

- Digital Agenda Commissioner – Neelie Kroes - <http://blogs.ec.europa.eu/neelie-kroes> -

## ICT and disability: achieving a better world for all

December 2, 2011

[International Day of People with a Disability](#) <sup>[1]</sup>; yesterday was its [European equivalent](#) <sup>[2]</sup>. So now is a good time for me to talk about what Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) can do to help the **80 million Europeans** with a disability.

For people with disabilities, does modern information and communications technology help – or hinder?

There are two issues I would like to share here. First, we need to ensure that the products, tools, opportunities of the online age are **available to everyone**. New technology should be adaptable and adapted to people's different abilities, so that they benefit equally – in terms of both access and quality. ICT is for everyone: we cannot have a digital divide.

Second, new technologies can be specifically designed to help people manage living with a disability, so they can overcome the challenges they face and **lead autonomous lives**.

In the Commission we're hard at work on both these issues. Making sure that **ICT helps knock down barriers**, but doesn't create new ones, for people with a disability. Here's a couple of examples.

First, let's take just one of the EU-funded Research and Innovation projects currently running in the area of [e-accessibility](#) <sup>[3]</sup> and assistive technologies: [REACH112](#) <sup>[4]</sup>.

I'm sure you all know that 112 is the single number you can dial to get **access to the emergency services**, free of charge, wherever you are in the EU. Through a Commission-funded pilot, we are working to make use of this number accessible to everyone.

Just imagine how difficult it must be – if not nearly impossible – for people with hearing or speech impairments to make a 112 emergency call. I find it unacceptable that anyone's life could be at risk in such a way: it's a no-brainer that emergency services must be made accessible to every single European citizen, without exception.

[REACH112](#) <sup>[4]</sup> aims to ensure accessibility for everyone: so people with a disability can communicate at a distance with each other, by using simultaneously video, voice and text. We're currently only at Pilot stage, and have only so far implemented in a few member states. But in the last six months alone **over 100,000 person-to-person calls** have been made placed using this technology.

Second, I wanted to talk about the EU-funded [BrainAble](#) <sup>[5]</sup> project, which empowers people with a motor disability to overcome the **devastating challenges and frustrations** they can encounter in their day-to-day lives. For severe disabilities, even simple activities like turning on the lights or talking to friends can be a complicated process.

ICT-based "Human Computer Interfaces" can take brain activity and translate it directly into a command. So **people who cannot move could still communicate** – to friends, to family, to appliances in a "smart home". Can you imagine the difference that could make? A new opportunity to regain independence, to express yourself, and once again be able to do the tasks that most of us take for granted. Here's a great video showing how it works:

That's just two examples of how the EU is helping new innovations be an opportunity, not a barrier, for people with a disability – enabling greater autonomy, greater social inclusion, and a better world for all. There are many more we are working on, and hopefully yet more still to come.

Got any other good examples, or ideas for how ICT can help? Feel free to share – on this blog, or share your thoughts on Twitter ([@NeelieKroesEU](#)).

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URLs in this post:

[1] International Day of People with a Disability: <http://www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp?id=1561>

[2] European equivalent: <http://europa.eu/eucalendar/event/id/266080-european-day-of-people-with-disabilities/mode/standalone>

[3] e-accessibility:

[http://ec.europa.eu/information\\_society/activities/einclusion/policy/accessibility/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/einclusion/policy/accessibility/index_en.htm)

[4] REACH112: <http://www.reach112.eu/view/en/index.html>

[5] BrainAble: <http://www.brainable.org/en/Pages/Home.aspx>

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