



TELEPHONE RELAYS

Ofcom looks at new types of relay

A report on additional types of telephone relay service for deaf people has encouraged Ofcom to explore how they can be funded and run. But RNID is about to close its video relay service through lack of funds.

A new report commissioned by Ofcom says that the number of weekly users of a sign language video relay service might be between 2000 to 4500. The study undertaken by City University says that deaf people were generally

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TAG's newsletter about deaf people and telecoms, broadcasting and electronic communications.

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Ofcom looks at new types of relay

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very enthusiastic about the possibilities of video relay. Sign language users said it gives them more independence, is very fast to use and allows them to convey emotion much more easily than in text relays.

Broadband is currently the best way to deliver video relay and, although there are still some technical challenges, existing fledgling video relay services already work well and are likely to improve further.

Captioned Relay

The study also looked at captioned relay and thought that it could be a very popular service because so many people – between 420,000 and 1.2 million – are thought to have great difficulty in using voice telephony. However, since many of these people are elderly, uptake would be expected to be much less.

A current fledgling service already exists, but it is not being widely promoted by the suppliers because they consider that a subsidy of some sort will be required to make it economically accessible to users. The study thought that a captioned relay could be integrated with a text relay service and that



Captioned relay in action

improving speech recognition will greatly enhance such a service.

Reactions to the study

Ruth Myers of TAG said “I warmly welcome Ofcom’s research into new relay services. Deaf people in the UK are frustrated that, notwithstanding the wide-ranging needs of the hearing impaired community and ongoing requests for video and captioned telephony, there is still no alternative to the text relay service. At last we have proof that there is a demand for them if they are similarly priced to services for hearing people. Cost is the barrier – cost for the service provider and for the user! We fully

expect 2007 to be the year when our needs are recognised by the government and central funding provided for these vital services.”

In January, RNID announced that it would be closing its own video relay service in March saying that it was disappointed that Ofcom has yet to address the key question of funding. “Ofcom says it will explore funding possibilities, but in the meantime BSL users continue to be left without an effective means of communication. There is a need for immediate funding for SignTalk while Ofcom decides on its long term strategy,” said Dr Mark Downs, RNID’s Executive Director of Technology and Enterprise.

Damian Barry, CEO of Hearing Concern, thought that the report was very positive especially in its reference to functionally equivalent access, but was concerned that the remit of the report was primarily on video relay: “The very high number of people who require functionally equivalent access using a voice telephone needs to be recognised – it’s very much larger than the total number of sign language users. Ofcom needs to include these people in the equation.”

Lorna Stephenson, Director of Typetalk, welcomed the report, “I support the introduction of any new services that will increase the choices

available to the deaf community. Video relay will bring huge benefits for people who use BSL and the report indicates a step in the right direction.”

Christopher Jones of Teletec which operates a captioned relay service commented: “The UK has lagged behind other English-speaking countries such as Canada and America by not having a proper funding mechanism that enables the development of alternative relay services for people with disabilities. The barriers to developing these new services must be removed immediately to give British deaf and hard of hearing people functionally equivalent access to the telecommunication networks”.

For the Ofcom report in full, go to www.ofcom.org.uk and search for “telephone relay”

For the Summary in sign language, see: www.addrelay.org.uk

UK RELAY SERVICES

Text Relay

RNID Typetalk www.typetalk.org

Fledgling Video Relays

SignTalk www.rnid.org.uk

SignVideo www.significant-online.co.uk

SignVRS www.signvrs.co.uk

Fledgling Captioned Relay

CapTel www.teletec.co.uk



HANDHELD INTERPRETER

Signing eguide at Wimbledon

The new interactive Wimbledon Museum is now accessible to sign language users thanks to an innovation by EyeGaze. Instead of receiving an audio handset, deaf visitors are given a handheld screen to have a sign language tour of the exhibits.



When Wimbledon totally redesigned its new Museum of lawn tennis, it wanted to make sure that it was as accessible to as many people as possible. So they asked accessible multimedia specialists EyeGaze to develop a way to present the contents of the existing audio guide in an accessible way for sign language users.

“Putting the sign language presentation together for Wimbledon Museum was a challenge and a thrill,”

explained Mick Canavan, Director of EyeGaze. “With our knowledge of sign language and our close contact with the deaf community, we selected three deaf presenters who do a fantastic job of communicating the excitement of Wimbledon and its history in a friendly, one-to-one style. The response from Deaf visitors has been terrific and we urge Deaf people of all ages to go and see a really special Museum.”

The technology is based on a computer gaming device and is very easy to use with touch-screen controls.

In a friendly, conversational style, the signing eguides present the same information that is available to hearing people on the audio guides.

EyeGaze has also provided signing e-guides for Tate Britain, the SS Great Britain, and the Victoria and Albert Museum.

www.wimbledon.org/museum
www.eyegaze.co.uk

RESEARCH

Retailer phone test

In a mystery shopping investigation, John Lewis was found to be the most helpful retailer for deaf telephone callers.

Calls were made to 100 of the UK’s biggest retailers to test their awareness of the Typetalk service, their ability to communicate with deaf callers and their general level of helpfulness.

John Lewis consistently provided an excellent service to Typetalk customers. Asda, BHS and Sainsburys also scored well. Only 5% of stores tested showed little ability to communicate with deaf callers.

“Our research shows that most retailers are able to handle basic calls from Typetalk customers”, said Lorna Stephenson of Typetalk. “But we still have a long way to go before all businesses become fully Typetalk aware.”



IN BRIEF

BBC subtitling trial

In December 2006 BBC launched a new online subtitling trial following on from its Click Online subtitling trial in 2005. BBC wants audience feedback, so do join in!

For details, see www.bbc.co.uk/accessibility/onlinesubtitletrial.shtml

Freezing broadband?

Deaf videophone users in the Bristol area say that the image sometimes freezes on their screen making it difficult to watch moving images. Is this widespread?

Broadband switching gets easier

It should become easier to change your broadband supplier now. You just need to tell your old supplier that you want to change, ask for a MAC code and give it to your new supplier. (But check your original contract first!) Ofcom has ruled that any technical difficulties encountered are the responsibility of the suppliers.



Early days of deaf telecoms

To celebrate TAG's 21st anniversary, Ken Carter recalls some of the exciting developments in deaf telecoms from 1970's teletypes to 1980's email.

About one hundred years after Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone, deaf and hard of hearing people were able to communicate over public telephone lines. This delay has been a very real disadvantage in terms of social, education, training and employment advancement.

A connection at last

In 1973 the first UK telephone call between two deaf people was made between two Breakthrough Trust members, Andrew Kenyon in London and David Hyslop in Birmingham. They used a teletype machine and the Phonotype system invented by deaf American scientist Robert Weitbrecht.

By the end of that year there was a network of about 15 Phonotype units and the equipment was sold and maintained by Finedon Communications, an initiative of Breakthrough Trust.

A link-up bureau soon followed (in a Leonard Cheshire Home in Ampthill, Bedfordshire) to allow those using a Phonotype or TTY to make calls to call those without special equipment – the text messages being converted into speech by the bureau operator and vice versa. By 1978 there were 165

phonotypes in use throughout the UK with five link-up bureaux.

In 1981, Kegwain Ltd which had been working with Breakthrough introduced the Vistel, the visual telephone. In the following year the Government helped fund the replacement of teletypes with Vistels and the first 999 emergency call service for text users was established. By 1985, the Vistel Telephone Directory had grown to 1000 names.

Projects

The Visicom project of 1982, funded by the Government and BT, and run by Breakthrough, tested and evaluated the existing telecommunications systems and equipment that could be used by deaf people. A variety of equipment was supplied to 75 deaf people for one year and it soon became clear that email was of huge significance to deaf people – they could now use a telecoms service on equal terms with hearing people. This



A 1973 press cutting of a young Ken Carter with a teletype.

led to the first deaf electronic mail networks: BKU run by Breakthrough and XCH by RNID.

A further project – Hasicom – promoted telecoms for deafblind people, especially through the development of Braille terminals for use with email.

In 1984 an action research project, the Reading HABIT, enabled a local community of deaf and disabled people to access information via Prestel and use a simple mailbox. The project showed that, with appropriate financial help and support, anyone could use new technologies to great benefit.

Change gathers pace

As technology change accelerated, the Vistel II was introduced, enabling back-to-back and email contact, as well as giving more memory and word processing and answerphone facilities. With a Government grant, Breakthrough distributed 300 Vistel II terminals to public places including libraries and hospitals.

In the early 1980s, a prototype telephone relay service emerged – RNID's TED – which became the direct forerunner of RNID Tynetalk.

Issues for hard-of-hearing people were also beginning to be addressed and in 1981 public phones began to be adapted for hearing aid users.

Ken Carter's Roll of Honour of deaf people making an early impact on deaf telecoms

Who's missing? *Email sequel@palam.co.uk*

Graham Hocking

Peter Howes

David Hyslop OBE

David Jackson

Dawn Jarrett

Christopher Jones

Andrew & Diane Kenyon

Michael King-Beer

Morag Rosie MBE

Terry Waters

Gillian & Tony Winstanley

In 1985, I set up a charitable enterprise within an academic environment, Bulmershe College, to "empower deaf people of all ages to lead fulfilling lives through the use of innovative communications technologies". And last year that charity, Deafax, celebrated its 21st anniversary. Its work has touched the lives of 60,000 deaf and hearing people worldwide.

The first electronic contacts were made between key deaf people across Europe in the Euroaction Electronic Mailbox project in 1986. Hailed as a tremendous breakthrough, it paved the way for greater participation and integration of deaf people in Europe.

In the next issue, Tony Winstanley will take up the story from the foundation of TAG in 1986.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Mobile to Typetalk

If you are still frustrated with the access that your mobile network gives you to RNID Typetalk, you have our sympathy! The situation is very complex. Currently Ofcom is not using General Condition 15, which sets out the regulations for services for disabled users, to enforce an acceptable solution. Ofcom says that there are legal problems to be overcome. TAG officers will meet the mobile providers at the end of February to raise the issue.

Deaf teenagers in Mini Oscars

A short film made by deaf teenagers in Belfast has been nominated in the Horror category of the Mini Oscars. *Lil Red* is a modern version of Little Red Riding Hood involving Internet chat rooms. It was made by 13 to 18 year-old deaf people with the help of NDCS and Lottery funding. Winners of the First Light Movies Awards will be announced in London on 27 February.

What subtitles?

Subtitling problems are on the increase again. There is a growing tendency for subtitles to cover up important in-vision information which is not repeated in the subtitles. And some subtitles flash on and off before you can read them – or just don't appear at all! It's even more annoying when subtitles appear on advertisements but not on the programme. TAG is investigating.



www.tagcomm.org.uk

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