

Downie Jonathan. 2020. Interpreters vs Machines. Oxon/New York: Routledge

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When Jonathan Downie wrote his book sometime in 2019, little did he know how timely and relevant will it be a year later. The year 2020 will be most probably remembered as a critical milestone in the development of the interpreting profession and interpreting studies. The pandemic of COVID-19 supercharged debates about the degree to which the role of interpreters is indispensable, whether we should be afraid of computers, whether AI will replace us and why and when is remote interpreting acceptable. As in any crisis, many long-held beliefs and axioms were shaken and had to be re-evaluated. At the same time, even the most conservative observers recognise that digitalisation and teleworking have transformed our behaviour and present a tectonic shift in the modus operandi of many industries, including conference interpreting. Downie's book is a first of all not exactly a research monograph, nor is it an essay. In an innovative way it documents the most recent strands of technological development, explains their functions and offers multiple scenarios for the future of the interpreting profession. The author managed to achieve a very delicate balance between accessible and communicative language on one hand and scientifically sound argumentation with a broad range of cited works and papers on the other. The fact that his writing style is humorous and entertaining gives the reader yet another layer of added value.

Fourteen chapters of *Interpreters vs Machines* are divided into five levels. In the quest for answering the main questions of the book, Downie is openly alluding to a world of computer games. The main question to answer is whether computers will one day fully or partially replace human interpreters. In the first level "The Fundamentals", basic concepts are explained and summarised. The second level called "How machines gained the upper hand" develops an interesting argument. Downie argues, that by insisting on our total neutrality and promoting full impartiality, as interpreters we have removed the human factor from the equation of interpreting, at least from the perspective of our clients. By becoming "disembodied voices" hidden in booths at the other end of the meeting room, or recently on the other end of Europe, we make it much easier for our clients to believe, that we could be very well replaced by computers. In the next step, Downie analyses the past and present projects of automated speech translation and the extent to which the boasting claims about this technology can be trusted.

The third level ("Choose your interpreting future") slightly departs from a factual and scientific discourse and pays a visit to the world of science

fiction. In each of the four chapters in this level, Downie paints a possible scenario of future development in short futuristic stories which are later analysed and discussed. Personally, I found this part of the book most interesting and thought-provoking. All four possible scenarios for the short-to-medium term future are plausible and the common denominator determining their materialisation into reality are the interpreters as individuals and also as a community. In the final levels of the book, Jonathan Downie proposes a strategy which could help interpreters defeat the bots. In order to avoid giving away the key elements of the finale in this intellectual computer arcade, I will only highlight what the author emphasises throughout the whole volume: the need to return the human dimension to interpreting, taking back the PR of our profession and delivering more than words.

Interpreters vs Machines is a highly relevant book, opening topical questions in times when (not only) the whole interpreting profession is adjusting to a paradigm shift. Our physical presence in the meetings, classrooms, courtrooms and conference venues is suddenly not possible, and the survival of our profession, at least temporarily, hinges on our ability and willingness to trust machines and software solutions. Jonathan Downie's book is an excellent and informative guide in this new galaxy of opportunities and threats. Just don't forget to bring your towel!