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Translation in the Twenty-First Century: The Need for a New Model

Colleagues and friends, thank you for inviting me here. My intention is to explore the environment of translation today, focusing on the economic and technological changes of the last decade or so.

Some of these changes have come upon us so subtly that we barely see them, the way we don't pay much attention to the air we breathe. But when that air changes enough that we can't breathe it anymore, we *have* to pay attention to it. We have to figure out what the changes are and what they mean, not only for our own sakes, but for the sake of the generations that will follow us. And so I want to consider how the atmosphere of translation has changed over our professional lives, and what these changes portend for our future and the futures of our younger colleagues. Among other things, I will look at why the once-inspiring vision of ourselves as independent contractors and proprietors of autonomous small businesses is counterproductive.

The most obvious change in translation as a whole is that it is bigger business in the twenty-first century than it's ever been. Billions of dollars are pouring into the industry. But, as most of us know, translators are getting less and less of it. Many of us are anxious about our futures, if not already struggling to earn a living. There's a paradox there, and we need to understand it. We can't deal effectively with situations that we don't comprehend.

Here's an example of what I mean about this massive change. Maybe you've been following the saga of TransPerfect, the largest privately owned translation company in the world. According to Katia Savchuk in *Forbes*, TransPerfect is "on track to reach \$1 billion in revenues by 2019," and if sold might be worth even more than that. Despite its record earnings, however, TransPerfect is in trouble. The company's co-CEOs, Elizabeth Elting and Philip Shawe, were engaged when they founded TransPerfect in 1992. But they are now on such bitter terms that the company is on the brink of a forced sale. The crisis has

afforded us a glimpse into some aspects of Big Translation that are usually shielded from the public eye.

Like about one million other corporations, TransPerfect is registered in Delaware, a corporate tax haven—our very own Panama. This is a state with relatively lax regulations on business and business-friendly courts, including a special one, the Chancery Court, which hears and decides on corporate matters.¹ It was there, as their relationship deteriorated, that the two TransPerfect CEOs sued each other for control of the company, and where, in August 2015, the chancellor appointed a custodian to sell the firm, citing “dysfunction between them” and “irretrievable deadlocks,” which if continued, would irrevocably harm the company.²

An initial group of about seven hundred TransPerfect employees (supporters of Shawe) then got together. Their intention was to protest the sale and to challenge the authority of the court to require it. And here—at the intersection of big business, power lobbying, and politics—is where things start to get interesting. The new group hired a political strategy firm called Tusk Ventures and formed a lobbying organization called Citizens for Pro-Business Delaware.³ The campaign manager for the organization at that point was Chris Coffey—a managing director at Tusk. In other words, it is probably safe to assume that whatever it was at the outset, Citizens for Pro-Business Delaware was now a Tusk operation.

Here’s what you need to know about Tusk Ventures: It is dedicated to helping companies gut regulation on business. Its stated purpose is to help companies “fight off unwanted regulatory aggression.”⁴ Gutting regulations that get in the way of unfettered profit-making has been a major focus of corporate lobbying over the past 40-plus years.

In 2015, for example, Tusk successfully beat back an attempt by Mayor Bill DeBlasio to impose some regulations on Uber’s growth in New York City.⁵ I’ll touch on the “Uberization” of translation shortly, and how the growth of what is euphemistically called the “gig” or “sharing” economy harms the interests of working people, including translators.

In July 2016, under Tusk’s guidance, several hundred like-minded business executives⁶ joined Citizens for Pro-Business Delaware and hired a PR firm in Baltimore [KOFA Public

Affairs] to implement a campaign in Delaware.⁷ But while the campaign mimics a grassroots effort, including direct mail, newspaper ads, door-knocking, and canvassing at the Delaware State Fair, lobbying elected officials, and other such activities, it is anything but.⁸ The Tusk strategy is to create seeming grassroots campaigns that are in fact organized from the top down and are completely consistent with corporate interests.⁹ This campaign is in the interest of one owner of *TransPerfect*—and his corporate brethren who want to see the Chancery Court weakened for their own reasons.

TransPerfect exemplifies Big Translation. It is a crucial example of how our profession has evolved out of the small translation bureaus and agencies that older translators cut their teeth on, and that are still the mainstay of many of our professional lives. As we have seen with a myriad other industries, translation is consolidating rapidly, a move that always benefits owners who extract wealth from the company, but never employees.¹⁰ Rampant consolidation, however, is not the only difference between translation then and translation now. Other new business models are crowding in as well.

One is the translation portals of the so-called “gig economy.” Uber and its imitators exploit the potential of just-in-time hiring for particular tasks. Workers provide their own equipment, their own insurance, their own vacations, and so on; the company provides... an app. This arrangement greatly favors the company. The system is centralized. The workers are scattered. This gives the employer—that is, the app owner—the final word on how the work is to be done and pretty much everything else, including pay. In an Uberized economy, people are pitted against each other for gigs. If that sounds familiar, it’s because in some ways translation has been Uberized for decades. But the amount of venture capital pouring into these new schemes is enormous,¹¹ and that’s because new technologies and the apps through which they operate have taken an old principle to a whole new level of profitability—but not for translators.

A good example is Steps—a mobile phone app that claims to be “More Uber Than Uber.” Steps fulfills at least one of the criteria set forth by TAUS, the Translation Automation User Society, which seeks to turn translation into an automated commodity: an on-demand utility like water that can be turned on and off at the tap. Bite-sized texts arrive sporadically throughout the day on the translator’s cell phone.

To its customers, the company advertises a “standard” rate of 13 cents a word (there are also “basic” and “premium” rates).¹² But the page for translators introduces us to a certain “Sarah Smart,” who has translated 6199 words and made all of \$277.68. *That’s 4.5 cents a word!*¹³ The owners of the app apparently keep *8.5 cents of every 13 they bill for*—almost two-thirds. It’s easy to see how opportunities like Steps might tempt young translators just starting out, or translators in poorer regions where opportunities are scarce. But, as more experienced translators know full well, these gigs are a dead end. No matter how much work “Sarah” does for this translational equivalent of Task Rabbit, neither her skills nor her income is likely to improve. “Sarah” personifies the underclass in a new business model of translation in which a corporation enriches itself on the efforts of a steady stream of low-cost, interchangeable, and disposable workers.

Note that this company’s sole apparent contribution to the translation process is a mobile phone app. This technology gives it, like Uber, almost unlimited control over the way profits are distributed, especially as Steps’s translators are not protected by labor law. We have no idea how large a footprint such gig portals have—or what their ultimate effect on translation will be. But these matters are worth examining seriously from the perspective of how they affect working translators.

Non-traditional translation portals like Steps are not the only places where supposedly innovative technologies are encroaching. Translators are strongly encouraged to use “translation memory tools” (TMs). According to their inventors and the agencies that often compel their use, these technologies are our best hope for achieving the speed, uniformity, and responsiveness that corporate clients demand. Translators who don’t accommodate themselves to that reality, we are warned, will be left behind.

Translation memory tools were initially sold as aids to help translators work more productively and therefore to live more securely and comfortably. And they have plenty of features that are a boon to translators. However, they have become mechanisms by which those who control the flow of work enrich themselves at the expense of translators—a pattern of appropriation seen over and over in the American economy. One senior translator I know estimated that he could make 50% more if he could use translation memory tools only on his own terms. Unfortunately, his agency clients insist that he use

them on *their* terms. Where is the differential going? To the client? To the agency? We have no way of knowing. Certainly not to the translator.

And then there is machine translation. It's worth noting that it is no longer a rarity. That's another big difference in today's translation landscape. In one 2016 survey, US agencies claimed to use it in 16% of projects.¹⁴ Yet TAUS, in its guidelines for training post-editors of machine translation (PEMT), talks about achieving not excellence in translation, but “‘good enough’ quality.”¹⁵ If “‘good enough’” becomes any sort of benchmark, how can our linguistic sensibilities not be blunted?¹⁶ In such an environment, post-editors will likely become members of the translation underclass already inhabited by “Sarah Smart”—poorly paid, poorly respected, and very likely bored out of their wits. I suspect that they too, like Steps's translators, will be young people just getting their feet wet. What a terrible thing to do to them.

At the 2011 NETA Conference, I asked presenter Alon Lavie, then president of the American Machine Translation Association, whether there was anything about editing machine translation “that would enable translators to develop the higher skills needed to translate more demanding material?” He responded, “I don't think there's anything; *but I'm not sure there's anything in TM either.*”¹⁷ If Lavie suspects that translation memory tools don't develop higher skills, others in the industry must as well. If translation memory tools using other people's TMs made their users better translators, their use could be justified on that account. But there's no evidence for this, and we know how quickly skills deteriorate when they are not challenged. Translation becomes not so much the product of a skilled individual interpreter, but anonymous work, mediated by technology in such a way as to make translators largely interchangeable.

Wherever we look we can find similar efforts to short-cut whole translation—in effect, to deprofessionalize it. Crowd-sourcing platforms, machine translation and post-editing, data mining of language corpora, translation portals that turn translators into cogs in corporate machines—all these exert downward pressure. They limit what we can charge for our work, how we are allowed to do it, how much we enjoy it, and whether our skills will evolve. And make no mistake: these developments hit commercial translators the hardest.

Meanwhile, agency profits are soaring. And they *are* soaring. A few years back, Nataly Kelly of Common Sense Advisory, a market research company for the translation industry, wrote to me that “it is not uncommon for profit margins to exceed 30%.”¹⁸ TransPerfect’s Elizabeth Elting is estimated to have a net worth of \$390 million;¹⁹ she recently bought a house in Bridgemanpton for \$11.5 million. How many underpaid translators do figures like these imply?

More dispiriting still, the lowered agency rates we have all observed cannot all be attributed to new technologies and “market pressures.” At a New England Translators Association luncheon in Vermont in December 2013, a former president of the ATA reported that she overheard some agency heads at an agency conference bragging about their record profits—as they traded tips on persuading translators to accept lower rates.²⁰ Commercial translation work in the global economy is supposedly plentiful. But it is counterbalanced by the abundance of needy translators who, required to work faster and faster to maintain an adequate standard of living, can easily be pitted against each other.

I do not deny that there remain niches where specialist translators can prosper, but the changes in our industry are turning it into one where the few prosper while the many do not. If you listen to the pundits of the ATA, however, you’d never know it. As average translator incomes decrease, more and more of us fear for our futures. Yet some of our most influential colleagues meet these all-too-reasonable worries not with solidarity and encouragement, but with criticism, shaming, and denial. The “solutions” they offer leave many of us out in the cold, or come with strings. I am speaking in particular of the so-called Poverty Cult.

That term was coined in 1996 by Neil Inglis, now a senior reviser at the International Monetary Fund, at a regional conference of the ATA. His original speech seems not to be available online, but according to Kevin Hendzel, these are the “Seven Deadly Sins” of Poverty Cult members as Inglis defined them:

... envying the success of others; gloating over the failure of others; a pervasive sense that it is better for everybody to fail than for a few to succeed; a sickly squeamishness where the subject of money is concerned; shabby gentility, more shabby than genteel; a widespread conviction that it is better to have a little and

be secure than to take a gamble and risk losing everything; and last, and very much least, *schadenfreude* mixed with sour grapes.²¹

Well.

That’s a comprehensive condemnation, all right.

But who on earth is Inglis talking about? Certainly not the intelligent and generous colleagues I’ve worked with over the last twenty-plus years. Was translation *ever* full of people so feckless, so fearful, so envious of other people’s success that they believed it was “better for everybody to fail than for a few to succeed”? I doubt it. The Poverty Cult is a straw man, a distraction from the reality that there will never be “room at the top” for everybody, and that there are real drawbacks to the corporate view of translation, both for translators and for the world at large.

Inglis’s broadside implies that if we are unhappy in any way with our circumstances, it is our own fault; that we are individually and entirely responsible for our own successes and failures; that any reservations about the pursuit of money at any cost is somehow reprehensible, and that “shabby gentility” is something to be ashamed of, especially in comparison with corporate glitz. Above all, Inglis implies that there are no legitimate reasons to question the corporate worldview, only *schadenfreude* and sour grapes. I’m going to call this vision the “Prosperity Gospel,” both in contradistinction to the “Poverty Cult” (from which it purports to save us), and because its tenets are passed off as articles of faith by its proselytizers. Chief among them is the insistence that translators are autonomous “small business people,” free to enter into contractual arrangements *on their own terms*. But in a landscape dominated by translation behemoths and Uber-style portals, this model of the independent yeoman translator is a mirage. It hasn’t been true for years—except perhaps for the few translators working directly for corporate clients. And while that route might sound enticing, there are good reasons, as you will see in a minute, for confident and self-respecting translators to embrace other ambitions.

Problem one with the Prosperity Gospel, then, is that it is a fundamentally elitist creed that accepts only one definition of success. And it denies the reality that there is not enough “success” in twenty-first translation to go around. Worse, it blames as hapless and whiny

the individual translators who either fail to go for the gold, or—perhaps worse—choose not to try.

That investment in blaming and shaming is problem two. The Prosperity Gospeleers do not consider why some translators who manifestly lack neither intelligence, ability, or will might choose not to follow their precepts; they simply deride and dismiss them.

In a 2014 article titled “The frugal translator,” financial specialist Chris Durban tells us how earnest, hard-working translators “routinely” illustrate to her the mentality of the “poverty cult,” and how she tries to help them achieve success. Here are two examples of her suggestions. The first:

Want some respect from your clients? Buy a suit and wear it.

and the second:

Travelling first class to a client industry conference to mingle with participants en route (and be able to work in peace and quiet on the way) doesn’t even pass the laugh test.²²

I don’t doubt that Durban means well. But the reality—unhappily—is that not all translators have opportunities to attend conferences in their areas of interest. And even those who do—if they’re paying off student loans, carrying private family medical insurance, providing and caring for their children—may really *not* have the money for first-class seats. The laugh test? It’s not really all that funny. For many of us, it is definitely the better part of valor to choose Macy’s over Armani. Durban herself tells us that “Responses often range from ‘No way, too expensive!’ to ‘Great idea; I found one at the flea market for a pittance’ to ‘That would be faking it; it’s not who I really am. And I don’t have that kind of money.’” She considers all these pathetic excuses.

I’m not sure why it’s so hard for her to grasp the reality that not everyone is a member of the one percent, or even the top ten. But a lot of people seem to have that problem, so I will comment instead on her dismissal of the objection, “That would be faking it; it’s not who I really am.”

The point here is that Durban doesn't seem to care. On the contrary. She's telling us precisely that (except for those of us who are corporate by conviction) we have only two choices—to be a great pretender or a loser. The Prosperity Gospel as purveyed in translation presses us to identify not with our own individual realities, whatever they may be, but with roles and realities established in the corporate mold and in the corporate interest. It dangles before us the glittering image of first-class flights and designer suits, while dismissing as trivial people's honest efforts to do fairly by the people, ideas, and values that matter to them.

The “Prosperity Gospel” thus has a dual function. It purports to instruct and inspire. But it is also a vehicle for aggrandizing the success of a narrowly defined elite while relegating everyone else to the margins. Despite the manifest reality that some translators do manage to mold themselves to corporate specification (and in so doing earn better than average incomes), the vast majority of us will continue to work for agencies or in less money-driven settings.

This is the third problem: The Gospeleers tacitly accept without protest the overall lowering of compensation and prestige in the industry as a whole. They offer no objection to dwindling or manipulated rates, to dubious technological shortcuts, to Internet portals that are a race to the bottom. They offer only invidious comparisons between the “premium” and “bulk” markets, and implicitly between elite translators and everyone else. Their lifeline is extended only to those willing to subordinate themselves to the corporate ideal. Collective resistance? As Durban might say, it doesn't pass the laugh test. Better to identify with corporate interests and grab what you can; in a corporatist meritocracy, you sink or swim on your own. Is this an offering in good faith to struggling colleagues? Is this what we want for the rising generation of translators?

Yes, it is true that the prosperity ideology stresses the need to master one's subject, understand one's limitations, and perfect one's craft. It's a hard one to disagree with that. But those goals will never be met unless people work in contexts that value mastery, understanding, and skill—contexts that, as we have seen, are increasingly difficult for translators, especially young and inexperienced ones, to find.

A quote from Kevin Hendzel: “Great translators—the ones who really stand out—have had their translations mauled, picked over, dissected, disemboweled, examined, edited, published, revised and amended by their translation colleagues, editors and reviewers, sometimes for years.”

Well, maybe that’s how it was for Hendzel. But the method that he describes will not help most of us learn new skills or improve old ones. What it teaches—especially when we’re young—is to kiss up and kick down. It teaches us to submit our own judgment to someone else’s condemning judgment, to be cogs in someone else’s machine. If we decline, we are whiny failures. The Poverty Cult rhetoric, in other words, does more than just instruct. It is an authoritarian ideology that teaches people their place. It glamorizes those who succeed on *its* terms and shames those whose frame of reference is different. As we shall see in a moment, it is the leading edge of a corporate creed that actively justifies the funneling of wealth upward. It supports an economy whose most important product is income inequality, where the many live an increasingly precarious existence so that the few may fly first class.

And so to Problem Four, clearly illustrated in a 2014 piece by David Jemielity, another financial translator and the head of translations at the Swiss Banque Cantonale Vaudoise. Jemielity unwittingly presents us with a terrifying underside of the Prosperity Gospel, which I will illustrate with his help, a case study of my own, and a counter-example.

“Specializing: A ticket to the high end of the profession?” is more than just another sermon on the importance of specialization. Jemielity also considers how translators can make themselves maximally useful in a business setting. But what he advocates as “contributing ideas and solutions” is predicated entirely on complete identification with corporate interests. One of his hypothetical situations—intended, no doubt, to be witty—will give you a sense of what I mean. He writes:

For our purposes, let’s say the language you’re working on is English, the meeting is about a bank’s quarterly results, and the group at the conference table is casting about for solutions to a tricky passage concerning the increasing number of bad loans the bank has underwritten. A translator who is truly specialized in the field will give the CEO *tons* of different ways to talk about

this uncomfortable thing that the CEO doesn't really want to talk about (because it might send the share-price down). He'll have it all on the tip of his tongue: "You don't like 'bad loans'?" "How about 'impaired' loans?" "Distressed' loans?" "NPLs'?" "Oh, so you don't want the focus on the loans at all? We could say 'increased loan-loss allowances', or 'asset-quality concerns' (although that's broader), or 'credit-risk provisions' ... Something even more vague? OK, how about just saying 'higher provisioning needs'?"²³

This passage is revealing, and *very* disconcerting. In 2008, the world financial system nearly imploded because banking institutions deliberately and systematically made mortgage loans to people they knew couldn't repay them. They then sold these, sliced up and repackaged, to other banks, abetted by crooked ratings agencies that gave these "financial instruments" the AAA stamp of approval. Arcane financial euphemisms like "subprime mortgages," "residential-mortgage-backed securities" (RMBS) and "collateralized debt obligations" (CDOs) helped confuse the public—and to some extent the bankers themselves—about the scams being perpetrated. They contributed to the 2008 financial collapse in which more than 6 million Americans—real people—lost their homes. Many of them may never recoup their losses. In parts of the country, homelessness is on the rise while repossessed and abandoned houses fall apart, empty and uncared for. The dollar amount of lost assets is probably unknowable.²⁴

Yet a scant six years later, Jemielity is proposing that part of the skill set of a really desirable financial translator is the ability to offer bankers *tons* of euphemisms for bad loans. I'm pretty sure that I'm not the only one here who is not ambitious to become an expert linguistic manipulator and prevaricator, or to help the world's financial institutions paper over bad decisions or, at worst, rob people of their homes and savings. Skilled rendering of complex financial material is one thing. But does a translator have to identify blindly with illegal financial maneuverings and corporate stock-prices to a point bordering on collusion? That sounds like a seriously "toxic asset." And a risky one.

So what is the draw?

Obviously there's a lot of prestige in being a translator at Jemielity's level. He depicts the goal seductively, and makes clear that we're not all going to achieve it. "If we don't

perform well in [Board] meetings—if we don't generate options and solutions—we won't get invited back. Executive Board members are *busy*.”

But when we *do* get invited back—wow! What an ego boost to be sought after by *important and busy* people! Until we start to think about what our labors actually accomplish. But we don't have to be working for big banks to encounter the ethical dilemmas that “success” can breed. Here's a painful example from my own practice.

Back when I was struggling to establish my own clientele, I caught a break. A friend recommended me to a patent firm. Between 2004 and 2010 I translated some 50 patent applications for them. The pay was great: \$0.20 per word. Each patent brought in between \$500 and \$1500, and many were in the same “family,” so I could do them very efficiently. I thought I had it made. Then one day the lawyer I worked with called and asked me to change a phrasing. I looked at the German and at the English and told him that I really didn't think the sentence could be interpreted the way he wanted. He insisted, and after a disagreeable private struggle, I made the change. The end of the story, as I'm sure you can guess, is that despite my six years of unblemished service, the firm never contacted me again.

That encounter disturbed me deeply. I quit doing patent translation, in part because I never wanted to be in that position again, and I could see that when financial stakes are that high, ethical conflicts are inevitable. But focused as I was at the time on expanding my business and making money, it took me several years more to recognize that I had missed the larger lesson in the debacle: When you work for a company like that, you are useful only to the degree that you identify with its interests.

Theoretically, Jemielity's imaginary translator might have reminded the bank executives *ever so tactfully* that in the long run it's better to account honestly for one's mistakes. But somehow I don't think that he or she would have been invited back.

Betsy Benjaminson sure wasn't. Benjaminson is a Japanese translator. She was working on documents relating to the so-called “unintended acceleration” problem in Toyota cars that may have killed as many as a hundred people in the late 2000s. These documents made clear that Toyota executives knew that software problems were likely involved, not mats or

driver error as they purported in their PR. Benjaminson blew the whistle on the company's systematic cover-up.

There's a lot of pressure, external and internal, on us translators to close our eyes to the implications of what we do. It's a job. We want to do it well. We need to earn our livings. But where does a translator's ethical responsibility lie? When does public good trump a nondisclosure agreement? Ultimately, Benjaminson couldn't square the money she was earning with the loss of life. The cost to her career has been high—agencies, obviously, no longer hire her. But she knows that her decision saved lives, and that her integrity is intact. There is a lot to think about in her story—and in Jemielity's.²⁵

Can we suppose that the wordings in financial source documents back before 2008 were evasive enough that even super-high-level financial translators didn't really have a clue about what was going on? If that's true, that vaunted "specialization" may not count for all that much. Perhaps more likely is that the translators handling such material for the banks identified with their employers so completely that it never occurred to them to think about the implications of the documents they were helping to mold. Supporting that supposition is the fact that I have never seen, in what passes for translation journalism, a single article, or a single critical discussion, of those implications in a real-world context. Yet those fraudulent CDOs and RMBSs were peddled all over the world, and surely translation was involved somewhere in the peddling.

That is the kind of thing I mean when I say that the Prosperity Gospel enables the siphoning of society's wealth to the top. Jemielity's scenario is just one example of how translation may be appropriated into helping banks and other wealthy corporations expand their profits at the expense of everyone else. The Prosperity Gospel can't be held responsible for the profiteering of the big banks and financial institutions, but it does validate a mindset that sanctions it.

Interestingly, many of the Prosperity Gospeleers are financial translators. In their identification with Wall Street, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, they mold themselves in the image of the very corporate institutions that mandate austerity for the world's poor so that the world's wealthy may flourish. And by encouraging others to

do the same, they transform the profession of translation—intentionally or not—in that image.

So what can working translators do to resist and counter these trends, and to ensure that our next generation will be able to find fulfilling work at living rates? For one thing, we need a clear and reliable understanding of how the new translation industry works, and how it connects with the economic and political realities of the larger world. I have tried to make a start on this in my examples of TransPerfect, Steps, and the Prosperity Gospel. Documents from translation industry sources need to be studied carefully and skeptically. This means “political” analysis of the practices and ideologies promoted by such organizations as TAUS, the ATA, and others. It means close attention to and critical scrutiny of the mergers, controversies, and technological developments written up in trade newspapers and magazines, press releases, and so on. We need to share our insights in well-reasoned, well-sourced papers and articles, and to consider and discuss them. Unless we strive actively together for a keen and watchful understanding of the forces shaping the industry, we will be left in the dark, and unable to act in our own interest.

Crucially, we must fight the tendency to blame and shame ourselves for circumstances over which we have little or no individual control. But where we *do* have a measure of power, we must exert it wherever we can—by ensuring, for example, that young translators are encouraged to learn on whole translation, and not on the piecemeal output of translation memories. They need to be able to seek advice from old hands without invidious comparisons or fear of humiliation, “mauling,” or “disembowelment.” They need to be able to explore according to their own lights, and to discover what kind of translators *they* are. We, their mentors, must remain ever mindful of the purposes to which our work is put, and foster a community that supports and honors courageous colleagues like Benjaminson who refuse to let translation be reduced to an ethically empty exercise.

We need to create networks of solidarity among working translators—groups of thoughtful individuals who together can resist the efforts of the industry to coopt us into cogs or atomize us into fragments, and who can fight collectively for a more equitable distribution of respect and of profit. Although there will always be a “business” aspect to what we do,

we must escape the conventional “small business” mindset that imprisons us in isolation and so magnifies our powerlessness. We must reject the Prosperity Gospel, which encourages us to identify with the very corporations responsible for plummeting incomes and the progressive degradation of our work. We must occupy translation in a new way.

How to do that is an open question that awaits our attention. What *is* clear is that it must be a collective effort. Unless we join forces and fight for the survival of whole translation and equitable pay, those who follow us will enter a profession hollowed out, emptied of all intrinsic worth.

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- ¹ Leslie Wayne (June 12, 2012). “How Delaware Thrives as a Corporate Tax Haven,” http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/01/business/how-delaware-thrives-as-a-corporate-tax-haven.html?_r=0
- ² Katia Savchuk (July 20, 2016). “Court Sanctions TransPerfect Cofounder Phil Shawe For Lying Under Oath, Destroying Evidence,” <http://www.forbes.com/sites/katiasavchuk/2016/07/20/court-sanctions-transperfect-cofounder-phil-shawe-for-lying-under-oath-destroying-evidence/#293bceb68eb1>.
- ³ Citizens for a Pro-Business Delaware (May 23, 2016). “Citizens For A Pro-Business Delaware Launches Major Grassroots Campaign To Prevent Government Overreach In The State,” <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/citizens-for-a-pro-business-delaware-launches-major-grassroots-campaign-to-prevent-government-overreach-in-the-state-300273189.html> and Jeff Mordock (June 22, 2016). “Delaware court orders TransPerfect sale,” <http://www.delawareonline.com/story/money/2016/06/21/delaware-court-orders-transperfect-sale/86183404/>. Interestingly, Rudy Giuliani, a chief backer of and apologist for Donald Trump’s presidential campaign, has seen fit to give his opinion on the ruling, “a very intrusive ruling in terms of the free market.” This again underscores the short distance between economics and politics.
- ⁴ <http://tuskventures.com/about/>
- ⁵ Bradley Tusk (November 4, 2015). “Creating the Uber Voter,” <http://tuskventures.com/journal/creating-the-uber-voter/>.
- ⁶ Fred Lucas (August 15, 2016). “Free Speech and Free Enterprise at Stake as Estranged Couple Collide Over Company,” http://www.americanthinker.com/articles/2016/08/free_speech_and_free_enterprise_at_stake_as_estranged_couple_collide_over_company.html.
- ⁷ Fred Lucas (August 15, 2016). “Free Speech and Free Enterprise at Stake as Estranged Couple Collide Over Company,” http://www.americanthinker.com/articles/2016/08/free_speech_and_free_enterprise_at_stake_as_estranged_couple_collide_over_company.html.
- ⁸ Citizens for a Pro-Business Delaware (July 21, 2016). “Citizens For A Pro-Business Delaware To Attend Delaware State Fair To Rally Support For TransPerfect,” http://www.bizjournals.com/prnewswire/press_releases/2016/07/21/NY52217. See particularly Bradley Tusk (November 4, 2015). “Creating the Uber Voter,” <http://tuskventures.com/journal/creating-the-uber-voter/> for Tusk’s role in a pro-corporate “grassroots” campaign: “Look at some of the regulatory and advocacy fights companies like Uber have faced. When the DC City Council in 2012 tried to shut us down, *we* were able to rally over 50,000 local residents to send unique emails to individual Councilmembers to oppose anti-Uber legislation.” [emphasis added]
- ⁹ There’s a photo of a Tusk operative leading a group of TransPerfect workers before canvassing: Jeff Mordock (September 17, 2016). “TransPerfect workers lobby Delawareans,” <http://www.delawareonline.com/story/money/2016/09/16/transperfect-workers-take-fight-delawares-doorsteps/90411750/>.
- ¹⁰ One example is the sale of Corporate Translations (CTi) to RWS Group in November 2015. Once an agency universally respected by its translators, it paid relatively well based on word count. But in June 2014 it sent a mailing to its translators under the heading “We’re Making Some Changes! GOOD NEWS FOR EVERYONE.” From then on, they noted, “Service requests will now be offered to you at a flat rate,” that flat rate often being lower than the rates previously offered. Given the timing, one might well ask whether the new pricing system (at translators’ expense) was not intended, by the owners wishing to cash out, to boost the bottom line and make CTi a more attractive takeover target.
- ¹¹ A Google search for “translation,” “automation,” and “venture capital” turns up seemingly endless hits. See, for example, Laura Kolodney (May 21, 2014). “Smartling Raises \$25M to Help Companies Translate Anything Digital,” <http://blogs.wsj.com/venturecapital/2014/05/21/smartling-raises-25m-to-help-companies-translate-anything-digital/>; VCNews Daily (August 9, 2016). “SmartCAT Closes \$2.8M Seed Round,” <http://www.vcnewsdaily.com/smartcat/venture-capital-funding/tvbrjdjgry>; Erika Askeland (June 23, 2013). “Lingo24 targets Silicon Valley as source of funds,” <http://www.scotsman.com/business/companies/tech/lingo24-targets-silicon-valley-as-source-of-funds-1-2973837>.
- ¹² <https://www.steps.com/how-it-works/pricing/>.
- ¹³ <https://www.steps.com/translators/more-uber-than-uber/>.

¹⁴ ALCUS (2016). “2016 Industry Survey: Executive Summary,” [https://c.ymcdn.com/sites/alcus.site-ym.com/resource/resmgr/Files/alc_survey_16\(exec-summary\).pdf](https://c.ymcdn.com/sites/alcus.site-ym.com/resource/resmgr/Files/alc_survey_16(exec-summary).pdf). An astonishing percentage, if true and generalizable. It should be noted that ALCUS sent 1,657 questionnaires to agencies worldwide. The overall return rate was 13%, but the completed response rate only 6.7%.

¹⁵ TAUS (November 2010). “Machine Translation Post-editing Guidelines,” <https://www.taus.net/academy/best-practices/postedit-best-practices/machine-translation-post-editing-guidelines>.

¹⁶ See Sharon O’Brien (2002). “Teaching Post-editing: A Proposal for Course Content,” <http://mt-archive.info/EAMT-2002-OBrien.pdf>. The paper is peppered with caveats about quality.

¹⁷ <http://www.kfkronenberg.com/What%20is%20translation.pdf>.

¹⁸ E-mail from Nataly Kelly on 11/15/2012. This figure is also contained in Nataly Kelly and Jost Zetzsche (2012). *Found in Translation*. New York: Perigree.

¹⁹ See Katia Kavchuk (June 21, 2016). “Inside The Nasty Corporate Divorce Between Ex-Lovers Who Built A Company Worth Nearly \$1 Billion,” <http://www.forbes.com/sites/katiasavchuk/2016/05/25/liz-eltling-transperfect-engaged-cofounders-phil-shawe-corporate-divorce/#7b0125ed2c2e>; Aaron Elstein (November 16, 2014). “The TransPerfect storm,”

http://www.crainsnewyork.com/article/20141116/PROFESSIONAL_SERVICES/141119882/the-transperfect-storm. In 2016, Elting made the *Forbes* list of richest “self-made” women, coming in at #36 (<http://www.forbes.com/self-made-women/list/#tab:overall>). Shawe’s fortune is undoubtedly similar.

²⁰ E-mail communication 11/15/2012 on the NETA forum by an attendee at the luncheon, later corroborated by another attendee.

²¹ Kevin Hendzel. “The Seven Virtues of the New Translation Era: Building on the Rubble of the Shattered ‘Poverty Cult,’” <http://www.ncta.org/?15>

²² Chris Durban (February 17, 2014). “The frugal translator,” <http://www.iti.org.uk/news-media-industry-jobs/the-pillar-box/list-by-date/566-the-frugal-translator>.

²³ David Jemielly (August 18, 2014). “Specializing: a ticket to the high end of the profession?” <http://www.iti.org.uk/news-media-industry-jobs/the-pillar-box/list-by-date/639-specializing-a-ticket-to-the-high-end-of-the-profession?showall=1&limitstart=>

²⁴ See Lawrence Mishel and Teresa Kroeger (2016). “Superb income growth in 2015 nearly single-handedly restored incomes lost in the Great Recession,” http://www.epi.org/blog/superb-income-growth-in-2015-nearly-single-handedly-restored-incomes-lost-in-the-great-recession/?mc_cid=8b95767143&mc_eid=1c8b70bbc2. The 2015 gains benefited only the top 5% of earners -- especially at the top. Most -- but not all -- in the bottom 95% continued to lose ground.

²⁵ Asher Schecter (February 15, 2104). “Car Trouble: Toyota vs the Whistle-blower From Israel,” <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/business/.premium-1.574389>. An excellent and very revealing interview with Benjaminson conducted by Rogel Alpher on TLV1 may be heard at <http://tlv1.fm/journeys/2014/04/07/rogel-alpher-with-the-toyota-whistleblower-betsy-benjaminson-journeys/>.

Here is a thought experiment: It’s late 1953, and you’ve just landed your dream job, translating for the PR firm Hill and Knowlton. There has been growing evidence of a possible link between smoking and cancer and other diseases. Tobacco companies seem to accept that there is a link. But Hill and Knowlton proposes to the industry a massive multifaceted PR campaign to cast doubt on these findings, including foundation and funding of the Tobacco Industry Research Committee, which historian Robert N. Proctor has called a “triumph of deception in the guise of research.” **You’ve signed a non-disclosure agreement -- but you have this knowledge.** We know in retrospect that worldwide about 6 million people died annually from smoking-related lung cancer and other diseases, about 400,000 in the US alone. In addition, both of your parents are heavy smokers. **As a translator, citizen, and son or daughter, what would you do?**

See Robert N. Proctor, PhD (1996). Review of Philip J. Hilts, *Smokescreen: The Truth Behind the Tobacco Industry Cover-up*, *JAMA*; 276(12):998. doi:10.1001/jama.1996.03540120076040, <http://jama.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=408415>

Proctor covers the deception and fraud in depth in Robert N. Proctor (2011). *Golden Holocaust*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

<http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/05/tobacco-book-golden-holocaust-robert-proctor>

<http://www.who.int/tobacco/media/en/TobaccoExplained.pdf>