

WHAT A WONDERFUL EXAMPLE OF POOR QUALITY!
HOW VIDEOS OF PSEUDO SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS IMPACT WORKING
PROFESSIONAL INTERPRETERS IN CANADA

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Abstract

A known issue within the field of sign language interpreting is pseudo interpreters: people who represent themselves as professional and qualified, yet do not actually know sign language or how to interpret. Numerous examples of this phenomenon have appeared in videos that circulate on social media, acting as pedagogical tools to the general public. These videos have distorted societal perspectives on Deaf people, signed languages, the role of sign language interpreters, and what constitutes the provision of accessible communication. In this study I examined the experience of 11 professional sign language interpreters in Canada and how these videos impact their personal and professional identities. Themes identified in this study include concerns related to professionalism, misunderstandings about the role of interpreters, the burden of labour that interpreters take on to educate others, and the identification of specific quality assurance protocols that would prevent this type of service provision failure.

Dedication

To Jennifer Gravitz, thank you for bringing me with you on the adventure of a lifetime.

To Elaine Hampson, thank you for instilling in me the confidence to speak my truth.

To my Saba, thank you for guiding me home.

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In 2002, my high school physics teacher, Naomi Epstein, planted the idea in my head that I was destined to study communication at what is now Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU).

In 2022, I was accepted into the Joint Graduate Program in Communication and Culture at York University and TMU. Dr. Carolyn Steele, whom I have known for nearly 20 years, has been an invaluable resource as I have pursued this degree. I would not be here without either of them.

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Preface

I first started learning American Sign Language (ASL) in 2002 during my undergraduate studies at York University, when I volunteered with a student organization and one of our members was Deaf¹. I learned ASL to communicate with him and our friendship grew once I gained a greater understanding of his culture and the Deaf community. This knowledge, along with increasing proficiency in ASL, opened the door to conversations beyond what we were able to type back and forth to each other on our laptop computers (since this was in the days before cellphones became ubiquitous). We lost touch when I moved away to complete my degree elsewhere, and reconnected when I returned home to Toronto to continue my education in the ASL and Deaf Studies Program (ADSP) at George Brown College (now George Brown Polytechnic). That first year back was an immersion in everything ASL, Deaf culture and Deaf community, including unlearning medical perspectives on deafness (e.g. those that affect institutional access provisions), seeing Deaf people as a linguistic and cultural minority, understanding standard behavioural norms of Deaf culture, and my becoming more involved in the Deaf community.

After completing the certificate in ASL and Deaf Studies, I entered the ASL-English Interpreter Program (AEIP) at George Brown College, graduating three years later. After a year spent apprenticing as an interpreter with the Department of Access Services at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) in Rochester, NY, I returned to Toronto, Canada.

¹ Throughout this thesis, I use “Deaf” (with a capitalized first letter) to refer to a person or group of people who are members of the Deaf cultural group, and “deaf” (lowercase first letter) to refer to the audiological condition of deafness (as described in Padden & Humphries, 2005, p. 1).

My career as a professional ASL-English interpreter matured during a time when social media virality (and ubiquity of smartphones) became features of mainstream culture. Over the course of my career, there have been videos of interpreters² recorded and then circulated amongst the general public. In fall 2023, a video of a class prank at a Toronto university was posted to Instagram, YouTube and TikTok. In a video posted to the @northlytoronto account on Instagram the day of the prank (which I was alerted to by a friend of mine living in Australia), many of the comments posted refer solely to the interpreter and his work, including laughing/crying emojis and short snippets about the interpreter doing his job³ (Northly Toronto, 2023); the interpreter in that video was me, and as of January 2026 that reel had been viewed 148,000 times⁴. For weeks afterwards, I was peppered with questions from friends and colleagues who asked if I had seen the video and if I knew what had happened. While some of my closest friends and family did not recognize me in the video, others did and asked if I had seen all the comments posted about the interpreter (me) and the sign language interpretation. When comments on videos that happen to include a sign language interpreter focus solely on the interpreter and sign language as an object of fascination, it takes attention away from the overall intent of providing equitable access. Much of this attention favours what is seen as the spectacle of the interpreter, rather than the issue of access for the Deaf community: the reason interpreters are hired at all.

I have also experienced being the interpreter in a situation I did not have the correct qualifications for. At that time, I was still an interpreting student volunteering for an event to provide basic interpreting services for 1-on-1 and small group social conversations. While on

² In this thesis, unless otherwise mentioned, any reference to “interpreters” should be understood as sign language interpreters.

³ Some of the comments included “Interpreter murder [three fire emojis and laughing/crying]”, “Asl dude killing it [three laughing/crying emojis]”, “The sign guy wins”, “NOT THE TRANSLATOR”, “Did homie do sign language for everyone? Holy smokes lol” (Northly Toronto, 2023).

⁴ As of March 2, 2026, this video appears to have been removed from Instagram.

site, I was asked to stand at the front of a large outdoor space, next to speakers on a stage, and interpret what was being said for Deaf people present. As I was working, I looked to my left and right and noticed news cameras. Concerns overwhelmed me, and I hoped that nothing I interpreted was being captured on camera, because I feared going viral could end my interpreting career before it even began.

When viral videos of interpreters (professionally qualified or not) are actively circulating, it is common for professional interpreters to be asked questions about them in both personal and professional conversations. As first a student and now as a professional ASL-English interpreter, this is a phenomenon I am keenly aware of, and have experienced firsthand as both interpreter-gone-viral and as the interpreter-in-over-their-head.

Chapter 1: Introduction

“Can you imagine watching a news channel, and not being able to understand anything that is being said?” (YADI Accessibility, 2020).

So begins a change.org petition started by the Youth Association of Deaf India in 2020 to campaign for one of their news broadcasters to provide properly trained and qualified sign language interpreters—after a television news program had hired someone who was not a professional. While this situation might seem absurd to some, it is a reality that Deaf people and sign language interpreters have been acutely aware of for quite some time.

Over the last 15 years, a number of videos of sign language interpreters have circulated on social media and news programs, sparking international interest, conversations, and sometimes controversy⁵. Much of the attention on these videos focuses on the spectacle of the interpreters, rather than the effect on the Deaf community (for example, problems of decreased access and mocking of sign language). While many videos that have circulated on social media and news programs do depict qualified professional interpreters, there are a number of videos depicting those who are fake, incompetent, or underqualified. In this thesis, when addressing non-professional interpreters, I use the term fake to refer to those who do not know sign language but pass themselves off as professional interpreters, and I use the term incompetent to refer to those who might know a bit of sign language but not enough to interpret (in a way that clearly renders equivalent meaning). I use the term underqualified to refer to those who may be professional interpreters but find themselves in-over-their-heads (where the training and experience the interpreter brings to the job are an incorrect fit for the demands of the work). At

⁵ Where possible, I have included links to these videos in footnotes. Some of the examples I address have no videos available and were referred to only in news articles or on other media.

times, I refer to these identifiers collectively because the ultimate impact of having a fake or incompetent or underqualified interpreter in any situation is the blocking of access.

Purpose and Research Objectives

This thesis interrogates how media representations of fake, incompetent, and underqualified interpreters arise and are addressed in conversations that interpreters have in their personal and professional lives. This research sits at the intersection of media studies and professional identity, exploring the general public's fascination with the interpreting profession, the enduring appeal of these videos, and interpreters' own perceptions of how these videos impact themselves and their profession.

As a professional ASL-English interpreter, discussions around videos depicting fake interpreters arise in my personal and professional conversations. Sensationalized media coverage in the wake of each event has created a lasting impression on public audiences. These videos have shaped public perception, adversely impacted the labour of sign language interpreters and how their interpreting work is viewed and valued by society. Over the course of my career I have, on a regular basis, been asked questions about the fake interpreter from Nelson Mandela's funeral or whether I have heard about the woman who got arrested for incompetently interpreting in Tampa, FL, as well as other examples that have spread online. In undertaking this research, I seek to better understand how media representations of these events have impacted personal and professional interactions for sign language interpreters in Canada. Though there have been a number of instances where videos of interpreters have widely circulated on social media, the Mandela funeral event (and to a slightly lesser degree the Tampa, FL woman) are the ones that people ask me about most often.

In this chapter, in order to situate the study of these circulating and (in some cases) viral videos, I introduce the profession of sign language interpreting, and the importance of relationships between these professionals and the Deaf communities with whom they work. In order to respect the voice of Deaf people, I have included sources by Deaf researchers as much as possible⁶.

Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature regarding the development and evolution of sign language interpreting as a profession, including legal, technological and media changes and their impacts.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology used in this study, including recruitment, thematic coding, and analysis methods.

Chapter 4 describes rationale for participant criteria and examines the demographic characteristics of participants in the sample, including settings in which each interpreter works.

Chapter 5 discusses analysis of the findings as falling into six main themes identified as: professionalism; the education piece; misunderstandings by non-community members; impact on the Deaf community; emotional exploration and revisitation of trauma; and quality assurance protocols. Within each of these themes, numerous sub-themes are identified.

Chapter 6 provides a more nuanced look at certain perspectives explored in the previous chapter and examines three perspectives from which participants reflected: looking inwards at their own thoughts and feelings, looking outward to their clients and the Deaf community, and looking beyond these groups to those who are unaffiliated with either interpreters or Deaf people. Additional discussion reflects on the consistent unique language production patterns of bilingual bimodal (ASL & spoken English) individuals in this study.

⁶ I have specifically referenced this in some places for Deaf researchers and certain disability studies scholars, but it was not possible to attach these labels to all those whose work is mentioned within this thesis.

Chapter 7 offers a review of the themes and considers implications particularly for the interpreting profession, the Deaf community, and the general public. I conclude by reflecting on the limitations of this study and explore directions for future research.

I begin this discussion with a note on terminology to be used throughout this thesis.

Terminology

Media

For the purposes of this thesis, media will be defined as

The main means of mass communication, *esp.* newspapers, radio, and television, and (from the later 20th century) content accessed via the internet, regarded collectively; the reporters, journalists, etc., working for organizations engaged in such communication [emphasis in original] (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d., “Media, n.” entry).

Representation

Representation will be defined as “Something which stands for or denotes another symbolically; an image, a symbol, a sign” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d., “Representation, n.” entry). To provide further context, “representations stand for their objects in some sense, but “standing for” is a contested expression” (Bennett et al., 2013, p. 307), meaning that representations only present part of the thing that they are *re-presenting* but not the complete thing, which would be the original source. For example, the word “orange” represents both a colour and fruit, but you cannot eat the word and taste the fruit, nor does a colour present itself visually when the word is uttered. Nonetheless, the word “orange” represents both. The representation that is depicted is shown from a perspective other than the original as “practices of representation are said to interpret the reality they represent” (Bennett et al., 2013, p. 308).

Unless otherwise noted, representations (of interpreters, sign languages, Deaf community, etc.) herein refer to those appearing in or on media.

Representation in Media vs Representation on Media

I define representation *in* media to be when mass media sources (newspapers, radio, programs, blogs, reels) discuss or write about interpreters. I see this as being distinct from representation *on* media, when interpreters appear on screen (for example while interpreting a press conference or being interviewed by media outlets).

Social Media

For the purposes of this thesis, I define social media based on Obar and Wildman's (2015) definition as the cluster of Internet platforms that function either as standalone applications or those that can be embedded into other media. Within this cluster, "Individuals and groups create user-specific profiles for a site or app designed to be maintained by a social media service", and these "services facilitate the development of social networks online by connecting a profile with those of other individuals and/or groups" (Obar and Wildman, 2015, p. 2). The applications that form these networks comprises:

the interwoven collection of websites that allow users to host and share content (YouTube, Instagram, Flickr), connect with friends and people with similar interests (Facebook, Twitter), and share their knowledge (Wikipedia, blogs). Collectively, these sites have formed a social infrastructure that we refer to as social media. (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013, p. 2)

Virality (of videos)

Virality (of videos) will be defined as

a social information flow process where many people simultaneously forward a specific information item, over a short period of time, within their social networks, and where the message spreads beyond their own [social] networks to different, often distant networks, resulting in a sharp acceleration in the number of people who are exposed to the message [emphasis in original]. (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013, p. 16)

For the purposes of this thesis, I use “viral videos” to refer to those videos that have circulated inside and outside of the Deaf and interpreting communities (typically to tens of thousands of people or more). In my own experience, some videos spread virally and achieve mass circulation to millions of people, while other videos circulate only within the Deaf community and/or amongst interpreters through various channels⁷. These video phenomena then have an impact on how non-professional contacts (family, friends, etc.) approach me outside of my workplace—aligning with the definition above. I suspect this experience is not unique to me and also manifests in the lives of my colleagues. Further, the subjects of those videos (referring both to issues addressed and actual people appearing in them) “can raise awareness on a given topic, can show new ways of viewing the world, and can expose truths” (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013, p. 9).

Situating Sign Language Interpreting in the Context of Deaf Culture and Community

The job of a sign language interpreter is to bridge the language and cultural gap between two or more people (typically at least one Deaf and one non-Deaf/hearing person) who do not use the same language and are not of the same culture. To fully communicate using a signed language, one must understand the Deaf cultural context within which the language exists and operates. According to the website of the Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf:

⁷ In some cases, though Deaf people and interpreters are aware of specific examples of videos, there is no recording available online to track video views or archival footage (as in an example from Québec that I address below).

The Deaf community is comprised of culturally Deaf people in the core of the community who use a sign language (e.g. American Sign Language or langue des signes québécoise [in a Canadian context]) and appreciate their heritage, history, literature, and culture. The Deaf community is also comprised of other individuals who use the language and have an attitude that makes them an accepted part of the community though they may not be in the core of the community. (Cripps, 2026)

The core of the Deaf community referred to here is those people who embody all four paths of membership within it: audiological (whether a person is deaf or not), political (working towards access, inclusion, empowerment of Deaf people and community), linguistic (aptitude in the language of the community: ASL in most of English-speaking North America), and social (spending time connecting with other members of the Deaf community, e.g. at Deaf community events), along with a respectful attitude towards each (Baker-Shenk & Cokely, 1980, pp. 56-57). The reference to audiological Deafness here is worthwhile to note: while hearing interpreters have a place within the Deaf community politically, socially, and linguistically, they cannot exist at the core since they are not audiotogically Deaf themselves.

Lane et al. (1996) liken participation in the Deaf community to a spinning door: some come to the community briefly and then leave, while others stay longer. Hearing people who did not grow up with Deaf family and are unconnected to the Deaf community may feel unsure how to approach and become involved. To enter and continue involvement requires one to move at the speed of this “revolving door”, recognizing that they may, at times,

feel that they [hearing people] are not accepted. In the same way, for example, American expatriates might feel they are not totally accepted in France. But it is not true that hearing people are unwelcome among the Deaf. It’s just that Deaf people, like all people,

have a need for being, at least part of the time, with others who share the same language and culture, values and concerns. (Lane et al., 1996, p. 6)

Interpreters who grew up with Deaf parents (or siblings or other family members⁸) often have a different relationship to the Deaf community than those interpreters who grew up unconnected to it. Justin Read (2025), who was raised by Deaf parents, articulated a tension at the cultural and linguistic crossroads where hearing Children of Deaf Adults (CODAs) like him exist: being not truly “hearing” and not truly “Deaf” since they exhibit cultural behaviours of each demographic and may find themselves recognizing behavioural differences when socializing with either hearing or Deaf people (pp. 33-34). While he grew up in a Deaf cultural context, he writes that “In Deaf spaces – even within my own family – I was sometimes reminded that I’m hearing” (p. 32), and “even among hearing people, I never felt completely “hearing” either. My English was fluent, but my identity was different. It’s a strange dual existence – always part of each world, yet a bit apart from both” (p. 33).

For those unconnected to Deaf people or interpreters, the idea of seeing the Deaf community as a cultural and linguistic minority, rather than as “hearing people who cannot hear” (Lane et al., 1996, p. 335), may feel contrary. And yet, Deaf people have their own distinct culture, language, behaviours, norms, and ways of seeing the world. Because of how sign language interpreters work in partnership with the Deaf community, it is incumbent on those interpreters to be aware of this relationship between Deaf studies and sign language interpreting. Deaf Studies, knowledge and application of Deaf cultural norms, and understanding one’s place within the Deaf community are critical for being able to provide services that reduce the risk of

⁸ Interpreters who grew up with Deaf siblings or other Deaf family members (rather than parents) may have a different relationship to the Deaf community and a different perspective on their own identities. A full exploration of these identities is beyond the scope of this thesis. For more information on identities shaped by having a Deaf sibling see Yeo (2012).

harm. Deaf cultural knowledge and understanding of the Deaf community underpin everything that sign language interpreters do.

Deaf Epistemology

Integral to working with the Deaf community is an understanding of Deaf epistemology, which, rather than creating knowledge using the rules of hard scientific methods, “relies [more] heavily on personal testimonies, personal experiences, and personal accounts to document knowledge⁹” (Holcomb, 2010, p. 471). Deaf Studies researchers Hauser et al. (2010) write that “Deaf epistemology constitutes the nature and extent of the knowledge that deaf individuals acquire growing up in a society that relies primarily on audition to navigate life” (p. 486). A Deaf life is one lived “in a visual reality, which leads to the acquisition of a knowledge base that is different from that of hearing individuals” (Hauser et al., 2010, p. 487). This knowledge base includes the life experiences that Deaf people have growing up as different from their hearing peers, which may include a lack of incidental learning (how deaf people cannot passively listen to most conversations around them as hearing people can, thereby absorbing knowledge through their surroundings) (Hauser, et al., p. 488).

Deaf people also regularly experience audism, a term referring to the “discrimination or prejudice against individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing” (Merriam-Webster, 2026), on an individual, institutional and societal level. Audism directly impacts the lives of Deaf people in two ways: in forcing them to become like hearing people (including expectations to fit into a society designed by and for hearing people) and in decisions being made by hearing people about Deaf people and the Deaf community (CAD-ASC, 2015). Eckert & Rowley (2013), Deaf researchers who each experienced systematic oppression on the basis of access to ASL, write that

⁹ This value placed on personal experiences is also an approach used in Black feminist epistemology. For more information see Collins (2026).

“Audism is a schema of audiocentric assumptions and attitudes that are used to rationalize differential stratification, supremacy, and hegemonic privilege” (p. 105). Audism may manifest as assumptions that Deaf people cannot be hired for certain work because it is unsafe for them, or that Deaf children should not be taught sign language (even when their hearing peers are) (CAD-ASC, 2015). For Deaf people growing up as the sole Deaf person in a hearing family, their experience of audism may be compounded as issues can arise related to communication as a form of “dinner table syndrome” where “deaf individuals are excluded from the flow of conversations at mealtime” (Meek, 2020, p. 1676).

Viral Videos of Sign Language Interpreters

To capture the extent of the phenomenon of these circulating videos of interpreters who are fake, incompetent or underqualified, I offer in this section a description of all the video examples I have been able to trace. These videos are referenced in the literature review chapter, as well as in the interviews conducted for this thesis. In as many cases as possible I have included links to each video occurrence in the footnotes; for two cases I have not been able to find video footage (2012 Québec and 2020 India), so a video link will not be included for those specific instances.

2012: Hurricane Sandy Briefings¹⁰, Saturday Night Live (SNL)¹¹ & Chelsea Lately¹²

The first example I address is that of satirical parodies based on viral videos of a qualified professional interpreter named Lydia Callis. In late October 2012, during emergency press briefings as Hurricane Sandy headed towards New York City, Callis appeared next to Mayor

¹⁰ For video of Hurricane Sandy Briefings see Bloomberg (2012c) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mbYIANLOayw>

¹¹ For video footage of November 3, 2012 Lydia Callis sketch on *SNL* see Saturday Night Live (2013a) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zMfm6ZCMWzY>

¹² For video footage from *Chelsea Lately* see AdamSlowHandSmith (2013) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MlnZETpWb9Y>

Bloomberg in order to ensure Deaf people had access to vital information¹³. Videos of Callis interpreting went viral, with the general public commenting on her facial expressions and signing style, which contrasted the even measured tones of Bloomberg's speech. It should be noted here that grammatical features of ASL appear on the face, so the language tends to appear more expressive to non-signers even when conveying the same point. *The Huffington Post* created a video posted to their YouTube channel called "The Many Moods of Lydia Callis," which spliced 1-2 second clips of her work together with three different pieces of music to group the clips into different "moods" (Huffington Post, 2012a). Both *Chelsea Lately* and *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) each had sketches meant to satirize her work for comic fodder.

On October 30, 2012, Chelsea Handler, on her show *Chelsea Lately*, described Callis as being "pretty passionate about signing" amidst how much she (Handler) "enjoyed her energy" (AdamSlowHandSmith, 2012, 1:22-1:30). A clip of Callis with a large red arrow pointing to her was shown on screen, before Handler invited out her own "interpreter", a tall woman dressed to look like Callis in the clip. Disability media studies scholar Ellcessor (2015) described the sketch from that episode as:

a woman costumed to resemble Callis stepped onstage behind Handler and began 'interpreting'. The mock-sign language incorporated vivid facial expressions, eye rolls, the familiar 'crazy' gesture of a finger pointed at the temple, spinning around, and eventually even the 'interpreter' grabbing her own breasts. (p. 586)

Show guests on stage next to Handler then made denigrating comments towards the "interpreter": Chris Franjola asking her "who's your lesbian friend?" while miming made up

¹³ Lydia Callis was not the only interpreter working these press briefings; Pamela Mitchell is another sign language interpreter who worked them as well. It is worthwhile noting that at the October 27, 2012 press conference, Mayor Bloomberg opened by explaining that interpreters are included in these emergency briefings in order to make the information as accessible as possible to New Yorkers (Bloomberg, 2012a; Bloomberg, 2012b).

signs and Josh Wolf commenting “I didn’t know Kris Jenner was doing sign language” (AdamSlowHandSmith, 2012, 1:15-1:22). After the “interpreter” departed the stage, the third guest, Mary Lynn Rajs kub mentioned how she found both Callis and the “interpreter” (named Heather) to be sexy. Rajs kub then mimics the interpreter and makes up signs as she talks about inviting her husband to sleep with her (AdamSlowHandSmith, 2012). Throughout the entire sketch and conversation, a frozen image of Callis interpreting next to Mayor Bloomberg remains in the background.

On November 1, 2012, DeafNation, an organization that promotes and honours Deaf culture and advocates for inclusive spaces (DeafNation, 2026), sent a letter to Chelsea Handler expressing dismay over how Callis, the Deaf community, and ASL were portrayed. DeafNation stated that their “language and culture are not to be mocked or made fun of” and “this clip is not only tasteless and not funny, but also ignorant and offensive to a huge oppressed minority” (DeafNation, 2012). The National Association of the Deaf (NAD) sent a letter to Handler the next day on November 2, 2012, expressing their “extreme disgust with [Handler] and [her] show for the despicable manner in which [they] mocked American Sign Language (ASL) and the profession of sign language interpreters” (Wagner, 2012). That letter also mentioned that ASL is a formal language, that mocking the Deaf community and its language is demeaning, and demanded an apology¹⁴.

On November 3, 2012, the opening sketch for *Saturday Night Live* involved Cecily Strong as Lydia Callis interpreting for Fred Armisen playing Mayor Blomberg. Strong appears on stage next to the Bloomberg character and begins to interpret using what looks like

¹⁴ I have been unable to find any sources that say whether an apology was ultimately issued, however, the original clip of the show is no longer available from any official social media accounts of *Chelsea Lately*. This suggests that the backlash to the sketch may have had some effect. Independent users have since re-posted the clip to YouTube under fair use statements.

rudimentary sign language (SNL, 2013a). Rather than invent her own signs, Strong looked up actual ASL signs, since she “wanted to make sure I was really signing, so my shitty sign language wasn’t the joke” (Sheffield, 2012). The scene later shifts to two other actors, Bobby Moynihan as New Jersey Governor Chris Christie and his “interpreter” Roxy (played by Nasim Pedrad). Pedrad, playing fictional interpreter Roxy, uses some basic signs mixed with mostly gestures (Huffington Post, 2012b), and is meant to poke fun at New Jersey Italian stereotypes. At the closing of the sketch, Strong signs in ASL “live from New York it’s Saturday night”, the line that triggers the opening theme song of the show—part of her attempt to make these pieces of the show accessible to a Deaf audience. Actress Marlee Matlin, who is Deaf, tweeted her disdain for the sketch and the way that *Saturday Night Live* parodied American Sign Language¹⁵ (Matlin, 2012a; Matlin, 2012b; Matlin, 2012c).

2012: LSQ in Quebec (video not available)

In 2012, a sign language interpreter was hired for a Québec politician’s holiday video greeting. In that instance, the langue des signes québécoise (LSQ, also known as Québec Sign Language) interpreter used nonsensical signs that were not understood by the Deaf population in the province (CBC News, 2013). I have not been able to find video footage of this instance, nor any other article that references it in English-language media.

2013: Nelson Mandela’s Funeral¹⁶ + SNL¹⁷

The case study most widely addressed in the literature (Wallmach, 2014; Diriker, 2022; Murray, 2015; Stone & Russell, 2022; Saunders, 2016; Turner et al., 2022; Wallmach &

¹⁵ I have been unable to find any sources that say whether an apology was issued from *Saturday Night Live* following Matlin’s tweets.

¹⁶ For video from Nelson Mandela’s funeral see The New York Times (2013) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7qu1cs6Fhk8>

¹⁷ For video from Mandela funeral sketch see Saturday Night Live (2013) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-v9oJOCrxQ>

Okagbue, 2022) is that of the memorial service for Nelson Mandela. On Tuesday December 10, 2013, an internationally televised memorial service was held for South African President Nelson Mandela. The South African government hired an “interpreter”, Thamsanqa Jantjie, who did not render a single understandable sentence or thought; he did not even know the well-known sign names for Nelson Mandela or Barack Obama (SABC News, 2013b). On December 12, 2013 the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD), together with the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI), released a joint statement condemning the quality of interpreting services. This statement recognized that an interpreter who did not know South African Sign Language (SASL) (or any other known sign language) had been hired for this high profile event, and stressed the need “for trained, qualified interpreters to be used, and the emphasis on the need for access that is based on direction from deaf people” (WFD & WASLI, 2013, p. 1).

The information that emerged around this event in the following days and weeks was truly bizarre. This fake interpreter had been hired for previous public events, and while the local Deaf community had complained about him there was no action taken to prevent him from “interpreting” at future events (Channel 4 News, 2013). Other news coverage would write about how he was apparently being treated for schizophrenia, had a history of violence, and had hallucinated angels coming into the stadium during his time on stage. He also had a violent past, and spent more than a year in a psychiatric facility after being found mentally unfit to stand trial (Musiya & Clendenning, 2013, p. A16; York, 2013, p. A13).

Later that week, on Saturday evening, capitalizing on the zeitgeist of the moment, *Saturday Night Live* elected to satirize the fake interpreter from Mandela’s funeral in their opening sketch. Jay Pharoah, playing President Barack Obama, encounters an interpreter (played by Kenan Thompson) standing next to him on stage. Thompson signed nothing in sign language

but used gestures and physical humour to portray parts of the spoken monologue, for example “huge improvements on our website” was played as Spiderman shooting webs out of his hands, and “I can’t say I’ve been entirely thrilled with the results” inspired Thompson to break out into the choreography from Michael Jackson’s Thriller music video. The interpreter is removed by security but returns for the end of the sketch, miming Pharoah’s action until they both announce the start of the show. There is no actual American Sign Language used in this sketch, and captions are not available (SNL, 2013b).

2014: Toronto Police¹⁸

On December 8, 2014, the Toronto Police Services announced a new service to allow Deaf and hard of hearing persons to communicate directly with 911—via text (TPS, 2014). Instead of hiring a professional interpreter for the press conference, the job was done by Sergeant Deborah Hartford; while she has Deaf family, she is not a professionally trained interpreter. There was no news coverage of this event that I have been able to find in any searches, though the news made its way through the interpreting and Deaf communities in Ontario. On December 20, 2014, the Ontario Association of Sign Language Interpreters (OASLI) wrote a letter to Toronto Police Services expressing concern about the quality of services provided, noting that because a professional interpreter was not retained for the announcement it had not been accessible to the audience that it was meant to reach¹⁹ (L. Scully, personal communication, November 11, 2024).

¹⁸ For video of Toronto Police 2014 press conference see Toronto Police Service (2014) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6nUNbE8P9U>

¹⁹ I am unaware if there was follow up by the Police to this letter.

2016: Peruvian Government²⁰

In September 2016, at a meeting of the Peruvian Parliamentary external commerce commission, there appeared to be an interpreter in the bottom-right corner of the screen, gesticulating in what looks like copies of the hand movements made by the woman speaking into the microphone (The Daily Moth, 2016). There was widespread criticism for the lack of access provided by this “interpreter”, later identified as Balvina Panduro Dacosta (Trome Editorial Staff, 2016). In response to this video, both a written and video statement were put out by the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI) in partnership with World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) (WASLI, 2016).

2017: Hurricane Irma; Manatee County, FL²¹

In September 2017 in Manatee County, FL, lifeguard Marshall Greene was asked by government officials to step in to interpret for evacuation announcements related to Hurricane Irma. Though Greene has a sibling who is Deaf, he is not a professional interpreter and was not able to provide an accurate or coherent interpretation. This incident provoked widespread criticism from Deaf people and interpreters who called out the county for not providing accessible communication for this emergency (Mendoza, 2017; Inside Edition, 2017a).

2017: Police Press Conference; Tampa, FL²²

In December 2017, Tampa, FL Police were set to host a press conference to announce the arrest of a serial killer. Shortly before the event began, a woman appeared at the police station and said she was there to interpret (Fox 13, 2017). Accepting her at her word, she appeared next

²⁰ For video of the Peruvian Government commission see The Daily Moth (2016) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OEczA5oeC7k> (4:02-6:10). This video is only available in American Sign Language.

²¹ For video from Manatee County FL see Inside Edition (2017a) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIWJwIs3pbI>

²² For video from Tampa, FL see Inside Edition (2017b) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LvNPKwz4Ghw>

to the police spokesperson signing mostly incomprehensible signs (Fox 13, 2017). It is worth noting that in this case, the mother of one of the victims is Deaf, so the department occasionally had an interpreter on hand for her—though she was not actually present at this event (Fox 13, 2017; The Daily Moth, 2017). The woman was later identified as Derlyn Roberts who, at the time, had already been convicted multiple times for fraud. As disappointing as this event and its appalling lack of access is, it is not actually illegal to impersonate an interpreter in the state of Florida²³, though it is an ethical violation nonetheless (Tampa Bay 28, 2017).

While the video achieved widespread attention at the time, with one of the many news pieces on YouTube having been viewed more than 14 million times (Inside Edition, 2017b), the @insidehistory account on Instagram reposted video footage of this event in September 2025. Alongside the video was text that read “Never forget the woman who got arrested for being a fake sign language interpreter” (though this is not the reason she was eventually arrested), and this video also makes mention of what happened in Manatee County in September 2017. Hashtags associated with this video are #history, #funny, #trending, #reels, and #comedy. As of January 12, 2026, the post has been viewed more than 8 million times (Inside History, 2025).

2020: Dallas County, TX²⁴

On March 29 and 31, 2020, in Dallas County, TX, sign language interpreters were hired for COVID-19 press conferences where Judge Clay Jenkins spoke to residents about COVID-19 protocols. The County had hired interpreters through Final Graphic, a company that provides translation and interpreting services in multiple languages: Heather Ivey for March 29 and Anne

²³ Sign language interpreters working in the state of Florida are not required to have a license or certification in order to provide services, except in specific legal contexts (RID, 2026). For further information see “Florida” at <https://rid.org/programs/gap/state-by-state-regulations/>

²⁴ For video from Dallas County, TX see The Daily Moth (2020a) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zStwKOvIhPA> (0:28-1:02)

Tierney for March 31 (The Daily Moth, 2020). While neither interpreter had active certification with either the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) or the Texas Board for Evaluation of Interpreters Registry (BEI) at the time, Ivey had previously been certified by RID before her certification expired in 2008 (The Daily Moth, 2020). The bulk of criticism for these events was levelled at Tierney, who had interpreted that people were allowed to go to church in person—which was contrary to what had actually been stated: that people should be staying home and church services would be streamed online. *The Daily Moth* used Facebook to track down Tierney’s profile and found she had posted publicly about her interpretation that day: that it was “maybe not perfect by people’s standards, but by the almighty God’s standards...” and “I truly believe God moved through me to tell people His will... that we can go to Church” (2020, 2:46-2:58). On April 1, 2020, Judge Jenkins posted to his X account that he was aware of complaints about the interpreting services and was working to address them (Jenkins, 2020). Thereafter, the County began working with the Deaf Action Center for interpreter provision. Coverage in *The Daily Moth* also noted that a Deaf advocate had questioned whether Final Graphic or Tierney “should be accused of committing criminal negligence because she defied the Judge’s order and encouraged people to go to church and put Deaf people at risk” (The Daily Moth, 2020b, 8:45-9:10).

2020: India (video not available)²⁵

On May 12, 2020, a series of tweets were posted to the Twitter (now X) account of the National Association of the Deaf India decrying an unintelligible interpreter on the news as being “incomplete and unprofessional” (NAD India, 2020a; NAD India, 2020b, NAD India, 2020c). One of the tweets included a comical graphic depicting two people in separate squares with

²⁵ While a video of the India example is not available, this NAD INDIA (2020d) video shows an image of the interpreter: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8g1VezVa0PA> (0:02-0:05)

speech bubbles on top of them that seems to demonstrate the “access” being provided by this sign language interpreter to the Deaf community. On one side of the image is a bearded person in a pink vest below a speech bubble that reads “... coronavirus will be a part of our live [sic] for very long time...” while the other side depicts an interpreter beneath a speech bubble of “.....#%\$%^%____%^\$#%^% part ____ our live ____ very ____ time” (NAD India, 2020c). The Youth Association of the Deaf India (YADI) created a change.org petition to lobby their local media to put qualified interpreters on the news, calling for institutional change including Deaf subject experts and interpreters joining a board to evaluate providers of interpreting services. The petition also calls for the name of a news program providing interpreted news to change from “News for the Hearing Impaired” to “News in Indian Sign Language” (YADI Accessibility, 2020).

2022: Limpopo, South Africa²⁶

In 2022, another fake interpreter video went viral in South Africa. Though I have not been able to find the original video online, it is addressed in a news segment on Newzroom Afrika. During this televised segment, South African Sign Language (SASL) activist Ntombi Sikuza reflects on the problematic nature of these fake interpreters and how they tend to work at large events where there are no Deaf people who can call out their inadequacies. She feels that recognizing SASL as an official language would do much to quell the problems that have arisen related to fake interpreters in the country²⁷. While this incident and that of the Mandela funeral in 2023 have been caught on camera, Sikuza reflects that this type of issue happens more often than just these two isolated occurrences (Newzroom Afrika, 2022).

²⁶ For video from 2022 Limpopo see Newzroom Afrika (2022) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=thtgIRn7grs> (2:36-3:01)

²⁷ In July 2023, South African Sign Language (SASL) became recognized as the 12th official language of South Africa (Republic of South Africa, 2023).

2024: KCAL News, CA²⁸

In a 2024 news segment on KCAL news (part of CBS News in Los Angeles, CA), Oshún Ramirez is shown providing “interpreting” services. The news piece focused on her brother, Xolo Maridueña, as part of promoting his work in the film *Blue Beetle* (g5258, 2024). Although Ramirez uses an equivalent ASL sign for some individual English words, there is no grammar used in her “interpretation”, and therefore no equivalency to the spoken English interview²⁹.

The news clip was covered by Jon Urquhart, an influencer on YouTube who was raised by Deaf parents and is a certified interpreter himself, and Deaf actress Elizabeth Harris³⁰. Both expressed dismay and concern that a news program would consider Ramirez qualified to be interpreting on the news. Urquhart was puzzled over how Ramirez could have been allowed on the news, and after questioning why this happened, opts to interpret the original video so viewers can compare his work as a professional interpreter to that of Ramirez (Urquhart, 2024). Harris explained how devastating it felt to have been excited at this segment being interpreted, only to see the interpretation that did not convey coherent meaning. Her video included her own attempt to interpret back into English the few words conveyed by the “interpreter” (Harris, 2024).

This corpus of videos provides a foundation for the study of this thesis. Although Deaf people, sign language interpreters and their consumers are aware that the phenomenon of fake, incompetent, and underqualified interpreters is widespread, there are only a small number of videos that capture these occurrences as they happen. Not all of the videos mentioned in this chapter circulated virally, yet all examples mentioned here demonstrate that media

²⁸ For video of 2024 KCAL News see g5258 (2024) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ANyUMLpK1iU> (0:18-7:44)

²⁹ ASL and English are two distinct languages. While some words in English can be conveyed in ASL using individual signs, a complete sentence requires a different grammatical construct, (often) multiple signs used together in a specific space at a specific speed in order to convey equivalent meaning.

³⁰ As of January 15, 2026, Urquhart’s video has over 160,000 views and Harris’s video has over 187,000 views.

representations of sign language interpreters can affect how the general public understands interpreting. The first example I addressed, Lydia Callis in Hurricane Sandy Briefings in New York City, is a qualified interpreter who was depicted on sketch comedy television programs. The examples from Québec, South Africa, Toronto, Peru, Tampa, Dallas, India, KCAL News, and Limpopo each depict fake, incompetent or underqualified interpreters. The videos from Québec, Toronto, Peru, Dallas, and India did not circulate virally, but are included here to demonstrate that this phenomenon is widespread and not confined to a specific country or region. While the videos noted above are a small representation of the number of times this phenomenon of fake, incompetent, or underqualified interpreters has occurred, they are the ones that have been most widely seen and circulated amongst interpreters, the Deaf community, and in some cases the general public. Given the foundation of knowledge established in the examples above, I move on now to a review of the literature to situate my study within a range of academic contexts.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In order to situate an understanding of how Canadian sign language interpreters are affected by viral videos of fake interpreters, I will be taking a deep dive into the historical background of sign language interpretation, the development of the profession, cultural shifts that have affected the field, and the intersection of media and interpreting. The profession of sign language interpreting (SLI) is a relatively young field, and research that specifically addresses the Canadian context is quite small. Where possible, I have included Canadian examples to provide as much background as possible, along with aspects of my own professional experience in an effort to clarify certain points.

I am myself an accredited professional American Sign Language (ASL)-English interpreter³¹ who has been working in the field providing interpreting services since 2012. Whereas concerns related to the video-taping of interpretations at public and private events were largely uncommon when I was an interpreting student, they have now exploded to the forefront of concerns in our field. Anyone can be recorded interpreting anything at any time and anywhere. Those videos can be posted to news sites and social media sites for mass public consumption without the interpreter's consent—opening up responses to de-contextualized analysis, mass ridicule, questioning of qualifications, and more.

Though the focus of this thesis is sign language interpretation, it is imperative to include discussions of Deaf culture and the Deaf community. Sign language interpreters generally work with two or more people who do not use the same language and are not of the same culture:

³¹ I am a member of the Canadian Association of Sign Language Interpreters (CASLI), the national professional organization of sign language interpreters in Canada, and I am also a member of two chapter affiliates: the Newfoundland Association of Visual Language Interpreters (NAVLI) and the Ontario Association of Sign Language Interpreters (OASLI). I am also a member of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID), the national professional organization in the United States, and have been nationally certified in the United States by RID since 2016.

usually this means working with one or more Deaf persons and one or more hearing (non-Deaf) persons. Though sign language interpreters are not the only way to access aspects of life and services, sign language interpreters do tend to be the preferred access measure for culturally Deaf people.

In his book *Deaf Heritage in Canada*, Clifton F. Carbin (1996) writes, “Sign language interpreters began to appear on Canadian television in the late 1970s” (p. 328). Since then, and more so over the last decade, sign language interpreters have been seen with increasing regularity at press briefings, community events and on stages at conferences and arts performances. This increasing exposure of audiences to interpreters has sparked conversation, interest, and in some cases controversy.

This chapter begins with a brief history of interpreting studies and the professionalism of interpreters before tracing the development of sign language interpreting as a profession in Canada over the last half century within a North American context. I then address Canadian legislation that has profoundly impacted sign language interpreters and Deaf people, along with the role technology has played in shaping the interpreting field—particularly in the recent past. The chapter then studies media representations of sign language interpreters, viral videos and circulating images of certain interpreters before concluding with a section addressing Deaf culture, fluency and access. The previous chapter concluded by exploring examples of the phenomenon of fake, incompetent and underqualified interpreters. This chapter also refers to selected examples of viral videos in which the representation of interpreters has caused an uproar in the Deaf and interpreting communities.

A Brief History of Interpreting Studies

Even though language mediation and interpreting have a long history, interpreting studies is a relatively young field. As the need for qualified interpreters has expanded across various domains, there has been “a growing interest in interpreting studies” (Jourdenais & Mikkelsen, 2015, p. 1). Pöchhacker (2015) writes that studies of and about spoken language interpreters began in the 1920s “when interpreting began to be practised and appreciated as a professional function in multilingual meetings of diplomats and heads of state” (p. 62). These functions included meetings of the League of Nations in Switzerland and later the Nuremburg Trials in Germany, where public audiences became aware of spoken language interpretation (Pöchhacker, 2015, p. 62; Downie, 2016, p. 57). The Nuremburg Trials aimed to hold leaders of the Third Reich in Germany accountable for their criminal actions during World War II (Baigorri-Jalón, 2014, p. 212), and proceedings were conducted in four languages: German, English, French, and Russian. To allow access for all participants (the tribunal, witnesses, the accused, the public, and the press) to have a method of streamlined communication, an interpreting solution had to be implemented to deal with the quadrilingual proceedings. Up until the trials began in 1945, the predominant practice was consecutive interpreting³² when two languages were being used in the same space, but given the number of languages (4) being used, this approach would have been too time consuming (Baigorri-Jalón, 2014, p. 214). Simultaneous interpreting was used during the Nuremburg Trials to accommodate the multiple languages spoken in order to maintain the

³² Consecutive interpretation involves the interpreter listening to a chunk of information of the source language, sometimes taking notes on the content, and then pausing the speaker. The interpreter then interprets the chunk of language that has just been said/signed. A simultaneous interpretation begins when the interpreter has enough of a sense of the speaker’s utterance and intent to start composing an interpretation into the target language (usually about 5-15 seconds after a speaker begins). While simultaneous interpreting reduces the time it takes to interpret (as interpreting happens at the same time as the original/source text is said/signed, albeit with a slight delay), there is less time accorded to processing the original source language. Thus, a consecutive interpretation tends to be clearer and more accurate than a simultaneous interpretation (Stratit, 2005, p. 244).

speed of the trial without unnecessary delay. The system proved so successful that it became the standard for most international organizations, beginning with the United Nations in 1946, and “[w]ithin a few years, simultaneous [interpreting] became the predominant mode of interpretation at international conferences and organizations, and it remains so today” (Baigorri-Jalón, 2014, p. 212).

Interpreter Professionalism

It is relevant here to address French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu, whose work has been applied to studies focusing on the professions of translation and interpreting, specifically his theories around various forms of capital, habitus and fields. A number of articles with a focus on the profession of translation

have adopted or adapted Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, field and capital in order to articulate the higher level features of translational activity — features which are located within social structures and social institutions and have a cultural, historical and a political specificity. (Inghilleri, 2003, p. 244)

Inghilleri (2005) develops the idea of a specific interpreter habitus, which includes the way in which interpreters understand the world and behave within it. Diriker (2022) argues that “[i]nterpreting, like other professions, is associated with a professional status that makes claims to symbolic, cultural, and economic capital” (p. 196), and Inghilleri (2005) notes that “different forms of capital confer *legitimacy* on particular ways of constructing and constituting social reality [emphasis in original]” (p. 70). Schinkel & Noordegraaf (2011) build upon this theory of various types of capital to “regard professionalism as a form of symbolic capital” (p. 67). Bourdieu rejected the idea of profession or professionalism and instead focused on the concept of “autonomous, historically constituted social fields” (Schinkel & Noordegraaf, 2011, p. 77),

“[f]ields (e.g. legal, educational, artistic, literary) [that] are viewed as relatively autonomous structures in social space, each with its own particular set of values and regulative principles” (Inghilleri, 2005, p. 70). The way that interpreting (sign language or spoken language), or really any profession, fits into this social space is to be “structured as *one subfield of the field of power* able to claim such status in the form of *professional capital* recognized as such by others in the field of power [emphasis in original]” (Schinkel & Noordegraaf, 2011, p. 87). This discussion has particular relevance to the way that the profession of interpreting is evolving in the current day and age. There is a tension that exists within the field of interpreting, as “it is widely recognized that the interpreting profession, with the possible exception of conference interpreting, is engaged in an ongoing struggle to define itself” (Inghilleri, 2005, p. 72).

One of the ways that the profession of sign language interpreting is being forced to define itself is through the general public’s exposure to media representations of interpreters. Interpreter appearances in media are not a new phenomenon. As I discuss later in this chapter, there is a substantial history of media outlets covering stories about sign language interpreters. The dissemination of sign language interpreters’ work through recorded media is, however, a newer dimension to consider. Deaf researcher Breda Carty (2010) suspects that popular culture representations of interpreters shoulder some responsibility for how the general public perceives interpreters, particularly those who deviate from standard behaviour and protocols. She writes:

It seems that the world is most interested in interpreters when they are working in fraught situations, confronting ethical dilemmas, and especially when they are breaking the rules. This seems to apply to interpreters in any language, not only sign language interpreters. (Carty, 2010)

This type of attention is exemplified by a 2005 case, when Ukrainian sign language interpreter Natalia Dmytruk stopped interpreting a live broadcast of election results on television, and then “broke with protocol and informed viewers that the election results were fraudulent” (Carty, 2010). Although ethical codes exist to guide the interpreter’s decision-making in ways that would typically prevent this type of situation from happening, Dmytruk’s action was lauded by audiences. While she was venerated for her actions, “it was also hard to reconcile this with the way we expect interpreters to behave and to be perceived by the public” (Carty, 2010).

North American Context for Sign Language Interpretation

McDermid et al. (2022) outline the context within which sign language interpreting is situated in North America, comparing and contrasting the development of the profession in Canada, the United States and Mexico. In North America, sign language interpretation has only been recognized as a profession since the 1960s, when the first professional organizations began to establish themselves, beginning with the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) in 1964³³ (McDermid et al., 2022, p. 552). The Canadian Association of Sign Language Interpreters (CASLI) came into being in 1979³⁴, and the Asociación Nacional de Intérpretes de Lengua de Signos (ANILS) was founded as the professional organization in Mexico in 1994 (though it closed its doors and a new organization called the Asociación Interpretes y Traductores de Lengua de Señas en la República Mexicana (AITLS) was founded in its place in 2014) (McDermid et al., 2022, p. 552). Also noteworthy is the global-scale professional organization

³³ Lou Fant (1990), one of the founding members of RID, recounted that prior to 1964, sign language interpreting was not thought of as a profession: services were offered but it was always on a voluntary basis and remuneration was not guaranteed or even expected (p. 9). Those who provided interpreting services at the time did so when needed in order to aid the Deaf community (Fant, 1990, p. 10).

³⁴ Originally named the Association of Visual Language Interpreters of Canada (AVLIC), the name was changed in 2018 (McDermid et al., 2022, p. 552)

known as the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI), which was established in 2003³⁵ (Adam, 2022, p. 118).

Up until very recently, sign language interpreters were educated by Deaf communities; there has been a shift over time to the current state of affairs, where interpreters are now required to go to educational institutions and take courses to learn ASL, familiarize themselves with interpreter codes of ethics meant to guide their decision-making, become involved with the Deaf community and then learn to interpret and work in the field³⁶ (McDermid et al., 2022, p. 557). This development of educational programs stemmed from a lack of interpreters being available to provide services. In the early 1980s in Canada, federal and provincial government grants enabled certain Deaf organizations to conduct needs assessments with their local communities and to begin setting up referral services and training programs (Carbin, 1996, pp. 326-327). This trajectory of learning through either the community or in educational institutions aligns with Schinkel and Noordegraaf's (2011) definition of what it means to function as a professional: "A professional does not merely work; he/she has to be educated and trained, (socialized) as member of an occupational domain, supervised by his/her peers and held accountable" (p. 69).

All North American countries' national interpreting organizations have a code of ethics as well as a conduct review process (CASLI, RID, AQILS³⁷, AITLS)—though the CASLI

³⁵ There is a common misconception that sign language is universal. The *Ethnologue* lists 160 different sign languages and the countries where those individual languages originate from (Eberhard et al., 2025).

³⁶ While this is the situation in North America and much of the Western World, the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI) (2026) writes in their *WASLI Interpreter Guidelines* that many countries have either no formal training programs for sign language interpreting or programs that only operate periodically and informally. For further information see WASLI Interpreter Guidelines at <https://wasli.org/sign-language-interpreters/trainers-mentoring/>

³⁷ AQILS, Association québécoise des interprètes en langues des signes (the Quebec association for sign language interpreters) was established in 2015 and is a separate organization from CASLI. I am including AQILS in this collection of organizations as it is the only professional organization specifically for LSQ-French interpreters in Canada (though there have been ASL-English interpreters fluent in spoken French who have been, and may still be, members). Some LSQ-French interpreters and ASL-English Interpreters are also members of the Ordre des traducteurs, terminologies et interprètes agréés du Québec (OTTIAQ); OTTIAQ also has a conduct review process in place (AQILS, 2023; OTTIAQ, 2025).

Professional Conduct Review Process (PCRP) has been on hold³⁸ since 2019. This suspension of the PCRP was enacted due to accusations of racism³⁹ levelled at both the individuals responsible for administering the steps of the process, as well as the process itself by which complaints are investigated (McDermid et al., 2022, p. 554; Snoddon & Wilkinson, 2023, p. 368).

As of January 2026, the Canadian Association of Sign Language Interpreters (CASLI) lists 750 ASL-English Active members (the category for those who are actively working in the field) (CASLI, n.d.). According to the Canadian Association of the Deaf, there are approximately 357,000 people living in Canada who are Culturally Deaf (CAD-ASC, 2022). Since the end of the 19th Century, hearing (non-Deaf) interpreters⁴⁰ have been a reality of access provision for the Deaf community; a letter dating back to 1902 is quoted in Carbin (1996) noting that at a convention that year, the sign language interpreters “were the connecting link that joined the deaf to the hearing public in every meeting” (p. 326).

Quality assurance protocols protecting access to the field of interpreting exist in several states in the United States of America, but there is only one province in Canada—British Columbia—which enacted title protection legislation in 2011 (McDermid et al., 2022, p. 554; WAVLI, 2015, p. 1). Title protection is a strategy that ensures those hiring interpreters under a

³⁸ At least two CASLI affiliate chapters have separate quality control mechanisms in place: the Westcoast Association of Visual Language Interpreters (WAVLI) and the Association of Sign Language Interpreters of Alberta (ASLIA). WAVLI has a Professional Standards Committee; ASLIA has a grievance procedure (WAVLI, 2016; ASLIA, n.d.).

³⁹ These accusations were detailed in an open letter (“Silent No More”) that was read out to attendees at the 2018 Association of Visual Language Interpreters of Canada (AVLIC) conference. To read the complete letter see MAPSLI (2018): <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/14Urg7wKEYT/>

⁴⁰ These days, interpreting teams might include both hearing and Deaf interpreters (DIs). DIs are skilled professionals who work with signed language at a native fluency level, whereas most (but not all) hearing interpreters do not have a native command of the signed language they work with, though it must be noted that hearing interpreters who grew up with Deaf parents or family who signed would have native fluency but not lived experience as a Deaf person. The work of a DI can add an additional level of clarity, a clearer and more easily understood production of the signed language, a culturally-adapted version of the interpretation, and more (CASLI, 2022). For further information see CASLI’s position paper Language Equity: Working with Deaf Interpreters at <https://www.casli.ca/page-18143>

specific job title are guaranteed a qualified professional will be the one showing up to do the work. The Westcoast Association of Visual Language interpreters (WAVLI) has the rights to three titles: Registered ASL-English interpreter, Registered Sign Language Interpreter, and Registered Visual Language Interpreter, which means that only those members of WAVLI can refer to themselves using these titles (WAVLI, 2015, p. 1). Title Protection is not the sole legal provision that ensures quality assurance of access for Deaf people. Laws both in Canada and internationally seek to protect Deaf people and ensure accessible communication is provided.

There is additional legislation that has been enacted in Canada that impacts interpreter service provision. One of those pieces of legislation is the 1982 Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which ensures the right to have access in sign language (though it is generally applied only for some—rather than all—situations) (Snoddon & Wilkinson, 2023, p. 360). The 2017 Eldridge decision by the Supreme Court of Canada “enshrined deaf Canadians’ right to sign language interpreters as an accessibility accommodation to ensure equal benefit of government services” (Snoddon & Wilkinson, 2023, p. 362). This case stemmed from the denial of interpreters being provided to a Deaf patient during a medical procedure, and the court found that this “failure denies them the equal benefit of the law and discriminates against them in comparison with hearing persons” (Eldridge v. British Columbia, 1997, para 22). While there has been a lasting impact on interpreter provision for Deaf people at medical appointments because of this case, the same protection has not necessarily been extended to other non-medical contexts where an interpreter would be required for access. Just over 20 years after the Eldridge decision, in 2019, the *Accessible Canada Act* was passed; within it, paragraph 5.1 (2) gave official recognition to the signed languages of Deaf communities in Canada, stating “American Sign

Language, Quebec Sign Language (LSQ) and Indigenous sign languages⁴¹ are recognized as the primary languages for communication by deaf persons in Canada” (Canada, 2019). Article 21 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) focuses on “freedom of expression and opinion as well as access to information, specifically calling on governments to recognize and promote the use of sign languages” (Snoddon & Wilkinson, 2023, p. 360). Snoddon & Wilkinson (2019) make note that “the *Accessible Canada Act* excludes the public service domains of broadcasting and telecommunications, which are directly addressed in Article 21 of the CRPD with reference to sign languages” (p. 360).

Impact of Technology on the Practice of Interpreting

Historically, sign language interpreting services were provided face-to-face, yet services provided remotely via video conferencing software (known as video remote interpreting or VRI) have become increasingly routine, which has created certain challenges in the field. Though interpreting remotely using web conferencing programs like Google Meet, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or Skype was a practice used periodically prior to 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced a change in the method of interpreter service provision. As at-home isolation became a norm and a widespread necessity, the need for remote interpreting services grew astronomically, as did the need for interpreters to quickly become adept at providing services from their homes using online conferencing programs. Some organizations even set up workshop sessions to help interpreters acclimate to working online and to test the capabilities of platforms like Zoom⁴². In the past, interpreters worked mostly locally and became familiar with the Deaf community in

⁴¹ According to the Sign Language Institute of Canada (SLIC) (2024), Indigenous Sign Languages used within the borders of Canada include Inuit Sign Language, Plains Indian Sign Language, and Oneida Sign Language (p. 3).

⁴² On September 9, 2020, I joined staff interpreters from the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) in two online meetings (via Zoom) where we practiced using technical functionalities on the Zoom platform to establish a common understanding of how to do our interpreting work for RIT (and other institutions) online.

their region, along with regional signs and dialects of the language⁴³, specific local community issues, locations in a given region, etc., however, the prevalence of VRI has allowed interpreters to work in other areas of their province/state, country, or internationally. This “beaming in” of the interpreter to another location “raises questions related to the quality of care and the impact on consumers using various dialects of sign language in a virtual form” (McDermid et al., 2022, pp. 557-558). For example, when I work in the United States (either remotely or in person), I am cognizant of the ASL signs that I use that differ between Canada and the United States. You might say that I have a Canadian accent in ASL; some of the signs that are commonly used in Canada or Ontario may have completely different meanings or no meaning at all when signed to someone who resides south of the Canada-USA border.

It is important to note here that English and ASL are two fully distinct languages, as there is a widespread misperception that ASL is a manually coded form of the English language or just gestures that lack the grammatical and syntactical features of a language. While it is possible to produce an utterance in ASL that follows the grammatical form of English, it is likely that a person not proficient in English grammatical structure will not understand the intent or nuance of that sentence. In 1960, William Stokoe published his research on American Sign Language that proved it to be an actual language rather than just a system of gestures without their own unique cultural and grammatical constructs (referenced in Adam, 2022, p. 114). The fact that ASL is a language unto itself and not a mirror of English is important to keep in mind when addressing an oft-arising question: what is the point of having a sign language interpreter if captions are

⁴³ For example, the sign for Austin, TX and the sign for Albany, NY look the same, and the sign for the city of Toronto and the country of Poland look similar depending on which handshape a person uses (there are at least two handshapes used to sign “Toronto” that I have seen, one using the ASL letter “T” and one where four fingers are held together and pointed at the chest and the thumb points upwards; Poland is signed using what looks like a flattened oblong version of the ASL letter “O”).

available⁴⁴? That English is a separate language with a distinct grammatical structure and cultural context different from ASL might be reason enough, but the inability for a caption to convey the nuance meant behind a sentence is also worth discussing. Consider, for example, the word “happy”. If I say I am happy, you might assume that I am feeling positive, joyous, and that I am enjoying an experience. If, however, I inflected the word with a lower tone, and my articulation indicated that I was clearly *not* happy even though the word I used was “happy”, any person who hears me say that will recognize immediately that I am upset. A caption does not capture the inflection that changes the meaning of the word and the intent of the utterance.

Representation In and On Media

There is a legacy of sensationalism in how news pieces have represented sign language and interpreters that dates back over 200 years. Adam (2022) addresses the court case of a deaf woman having been accused of a crime—and the fact of the interpreter using sign language was reported upon. He notes that this legal “case was sensationally reported in the newspapers: the *Caledonian Mercury* reported that she used not formal signs yet was able to have a detailed conversation with Kinniburgh through gestures” (p. 113). In another case in 1884, a newspaper article in *Drogheda Argus* wrote of a court case where

the examination was the most curious and interesting piece of pantomime ever performed before the court, in the rapidity of the movements of the two mutes, play of features, hands, and arms, being so rapid and jerky as if they were being operated on by electric shocks. (Leahy & Leonard, 2016, p. 3)

⁴⁴ In February 2024, Elon Musk tweeted about this very topic when a video of a private Disney employees meeting surfaced online showing executives speaking while an interpreter interpreted the meeting into ASL; captions were also included on this video circulating online. It was later revealed that the captions were added after the fact and were not an accessibility provision at the original meeting. The Deaf community responded to Musk’s post emphasizing the difference between captioning and interpreting, the inaccuracies that riddle captioning, and the lack of information captioning offers—but which sign language interpretation naturally includes (The Daily Moth, 2024).

While there is a growing body of research on the appearance of interpreters in the media and the subsequent coverage in traditional and social media spheres (including memes, spoofs, satires, articles, TikTok videos, etc.), few studies look to include the perspective of the interpreter. By not including this perspective, those studies miss addressing the direct impact experienced by interpreters affected by those representations.

When considering ways that interpreters' work might appear on media, one common depiction is placement within a bubble (picture-in-picture style) at one of the bottom corners of a television screen. Since this footage of a "bubble" interpreter lies at the periphery of an image, it is not the focal point. Schmitt (2017)'s work addresses what happens when both a signed language and a spoken language share space together, and he pays particular attention to the regions on screen where sign language is typically depicted (in the corners or margins of the whole image—in a place that is not front and centre). He posits that by placing on-screen sign language interpreters right next to the speaker⁴⁵, and according equitable space and attention to both signed and spoken languages, outsized media coverage tends to follow. This placement of a sign language interpreter on screen and fully visible to a Deaf audience is enough to make waves and invite criticism⁴⁶, as happened in the case of Lydia Callis interpreting beside New York City's then-Mayor Bloomberg during press conferences warning residents about Hurricane Sandy in September 2012 (Schmitt, 2017, p. 137). The fact that Callis was placed directly next to the mayor allowed sign language to be given equal space as spoken English⁴⁷, which deviated

⁴⁵ This is the standard set up at conferences, lectures, classes, and other in-person events.

⁴⁶ In June 2025 Manitoba's Minister of accessibility, Nahanni Fontaine, was recorded at an event making insulting comments about an interpreter who had been next to her on stage in order to provide access for the audience. The video caught the minister saying "'Yeah, I'm like, 'F—k', why did I have her on the stage?' Jesus! I'm like, 'you need to leave'" (Chang, 2025). Though she later apologized for her comments, this news item highlighted the perspective that some people (even those responsible for accessibility provision) harbour about the ideal provision of access.

⁴⁷ This type of set up also allows for a Deaf person to see the original speaker alongside the interpreter, meaning they can view the speaker's mannerisms, body position, motions and facial expressions in addition to the interpretation.

from the classic placing of an interpreter into a “bubble” at the corner of the screen (Schmitt, 2017, p. 137), where most hearing audiences would expect an interpreter to appear (and where the image of the interpreter would likely be ignored by those not requiring that form of access) (Schmitt, 2017, p. 137). Ellcessor (2015) addresses coverage of Callis on *The Chelsea Handler Show*, when Handler discussed media coverage of the press conferences and derisively joked about Callis and her work. Handler’s approach clearly demonstrated how hearing (non-Deaf) people aimed to capitalize on news coverage of Callis to extract humour rather than focus on the provision of access by a qualified professional (Ellcessor, 2015, p. 586). This devalued the access work Callis was doing, and invited audiences to critique, criticize, and poke fun at ASL and interpreters. Ellcessor later elaborates on how sign language interpretation depicted on screen gives an opportunity for Deaf people to participate in the public sphere, while also referencing Jürgen Habermas and his concern that increasing media ownership by private enterprises would prioritize business interests leading to “the decline of the public sphere” (Ellcessor, 2015, p. 590). Additionally, “when ASL interpretation can be seen, it may be reinterpreted and recontextualized, rendered exotic and eradicated of its communicative content and political challenges as it is incorporated into hegemonic, ableist, racist and sexist cultural formations” (Ellcessor, 2015, p. 591). As the examples above indicate, there was much “recontextualization” and “reinterpretation” that happened when the images of Callis were broadcast widely. It is reasonable to expect Callis’ life outside of work would have been affected by this coverage, but her perspective is not included within this article.

One of the widely accepted public beliefs is that the way to make events accessible is just to provide interpreters (De Meulder & Hualand, 2021, p. 21) (whether the event happens in person or virtually), without giving an interpreter what they need (and ask for, for example

materials from which to prepare) to do the work they are hired to do. There is a belief among some people that just having an interpreter there, whether they are qualified for the job or not, is preferable to having no interpreter (Chovaz et al., 2022, p. 7). Reflecting on my own experience working as a professional interpreter, it is apparent that this lack of scrutiny for best fit to the job is becoming standard practice in some settings. In researching the perspectives of Deaf Canadians and their emotional wellbeing, Chovaz et al. (2022) identified one subtheme within their research as “frustration with communication equity being touted in policy and yet absent in practice” (p. 6). One of their participants recounted an experience they had in court relating to an issue with qualifications of the interpreter: being saddled with an interpreter who was not qualified for that job meant this Deaf person had to rely on someone incapable of providing access (Chovaz et al., 2022, p. 7). Interpreters have the power to decide what they do and do not interpret, and their decision to filter or gatekeep this information disempowers Deaf people (Chovaz et al., 2022, p. 7). The phenomenon of interpreters either not having capacity for or not being the correct fit for an assignment is, unfortunately, prevalent in the field of sign language interpreting⁴⁸.

Another known issue in the field of interpreting—and one that is central to the research set out in this thesis—is that of fake interpreters: those that represent themselves as professional interpreters but do not actually know sign language or how to interpret. Some apt terms to

⁴⁸ There are numerous reasons for this. Interpreters are in high demand but are a fixed supply. It can be very challenging to book interpreters at the last minute and professionally the recommendation is 2-3 weeks lead time or ideally longer in order to secure a qualified professional. The timing during the year can also affect availability (interpreters working in education may not be available during business hours from September to April/June). Some entities hiring interpreters will send out mass emails and then take the first person to respond rather than another interpreter who has previous experience in the setting but responds later that day. Many people would prefer to confirm someone immediately and then be done. There is also an attitude amongst some people that any interpreter is better than having no interpreter (even though this might lead to inaccuracies or messages becoming skewed in the interpretive process). Sometimes budgetary constraints also affect who is hired for a job, particularly if the expectation is that the service will be provided for free.

describe these fake interpreters are: con artists, bogus practitioners, imposters, and frauds. The *Oxford companion to crime and mystery writing* identifies a con artist as “a specific type of fictional character who, having raised the techniques of deception, ingratiation, and tomfoolery to the level of an art form, cultivates the confidence of others” (Herbert, 1999) for particular purposes. While this definition is rooted in fiction writing, the phenomenon of con artists is a very real occurrence. Nocera & Newton (2000) and Seggie (2011) reference cases in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, the Middle East, and South Africa where people have masqueraded as doctors. Novera & Newton (2000) write that “A “bogus doctor” is an individual who misrepresents him/herself as a registered medical practitioner by their demeanour, actions, dress, or surroundings, while not entitled to be on a register of medical practitioners” (p. 25). While this quote speaks specifically of examples within the medical profession, the concept of this type of fraudulent action can be applied to the case of fake interpreters who also set out to misrepresent themselves as qualified for the work they purport to do. This phenomenon of masquerading as an accredited professional is not restricted to contemporary times: Seggie (2011) references an editorial from 1920 that identified issues related to people pretending to be doctors in that time as well.

Delving further into the concept of forgery, Wreen (2002) addresses how stories about con artists are enjoyed by audiences (assuming, of course, that the fraudulent activity in question has not been committed against them⁴⁹), where “decent people cheer for the bad guy to get away with it” (Wreen, 2002, p. 143). While his writing here largely focuses on perception related to fraud in works of art, the concept of forgery is addressed as well, noting that while “[e]very

⁴⁹ In the case of the Mandela funeral, Deaf and interpreter communities were outraged, whereas many non-Deaf people looked at the fake interpreter as opportunity for humour (Ellcessor, 2015, p. 594). See also this 2013 sketch from *Saturday Night Live* that satirized then-US President Barack Obama standing next to the fake interpreter: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-v9oJOCrxQ>

object, or kind of object, can be faked, artifacts included, [sic] only artifacts can be forged” (Wreen, 2002, p. 153). These forgeries are “represented as a genuine [thing], with the intention to deceive” (Wreen, 2002, p. 152), which accurately describes what happened in the case of Thamsanqa Jantjie (the interpreter at Mandela’s funeral), who performed a series of repetitive arm movements “and aimless gesticulation. Whatever he was doing, it certainly wasn’t sign-language interpreting” (Downie, 2016, p. 56). Both forgery and faking something fall under the guise of lying, which “is, in general, the misrepresentation of a matter of fact, with the intention to deceive” (Wreen, 2002, p. 159). There is little doubt that Jantjie set out to deceive in representing himself as an interpreter qualified to work at this globally televised ceremony. South Africans watching the televised memorial service from their homes would have otherwise seen a professional South African Sign Language (SASL) interpreter (hired by television news networks) on screen—not Jantjie⁵⁰. There is a clear contrast between the work of the on-screen qualified interpreter (in front of the blue background) to the work produced by Jantjie. Statements afterwards stated that he “did not know SASL or any sign language at all” (WFD & WASLI, 2013, p. 1), that there was 0% accuracy of his work, and that his interpretation did not follow any grammatical structure at all (SABC News, 2013a).

Viral Videos: Impact & Circulation

In his book *Media: Why it Matters*, Nick Couldry (2019) writes that “media are infrastructures of connection, but media are also the meanings that circulate *through* those infrastructures of connection, meanings that present the world back to us” (p. 1). In the case of sign language interpreters, seeking to understand media and the way that media instigate connections is relevant for determining what captures the attention of viewers—while also taking

⁵⁰ For video footage of the professional interpreter contrasted with Jantjie see Palmer (2013) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJlttIL2PSs&t=47s> (0:28-1:11)

into account how audiences perceive the interpretation process and its effect on all parties involved. Today's media landscape includes numerous provocations vying for the attention of mass audiences (Couldry, 2019, p. 3). With that in mind, how does media coverage about interpreters make a substantial enough impression to be memorable?

Both Berger & Milkman (2012) and Guadagno et al. (2013) address the virality of certain media content and possible rationale for what triggers sharing it. Berger & Milkman (2012) write that “[s]haring online content is an integral part of modern life⁵¹” (p. 192), and that while this circulation is significant, there are fewer conclusions on the reasons “*why* certain pieces of online content are more viral than others [emphasis in original]” (p. 192). Drawn within their conclusions is the finding that “online content that evoked high-arousal emotions was more viral, regardless of whether those emotions were of a positive (i.e. awe) or negative (i.e. anger or anxiety) nature” (Berger & Milkman, 2012, p. 201). A study by Guadagno et al. (2013) likewise found that “participants viewing a video eliciting a positive emotion were significantly more likely to forward that video” (p. 2318), and further elaborated that as memes are easily shared online they tend to circulate rapidly.

The context around which content (including memes) is rapidly shared coincides with a cultural shift as some people turn to social media to consume their news. This has changed the way news is presented to and consumed by the general public⁵²: more opinion and specific slanting added into that distribution as mediated by social media algorithms (Couldry, 2019, p. 9). The flow of what Hall (1993) would describe as “sender/message/receiver” (p. 92) would then shift from what was originally encoded by the producer of the message to what is being

⁵¹ As much as content sharing is integral for those who have access to the Internet, as of 2023 there were over 2 billion people globally who did not have Internet access (cited in Reglitz, 2024, p. 2).

⁵² While I believe this to be true in developed countries with ubiquitous smartphone ownership and high-speed internet access, I recognize that in developing countries this is not necessarily the case.

augmented on by social media as Couldry suggests. Various producers could be added along the way from the original outlet that created the news item, it then being filtered through a social media producer, and ultimately consumed by the audience.

McLuhan ([1964] 1994) wrote that “the “content” of any medium is always another medium” (p. 8); elsewhere he states that people are more aware of the content within a medium rather than the medium itself, therefore it is more pertinent to look at what the content is rather than the effect of how it is conveyed (p. 18). If the medium is the message, then the body of the interpreter selected for any given job matters—since interpreters act as media to relay a message from one party to another. Objectively, any party could look at an interpreter’s work and see only the interpretation, but some parties will see both the interpreter *and* the interpretation⁵³—so matching interpreter to scenario is ideal (though challenging with limited resources) to fill a sizeable demand for services. At the same time, some audiences look at the interpretation and see only the interpreter—not the interpretation (as a product) nor the process of how an interpretation is rendered. In the case of Lydia Callis interpreting for then-Mayor Bloomberg in New York City in 2012, one article in the *New York Times* wrote that

Official news conferences in New York are often attended by sign-language interpreters. But they generally go unnoticed, blending in with the aides or elected officials that surround a mayor or a governor at such events. Ms. Callis’s form makes it all but impossible not to notice her. (Peters, 2012, p. A21)

This article also describes what Callis looks like, how the author views her body movements, in addition to how social media responded to her presence on screens at subsequent re-showings of the press conference (Peters, 2012). Another example that illustrates this point of seeing both the

⁵³ Think, for example, of whether a male interpreter would be the correct fit for a women’s empowerment event.

interpreter and the interpretation is the controversy that erupted publicly in the United States in early 2021 when a sign language interpreter was hired for press conferences at the White House after Democratic Party candidate Joe Biden won the vote and became President. What was meant to be a show of access became a public relations issue when it came to light that the first interpreter hired for this work, Heather Mewshaw, operated a group that supplied interpretations for far-right conservative programming and publications, and images surfaced of her working in pro-Trump and Make America Great Again (MAGA) clothing (Abrams, 2021). While by all accounts Mewshaw has the correct credentials to qualify her for this work, the impression left on Deaf communities seemed to be a mismatch between the person conveying the message and the message itself (Abrams, 2021).

Hall (1993) posits that how something is decoded will usually depend on how it is encoded within an already understood set of rules, as he explains the need to have “*some degree of reciprocity between encoding and decoding moments, otherwise we could not speak of an effective communicative exchange at all [emphasis in original]*” (p. 98). How this plays into videos of fake interpreters is that there must be some kind of understanding that is common to all parties—either that this object of discussion is egregious or that it is hilarious or that it is shocking or that it disadvantages the Deaf community. Ultimately, it is important to remember that “[m]edia present us with a world for our reactions, involvement, and disgust, but this is always a *re presentation*, just *one way* that media have chosen to present us what they have heard, read, or seen [emphasis in original]” (Couldry, 2019, p. 1).

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, there has long been a fascination with the idea of people faking something. Movies like *Ocean’s Eleven* (2001), *Heartbreakers* (2001), *Catch Me if You Can* (2002), and television series like *To Tell the Truth* (1956-1968; 2016-2022) venerate

those actors able to take on the job of faking something—a profession, a performance, or an act in the interest of crime. Hall’s theory on encoding and decoding relates closely to the challenges that viral videos of fake interpreters present, particularly when they are shared by news outlets and in social media posts. Those videos have circulated within this culture that has celebrated fakery. At the same time, television shows like *The Chelsea Handler Show*, *Tacoma FD*, and *Saturday Night Live* have capitalized on the spread of viral videos of interpreters to create objects meant to elicit laughter and amusement from largely mainstream audiences⁵⁴ (Ellicessor, 2015; Robinson, 2022). Whereas producers of media and news content related to the amusing or satirical nature of fake interpreters may intend to capitalize on an intended humorous zeitgeist, Deaf communities and interpreters largely decode *not* amusement but issues related to access at the presentation of interpreting, sign language and Deaf culture from a demeaning viewpoint. In considering the demographics that form a particular audience of a news story, sign language interpreters and the Deaf community bring a distinct set of equipment to the decoding process compared to hegemonic ideas in mainstream society. The way that this phenomenon of fakery tends to be celebrated does little to address underlying issues of how to stop it from happening in the first place.

Given the unique nature of the jobs of interpreters, the inclusion of the voice of the interpreter is necessary and ought to be included in the research. There are some studies that have interviewed interpreters as part of their methodology and where the voice of the interpreter appears in the literature. Some of those articles address education or health contexts (Ott et al.,

⁵⁴ When Lydia Callis’ interpretation from press conferences during Hurricane Sandy was satirized in a sketch on *Saturday Night Live*, there was some effort made to include certain ASL signs into the performance—these were then interspersed with gestures meant to elicit laughter from the audience (Saturday Night Live, 2013). On the interpreter skit on *The Chelsea Handler Show*, however, it was sign language itself that was being impersonated—and this caused an uproar within the Deaf community (DeafNation, 2012).

2020; Perez Toledo et al., 2020; Roman et al., 2023), while Chang and Russell (2022) address video relay interpreter settings (where interpreters interpret phone calls between Deaf and hearing people). Hong & Choi (2020) address interpreter identity when looking at how male interpreters in Korea assert themselves in the female-dominated profession of interpreting, applying narrative inquiry to fully encapsulate the experiences that those men have in the field. As other articles have mentioned, interpreters are predominantly female (Du, 2020; Hong & Choi, 2020, p. 675), and other studies have referenced the propensity for media outlets to then highlight the beauty or feminized characteristics of those female interpreters (Cho, 2017; Du & Wang, 2021).

Representation of Interpreters in Newspapers

In Diriker's (2022) study of interpreters represented in newspapers in Turkey, she states that there is a dearth of research on media representations of interpreters (p. 197). Her study took both a quantitative and a qualitative approach: quantitatively looking at what caused media to represent interpreters within their discourse, and then also what is referred to as visibility markers, meaning "interpreters' names, pictures, embedded videos, and voice (i.e. direct and indirect quotations of interpreters)" (Diriker, 2022, p. 198). Qualitatively, she explored how the media talks about interpreters and how interpreters talk about interpreting, all within three distinct categories: whether the way that the media presents them is in a positive, neutral or negative light (Diriker, 2022, pp. 198-199). Her findings indicated a staunchly positive slant to the coverage of sign language interpreters (different from her findings on spoken language interpreters, which I address below), save for two news items that portrayed their stories in a negative light: "a healthcare setting and a news report on the 'fake' interpreter at Nelson Mandela's funeral" (Diriker, 2022, p. 201). Diriker (2022) is not the only researcher who has

addressed the issue of the fake interpreter who stood on stage at Nelson Mandela’s funeral; this topic is widely addressed in the literature (Diriker, 2022; Snoddon & Wilkinson, 2023; Stone & Russell, 2022; Turner et al., 2022; Wallmach & Okagbue, 2022; Chovanec et al., 2019; Downie, 2016; Saunders, 2016; Ellcessor, 2015; Murray, 2015; Wallmach, 2014).

Another pertinent point to be derived from Diriker (2022)’s study is the significance accorded to “the language modality (signed versus spoken language interpreters) on the ensuing representation of interpreters. In general, the media coverage of sign language interpreters was remarkably positive (80.8%) across almost all settings” (p. 208), while the same degree of positive coverage was not accorded to spoken language interpreters, as the coverage varied widely “depending on the setting in which the interpreters worked” (p. 208). Thus there is clearly a difference in the way that the general public perceives sign language interpreting in comparison to spoken language interpreting as reflected in this framing.

When I originally started researching fake interpreters in the media, with a focus on the fake interpreter from Nelson Mandela’s funeral, I began with a pilot study looking at two Canadian newspapers and their coverage in the month after the memorial service. My findings indicated that both of those newspapers, *The Toronto Star* and *The Globe and Mail* had a tendency to sensationalize the coverage of this event and that there was a clear negative gaze on the subject (Kraft, 2023, p. 6), which aligns with the findings of Diriker (2022) as noted above. Much of the research that addresses the formation of social media as a site for news consumption coincides with the timeline of my growth as an interpreter and the development of my career. That this level of attention impacts our ability to do the work our job requires is definitive. People see and share videos that they find humorous or that elicit an emotion that they want to share with others, and sometimes those videos happen to be of sign language interpreters.

Deaf Culture, Fluency & Access

K. Crom Saunders (2016), a nationally certified Deaf interpreter and Associate Professor, writes that information about Deaf culture by Deaf people, abundant as it is, is often available in ASL only, which not many people unconnected to the Deaf community have fluency in or access to (p. 2). Ellcessor (2015), who is not fluent in ASL, even notes that this is a limitation to her researching the accuracy of interpreters and interpretations she studies (p. 588). While certain researchers do have some familiarity and awareness of and about the Deaf community, “this knowledge reaches a limit since none of these authors (and many others in the field of disability studies) are able to converse in, or access information sourced in sign language directly without relying upon interpreters” (Saunders, 2016, p. 2). For this thesis, which capitalizes on sources in both English and American Sign Language (ASL), my proficiency in the latter was an asset as it allowed me access to a number of sources without having to hire another interpreter to translate for me, which would otherwise have been required⁵⁵.

Another issue identified by Saunders (2016) is the inadequate knowledge amongst the general public that would be needed to discern whether a person communicating in sign language is coherent or not. He writes of

the lack of the mainstream public’s ability to discern the difference between fluent ASL and poorly signed, even nonsensical, ASL. Anyone could post a video purporting to be signing something fluently, and any viewer who was not familiar with ASL would not know the difference. (p. 4)

This inability to determine whether a video contains accurate sign language or not suggests that people sharing videos on social media may inadvertently add to the virality of videos in sign

⁵⁵ Note that this advantage of accessing sources presented in a signed language stops for me at ASL. I am not fluent or proficient in any other signed language.

language that are incomprehensible. When people within the Deaf community have expressed resentment publicly about these videos, they have been met, at times, with derision. People online judge based on the strength of one's written communication; since Deaf people are often more adept in sign language than written language, there's a higher propensity for their concerns to be dismissed because their language use is looked upon with less cultural capital (Saunders, 2016, p. 3).

Saunders (2016) indicates that the Deaf community aims to put out good public relations (PR) (of a sort) when commenting on those aforementioned problematic videos. In an ideal world, this should also extend to the way that interpreters are portrayed in media and how those in the interpreting or Deaf communities respond to them. Downie (2020) notes that "Interpreting PR hasn't been great, because, until recently, it didn't need to be" (p. 59). Given the proliferation of representations of sign language, Deaf people, and interpreters into media spheres, I would argue that there is a greater imperative to showcase and present interpreting in a way that allows audiences to understand what they are seeing. This concept of "poorly signed, even nonsensical, ASL" that Saunders (2016) refers to extends not only from videos where the signer is intending to sign (however incorrectly) but to the corpus of videos that have been widely referenced within the interpreting community as the phenomenon of fake interpreters. Adding to that, Elcessor (2015) writes that "the spectacularization of ASL interpreting by hearing audiences exoticizes and marginalizes it even as it is briefly made part of the public discourse" (p. 587). This firmly roots ASL interpretation in the category of something that is othered.

Delving further into the way that representations of access have become spectacularized for consumption through online platforms is Deaf and disability studies scholar Robinson (2022)'s article that addresses the "reduction of signed language interpreters to entertainment

material” (p. 329). His article discusses several interpreters who have achieved this particular kind of fame in recent years: Amber Galloway Gallego (who gained popularity for interpreting rap music), Kevin Gallagher (an interpreter who worked with Seattle Gay Men’s Chorus and had numerous complaints levelled against him that questioned his competence), Lydia Callis (whom is addressed above), Jonathan Lamberton (a Deaf interpreter who went viral during Ebola virus press conferences for signing something that looked like “zombie”), Jesse Conrad (who went viral while interpreting for COVID press briefings and whose qualifications were called into question), and Nigel Howard (who garnered attention for interpreting COVID pandemic briefings in British Columbia, and signs he used to convey social distancing were turned into jokes of sexual innuendo) (Robinson, 2022, pp. 335-337). He separates out the first two, Gallego and Gallagher, as the ones who steal the spotlight when really it is Deaf people who should be the ones centred—the latter four named interpreters have become memefied while just doing their job⁵⁶ (Robinson, 2022, p. 330). Robinson (2022) argues that the way that these interpreters have become pure entertainment imagery no matter the setting “negatively impacts the willingness of public figures to “share” the stage with interpreters, creates hostile workspaces for signed language interpreters, and reinforces notions of signed languages as lesser than spoken languages” (p. 331), which ties into the cultural capital of languages mentioned in the discussion of Saunders (2016) above.

Robinson (2022) also addresses a fake interpreter as depicted on *Tacoma FD* in a clip clearly made for a hearing audience, noting the lack of accessible captioning and the way that

⁵⁶ Meaning that, in this case, these four interpreters were qualified professionals producing accurate interpretations, and just happened to become memes—rather than for being unprofessional or underqualified, or being desiring of media attention, etc.

sexualized signs and topics are brought up to clearly make a spectacle of the interpreter (p. 333).

He takes a dive into addressing the issue of fake interpreters, writing:

In some cases, people fraudulently claiming to be interpreters in order to claim public attention have deprived deaf people the opportunity to participate in communal activities like mourning a beloved political figure or remaining informed of important political news. Known as fake interpreters, they have emerged on media newscasts in South Africa, Columbia, Peru, and the United States. (p. 339)

As I noted earlier in this chapter, there is coverage in the literature of the fake interpreter who appeared next to world dignitaries at Nelson Mandela's funeral, as well as satires of the work of Lydia Callis during Hurricane Sandy. Largely, though, the coverage of fake interpreters in the literature is sparse.

Chapter 3: Methodology

I interviewed 11 Canadian sign language interpreters (SLI) recruited by convenience sampling and snowballing. Exclusion criteria for participation required that interpreters had been working since at least 2012 and had worked consistently since then (meaning that they had not left the field of interpreting for lengths of time to pursue other careers). This ensured that each interview subject was working in the field for at least a year prior to the Mandela funeral event in 2013, which allowed me to capture information on how this event (and subsequent ones) affected their work on an ongoing basis (with an established baseline of minimum 1.5 years of work prior to that viral video in 2013). Qualified professional interpreters are aware of the intricacies of the services they provide and are therefore one of the best sources to reflect on how coverage of these fake, incompetent, and underqualified interpreters shape how people view interpretation and access. Interviews were conducted on Zoom and were video recorded, and participants were asked to fill out a demographic survey to capture information that included years of experience, region where they are located, what broad settings (community, medical, education, media, etc.) they work in, whether they have Deaf people in their family, and if they are open to being recorded while they are interpreting.

On August 8, 2025, an email was sent out to the distribution list of the Canadian Association of Sign Language Interpreters (CASLI). Amidst the initial responses, two colleagues suggested others in their region that they felt would be a good fit for the research. I reached out to those interpreters directly; two of the three I contacted this way agreed to be interviewed. Two other colleagues heard me talking about the research and expressed interest directly to me to participate. Interviews began on August 11 and were completed on October 21, 2025.

Each interview was recorded on Zoom and then transcribed manually. Of the 11 interviews, only the final two utilized auto-captions within Zoom, and I used these to guide my transcription. I watched all the videos and transcribed each of them by hand, including any pieces of the answer that were signed in American Sign Language (ASL). Without exception, every single interview participant incorporated ASL signs or discourse markers into their answers.

Once the transcripts were compiled and reviewed to ensure capture of information fully, I read through and watched them again at least three times, considering broad themes that began to present themselves within the texts. The categories that arose from informal coding were:

- 1) Professional reputational concerns and what qualifications interpreters should have in order to work particular events or categories of events
- 2) Quality assurance protocols (and what interpreters feel should be in place)
- 3) Misunderstandings by non-community members, meaning people who are unfamiliar with ASL, the Deaf community, and the interpreting process
- 4) Impact on the Deaf community, and the analysis of interpretations that cause harm
- 5) The education piece from four standpoints: (1) interpreter to interpreter; (2) Deaf people educating hearing people; (3) hearing people (usually interpreters) educating other hearing people; (4) hearing people educating Deaf people (usually about quality assurance)
- 6) The resonance and legacy of the fake, incompetent, and underqualified interpreters
- 7) Revisitation of trauma related to the videos or instances of fake, incompetent, and underqualified interpreters causing harm

While coding the interviews for broad themes, I also made note of unique pieces from each interview that I wanted to investigate more deeply. The decision to select these passages was based on (1) common perspectives across the interviews (for example, discussions around specific security protocols, or thoughts on hearing people who sign songs and music, or using an analogy related to how people look at a car or train crash), (2) unique perspectives (e.g. introspective thoughts on retirement, innovative ways to deal with the issue of fake interpreters, etc.), or (3) other passages that I thought were interesting for reasons such as how a problem was approached, use of sarcasm or coping mechanisms, using aspects of ASL discourse markers, using ASL to describe the narrative, or particularly thought-provoking answers that resonated based on my own knowledge of and experience in the interpreting field.

Interpreters are bimodal bilinguals and work between a signed language and a spoken language, or in some cases multiple signed or spoken languages. American Sign Language (ASL) operates within a specific cultural context, utilizes different norms than spoken English, and relies on—among other things—eye gaze to convey meaning, as well as paying attention to movements of the body and facial expressions. Given distinct cultural norms within Deaf culture and amongst interpreters, the videotaping of interviews and ability to sit (more or less) face-to-face was necessary in order to capture as much linguistic and behavioural information as possible to provide a breadth of context for understanding texts.

The method selected to analyze the texts was narrative analysis. This is a method of inquiry that is particularly apt for exploring how history, context and nuance work when people speak about their past experiences. Narrative analysis has been used in the literature to address the experience and identity of interpreters reflecting on their lives and their work (Halley, 2018; Subak, 2015). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) write that “narrative [inquiry/analysis] is the best

way of representing and understanding experience” (p. 18). Narrative analysis relies on understanding the context in order to understand the events within, since “context is ever present. It includes such notions as temporal context, spatial context, and context of other people. Context is necessary for making sense of any person, event, or thing” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50). The understood context for this interview relied on the assumption that bimodal bilinguals may choose to express themselves in English or ASL or a combination of both. Choosing narrative analysis to understand the content and context of the interview texts thus allowed for co-produced meaning, exploration of life history, a thorough consideration of nuance, and consideration of cultural cues that may be non-normative in non-Deaf (hearing) cultures. Narrative analysis allows for these factors to be considered in analyzing the data in a way that cannot be done by a textual discourse analysis or by statistical or quantitative measures.

I analyzed each of the selected quotes grouped into the following categories: common perspectives across interviews; unique perspectives; and passages that resonated strongly with me. I cross-referenced the original text with the interview transcripts to find each quotation in the video. My analysis was conducted using the original source material rather than the transcript alone, which enabled me to consider emotions, where a person was looking, intonation, inflection, body position, and language use. I then referred back to the original thematic colour-coding and gathered each of the quotes under respective categories, looking for through-lines and common elements amongst the data pieces.

Each participant was assigned a pseudonym at random from 11 late family members of mine. I did not align gender between actual participants and pseudonyms; pronouns for each follow the pseudonyms, not the original participants’ names.

The transcripts were left fully intact until analysis was complete. Following this, some transcripts were edited for clarity, removing repeated words, fillers (“um”, “uh”, “hmm”), and any notation of ASL signs and discourse markers. Specific identifying information about names of cities, colleagues or family members were either removed or assigned pseudonyms.

The interpreting profession is fairly small (fewer than 2,000 interpreters nationally in Canada). While I believe it is important to have basic demographic information to frame the research, being too specific could easily identify participants. I did not ask in the survey research about ethnic background or racial identity, age, or gender. In conversations I had with interpreters of colour (after receiving ethics approval), a concern was raised that non-white interpreters would experience this phenomenon of fake interpreters differently; by not asking, I was excluding information that would be relevant and valuable to the research. One suggestion made was to ask participants at the end of the interview if there was anything else they wanted to add, which I did.

Chapter 4: Participant Demographics

The Office of Research Ethics (ORE) at York University approved all procedures. There were 11 participants interviewed for this thesis research. Years of interpreting experience ranged from 13 to over 35 years. Two participants reside in the prairie provinces (Alberta, Saskatchewan or Manitoba) and nine reside in central Canada (Ontario or Quebec). Two participants are full-time staff interpreters, seven are full-time freelance, and two do a combination of staff and freelance work. Seven participants are open to being recorded during their interpreting work, three are open to being recorded if they are made aware in advance, and one participant is not open to having their work recorded. One participant is a CODA (Child of Deaf Adults), two participants identify as heritage signers (a term usually used to identify those who grew up signing), and one participant has Deaf family members but is not a CODA. This demographic data can be viewed in Table 1 below.

Participants were asked what interpreting environments they typically work in: community (e.g. community work and social events, social services, workshops, etc.) conference, corporate, media/news/political, Deaf-Blind, medical, mental health, education: K-12 (primary, elementary, secondary school), university/college, religious settings, theatre/performance, and legal. The three environments most common amongst the participants were community settings (11/11), medical (10/11), and conference, corporate, and mental health (9/11). The least common environments worked in were media/news/political (3/11), religious (3/11), Deaf-Blind (2/11) and Education: K-12 (2/11). Complete information about work environments can be seen below in Table 2.

Table 1: Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Years of Experience	Canadian Region	Primary work	Open to being recorded during work	Self-Identification
Ruth	20-25	Central (Ontario & Quebec)	Freelance	Yes	n/a
Suddy	13-19	Central (Ontario & Quebec)	Freelance	Yes	n/a
Gertie	20-25	Central (Ontario & Quebec)	Staff + Freelance	Yes	n/a
Mickey	13-19	Central (Ontario & Quebec)	Staff	Yes	n/a
Dene	31-35	Prairie Provinces (Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba)	Freelance	Yes, if informed in advance, and if there is a purpose for recording.	CODA (Child of Deaf Adults) & Heritage Signer
Lawrence	13-19	Central (Ontario & Quebec)	Freelance	Yes	NERDA (Not Even Related to Deaf Adults)
Seymour	35+	Central (Ontario & Quebec)	Staff + Freelance	Yes, if informed in advance	Heritage Signer
Eugene	35+	Prairie Provinces (Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba)	Freelance	No	Hearing; no Deaf family members
Sylvia	35+	Central (Ontario & Quebec)	Staff	Yes	NERDA (Not Even Related to Deaf Adults)
Irv	31-35	Central (Ontario & Quebec)	Freelance	Yes	Relative of Deaf adults
Marci	35+	Central (Ontario & Quebec)	Freelance	Yes, if informed in advance	n/a

Table 2: Participant Demographic Information: Environments Worked In

	Ruth	Suddy	Gertie	Mickey	Dene	Lawrence	Seymour	Eugene	Sylvia	Irv	Marci
Community	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Conference	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes
Corporate	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes
Media/News/Political			Yes					Yes			Yes
Deaf-Blind				Yes		Yes					
Medical	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mental Health		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Education: K-12				Yes			Yes				
University/College	Yes		Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes			Yes	Yes
Religious		Yes					Yes			Yes	
Theatre/Performance			Yes			Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes
Legal		Yes			Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes		

The demographic survey for this research was deliberately designed to be nondescript, and did not ask about age, ethnicity, specific accreditations or membership in specific

professional organizations. While this approach protects the participants, it has the potential to diminish visibility and experience of interpreters of colour, as there is no assurance that diversity of background, experience and ethnicity was not homogenous in the sample. Originally planned to protect anonymity as much as possible, on later reflection it would have been possible to ask these questions and provide said demographic information in a way that preserved the anonymity of all participants.

The interpreting field is a small one and there is familiarity amongst many interpreters nationally. That familiarity has increased further since 2020, largely due to the COVID pandemic, as many jobs switched to provide services virtually, which often meant that interpreters from different provinces would work together more often—a trend that was rare when most jobs were exclusively done face-to-face. The growth of national video relay services (VRS), a service that provides interpreters for telephone conversations between Deaf and hearing callers, has had a similar effect, when interpreters work as part of large organizations. This interlinkage of interpreters has unified the community, but I believe it also makes it easier to identify interpreters based on unique features. For example, the number of certified interpreters of colour is relatively small; there remains a greater number of female-identified interpreters than those of other gender identities, etc. Therefore, were a survey of this population to identify a particular grouping of characteristics (e.g. Black male with 25+ years of experience or Indigenous interpreter in Maritime Provinces) that person might have been easily identifiable. The design of the survey sought to remove any chance of this happening, yet I believe more information could have been included and then stated safely.

Chapter 5: Interview Analysis

We begin this chapter with the video of the fake interpreter from Nelson Mandela’s funeral, the videos of fake, incompetent, and underqualified interpreters that have circulated on social media, and their impact on the professional practice of sign language interpreters. First, we explore the iterative nature of these videos. While the general public may assume this phenomenon is a singular occurrence, many interviewees addressed how this issue of fake or incompetent interpreters is not a singular occurrence: it is part of a larger pattern. Several other themes arose from analysis of the data: educating others, misunderstandings, impact on the Deaf community, emotional exploration, quality assurance protocols and the spectacle of these failures. Interpreters’ own reflections on these circulating and viral videos—and other examples they have encountered—are explored, before delving into three tangential topics: how the context of fake news impacts the perception of fake interpreters, artificial intelligence (AI) interpreters⁵⁷, and one interpreter’s perspective on when to leave the field (and awareness of her own skills).

The Education Piece addresses how interpreters educate others about their work to clients, colleagues, and peers. This section closes with a discussion around the potential for retraining fake interpreters to becoming qualified professional interpreters.

The subsequent theme, misunderstandings by non-community members, addresses common misunderstandings about the work of interpreters, including trust in professionals, knowledge of codes of ethics, and how viral videos of fake interpreters affect understanding of

⁵⁷ AI or artificial intelligence refers to “software used to perform tasks or produce output previously thought to require human intelligence, [especially] by using machine learning to extrapolate from large collections of data” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023, “artificial intelligence, noun”). In the case of AI interpreters, this refers to non-human interpreters who translate language based on a computer data set input, rather than those that can process truly artificial thought and reasoning.

the profession. This section also includes a discussion of compliments around the beauty of sign language, and a section on people who post videos of themselves signing the lyrics of music.

The next theme, impact on the Deaf community, addresses relationships between interpreters and the Deaf community, specific harms that can come to the Deaf community when someone who is not a professional interpreter is hired, as well as the perception around certain videos of interpreters. This section closes with a linguistic analysis of the 2017 Tampa interpreter example.

The following theme, emotional exploration and revisitation of trauma, explores two perspectives on the videos—the amusement factor, followed by the perceptions of harm and intrapersonal sentiments related to seeing fake, incompetent, and underqualified interpreters. This topic includes a discussion of the discomfort one interpreter felt at being filmed without consent while interpreting, and one participant’s thoughts on how the actions of fake interpreters impact the broader interpreting community. A short discussion follows on how humour and amusement have arisen with respect to these videos.

Discussions of quality assurance protocols address the hiring practices of interpreters, security protocols, and how some professional interpreters promote and embody specific practices. Finally, a theme I encapsulate as enraptured by failure, looks specifically at how interviewees compared fake interpreters to train wrecks, car crashes, and other emergent situations, etc.

It should be noted here that even though the questions asked in these interviews specifically targeted experiences related to fake and incompetent interpreters, many of the conversations drifted outside of that group to include trained interpreters (or possibly untrained

interpreters) who accept work that is beyond their skill sets (I have referred to these through the thesis as those who are underqualified). These groups are referenced below throughout.

Professionalism

Here We Go Again

One concept that was brought up repeatedly was the iterative nature of these circulating and viral videos and the Deaf and Interpreting communities' experiences around them. Suddy, Gertie, Marci, Irv, and Lawrence each commented on how this experience has come up multiple times over the course of their careers and lives.

Suddy reflected on his feelings related to reading comments on social media about how terrible what had happened at the Mandela funeral was, remembering people being outraged and shocked at what had happened. And yet this stands in opposition to his lived experience, because

this happens all the time. This happens every day that somebody is brought in to help the Deaf person and facilitate communication, but it's not always videotaped. It's not always documented. And nobody is affected, except the Deaf person.

Gertie felt annoyed at the repeated events: that it is not just a single occurrence, but an iterative one, which left her questioning what flaws in the system allowed for this to happen so frequently. Specifically addressing Mandela's funeral, she felt that there should have been "*some forethought in bringing in an interpreter to ensuring you're getting somebody who is an appropriate fit for whatever your event assignment/it is,*" rather than "*just grabbing whoever is available and throwing them up on a stage.*"

Marci, like Gertie, references appearances of these videos as not being a singular event but part of a series of other events that have become part of a system that continues to oppress and marginalize Deaf people. When she first heard of the incident at Mandela's funeral, Marci

messed one of her close interpreter friends, and both expressed the aggravation of this type of situation happening again—perhaps not the same exact occurrence of a sign language interpreter signing gibberish to millions of people globally, but still acting in a way that compounds the negative effects on the Deaf community given the myriad of other ways that this oppression occurs. She questions “*why are there not stricter [...] screenings, and then repercussions, so that people don’t think that they can keep doing this?*”

Marci mentions that a similar situation arose related to weather disasters in Florida, and she remembered seeing people meant to be interpreting on screen “*barely sign anything*”. She reflects that seeing the profoundly unprofessional behaviour exhibited by these examples of fake, incompetent, or underqualified interpreters energizes her in her own work. The videos contribute to her determination to provide a top-quality interpretation that includes the maximum amount of information: “*I want to make sure I’m doing, like, a really, really, really good job.*”

Irv, as well, feels a strong inclination to provide top quality work in the face of substandard interpreting examples that have circulated online. For example, when he is booked for “*a public event, like a festival or something like that, I make sure to be on my A-game. I make sure to show what a professional interpreter can do, how clear it can be, how fun it can be.*” At the same time, he recognizes that perfection is an unattainable standard:

I try very hard not to make mistakes in public that are... blatant as opposed to the human error we make [in] interpretations, [where] we have to clarify, we have to fix stuff, that’s—that’s a normal part of the job. Um but I’m not blatantly ignoring feedback from the consumer or my teamer [to fix these errors] or anything like that.

Marci’s perpetual goal is to empower the Deaf people she works with to honestly give feedback about the level and quality of access they are receiving—including if they feel her own

work is not up to scratch. When reflecting on her work with Deaf people, she feels strongly about forging connections with them, stating

in solidarity, I'm with you, this shit can't keep happening. You tell me when you need me to do something different [...] [and] that betters, it strengthens, I think, my relationships both with the people that I provide services with and the people that I serve.

Lawrence felt that the videos were cringe-worthy. Whereas he used to feel a personal affront when these videos came out, along with the fear that people would equate his work and that of a fake interpreter, this is no longer the case. Becoming more confident in his work as a professional interpreter over the course of his career has to a great degree abated those worries. He pondered what would happen if a similar video of a fake interpreter were to come out today, and how he might react, saying:

if a similar video came out now, I think I would feel less cringing and less embarrassment, more... more disappointment that this keeps happening and that service continues to be subpar. But it's—I don't know that I would take it personally anymore.

Participants Addressing Their Thoughts on Fake, Incompetent, and Underqualified Interpreters

There is much confusion about the examples of fake, incompetent, or underqualified interpretation provision amongst those interviewed for this thesis.

Mickey separates out here his thoughts about the two most notorious fake interpreters—that of the Mandela funeral and the woman at the press conference announcing the arrest of a serial killer in Florida—from the man with a Deaf sibling who interpreted for hurricane warnings. In the case of the first two, he wonders whether either of them had a connection to the Deaf community:

I heard the stories of the gentleman from South Africa who was saying he was an interpreter and all this, but...my opinion hasn't changed on them. They should not have accepted those assignments. They are fake interpreters. Their reason for doing it—who knows? Money, spotlight, God's work—whatever they might have felt their need to do. It hasn't changed. It still was inappropriate and had real consequences.

Both Dene and Sylvia have memories of the videos of fake interpreters that circulated in the media, but the videos do not come up regularly in their work or conversations these days.

Dene recalls:

to me this isn't present in my daily life. It's not something that I pay attention to in my daily life. I know that it's out there. Fake interpreters hurt the Deaf community—no ifs, ands, or buts about it.

Sylvia had similar sentiments, and reflected on what impact the circulating videos of fake interpreters may have had:

Either I am very much in the dark these days, or the effect of videos like that has been positive in that I have not seen anything like that recently. I don't have hearing people asking me questions about it. I'd like to think that it's a thing of the past, because we've already had at least—at the very least—three hardcore examples of what happens when you bring in a fake.

Sylvia continued:

I know a lot of interpreters feel like they're suffering from imposter syndrome, especially when they're put in things that are close to, not necessarily over their heads, but when stuff gets really challenging, I know. Because after 42 years I still feel that sometimes too. Like what am I doing here? Do I even know this language? So it doesn't—it might

highlight things in my own view of my work and other people's work, and I guess to some degree today it still does, because I'm still very much on guard.

When asked what she meant by “on guard”, she reflected on the pressure she puts on herself to ensure she provides the best services possible, and concerns about her reputation that are omnipresent.

I don't wanna ever be perceived like I don't know what I'm doing. I have been in interpreting situations where I am struggling and I am floundering and I feel like I am “that guy”. I know I'm not. But in that moment I feel very much like... like if I could call in a lifeline I would do it.

Seymour remembers well the feelings he had when he first set eyes on the fake interpreter at Nelson Mandela's funeral. His first concern was that this event and the associated media attention would “*make it look so bad for all of us, all interpreters.*” He then questioned the psychological mindset of the fake interpreter himself, wondering what could have been going through his mind:

I'm thinking what's this guy thinking? What's going through his mind? And so probably to extrapolate a bit, what goes through the mind of a fake interpreter? Does he know that he's not good, but just wants the limelight? Does he think he's good, but doesn't realize that he's not? Or did the real interpreter not show up and somebody just put him up there to make him look like it was being accessible? So I was trying to wonder how did he get there? What's going through his mind? You know, is he trying to pull one off or did they just grab whoever was nearby and say ‘stand there and move your hands, make it look like it's accessible’? So I wanted to know more about how that came to be.

Looking at the issue of fake interpreters from a gatekeeping perspective, Lawrence believes that fake interpreters happen because credentials are not being checked: *“if we exist in a world where fake interpreters aren’t happening, that’s probably because someone has asked for credentials before they put them on TV.”*

He now emphasizes his own credentials and professional association memberships to clients by adding them to his email signature. In the current environment he feels this is necessary because interpreters are not as widely-understood as other professionals (for example, those credentialed in a medical or legal field).

Seymour too felt that circulating and viral videos caused people to look down at the interpreting profession and the Deaf community. Referencing experiences he has had over the duration of his tenure in the field, he says:

it detracts or it regresses the progress that the field has done over I’ll say in my case the last 45 years of where we were digging the trenches with our bare hands to now having some kind of understanding as to what we do and equivalence with spoken language interpreters.

He explains that rather than seeing interpreters as professionals, there is still an assumption that the service is voluntary and provided by family members: *“because there’s still the thought out there ‘oh are you their father/brother/uncle/mother?’ Whatever. ‘Oh and are you doing this out of the goodness of your heart?’”*

Irv mentioned similar experiences to Seymour, saying:

I get a lot of ‘thanks for volunteering’. I work a lot in the hospital field. And, you know, ‘thanks for—is this your grandfather?’ [to which he would answer] ‘No, no, this is not.

I've never met this man before. I am a professional interpreter brought in from an agency. You know, the hospital pays me to be here to do this service, just like they pay you'.

This experience of having been assumed to be family rather than a paid professional was echoed by others. Like Seymour and Irv, Lawrence talked about the perception that sign language interpreters are not viewed as professions but instead as helpers, which patronizes the Deaf person(s) involved. Here, his reference to “consumer” means the Deaf person:

like when you're thought of as being the consumer's son or the consumer's caretaker or [that the interpreter is] like related in some way to the consumer, rather than a professional and not related to the client, as most professionals are assumed to be.

Seymour witnesses a lack of trust between people who work with interpreters and interpreters themselves. For those unfamiliar with the interpreting process, interpreters may already be seen as someone merely waving their hands around. When people then find out that certain interpreters are fake, it validates erroneous assumptions, adds to mistrust of interpreters, compounding concerns regarding confidentiality, professionalism and appropriate experience for the work they are purporting to do. There's a danger, he says, about painting all interpreters and “interpreters” (fake, incompetent, and underqualified) with the same brush, yet he still sees it happening.

Eugene believes that the fake interpreter at Mandela's funeral has sparked conversation about future funerals of dignitaries and what access there should look like:

Bill Clinton's still alive but at some point he will pass, and somebody will have the opportunity to do his funeral. Obama's funeral. And so those are very public-facing events that have international impact, and interpreters will be present. Should they be hearing? Should they be Deaf? Should that even be a question? Should it be competence-

based? So I think that those are important conversations that if you think about where they started, they probably started with the fake interpreter.

As to the suitability of interpreter to event, he questioned: “*how do we decide when it should be public-facing with a Deaf interpreter... versus a hearing interpreter?*”

This question speaks to a more recently accepted standard to put Deaf people in front of media cameras and hearing interpreters behind them, ensuring that sign language from first-language users is depicted and shown on screen, as this is likely to be the best fit for the broadest segment of the Deaf community. To this effect, Eugene noted that some of his colleagues who typically work high profile events with substantial media attention have not wholeheartedly embraced this approach, noting the “*resistance among some of my colleagues who are hearing interpreters to give up that limelight of those big jobs.*”

In terms of assessing suitability of colleagues to assignments, both Ruth and Marci discussed how they deal with situations when colleagues aren’t skilled enough to work a job they have accepted. Ruth considers a few scenarios: perhaps the interpreter is not a good fit for the content of the message or perhaps something else is going on that is affecting their work. If it’s the first time she’s working with this person, she approaches the situation differently than if they work together regularly. In the latter case, she would either approach the colleague first to address it, or she might broach a discussion directly with the agency (if the work is contracted through an interpreting agency). This is an issue that comes up regularly within interpreting circles, and the whole community is dumbfounded in terms of how to correctly deal with it.

everyone’s kind of at a standstill of what to do about it. Because do we go back to agencies and say this particular person was not a good fit for [this job] ’cause then what do we say? Is it the content? Is it the— but again are they having a bad day? Have I only

worked with them this one time? Do I really want to go back to an agency and be like 'this did not work' but I don't know why, deal with it. Or am I working with them often and being like you know what they're just not a good fit for recorded stuff, because it's scripted and they can't keep up.

Whereas Ruth feels at a bit of a standstill in terms of deliberately making the decision to address this with her colleagues, Marci feels that directly addressing the issue with her colleagues before an assignment takes place is the best approach. When she is booked for work she will *"Ask the questions that we ask as professionals. Who's the other interpreter? If I don't think that person's qualified, I will reach out to them one-on-one and try to be respectful in that way, but call it out."*

Both Ruth and Marci do conference and corporate work, but Marci does media/news/political and theatrical/performance work on stage, whereas Ruth does not, which may play a role in the approach taken depending on the scenario where this problematic work—or the potential of problematic work can be seen (since Marci addresses calling out people at the time of booking and Ruth addresses it after the fact).

Ruth feels more empathy now than she did in the past for the interpreters who have appeared in viral videos, largely because of her own experience. Whereas most of her work used to be done face-to-face, more of her work has shifted to being done remotely on video. Back in 2013, at the time of the Mandela funeral, interpreters were only shown on screen for large-scale events with broad public interest or during emergency briefings, whereas now (and over time) interpreters are seen on various media with increasing frequency. As the volume of her over-video work has increased, she has become more aware of what goes into on-camera work, and her perspective has shifted to become more

generous and empathetic, because I don't know—I don't know what prep the interpreter was given. I don't know if they were thrown in at the last minute. I don't know if they were replacing a sick colleague just [to] save face for whatever agency they were working for and they had no prep. I don't know if they had a bad day [...] [so] why they were put there—I am much more empathetic.

Ruth acknowledges that many of her colleagues see her as a highly skilled professional, and part of a cluster of interpreters who are both highly regarded for their work and considered to be more influential. Yet, she remembers clearly how some of those other interpreters within that cluster made her feel as a newer interpreter working in the field: that she was less than them, and that they had some air of eliteness and looked down on others outside of their exclusive circle. She does not want to be seen as a part of this group and their (in some cases) detrimental effect on colleagues whose skills are still developing:

I don't wanna be that person that's now could like [be] affecting the profession of up and coming interpreters. [Newer interpreters] didn't ask me my opinion of whether or not I thought they should be there so how do I approach telling them I don't think this is the best space for you. Who gave me that power? Nobody. So it's very layered and it feels really terrible.

Fake News

Ruth wonders whether the widespread fascination with fake news in the present time is the same sort of interest that causes people to be so drawn to fake interpreters: “*They're just fascinated by how things can happen, how—how information can get out there without anyone having source checked it, like at all*”. At the same time, she recognizes that interpreters are often booked without asking for or verifying interpreting qualifications; unlike other professions like law or

medicine or dentistry, the field of interpreting does not have a regulatory college. Furthermore, she mentions that with the advent of video relay services⁵⁸ (VRS) and interpreted events and appointments increasingly being conducted virtually and online, a number of interpreters who had previously worked in isolation are suddenly taking work that would otherwise not have been available to them. She wonders where people have been hiding out and whether they have done any work to better their skills from when they graduated. What she is seeing, instead, is people who have not improved on their skills, so how they interpret and what they interpret seems to have stagnated:

once everything became virtual and VRS became a thing and work from home and [now these interpreters are] suddenly out of the woodwork and they're interpreting now and we're like where have you been? You graduated in 2001? Where have you been?! You're still interpreting like it's 2001.

When to Leave the Field

Ruth contemplates the future of her interpreting career when she is nearing the age of retirement. At that point, she wonders if she will be aware if her work is degrading, or if someone will let her know that it is time to give up the fast-paced media work. Reflecting on the co-interpreters she currently works with, she sees that some have reached this stage—not effectively analyzing their work and putting themselves in environments beyond their current skill level. And then she wonders, in the case someone does approach her, whether she will be able to accept that—whether she will be *“the kind of person who can actually take a look at myself and know that my time has come?”*

⁵⁸ Video Relay Services (VRS) are telecommunication services that provide sign language interpreters for telephone calls. Interpreters connect through a video call with the Deaf person and through an audio call with the hearing person and interpret the conversation between them.

AI Interpreters

Eugene uniquely addressed the issue of avatars and artificial intelligence interpreters, sharing that during a recent trip to Asia he saw an interpreter he strongly suspects was not actually human:

It was so good I couldn't tell if it was a real person. I think on an airplane it wasn't a real person, but that was darn good! And so I worry a little bit about what that will do for the profession and the data that's fed into those models, because again if it's not fluent language users. Recently a Deaf colleague and I met with some software developers, none of them who have sign language knowledge, and who are wanting to use interpreters as the data that feeds their model, and both of us were like 'no. That can't happen.' But it will happen, you know, it's not like we control them. So I think that we're going to see more and more fake renditions of language use with AI as well.

His concern was twofold—wondering both how AI interpreters would impact the work of human professional interpreters and also what data is being used to inform the programming. Here, Eugene mentions a recent meeting he attended with a Deaf colleague to talk to software developers wanting to use interpreters as language models, which they were both firmly opposed to. He reflected that, in all likelihood, this will be the case, affecting the language used by those AI interpreter avatars in unintended ways that may lead to further problems in the future.

The Education Piece

Marci talks about the types of questions asked by professional interpreters to inform decision making around the requirements of the job in question, as well as whether the requestor has had previous experience with booking interpreters to understand the degree of familiarity they might have with the process. While not a common occurrence, if there is already a second

interpreter booked that she does not believe has the correct skills for the job, she'll work to reach out to that colleague to engage with them respectfully to address the potential mismatch.

I haven't honestly had it come up very recently. I know for me, I just talk about, you know, if I'm going to be working somewhere... Have they worked with interpreters before? Ask the questions that we ask as professionals. Who's the other interpreter? If I don't think that person's qualified, I will reach out to them one-on-one and try to be respectful in that way, but call it out. But it hasn't come up in a while.

She also makes an effort to educate friends, family or acquaintances outside of the profession and the Deaf community who bring forward videos of disfluent signers or incompetent “interpreters” but is selective about who she engages in these conversations with. Some are not receptive to the concerns or thoughts she has about such videos—even if they do ask. Those who know her know she is likely to respond at length, honestly and directly, as she acknowledges being fairly outspoken both in terms of her work as an interpreter and for social causes close to her heart.

Eugene remarked on the embarrassing nature of what happened at Mandela's funeral. With a hint of amusement when recalling how much media attention was focused on the event, he felt “*an extreme sense of embarrassment for our profession because that funeral could not have had any more media attention than it did around the world.*” At the same time, he saw the potential to harness that media focus and put out messaging about professional standards:

I also saw it as a huge opportunity. We could not have paid for that media attention that was garnered around the world around what does a real interpreter look like. You know, we could not have paid for the media time that the US people had on their national television. I think CBC approached it somewhat differently here, but I mean all of that

media attention around the world I don't think we could have paid for. And so in many ways I think it heightened the experience of people paying attention to sign language interpreters.

Mickey, too, recognized the potential benefits that widespread awareness of the viral videos offered, and how that fixation could be leveraged as a springboard to open up discussions meant to educate. With this event and the resulting negative attention on the incompetent “interpreter” being so public, it opened the door to facilitate conversations around the skills professionally qualified interpreters bring and the need for their services.

Eugene talked about using what happened at the Mandela funeral example as a tool to assist when negotiating contracts with government agencies that have balked at the cost of interpreting services. His approach is to explain:

'fast, good, or cheap, you all remember what happened with Nelson Mandela's funeral.'

[they respond with] *'Oh yes!'* [and I would say] *'Well, you're getting quality here and this is the price of quality. 'So I think in some ways when people have that awareness of the—the worst case scenario, they can turn that around and flip that so that it becomes a lever—a lever to them to negotiate.*

Ruth, too, has used the widespread knowledge about the Mandela funeral interpreter debacle when talking to clients looking to hire an interpreter. In order to drive home the point that due diligence is needed when hiring interpreters for an event, she occasionally mentions:

“‘I'm sure you heard what happened at Nelson Mandela's funeral, you know they hired someone who wasn't even an interpreter.’”

Marci reflects on when she can and cannot educate people. Her goal appears to be increasing awareness when queries arise. When sent or shown videos and asked for her thoughts,

she identifies whether the person signing on screen is Deaf. If they are not Deaf, she will explain why using Deaf performers is more appropriate in a given situation, in the hopes that it piques their curiosity and they will continue to inquire about this perspective.

Retraining Fake Interpreters

Lawrence recalls his mentor, a well-regarded interpreter in their community, suggesting that in order to deal with the problem of fake, incompetent, underqualified or even unethical interpreters, that the community re-train them: “*“like why not retrain them? [...] wouldn't it be great if they could be part of our number once they had more exposure and training, etc.?”*”

Lawrence reflects further on the paradoxical way that fake and incompetent interpreters operate—seemingly trying to provide a service to the Deaf community but in actuality creating an access barrier instead, harming the community they set out to “help”. His mentor’s suggestion to train those attempting (and failing) to provide access would work to rectify that issue.

Misunderstandings by Non-Community Members

Marci has experienced how fake, incompetent, and underqualified interpreters circulating on media have impacted her close personal relationships. She remembers at one point sitting with her partner, John, watching an interpreter on a TV broadcast struggle to provide a coherent interpretation. The interpreter hired was not skilled enough for the job they had accepted. Seeing the inaccuracies and content missing made her mad. John asked if her anger stemmed from her not being the interpreter hired for that particular job

I was like, ‘oh no. I don't even want to be on there’, but then I got pissed off at him, because I'm like why would you think that about me? So that interpersonal relationship got affected in a negative way.

When Irv was asked what he thought the lasting legacy of these fake interpreters was, he was quick to respond pointedly: *“Ridicule to the profession.”* When asked to expand on this idea further, he shared that there are numerous misunderstandings of the role of interpreters, and the qualifications needed to provide the service. Videos of fake interpreters in media have shifted public perception of the work that sign language interpreters do, both for better and for worse. He noted a primary confusion around interpreting is:

we’re still struggling to be recognized by everybody who’s not in the field, and everyone who’s not in the Deaf community or everyone who has no idea what a Deaf person or an interpreter is. And then they see these videos and it’s funny and I don’t want to say ignorance, but it is ignorance in a way, because people—if you don’t need an interpreter, you don’t need to know what interpreters are about. Right? So I don’t think it is ignorance by choice. I think it is ignorance by lack of need.

The way this ignorance manifests includes resistance to the need for more than one interpreter when two or more are required for an assignment. Irv gave the example of negotiating terms with a prospective client who argued, having seen only a single interpreter at Mandela’s funeral, and that a single professional interpreter should be sufficient, offering to *“bring in Sue from HR because she took a course in college as an elective and she can do some fingerspelling with you”*, which then leads to other conversations such as:

...again here’s the advocacy and here’s the 20 minutes explanation and here’s the okay this is too long of an email can you call me so we can chat because you need to understand that you’re doing a disservice to your Deaf staff and/or clients.

Gertie sees a substantial lack of trust between interpreters and particularly their hearing (non-Deaf) clients. Despite her many years of experience in the field, those who do not

understand the role of the interpreter may question the interpreter's skills, efficacy and whether or not they will remain unbiased. She has had to explain to people that her presence to interpret is required and why. In relation to the videos of the fake interpreters, she says that sometimes people will *"make little comments about a fake interpreter or 'how do I know you're not one of those fake interpreters?' Cause I've been in the community for 20-plus years. That's how you know I'm not one of those fake [ones]."*

When considering whether these circulating videos have shifted how she talks about herself and her work, initially Gertie said no, then reconsidered: *"I'm sure they probably have on some level and I'm just not aware that it's altered how I've viewed things."*

Eugene does not understand the attraction to viral videos of interpreters:

I don't understand social media well enough to really comment on other people's motivations, but it strikes me that when something goes viral people look at it in a very decontextualized way. And so they see a clip that might be 'ooh that's pretty funny' or 'ooh that's bad', but there's not much deeper level of analysis other than that. It's like 'Oh that's a memorable moment—let me forward this to somebody else'. 'Oh I could do that'. I think the other piece that's maybe negative that people don't get when they see these virals is it still feeds the perception that anyone can learn the language. [in a high pitched voice] 'I see them, they're doing something with their hands, must be okay.' I don't know why people find them... I don't know why people are attracted to them, to be quite honest.

Suddy is aware of how he walks the line between the hearing and the Deaf community. Being a person from and of the hearing community and working regularly within the Deaf community, he says that interpreters see that gap—what hearing people are missing and the truth that Deaf people know: that while it should be a given that a professional will be hired, it is not.

To have a qualified professional interpreter requires advocacy. And rarely are the shortcomings ever caught on camera, despite how frequently an incompetent person shows up.

Irv has been asked repeatedly why a professional is needed, and though he sounds frustrated and exhausted, his response is direct: *“Why would you need a professional plumber? Why would you want a professional doctor? It—it is equivalent, and accessibility and proper use of the service, if you will.”*

How an Interpreter’s Job is Understood

Dene was asked how friends of hers who know that she is a professional interpreter understand what her job entails. There is a general understanding that she knows sign language, and that this is how Deaf people speak to one another, and that she is able to explain things to them in sign. She elaborated that there is minimal understanding of Deafness as a specific cultural minority, and some friends have asked her: *“‘Well ’cause sign language, it’s, it is kind of like a language, right?’”*

As a heritage language user of ASL herself, one way that she explains her work to friends is by appealing to those who spoke a language other than English at home. To them she explains that American Sign Language is the language she used at home with her parents, and that the language barrier present for those with English as a second language is the same as her parents in that respect.

Sign Language is Beautiful/Pretty

One of the questions the participants were asked was why the public is so fascinated by videos of fake interpreters. Suddy, Mickey, Dene, Sylvia, and Irv each shared that they have experienced people approaching them after seeing them interpret to tell them that sign language is beautiful—this largely from people who do not understand ASL.

Mickey feels that interpreters are seen as a novelty, particularly at public events like a TED Talk. This perspective of the interpreter as something out of the ordinary is what feeds into public interest around sign language interpreters. He has been praised for how beautiful his interpreting work was by people who admit they do not know or understand American Sign Language. His shared internal thoughts are noted with a hint of sarcasm *“okay, well thank you for telling me that I looked good?”*. He feels this perception stands in opposition to how interpreters themselves are captivated by the videos of interpreters that have gone viral—seeing them not as novelty but as an access barrier. Those who are professional interpreters are aware that hiring fake, incompetent, or underqualified people is a problem; both interpreters and the Deaf community understand this. And yet, he says that there is still a fascination with the fact that this phenomenon continues to happen.

Suddy shared his experiences of people approaching him after a job to tell him that *“sign language is ‘just so beautiful’”*. This is a frequent occurrence, particularly from people who do not understand the language. He says this phenomenon is unique to sign language interpreters and would likely not happen to a spoken language interpreter.

If it was a spoken language interpreter, and there was a video of that, and it got shared—it's just not as visually interesting, so I think just the fact that it's visual, and people are seeing these random gestures and facial expressions, I think, is just more interesting to look at.

Dene, too, raised the idea that hearing people are captivated by seeing people sign and waving their hands around. When applying these ideas to the fake interpreter from Mandela's funeral, the lack of knowledge around signed languages led people to believe that he was not, in

fact, a fake. *“I don’t think a lot of people believed he was fake. I don’t think a lot of people... ’cause they don’t know. They don’t know the language.”*

Sylvia does not understand whatsoever why people were captivated by the videos of the fake interpreter, given what a terrible example of access it portrayed: *“the only interest I see is what a wonderful example of poor quality that is. We all need positive models and negative models and that was—those were perfect negative models of exactly what not to do.”* She hopes that, if anything, the videos will force standards in the field to increase: *“That hopefully that’ll bring up the level of quality and the level of awareness for people who think ‘sign language is beautiful, you did a great job’ and they don’t have any clue what we did.”*

Irv feels frustrated hearing comments from people about how much they enjoyed his interpretation *“‘Because ASL is pretty’ and I hope you can transcribe my sarcasm through that. People don’t know any better.”*

Marci says that people tend to approach interpreters post-assignment to compliment them on their work or on doing a great job, but on inquiry these people do not actually understand sign language or the interpreting process. Some interpreters will ask how they knew that the interpretation was well done. This situation has arisen so regularly that skepticism can be built-in to reactionary responses.

Sylvia had a similar situation to this arise where her response to a hearing person complimenting her work manifested skepticism:

I got used to saying, you know [in a] friendly tactful way, ‘haha how would you know?’ until I said that to someone who is hearing who happens to be the only hearing person in a family of 7, so yeah I guess if anybody was gonna know you’d know, so I appreciate your feedback and it’s from the heart and it has value to me.

These days, Sylvia's response to compliments about her work is to thank them. She has thought about using those moments to educate those people about how ASL is the language of the Deaf community and they are the ones who taught her enough for her to function as a guest within their community, that ultimately it is their language. And yet she reflects that most who thank her aren't interested in learning about the language or the community.

Signing Songs

A tangential phenomenon on the spectrum of interpretations that fail to render an accurate message is videos of people "signing" songs, which Seymour, Ruth and Marci all addressed.

Seymour outlined the issue of signed songs based on what he has seen online. He says that oftentimes people follow English word order, which fails to render a concept coherently—and usually conveys the opposite of the meaning of the song lyrics:

I'd call that fake interpreting and that it's just someone who learned some signs and they're putting the signs to a song and they're putting it out there and saying 'look, I've interpreted a song'. But mmm no you haven't, you've put some signs to a song but you haven't interpreted.

Ruth has had hearing people send videos of signed songs to her via social media. Opting to use those interactions as teachable moments, she felt that:

I might say something like 'wow, it's really brave of them to have done that. I wouldn't do that. I would make sure that it's a Deaf person doing that. Like I—I would be the one behind the camera interpreting and a Deaf person would be on stage. And then it can be their flair of their language in art form'.

Marci too felt that signed songs on video should be responded to, in this case referencing how she approaches a person who posts a video of a signed song themselves. Feeling strongly that:

there's really no excuse for people to be fake interpreting. It's just beyond disrespectful. There's no excuse in the day and age... this day and age of technology and awareness and information. So then it's a choice, which would infuriate me even more. And I would... to the point where, like, now, because of technology, I would potentially reach out. And write a letter. Or send an email. Or make a comment. Which I do. Which I do when I see, like, hearing people signing songs, and it's so bad.

Impact on the Deaf Community

Marci acknowledges that relationships between interpreters and Deaf people can be strained and divisive. She recognizes and feels a divide between both groups; for some Deaf people, interpreters are viewed as “a necessary evil”. Based on this stance, she considers it serendipitous when actual friendships are formed between Deaf people and hearing interpreters who have worked together (she does not mention relationships outside of work situations). Viral videos of fake interpreters do not create additional warmth within those relationships; those videos can cause greater tension between Deaf and hearing interpreter relationships. In a perfect world, she hopes that the shared disdain towards these videos would lead to stronger connection and allyship but that has not materialized.

The general public is unaware of the issues faced in encounters with fake interpreters and the consequences of circulating viral videos of them on social media. Irv assumes that hearing people unfamiliar with interpreting, sign language, or the Deaf community see someone waving their hands around and assume that due diligence has been done to provide access and hire an

interpreter. The impact of this scenario on interpreters is the need for additional advocacy in effort to correct the error and ensure it does not happen again, but for a Deaf person this is a direct barrier to access information that it is their right to understand.

Also impacting the Deaf community is that professional interpreters' ethical standards and codes of conduct tend not to be widely known and understood. Consequently, interpreters experience general distrust regarding their ability to maintain confidentiality. For example, when Irv is hired for academic or conference-type work, and he requests access to materials in advance to appropriately prepare, there is frequently pushback. Speakers' notes constitute intellectual property and conference organizers and presenters tend to be hesitant about turning over any work in advance, not wanting to send

their PowerPoints and things because they think I'm going to put it on Facebook and let it go viral and sir and/or ma'am and/or person I'm speaking to, that is not something I have any interest in, nor would I do that because I have ethics.

Irv then mused that: *"I don't know what experience they've had where they think it's a concern, but if there are people doing that, that is a whole separate Master's degree dissertation research project."*

Dene remembers having conversations about the issue of fake interpreters with Deaf people she is close to but could not recall the specific content of the interactions given how much time has passed since Mandela's funeral actually occurred. For her, the impressions of those dialogues encompassed themes she reiterated throughout the interview of: *"taking advantage of our language, not understanding our community, making us look bad, making us look like we're a joke."* Having grown up with Deaf parents and living within the Deaf community as a hearing child of Deaf adults (CODA), Dene here uses "our/us" to express the Deaf community's view.

She feels frustrated that fake and incompetent interpreters take work when they cannot effectively provide access. These actions diminish the standing of the Deaf community, and effectively puts all those who require access services at a disadvantage:

we continue to be lesser than because this person can get away with getting up on the stage and just doing that and... not giving a care about anybody in the room that wants to understand what's going on, that has a right to understand what's going on.

Mickey raised the issue of trained interpreters taking work that is an incorrect fit for their skill level, separating out these occurrences from those who are outright fake interpreters. In terms of the mismatch between trained interpreters and work above their skill level, he sees it come up:

Not regularly, but often enough that it's concerning, partly because what that does to actual access, or lack thereof, but it makes me think there is still a shortage of interpreters or qualified interpreters to cover the assignments that have to be covered.

He thinks this happens for multiple reasons, including: “*a desire to give back to the community, offer support to the community, serve the community and that desire to serve trumps recognizing whether they're the appropriate interpreter to do assignments.*”

Ruth, too, addresses both of these problematic scenarios, noting again the difference between a person whose skills are a mismatch to the work and those fake interpreters who have no skills at all. Rather than consider the psychology of those individuals who are ill suited to the work they have taken, as Mickey did, Ruth instead considers how consumers of the work can ensure that those people are not booked again:

the onus like completely goes on the Deaf community to be like don't book me with them again. I don't want them again. And it takes a long time for enough people to be like 'not

them, not them, not them, not them’ for an agency to finally be like ‘we’re just gonna offer them less work’. But who’s actually having the conversations with people?

Suddy discussed the response to one video that had circulated amongst the Canadian Deaf community and interpreting circles recently, where the Manitoba minister responsible for having made disparaging comments regarding the presence of sign language interpreters had sparked backlash and issued a follow-up statement: this video was meant to be her public apology⁵⁹. The video circulated widely and Deaf people in Suddy’s home province questioned the skills of the interpreter on screen. In this case, the interpreter does happen to be qualified, but his signing style is—in Suddy’s words—a bit odd. Since interpreters are “*socialized to be critical of signing style and signing skill*” this may account for how the community responded to this video.

Ruth talked about some of the specific issues with some of the circulating and viral videos, and what made them harder to understand. She mentioned linguistic production of the interpretation varying in some cases between English and American Sign Language, which “*wouldn’t be a good choice to match all individuals, right, who may be looking for that emergency content.*” She also brought up technical production considerations such as keeping the interpreter on screen near the speaker at a size large enough that the interpretation can be viewed clearly. A sign language interpreter must be visible throughout and then also appear as the same physical size as the person speaking (suggesting the interpreter not be downsized and relegated to a separate region of the screen). She says this also needs to be addressed with the person operating the video camera in advance so that they know to focus on both the speaker and the interpreter.

⁵⁹ To view the follow-up apology video see APTN News (2025): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0gwCMC6iai8>

Linguistic Analysis of the 2017 Tampa Police Press Conference Interpreter

Gertie was the only participant to linguistically analyze any of the fake interpreters who have gone viral and did so with two of the examples, both the Mandela example and the one from Tampa, FL. For the one at Mandela's funeral, she remembers trying to make sense of anything she was seeing, but could not discern a single sign that made any sense. For the woman in Tampa, she remembers seeing the video and immediately exclaiming “*“What the hell?!”*” because the information was so wrong. She talked about the ability of this woman, who clearly knew a bit of sign, to thoroughly misconstrue the information (specifically timelines related to the sequential order of the victims), and “*she was dangerous enough to screw up the information but look professional enough, and I know that she has several fraud charges behind her already.*”

When Gertie was asked how she felt about what she saw, she looked down, a sadness to her expression, and told me “*Not happy*”. Framing the situation from the perspective of the parent whose late daughter had been a victim, she explained:

that parent, who is a victim of this as well, you're not giving them the right information so they know what actually happened to their child. Like you're convoluting what happened in something that's already a horribly stressful awful time.

In doing this, Gertie explained, this woman took advantage of not only the Deaf parent but also the police. Things are fairly layered here but at its core, what stings the most for Gertie is how particularly unfair this was to the Deaf people involved.

Emotional Exploration & Revisitation of Trauma

“It Was Funny”

While a number of interviewees talked about being saddened, appalled, or galvanized to educate, some also talked about people finding the fake interpreter from Mandela’s funeral funny—either to themselves or to people around them. Here we hear from Ruth, Seymour, Sylvia, and Eugene.

For Ruth, the only time the Mandela interpreter comes up in her work now is as comic relief amongst colleagues:

Let’s say me as the interpreter—I’m having a really bad day, and like I might say to my colleague ‘I swear I’m not the Nelson Mandela interpreter!’ Right? Like if I’m having a really bad day and I’m not producing my best work, and I’m feeling terrible about it, it’ll be a comedic relief. Like I swear I’m not the Nelson Mandela interpreter.

Seymour felt that most interpreters would have been amused at first sight of the interpreter at Mandela’s funeral before recognizing the possible repercussions this would have on the interpreting community: *“Well to be honest, there was that initial chuckle that I think most interp—sign interpreters would go and kind of chuckle for a moment going hahaha and then after that initial gut reaction going ‘mmm not good’.”*

That initial chuckle Seymour mentioned was also expressed by Sylvia, who watched the Mandela video multiple times when it was in wide circulation:

I rewound and rewound that video so that I could watch it many times and laugh my ass off. At the same time be totally embarrassed because I can’t believe you just did that on a national scale or an international scale, but it was funny as hell to see him do some of those things, looking like an absolute idiot. And better you than me, dude.

Eugene did not think it was funny at all. He remembers when the Mandela video was actively circulating and how many people approached him to tell him they found the video funny. He recalls resenting the way that people felt the video was amusing:

You know, 'oh, that was funny'. It's like: 'it wasn't funny to Deaf people and it wasn't funny to my profession.' You know, would it have been funny if it was a fake doctor or a fake lawyer? Probably not. And so I—I'm sometimes defensive then about that 'funniness', it's like 'No, it wasn't funny at all! And here let me tell you why!' And then I move into educator mode, so that's not the most fun for them at a party over a glass of wine.

Dene, who grew up with Deaf parents, has seen firsthand exactly how an untrained or underqualified interpreter can impact the lives of Deaf people. When she was an adolescent, Dene's father took their neighbour to court to recover the costs of a fence they had mutually agreed to build. Dene remembers seeing an interpreter in court that day—someone known to the Deaf community, but not trained. This interpreter did not interpret everything that was said by the court, nor did they interpret into English certain details her father shared in sign language to the court. Her father did not win the case. Dene recalls:

I sat in the courtroom and I was very young, I was only about 13 or 14, so just remembering that the person who was there interpreting really didn't interpret much of what was being said, and so my dad was just standing there with this quizzical look on his face, like what's going on? And I didn't see the interpreter interpret certain aspects of what my dad was trying to get across, and why he felt that he should be, he should win the case. And he ended up not winning the case and I think largely because the interpreter didn't know what they were doing in the courtroom. And yet this was an

interpreter that was well known in our community... that didn't do justice for my dad, and I...I had lots of conversations with people about that, just in the sense of why is it that we accept interpreters like that in our community?

While some people over the years have expressed sentiments along the lines of being grateful that at least there was someone there to interpret, this clearly did not and does not provide equitable access. For Dene, this situation and others like it “*Hits me in a way that I can't even, I get—actually get very angry.*” That sense of despair and anger was not unique to Dene. Eugene, Irv and Lawrence expressed similar sentiments.

Regarding Mandela's funeral and considering how those circumstances could have happened, Eugene felt

utter despair looking at that fellow standing by Obama and utter amazement that that level of corruption can still take place, and so I think in many ways myself and others were somewhat naïve to the fact that this could happen. You know, naïve based on our own experience.

Irv talked about his feelings related to discussions around “interpreters” in circulating videos. When people call his attention to it and label the person-on-screen as an interpreter, he is quick to stop that discussion in its tracks and provide a bit of education on why that term cannot be applied here. Connected to that is also a piece of self-advocacy:

if you ever come across a Deaf person in your line of work and you notice your boss is not bringing in an interpreter, here's my card, 'cause it's not fair—nor is it right—in many, many ways for someone to go without access.

Lawrence talked about a qualified interpreter in his community who, upon seeing cameras pointed at him when interpreting in front of a crowd, felt a strong desire to flee.

Relaying the story, he explains his colleague's thoughts:

'as soon as I saw cameras in the audience, like phones, I wanted to... I wanted to run, like I wanted to not be there anymore, and I stayed because I'm paid to stay, and there's a Deaf person staring at me, and I stayed for that reason, but intrapersonally I had to deal with the fervent desire to escape'.

He remembers this interpreter being fearful that if their work was uploaded online, devoid of context, then the whole Deaf community might turn against them. This conversation made Lawrence think about the current state of interpreters and the psychological effects of videos-gone-viral on practitioners:

interpreters don't want to be on camera whether regardless of whether or not they think they're doing good work or not. It's [them being] too afraid of the Photoshopping that's of the context removal and then being cancelled as a consequence of that.

For Dene, the issue of fake interpreters—along with those underqualified for the work they are taking—points to ethical failures. She says:

maybe they're not fake interpreters like the Mandela interpreter was or was purported to be, but maybe they're interpreters who have taken training and they get out there and they think that the world is their oyster and they can do everything and they walk on water. And they can do absolutely anything and everything and it doesn't matter who the Deaf person is, doesn't matter the scenario, doesn't matter anything, they can just—they can flap their hands, for lack of a better word, and they can just do that and get paid for it and walk away and be done with it.

Dene says that the service these people purport to provide has lasting effects for the Deaf people who rely on interpreters for access. This substandard service then affects the reputation of all professional interpreters. She directly expressed how she feels seeing this level of work out in the field: *“I’m disgusted by it. I’m disgusted by people who can call themselves professionals and don’t understand or see the impact of the work that they’re not providing. Access that they’re not providing. It is devaluing. It’s harmful.”*

Quality Assurance Protocols

Suddy recognizes that the videos of the fake interpreter at the Mandela funeral put a spotlight on sign language interpreting, which—even amidst the decidedly negative consequences—present some positive effects, since *“it sparked lots of conversations about qualifications. It did make people aware that sign language interpreters were potentially hired for big announcements like that, because at that time it wasn’t a standard practice for large announcements in Canada.”* Suddy here also reflects on the irritation he felt at seeing sign language being—in essence—mocked by the fake interpreter. With more distance from that event, he considers that the lasting impact on his work is the recognition of and need to be professional and encourage people to ask for credentials and qualifications from those interpreters they hire.

Hiring Practices

This section will explore thought around hiring practices, security protocols, and strategies interpreters use to promote quality assurance protocols.

Lawrence expresses a degree of frustration that interpreters tend to be booked for jobs based on when they are available rather than on qualification-for or best-fit-to the job. Typically, he is asked about his availability for a specific date and time, and if he can accommodate the

timing then he gets the request. It is a rarity for him to be asked for a copy of his CV, credentials, or whether there are specific skills screenings that he has passed. Articulating the types of conversations he has with people seeking his availability, he shares amusedly that they typically look like: “[Them saying] ‘*hi, are you available?*’ [Rather than] ‘*Okay, who are you? What have you done? What credentials do you have? Do you have any screenings?*’” Following that, he wonders “*where is the anything past are you available—there’s none of that, and that’s why fake interpreting happens.*” The root cause, then, according to Lawrence, is not appropriately checking credentials.

Eugene broached the topic of national standards to give context around why fake interpretation is likelier to happen in certain countries than other ones:

I think that many North American and European countries have standards that would not have allowed this to happen, yet there are many countries where this can still take place, where there are no standards, when there are levels of corruption that can result in such damage.

Relating this lack of standards to other countries outside of South Africa, where fake interpreters have made headlines more than once, he asked:

what’s the parallel? What’s the common denominator in terms of countries where there is corruption? In terms of countries where there isn’t a standard? In terms of countries where Deaf organizations may not have a voice within government, then you can see the—the common denominator between South Africa, Colombia, and Peru at that time.

By including the perspective and knowledge of the Deaf communities into the hiring practices of interpreters, Eugene believes that this will stem some of the major issues related to the hiring of problematic practitioners.

Suddy has not often been asked to prove his credentials to people, which says something about the state of the profession; being asked for qualifications more often may be one way the field can develop further. He believes that membership in Canada's professional association of ASL-English Interpreters, the Canadian Association of Sign Language Interpreters (CASLI), is necessary in order to both maintain the standards that have been set for the field (professionally and ethically) and to move them forward. Even as CASLI, he says, "*is going through its own time of change*" (which may be referencing here the 2018 Silent No More letter; see page 32 footnote 39), he still feels that membership is necessary, even for those who have contrary feelings towards CASLI.

Gertie, like Suddy, believes strongly in representing herself as a member of CASLI. She always has her membership card on her, ready to show it to anybody who might question her qualifications. The card proves that she is an accredited member of a professional interpreter organization. Given the state of non-professionals being hired to work in the field as interpreters, she feels the

need to have some sort of qualification, some sort of proof of documentation that... I am qualified. I am supposed to be here. And it—and explaining ethical decisions, like if I am not a good fit I pull myself or I don't accept the work.

Security

Ruth, Gertie, Lawrence, Eugene, Mickey and Seymour each discussed security measures—either lack thereof or applying their own experience working with dignitaries to what they assumed should have been in place at that event.

Ruth had many discussions with people about the Mandela funeral interpreter, focusing on: *“how did that person get security clearances? Like what was the booking process? How were they able to stand next to all of those world leaders and not be an actual interpreter?”*

These conversations led to her educating others about security protocols within Canada, as well as some of the system checks that qualify a person as an interpreter (membership in the national professional association, CASLI, formerly known as the Association of Visual Language Interpreters of Canada or AVLIC) but don’t necessarily signify that an interpreter has a correct skill set for every job available in the country:

in Canada you have to have security clearances to be near people with that kind of notoriety, like for politicians or famous people you have to have some kind of security clearance, but then there was also the discussion about how really in Canada you just have to be a member of AVLIC. That’s the only thing that you can say that would qualify you as an interpreter—but it doesn’t actually qualify you as an interpreter, so there’s actually huge gaps in how someone would know whether someone was fake or not.

Gertie questioned what security protocols were in place at Mandela’s funeral. Based on her own experience working with high-level government officials in the past, security in those spaces was very much present:

I’ve interpreted in the same space as Justin Trudeau, and while I wasn’t heavily vetted to my knowledge I was walking too fast for one of the security guards and they were on me like in an instant so that’s pretty tight security. How was it not so much when you have somebody like Obama and other world leaders standing right there and they’re feet away from the other person, like I...how? How does that happen?

Lawrence expressed shock and frustration about the lack of security protocols on site at the Mandela memorial service and he wondered “*did no one think? How is it that no one thought to ask?*”

Eugene also wondered how this fake interpreter could have been vetted and approved to be on stage at Mandela’s funeral:

I would assume as well that many governments around the world had to wake up, not even just on the sign language interpreting piece, but how the heck did this happen security-wise? And so I think now, again, because governments had to review their security protocols, for there’s somebody standing beside the President of the United States who we now realize is fake. We have no idea if he’s insane, and does he have a weapon with him?

The idea of screening interpreters in terms of skill level was also raised, with Eugene noting that the Government of Canada: “*keeps saying we can’t use Deaf interpreters on TV because we don’t have a screening. Well, create a screening. Use the [Canadian Hearing Services skills] screening. I mean there’s ways to address those barriers.*”

It is Mickey’s experience that interpreters have, at times, disproportionate access to venues backstage and secured areas because the general population does not understand what interpreters do:

people don’t know what we do. They know enough, but a little information is dangerous as they say. It’s like ‘I’m the sign language interpreter’ and then when people sometimes see that or hear that, they then don’t want to block access or be the person to later on be told—be painted as the one who blocked access or made something inaccessible because they didn’t allow the interpreter [in].

He talked about what happened at the funeral of Nelson Mandela, and how videos of that event led to conversations he had with colleagues that:

we really can get in anywhere. And so someone tells a story of how they were able to go stand next to this premier—prime minister, 'cause they were the interpreter. I mean they were actually there working, so it wasn't anything nefarious but it's like wow, at times we really can [get in anywhere].

In order to make events accessible, interpreters typically position themselves in a highly visible area, such as on a stage next to the person presenting or performing. Mickey says that there is widespread ignorance by those responsible for managing who is allowed on stage, in what location and when. He has experienced both sides of this ignorance: either being shepherded into secured areas and sent directly on to the stage, or being told outright that he cannot set foot on stage at all (even when this is the best model for provision of access services—the job he is hired to do).

Considering that Barack Obama, President of the United States, was present amongst other dignitaries at Mandela's funeral, Lawrence was gobsmacked at the series of errors that would have allowed this fake interpreter on to the stage, let alone into the event space:

Secret service and dignitaries up the wazoo and it was like in an arena and I imagine the arena has security too. There's so many levels, like has anybody asked for this guy's CV? Did anyone ask themselves whether this guy is reputable? Who—who, where, I don't... like where does this person come from?

He compared what had happened security-wise to the vetting of interpreters by other professionals in the financial and medical fields saying that it is

incomprehensible to me and bordering unforgivable when the doctor doesn't check to see if the interpreter is credentialed before they relay treatment to their patients. Or the bank teller not checking to make sure that the interpreter doesn't have a real or perceived conflict of interest before they advise their clients on what to do with their finances or what to do with their mortgage.

He feels that personal vigilance is required from professional interpreters in order to maintain standards, since the system of access provision in its current state is failing to meet the needs of Deaf people who rely on interpreters for access. What happened at Mandela's funeral:

suggests little care about who the interpreter is and what they can do and can't do. And it suggests little care for the Deaf consumer or the audience or the public and whether or not the message is getting across and so this is why I have to be vigilant.

Seymour, too, expressed concern at the lack of security the Mandela funeral demonstrated. In light of the high-profile nature of the speakers at that event, he assumed a strict security protocol and yet was shocked at the level of:

the security aspect. I went to that first because of the nature of it. Had it been another environment I would have thought differently, but this because we're dealing with, you know, leaders and, you know, people, in government and that shape the world in which we live in and whatnot, the whole security aspect bothered me topmost there... because they always talk about secure secure but it—it just shows the lack of security.

It also occurred to him that this event revealed the potential of further harm: *"it opened up the notion that people who want to do harm find a way of 'maybe we can pretend to be an interpreter as well.' But their intent is not to do what he did, but to harm."*

Promoting and Embodying Quality Assurance Protocols

Irv has worked at several conferences, and is frustrated having organizers asking him and other teams of interpreters to work separately during small-group breakout sessions. On saying that, no, the team needs to stay intact and explaining the reasons why interpreters work in pairs or groups, he has been met with resistance, with organizers suggesting “‘some sort of AI-generated or one of the people in HR knows some sign, do you think that the Deaf person would be okay with them?’” to which Irv responds both intently but with a hint of sarcasm at the inappropriateness of this type of suggestion: “‘you’re in a conference. Would you be okay if a grade two student stood up and did your presentation?’”

Suddy outlines the extreme level of trust that is placed with interpreters by the parties who hire them. Rarely is he asked about his qualifications for the work he is hired for. Sometimes he has conversations with the Deaf clients he works with to let them know that whoever hired him did not ask him whether he was qualified for the job or whether he had any credentials or education in the area. Deaf people expect this quality assurance piece happens, so informing them that it did not, in fact, happen, is how he maintains transparency.

I think if I was booked through an agency then there is a screening process that happens, but if I’m just contacted as a person that they know it’s an interpreter, there’s no screening or I don’t have to send my resume in or any of that, right? So anyways I do recall having a couple of conversations around that. Like [...] it’s not surprising when I’m booked and the person who booked me has no idea if I can actually sign.

He has had conversations before with Deaf community members about the types of things that people requesting interpreters should ask for: “are you qualified? Like did you go to school? Do you have experience? Do you have a reference or...?”

Periodically, friends have asked Suddy where he works as an interpreter, or, if they see an interpreter video circulating, they will ask if he takes that specific kind of work. For those queries, he emphasizes that, yes, having interpreters is important for access purposes; at the same time he makes clear that appropriate questions need to be asked in advance to determine that any interpreter hired has the correct qualifications for that job.

Enraptured by Failure

One analogy that arose repeatedly regarding the continued resonance for videos of fake interpreters was that of a train wreck or car crash. Marci, Sylvia, Lawrence, Gertie, Seymour and Eugene each addressed how people stop to look at an accident, they slow down, keep looking, or even read about it afterwards on the news.

Marci thinks that videos of fake interpreters tend to spread and be talked about in the same way as *“a bad car accident. When people find out that the interpreters are fake, they want to watch it. They’re like, ‘oh my gosh. Oh, but this looks so real!’ Like they don’t know.”*

Sylvia explained that people are enraptured by failure:

I think why are people fascinated by car wrecks and people watch race car driving to watch them crash, not to watch them win a race. I think people like to see people fail. Makes me feel better about myself, I guess. I don’t know.

Lawrence considers how people view a car accident—that it is something people fixate on, unable to look away. This continued fascination on the videos (the problem), rather than seeking solutions then prevents broader changes from happening:

I think it’s because you sometimes can’t look away from the car crash. You just shake your head and roll your eyes and go why are we still here, and get down on how things seem not to be moving forward. So there’s a morbid fascination, possibly?

Gertie thinks the fascination around fake interpreters is rooted in the *“fascination with the derailing train that you just can’t look away from.”* Beyond that fascination is also, she feels, an underlying attitude amongst those unconnected to the Deaf community that *“Deaf people need to be fixed and helped and supported. All that fun audist attitude that so many people have.”*

Seymour agrees, calling it *“firetruck curiosity”* and likens the continued viewing of these events to people who chase after firetrucks to see what emergency situation is unfolding.

Eugene compared the phenomenon of these viral videos as car and train wrecks that attract attention from passersby. While he recognizes that some people may fixate on disasters happening, it is not an approach that appeals to him:

I’m not attracted to looking at a car wreck. I’m not attracted to looking at a train wreck, so for me these are train wrecks at the professional level. I’m not interested in that, but certainly others do like to take advantage of those.

He addressed other videos that have gone viral on social media—that of the man in Florida interpreting during Hurricane Irma in 2017 and who has a Deaf sibling, and Lydia Callis, a qualified professional interpreter who went viral when interpreting for press conferences during Hurricane Sandy in 2012. Eugene has spoken about both situations with people in the Deaf community and recalled conversations where Deaf people had shared that *“they don’t like that viral piece because it brings negative attention and feeds perceptions about their language that are not accurate.”*

This chapter has demonstrated a plurality of thoughts and reactions interpreters have in relation to the viral and circulating videos of fake, incompetent, and underqualified interpreters. In the next section, I explore these thoughts from a synoptic viewpoint, examining unique

connections amongst common perspectives, and determining broader implications for what this study has shown.

Chapter 6: Discussion

Three distinct perspectives emerged over the course of analysis of participant interviews conducted for this thesis: interview subjects looking inwards at themselves (intrapersonal perspectives), the impact that these videos have on interpreters' clients and the Deaf community, and the outside experience: how the videos impact those who are unconnected to the interpreting profession or Deaf communities.

Within the interpreters' intrapersonal perspectives, a concern over the reputation of interpreters and their own sense of what it means to be a professional were stated to include: professional education, active credentials, experience in the environment they are working in, and having enough information to make an educated decision about suitability to the work. There is no college of interpreters the same way that there exists a college of medicine for doctors or law society for lawyers. While there are national professional organizations such as the Canadian Association of Sign Language Interpreters (CASLI), membership is not mandatory and interpreters can work professionally without being a member of a professional organization⁶⁰.

Although no Deaf people were interviewed during the course of this research, some interpreters discussed conversations that they have had with Deaf friends or clients. Dene, having grown up with Deaf parents, feels that fake interpreters prey on the Deaf community. She talked about how these fake interpreters and the videos of them diminish the value of the Deaf community who need capable interpreters in order to understand what is going on. Ruth raised the issue that fake and incompetent interpreters (in videos or at face-to-face assignments) put more labour requirements on the Deaf community to identify problematic interpreters. Some participants talked about the harmful effects of these videos on the Deaf community, for example

⁶⁰ The exception to this is if a province has legally protected titles as in British Columbia. See pages 32–33 for further details on title protection in British Columbia.

Gertie analyzing the interpretation at the 2017 Tampa Police press conference and noting the errors that skewed meaning significantly and incorrectly; since the mother of one of the victims is Deaf, this had a direct impact on her ability to access that information.

For those unconnected to the Deaf community or the interpreting profession, the videos can be a catalyst to learn more about the interpreting profession but they can also serve to create further harm. Irv addressed the ignorance of the general public, where if a person never needs an interpreter, they may not know what the profession is about, noting how the videos bring “*ridicule to the profession*”. Gertie made mention of disdainful comments she has heard in the course of her work that question directly how clients can be sure she isn’t one of the fake interpreters seen in media videos. Both Gertie and Suddy referenced the value of their professional credentials and ensuring they are ready to be produced if asked for them.

Video Views

In the initial research I conducted leading up to the interviews for this thesis, I identified eight videos that contained fake, incompetent, or underqualified interpreters whose work had been captured on video and were then circulated online. Five of these videos (2013 South Africa, 2014 Toronto Police, 2017 Manatee County, 2017 Tampa, and 2020 Dallas) were at events that were broadcast to the public: emergency weather warnings or police announcements related to public safety. At these types of events, the interpreter is front and centre, usually next to the speaker, to ensure that the interpretation can be seen clearly, which accords equal status to both languages (Schmitt, 2017). The general public is strongly encouraged to pay attention to, which may account for a greater focus on them than those on a smaller or regional scale⁶¹.

⁶¹ It is worth noting here that in the case of some large-scale media events, for example the Super Bowl, the sign language component is either not shown on screen throughout, or large swaths of a sign language performance is cut to focus on other images (e.g. football players). Over the past several years, a separate stream is required to see the sign language performance or interpretation of the anthem into ASL. For more information see Kim (2020).

One of the questions that was asked of each participant was which instances of fake interpretations were known to them. The 2013 Mandela Funeral occurrence was mentioned in the introduction of the interview, so it was unsurprising that all 11 discussed that event specifically. Table 3 below outlines which interview participants were aware of and able to identify the 7 others. The 2014 Toronto Police press conference was only identified by Lawrence, who is located in Central Canada (Ontario & Québec), the region where that occurrence took place. The 2016 Peruvian Government panel was only mentioned by Eugene, who also recalled hearing about video footage of a fake interpreter in Colombia⁶² (though he could not recall the specific year it happened; he believes it was prior to 2019).

Table 3: Video Views

	Ruth	Suddy	Gertie	Mickey	Dene	Lawrence	Seymour	Eugene	Sylvia	Irv	Marci	TOTALS
2013 South Africa	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	11
2014 Toronto Police						1						1
2016 Peru								1				1
2017 Manatee County	1		1	1		1		1	1	1	1	8
2017 Tampa			1	1		1				1		4
2020 Dallas												0
2022 South Africa												0
2024 Los Angeles												0

In addition to Eugene, two other participants recalled videos that had not been identified by my initial research. Lawrence recalled a video emerging out of Québec *“in 2012, the [Québec] Minister for Seniors whose name is Marguerite Blais filmed this video message wishing everyone a merry Christmas beside an LSQ interpreter who was unprofessional and incomprehensible.”* Marci had mentioned hearing about an incomprehensible interpreter working in New Orleans, LA, during a Hurricane, but could not recall specific details⁶³.

⁶² I was not able to find any news coverage discussing this occurrence in Colombia.

⁶³ I was not able to find any news coverage discussing problematic interpreters during the New Orleans, LA hurricanes.

Ruth was aware that there were incomprehensible interpreters during hurricane warnings in Canada and the United States but did not identify any specific examples.

I had expected that the 2017 Tampa, FL press conference for the arrest of a serial killer would be addressed most after the Mandela funeral, but only four participants (Gertie, Mickey, Lawrence and Irv) mentioned they were aware of this occurrence. By far, the first occurrence in 2017 in Manatee County, FL in relation to warnings for Hurricane Irma was identified more often with 8 participants mentioning it (Ruth, Gertie, Mickey, Lawrence, Eugene, Sylvia, Irv, and Marci). In the Manatee County video, the interpreter stands next to the podium and is wearing a yellow shirt. As a common practice, sign language interpreters wear a clothing colour that contrasts the skin tone of the person interpreting so that the signs are more visible. That this man wore a shirt that was brightly coloured might be one reason that it sticks in the minds of professional interpreters. The proximity of this man to the Deaf community may also be another factor, since his brother is Deaf. Also, this press conference was meant to warn the Deaf community about impending emergency procedures for Hurricane Irma, which would have a proportionately larger impact on the Deaf community and their safety than information related to the arrest of a serial killer (even though in the latter case, the mother of one of the victims is Deaf).

Two of the viral video examples have arisen frequently in conversations I have had with people not connected to the interpreting field or the Deaf community: the 2013 Mandela Memorial and the 2017 Tampa police press conference. These are two fake interpreters who happen to be Black, and both of whom have equally bizarre and provocative backstories. Thamsanqa Jantjie (2013 Mandela funeral interpreter) had a violent past, was tried for murder, spent time in a mental institution, and hallucinated during his time on stage at the memorial.

Derlyn Roberts (2017 Tampa police press conference) had been convicted multiple times for fraud and was arrested again sometime after the press conference she interpreted. Research on the intersection of racialization and interpretation has found that racism and seeing things through a “white gaze” can translate to the marginalization of Black interpreters (Snoddon & Wilkinson, 2023, p. 373). There is a higher propensity for racialized interpreters to experience harm from the continued circulation of stories about “fake interpreters who happen to be Black” (Player, 2020)—like the examples of Jantjie and Roberts. The way these stories are talked about and circulated keeps them in the category of the exotic, even while it is widely addressed in mainstream media (Ellcessor, 2015, p. 586). I read all of this as media continuing to focus on the racial dimensions of these stories, rather than the issues of access that these stories exemplify.

The videos discussed here that circulated widely within the Deaf community, amongst interpreters and the public at large are visible examples—part of a phenomenon that is not new. In addressing the 2020 Dallas County unqualified⁶⁴ interpreters on the news, *The Daily Moth* stated that though that particular example was caught on tape and received attention, it is not an isolated incident: “in the Deaf community [sic] we have seen multiple instances of this happening in different places” (2020, 9:16-9:22). This is a statement that was echoed by Suddy, Gertie, Marci, Irv and Lawrence in the “here we go again” section of the analysis, as well as affirmed by Saunders (2016) on a scholarly level addressing the numerous videos that have circulated on social media over the last decade.

The 2020 Dallas County example was not addressed by any of the participants, nor was the 2022 occurrence in South Africa or the 2024 occurrence in Los Angeles. The case in Dallas County was only covered by *The Daily Moth*; outside of a few posts on social media, there was

⁶⁴ “Unqualified” is the term used by *The Daily Moth* in this news story.

not substantial coverage of the event. The 2022 occurrence in South Africa was only covered in a single news segment on YouTube that I was able to find (Newzroom Afrika, 2022). Given the sheer volume of coverage of the earlier event in South Africa at the 2013 funeral of Nelson Mandela it seems reasonable that another event on a much smaller regional scale would not be as memorable as one that was broadcast worldwide. The 2024 occurrence in Los Angeles was also not identified by any of the participants, which might be due to its coverage only by two social media influencers, rather than news media corporations. Had a participant been connected to (or following) either Jon Urquhart or Elizabeth Harris on their social media channels, it is possible that this 2024 video would have come to their attention.

Comfort with Recording

Seven participants are open to being recorded during their interpreting work (Ruth, Suddy, Gertie, Mickey, Lawrence, Sylvia, and Irv). Three participants (Seymour, Marci and Dene) are open to being recorded during their work if they are informed in advance; for Dene, she must be aware of the purpose for recording her work.

Eugene is not open to being recorded at all. Over the course of Eugene's interview, he demonstrated an awareness for the global effects of circulating and viral videos of interpreters, raising examples from countries including South Africa, Peru, Colombia, Canada, and the United States. This awareness of both viral videos and the policies that impact interpreting services there and in other countries suggests that knowing more about the phenomenon of viral videos and the way that people react to them may lead to the desire to remove the chance of that happening to oneself even in the event that they are a qualified professional.

With the ubiquity of recording devices amongst the general population, I wonder if some interpreters have accepted the fate that they will inevitably be recorded and have resigned

themselves to that. Some interpreters may feel put off by being recorded, as in the example that Lawrence shared of his colleague who wanted to run away from their job after seeing cameras pointing at them—though they stayed because they were paid to be there. This perspective referred to the way that other videos of interpreters have been de-contextualized, spliced together, and commented on at length by people on social media. As mentioned in the introduction and description of videos, one of the more extreme examples of this de-contextualized analysis was the commentary on the work of professional interpreter Lydia Callis during press conferences warning of the dangers of Hurricane Sandy in 2012.

Ethical Quandaries

Marci talked about addressing skill-set-to-job mismatches in one-on-one conversations with colleagues. The Canadian Association of Sign Language Interpreters (CASLI) Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Professional Conduct states under Tenet 1.2 Professional Conduct that interpreters will only accept work that they are qualified for:

1.2.4 Members shall take into account the limitations of their abilities, knowledge and resources available to them prior to accepting work. They will remove themselves from a given setting when they realize an inability to provide professional service.

1.2.6 Members are accountable to CASLI and to their local chapter affiliate for their professional and ethical conduct. Further, members are responsible to discuss and resolve, in a professional manner, issues arising from breaches of ethical or professional conduct on the part of individual colleagues after they are observed. In the case where these breaches are potentially harmful to others or chronic, and attempts to resolve the issue have not been successful, such conduct should be reported to CASLI and/or their local chapter affiliate in a manner directed by the appropriate grievance procedure.

Some people are uncomfortable with confrontation, but if members see something as unethical, the code of conduct says that it must be called out. Marci speaking to colleagues one-on-one is part of her effort to prevent an ethical violation from happening where she sees potential for substandard service provision.

(Re-)Training Interpreters

Lawrence mentioned one of his mentors suggesting that (re-)training the problematic interpreters from the videos could be a way to increase the available supply of interpreting services providers. In a video reel created in response to the fake interpreter in 2024 on a Los Angeles news program, reel, Jon Urquhart (2024) said that he didn't want "to deter [this girl] away from learning more American Sign Language and eventually becoming an American Sign Language interpreter", which is aligned with the sentiments of Lawrence's mentor. This perspective seems to be unique, as none of the other participants suggested that (re-)training interpreters was a potential solution to the problem. Instead, there was agreement amongst the participants of this study that viral videos of fake interpreters cause harm to the interpreting profession, the Deaf community, and public knowledge about interpreters.

Security Concerns

Some of the concerns raised during this research were institutional in nature. Policies and legal regulations affect the provision of interpreting services. There are some quality assurance protocols in place, but this largely depends on the entity requiring services, and the knowledge of those who are responsible for booking interpreters. Credentials or qualifications of interpreters are not often asked for or verified, and Lawrence believes this to be the root cause for fake interpreting. If credential checks were in place and required, then it would not be possible to hire someone who is not qualified for the work they are meant to be doing.

Several participants expressed concern over how security was handled at the 2013 Mandela memorial, where a fake interpreter who was mentally unwell and incapable of performing the work—and about whom the Deaf community had previously complained—was hired. They wondered about security clearances, the booking process, and secret service protection: how these security protocols might have failed, which created such a colossal failure of access. Saunders (2016) affirmed that this event clearly showcased the need to have “an effective method of screening a sign language interpreter’s fluency in signed language” (p. 4). Lawrence compared this situation to how interpreters’ credentials tend to not be checked at banks or in medical settings in Canada, as there is a high propensity for harm in these situations. Eugene acknowledged that there are established standards in North America and Europe that aim to prevent this type of failure of access from happening, and it is imperative to incorporate Deaf perspectives and knowledge into hiring practices.

More than half of the participants addressed security protocols that ought to be in place to restrict access to only those qualified to interpret. Ruth explained that there is usually some type of security clearance required to work with high profile people or politicians. Gertie, who worked with former Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, does not remember being vetted at all prior to working that event. Mickey shared that interpreters sometimes have open access to secured areas simply by identifying oneself as an interpreter. Eugene addressed how corruption within governments in South Africa, Colombia and Peru was one of the core causes of their issues with hiring fake interpreters, as each country had a viral video (or more than one video) of a fake interpreter at some point between 2013-2022.

The Comedy vs the Car Wreck

One unique dichotomy that emerged from the analysis was perspectives on the fake interpreter videos—in particular the 2013 Mandela funeral event—as either a situation to derive humour from or to fixate on in the same way that people stop to stare at a car crash on the road: a form of disaster entertainment⁶⁵.

Ruth, Seymour and Sylvia each reacted with amusement to the 2013 Mandela funeral interpreter's work, whereas Eugene did not find any humour in the situation. While Ruth believes humour can continue to be derived from that event, and can joke about it now, Seymour realized that this would not be good for the interpreting profession. Eugene also talked about how he can be defensive when people try to derive humour from what had happened, noting the negative consequences for the Deaf community and the interpreting profession.

Marci, Sylvia, Lawrence, Gertie, Seymour and Eugene all discussed the tendency for people to fixate on the various videos of fake, incompetent, and underqualified interpreters in the same way that people tend to focus on car wrecks and the fascination that accompanies wanting to find out what happened. As addressed earlier in the literature review (pages 45-46), the general public, perhaps encouraged by television shows and movies, tends to be fascinated by people being able to successfully fake some kind of job or activity. Popular culture has celebrated fakery, and so the concept of being drawn to those videos that show sign language interpreting failures seems to sit comfortably within that same genre. Consider, for example, the Netflix series *Inventing Anna* (2022) which was based on the true story of Anna Sorokin who fooled “New York’s high society, investment bankers, and real estate moguls into believing that

⁶⁵ The term “disaster entertainment” is also used by Hou and Robinson (2020) to describe how any sign languages appearing in interpreted media have been preyed upon as a form of entertainment for hearing people, rather than looked at as manifestation of a Deaf person's right to accessible information.

[she] was a German heiress⁶⁶” (Marcus, 2022, p. 22); Anna was apparently paid \$320,000 by Netflix for the rights to her story (Shamsian, 2021). Other examples from popular culture include television series like *To Tell the Truth* (1956-1968; 2016-2022), Netflix series *The Tinder Swindler*⁶⁷ (2022) and *Ripley* (2024), along with films like *Ocean’s Eleven* (2001), *Heartbreakers* (2001), *Catch Me if You Can* (2002), *Ocean’s Twelve* (2004), *Ocean’s Thirteen* (2007), and *Ocean’s 8* (2018).

AI Considerations

Eugene addressed the issue of artificial intelligence (AI) interpreters, and what language models are being used to train AI avatars to interpret into sign language. He noted that while interpreters should not be used as language models, he was aware that it will likely happen anyways. Within the interpreting profession and Deaf communities, it is understood that Deaf people should be the language models used as signed language is the language of their community. Irv, too, raised the issue of AI-generated interpreters in the context of an event requiring the services of two interpreters where a hearing client suggested he work with an AI co-interpreter. He dismissed this as an option, but the fact that it was suggested as a possible solution in the first place demonstrates that there is not a general understanding of why a qualified human interpreter would be needed.

Challenges related to AI are not unique to the interpreting profession. Technology that seeks to replace human-held positions is abundant in many fields, and the concept of AI replacing human workers is not fiction; it is becoming reality. One question I have been asked more than once is whether AI will replace my job as an interpreter, either with avatar-type

⁶⁶ The original news article that exposed Sorokin is by Pressler (2018) and can be viewed here: <https://www.thecut.com/article/how-anna-delvey-tricked-new-york.html>

⁶⁷ *The Tinder Swindler* (2022) tells the story of a man who conned women he met on dating website Tinder out of millions of dollars.

interpreters, hologram interpreters, translation technology that employs machine-learning models, or with inventions like sign language gloves.

Although there have not been videos of AI interpreters in circulation that I am aware of, one video that has circulated through social media over the last decade is related to the SignAloud gloves invented by University of Washington undergraduate students Thomas Pryor and Navid Azodi in 2016. Their invention aims to translate American Sign Language (ASL) into spoken English. The gloves rely on hand position and movement to transmit information to a computer that then outputs an English word or phrase via an audio speaker. While their intention is to bridge the communication gap between hearing and Deaf people, the gloves work only from ASL to English, the signs used by the creators to demonstrate the technology are often times non-standard (e.g. handshape of a sign is correct but movement of the handshape to convey the sign is not), altogether wrong (e.g. signing TRANSLATE but machine interprets it as PRIZE), and seems to work only with signs in English word order (which breaks grammatical rules of ASL) (AI Innovations Hub, 2026). The gloves in this video have no way of taking into account a signer's torso position (which could be used to indicate time, comparisons, or other discourse markers), and non-manual signals which occur on the face: eyebrows indicating the topic of a sentence, whether the utterance is a question and what type of question (for example a yes/no question or who, what, where, when, why, how; rhetorical or not).

Criticism was levelled by the Linguistics Department of the University of Washington that the creation of these gloves was audistic (discriminatory against Deaf people) since spoken English is clearly prioritized in the design, and not including the Deaf community into the project's development process meant that ASL in this context was being culturally appropriated (Hutter & Lawrence, 2021, p. 152). At a presentation about their early prototype in 2016, Pryor

recognized that the gloves fall short of incorporating the syntactic structure of ASL and stated that future iterations of the technology could incorporate its target community (Deaf people) in the discussion (Lemelson MIT, 2016). Though the gloves have been lauded as a game-changing technology, there is little assurance that their aim to make Deaf people feel more included will be successful as the device functions only from sign-to-English, not English-to-sign.

The push towards AI interpreters/interpreting and the technology that removes the actual human interpreter from the equation is a problem. When I trained as an interpreter at George Brown College (2009-2012)⁶⁸, my instructors emphasized the importance of interpersonal communication, eye contact, and building rapport with the people in the room. These are behaviours that AI is as-of-yet incapable of. Additionally, Deaf people have the right to request which interpreters they prefer to interpret for them; the decision to use an AI interpreter rather than a human interpreter known to those Deaf people is a problem since it removes their agency. I question as well whether a feedback mechanism to enhance the work of an AI interpreter during an interpreted event would be possible, or even whether an AI interpreter could acclimate to the language demands of Deaf people in the room⁶⁹.

Language Use in Interviews

While the interviews with participants were conducted in English, every single participant used American Sign Language (ASL) at least once—whether specific signs,

⁶⁸ The program I studied, the Advanced Diploma in American Sign Language (ASL)-English Interpreting, is no longer offered and has been replaced by the Honours Bachelor of Interpretation (American Sign Language – English). George Brown College has since been renamed George Brown Polytechnic. Further information about this interpreting program can be found here: <https://www.georgebrown.ca/programs/honours-bachelor-of-interpretation-american-sign-language-english-program-c302>

⁶⁹ The language use of Deaf people varies widely along a spectrum of pure ASL to ASL signs with an English-like grammatical structure. Sometimes services are required with all English words mouthed in English word order, and other times services are required that utilize ASL signs with ASL grammar. Generally, when showing up to an interpreting job (or when negotiating contracts), specific language use preferences and requirements are discussed in order to ensure a correct fit between interpreter and clients.

grammatical features, or discourse markers. All the participants were working professional interpreters who work between English and ASL as bimodal bilinguals. Dene and Seymour self-identified as heritage signers and Irv grew up with Deaf people in his family, so ASL has been a part of their lives for perhaps longer than some other interpreters who elected to participate in this sample.

In his interview, Irv tended to switch back and forth between storytelling as narrator and taking on the characters themselves, using direct address. For example, in telling a story about talking to clients, he sets the scene, then role-shifts as if talking to a client, before becoming narrator again. This is a grammatical structure employed in American Sign Language where the speaker uses role-shifting by changing the position of their body in space (looking in a different direction, leaning to one side, embodying different mannerisms or metanotative qualities⁷⁰) in order to take on other characters in the story outside of themselves.

When addressing her thoughts about retirement, Ruth used multiple ASL signs alongside spoken English utterances, as demonstrated in Transcript 1. In this sample, she considers a future where she may not be able to continue to pursue the same level of work she currently does, pondering whether others will inform her that the quality of her work is degrading. The English and ASL have been separated out, with ASL signs capitalized and enclosed with square brackets, and spaces added in the English sentences to indicate the space where the ASL signs were produced. Where body shifts are marked specifically, this indicates a comparison or contrast situation where one topic is signed in space in front of the body on one side and a second topic is signed in space in front of the other side of the body. A “+” symbol indicates a repeated sign.

⁷⁰ Metanotative qualities refer to aspects outside of the content of what a speaker says that impact how an audience perceives the person who is speaking. This topic was addressed in a paper presented by Willie P. Isham at the 1985 National Convention of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (Isham, 1986, p. 119).

Transcript 1: Ruth: 29:36-30:29

ENG: ...and even for me when I get older. Who's gonna have a conversation with me to say
Ruth, I think you're—I think the time of you doing

ASL: [TIME PERIOD]

ENG: you know speaking notes

ASL: [SCRIPT]

ENG: scripted

ASL: [PUT-WORDS-ON-PAGE]

ENG: fast paced things that are relevant to social media and

ASL: [SIGNING-QUICKLY]

ENG: I'm like backing—I'm like getting close to retirement, right?

ASL: [HANGING-BACK] [HANGING-BACK]

ENG: and maybe I don't know the things anymore.

ASL: [DON'T-KNOW]

ENG: I don't have my finger on the pulse of the community, and who's gonna tell me that
maybe my time should go back to

ASL: [TIME-PERIOD; sign shifts backwards right-to-left]

ENG: one-on-one interpreting and more in the community and more grassroots

ASL: [ONE-ON-ONE] [GROUP] [GROUP]

ENG: That I would be a better fit for that than this viral interpreting.

ASL: [body-shift-right; GROUP] [body-shift-left; GENERAL]

ENG: I don't know who's responsible for that and am I gonna be the kind of person

ASL: [ANALYZE + + +]

ENG: who can actually take a look at myself and know when that time has come?

ASL: [ANALYZE + + + + +]

ENG: Cause I've worked with people who are not doing that. They're not doing that

ASL: [ANALYZE ++++]

ENG: self-evaluation. And they're just continuing to work until they retire.

ASL: [ANALYZE] [PROCESS-FORWARD]

The articulation patterns of people who are bimodal bilinguals (having command of both a spoken language and a signed language) has been documented in a few research articles. In a study of hearing individuals who grew up in Deaf families, Bishop & Hicks (2005, p. 189) note that the dearth of research on this subject may stem from recent recognition of sign languages as bona fide languages. Further, they argue, “It is not unusual for bilingual people to code switch when talking to other bilinguals with the same language knowledge” (Bishop & Hicks, 2005, p. 196). This code switching (changing how one speaks/signs to match other interlocutors) can happen at the beginning, middle, or end of an utterance (Bishop & Hicks, 2005, p. 197). Shook & Marian (2012) found that “hearing bimodal bilinguals commonly produce code-blends, which are simultaneous productions of spoken and signed lexical items” (p. 315). Emmorey et. al (2008) studied 11 ASL-English hearing bilinguals who had grown up in families with two Deaf parents, and their findings indicated that code blending took place more often than code switching, “and the majority of code-blends expressed semantically equivalent information in the two languages” (Emmorey et. al, 2008, p. 57). The signs used by Ruth that are indicated in Transcript 1 demonstrate this semantic equivalence over the majority of signs used.

One challenge that arose during the transcription of interviews was noting two different language productions when they were used simultaneously. Howerton-Fox and Kretschmer (2023) addressed the creation of multilingual transcripts in their study of teachers at a Swedish Deaf school who used three languages: English, Swedish, and Teckenspråk (the signed language used in Sweden). While transcription in multiple languages is beyond the scope of this thesis, various methods for transcribing multiple languages used during research interviews is an important area for future research, particularly when working with bimodal bilingual individuals.

Broader Implications

For researchers considering media misrepresentations of interpreters or others, or who are looking to apply this type of research to other fields outside of interpreting, analyzing the view from multiple angles and the issues that arise is both relevant and advised. In this study, themes that emerged from this research can be categorized into three perspectives: those in the field, those they work with, and how this is all seen from the outside. If applying this approach to the study of high school teachers, for example, consideration of the teachers' perspectives could be explored, along with the perspectives those teachers share about the students, their parents and the administrative staff, and perceptions of what those external to the school environment may opine on or ask about. This multi-pronged perspective allows for the building-on of interconnected and multilayered experiences, allowing participants to elucidate their own perspectives as well as how others perceive them.

The videos that are addressed in this research take up space very differently amongst interpreters, the Deaf community, and those people not connected to either Deaf people or interpreters. For interpreters, the videos hold multiple spaces: they are a point of tension and frustration, emphasizing the barriers in access, and they actively cause harm. For some interpreters, the videos have galvanized them to act and educate people about why they are problematic and the issues associated with them. The videos are also a pressure point of trauma. The acknowledgement by Suddy, Gertie, Marci, Irv, Lawrence, Dene and Sylvia that the videos which have circulated on social media are not unique but part of a larger pattern is telling. Participants variably expressed annoyance, frustration, incredulity, shock, disgust, despair and—in some cases—amusement about the videos in circulation.

While for Sylvia and Dene these media artifacts remain in the past and have not been brought up in conversation recently, both recognized the harm to the Deaf community. For Sylvia, her feelings of needing to be “on guard” manifested as worries about her own professional reputation: that even after having worked as an interpreter for over 40 years, she does not want to feel like she is the person incapable of producing coherent work. Dene succinctly stated her feelings on seeing this work and her being “*disgusted by people who can call themselves professionals and don’t understand or see the impact of the work that they’re not providing. Access that they’re not providing. It is devaluing. It’s harmful*”. The videos are a reminder of the work that must be done to ensure that these types of situations do not happen again and that full access is maintained and provided in order to appropriately serve the Deaf community and protect Deaf people from harm.

For Deaf people, these types of videos (containing interpreters who are fake, incompetent, or underqualified) are a known occurrence—this type of situation happens regularly. The interpreting profession is not regulated, meaning there is a higher chance that this type of situation arises more easily than in regulated professions where practitioners are registered on a central database and there are clear guidelines for qualifications, professional expectations and standards. For those unconnected to either interpreters or Deaf people, the videos are an item of novelty, fascination, and interest.

As a professional interpreter myself, I was able to listen to what participants were saying, use my extra linguistic knowledge, professional expertise, and past experience to frame the answers that were offered. This meant that I was capable of understanding nuances related to the profession of interpreting, and I could understand either language (English and ASL) that was used. The fact that I am also an interpreter—being of the profession that I was researching—

added, I believe, a degree of trust. During the ethics approval process, I had stated that my name should be on the consent forms rather than a more formal or broad term such as “the research team”. Including my name and identifying myself as a member of this group declared to interested participants that I would understand the nuances of them talking about their profession, current trends and issues in the field, and references within the unique culture of sign language interpreters.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This study explored how circulating videos of fake, incompetent, and underqualified sign language interpreters impacted professional sign language interpreters working in Canada. Interpreters provide services bridging the cultural and linguistic divide between Deaf and hearing persons in a way that is maximally supportive of the Deaf community. At the same time, interpreters must be attentive to their own needs and their capacities to provide quality service. Participants in this research addressed the impact these videos played on their professional self-image, their vocation as community service providers, and the impetus to support people with various access needs. The findings of this study also demonstrated a relationship between the profession or vocation of interpreting and its crossover into the personal lives of interpreters.

Thematic Analysis

Six themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the interviews: professionalism, the education piece, misunderstandings by non-community members, impact on the Deaf community, emotional exploration and revisitation of trauma, and quality assurance protocols. The professionalism section addressed concerns that participants had about the reputation of the interpreters and the work they do. The videos of fake, incompetent, and underqualified interpreters often did not depict professional ethical behaviour, which participants understood to damage the reputation of professional interpreters. While endeavouring to build relationships based on trust, the spread of those videos caused some clients to question whether that trust was dependable. There is a clear need for interpreters to be seen behaving as professionals; this also extends to collegial behaviour such as not jumping to conclusions when an interpreter's work falls short of expectations; when interpreters have more information, they are better able to give

grace. Also addressed in this section were contemplations about how to recognize one's declining skills, and the effects of AI on the interpreting profession.

The education piece dealt with how videos of fake, incompetent, and underqualified interpreters can be capitalized on—using the attention of the general public to educate about proper practices, quality assurance, the need for professional interpreters, or why interpreters are even hired at all. This section also dealt with when to educate those external to the interpreting profession and the Deaf community, as well as when colleague-to-colleague education is needed. Here, a suggestion of how to solve the problems created by these circulating videos was to train or re-train those depicted in the videos to meet professional qualification standards.

Misunderstandings by non-community members identified that the work of interpreters is largely misunderstood by those unconnected to the Deaf community or the interpreting profession. Videos of fake, incompetent, and underqualified interpreters have exacerbated this issue, compounding, in some cases, the labour that interpreters must take on to educate others about their job and counter ignorant comments such as those suggesting hiring people with only rudimentary knowledge of ASL as substitutes for professional interpreters. This section also identified misunderstandings around the role of an interpreter, the incorrect assumption that ASL is only a manually coded form of English (rather than a language unto itself), and the aesthetic perceptions of people who evaluate interpreters on the basis of looking pretty rather than whether the interpretations were accurate.

Impact on the Deaf community focused on the effects that videos of fake, incompetent, and underqualified interpreters have on interpreter-Deaf relationships and the Deaf community at large. Ethical standards, codes of ethics, and guidelines that govern professional conduct of interpreters are not widely understood outside of the profession. Substandard service provision

and the hiring of fake, incompetent, and underqualified interpreters results in errors and omissions within the interpretation—all of which is rooted in decisions related to hiring practices. Deaf people then bear the weight of these decisions in lack of access or interpretations that skew meaning.

Emotional exploration and revisitation of trauma gave space for interpreters to contemplate their emotions in relation to videos of fake, incompetent, and underqualified interpreters and their perceptions on the lack of access resulting in harm to the Deaf community. This theme incorporated not only what is felt by interpreters, but also the strategies they use to counteract or respond to what they are feeling, for example by empowering decision-making by the Deaf person as often as possible. This theme also touched upon how interpreters respond when audiences elect to record their work, and the inner dialogue of both wanting to escape but feeling it necessary to stay and complete the job they have been hired to do.

Quality assurance protocols focused on best practices to mitigate instances of (and viral videos of) fake, incompetent, and underqualified interpretation provision from happening. Participants stressed the need to have quality assurance protocols in place for hiring practices and support at events, ensuring competency for and suitability to the work, in addition to evaluations of services afterwards. Deaf people must be included in this process from start to finish; there must be a mechanism in place to ensure their involvement. Security clearances and protocols for working with interpreters on site (including where interpreters should be placed at an event to maximize access) need to be put in place in advance in order to protect consumers of the service.

Interest in the Failure of Others

The general public is not normally interested in seeing an interpreting job well done⁷¹. People enjoy watching failure and disaster, as discussed in the way numerous participants talked about the videos of fake, incompetent, and underqualified interpreters being akin to car crashes or train derailments. There is a fascination, a *schadenfreude*⁷² at seeing others fail. As Carty (2010) said:

it seems that the world is most interested in interpreters when they are working in fraught situations, confronting ethical dilemmas⁷³, and especially when they are breaking the rules. This seems to apply to interpreters in any language, not only sign language interpreters. (Carty, 2010)

This idea of being fascinated by failure is likely to occur more frequently and in a wider array of contexts. As filming others has become normalized, it seems inevitable that there will be professional deviations caught on camera.

When I have supervised ASL-English interpreting students during their placements or internships, teaching and mentoring them to advance their interpreting skills, one of the expectations was that they would not appear on camera or be in any place where they could be inadvertently recorded. Students are not yet qualified professionals and should not be doing on-

⁷¹ In a recent Facebook post, Sean Dietrich (2026) recognized the ASL interpreter he had seen on stage at the Savannah Book Festival. The comments section of the post reflects much of what was illuminated within this thesis. There are several comments referring to the beauty of ASL, with responses that explain the facial expressions of people signing in ASL. The post illuminates certain challenges faced by the Deaf community, as well as recognizing that the interpreter is there for access—for a job well done.

⁷² German word meaning happiness at the misfortune of others.

⁷³ In 2010 a video was uploaded to YouTube depicting a Deaf person mugging a stranger, using a BSL interpreter to interpret his demands for money into English. The video was meant to satirize a UK government program that provided interpreters for Deaf people doing their work. Writer Ben Green thought that “taken to its logical conclusion, that Deaf criminals would have the same access needs as anyone else!” The Mager (2010) video can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=us7nAFSfo1U>

camera work (which requires a greater degree of skill)⁷⁴. As much as possible, we work to set those students up for success, not failure. While this thesis did not set out to create a lesson plan for teaching interpreting students (or professional interpreters) about the harmful effects of videos of fake, incompetent, and underqualified interpreters, a lesson plan or workshop may be developed from its findings. I am also aware that some interpreting professors already incorporate teaching this topic into their class curricula so that students are aware of the phenomenon itself and are able to articulate why they are not yet best fit for recorded work (C. Kennedy, personal communication, February 7, 2026).

Limitations

This study was undertaken with a small sample of 11 sign language interpreters in Canada who had been working full-time in the profession since at least 2012. Given the small sample of interpreters interviewed, results are not generalizable across the population of interpreters in Canada. The sample included participants from central Canada (Ontario and Québec) and the prairie provinces (Alberta, Manitoba, Saskatchewan), but not from British Columbia, Northern territories (Yukon, Northwest Territories, Nunavut), or the Atlantic provinces (Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland & Labrador). Additionally, out of respect for participant privacy, I did not ask about specific information relevant for determining professional qualifications. Research questions were designed in advance, however, in order to mitigate the potential loss of relevant information, at the end of

⁷⁴ George Brown Polytechnic's interpreter training program also offers Volunteer Student Interpreting Services (VSIS) for specific requests that are suitable for a not-yet-graduated student in their fourth and final year of the program. Students hired through VSIS are also not allowed to be recorded. For more information about VSIS see George Brown Polytechnic (2026) at: <https://www.georgebrown.ca/community-services-interdisciplinary-studies/deaf-deafblind-studies/volunteer-student-interpreting-services-faq>

each interview I asked the participant, “Do you have anything else that you want to add?” This question invited participants to share any additional relevant information they wanted to include.

The interpreters interviewed were all hearing (non-Deaf) and worked as ASL-English interpreters. Interpreters with other language pairings were not included in this study (La langue des signes québécoise (LSQ)-French, or Indigenous Sign Language pairings), due to the limited scope of this MA thesis. Deaf interpreters and Deaf consumers of interpreting services were also not included in this study, yet their contributions to this area of knowledge would be relevant and beneficial in order to ascertain a clearer picture of the broad spectrum impact the phenomenon of fake, incompetent, and underqualified interpreters has on all stakeholders. Also, since the method of analysis (narrative inquiry) required me to think through life experiences of the participants, I reasoned that in this context a Deaf researcher (in a future study) would be better equipped to capture the nuance of potential Deaf participants than I, as a hearing person, could do.

Further, I did not ask participants about ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, or racial background. Given the increased emphasis on identity politics and appropriate representation between interpreters and the groups they work with, this information may have been helpful for understanding experiences related to this phenomenon by specific demographic groups. Finally, the call for research participants was only distributed on the Canadian Association of Sign Language Interpreters (CASLI) list. While this is the largest professional interpreter organization in Canada, membership is not a requirement for working as an interpreter. Thus, the reach of the call for participants was limited to this organization or others who became familiar with the study through word of mouth.

Directions for Future research

This research sets a model for how professionals in any field can assess responses to media about pseudo professionals or those deviating from professional norms in that field. Professionals (in this study sign language interpreters) have a more nuanced perspective than those on the outside, and their experiences are invaluable for a close reading of how viral and circulating videos impact them, their clients or consumers, and other stakeholders in those relationships.

This study focused on videos of fake, incompetent, and underqualified interpreters, and future study is needed to assess what happens when videos of qualified professional interpreters circulate and spread widely. For example, when videos of professional interpreters like Lydia Callis spread, what type of impact does that have on professional interpreters and correspondingly the Deaf community? Is the impact the same or is it different when it is a qualified interpreter rather than a pseudo-professional? Is education needed around these videos in the same way? Are there still misunderstandings from non-community members, and are those different from the ones identified in this study?

As I ponder the effects of viral videos on social media, I consider, too, whatever positive effects might come out of representation and exposure to various audiences, particularly if the interpreters represented in the viral videos are qualified professionals. I wonder whether videos depicting qualified interpreters would produce a similar type of effect: when audience members see qualified interpreters working, would they be inspired to become an interpreter themselves?

Most people have no idea what interpreters do, and the challenges inherent in moving meaning between two different languages. An interpreter is responsible for rendering from a source language (the language being interpreted from) the same concept/meaning with the same

impact in grammatically correct and culturally appropriate target language (the language being interpreted to). How does this understanding—or misunderstanding—of interpreters’ work impact how the general public views videos of interpreters on the internet? Why is it that some videos of interpreters go viral and circulate to hundreds of thousands (or millions) of people while others do not?

Closing Thoughts

Nahon & Hemsley (2013) write that “at some level we are all concerned about how others perceive us, what Goffman (1990) calls our *presentation of self*, [and] we may avoid sharing something because we don’t want others to know about it; we can act as gatekeepers for our own networks [emphasis in original]” (p. 20). This study encapsulates the clear impact that videos of fake, incompetent, and underqualified interpreters have on professional interpreters, the Deaf community, and outside perspectives on the interpreting profession. While the videos create opportunities for conversation, dialogue and education, they also act as pedagogical tools for the general public, increasing the labour that interpreters take on to counteract their harmful effects in the form of educating others while also increasing the labour to take care of themselves.

Social media posts and videos that circulate widely play a role in shaping conversations in professional, political, social, and cultural contexts. In considering the future of communication in all contexts, social media is unlikely to disappear from the landscape any time soon, and will have an enormous impact on the everyday lives of people as it continues to colonize our lives and our attention. Is it worthwhile to remain invested in social media to sit at the proverbial table and contribute to the dialogue therein? If one chooses to stay on social media, are there ways to mitigate the harmful effects engendered by the spread of damaging videos like those explored in this study? Is full disengagement from social media possible if

ubiquitous recording devices capture videos of us and place us back on those applications and platforms without our knowledge? Are videos of interpreters being used by AI platforms to create videos using an interpreter's likeness?

Today's 21st century world is one of interconnection. Social media platforms function as clusters of applications that connect people and circulate mass amounts of information rapidly. Surveillance technology through recording devices like smartphones produces the information that circulates; that circulation can have broad consequences for those impacted by its spread. As technology and platforms continue to evolve, the process by which information spreads may shift in ways that cannot currently be predicted. There is little doubt, however, that forms of surveillance will continue to grow, and this spread of information will further permeate our lives.

This thesis sits at the intersection of media studies and professional identity (or the sociology of professions), and this study has shown a connection point between two aspects of contemporary life: profession or vocation and circulating or viral media. This research identified that the circulation of videos of fake, incompetent, and underqualified interpreters can detrimentally affect sign language interpreters and the Deaf community, while at the same time bringing attention to a profession that remains largely invisible. While this study focused on ASL, sign language interpreters, and the Deaf community, the model applied is applicable to other videos impacting interpreters, and perhaps how viral or circulating videos also broadly affect those in other professional fields.

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