

Real-time text aims to improve Internet accessibility for the deaf and hard of hearing

RESTON, VA, USA and GENEVA, SWITZERLAND – 30 July 2008 – The blossoming of multimedia content on the Internet in recent years has revolutionised personal interactions, business communications, and other online services. But for millions of Internet users with sensory disabilities, many of the communication tools remain frustratingly out of their reach.

Mr Arnoud van Wijk, Disability Projects Coordinator for the Internet Society (ISOC), who was born deaf, knows only too well the frustration Internet users with a disability experience from many current Internet services.

"During the past few years, the use of the Internet as a modern replacement for telephony has accelerated," said Mr van Wijk. "The ability to include more media in calls provides an excellent opportunity to include people with disabilities in online conversational services. But too often discriminatory voice telephony services are simply re-created."

With this motivation, Mr van Wijk and other researchers have documented a technique for "real-time text"; combining existing Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF) standards to enable text streaming over Internet Protocol networks.

The technique uses Internet telephony protocols to ensure compatibility with voice, video, and other multimedia services on the Internet. It allows text to be sent and received on a character by character basis, with each character sent and displayed immediately once typed, giving text the same conversational character as voice communication.

According to Mr van Wijk, "Internet Telephony is rapidly becoming a major way of staying in touch. But it breaks the traditional text telephone, which deaf and hard of hearing people used in the past to call each other. The real-time text technique addresses this problem and can be integrated with Internet telephony."

Along with fellow technologist Guido Gybels, Director of New Technologies at RNID (UK), and with contributions from other experts in communication and accessibility for people with disabilities, Mr van Wijk edited and co-authored 'Framework for Real-Time Text over IP Using the Session Initiation Protocol (SIP)', which the IETF has just published as an informational document in its 'Request for Comment' series as RFC 5194.

To further progress work in this field, this week sees the launch of the 'Real-Time Text task force' (R3TF), an informal forum for engineers, motivated individuals, experts, companies and organisations. The R3TF has received incubation support from ISOC, as part of its "Enabling Access" initiative, under which ISOC promotes a diverse range of projects aimed at breaking down the barriers to Internet access.

Michael Burks, Chairman, and Cynthia Waddell, Vice Chairman of ISOC's Disability & Special Needs Chapter, welcome the announcement of the new task force.

"Accessibility for persons with disabilities is critical and must be maintained in the coming convergence," said Ms Waddell, an Accessibility Expert to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), who is hard of hearing herself. "But it is worth pointing out that, like many disability projects, this effort has the potential to provide more options and greater usability for all users in many situations."

More information about the R3TF is available on its new web site:

<http://www.realtimetext.org>

About the Internet Society

The Internet Society is a non-profit organization founded in 1992 to provide leadership in Internet related standards, education, and policy. With offices in Washington, DC, and Geneva, Switzerland, it is dedicated to ensuring the open development, evolution, and use of the Internet for the benefit of people throughout the world.

For further details

Gerard Ross

Senior Communications Manager, Internet Society

E-mail: ross@isoc.org

Telephone: +41-228-071-444 x2261

4, rue des Falaises

CH-1205-Geneva

Switzerland