

ore ICT is used for everything, the more excluded you are if you cannot access it. Everything these days seems to be online. It's the window to the world. Accessing government services, communicating by email, looking for a job, catching up with the news, buying goods and services.
All online.

Also, ICT often can empower disabled people in ways that could only be dreamed of a few years ago. Spoken output on computers for blind people, rather than having to rely on a "reader".

Therefore more important than ever that disabled people be fully included.

Very often, when I advocate for the inclusion of disabled people in ICT, I am confronted with questions about the "business case" for inclusion, where the money for more costly services will come from, the fact that it's "tricky" to meet the needs of all people, and so on. "Yes, we'd like to make it accessible, but we cannot afford to pay for it". Sign language on TV. Accessible spoken TV. 95% of books are not published accessibly, but we are often told there is not a big enough market to change this "book famine".

Well, I think sometimes there is a clear business case for inclusive ICT, sometimes not. Sometimes inclusion can be simple. Other times more complex.

But we should just ask whether there is a "business case" or whether inclusion is seen as sufficiently "doable" or "profitable". These are the wrong criteria. Surely we should start with the question - what sort of society do we want to live in? Are we serious about the full inclusion of all citizens in our society - or just the inclusion of those citizens who have similar needs to us?

Ethics is at the very heart of the matter, because it determines how we organise the world and hence how inclusive that world is. Thought precedes action! Society has to agree what it wants in terms of inclusion, what is fair, what's "civilised". Once this vision is clear, we then have to decide what we must do to achieve this in terms of legislation, funding, action, etc.

On any issue of discrimination or exclusion, once the moral argument is truly won, arguments about practical difficulties and resources are less often heard and the will is in any case found to overcome the barriers that do exist.

Slavery was hugely financially rewarding for those who organised it. My own country got rich and obtained a huge empire on the back of it. At the time when people first started to oppose slavery, many rich industrialists complained that they would be ruined were it to stop. That the country simply could not afford the nicety of arresting the trade. But the moral argument against slavery has now (in most places) been won. Society has reached the point where nobody would consider whether it "costs in" to continue with this activity, or the practical

implications of outlawing it. There is a moral consensus that this practice is just unacceptable, and that we have to organise our economies in ways which do not require or support slavery. As a result, we HAVE organised our economies so as not to rely on this horrific practice.

The equivalent ethical case for the inclusion of disabled people in our society has, I think, taken longer to reach the public consciousness, and likewise legislators and businesses. In fact, I sometimes wonder, given the reaction one sometimes hears to calls to stop discriminating against disabled people, if this argument has in fact been won as yet.

Certainly, at EU level, legislation outlawing discrimination against disabled people has lagged behind that on other grounds such as race or gender.

So perhaps even now, given the opposition on many "practical grounds" I see to calls to make the world of ICT accessible to disabled people, we might suggest the ethical argument has not been fully accepted in the hearts and minds of the EU's population. If it had been, as it was in the examples I gave earlier, I feel we would have made more progress towards the inclusion of disabled people in ICT and other fields of life.

Let me illustrate the difference between the apparent acceptability of discrimination against a disabled person in this field with that of others, by giving a couple of very hypothetical cases.

What if, in order for a mobile phone to be accessible to women, it cost on average three times more than one which is accessible to men? Would manufacturers of these phones be able to say "yes, but our phones are still accessible to women, and we are working to bring down the costs for this part of the population"? No - there would again be a justified outcry. But this is the real situation for many people with sight problems.

In terms of legislation, the EU is catching up in this area. Since 2000, Article 13 of the Treaty provides the legal base for anti discrimination legislation on the grounds of disability among other areas. But despite a promise back in 2003 to deliver a directive outlawing discrimination on the grounds of disability, there is still no EU anti discrimination legislation on this ground outside of the field of employment. Having raised 1.2 million signatures petitioning the EC to propose a "disability directive", we are hopeful that this situation is about to change.

Welcome the "E Inclusion Be Part of It" initiative from the Commission, and in general Paul Timmers' team's enthusiasm and drive towards inclusion. Reding herself last year urged all parties to "get on with it" at the Lisbon summit on eInclusion. And the Riga Dashboard shows how far we have to go.

It has been suggested also that there will be "eInclusion legislation" from the Commission. We would welcome such an initiative and look forward to giving our input to it..

But above all, ensuring the inclusion of disabled people in today's information society is a matter of will. This brings me back to where I started. If we as a society decide that the inclusion of disabled people is really a priority and a non-negotiable right, a way will be found to overcome the technical challenges and barriers that stand in our way.