



26 March 2010

## Does modern telecommunication promote or hinder the social integration of disabled people?

**MUNICH.** What influence does modern telecommunication have on the integration of disabled people? This question was raised yesterday evening in a podium discussion organised by Telefónica O<sub>2</sub> Germany together with the UPJ federal government initiative. Representatives from science, politics, business and civil society debated the various aspects of this issue on the basis of the results of an online dialogue on [diskutiere.de](http://diskutiere.de). The event was also made accessible to people with hearing difficulties thanks to the newly developed VerbaVoice transcription service.

2010 is the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion. A key focus of the year is "Integration not exclusion - self-determined participation for all", one aim of which is the improvement of social integration among disabled people. In yesterday's debate at the O<sub>2</sub> headquarters in Munich, one of the topics discussed was the contribution the telecommunications industry can make in this, the European year, and beyond. The debate was moderated by TV journalist Conny Czymoch and participants included Joachim Unterländer, acting chairman of the Committee for Family, Employment and Social Affairs at the Bavarian state parliament, Judith Faltl, State President of the Bavarian Society for the Blind and Partially Sighted, Prof. Dr. Annette Leonhardt, head of education for those with hearing difficulties at the University of Munich and André Krause, Managing Director of Finance at Telefónica O<sub>2</sub> Germany.

Since 26 October 2009 experts and interested parties have been visiting [www.diskutiere.de](http://www.diskutiere.de), the dialogue platform of the UPJ, to discuss the role telecommunication can play in the digital integration of disabled people. A preliminary result of the online debate revealed the participants basically all agreed on the extraordinary potential of modern technologies. What would be decisive for their actual use, however, were the user-friendliness of the products as well as the behaviour of the provider towards disabled people and the services offered to them.

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In the internet discussion the point was also raised that companies should take disabled people seriously as a target group - not least out of commercial interest. Yesterday evening Judith Falzl gave her opinion: "Freedom from barriers should actually be standard and not just seen as a novelty characteristic. The question arises: Are we still a social market economy or just a market economy? We want to, and indeed have to, aim at making a profit, of course. But with that there should be a certain degree of readiness to make room for issues such as this one."

Prof. Leonhardt also made the point that with demographic change, more and more people will be affected. "From the age of 80 one hundred percent of people have hearing difficulties to a greater or lesser extent." She also pointed out that "technology can indeed help, but it can't replace human contact. That's why we need both."

André Krause summarised the situation: "In Germany around 800,000 people live with sight or hearing disabilities. With the development of easy-access products and specially tailored services, we can contribute to their digital integration. Today's discussion has given important stimuli for ongoing cooperation with this customer group."

The panel and participants were in agreement on one thing in particular: Solutions can only be developed jointly. "O<sub>2</sub> has done something unique by bringing together people with and without hearing difficulties", came one voice from the audience.

#### **About the VerbaVoice service**

VerbaVoice is part of a pilot project and offers a new service enabling the transcription of spoken words. This text is then transmitted to the laptop or mobile radio device of the hearing-impaired person using a specially developed internet platform. This takes place with the help of innovative technologies and transcription processes. The hearing-impaired person can thus follow what is said by reading along in close to real time. O<sub>2</sub> is a cooperating partner.

For further information go to [www.diskutierte.de](http://www.diskutierte.de)

**Telefónica O<sub>2</sub> Germany GmbH & Co. OHG** belongs to Telefónica Europe and is part of the Spanish telecommunication group Telefónica S.A. The Company offers its German private and business customers postpaid and prepaid mobile telecom products as well as innovative mobile data services based on the GPRS and UMTS technologies. In addition, the integrated communications provider also offers DSL fixed network telephony and high-speed internet. Telefónica Europe has nearly 49 million mobile and fixed network customers in Great Britain, Ireland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Germany.

**UPJ** is a network of engaged businesses and non-profit intermediary organisations in Germany. At its core are projects that contribute to resolving social problems in creating new links between companies, non-profit organisations and public authorities. The non-profit UPJ e.V. also supports these parties, giving information and advice on the development and implementation of their Corporate Citizenship and Corporate Social Responsibility activities.

**Further information:**

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# Press Release



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