Dis·IT
Disability & Information Technologies Research Alliance

Telecommunications policy: What's in it for you?

Why should disability advocacy organizations be concerned with telecommunications now?

- Telecommunications is **CHANGING FAST**
- Innovations in telecommunications are providing new ways for people with disabilities to be **INCLUDED**
- But government is dramatically **REDUCING** regulation of telecom companies
- People with disabilities could be **EXCLUDED**

Disability advocacy organizations can take action NOW by promoting universal, inclusive design and protecting disability rights in telecommunications policies.

Telecommunications is changing FAST

- Equipment has changed from rotary dials to touch-tone keypads to cordless phones to cellular phones, and now includes wireless voice and data devices like the Blackberry and iPhone.
- Telecommunications services now include text messaging, voice mail, call forwarding, caller ID/display, and other features.
- The complex layers of technology and networks that connect callers have changed in ways that create more potential for enabling technologies.
- Who provides equipment and services has also changed, with the traditional phone companies now competing with wireless, cable, and internet based companies.

Most of these changes have happened in the last ten years, and the pace of change is getting even faster. That is putting pressures on businesses to develop and put new products and services on the market very quickly, before their competitors and before the next technological advance.

Innovations provide new ways for people with disabilities to be INCLUDED

New equipment and services provide:

- Choice among multiple ways to communicate, such as voice, text, graphics, and video, all available at the same time
- Translation from one way of communicating to another, like sign language to voice, voice to text
- More types of phones and other equipment designed for the abilities and preferences of users with and without disabilities

But if the companies that develop and provide the equipment and services don't do it right, people with disabilities won't be able to take advantage of these amazing opportunities. Instead, these technologies will become major barriers to participation in the mainstream of society.

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This is one of a series of fact sheets on telecommunications and people with disabilities produced by the Disability and Information Technologies (Dis-IT) Research Alliance. All of the fact sheets are available at www.dis-it.ca.

Government is dramatically REDUCING regulation of telecom companies

The telecom companies haven't voluntarily made their equipment and services accessible to people with disabilities. One of the corners that often gets cut in the race to develop and sell new products is making sure equipment and services meet access requirements of people with disabilities. Government regulation can help.

REGULATION = Laws or rules that make sure companies act fairly for all Canadians

- The federal government regulates telecommunications equipment and services, including access for people with disabilities, through the CRTC and Industry Canada. (The CRTC's full name is the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission.)
- The Canadian Government has been gradually deregulating the tele-communications industry for over 20 years, and the current Conservative government is **increasing the pace of deregulation**.
- Some deregulation has reduced costs for consumers.
  - A long distance call costs a lot less now than it did before long distance services were de-regulated in 1992.
- Deregulation has created **more barriers** for people with disabilities
  - Phones have become more complex and inaccessible since the federal government stopped regulating wired telephone equipment in 1994.
  - People with disabilities also experience barriers using wireless cellular phones which is a telecom service that has **never** been regulated in Canada.

What can we *DO? 3 Actions that will help*

- Advocate for universal, inclusive design to make all equipment and services usable by all people.
  - Universal or inclusive design is an approach to making mainstream equipment and services that are usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for assistive or adaptive equipment or specialized services.
- Call on the federal government to protect disability rights in telecommunications policy
- Work with other disability advocacy organizations to highlight this issue

How and where can we *ACT?*

- On June 10, 2008, the CRTC launched a seven-month consultation examining the accessibility of telecommunications and broad-casting services in Canada.
- Interested individuals and organizations will have three oppor-tunities to make written submissions.
- Web links:
  - Details about the consultation:
    http://www.crtc.gc.ca/archive/ENG/Notices/2008/pt2008-8.htm
  - Links to all documents issued by the CRTC and submitted by other parties:
    http://www.crtc.gc.ca/PartVII/eng/2008/8665/c12_200807943.htm

How to contact the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC)

Mail: Secretary General, CRTC, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0N2
Tel.: 1-877-249-2782 (toll-free)
TTY: 1-877-909-2782 (toll-free)
Fax: 819-994-0218
Internet: http://www.crtc.gc.ca

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