

AI and the Deaf Community

Discussion and debate — because AI isn't just a tool you use. It's something happening to a community right now.

Every other page in this folder treats AI as equipment. This one treats it as a **Deaf culture topic**. Decisions are being made right now about captions, interpreters, and access — and the central question in all of them is the same one running through Deaf history: *who gets to decide what Deaf people need?*

Before you argue: find out what Deaf people are actually saying. Look up statements from the NAD, WFD, Deaf creators, and working interpreters. An opinion about Deaf access formed without Deaf input is exactly the problem the Deaf community has been naming since Milan 1880.

TOPIC 1 — AUTOMATIC CAPTIONS

Auto-captioning is everywhere: video calls, lectures, livestreams, social media. It's also imperfect — it stumbles on accents, crosstalk, background noise, names, and technical vocabulary, and it can't convey tone or identify speakers reliably. Deaf viewers have long joked about “craptions.”

Discuss:

- How accurate does a caption have to be before it counts as access? Who decides that number?
- If a school uses auto-captions instead of hiring a captioner, who saves money and who takes the risk?
- Is imperfect access better than no access — or does it let institutions off the hook?

TOPIC 2 — SIGNING AVATARS

Animated avatars that produce signs are pitched as a way to add ASL to websites, airports, and announcements. Deaf organizations have objected, pointing to missing facial grammar, unnatural movement, and the risk that avatars get used to replace human interpreters rather than to expand access.

Discuss:

- Is a low-quality avatar at a train station better than nothing, or worse than nothing?
- What is lost when the signer isn't a person — culturally, not just linguistically?
- Who was in the room when these were designed?

TOPIC 3 — AI INTERPRETING AND TRANSLATION APPS

Companies periodically announce apps that promise to translate between spoken English and ASL. They tend to attract funding and press coverage, and criticism from Deaf people and interpreters.

Discuss:

- An interpreter reads the room, asks for clarification, and manages cultural context. Can software do any of that?
- What are the stakes in a hospital, a courtroom, or a police stop when the translation is wrong?
- Why do these products keep getting built despite Deaf pushback? Who is the customer?

TOPIC 4 — WHO TELLS THE STORY

AI writes about Deaf people using what it learned from text — most of it written by hearing people. AI image tools generate pictures of “people signing” that fluent signers can spot as nonsense immediately.

Discuss:

- If most writing about a community comes from outside it, what happens when a machine learns from that writing?
- Where else in Deaf history have hearing people spoken for Deaf people? How did that go?

Structured Debate

Pick one resolution. Assign sides. Research first, argue second.

RESOLUTIONS

1. **Automatic captions should legally count as accessibility.**
2. **Signing avatars should be used for public announcements when no interpreter is available.**
3. **AI translation apps do more harm than good for the Deaf community.**
4. **Schools should teach students to use AI for Deaf culture research at all.**

FORMAT

PHASE	TIME	WHAT HAPPENS
Research	15 min	Each side gathers evidence. At least one source must be Deaf-led. AI may be used to find leads — every claim must be verified elsewhere.
Opening	3 min each	Each side presents its strongest case.
Cross	4 min	Open questioning between sides.
Flip	2 min each	Each side states the <i>best</i> argument for the other side.
Close	2 min each	Final position — which may have changed.

PREPARATION NOTES

Our resolution: _____ **Our side:** For / Against

OUR THREE STRONGEST ARGUMENTS
1.
2.
3.

DEAF-LED SOURCE WE FOUND	WHAT IT ACTUALLY SAID

THE OTHER SIDE'S BEST ARGUMENT — AND OUR HONEST RESPONSE

AFTER THE DEBATE

- Did anything you found change your mind? What was it?
- Did your side's argument depend on any assumption about what Deaf people want — and did you check it?
- What would you want to ask a Deaf person about this topic if you could?

The thread through all of this: “Nothing about us without us.” Every one of these debates comes back to whether Deaf people were consulted before decisions were made for them — which is the same question at the center of Milan 1880 and Deaf President Now.