



Nancy du Plessis is a filmmaker, solo performer, writer and recording artist. Her latest film *Get the Fire!* is currently being broadcast in Europe and the US.

Inaccurate Translation is Treason

“ Making a documentary can be such a joy. And such a trial. First, you've got to find a subject you can live with—for perhaps as many as five long years while you make the film and, if your work gets any attention, for the rest of your life. Then there's lining up the production company. Locating the financing. Surviving the shoot. Doing the editing. The rough cut. The fine cut. The finishing. At long last, you deliver your baby. And sink into those *post-partum* blues. Now, finally, the kid is on its own!

NO! *It can't be!* There are still many dangers to overcome to ensure that your film is broadcast as you intended: The translation has to be accurate *and* complete. The appropriate voices have to be cast. The text has to be recorded with the appropriate intonation. And *all* the on-screen information (names, positions, dates, etc.) that appears in the original version must also be broadcast in foreign-language versions.

I write this based on my own experience. From the horror of hearing my family's history inaccurately broadcast while highly-political subjects uttered things they wouldn't be caught dead saying. And from the agony of having justified at length, and in two languages, each requested change in the foreign-language version, and then have e-mailed, faxed and phoned for most of the week before broadcast with no response—only to be informed by e-mail that the C.E. has visitors and no time for me. “Besides, The TV station used its 'star translator'! And everyone loves your film!” I'm not the only one with such stories to tell. I want and need to believe that we are all trying to do our best. I know that we are all overworked and rushed. And that many of us are not adequately compensated for our efforts.

Yet we have got to get the foreign-language versions right! Not just because of the threat of lawsuits, or the prohibitive cost of Errors & Omissions insurance. But because we ask the subjects of our films to trust us. They give us their time and give us their stories. The viewers should be able to trust our work, too.

Given the fact that budgets for documentary films are unlikely to increase anytime soon and in order to buy us all much more time, the only option I see to ensure proper foreign-language versions is for documentary filmmakers to exercise vigilance, even after delivering their films.

Since a lot of information is transmitted in the images, be sure that the translator gets a VHS cassette of the original version of your film. (And because a graphic artist has given your film a certain style, provide a VHS copy of the original film for the person in charge of the graphics in the foreign-language version, too.)

For territories where you know the broadcast language, contractually reserve the right to reread the translation, and insist that the translator's name be broadcast with the film. (You're the author. Don't let yourself be held accountable for a poor foreign-language version!) You must be ready to go all the way to defend your text, if necessary enlisting a media lawyer to prevent the broadcast of a faulty translation.

Where there is no practical way to check the translation personally, then the next-best bet is to draft a list of “tips for the translator” explaining any confusing terms or comments. Beyond that, make accurate translations an issue within the documentary community. Raise the level of consciousness. ” Do this as if all of our reputations depended on it. They do.