

## Telephone Relay Services in the Age of the Internet

### 1. Today's situation

Alexander Graham Bell tried to help deaf people by developing a hearing aid. Instead he invented the telephone - and laid the base for today's age of the internet.

The telephone offered hearing people an instrument for a most natural communication with almost anybody, anytime, anywhere and at reasonable cost.

Natural communication for hearing people means to speak and to listen – just what deaf people cannot do well. From Bell's invention in 1876 it took 88 years until Weitbrecht and Marsters coupled a teletypewriter with a modem and broke the barrier that hindered deaf people from using the largest machine of the World – the telephone network.

And during the last 10 years or so, telecommunication and information technology have dramatically changed the life of both hearing and deaf people in developed countries.

Today, deaf people have a much better access to telecommunication and information than only a few years ago. There are now several tools to communicate and to obtain actual informations: text telephones, telefax, captioning, internet, small message services, video telephones and more.

Most of those new technologies are „mainstream technology“ to transmit communication and information in a visual manner – as readable text or as pictures. Hearing people are buying and using them in large numbers, bringing cost down to an affordable level for everyone.

Deaf people are profiting from this change in technology and in the change of communication behavior of hearing people: More hearing people get used to communicate by writing. Also many hearing and deaf people believe that the new technologies are better and cheaper than the „old fashioned“ text telephones. In many countries, text telephones are used less and less - or worse: there has never been a sizeable number of text telephones.

But there are problems which are not always realized by many deaf people and their organisations:

The preference of spoken communication by hearing people.

### 2. Communication behavior of Hearing People

Hearing people grow into a natural, almost effortless mode of communication: speaking and listening. They can communicate with almost anyone around them, they can communicate during work and leisure time without interrupting what they are doing. And through the telephone network, they can extend the range of this natural communication simply around the whole world. And hearing people love this communication as much as deaf people love to chat in sign language.

When you observe the communication behavior of hearing people, you will see

- they are running for the telephone as soon as it rings
- they will interrupt almost anything else for a telephone call
- if they don't have time for anything else, they always have time for a telephone call
- they can explain things on the telephone spontaneously and to the very last details
- they don't mind to spend a lot of money for telephone calls, especially not for expensive mobile phone communications

Hearing people buy fax machines, have pagers, have internet connections and the like. But have you ever seen a hearing person throwing away its voice telephone after he or she got a fax or a connection to the internet? I have never seen one! Instead they are buying also mobile cellular phones in addition to their telephone at home. In industrialized countries, already more than 50 % of hearing people have mobile cellular phones, and the numbers are still growing rapidly.

These simple observations show that instantaneous spoken communication is the most preferred and most normal way of communication for hearing people. It is the major reason for the success of Bell's invention. And it cannot be replaced by any communication system using text.

Do you think hearing people are willing to communicate with deaf people by writing in the same spontaneous and detailed manner, especially if they don't know each other? Do you think they take all the time required for this mode of communication? My experience shows that they don't do it or only very, very rarely. Therefore, all the available modern text medias cannot bring deaf people the equivalent of a natural telephone communication with hearing people, simply because of the predominant communication culture of the hearing majority.

### **3. Telephone Relay Service to Access Hearing Communication Culture**

Deaf people cannot expect the hearing world to change their communication culture. Therefore, we need to have systems that can provide equivalent opportunities for communication with the hearing world. And there is only one real thing that can bring this equivalence: a professional telephone relay service.

A professional telephone relay is a site where Deaf people can call using a text or video communication system and are then relayed to any accessible telephone connection of hearing people.

A communication can be carried out at any time, in real time, without any restrictions regarding duration or content of call. Cost of such calls are equivalent to what hearing people would have to pay.

With such relay services, Deaf people are able to get immediate feedback to all their everyday problems and questions, and are able to carry out social chats as they desire. Such immediate feedback is not possible with fax or e-mail. Also privacy and secrecy is not assured with printed messages.

Just a few real examples from my experience:

- A deaf couple has a child which is very sick. They send a fax to the doctor's office, asking for an immediate appointment. There is no reply. After some time, they repeat the fax. Again – no answer. Finally, they called through the relay service and learned that an answering machine informed on the phone, that the doctor was on vacation....  
If the child would have really been very sick, and there was no relay service, the child could have died because of the communication problems.

- In my house, a water pipe broke in the basement. Through the telephone relay, I could call myself for help, limiting damage considerably. If I had to run for a hearing neighbour, explain the situation to him, ask him to call for me etc., valuable time would have been lost and damage would have been much higher.

- A woman called to the Swiss telephone relay service and said: „Thank you, my husband is still alive because I was able to call for immediate help through the relay service.“

The other opportunity a relay service offers is the chance of a direct dialogue. When you can ask, you will always get more information. And with a dialogue you can solve problems within minutes which would otherwise require several faxes or e-mails. Don't forget: hearing people will provide you with detailed informations as long as they can use their normal mode of communication: speaking. If forced to write, they will limit the information to an insufficient minimum.

Last but not least: My estimate is, that every second call from a telephone relay center goes to a hearing person who has never had contacts with Deaf people before. This hearing person will be confronted with our communication problems and will become aware about the presence of Deaf people in society. Most of those people will never forget this personal experience and will most probably think different – think positively about the abilities of deaf people.

It's your choice: hide yourself and your handicap behind faxes or e-mails and get delayed and limited responses - or reach out, use a telephone relay service, get immediate and detailed informations and at the same time make hearing people aware about the invisible presence of Deaf people in society.

#### **4. Telephone Relay Services in Europe**

There is the sad reality, that from 15 countries in the EU - to my knowledge - only 5 do have professional relay services:

Sweden, Finland, United Kingdom, Danmark, Netherlands

Outside the EU, Norway and Switzerland do have professional telephone relay services, and several countries are running trials with limited operating hours and limited services.

But text telephones are available in Europe for more than 20 years.

Also the European Conference of Telephone Organisations (CEPT) made a recommendation already in 1974, stating that everything should be done to make the telephone system accessible for handicapped people [1].

Helga Stevens, today's EUD director, wrote a paper in 1994, showing that within the EU, the legislation is already in place to command telephone relay services in all countries [2].

In Switzerland, a research paper of the University of Berne came to the same conclusion for Switzerland [3].

The last two papers can be summarized rather simply:

- In all democratic countries in Europe, all citizens are equal.
- EU decrees and national laws on telecommunication require, that basic telephony services must be accessible by all citizens at comparable conditions.

The paper of the University of Berne was so convincing that the new Swiss law on telecommunication (1998) included the following paragraph [4]:

#### Article 10: Fundamental Services

The required fundamental services must include the following:

.....

Article 10 f: Relay service for the hearing impaired: Provision of a transcription service for the hearing impaired at no (additional) cost, including emergency calls around the clock at the lowest possible tarif.

Based on this paragraph, SWISSCOM as the major Swiss telecommunication provider accepted to finance the telephone relay service set up by PROCOM over 10 years and expand its limited operating hours to a 24 hours service. Cost for users went down from EURO 0.23 per minute to EURO 0.04 or less.

It is my opinion, that the example of Switzerland, as well as those from the five EU countries with professional telephone relay services can serve as models for all countries which do not yet have professional relay services.

You have the right to access voice communication on the telephone network as the backbone of telecommunication in today's society. Telephone companies, also commercialized organisations, are required to provide such telephone relay services based on national laws and additionally by EU decrets.

But you will not get it, unless you make your needs known to the telephone companies, and – if required - get political support.

### **5. Argumentation for Establishing a Telephone Relay Service**

I have already provided the two most important arguments :

- In all democratic countries in Europe, all citizens are equal.
- EU decrets and national laws on telecommunication require, that basic telephony services must be accessible by all citizens at comparable conditions.

Using those arguments, you must challenge your national telecommunication providers to stop discriminating deaf people. They will most probably not like those arguments. But you must make them aware of their own communication behavior as hearing people – and the problem deaf people face as a consequence of their behavior. The telecom's may try to satisfy you with text based services such as fax, SMS and e-mail. Make them aware that those instruments are nice things that can solve some communications problems, but not immediate, urgent personal contacts – especially if half of the hearing society is running around with mobile cellular phones and can be reached only by voice telephony. They will argue that telephone relay services are much too expensive. You can counter that costs become negligible when they are divided by the number of telephones in the country. For Switzerland with 10'000 calls per month, those costs are about EURO 0.25 per year for each telephone connection on the fixed net.

There is also a new „Guideline for Telecommunication Relay Services for Text Telephones“, issued by the European Telecommunications Standards Institute (ETSI) in June of this year. This shows, that there is really a documented standard on such relay services. This could be another important document towards relay services in all countries.

The ETSI guideline also recommends a parallel service for both text telephones and video phones. This will be the future standard. Not all deaf people like to use text telephones. Some will prefer video phones which offers new and unique opportunities for using sign language. However, there is a serious problems with relay services for video phones: the number of sign language interpreters required to run such relays. It will take years to train a sufficient number of proficient sign language interpreters to run a relay with sufficient capacity around the clock.

Therefore, for the time being, text telephones still offer the best possibility to set up a relay service and they can be used everywhere without problems. Video phones will develop in parallel and relay services can be expanded step by step to include them as a second relay system. But as long as you cannot convince your telecom today to provide a telephone relay service with text telephones, you will also not be able to convince them later to offer relay services with video phones.

For smaller countries, a telephone relay service under control of organisations of the Deaf can offer additional services like interpreter referral, editing of teletext and internet informations for the deaf and other services. Thereby deaf people are getting a one source communication center.

To conclude: The age of the internet brings fantastic new opportunities for information and communication. This enables us to contact people at the other end of the world. But when you need to contact someone in your own town quickly and urgently, you need to use the good old voice telephone over the relay service. It can save your life! It can save your job! It can make you an equal citizen. Go for it – ask for your right.

#### Literature:

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- [3] Dr. P. Tschannen/Dr. R. Kiener: „Rechtsgleiche Behandlung von Gehörlosen im Telefonverkehr“( „Lawfully equal treatment of the Deaf in Telecommunication“), University of Berne, 1995: Investigation on behalf of Fondation PROCOM.
- [4] Swiss Law on Telecommunication FMG (30. 4. 1997) and Regulation on the Swiss Law on Telecommunication FDV. Valid since 1. 1. 1998.
- [5] European Telecommunications Standards Institute: „Guidelines for Telecommunication Relay Services for Text Telephones“, ETSI TR 101 806, 2000-06

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