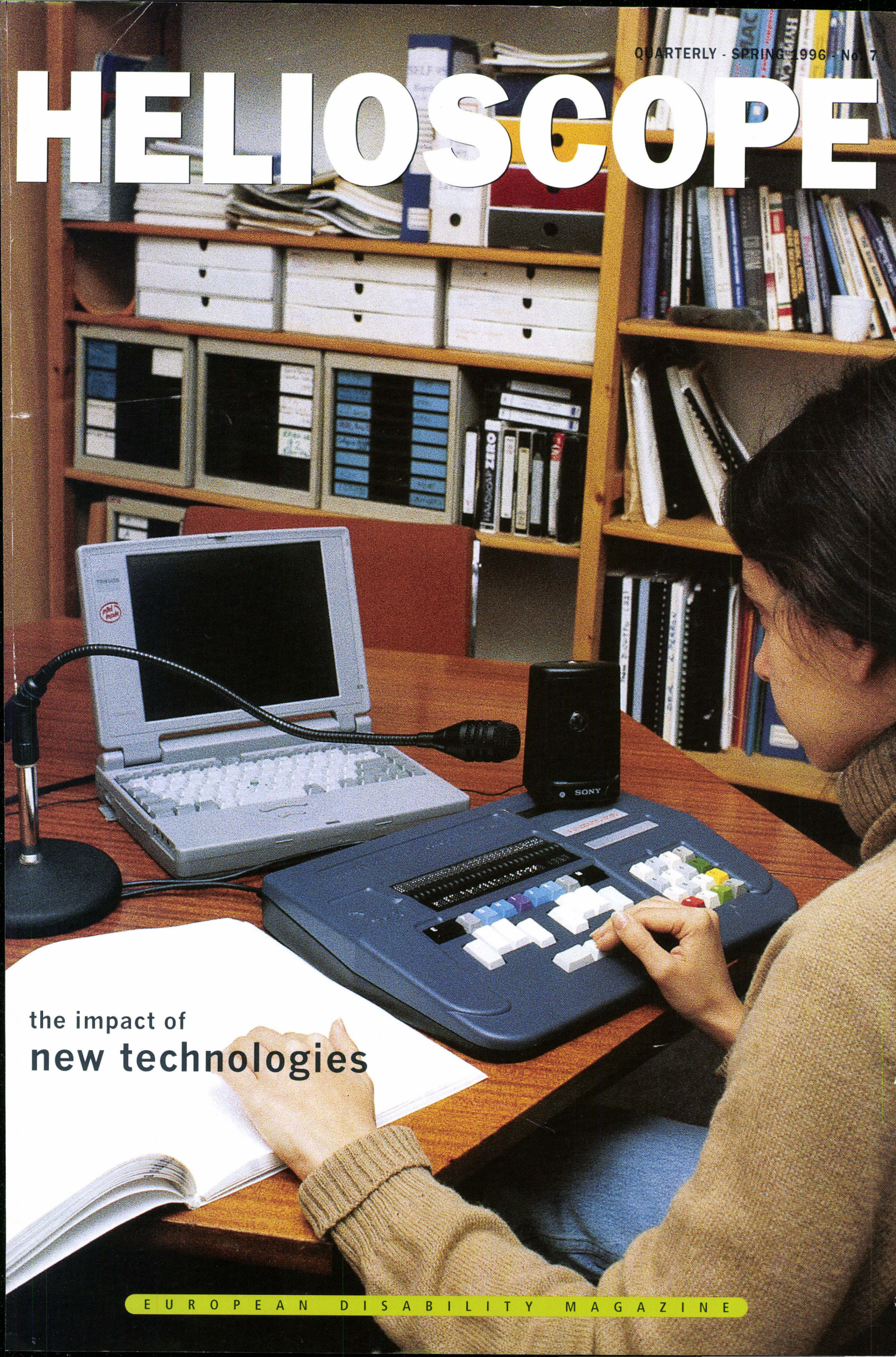


# HELIOSCOPE



the impact of  
**new technologies**

e d i t o r i a l

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# New technology

## opportunities and social implications

**Technology is everywhere.** We are all familiar with its applications: cars, traffic lights, boats, planes and their navigation systems. Refrigerators, washing machines and entry-phones. Telephones, televisions and networked personal computers – some modem-linked to the Internet. From the alarm clock to the microwave, technology is unavoidably part of daily life; it is there wherever you turn. But whether it is always accessible, useful and affordable for disabled people is another matter altogether.

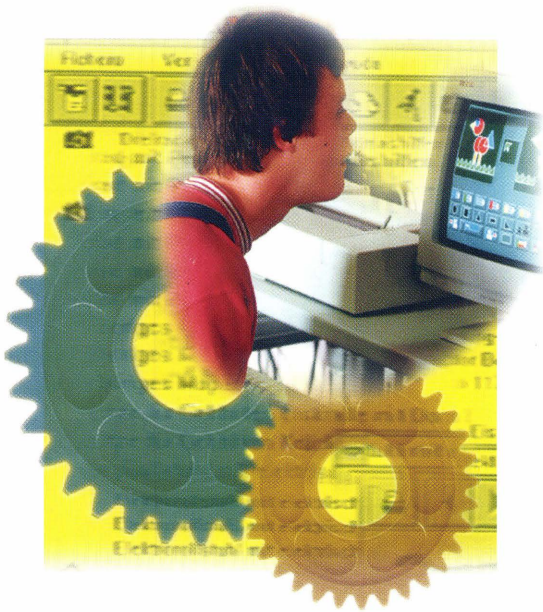
The contention in the UN standard rules that “States should develop national rehabilitation programmes for all groups of persons with disabilities” implies the use of technical aids. Rehabilitation involves a whole series of measures designed to maximise and maintain the individual’s physical, social, professional and economic capacities. In many cases the use of technology to compensate for functional loss or impairment is part of this. Prostheses, electric wheelchairs, Braille printers and text telephones are all examples of applied technology for disabled people. But, however positive the standard rules may be, they do not have the force of a law or directive. However forceful and detailed, to be effective they must also prompt and shape legislation and (disability) policy – both national and European...

The United States set the pace with the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990. First and foremost, this act established the use and provision of technical support as a civil right. To give one example, Title IV of the ADA provides for the accessibility of public telecommunica-

tions and information services. This guarantees access to such systems for people with hearing and speech impairments, for instance.

Technology is essentially the transformation of natural products and raw materials into objects suitable for human use, and the study of the techniques by which this can be achieved. It covers a broad swathe of disciplines, from electronics and data processing to metallurgy, machine construction and architecture. There are also various levels of application: universal technology accessible to everyone, and specific technology designed for use by disabled people. This may take the form of devices attached to the body (prostheses), freestanding devices (such as wheelchairs) or infrastructure applications (kitchens, workplaces, etc.). Individual applications in the built environment (infrastructure) are distinguished from facilities for horizontal and vertical transport (buses, trains and lifts). Technology for disabled people is of use in many fields: mobility for people with motor disabilities, technology in education and therapy for people with learning disabilities and behavioural problems, and orientation and communications technology for people with sensory disabilities, etc. DG XIII’s OPEN programme is an instance of the latter. The Commission’s mobility directive – on which a decision is still pending – is an example of the former, as it primarily targets people with motor disabilities.

Not all solutions and adaptations for disabled people can be described as high-tech. Far from it: disabled people and their families and friends overcome a great many problems



themselves by the simple use of a piece of string, a stick, a standard item of furniture or a couple of wall supports. But the more severe the disability, the greater the technology content involved.

One encouraging trend is towards consumer influence on the quality and utility of individual technical aids. Institutions exist in a number of European countries to test such devices, and the involvement of users is evident in their influence on test programming and membership of consumer panels and the like. This approach is also a rich seam of information for product development and thus innovation.

It has been claimed that increasing technological sophistication will ultimately isolate disabled people. Telework in particular – working at home on a terminal linked up to a computer network elsewhere – is often cited as an example of this. My own view is that isolation will recede as more and more technical aids become available to promote mobility, communication and orientation. With a little imagination it must be possible to have the best of both worlds.

Our concern would be better directed at ensuring that technology is both available and affordable for disabled people. The sky may be the limit in terms of technological progress, but not when it comes to finance. Sadly, perfectly decent systems of provision in a number of EU countries are coming under economic pressure. Other countries have no such system to speak of in the first place. And that, in terms of economic and social policy, is exceptionally short-sighted.

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## Feature

### ► The impact of new technologies

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# European initiatives and new technology

## Multiplier effects between HELIOS/HANDYNET, EURES, TIDE and COST 219

Coherence, synergy and the concentration of assistance are key concepts in a relatively new school of thought underpinning the implementation of Community policy.

**Synergy implies** coordinating measures with identical or similar aims in order to economise on and/or focus the use of available resources. Synergy is a goal for the HELIOS II programme, as the decision of 25.2.1993 indicates, "...in the field of vocational rehabilitation and employment, with the Horizon initiative and, in respect of the use of effective technologies, with the TIDE initiative."

What is the shared goal of Community activities in the field of new technologies for disabled people, such as HELIOS/HANDYNET, TIDE, COST 219 and the EURES network?

The view of the European Disability Forum is that technical adaptations and products are intended to improve the quality of life for disabled people and promote their participation in society, i.e. their social and economic integration.

This aim is all the more important in that, despite the substantial technological progress made and the increased support for disabled people that has enabled, the problem of social integration is still far from being resolved. This is due to a number of factors, in particular a lack of information: there are products and technologies which work well and are suited to a given disability, but are not adapted to envi-

ronmental conditions. Even the most ingenious wheelchair design still requires low kerbs and wide doors and lifts.

The activities mentioned, if coordinated to ensure synergy, could make a contribution to achieving common goals through interaction and cooperation.

HANDYNET, a major activity of the HELIOS programme, is a computerised information and documentation system on, *inter alia*, technical aids for disabled people. A database available on CD-ROM and E-mail supplies disabled consumers with all the information they need on products, prices, use and the statutory conditions attached to assistance. It gives disabled people access to the benefits of the internal market: for example, a wheelchair made in Germany might be available more cheaply in Luxembourg.

TIDE's aim is to develop prototype technological products and tools to assist disabled and elderly people in their daily lives. This involves on the one hand facilitating access to these products and on the other developing applications for new technologies in the field of physical disability. TIDE seeks to develop a European market for rehabilitation technologies, in which price and quality differentials are transparent and open to scrutiny by disabled people. The initiative was launched as a pilot project on the basis of studies conducted under COST 219.

COST 219 promotes research in the field of telecommunications and telematics. The central aim is to gather information on existing support and services in these fields. The EURES network, providing information, guidance and placement services within the European labour market, runs databases on living and working conditions and job vacancies. Its function is to place jobseekers on the European labour market.

In addition to existing contacts on the ground between specialists working together within the technology programmes, what are known as inter-departmental groups have now been set up at management level, within which European Commission officials from the various directorates-general establish common development strategies and cooperation on content with a view to generating multiplier effects. One such group is composed of people responsible for TIDE and COST 219 at DG XIII, and for HELIOS at DG V. There would appear to be wide variations in the intensity of collaboration within these bodies, however.

At present, synergy chiefly takes the form of mutual use of the information and results yielded by the individual activities. The findings of TIDE research projects on improving technical aids and integration technologies, for example, are stored in the HANDYNET computer system, where they are available to disabled users. A study group set up to coordinate this process, comprising members of the TIDE Expert Committee and HANDYNET specialists, has drafted a questionnaire to gauge information needs. Involving those directly concerned makes it possible for them to assess the value of a product developed with TIDE backing and whether it is worth including in the database. For example, TIDE supported the development of a software package which enables visually impaired people to use Windows 95. Information on the product was then made available via HANDYNET.

Ties also exist between the HELIOS and COST 219 teams, with COST experts giving specialist input to the HANDYNET study group on research and development. A joint conference was held early in 1994 on the impact of technology on elderly and disabled people from a social



## European initiatives and new technology

standpoint, leading to the launch of the INCLUDE project. These initiatives pave the way for planned cooperation on the development of an information network in the field of telecommunications and telematics.

Synergy between EURES and HELIOS/HANDYNET is chiefly in the form of the concentration of technical resources. When an E-mail operating program was needed for HANDYNET, the European Commission's DG III made its IDA system available, on condition that it was run in cooperation with the EURES database. Joint technical management has been set up for the two database servers. A possible next step could conceivably be for information for disabled people concerning jobs and the labour market to be gathered via the EURES system and disseminated through HANDYNET. Initial discussions are under way between the two teams on the option of mutual access to their respective information tools. The outcome depends on which new avenues are identified for EURES, for example:

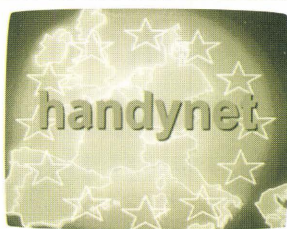
- Extending access to the EURES databases (currently reserved for Euroadvisers) to the general public – including, of course, disabled people –, and using the information via HANDYNET.
- Developing a separate section of the database on living and working conditions for disabled people in the EU Member States, e.g. employment support, jobs suitable for disabled people, etc. Disabled people have very limited mobility within the EU. If the aim is really to promote exchange, in addition to a database special support and guidance services need to be made available. This might be a suitable focus for a future EURES-HELIOS pilot project in the border regions.

Officials on all sides are agreed that, for potential multiplier effects to be fully developed, far more time is needed for meetings on content and technical issues. But the approach is seen as generally positive and necessary. One of the review seminars for the HELIOS II programme, which expires at the end of the year, will be held in October 1996 on the subject of technological impact. The meeting will examine each of the fields covered by HELIOS – education, training, employment, recreation, etc. – and assess the impact of technological factors and the development prospects for each. The conclusions drawn will have major repercussions for the content of HELIOS after 1997.

Disparities between the Member States in terms of synergy are even greater. Specialists are calling for “coordination circles” to be set up, which would at least draw together Community activities in the Member States. The model exists in northern EU countries, including Denmark, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands and Sweden. Resistance to similar moves is strong in countries such as France, Germany and the UK. The southerly EU States are often more open to such ideas: in Portugal and Spain, for instance, information and guidance structures have been developed using all the available programmes. Training for disabled people in the use of HANDYNET has been financed by the Community initiative HORIZON.

Possible avenues for future collaboration might include, for example, a joint specific programme of research for disabled people focusing on technological and social developments under the EU's next R&D framework programme.

Ulrike Wissler  
BBJ Brüssel



## Information technology in action

Full knowledge of the facts has always been essential to make informed personal choices in any field. Ever since Gutenberg, the history of information technology has been inextricably bound up with the development of industry and civil liberties.

**The ongoing technological** revolution in the information field is linked to progress in telecommunications and computing. It opens up the prospect of access to maximum information, anytime, anywhere. Information technology is undoubtedly ringing the changes for freedom of thought and expression throughout society. And equal access to information for disabled people, as enshrined in Rule 5 of the United Nations' standard rules, is precisely where HANDYNET, the European computerised information system, comes in.

HANDYNET was set up on the initiative of the European Commission as an information service for disabled people. Using leading-edge tools such as CD-ROM and the information superhighway, it provides information in all 11 official Community languages, ensuring that each user obtains the same information content and quality in his or her own language.

HANDYNET is also a multimedia information tool, presenting 5,000 illustrations of the technical aids described. In addition, the CD-ROM contains demonstrations of rehabilitation and communications software, classified as technical aids by ISO (the International Organisation for Standardisation). These give potential users a clearer idea of the possibilities of each program, cognitive and speech rehabilitation packages in particular. Unfortunately, new technologies are not always accessible to all users. This is especially true of computer programs developed from graphics software, which remain only partially accessible to non-sighted people. A DOS version of HANDYNET on CD-ROM has therefore been developed to allow non-sighted people to consult the information using voice synthesis or Braille.

The HANDYNET CD-ROM further contains descriptive information on organisations concerned with technical aids: not only manufacturers and distributors, but also organisations involved in information, advice, training and research activities, etc. 15,000 such organisations across Europe are listed. Details are also given of the procedures in force under social policies in each of the European Union countries for buying, hiring and borrowing technical aids.

In August 1995, the contract for the production, marketing and commercial distribution of the HANDYNET CD-ROM was awarded to the HANDYCOM consortium, comprising IMEXPERT (France), UPEL (United Kingdom) and PROMI (Spain). At the request of the European Disability Forum, the Commission is supplying free copies of the CD-ROM to interested NGOs on the forum and their partners, with a view to securing wider access to the information for end users. In all, 2,000 copies of the HANDYNET CD-ROM will be distributed to the Member States free of charge.

Which of course leaves the crucial question of consultation. As the CD-ROM is, by definition, a kind of encyclopaedia, it is difficult to gauge precisely how often it is consulted and by whom. The latest version, issued in December 1995, contains a statistical processing program which records each consultation of the database. Only the 16 centres within the HANDYNET network and organisations issued with a free copy have undertaken to supply the Commission with data on consultations. The first meaningful results should be published in June 1996.

While the CD-ROM's large data storage capacity and multimedia potential make it an ideal medium for information

on technical aids, the primary goal of all the partners in the HELIOS programme is to be able to communicate with one another by E-mail. In cooperation with EURES, the European employment information network, the HANDYNET E-mail system has been installed at nearly 50 sites, including the ministries represented on the HELIOS Advisory Committee and the offices of NGOs on the European Disability Forum. The E-mail system, like the consultation software for the HANDYNET CD-ROM, was developed under Microsoft Windows.

The volume of messages circulating in the system and the many requests received for installation of the new communications tool are a measure of its value. HANDYNET's future is on the information superhighway (e.g. the Internet), where information from existing sources in the Member States can be accessed and given a European dimension.

**Josyane Pierre**  
*HANDYNET coordinator*  
*HELIOS Team of Experts*



## Focus on user involvement

There is a growing awareness that disabled and elderly people have a right to expect the same standard of service and access as every other member of society.

**Meeting these expectations** is not only a matter of equipment or training, it also implies dialogue with user groups to gather information on specific needs and provide details of the products and services available.

Access to telecommunications and database facilities ensures greater independence, mobility and quality of life. Unfortunately, more advanced equipment often makes greater demands on users, and people already experiencing difficulties can actually be further isolated by technical progress. Disabled people who cannot use telecommunications services or access databases of use to them will find it hard to gather information, make arrangements and maintain social contacts. On the other hand, the opportunities that international communications networks present should not lead to new forms of institutionalisation and marginalisation for disabled people. On the contrary, these systems should supplement existing information tools and foster inter-personal communication.

As regards the HANDYNET database on technical aids (WHAT), measures should be taken at national level to enhance the system's role as a catalyst in the purchase of technical aids and the conditions attached to public finance and subsidies.

The role of European disability NGOs in relation to HANDYNET must be clearly defined. NGOs are a vital information channel for disabled people. To be effective in this, not only must they have the necessary technological infrastructure but, more importantly, they must be an integral part of the decision-making, implementation and management structure.

Following the HANDYNET training seminar held in Belluno in June 1995, some moves have been made in that di-

rection, such as the decision to distribute the CD-ROM free of charge to NGOs on the European Disability Forum and their partners, the participation of NGO representatives in the various working groups, the extension of the E-mail system and the inclusion of data on NGOs. These measures will hopefully develop synergies among disabled users, disability organisations and the HANDYNET system.

Following the pilot phase of networking European NGOs on the forum via E-mail, the second phase should be to include all their member organisations, with a view to facilitating pro-active and efficient information exchange. The aim of developing a network is to establish a new, efficient channel of communication which will also ensure, at relatively little cost, that greater use is made of the data collected.

At the same time, a HANDYNET co-ordination group should be set up at European level. This should be composed of one representative of European NGOs, a HANDYNET expert and a member of the national coordination centres. Its role will be to coordinate the planning of activities at European level, liaise between national coordination centres and act as the technical and indeed political interface for the HANDYNET expert team. The group could also undertake a study to identify new areas for development to be included within the CD-ROM, such as tourism for all, accessibility information, etc.

The key stake in HANDYNET has to shift to disabled users; that is its main challenge for the future. Disabled users are the potential market for any new technology developed in the fields of telecommunications and databases. To guarantee user involvement, the system has to be made user friendly. But if real user friendliness is to be achieved it is vital

that disabled users should be involved at every stage of the decision-making process. That will ultimately lengthen procedures and perhaps raise costs, but it will certainly pay off in terms of user acceptance, creativity and quality.

Modern telecommunications and databases that meet disabled peoples' needs have the potential to open up society to these groups. It is imperative that these instruments should develop in a way which improves the service available to all users. A coherent and coordinated policy is therefore essential if technological development is to secure improved access. A policy which, alongside technological considerations, standardisation and coordination, acknowledges the rights of the disabled people who form such a substantial share of the market for new technology.

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## The TIDE initiative

### Advanced information and communications technology applications for disabled and elderly people

TIDE was launched in 1991 as a pilot initiative by the European Commission's DG XIII <sup>(1)</sup>. During the pilot phase (21 projects completed between 1992 and 1994) and bridge phase (55 projects between 1994 and 1996), TIDE stood for "Technology Initiative for Disabled and Elderly people". In its current phase, it is part of the programme for telematics applications under the fourth framework programme for research, technological development and demonstration, and stands for "Telematics for Disabled and Elderly people".

#### Aims

The purpose of TIDE projects is to enhance the individual abilities of disabled and elderly people and improve their social and physical environment. The means used to this end are developing and demonstrating information and communications technology applications and increasing the competitiveness and quality of the assistive technology industry and European services for disabled and elderly people. These goals are pursued within the framework and with the instruments of research and technological development. TIDE is therefore governed by the usual rules and procedures for Community RTD programmes.

The TIDE initiative places strong emphasis on user involvement at all stages of a project. The basic tenet is the "equalisation of opportunities". No one should be denied access to the technological developments which are bringing new services onto the market and into society. TIDE aims to create the right conditions for disabled and elderly people to gain access to the new systems and services, and seeks to equip these groups to confront any problems and obstacles that the introduc-

tion of new technologies might generate. Such obstacles should be anticipated and avoided from the outset of any new development process, in line with the principle of universal access and design.

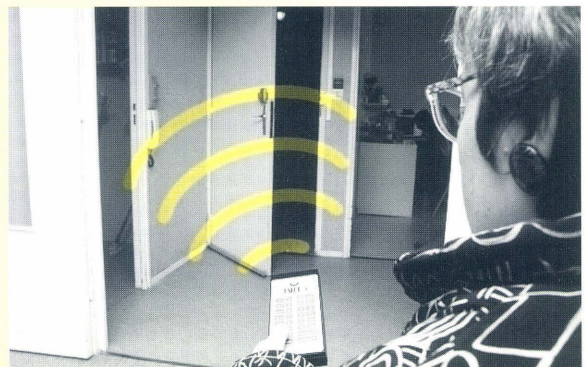
#### Ongoing projects

The breakdown by theme of the projects of the bridge phase, due to run until the end of 1996, is as follows: access to technology and related services: 16; life at home and remote care: 7; mobility and transport: 6; control and manipulation: 3; restoration and enhancement of functions: 18; and user and market issues: 5 <sup>(2)</sup>.

Projects usually receive 50% part-financing from the Community. Up to 100% financing can be awarded for "horizontal" – or support – activities. On average, projects receive some ECU 900,000 for a budget of approximately ECU 2 million. The average budget for horizontal activities is ECU 500,000.

#### TIDE within the fourth RTD framework programme

Replies to the call for proposals issued on 15 September 1995 were processed in February 1996 and selected projects will





be able to get under way by the end of the year. This new phase is fully in line with the Telematics Applications strand of the fourth RTD framework programme; indeed TIDE is one of its 12 sectors, with a budget of ECU 65 million (for projects running from 1996 to 1999). TIDE benefits from a broad interpretation of the concept of "telematics" and will therefore also cover developments in areas such as control, robotics and mobility, and electronic applications for the restoration and enhancement of functions.

### Scope

The two "traditional" components of the TIDE programme, access to technology and services and restoration of functions affected by impairment, now include new areas such as information and communication systems for enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of services supporting independent living, advanced solutions for ability assessment and training, alternative and augmentative communication and technology support for the enhancement of mental abilities. And experience gained from the HEART study<sup>(3)</sup> and the related findings and recommendations of other ongoing studies have contributed to enabling the goal-orientated management of these support measures.

### What next?

TIDE cooperates with various Community programmes. DG XIII and DG V are planning to organise a wide-ranging consultation exercise on the basis of a discussion paper drawn up by a working group in conjunction with COST 219 and COST A5<sup>(4)</sup>, and with the participation of other directorates-general such as DG VII (Transport) and DG XII (Science, Research and Development). Nearly 60 experts were consulted on the draft, including various participants from disability organisations (on the European Disability Forum) and associations of elderly people (the European Platform of Seniors' Organisations).

The document ("Research and development addressing the needs and potential of older people and people with disabilities. A holistic approach to disability, ageing, and living conditions"<sup>(5)</sup>) will be circulated with a questionnaire. The findings of the survey will provide a basis for the Commission to propose a new framework of measures with a view to promoting the development and coherence of Community RTD activities for disabled and elderly people.

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- (1) See "An evaluation of the pilot action of TIDE 1992-1994". Two documents: "Full Report" and "Summary and Recommendations", produced by the Evaluation Board and Committee and published by the European Commission, DG XIII, September 1994. Original: English. Other languages available from the TIDE Office, fax: +32.2 299 02 48.
- (2) See "Technology initiative for disabled and elderly people. TIDE. Bridge phase - synopses", December 1994, European Commission, DG XIII, Luxembourg, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Scientific and Technical Research Series, 1995, 191 pp.
- (3) See "Technology assisting disabled and older people in Europe. The HEART study", 1995. Distributed by the Swedish Handicap Institute.
- (4) COST: scientific and technical cooperation. COST 219 focuses on telecommunications accessible to all, while COST A5 is a cooperation project on "geronto-technology".
- (5) "Research and development addressing the needs and potential of older people and people with disabilities in the European Union. A holistic approach to disability, ageing and living conditions. A discussion paper", November 1995, European Commission, DG XIII, TIDE.



## Involving disabled and elderly users in technical research

Disability issues were first raised under the COST programme – European Cooperation in the field of Scientific and Technical Research – in the telecommunications sector in September 1986, with the COST 219 research project “Future telecommunication and teletinformatcs facilities for disabled and elderly people”. The aim was to explore ways of opening up access to telecommunications services and terminals to disabled and elderly people and using telecommunications and telematic services to assist disabled and elderly people in their daily lives.

**The project soon** attracted the participation of 18 countries. The 28 reports, proceedings and books produced so far include such titles as “User Needs”, “Telecommunications and Disability”, “Universal Access to Telecommunications Services”, “Telecommunications For All” and “The Forgotten Millions”. Cooperation with other initiatives led to the launch of the TIDE research programme (Technology Initiative for Disabled and Elderly People), projects for disabled and elderly users were set up under the RACE programme (R&D in Advanced Communications Technology in Europe), and ETSI (the European Telecommunications Standards Institute) created technical subcommittee HF2 on people with special needs. Cooperation between directorates at the European Commission has facilitated the planning of further activities to ensure that the future development of society takes full account of disabled and elderly people’s needs.

One central factor in this is the universal service obligation. This is the principle that products and services should be designed and implemented in such a way as to be accessible to all. COST 219 has yielded technical progress, new prospects for standardisation and legislation and economic arguments in support of universal services.

Representatives of disability associations have been involved in managing the initiative from the very beginning. National reference groups including disabled and elderly people have been set up in many countries to ensure the flow of information to the project and the dissemination of results.

Disabled and older people are also actively participating in other research activities, including for instance the European telematics applications research programme (assessing user needs, preparing and evaluating research proposals, carrying out research and evaluation work and ensuring the utilisation of results).

One example of new activities is the INCLUDE project, a four-year support initiative on the issues of telematics applications for elderly and disabled people which is intended to ensure that issues of importance for these groups are properly addressed under the European telematics applications research programme.

To this end, INCLUDE will:

- assess the plans, activities and achievements of all projects in this regard,
- develop consensus mechanisms to ensure optimum consideration of disabled and elderly users’ needs and requirements,
- provide ongoing project support,
- assess issues relating to standardisation and legislation in order to ensure a broad uptake of results,
- produce targeted information, publications and pamphlets on accessible design.

The INCLUDE project is structured around:

- A user board (DG V, European Disability Forum) which advises the project on issues concerning disabled and older people.
- National user groups set up by the partners. These are networks of users, separate groups and sections of existing groupings such as the COST 219 na-

tional reference groups. The national user groups are kept informed of the activities and issues addressed by INCLUDE and can comment on and influence the project’s work.

The participation of disabled and elderly people and their organisations ensures that not only the knowledge produced but also the information input into the project is of the highest calibre.

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# Standardisation

## The HEART study

### Consumer feedback needed on technical aids

The 1993-1994 HEART study (Horizontal European Activities in Rehabilitation Technology) reviews practice and targets in the field of technical aids throughout western Europe. In this it is a unique tool for industry, government, the Commission and consumer organisations.

**The HEART study** was conducted by a consortium of 21 institutions, organisations and businesses in 12 European countries and coordinated by the Swedish disability institute. It covers six areas:

- standardisation and testing
- the technical aids industry
- the supply of technical aids
- legal and economic factors
- training
- R&D

The aim of the study was to raise the quality of life for disabled and elderly people by means of a series of improvements in the field of technical aids throughout Europe, designed to facilitate the establishment of a single market for the sector, promote cooperation and exchange between the various parties concerned and increase the quality and effectiveness of products and services alike. The project was financed by the EU initiative TIDE (Technology Initiative for Disabled and Elderly People).

The HEART study yielded 48 reports. These contain a number of very clearly formulated conclusions – and over 130

fairly practical proposals for action. 16 of the recommendations concern increased consumer feedback, a recurrent theme in the study.

#### Consumer feedback

We at DSI are confident that industry, the authorities and organisations will be guided by the HEART survey. Technical aids, assistive technology, the supply of aids and licensing are subjects which we as a national umbrella organisation have always given top priority. This is clearly a matter of interest to all disability groups, and thus all our member organisations.

Technical aids need to be developed in collaboration with the consumers, i.e. disabled and elderly people. When it comes to living with technical aids, we are the experts. For those of us who belong to disability organisations, this is only logical. But it is not the way industry traditionally operates, possibly because the customer is not always the consumer. The customer or purchaser may be a public body or institution, which cannot tell where a surgical shoe or prosthesis pinches. The consumer can.

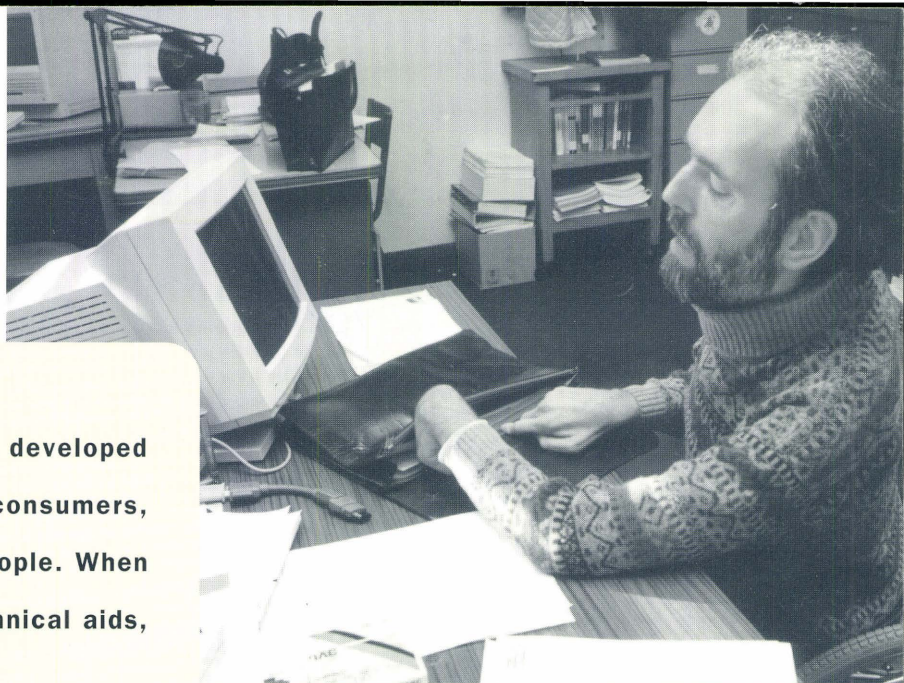
What is needed is direct communication between industry and the consumer. Steps must be taken to ensure that all groups of disabled people receive a hearing: what one group wants from a product may well spell disaster for another.

The HEART study sets out very clear recommendations on this point. It further provides a step-by-step model for collaboration between professionals and consumers.

#### The importance of standards

Traditionally, quality standards for technical aids in Denmark have been established nationally. But an industry as small as the technical aids sector must and should take advantage of the European single market as a means of ensuring quality and fair pricing. And clearly a common market requires common standards – standards guaranteeing product durability, flexibility and availability to all groups of disabled people.

DSI has appointed someone with 20 years' experience of standardisation from a consumer viewpoint to its secretariat to deal exclusively with health policy, tech-



**“Technical aids need to be developed in collaboration with the consumers, i.e. disabled and elderly people. When it comes to living with technical aids, we are the experts.”**

nical aids and standardisation. As an umbrella organisation we also handle coordination between the various disability groups. DSI enjoys excellent relations with the Danish standardisation organisation and the Danish technical aids institute. We have seats on a number of standardisation committees at both national and international level, including European bodies such as the CEN (European Committee for Standardisation), and the ISO (International Organisation for Standardisation).

#### **More hands to the wheel**

However, it is no secret that we often feel somewhat isolated in our work in this field. We are lacking commitment from the other national and European disability organisations. It is our sincere hope that the HEART study will help change this.

The recommendations in the study are clear enough. Industry, governments and the Commission are called upon to support the participation of disabled people and disability organisations in the standardisation process. But that costs money. The HEART study shows

where support is needed and makes a range of proposals for financing consumer feedback.

I would like to take this opportunity to touch on another aspect of standardisation. The industry is always extremely well prepared for meetings of the various working groups. The same is true of suppliers of technical aids. It is therefore important that representatives of disability organisations too should talk matters through at European level prior to meetings of the European standardisation organisations.

We hope that all those involved will take the recommendations of the HEART survey on board and put them into practice in their political activities.

**John Møller**

*Chairman of the Danish Council of  
Organisations of Disabled People  
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# The producer's perspective

## Technologies for disabled people a profitable business?

IBM has some experience of developing technological products for disabled people.

Among its social projects – a common practice in industry – the special needs sector is a priority.

**The aim is to develop** technical aids for disabled people, both at work and for therapeutic use. The need to equip the workplace for disabled IBM staff is a spur. For example, special software – a graphical interface system – for the use of computers and computer programs has been developed for visually impaired people. In addition, the company finances or maintains information centres for disabled people, organisations and businesses alike in a wide range of countries.

So do socially motivated projects of this kind not have sufficient potential for a company like IBM to launch commercial production? Claude Ronse at IBM Belgium sees a number of obstacles. In his assessment, there is presently no profit for manufacturers such as IBM in developing or producing technological aids for disabled people. This is because products of this kind are too expensive: developing the software for visually impaired people, for example, took two years and required continual adaptation. For it to sell at a profit, output would need to be high. But there is not sufficient potential demand for that, and Claude Ronse suggests that it would not be feasible to keep a large stock. He does not believe there is a market for such products in the usual sense, for two reasons:

1. Disabled people do not form a homogeneous consumer group: disabilities and needs differ too widely.

2. The product is not self-contained: simply supplying and selling technical aids is not enough – additional services such as installation, familiarisation with the technology and training have to be provided.

He points out that no market research information is available to manufacturers, nor do any general statistics on disabled people's needs and consumer behaviour appear to exist. And it is precisely the process of adapting product ideas to the actual conditions in which disabled people live and work that is so time-consuming. The manufacturer's investment rises with products of this kind: the development, production, administration, storage and, in particular, marketing costs are substantially higher. The additional cost, in our source's view, is the main obstacle to business investment in the market for special needs technology.

His assessment is that this could become a viable market only if the focus is on standard products rather than the complex range of special needs. Commercial profit can be achieved only by product standardisation, to appeal to the broadest possible spectrum of customers. As long as items for disabled people are sold in special shops, for example, the market will remain small and unprofitable. Claude Ronse would welcome moves simply to introduce these products into "supermarkets" as a significant step forward.

Another obstacle is the persistent information deficit. There would still seem to be a large group of people painstakingly translating literature into Braille in the traditional manner rather than using the available software, which is faster and no more expensive. Existing technology is often unused through ignorance. The requisite information provision is lacking, as is marketing and advertising for such products – and activities of this kind become unprofitable in times of economic hardship.

Claude Ronse feels that government support for product development would be largely ineffective. He points out that companies operating at IBM's level map out long-term development plans which would be hard to reconcile with the short timescales and complex financing arrangements often associated with public programmes. So it looks as if social projects are set to remain dependent on the company's sense of social responsibility.

Ulrike Wisser  
BBJ Brüssel

Design is a pervasive factor in everyone's life, but particularly for disabled people. It determines their immediate environment, the tools they use, the work they can undertake, and the buildings and transportation they have access to. *HELIOSCOPE* spoke to Rosalie Wilkins, a freelance television producer and presenter, and founder presenter on LINK, Britain's longest running disability television programme.

## Universal design and new technology

Some producers argue that technology aimed at disabled people is uneconomical to produce. The needs of this group of consumers, they say, are too specific, and demand is insufficient to cover the financial outlay on product research, design, administration and marketing.

*They argue from the traditional medical perspective which isolates us as a market group. What we ask of producers is that they have the vision to be all-inclusive in their product design. This benefits not only disabled people, but a whole section of the population – and producers themselves.*

**What you are asking for is universal design...**

*Yes. Universal design takes on board the needs of disabled people, of children, of elderly people. For example, the new accessible buses do not meet only the needs of wheelchair users, but also those of mothers with prams, of elderly people, of people carrying luggage. Or think of lifetime homes, that is houses designed to meet our needs from childhood to old age by including certain basic features. Universal design reflects greater social awareness as well as the commercial imperative of catering for the widest possible market.*

**Meaning that universal design makes business sense?**

*It does, and particularly so in a Europe with a rapidly ageing population. Collectively, disabled and elderly people represent a large group of consumers with an immense purchasing power. Still, new technology is often not being designed with this perspective. We are too accus-*

*tomed to adapting ourselves to a badly designed product rather than the product being adapted to our needs. This results from the fact that designers tend to be healthy, agile young people with good sight who cannot imagine life otherwise. For example, the TV remote control is appallingly designed and difficult to use for many people with stiff fingers and poor sight.*

**But a great deal of awareness-raising is needed to bring about real change.**

*Quite right, and we should start by giving appropriate training to architects and designers, as is already the case at the Royal College of Art in London. It is important that disabled and elderly people are involved in the design process as potential users. The German low-floor bus, for instance, has been the result of cooperation between disability activists, technologists, engineers and designers. This idea of cooperation is, by the way, also being advanced by the European Institute for Design and Disability<sup>(1)</sup>.*

**Do you think that appropriate legislation may help to further improve the situation?**

*Yes, it is, in fact, forcing the change. In the United States, the Americans with Disabilities Act has given impetus to the spread of universal design. It is being acknowledged that technology can be designed to take the needs of disabled people – as legitimate customers – on board right from the beginning, whereas it is generally more expensive to adapt products at a later stage. With the growing awareness of the need for anti-discrimination legislation for disabled people in Europe, manufacturers are going to have to ensure that they do not discriminate in goods and services. Also, we should not forget that meeting the needs of disabled people has, in the past, sparked inventions which have benefited everyone. For example, the typewriter emerged from 100 years of experimenting with machines to help visually impaired people read and write<sup>(2)</sup>.*

(1) The European Institute for Design and Disability (EIDD) is an Irish-based non-profit organisation with members in 11 EU Member States. It promotes interest in design as a response to disability.

The secretariat is located at the Special Needs Research Unit, University of Northumbria, Coach Lane Campus, UK-NE7 7TW Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Tel. +44.191 227 42 11; fax +44.191 266 40 61

(2) Rosalie Wilkins and the SAME Production Company produced a 12-minute video entitled "Vive la Différence" (in English, French and German) within the framework of the HELIOS public awareness-raising activities, demonstrating the practical business sense of integrating disabled people into society.

Further information is available from Mr B. Wehrens or Mr E. Rojas, European Commission, DG V/E.3, Division "Integration of Disabled People", rue de la Loi 200, B-1049 Brussels, or Ms Y. Galton, HELIOS Team of Experts, tel. +32.2 738 06 20.

# The user's perspective

## The impact of new technology

The editor of *HELIOSCOPE* is expecting an article from me on the theme of new technology seen from the standpoint of the disabled user/consumer. But am I a disabled consumer? Do I not in fact pride myself on having achieved sufficient independence to be hardly "disabled" at all, although I have so far spent over half my life in a wheelchair? So who are the representative consumers in the disabled and elderly community that major research projects target? Does anyone answer to that description?

Can I, as a member of standardisation and planning bodies, still call myself a consumer? Have I not long since been tainted by the constraints that entails?

As someone who for over 15 years now has been collecting information on technology for disabled people and passing it on in an advisory capacity, do I still have the capacity to imagine improvements or innovations?

I know from my own experience that:

- Much progress has been made towards creating a more user-friendly environment for disabled people: people with impaired mobility have secured improvements in many areas, and ones which are increasingly coming to be so ingrained in the public consciousness that planners will find it more difficult in future to ignore them – stepless access to all buildings, lifts in addition to stairs, toilets with wheelchair access, etc.
- With the expansion of the market for equipment for elderly and disabled people, many aids that once seemed in-

accessible luxuries have now become available: automatic door openers, hands-free telephones, infra-red remote switch control, domestic appliances with voice synthesis, etc.

- The use of special technologies for people with severe and multiple disabilities in all age groups has produced a host of useful innovations: reading tools for visually impaired people, communication tools for people with speech impairments, and many more.

But I am also aware of some of the alarming concomitants of development. With the above provisos regarding my own ability to comment, I shall endeavour to give some indications on the matter, in the belief that it is of direct concern to the consumer.

### **Environmental adaptation: not integrating everyone, but pushing back the boundaries**

Efforts to prevent and remove barriers in daily life are bringing us closer to the goal of integration in many areas. The point has been reached where people no longer see their loss of capacity (disability) due to functional disorders (impairments) as a social disadvantage (handicap), nor are they disparaged by their peers to the same extent as they were 15 or 20 years ago.

However, as success is always relative, this represents a constant shifting of the boundary beyond which people experience the effect of their loss of capacity as a "handicap".

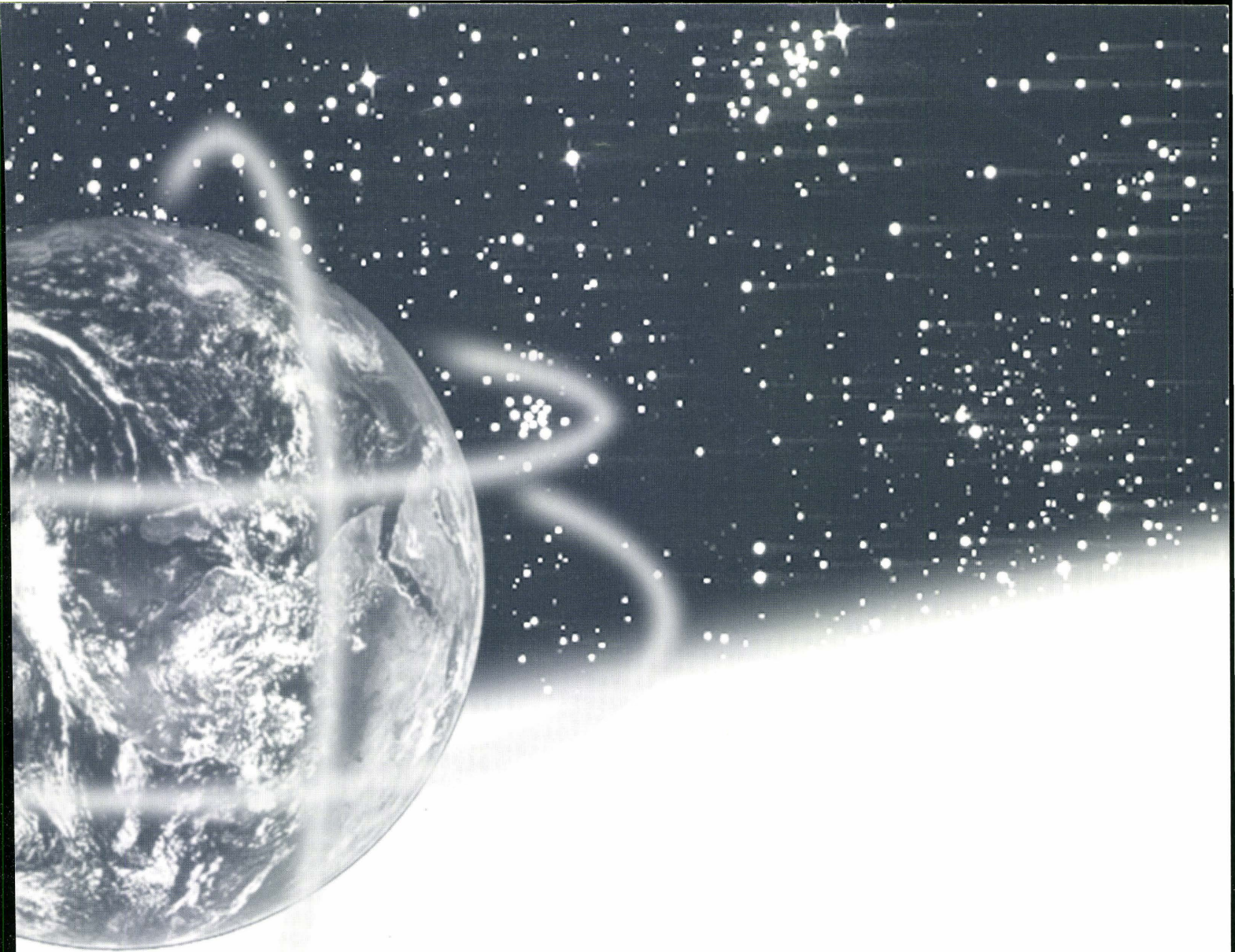
To give one example, nearly all long-distance trains in Germany now seat wheelchair users and are equipped with toilets with wheelchair access. This has made travelling easier. However, as no facilities were initially available for boarding trains, people in – heavier – electric wheelchairs had virtually no hope of taking advantage of the new opportunities for travel, since even brawny railway workers could hardly be expected to lift them and their heavy chairs from the platform into the carriage. So there was an improvement in the situation, a shift in the demarcation line – but which still excluded a smaller group of people with severe disabilities that prevented them from travelling with lighter chairs.

Time and again we are faced with the paradox that improvements in the general situation can nonetheless leave a smaller group with more severe disabilities out in the cold. If, on top of this, the idea that disability is avoidable – through genetic engineering by means of prenatal diagnosis or through legalised euthanasia, for example – were to gain further ground, we could end up nurturing the fatal illusion that the problem of disability might one day disappear altogether.

### **Rethinking superman**

Specialists with a passion for technology are pushing progress towards the "information society" with a great deal of effective, high-budget publicity. Financial concerns are not the only motive. The pressure for results within research projects and large-scale





in the wall of social exclusion, even if it is brought on by the beeping of a computer, can in time be widened into a doorway.

So what is the alternative? Switch on the computer and start by planning the day. Once I have connected up with the bank and reassured myself that my account balance is sufficient, I can send my shopping list to the supermarket on the other side of town, which will deliver the goods to my home. Perhaps, after I have connected myself to a jumble of cables and sensors, my dentist will, by means of a simple telephone call, detect the onset of decay in one of my molars and make me an appointment for a check-up in his electronic diary. As the day wears on, I shall become absorbed in my usual work, which might involve retrieving information from a server somewhere in Tibet... All that is probability. The certainty is that the next day when I go to the den-

tist's, someone will have to push my wheelchair, because it is too far for me to go on my own and there will be no public transport to the surgery. And as I am being taken there I shall keep my head down, not so much in sadness as because I am thinking about the tangled mass of fibre optic cables running beneath the pavement, transporting megabytes of information from one side of the planet to the other at such a speed that each time the wheels of my chair go round it is like cocking a snook at eternity. When finally I reach the surgery, it is more than likely that my gaze will travel from the steps at the entrance up to the third floor where my dentist, tired of waiting, is cancelling today's appointment, sending a computer message to my terminal which I might sum up, an hour later, as "out of sight, out of mind". Fortunately I have a computer and, with infinite patience, I shall

use it to draw a picture of that cartoon character poking his cheeky nose over a fence and looking out with inquisitive little eyes over a caption reading "Kilroy was here". I shall dial a number and the dentist will get the message. Then, perhaps, I shall start to worry at the thought that I am faced with two parallel worlds advancing at different speeds: one at the pace of little pulses of light down a cable, the other just as fast as wheel size allows.

**Juán José Maraña**

Executive Manager

*Confederación Gallega*

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# Anti-discrimination legislation

## and new technologies

Anti-discrimination legislation worldwide has had no direct impact on new technologies because it makes no reference to manufacturers and thus allows them to ignore the presence of disabled people as legitimate customers. However, it has had the indirect effect of stimulating awareness of the need for legislation in this area.

**A casual look** at electronic devices in the home and at computers in the workplace quickly reveals that systems are designed to cater only for those customers who can see and hear perfectly and have full use of their hands. There are many legitimate customers who do not match this model. For example, a person with a visual impairment has difficulty determining what is being displayed on an appliance or on a computer screen, a person with a profound hearing difficulty cannot hear critical warning sounds made by the appliance or the computer, and another person might have difficulty in using their hands to operate the controls on the appliance or to manipulate the computer keyboard or the mouse.

Recognising this discrimination, the Visually Impaired Computer Society <sup>(1)</sup> in Ireland has published the following two principles:

1. Disabled people are a legitimate and equal part of the customer base of all manufacturers.
2. Accessibility is achieved only when the access is available at the time that the product is launched and at no extra cost to the customer.

The term "legitimate customer", as used here, means the body of customers for whom products are created. Any special access requirements which they have are taken into account as part of the normal range of user differences that have to be catered for by the design.

Some computer manufacturers have attempted to compensate for this discrimination by providing "bolt-on" adaptations that, for example, work out what a computer screen is showing and either speak through a voice synthesizer or display the information in Braille; or by substituting a special keyboard or single switch device which allows the user to input data as if using the keyboard. However, the discrimination persists because the disabled user must wait for the adaptation to be developed after the new product has been launched and must pay extra for it. This is a charge that the "able-bodied" user does not have to face.

Almost all of the popular computer systems are developed and manufactured in the USA, where Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1986 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 are the most significant pieces of anti-discrimination legislation. Although neither of these acts contains any provisions that would affect computer manufacturers, it might be useful to take a closer look at them.

Section 508 prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability by the federal government, federal contractors and recipients of federal financial assistance.

The ADA makes it unlawful to discriminate in employment against a qualified disabled individual. It also outlaws discrimination against disabled individuals in State and local government services, public accommodation, transportation and telecommunications. The ADA man-

dates equal treatment and access in employment. Employers must provide "reasonable accommodations" – adaptations to the individual's disability – at all levels of the employment process. Services provided or financed by the State and local government must meet access requirements. Disabled people must be able to use the services and facilities that are available to the general public <sup>(2)</sup>.

The ADA is generally invoked when individuals need to be defended. Disabled people answering recent surveys on the impact of this act described real, concrete changes in their localities, and expressed excitement about the feelings of equality and empowerment these changes engendered. The elevated visibility and participation of disabled people in their communities has caused business owners and corporations to market their services and products to this constituency. Many testified about augmented employment opportunities, or job accommodation through the purchase of adaptive equipment.

Advances in computer technology pose unanticipated employment barriers, especially for visually impaired people. The proliferation of the graphical user interface (GUI), which now accounts for about 80% of the personal computing market, has caused significant numbers of layoffs, denials of promotion, and a substantial lack of employment opportunities for visually impaired jobseekers. Adaptive technology that converts text into speech or Braille does not function adequately in the new Windows-based environments.

The American legislation is powerless to protect disabled people faced with the consequences of these developments, nor does it cover many of the new information systems, such as the World Wide Web. On the other hand, this legislation is causing employers and federal agencies to turn to computer manufacturers in search of an answer. The resulting solutions tackle only the immediate problems and must be fought for every time a new product is released. There is no such activity in relation to domestic appliances.

The ADA has now been five years in existence. Disabled people have been campaigning for that entire period to persuade the Microsoft corporation to make Windows 95 accessible. The computer giant began to listen to campaign representatives only after the Commonwealth of Massachusetts issued a rumour that they might boycott the purchase of Microsoft products if the latter refused to sort out the access problem of visually impaired users.

It is clear from the US experience that existing anti-discrimination legislation is weakened if manufacturers are allowed to ignore the existence of disabled people when designing their products. The task now is to ensure that designs which include disabled people as legitimate customers form the basis of all future operating system releases, and that access solutions of a high quality are delivered in a timely manner.

If this can be achieved, employers, governments and public services will find it easier to comply with their obligations under existing anti-discrimination legislation.

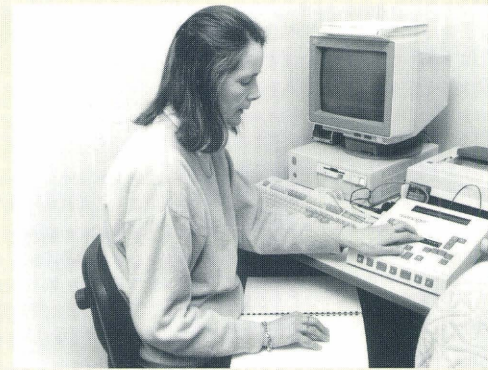
The EU can learn from the US omission and set up legislation that will set an example to all other countries by implementing a programme of action which includes the following points:

- An energetic campaign must be commenced to demonstrate the marketing advantage of accessibility in general product design.
- An anti-discrimination provision must be inserted at the review of the Maastricht treaty, containing a declaration of the right of disabled people to recognition as a legitimate and equal part of the customer base of every manufacturer.
- To assist the effectiveness of an information campaign and the framing of effective legislation in EU Member States, a set of international standards must be drawn up to define the usability of access technology.
- Legislation must be enacted in each Member State to enforce manufacturers' compliance with the standards.
- Further legislation must be enacted in each Member State to ensure that only accessible computer products which conform to the standards are sold in the marketplace.

**Cearbhall E. O Meadhra**

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- (1) *The Visually Impaired Computer Society of Ireland, "Graphical User Interface Usability for Blind and Partially Sighted Users" (1995)*
- (2) *The National Council on Disabilities in the USA, "Your Responsibilities as an Employer Under the Americans with Disabilities Act" (EEOC-BK)*



**"Adaptive technology that converts text into speech or Braille does not function adequately in the new Windows-based environments."**

# 1996 a year of new challenges

Having embarked on 1996, a year that in many ways presents a watershed for the European Disability Forum (EDF), there are several issues at stake. Three main questions will be raised. These are: how and when will a future post-HELIOS II programme take shape? How will the European Disability Forum continue after the end of HELIOS II? And, finally, will EU social policies be strengthened? The three questions are interlinked and have been the focus for considerable efforts on the part of EDF members and their partner organisations during 1995, which will continue throughout 1996.



Photo: European Parliament

A meeting on **cochlear implants** organised by the European Union of the Deaf and supported by the European Commission set the stage for a fruitful exchange of views between deaf people, parents of deaf children and representatives of the medical profession on this highly sensitive issue. The use of cochlear implants for children in particular has become extremely controversial. *HELIOS Flash* No. 15, issued in February 1996, covers the event in more detail.

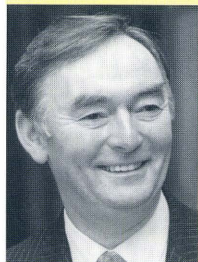
The European Day of Disabled Persons 1995 was celebrated on 7 December in the European Parliament, in the presence of a large number of disabled people, NGO representatives, Members of the European Parliament – including its President, Mr Hänsch – and Commissioner Flynn. A consortium of three organisations on the EDF (Autism Europe, the ILSMH and the ERC-WFMH) organised the event, at which the EDF presented a report entitled “Disabled Persons’ Status in the European Treaties: Invisible Citizens” to the Commission and the Parliament. The report provides diverse and everyday examples of the way in which disabled persons are systematically discriminated against throughout Europe.

The most tangible results of the December 1995 meeting of the EDF were the renewal of the mandate and extension of a working group to review the ongoing evaluation of HELIOS II by, among others, the Tavistock Institute in the UK, and the renewal of the mandate of the working group set up to prepare the future of the EDF. Representatives met in Paris in January, on the initiative of the forum and the European Commission, to prepare the EDF’s contribution to the revision of the WHO’s 1980 **International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps**.

The intergovernmental conference (IGC), at which all the EU Member States’ governments will meet to review the Treaty on European Union, begins this year and is expected to end in 1997. The Reflection Group preparing the work of the IGC issued its final report on 5 December 1995, which contains a clear reference to non-discrimination as advocated by disability and other “social” NGOs across Europe. The report states that “many of us think it is important that the Treaty should clearly proclaim such European values as equality between men and women, non-discrimination on grounds of race, religion, sexual orientation, age or disability”. Also, Commissioner Flynn has expressed the European Commission’s support for a non-discrimination clause, as has the European Parliament. Our initial goals have been achieved – putting the issue of non-discrimination on the agenda – but this is no time to sit back. Instead EDF members are encouraged to lobby the national governments participating in the IGC to ensure that the necessary changes are brought about.

The **European Social Policy Forum** organised by the European Commission is to be held in Brussels from 28 to 30 March 1996. The event is set to attract up to 1,000 participants, and will send a clear message to the IGC that stronger

# The Barcelona Declaration on "The City and the Disabled"



Pádraig Flynn,  
Commissioner for  
Employment and  
Social Affairs

European social policies are needed. The EDF took part in the preparations, together with other members of the Platform of European Social NGOs (see *HELIOSCOPE* No. 5). The EDF and the International Save the Children Alliance coordinated a working group to prepare NGO input to the session on equal opportunities. Other themes for parallel sessions are employment, social protection and the future of working life.

The HELIOS II programme expires in December 1996. The European Commission will be presenting its proposal for a new initiative to the Council and the European Parliament in April. Other action programmes in the sphere of social affairs were recently blocked by the Council, and a new initiative on disability policies may face similar problems.

As the EDF operates within the framework of HELIOS II, its future too is a matter of intense debate. Two parallel and complementary structures are envisaged to optimise the impact of consultation on disability issues. The European Commission has proposed establishing an Advisory Council of Disabled People – an official advisory body to all the Commission's directorates-general, which, moreover, would not be dependent upon a post-HELIOS II initiative. Parallel to this the NGOs are unanimous in their aim of creating an independent forum. This will be external to and politically independent of the Commission, and free to interact with other European Union institutions. An EDF meeting in February focused specifically on these proposals.

Johan Wesemann  
*Chair of the  
European Disability Forum*

**"The European Commission is committed to the principle of equal opportunities for disabled people in Europe", said Pádraig Flynn, Commissioner for Employment and Social Affairs, speaking in January in Brussels at a meeting with representatives of the cities of Barcelona and Bologna, who presented the Barcelona Declaration on "The City and the Disabled".**

**"The Commission believes** that when the European treaties are revised, serious consideration must be given to the introduction of a specific reference to combatting discrimination, including that related to disability. Furthermore, the Commission is currently preparing an appropriate instrument endorsing the United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities."

Signed by 150 cities in the Union following the European Congress on "The City and the Disabled" held in Barcelona in March 1995, the dec-

laration sets out measures to promote equal opportunities for disabled citizens as active members of their communities, including access to information, to services, to urban spaces, to adapted housing and transportation, and participation in decision-making processes. To attain this goal, all municipal authorities involved in the initiative will foster ongoing cooperation so as to identify and stimulate good practices, and to promote the harmonisation of municipal policies aimed at disabled people.

Mr Flynn underlined the Commission's support for this initiative. He said: "Action at regional and local level is essential to tackle the problems faced by disabled people. This bottom-up approach is a key element of Community initiatives in this area, in particular of the HELIOS II programme and the initiative EMPLOYMENT-HORIZON." He went on to say that the Commission would seek to build on and take forward the measures proposed in the declaration when developing future strategies at EU level to ensure that disabled people can fully participate in and contribute to life in society. He also announced that the Commission will support a conference on cooperation between European cities with regard to the issue of equal opportunities for disabled people, to be held in Bologna in May 1996 under the Italian EU presidency.

# News from the Disability Intergroup: activities on access to information

Access to information is vital for disabled people to fully participate in daily life. Disabled people need access to information in their preferred format; this can be tape, Braille, large print, sign language video or appropriate information for people with learning disabilities.

In the Disability Intergroup, the issue of access to information has been taken forward in a number of ways. First, we have ensured that our own monthly newsletter is available in large print and on computer disk. Secondly, we have followed up the excellent work of the European Blind Union on the issue of access to information by writing to the President of the Parliament asking the Parliament to take steps to ensure that information available to the general public is also made available in a form appropriate for blind and partially sighted people. So far, the European Parliament has taken no action on the issue; the intergroup will continue to press for this over the coming year.

Thirdly, the Commission will shortly be publishing its proposals for a levy on blank tapes and the intergroup will continue to raise concerns about the adverse financial effects that a tape tax will have on many groups of disabled people who depend on blank tape for communication.

Finally, Europe is currently creating the regulatory framework for the development of the information society. The European Parliament is presently drafting a report on the information society and the Commission will also be producing a

Green Paper on the same subject. In this vital debate, Parliament and the Commission must ensure that the information society is both relevant to and accessible for all citizens. Take the case of personal computers, as one visually impaired person commented to Mary Banotti MEP, Vice Chair of the Disability Intergroup: "We realise that since 1990, when we could use 99% of personal computers in the workplace, things have changed dramatically for the worse. Only one-third of personal computers are readily usable by blind people." This is due to the fact that some companies such as Microsoft are marketing "Windows" packages which are inaccessible to disabled people. Mary Banotti MEP has been active in the campaign led by disability groups in Ireland to put pressure on Microsoft. Disabled people must make their voices heard during the debate on the information society, otherwise there is a danger that technology, rather than benefiting disabled people, will put up barriers.

Barbara Schmidbauer MEP  
Mary Banotti MEP

EUROPEAN COMMISSION  
DIRECTORATE-GENERAL V  
EMPLOYMENT,  
INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS  
AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS



*Social  
Europe*



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