10 October, 2016

Press release

BEREC Workshop on the Accessibility
of Communications Services

On 5 October BEREC held a Workshop on the Accessibility of Communications Services, taking into account the needs of disabled end-users. The Workshop was focused in particular on broadcasting, other audio-visual services and the provision of online content.

The event preceded BEREC's quarterly Plenary meeting of national regulators at which common regulatory subjects across Europe are discussed. On this occasion, the event was hosted by the national communications regulator of Lithuania, RRT, in Vilnius.

BEREC was joined for the event by several organisations representing European citizens and disabled people, as well as representatives of broadcasters, online service providers and equipment manufacturers, who shared their views and experience.

The Workshop was opened by the BEREC Chair 2016, Wilhelm Eschweiler, who emphasised that the issue of accessibility is recognised and is to be given significant importance in the revised Telecommunications Framework in order to promote equal access to services, culture and information for disabled people. In the context of rapidly moving technological developments it is essential that people with disabilities are able to fully participate in and benefit from such innovation and new services, since digital inclusion is a necessary condition for a digital society.

One of the aims of the Workshop was to learn more about the evolving needs and expectations of disabled end-users and the barriers that need to be overcome in order to promote accessibility. The organisations representing end-users, including the Vilnius Multiple Sclerosis Association, the Blind and Partially-Sighted Union of Lithuania and the European Disability Forum provided their insights on these issues. For instance, they explained the wide range of ways in which people may have difficulties using communications services. Based on this, it is important to recognise that solutions should be flexible, rather than attempting to impose a 'one size fits all' approach. They also pointed out that, whilst technological development can bring new opportunities, there is also a risk it can raise new barriers. To avoid this, the needs of disabled end-users should be considered when designing new products and services.

Representatives from the broadcasting sector also offered their perspectives. They discussed the ways in which they had promoted accessibility within the services they offer, such as through the provision of subtitling, audio description, sign language and accessible electronic programme guides. They noted the steady progress in this regard under the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMS Directive), which is currently under review by the European legislator, based on the proposal of the European Commission.

There was also discussion of the potential removal of the accessibility provisions under the AVMS Directive, whilst instead including the audio-visual sector in the wider European Accessibility Act (EAA). Some were concerned that this could lead to the loss of a sector-specific approach, being detrimental to both broadcasters and end-users.

They also noted how provision of accessible services by many broadcasters had gone even further than the levels prescribed in regulation, due to the promotion of brand values and competition. However, there was also discussion about the importance of maintaining proportionate regulation.

Among the other discussions at the Workshop was the potential of new technology and technological convergence. For instance, several of the participants had experience of Hybrid Broadcast Broadband TV (HBBTV), including the promotion of accessibility through HBB4all. HBBTV, an open platform, allows broadcast TV to be combined with online content through a single user interface.

BEREC also heard from representatives of equipment manufacturers and online service providers. For instance, there were presentations about the capabilities of televisions, including their customisable accessibility features. BEREC was also informed about object recognition technology that is being used to provide blind and partially-sighted people with a description of a photo, which may help to promote greater inclusion and interaction.

A common theme throughout the Workshop was the importance of standardisation in promoting an integrated approach to accessibility. In this regard, the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) discussed their Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI), which develops strategies, guidelines, and resources to help make the Web accessible to people with disabilities. In particular, it highlighted four important principles for web accessibility: that content is Perceivable, Understandable, Operable and Robust.

Last but not least, a number of national regulators offered their views, explaining the ways in which accessibility has been promoted across Europe. They discussed the goals of equivalent access and choice for disabled end-users of electronic communications services, whilst ensuring that obligations placed on service providers are proportionate and evaluating the socio-economic impact of accessibility measures. They also noted the potentially complex interaction of regulation and innovation and how regulation should incentivise, not impede innovation. This is particularly important in the context of technological development that has the potential to facilitate greater accessibility for disabled end-users.