

# ON-SCREEN INTERPRETING

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## **Abstract**

This article reports on an ongoing project, which is testing the application of modern communication technology in the transmission of interpreted discourse. The article describes the rationale behind the project and presents results from a pilot survey where both interpreters and interlocutors report on their experience with on-screen interpreting. Although additional data are necessary in order to determine the true value of this medium in interpreted discourse, the current survey shows that on-screen interpreting may present a useful supplement to on-site interpreting, given that certain factors are controlled. Firstly, there are indications that the strategies for turn taking used in on-site interpreting are challenged during on-screen interpreting. A factor that needs attention is, furthermore, the number of persons present in the interlocutors' studio. Finally, the quality of the technical equipment and the bandwidth are likely to influence the success level of each transmission. The choice of equipment is determined by economic factors, however.

## **1. Introduction**

I use the term '*on-screen interpreting*' for the mode of communication described here. The term on-screen interpreting depicts a situation where the interlocutors sit together in one site, and are connected audio-visually via a television or telephone screen to the interpreter, who is located in a geographically remote site. On-screen interpreting thus forms an opposition to on-site interpreting, which is characterized by the interpreter's physical presence in the room – or at the table – together with the communicating parties (cf. Gentile et al. 1996, Ozolins 2000).

The field of interpreting is frequently referred to in terms of three major sub-categories, or rather, sub-arenas, since the basic criterion for classification is the arena or setting where the interpreting takes place. Hence, one commonly speaks of 'conference interpreting', 'courtroom interpreting' and 'community interpreting'. The current project deals with community interpreting—or what is also labeled public service interpreting, since it refers to encounters between public servants and their clients. In the definition chosen here, community interpreting refers to interpreting that enables the civil servant or professional to act in compliance with his duty to provide information and guidance to their clients, and to hear the client in the case before making a final decision (cf. Skaaden 2001).<sup>1</sup> In Norwegian legislation the civil servant's duty to communicate is stated in the Administrative Act, and in several special acts regulating the practices of different professions (e.g. doctors, lawyers,

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<sup>1</sup> It follows from the delineation of community interpreting chosen here that court interpreting is considered a special sub-type of community interpreting. This stance accordingly reflects the fact that the value of the concept 'legal protection' is not restricted to the confines of the courtroom (cf. the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UN [1948] 1978: 7).

psychologists, dentists, police servants) on the issue of information exchange in professional-client encounters. The awareness of the civil responsibility that follows from the principles just mentioned, contributed to the Norwegian authorities' decision to initiate the current project (cf. Utlendingsdirektoratet 1998).

## 2. Why On-Screen Interpreting?

For a society to reach what Ozolins (2000) labels 'a state of comprehensiveness' in its approach to community interpreting, three main components are necessary; i.e., organized services, interpreter training and accreditation. Norway has since the mid-seventies had public interpreting services (cf. Stuland Larsen & Melby 1997). Organized training of student interpreters was initiated at the University of Oslo in 1985 (cf. Skaaden 1999). Norway got an accreditation exam for interpreters in 1997 (cf. Mortensen 1998). The three components mentioned by Ozolins are, accordingly, present on the Norwegian scene of interpreting. Nevertheless, the field of community interpreting in Norway still faces many challenges (cf. Skaaden 1999). Some of the problems are rooted in the organization of the interpreting services (cf. Skaaden 2000), others are linked to demographic patterns and Norway's geography and topography. The communities in question are often small and close-knit societies where the members have ties at several levels of interaction. Accordingly, even if someone who possesses the skills necessary for taking on the interpreter function is at hand in the local community issues in terms of the interpreter's professional ethics and professional secrecy soon surface. In Norway distances, topography and a high price level make traveling time consuming and expensive also for interpreters and their customers. Hence, there is a general problem of interpreter availability.

In order to remedy the problem of interpreter availability interpreting has sometimes been carried out over the telephone (cf. e.g. Haabeth & Karlsen 2000). There are, however, indications that interpreting over the telephone is not satisfactory. Although little research has to my knowledge been carried out investigating the actual effects of telephone interpreting, studies on interpersonal cooperation indicate that mutual understanding drops during audio-only interaction. O'Malley et al. (1996), for instance, found that when subjects were cooperating on the same task, pairs who could also see each other were more efficient than pairs who could only hear each other. O'Malley et al.'s finding is quite in agreement with the interpreters' often voiced resistance towards audi-only solutions (cf. e.g. Mouzourakis 1996). Viaggio (1997: 285), who discusses the interpreter's urge for visual information, argues that the interpreter's need to see the interlocutors has to do with the fact that a thorough reading of the situation is "decisive in order to make out *deep*, as well as *indirect* and *direct intended sense*".

Of importance is, moreover, the fact that telephone interpreting raises issues of confidentiality and professional secrecy. Audio-only communication does not give the parties the possibility to examine whether someone may be eavesdropping, or even to control the identity of the interpreter. This aspect becomes of particular significance in our day and age of the cell-phone. Reporting on their experiences with telephone interpreting in psychiatry, Haabeth & Karlsen (2000), who otherwise argue in favor of telephone interpreting as an alternative to local interpreters, refer to instances where the interpreter was performing from a street corner, or was obviously driving his car while interpreting. In other instances the interpretation was disturbed by background voices or children crying, they report. In a growing market of private entrepreneurs who mediate interpreting services for profit, availability may soon be placed before user security. The aspects of confidentiality and user security, thus, represent a serious problem for telephone interpreting.

In Norway modern telecommunication systems have already been successfully tried out in doctor-patient encounters: i.e., in the project 'Telemedicine in North Norway' at the University Hospital of Tromsø. In this project, as reported for instance by Rinde et al. (1993), Pedersen et al. (1994) and Danneskiold-Samsøe et al. (1998), telecommunications bring rather sophisticated medical expertise to remote rural areas. Within the same framework, Gammon et al. (1996) surveyed the satisfaction of psychiatric personnel taking part in telemediated communication.<sup>2</sup>

Due to the nature of the skills involved in the activity of interpreting and the concentration level needed in performing the task, it cannot be taken for granted, however, that the new technology can be used without inhibiting the interpreter's performance to a degree that is not defensible. In her account of the interpreting process Seleskovic (1978) emphasizes that the concentration of the interpreter differs from that of the "normal" or "passive" listener. For instance, the interpreter has to make a constant effort to grasp all aspects and details of the message, and unlike the normal listener, therefore, cannot ignore those parts that seem uninteresting to him, Seleskovic points out. The interpreter's working memory is undoubtedly under tremendous strain during performance, and Tijus (1997:31) states that "[i]n interpreting, comprehension is made more difficult by a number of constraints, including time pressure and the simultaneousness of several tasks". In his 'effort model', Gile (1995), similarly, postulates that interpreting requires some sort of mental energy that is only available in limited supply. He, furthermore, posits that interpreting may sometimes require more energy than the interpreter has available, whereby the performance deteriorates.

In line with these perspectives, it can be posited that the interpreter will have less capacity to spare, than the normal listener, for the reconstruction of distorted or missing parts of an incoming message. In other words, because of the extreme conditions that the activity of interpreting itself places on the interpreter's working memory, it could be assumed that the interpreter when working on-screen is more vulnerable to technical disturbances than is the "normal" listener. A basic working hypothesis for the current pilot project is, accordingly: the interpreters will, when performing on-screen interpreting, more often than the interlocutors (i.e. the "normal" listeners) report the perception of technical problems e.g. in terms of sound/image disturbances. Secondly, it is assumed that the interpreters will more often report on discourse problems due to disturbances of an interpreter-technical character than will the interlocutors.

### **3. Design and Data Collection**

The data presented in this article are gathered through a survey where the respondents are asked to evaluate each transmission of on-screen interpreting. The encounters explored in the current survey represent institutional discourse of the type professional-client encounter.<sup>3</sup> Both the interpreters and the professionals (i.e. the doctors, nurses, policemen, social workers etc.) are asked to respond.<sup>4</sup> Henceforth, the two types of respondents are referred to as 'interpreters' and 'users', respectively.

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<sup>2</sup> Only 1% of the respondents in Gammon et al.'s study were patients.

<sup>3</sup> The discourse structure in this type of encounter has much in common with the structure of the interview as described e.g. by Milroy (1993). Aspects of 'institutional discourse' in relation to interpreting are discussed in Dimitrova (1991) and Wadensjö (1998).

<sup>4</sup> Since the professionals make the contact with the interpreter service, the survey was at this point restricted to the professional/civil servant party in the conversation and did not include their clients' evaluations.

Within the aforementioned telemedicine project Gammon et al. (1996) carried out a survey on the satisfaction of psychiatric personnel with a similar type of telemediated communication. The questionnaire from Gammon et al.'s study formed a base in the design of the current questionnaire. Certain items are bound to differ, however, and any comparison between the results from the two surveys must be made with caution.

The present survey consists of a one-page questionnaire where both target groups are asked to report on their immediate responses after each transmission. In order to increase the likelihood of the subjects completing the questionnaire, emphasis was placed on brevity (one page) and clarity (alternative answers). In the questionnaire, both the interpreters and the users are asked to report on two basic issues:

- Problems during transmission linked to the technology used
- Discourse problems related to the interpretation during transmission

The respondents are given alternative answers (see also sub-sections 4.1 and 4.2), and are asked to grade the occurrence of these alternatives in terms of 'frequently', 'some of the time', and 'never'. Both target groups were moreover asked to report what mode, on-screen or on-site, they prefer, and why (cf. 4.3).

The public interpreting services of five cities (i.e., Bergen, Grenland, Kristiansand, Oslo, and Trondheim) take part in the project, and are asked to report on their transmissions in the manner just described. Since three of the nodes produced very few responses within the pilot period, this article only reports on the results from two of the nodes in the project, Kristiansand and Trondheim.

#### **4. Results**

In the pilot period (November '99 to September '00) the two interpreting services carried out 230 on-screen transmissions altogether. The 230 transmissions resulted in 77 responses from 31 users, and 162 responses from 40 interpreters. The encounters reported on involve interpretations between Norwegian and the languages Albanian, Amharic, Arabic, Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, French, Kurmandji, Pashto, Persian, Portuguese, Punjabi, Russian, Somali, Sorani, Spanish, and Tamil.

The average response rate for the interpreter group is 70,4% (cf. Table 1). The high response rate for the interpreters is probably linked to the fact that they perform from the interpreting service's office, where they hand in the survey sheet immediately after each transmission. The users, on the other hand, have to return the questionnaire to a local project assistant by post or fax. Despite the fact that the users are offered a discount if they return the questionnaire,<sup>5</sup> the average response rate for the users is only 33,5%. As displayed in Table 1, there is considerable variation between the two nodes on this measure, however.

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<sup>5</sup> In order to facilitate responsiveness, the users are offered a discount of 1/5 of the price for each survey sheet they return. Currently, the price for on-screen interpreting transmissions is 500 NOK an hour, i.e., approximately 40 ECU or 55 US\$.

Table 1: Number of transmissions and responses from interpreters and users

	Number of transmissions	User responses	Interpreter responses
<b>Kristiansand</b>	95	51 (53,7%)	62 (65,3%)
<b>Trondheim</b>	135	26 (19,3%)	100 (74,1%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>230</b>	<b>77 (33,5%)</b>	<b>162 (70,4%)</b>

#### 4.1 Reported technical disturbances

In terms of technical problems perceived during transmission, the respondents in both target groups are asked to evaluate the transmitted conversation in terms of the alternatives ‘volume problems’; ‘image problems’; ‘problems with image/sound coordination’; ‘echo problems’. The questionnaire, furthermore, includes the alternatives ‘disconnected’, ‘other technical problems (to be specified)’, and ‘the transmission elapsed without technical problems’. As was mentioned above, the respondents were asked to grade their perception of each problem as either occurring ‘frequently’ or ‘some of the time’. Where problems are indicated, the option ‘frequently’ is used in only a few cases (2%).

Table 2 indicates that sound disturbances more often annoy both the interpreters and the users (34% and 32,5%, respectively), than do visual disturbances (21,6% and 19,5%, respectively). Problems with sound/image coordination are in Table 2 included under ‘image’ since this is the problem related to image that is most frequently noticed. As for the perception of technical problems other than those pertaining to sound and image, the two target groups differ, however. The users most often list under the ‘other technical problem’ issues like “getting disconnected” or “getting connected”. The interpreters, on the other hand, more often report on ‘other technical problems’ that can be summed up as “circumstances in the other party’s studio”. The interpreters thus describe as disturbing factors the presence of children; too many people in front of the camera; noise created by the interlocutors e.g. by touching the microphone or making noise with their chair; noise from external traffic; light conditions in the users’ studio etc.

Table 2: Perceived technical problems during transmission

Type of problem:	Sound	Image*	Other	Total	None
<b>INTERPRETERS</b> (n=162)	34% (n=55)	21,6% (n=35)	23,5% (n=38)	79% (n=128)	67,3% (n=109)
<b>USERS</b> (n=77)	32,5% (n=25)	19,5% (n=15)	29,9% (n=23)	81,8% (n=63)	59,7% (n=46)

\* Problems with sound/image coordination are here included under ‘image’.

When we add up the total of reported technical disturbances, we find that the interpreters report technical problems in 79% of the transmissions. The users report technical problems in nearly 82% of the cases. Our working hypothesis, that the interpreters would be more sensitive to technical disturbances than the “normal” listeners, is, accordingly, not confirmed by the present figures. There are, however, external factors that possibly contribute to the occurrence of this tendency. Firstly, in most cases the interpreters have better technical equipment at their end than the users. The interpreters receive the interlocutors’ image on a normal size TV screen (i.e., 29”). The users, on the other hand, in as much as 70% of the cases only have access to picture telephones with a small screen (i.e., 5,5”) which is all they can afford.<sup>6</sup> It is possible therefore that the users are more sensitive to technical problems simply because looking at the small size screen is more demanding on their concentration. The fact that the equipment at the users’ end allowed for only 128kbit/s in these transmissions may have further contributed to an increased sensitivity. When testing pairs who communicated audio-visually O’Malley et al. (1996) in their aforementioned study found that the precision in the pairs’ performance increased with the standard of the equipment in terms of bandwidth. We also note that in Gammon et al.’s (1996) survey, technical problems were reported in only 45% of the cases. In their study the transmission speed was at least 348 kbit/s. Although any comparison between our study and Gammon et al.’s should be made with caution, it cannot be ruled out that the high rate of technical problems reported here, is related to the low bandwidth.

At the same time, even in cases where they report to have perceived technical disturbances, both the interpreters and the users tend to mark the option “the transmission elapsed without technical problems”. The interpreters mark for “no technical problems” in as much as 67,3% of the cases, while 59,7% of the users do the same (cf. Table 2). The tendency of contradiction might indicate that the disturbances reported are not conceived of as very serious—an interpretation supported by the fact that both target groups use the option occurring “frequently” very seldom. A similar tendency of contradiction is found in Gammon et al.’s survey, however, where 87% of the respondents report to be satisfied or very satisfied even though 45% have at the same time perceived technical problems. Gammon et al. (1996: 197) suggest that the contradiction represents a bias whereby “the satisfaction scores reflected users’ expectations of the potential of the technology, as much as they reflected the experiences of the session at hand”. A similar suggestion could be made for the current study.

#### **4.2 Evaluation of the interpreted discourse**

The other basic item in the questionnaire refers to the respondents’ evaluation of the interpreted discourse. This item was bound to differ in the users’ questionnaire and the interpreters’ questionnaire, due to the divergent vantage points of the two target groups. Hence, the users are asked to indicate whether the conversation was disturbed by the interpreter’s behavior in terms of the alternatives ‘the interpreter’s Norwegian was insufficient’; ‘the interpreter was too dominating in the situation’; ‘the interpreter was too slow’. Additional options were ‘other problems (to be specified)’ and ‘the discourse elapsed without interpreting problems’.

The interpreters, on the other hand, were asked to make an evaluation of the interpreted discourse in terms of the alternatives: ‘It was more difficult to interrupt the interlocutors than in on-site interpreting’; ‘the interlocutors were talking too fast’; ‘the interlocutors were talking

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<sup>6</sup> The choice of equipment is regulated by economic factors, since the users have to provide their own equipment, and the price difference between the alternative solutions is considerable.

at the same time'; 'the interlocutors were talking for too long at a time'; 'it was necessary to ask for repetitions more often than in on-site interpreting'. The options 'other problems (to be specified)' and 'the discourse elapsed without interpreting problems' were also alternatives in the interpreters' questionnaire. Caution was taken to use wordings in the questionnaire that the interpreters would easily relate to. The comparison with the on-site situation was added after a tentative questionnaire had been evaluated by a test group of interpreters, who suggested that such a comparison was necessary.

The users report to have perceived no problems with the interpreted discourse in 77,9% of the cases. In five cases the user respondents had marked neither for problems nor for "no problems". Hence, there are missing data on this issue in 6,5% of the cases. In the cases where the users do report problems in the discourse, the problems are basically described under 'other problems' in terms of "the room was too small", "the conversation was not sufficiently planned" etc. Accordingly, the problems are associated with factors that have to do with the organization of the situation, rather than with those pertaining to the interpreter's performance. Only once is the perceived problem defined within the realm of interpreter ethics, in that the user notes that "a conversation between the interpreter and client evolved" (i.e., in table 3 marked under 'interpreter was too dominating'). Only one user assigns the problems in the discourse to the interpreter's insufficient command over Norwegian.

Table 3: Users' perceived problems in the interpreted discourse

Type of problem	Interpreter's Norwegian was insufficient	Interpreter was too dominating	Interpreter was too slow	Other specified problem	No problem
<b>Trondheim (n=26)</b>	0	0	0	11,5% (n=3)	80,8% (n=21)
<b>Kristiansand (n=51)</b>	2% (n=1)	2% (n=1)	0	13,7% (n=7)	76,5% (n=39)
<b>Total* (n=77)</b>	1,3% (n=1)	1,3% (n=1)	0	13% (n=10)	77,9% (n=60)

\* 5 user sheets had no markings for this issue.

The fact that the users detect very few problems with the interpreter's performance is in line with findings from other studies, suggesting that it is difficult for the monolingual user to evaluate the true quality of the interpretation. Andenæs et al. (2000), for instance, found considerable misinterpretations in the cases studied, without the monolingual Norwegian speaking users seemingly taking notice. Similarly, when Hansen et al.'s (2000) surveyed 248 lawyers' perception of problems during trials, nearly a third of the subjects avoided the questions about interpreting quality. This may indicate that the monolingual professionals found it difficult to evaluate the interpreter's performance. The fact that the interpreters in our study *do* detect problems, while the users do not, may also result from the users'

difficulties with evaluating interpreter quality. Hence, the tendency cannot be ascribed to the on-screen mode per se.

During the 162 transmissions the interpreters report 173 problems (hence, sometimes more problem types occur during the same transmission). The problems most often reported by the interpreters have to do with their seizing the floor or taking their turn to interpret; i.e., either “difficulties with interrupting” or “they talked for too long”. Together, these two alternatives, which are different phrasings of the same problem, are reported to have occurred in 56,2% (n=91) of the 162 transmissions. Both categories are summed up under the concept ‘turn taking’ in Table 4. In fact, also the increased need for speaker repetitions may signal turn taking problems (30,2%; n=49), and often co-occurs with reported turn taking problems. In comparison, problems caused by the interlocutor’s fast speech are noticed only 9,9% of the time, and problems with the interlocutors’ overlapping speech is reported only 10,5% of the times (but see footnote 7).

Table 4: *Interpreters’ perceived problems in the interpreted discourse*

<i>Type of problem</i>	Turn-taking problem	Interlocutor’s fast speech	Interlocutors’ overlapping speech	Repetitions necessary	No problem
<b>Trondheim (n=100)</b>	45% (n=45)	9% (n=9)	3% (n=3)	24% (n=24)	73% (n=73)
<b>Kristiansand (n=62)</b>	50% (n=31)	11,3% (n=7)	22,6% (n=14)	40,3% (n=25)	64,5% (n=40)
<b>Total (n=162)</b>	56,2% (n=91)	9,9% (n=16)	10,5%. <sup>7</sup> (n=17)	30,2% (n=49)	69,8% (n=113)

A considerable portion of the problems reported by the interpreters can, accordingly, be related to turn taking. This is not surprising given the fact that smooth turn taking is of major importance in the consecutive interpretation of dialogues (Dimitrova 1991). In the on-site mode the interpreter can use direct strategies to grab the floor for instance by hand and body movements or simply by starting the rendition. More subtle strategies are represented by the use of gaze or inhalation (cf. Dimitrova *ibid.*, Frøili, *forthc.*). It is plausible to assume that these strategies are less applicable in the on-screen mode, due to the lack of physical contact between the interpreter and the interlocutors. The direct strategies may be less functional due to camera angle and screen size. A subtle strategy like inhalation may be hampered by for instance a slight time lag in sound transmission. Moreover, as far as gaze goes, O’Malley et al. found that although video-communication is more efficient than audio-only communication, video-communication does not provide the same advantage of using visual cues or short gazes as do face-to-face encounters.

<sup>7</sup> There is a marked variation between the two nodes here, caused by the fact that some of the interpreters report under this rubric on problems caused by the presence of several people in the users’ studio, while others have reported the presence of several people under ‘technical problems’ (cf. 4.1).

Our second working hypothesis, that the interpreters will more often than the users detect problems related to the interpreting itself, accordingly, seems to be confirmed. As indicated above, however, the result may reflect the fact that the monolingual user generally has difficulties with detecting problems in the interpretation. This tendency, therefore, might not be an effect of the on-screen mode per se.

Finally, it is worth noting that in resemblance with the tendency of contradiction we saw in 4.1, the interpreters tend to contradict themselves in their evaluation of the discourse problems as well. Hence, the interpreters mark the possibility 'the transmission elapsed without interpreting problems' in 34,7% of the cases where they also mark one or more problem entries. (In the user group this tendency of contradiction does not occur in the evaluation of the interpreted discourse.) Again, a possible explication for the contradiction is that the interpreters do not perceive of the reported discourse problems as serious disturbances. However, the possibility that the interpreters' responses reflect their expectations towards the new technology rather than their actual experiences must be taken into consideration in our reading of the results on this item as well. After all, as illustrated in this subsection, the on-screen mode presents the interpreters with challenges unknown from the on-site mode.

### **Reported preference of mode**

The questionnaire, finally, asks the respondent's to report preference for mode. A majority of the interpreters (43,2%) say they prefer on-screen interpreting over on-site interpreting (24,7), while 32,1% mark no preference for either of the modes. This result is interesting, given the tendencies illustrated in 4.2. Several interpreters give a prosaic reason for the preference towards on-screen interpreting: with the on-screen mode the interpreter does not have to travel. Others, however, indicate that the on-screen mode frees the interpreter from boding attempts from the users, and makes the parties more structured and focused during the conversation, which in turn eases the task of the interpreter.

The tendency seen in the users' group on this item differs from that in the interpreters' group, however. More users (31,2%) prefer on-site interpreting over the on-screen mode (29,9%). 39% report no particular preference for mode. Some report to have a prosaic rationale for their preference of the on-screen mode: the on-screen alternative is less expensive. Others, however, state that they prefer the on-screen mode over a local interpreter, because it assures the services of a professional interpreter. Finally, several users emphasize that the on-screen alternative is far more satisfactory than interpreting over an ordinary telephone.

In sum, we note that both interpreters and users report to be relatively satisfied with on-screen interpreting. Although the responses from both target groups may to a certain degree reflect the respondents' euphoria with the new technology, the results indicate that the on-screen solution has potential as a supplement to on-site interpreting.

## **5. Conclusion**

Despite the fact that the current data are limited, our observations may serve as a contribution in the further development of the on-screen option. Factors that can be adjusted with simple means are the problems caused by disturbances in the interlocutors' studio: i.e., the number of persons present in the interlocutors' studio etc. The finding that the interpreters' accustomed strategies for turn taking are not feasible announces that alternative strategies must be developed for on-screen interpreting. It is worth noting, moreover, that more users emphasize the advantages of on-screen interpreting over telephone interpreting and on-site solutions with a non-professional local in the interpreter function. Finally, since 70% of the current

transmissions were carried out with minimal bandwidth, equipment allowing for increased bandwidth would probably reduce the technical problems considerably. The choice of equipment is, however, an economic issue. Given that the necessary equipment in the future becomes more affordable, on-screen interpreting has potential as a valuable supplement to on-site interpreting in a country with Norway's distances and demographic patterns.

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