Public lecture:
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Sir Shaw RunRun Building Room 318
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Communicative humanism and new technologies: possible futures for translation

Translators these days can revise free online data-based machine translation output; they can use free networking sites for consultation; they can translate and meta-translate together in online social networks. New technologies thus promise to make translations free, thus non-constrained by commerce, and thereby non-professional. So what are translation professionals to do? Some associations, as in Quebec, not only advice their members to avoid machine translation but are attempting to ensure legally that the term "translator" can only be used by them – the rest of society would somehow be involved in lesser activities, a form of sub-translation. The technologies will not touch the true professional.

This talk will address the brewing conflict between technology and professionalism by assessing what impact new technologies are actually having on the translation process, when they can be used, and what degree of quality they currently deliver. We will see how translators actually use machine translation output for Chinese-English; we will see their mistakes; we will see how fast they correct the mistakes.

The general argument is that translation is becoming a widespread social activity, on a par with reading and writing. Just as priestly castes once attempted to keep written communication to themselves, so the translation profession may be expected to resist democratic expansion. Professional translators should become purveyors of luxury products, for use in high-risk situations only, as a clear niche within the general social activity.

This is part of a humanist view of communication, and thus translation, as a common and always imperfect search for cooperation between people. New technologies not only challenge the established communication professions, they also circumvent many of the academic ideologies that have propped up the exclusive and perfectionist view of translation: equivalence, the text as finite narrative, auctorial intention, the transfer of information, and the illusion of understanding.