is a never-ending source of information, from job openings to training opportunities. Books and web sites featuring information or resources about interpreting abound, as do notices of certification exams, advice on how to prepare for them, and debates about their content and quality. Interpreters of rare or exotic languages are solicited and occasionally found. Interpreters interested in getting useful electronic dictionaries or other equipment can get helpful advice here. Scams designed to entrap or cheat unsuspecting and hungry interpreters are exposed. Experiences and opinions gleaned from telephone interpreting (which NAJIT has taken a position against) are discussed. Interpreting issues from non-legal fields (not all of us work exclusively in legal settings) such as medical venues, are raised.

Political issues related to interpreting also come up. Some perhaps are borderline appropriate for the listserv and this gets debated, too. Protection and support for Arabic-language interpreters working for the U.S. armed forces has been discussed, with some arguing for a more active NAJIT role in this issue.

When California state interpreters went on strike they were keen to inform the rest of us of their views and the status of their struggle with the state. While NAJIT is not a labor organization, it shares the same concerns about working conditions as the unions that some of us belong to.

One of the most interesting discussions in the past year was a debate about whether simultaneous or consecutive was superior for courtroom witness interpretation. Many intriguing points were made, making some rethink how they work, I suspect. Veteran interpreters and trainers weighed in heavily in the discussion,

highlighting the value of the listserv. This is an on-going discussion, which may never entirely end.

Perhaps the most entertaining feature of the listserv are the funny anecdotes of actual working experiences. These have been extensive and at times hilarious. One wonders if they could become the subject of a short humor book.

Some discussions go to the heart of what NAJIT is all about. They analyze issues that are key for court interpreting and for the future of NAJIT, possibly to appear later as position papers. While NAJIT elected leaders, or former leaders, don't play any particular role in the listserv (it's largely a rank-and-file institution), their contributions reflect years of experience in the trenches and help newer interpreters develop their ideas. If NAJIT has a formal position on some issue, they also ensure that it is known. In the future, members who follow listserv discussions will be better able to evaluate candidates for the NAJIT board, enabling members to feel more confident in their choices.

The NAJIT listserv, then, is a young, growing benefit of a growing organization. It seems certain that this discussion group will continue to make our field more professional and uniform, as well as contribute to the skill level of all. It may very well become the institution that best represents NAJIT and attracts more interpreters to it. Everyone owes it to themselves to log on and experience it. If you don't want to get daily messages, you can sign up for a daily digest, or for a summary of the subject lines.

Interpreters have common experiences and difficulties, and the listserv helps us share them. Sometimes we share more than we think. In a discussion last year over the meaning of a phrase particular to a certain nationality, some interpreters reminisced about their immigrant childhoods. Two of them noted the similarity of where they had been raised, and then realized on line that they had been childhood friends, now separated by years and miles. The listserv served as a catalyst for their renewed friendship. Let's hope for more happy stories like these. ▲

[The author is a staff interpreter in the New York Civil Court and freelances in the New Jersey courts.]

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As I look back over the past year, and the momentum we've built as an organization, I become increasingly excited about celebrating NAJIT's 30th annual conference in Scottsdale, Arizona. Our conference chair, Director Lois Feuerle, has once again brought together a varied, timely and attractive line-up of presenters. The preliminary schedule can be found on page 14. Please visit the NAJIT website for the most up-to-date and detailed information on sessions, testing, and continuing education credits.

This year, we will be voting on a few by-law amendments, with the goal of improving services to our members. Please look for these changes in your mail and in *Cybernews*. The conference not only offers educational opportunities, but also allows us to come together to find new ways of promoting our profession and vision. I look forward to seeing you in Scottsdale!

Isabel Frammer,
Chair, Board of Directors