As a profession, British Sign Language interpreting has grown significantly from its roots in social work to become a separate and recognised occupation (Gibson 1991). However, there has been recent speculation that BSL interpreting is being intentionally de-professionalised, with references made to deteriorating working terms and conditions and rate strictures imposed by the government’s Access to Work (AtW) scheme and the impending framework agreement of the Crown Commercial Service (CCS).

As the profession faces new challenges, how can we identify the possible de-professionalisation of BSL interpreting, and

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how can we be sure that, while innovating new approaches, we are not losing ground in the professionalisation process? More critically, why are considerations regarding professionalisation important?

What is professionalisation?

Professionalisation is a sociological theory regarding the process an occupation goes through in order to evolve into a profession. It is typified by the establishment of professional associations, codes of ethics, formal training programmes, regulation and community recognition (Winter 1983). The primary benefit of an occupation becoming a profession is a higher quality service to consumers, with the public able to trust that they will receive certain standards from practitioners. The benefits of professionalisation extend to practitioners because they typically enjoy greater autonomy in determining the profession's direction, and because the specialist knowledge they have accrued becomes more sought after, resulting in greater status and financial remuneration (Evetts 2013; Mikkelson 1996).

Although Watson (2002) explores potential problems with the term ‘profession’, Evetts
Grbic (2010) reminds us that the professionalisation process is dynamic, and that achievements gained can later be lost. Such de-professionalisation happens when an occupation has been devalued, usually as a result of strong pressure from external controls (Roosipold & Loogma 2014). This leads to a drop in quality of services and, sometimes, renders the occupation no longer financially viable for practitioners.

While several theories analyse the process of professionalisation, this article explores elements from theories of control, which judge an occupation's level of professionalisation by examining how much control the profession is 'able to exert over the substance of their work and the market in which they operate' (Mikkelson 1996 p3). Pollitt (1997) has explained that, since control theories focus more on the process and dynamics of professionalisation, they are more helpful in analysing the field of BSL interpreting.

I acknowledge that discussion of the following considerations leaves some interesting and relevant developments either cursorily considered or completely unexplored. Due to space constraints, this article is not intended to give an exhaustive analysis but rather a general overview of the professionalisation of BSL interpreting, providing a sociological framework that the reader can then apply more fully to recent developments.

Control of the market

One way to determine an occupation's progress toward professionalisation is by evaluating how much control practitioners have in the market in which they work; the more control, the more professionalised that occupation is (Mikkelson 1996). Market standards may include levels of qualification necessary to interpret, working conditions and pay. A major issue we face is reconciling the standards set by the profession with those set by the marketplace. Market standards are often not set by interpreters or consumers of interpreting services but rather by suppliers of interpreting services and, increasingly, by government. Potential suppliers with commercial interests may also advise government, resulting in the two using their joint influence to set market standards.

The profession and the marketplace currently lack consensus on the qualifications necessary for an entry-level practitioner and those with lower-level BSL qualifications to secure employment. This is as a result of some agencies sending individuals who are not fully qualified in order to meet contractual demands. Those agencies may also dictate substandard rates, working terms and conditions in order to maximise profits. The profession has not been able to gain control over this market element, although ASLI currently has an Agency Standards group. Ozolins (2007 p122) states that 'crucial aspects of interpreting practice can be influenced by agency action (or inaction)' and that 'interpreting agencies can play a crucial role in professionalisation or retarding of professionalisation of the field' (p130). Therefore, identifying not only interpreters but also agencies as safe to practice would mean significant further professionalisation.

External forces such as the government's
what is therefore required of even an entry-level practitioner. The draft framework agreement of the Crown Commercial Service (CCS) originally stated that individuals holding a BSL Level 1 Certificate were acceptable candidates for fulfilling interpreting assignments, and significant devolutions to interpreters’ working terms were proposed (Framework Agreement Schedule 2, 2014). Although the CCS were consulting, demonstrating a willingness to consult on issues they lack sufficient knowledge on, the fact that the draft document stipulated qualifications and terms below the standard indicates that the consultation was insufficient or was not carried out with the appropriate people.

Other framework agreements, such as that of the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), have been seen as de-professionalising spoken language interpreting (Buckingham 2015), resulting in severe drops in quality and leading to fully qualified interpreters leaving the profession for economic reasons (Sharples 2013).

To understand what was lost, it is important to first understand what had been gained. Major developments had been implemented after the Smith Smith & Sams (1994) trial failed due to an interpretation error, requiring new interpreters to be sought for the retrial (1995). Fortuitously, Durham University had then just been awarded government funding for a major research project that was to culminate in the book Equality Before the Law: Deaf People’s Access to Justice. This retrial presented the research team with their first opportunity in England and Wales to analyse a BSL interpreted trial.

AtW scheme also determine remuneration, working conditions and quality of service. When one considers that a hallmark of professionalisation is greater quality services for consumers, then we can easily identify some AtW measures as de-professionalising the interpreting profession since many Deaf workers have reported difficulty in finding fully qualified interpreters willing to work at the rate or under the conditions set by AtW. They have had to resort to using less qualified individuals, leading to a drop in quality of services.

Deaf groups and individuals, along with professional interpreters, have decried such measures. The National Union of British Sign Language Interpreters (NUBSLI) was established in 2014, aiming ‘to protect our rights as workers and provide a clear message that we aren’t going to accept poor terms and conditions, unsustainable working conditions or inappropriate levels of remuneration’. This statement shows a clear resistance towards externally controlled de-professionalisation. Furthermore, Mikkelson (1996) explains that ‘the theory of control posits that powerful professions establish alliances with the state’ and may therefore benefit from greater autonomy if the profession is ‘perceived as performing a service that benefits the public’ (p3).

Establishing such alliances requires political engagement with government figures so that they have an accurate and full understanding of how a profession benefits the public. NUBSLI has made significant headway for the profession of BSL interpreting in this regard.

**Framework agreements**

This work is crucial since there is an evident general lack of government awareness of the complex work undertaken by interpreters and
themselves forward stipulated the following conditions: the request for three interpreters rather than one; detailed preparation including photographs and maps; an escorted site visit with the officer in charge of the case; an opportunity to meet the Deaf defendants in order to ascertain language style; and an enhanced remuneration fee plus accommodation and subsistence. Importantly, these stipulations were incorporated into the research project recommendations and became commonly adhered to in legal settings for years. Devolutions to the standards began to occur after Applied Language Services (ALS), which was later taken over by Capita, won the contract with the MOJ.

BSL interpretation in the legal setting was not exposed to the same extent of de-professionalisation as spoken language interpretation because ALS/Capita found themselves having to subcontract BSL interpreters through two BSL interpreting agencies, which did their best to uphold the established standards. Nevertheless, the professionalisation of BSL interpreting and the resulting services to consumers inevitably suffered.

Recognising the eventuality of similar repercussions on a wider scale, the response from the profession and the community to the CCS framework agreement has been seen in the #Scraptheframework Campaign, with over 1,000 signatories in an open letter to Francis Maude MP. Although some notable improvements to later drafts of the CCS framework agreement have been reported at the time of writing this, the CCS National Framework delayed tendering until after the general election, so it remains to be seen what transpires. The fact that significant amendments were made through the collective action of stakeholders such as NUBSLI, UKCoD, NRCPD and the BDA reveals the recognition within the Deaf and interpreting communities of the importance of BSL professionalisation.

While neither BSL interpreters nor consumers control the market, and while there have been clear efforts at de-professionalising BSL interpreting, such efforts have been significantly challenged. Such instances of external market control and de-professionalisation may spark developments that could ultimately lead to further professionalisation. In order for this to happen, however, it is critical that we remain collectively vigilant and active against attempts at de-professionalisation.

Regulation and professionalisation

Regulation is an important factor in professionalisation (Mikkelson 1996). Evetts (2013 p787) cites McClelland (1990) as differentiating between professionalisation ‘from within’ versus professionalisation ‘from above’. The former is characterised by controls ‘operationalised by practitioners themselves’ while the latter is typified by ‘organisational objectives (which are sometimes political)’ defining the profession via the regulation of occupational control. This is particularly interesting when one considers that the National Registers of

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Communication Professionals Working with Deaf and Deafblind People (NRCPD) is a type of control ‘from above’, and they have recently been called upon by NUBSLI to respond to questions regarding their organisational objectives in regard to their links with Signature, an organisation that issues BSL language awards and NVQ interpreting qualifications.

With the advent of the Regulatory Body for BSL Interpreters and Translators (RBSLI), fully qualified interpreters can now choose which regulating body they register with. The organisation was established and is run by BSL interpreters, so could be seen as reflecting the principles of professionalisation from within. Mikkelson (1996 p3) explains that the incidence of self-regulation within professions is higher than that of occupations and that, importantly, such autonomy typically leads to greater trust by the public. Evetts (2013) also cites McClelland (1990) as representing professionalisation ‘from within’ as favourable.

However, it is important to note that professionalisation through regulation has already been achieved to a considerable degree, regardless of the direction from which it was administered. It is therefore necessary to identify how shifting the locus of control to within the profession would further the professionalisation of BSL interpreting. This is especially worth considering since RBSLI, in its 2015 Registrant Guidance, lists very similar eligibility criteria (with some additions) for registration as those listed by NRCPD. It could be argued that by clearly stating on its website that it is ‘not enmeshed with validating courses or prescribing curriculum and assessment’ RBSLI seems to be liberating BSL interpreters from the type of ‘organisational objectives’ to which Evetts (2013 p787) refers. Another potential advancement is that RBSLI regulates only interpreters and translators as opposed to several different types of communication professionals, thereby conferring greater status on sign language interpreting and translating. Whether such considerations warrant setting up a completely separate register is still up for debate, particularly when many interpreters may not only be making decisions based on immediately intangible benefits and professional ideals, but also on fees. Furthermore, considering that NRCPD now has interpreters on its board, creating a hybrid of professionalisation ‘from above’ and ‘from within,’ one must ask whether some of the potential gains from self-regulation have already been achieved.

At this point, there are several stakeholders hungry for control over the profession, and possibly too many cooks in the kitchen. The metaphorical broth has been turned into a thick alphabet soup of acronyms following interpreters’ names, a situation that many consumers and hiring entities may find increasingly difficult to decipher. It is worth noting that our American colleagues have found that multiple credentialing systems have had a negative impact on the professionalisation process in the United States (Witter-Merithew & Johnson 2004). This seems to prove what many in the UK are sensing, with speculation about whether another register greases the wheels of professionalisation or simply throws a spanner in the works.

Much may depend on the success of the new register. If it fails to attract a substantial number of registrants or achieve the recognition of consumers and other relevant stakeholders, or if interpreters choose to play
it safe by opting to register with both RBSLI and NRCPD, the existence of a second register will only further confound an already complicated profession. If, on the other hand, there is an exodus of interpreters from the established registering body to the new one – giving the new register a majority of the profession and therefore significant influence – then RBSLI will be well poised to shift the nexus of control to within the profession in regard to regulation. This scenario would require that any real or perceived benefits to the profession gained via self-regulation were collectively viewed as beneficial enough to justify boycotting the established regulator. This is unlikely given that RBSLI is a voluntary register and NRCPD is heading towards statutory regulation. Although statutory regulation may theoretically allow interpreters to register with any regulating body, it is likely that the regulating body pushing for statutory regulation will be the primary body recognised by and referred to stakeholders.

Although when writing about the professionalisation of community interpreting, Mikkelson (1996 p3) states that the autonomy of self-regulation generally leads to greater trust by the public, different dynamics may come into play with regard to self-regulation of BSL interpreters. The trust, mentioned by Mikkelson, garnered through self-regulation may not manifest in a context where regulation ‘from above’ has already been established. Although it may theoretically be preferable for people who are actually knowledgeable about interpreting to make decisions regarding complaints brought against interpreters, others may view interpreters as a collective group and trust them less to regulate one another. RBSLI may therefore face the possibility that consumers of interpreting services lack confidence in the robustness of a complaints procedure that is administered by practising interpreters.

Working together
When considering professionalisation from within, we should also consider the overall internal situation. When writing specifically about the professionalisation of community

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interpreting, Mikkelson (1996) cites the work of Tseng (1992), who found that the formation of a professional association which represents the majority of practitioners is an essential condition for professionalisation, but concedes that ‘dissent among members can weaken its effectiveness’ and that ‘an association cannot be expected to fully realise its power if it only represents a portion of competent practitioners’. This is precisely what has happened within the field of BSL interpreting, and we currently have two sign language interpreter associations. NUBSLI could be considered the unifying factor, bridging the divide and therefore yielding the influential power that Tseng (1992) explains is so critical. However, although its numbers are steadily growing, it currently represents just over a quarter of the profession (NUBSLI figures, 2015). The fact therefore remains that with two professional associations, two regulatory bodies and a union, they will all need to work together with consumers and stakeholder groups to maintain and advance the status of BSL interpreting. While there is collaboration through various forums and the UKCoD, maintaining a united front across so many different representations is imperative.

The full professionalisation of BSL interpreting remains a work in progress. It is vital that the profession protects its many significant achievements while also continuing to evolve. Current developments such as the CCS framework agreement can certainly be seen as orchestrated attempts to de-professionalise BSL interpreting. The response from practitioners and the community, however, has the potential to spur further professionalisation. This will depend largely on the combined influence of interpreters and consumers on the provision of sign language interpreting services. Most importantly, we must collectively realise that we won’t be able to fight external efforts at de-professionalisation if we are too busy fighting one another.


