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Telecommunication relay services as a tool for deaf political participation and citizenship

Graham H. Turner, Jemina Napier, Robert Skinner and Mark Wheatley

Centre for Translation & Interpreting Studies in Scotland, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, UK; European Union of the Deaf, Brussels, Belgium

ABSTRACT

It has long been recognised that deaf people experience barriers to political participation and that notions of citizenship do not take into account the needs of deaf sign language users. In light of an effort at the European level to increase the potential for deaf sign language users to participate in political processes through technology, this paper provides results from a survey study of deaf sign language users across Europe as to their preferences in using Telecommunications Relay Services (TRS), whether they would like to see the establishment of a pan-European multilingual TRS and if they would make use of such a service for the purposes of political participation. Responses from 74 deaf people across 14 European member states confirm that deaf people want to see such a service, and would be willing to use it in order to make contact with European institutions. Therefore, the establishment of such a service has the potential to contribute to improved access to, and increased willingness to engage in, democracy through telecommunications and thus enhance the citizenship status of deaf Europeans, and therefore enhance their political participation and access to information and communication in society.

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Introduction

The European Union (EU), a politico-economic union of 28 member states and 500 million citizens has committed itself to promote equality within its institutions. The active inclusion and full participation of disabled people in society is recognised as essential to the EU’s future, a commitment cemented when the EU ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities), strengthening the existing European Disability Strategy 2010–2020.1 EU institutions now have an obligation to ensure that their services are made accessible to deaf European citizens.

The EU’s 2002 framework for electronic communications includes the Universal Service Directive also recognises the need to provide electronic communication access for deaf EU citizens to institutions within the EU. One appropriate facility would be the use of telecommunications relay services (TRS), that is, call centre services offering remote communication support to enable deaf and hearing people to use technology to
communicate with one another. The availability of TRS, and particularly video interpreting (VI) services, has been credited with levelling the playing field for many deaf sign language users, making it possible to access the telephone and gain greater independence.

A belief that the European institutions could do more to include deaf citizens in political participation in particular led the deaf Hungarian Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Adam Kósa to submit a proposal to the European Parliament on the 13 December 2012 to develop a TRS permitting deaf people to converse in real time, using sign language, with the European authorities (Kósa, 2014). The rationale was to provide a technological solution to help remove the kind of linguistic barriers once experienced by Kósa himself, and thus increase opportunities for deaf citizens to engage in direct dialogue with the various European institutions (Kósa, 2014). Kósa’s proposal builds on a legacy of Resolutions passed by the European Parliament to increase the social rights of deaf citizens. The first Resolution of the European Parliament on signed languages, adopted on 17 June 1988 (see EU Parliament Resolution on Sign Languages, Doc A2-302/87), recognised signed languages as bona fide languages preferred by many deaf citizens, and stressed the importance of signed language-interpreting services (EUD, 2002).

To consider Kósa’s proposal, the authorities required a fuller appreciation of the context in which the service would be used. They were concerned to understand the likely nature of the demand for TRS, the level of usage anticipated, and the facilities required in order to offer a robust and sustainable service. The authorities wanted to know how the precise arrangements made for a pan-European TRS would impact upon user experiences. Ultimately, they were seeking to learn how a TRS could increase deaf involvement as citizens in European politics and public life.

In this paper, we explain the impetus for such a TRS service. Current TRS in Europe vary widely: we therefore investigate how these differences give rise to particular issues affecting how and when deaf people can access and make use of TRS. We then identify the perceived advantages and disadvantages of TRS, with reference to diverse contexts of use, with a view to understanding specific issues that may prevent deaf people from making broader use of TRS to fulfil their rights as equal citizens.

**Deaf political participation and citizenship: concepts and practices**

The members of the EU have presented themselves with a challenge which problematises Habermas’ aspiration for the public sphere as ‘a medium of unrestricted communication’ (1996, p. 308). According to Emery (2009), ‘citizenship’ presumes an idealised individual who is a speaking and hearing citizen, with social policy constructed and made in the image of ‘hearing’ culture that prioritises audio-centric forms of communication over sign language. Thus, state policies have resulted in an entrenched social exclusion of deaf people. An assumption is commonly made that – since many members of deaf communities are able to read the written majority national languages of their countries – having information in written form is sufficient to fulfil relevant obligations and enable political participation to occur. However, as Valentine and Skelton (2008, p. 482) have shown, there is a great deal of difference between information being theoretically ‘accessible’ and it being comprehensible for deaf users, especially given that the median deaf student will finish school with a reading age below that of an average hearing nine-year-old (Powers, Gregory, & Thoutenhoofd, 1999). There is therefore a mismatch between the
level of accessibility provided for by law and the real level of accessibility needed for deaf people to participate fully in society. Public information meant to be targeted at the deaf community is even broadcast (Valentine & Skelton, 2009) in a way that means deaf people find their access to information and debates on the state, future and political position of their own community limited due to choices made by those outside their community. As Emery (2006) recognises, observing people like oneself engaging in political action, and relating confidently to representatives involved in government, feeds into the experience of being an equal citizen.

There is therefore a real requirement for manageable ways of allowing access to political debate which overcome the monetary or linguistic barriers to political dissemination that currently exist. A survey conducted by the European Union of the Deaf (EUD) found that deaf citizens and deaf-led organisations did not feel able to influence the political system in their own country or confidently understand what each of the national parties stood for (Pabsch, 2014). The EUD study echoes findings from earlier work investigating aspects of political involvement of deaf people in the USA (Bateman, 1996) and UK (Emery, 2006; Skelton & Valentine, 2003). Article 29 of the UNCRPD exists precisely to counter such experiences by seeking to guarantee the right to ‘effectively and fully participate in political and public life [and] in the conduct of public affairs’. In the case of users of signed languages, it is access to information in those languages that delivers these rights of participation: as Turner and Napier (2014, p. 64) state, ‘rendering the public sphere penetrable through the vehicle of signed language is a sine qua non for meaningful active citizenship on the part of Deaf people’.

**Deaf political engagement**

Even in those countries that have the longest histories of recognition of the rights of sign language users, political engagement has been a perennial source of anxiety. It has become a truism that those deaf sign language users who do attempt to attain the responsibilities of political representatives find themselves battling consistently with systems and structures ill-designed to permit effective participation by people whose first or preferred language is a national signed language (see Buxton, 2014; Kósa, 2014; Mathers, 2012; Stevens, 2014). In the USA, whilst the 1970s and 1980s saw significant changes in deaf lives (Maher, 1996), discussions continued to appear expressing concern about deaf disengagement from national political processes (e.g., Hostin, 1988; Vernon & Estes, 1975). Subsequently, Bateman (1996) found that deaf people in general still did not engage in mainstream politics or fully appreciate their democratic rights and did not extend their understanding of politics beyond deaf-related issues. The lack of emphasis on broader issues may, Bateman argued, mean that members of the Deaf community struggle to relate to broader issues until they have a sense of equality or parity with the hearing community (Bateman, 1996, p. 158). Skelton and Valentine (2003) found the same with young British deaf people’s political participation, or lack of it, but suggested that young deaf people perceive political participation in a different way: rather than voting and engaging with politicians through communication and information gathering, they seek to volunteer in their community because they experience too many barriers to the general political system.

In Canada, too, the Canadian Association of the Deaf has found that deaf people ‘are not taught or trained to participate in politics; they find the Canadian political system
difficult to fully understand; and their rate of participation and activity in politics is very low. The association laments the fact that, a quarter-century after its publication, a set of recommendations to counter this picture (Roots, 1999) has yet to be acted upon. Similar messages have filtered through from around the world. Keenon and Atkinson (2015) cite examples from Guinea, Georgia and the Dominican Republic, whilst underlining that many of the barriers to participation have feasible solutions which primarily require recognition of the value placed upon signed communication within Deaf communities.

At the transnational level, deaf people gather as a ‘community of communicators’, marked by an identification founded on commonality of signed linguistic forms, common histories and culture (Solvang & Hauaand, 2014). Valentine and Skelton (2007) assert persuasively that the sense of injustice which flows from Deaf people’s experiences of marginalisation in the public realm promotes this internationalism, and leads to alternative forms of political commitment predicated on non-state spaces of belonging where deaf people can ‘live in and through’ their own languages at both local and transnational scales. Highly valued as these spaces of signing citizenship are, they are not a substitute for political participation alongside the wider public. With specific reference to the UK and to British Sign Language (BSL), Painter and Jeffrey (2009, p. 83) have argued that

the exclusion of Deaf people highlights the complexities of geographies of citizenship. On the one hand, [it] highlights the disenfranchisement of Deaf people from de facto UK citizenship on the grounds that their hearing loss prevents engagement with the debates of public life. On the other hand, their shared linguistic culture (BSL) serves to create new spaces of citizenship operating at both local and global scales … [However] this does not replace the need for new strategies through which Deaf people can participate in wider civic and political life.

Political action in a technological era

The broader context here is one in which participatory democracy has rapidly embraced the potential for contemporary technologies to engage audiences in contributing to dialogue in the public sphere. A grand challenge is thus presented

to nurture the emancipatory potential of the new media ecology by carving out within it a trusted online space where the dispersed energies, self-articulations, and aspirations of citizens can be rehearsed, in public, within a process of ongoing feedback to the various levels and centers of governance. (Gurevitch, Coleman, & Blumler, 2009, p. 179)

Forms of communication across communities and geographies have multiplied with the development of digital media. The floor within this ‘civic commons’ (Gurevitch et al. 2009) has, arguably, never been more open. Stanyer (2005, pp. 19–20) contends that the growth in opportunities for verbal forms of expression via the media and non-verbal forms of expression through symbolic action means public attitudes now saturate the public sphere like never before. The United Kingdom is witnessing the emergence of what some have termed a ‘self-expressive culture’; or what others have called a ‘new opinion environment’ or an ‘advocacy democracy’; in other words, a culture where public attitude expression is continually encouraged, enabled and facilitated by a series of individuals and organizational actors via new repertoires and communication technology.

Experiments with the use of technologies for political participation can be seen in many contexts. Dutch councillors have used an online forum for dialogue with citizens
(Edwards, 2008). Norwegian politicians, employing a variety of practices, report both marketing and dialogue with voters as motives for their social media use (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). Thompson (2011) reviews the use of social media and its influence in radicalising populations in Northern Africa and the Middle East. In essence, this burgeoning investment in technology simply reflects established knowledge about the outcomes of face-to-face communication: *au fond*, ‘people’s opinions on complex issues of social policy can be altered in discussion with others’ (Pattie & Johnston, 2001, p. 38).

However, it is salient to appreciate that these technologies are not equally functional for all. As we have noted above, for example, education systems do not always make it routinely possible for deaf people to acquire native-like literacy skills in the majority languages of their countries. There is no doubt that this presents a barrier in much online communication. Older technologies, which remain part of the landscape in the enactment of citizenship, also present problems. Coleman (2002), for instance, reflects upon the ongoing role for the telephone in a participatory political arena: ‘Citizens will expect to play an increasing role as interactive participants ... Election phone-ins undoubtedly perform a key function in facilitating such participation’ (Coleman, 2002, p. 741).

For the majority of the population, then, the opportunity to express opinions on significant public issues has been augmented by contemporary technologies. The result is often seen as ‘a “new” self-expressive political culture, one characterized by a plurality of voices talking across each other, promoting and responding to a myriad of agendas’ (Stanyer, 2005, p. 28). But, for deaf users of signed languages, the transformation has not been so straightforward. As Stanyer reports, traditionally, political attitude expression for the majority has been limited to certain events, required commitment and been inconvenient, often demanding organisation by, or at least the co-presence of others. Whilst many no longer need to sacrifice any of their leisure or work time to express their views, deaf people do not have equal access to such opportunities or platforms. Alternative avenues therefore need to be defined.

**Technologies and deaf participation**

Since Bateman’s (1996) study, then, the context within which deaf people’s democratic participation occurs has changed markedly. In particular, the advent of digital communication in society has delivered a significant shift in public engagement with political processes, and (at the time of writing) it appears that this shift has not yet run its course (Burgess, Green, Jenkins, & Hartley, 2009). Research indicates that citizens’ engagement in the political process can be improved through public authorities providing more access through forms of digital communication (Hand & Ching, 2011). Furthermore, deaf people have seen their communicative networks radically reimagined as a result of successive developments in digital media (McCleary, 2003; Valentine & Skelton, 2008, 2009). There is every reason to anticipate that these changes must have created the potential for improvements to the situation reported by Bateman (1996).

Small pockets of information at least indicate that, in appropriate circumstances, deaf organisations and individuals certainly do participate politically using communication and information technologies. Lomicky and Hogg (2010) provide a detailed case study to examine the role of computer-mediated communication (CMC) during social movement activities in 2006 at Gallaudet University for the deaf in Washington, DC, showing how
students and allies organised and engaged in collective action. Overall, the authors’ 540 respondents used, trusted, and depended most on CMC for information, employing blogs and vlogs more than other CMC activity to communicate about the conflict. Respondents also reported, however, that interpersonal communication was important to them as information about the conflict was being exchanged (Lomicky & Hogg, 2010). Much may have changed in the decade since these Gallaudet protests, but it is instructive to note that one-to-one communication remained salient.

A similar balance is, perhaps, apparent in recent experiences in Scotland. Here, the Scottish Parliament was advised (by one of the present authors) to use Facebook in order to engage the national signing community – 12,533 members according to the national census of 20116 – in consultation on a proposed BSL Bill. Parliamentary reflections show that

The initiative was widely welcomed as an excellent example of a public body being inclusive and accessible for Deaf people. Hundreds of BSL videos were shared by the group commenting on the Bill, and the group now has over 2,300 members. (Scottish Parliament, 2015, p. 1)

Alongside the online forum, however, it was considered appropriate to undertake fact-finding, face-to-face consultations in deaf spaces such as community centres and clubs.

More broadly, it is worth noting the findings of another recent study. Mattila and Papageorgiou (2016) report that, whilst disability is recognised as a predictor of withdrawal from voting, especially when associated with perceptions of discrimination, it does not entail disengagement in other respects. In fact, these authors state that people with disabilities are more likely to partake in demonstrations and to contact politicians than non-disabled people (Mattila & Papageorgiou, 2016). In the case of deaf citizens, we would be inclined to the view that an increase in preference for direct contact may be a predictable consequence of the unintended exclusion from public dialogue that is a consequence of the failure of educational systems to provide secure literacy skills. In any case, there is no substitute for being able to express oneself – particularly on matters that generate such passion as politics – in one’s first or preferred language. There is surely nothing exceptional about deaf people in this respect.

**Signing truth to power**

A growing body of research attests to both the impact of new channels of communication on political conversation (at local, national and transnational levels), and the sense of uncertainty about the consequences of shifts in this interaction ecology (Nielsen & Vaccari, 2013). Although there are grounds for optimism about enhanced participation, the danger also exists that the ’digital divide’ will deepen (Snellen, 2002) as practices become embedded. As disabled people and members of linguistic minorities who communicate in a (visual-gestural) modality unfamiliar to the surrounding majority populations, deaf people can be expected to take an interest in alternative avenues to civic engagement – avenues which enable them to use their preferred languages to present their unique perspectives on political truths to those in authority. Direct, personal interaction with political representatives demands a type and quality of communication that has historically been elusive when it comes to deaf-hearing dialogue – particularly at the transnational level at which the EUD and its would be politically active deaf citizens operate. Thus, it
seems plausible that the provision of some form of pan-European, multilingual TRS could potentially provide sufficient access to information and communication in European institutions to facilitate deaf political participation and enhance the experience of citizenship.

Telecommunication relay services

Telecommunication Relay Services encompass text- and video-based services and have been in widespread use for some time (see CSMG, 2012; ETSI, 2009). Video-based services are typically known either as Video Relay Services (VRS) or as Video Remote Interpreting (VRI). VRS and VRI are considered to have distinct purposes in the USA, but in Europe, reference is made more generically to VI services (Haualand, 2012).

The earliest version of a TRS was a text-relay service where trained operators would provide a caption reading and writing service to facilitate a live telephone interaction. Operators equipped with a teletypewriter (TTY) machine would communicate directly with a deaf person using a similar TTY. The exchange between the operator and deaf person would unfold asynchronously, the operator and deaf person taking turns to exchange manually typed messages. Forty-five words per minute (wpm) can be typed using a text-relay service compared to 180 wpm for natural speech/sign (Connelly, 2010). Although the pace of conversation can be slow, this was the only choice for deaf people who wanted to access the telephone networks independently and engage in live telephone conversation. Over the past three decades, text-relay services have been established in many countries, available 24 h a day, seven days per week, with state or telephone industry funding (CSMG, 2012; ETSI, 2009).

Text-relay services are designed for deaf people who are confident at using a written language (Pilling, Fleming, Pechey, Barrett, & Floyd, 2006; Russell & Demko, 2013). Interviews with deaf respondents in several countries have found a desire to experience more natural interaction over the phone, particularly from those who prefer to communicate using a signed language (Connelly, 2010; Pilling et al., 2006; Power, Power, & Horstmanshof, 2007; Russell & Demko, 2013; Shaw & Roberson, 2013). Providers have been developing a response to this demand whereby a deaf person can choose to communicate in their preferred spoken, written or signed language. These TRS are defined as ‘Total Conversation’ services by the International Telecommunications Union. Total Conversation services include VI services, whereby deaf people can reach a video interpreter based in a call centre using an internet video link.

In the USA, statutory regulation stipulates that deaf people have the right to access telephone networks in a functionally equivalent way to their hearing counterparts (Electronic Code of Federal regulations, August, 2014). Unrestricted access to VI services has been shown to benefit deaf Americans (Shaw & Roberson, 2013). In Europe, although the European Telecommunications Standards Institute (ETSI) recognises the economic and social benefits to deaf people when they are able to access these services, there is a patchwork of Total Conversation services (CSMG, 2012; ETSI, 2009).

Little is known about why and when deaf people use VI services. Two reports conducted by the National Consortium of Interpreter Centers surveyed deaf people who were frequent users of VI services in the USA. Twenty-five deaf, hard of hearing and deaf-blind interviewees took part in a 2008 study on VRS: 244 deaf, hard of hearing and deaf-blind respondents took part in a 2010 VRI online survey. The two surveys
recruited a broad mix of participants. Both studies found that respondents would generally use VI services at home for personal usage and work needs, in the workplace for business calls, from a friend’s house or onsite at a hospital or educational establishment. Only the VRI survey determined the purpose of the calls, showing that the wide usage of VRI services goes beyond social and informal functions. It is yet to be determined if access to a remote interpreter is generating greater active dialogue between political institutions and deaf American citizens.

The insign project

One outcome of MEP Adam Kósa’s proposal to develop a real-time TRS was the Insign project. The project was a 12-month proof-of-concept pilot to investigate the feasibility of providing a sustainable multilingual, pan-European Total Conversation service designed specifically to facilitate access to European institutions, increase political participation among deaf citizens and improve MEPs’ awareness of the UNCRPD and the need to address social justice for deaf people (Hay & Pabsch, 2014). One key component of the project was to explore users’ experiences, and thus to predict the likely nature of demand and the facilities required in order to offer appropriate services.

Methodology

To collect evidence of experiences and perceptions, an online survey – open from 28 February to 15 March 2014 – was developed in plain English and International Sign (IS) supported with pictographs. Developing the questionnaire in IS meant that the survey could reach a transnational audience, as EUD routinely does when disseminating information. An invitation to participate was disseminated via network and snowball sampling through the EUD and Heriot-Watt University social media networks, and by direct email throughout Europe via project partners’ databases. A second phase of the survey included seven follow-up interviews with selected survey respondents from different countries, balanced for gender, age group, and communication preference. The semi-structured interviews probed the following themes: (a) familiarity with information and communication technology (ICT); (b) experience with TRS, and (c) general attitudes towards TRS. Interviews were conducted in BSL or IS, video-recorded with consent, and translated by a professional interpreter with experience of both BSL and IS interpreting into written English. Pseudonyms are used when reporting interviewees’ comments.

In total, 84 deaf respondents completed the survey, with 74 from 14 EU Member States, and the remainder from Australia, North America and the rest of Europe. For the purpose of this study, the data will focus on those deaf respondents who live within the EU. Ninety-six percent of the 74 EU respondents declared themselves to be deaf \((n = 71)\) and 4% hard of hearing \((n = 3)\); 65% were male \((n = 48)\) and 35% female \((n = 26)\). Figure 1 shows the geographical spread of respondents, the majority of whom came from the UK \((n = 43)\). Fewer than half were from other European countries \((n = 31)\). Although the survey respondents cannot be said to be a representative sample of deaf citizens from the participating countries (there being no accurate demographic information available on the European deaf population), the survey recruited 74 participants from 13 countries who do not share a common signed language.
Responses were collected from participants aged from 16 to 75 years. Regarding educational level, 56.5% of the respondents had a university degree or higher (n = 42); 15% had not progressed beyond high school level (n = 11). In addition, 77% of the respondents were employed (n = 57). Respondents were asked about the technological devices they own. Seventy per cent of EU respondents owned three or four different devices (n = 53). Almost 70% (n = 51) of respondents reported that they have native-like sign language proficiency. Just over a quarter of respondents stated that they were able to read and write without problems (n = 21); over one-third of respondents considered themselves to have a high level of skill in reading and writing (n = 24); the final third felt that they had an acceptable level of skill (n = 27).

User experiences of TRS

More respondents had experience in using text-relay (n = 49) than VI services (n = 37). There was no identifiable pattern between the various socio-demographic variables of gender, age, education, employment, or level of competence in signed communication, and the tendency to use one of these services. The more extensive use of text-relay corresponds with a wider range of use in different situations (see Figure 2). The most common use of text-relay was for health- or work-related calls (67.5% and 63.5%, respectively). Comparatively, VI services are used in fewer situations, which may reflect the reduced VI service operating hours in many EU countries. More than half of the respondents mainly use VI services for work-related calls (57%), banking (46%), or medical-/health-related calls (45%).

Interviewees expressed a desire to have greater opportunities to make use of VI services without restrictions, but interviewees reported that a lack of government funding meant that they could not do so. Anna commented that:

I have stopped using the text-relay service for many years now [it’s too slow] ... I have interpreters in the office where I work, I use them to access the phone. If I wanted to use
a [VI service] provider for personal use I couldn’t afford it. The opening hours are limited, nine till six. It’s no use to me because I would like to access the service at weekends.

Sofia complained about the limitations of VI services:

I don’t use [VI services] often, maybe once a week. I’m not sure how long I will have to wait in a queue because there are only a handful of interpreters taking calls from deaf people all over [name of country]. I never know how long I will be held in a queue. So I don’t bother. I prefer to just keep to emails. If I do eventually get through … calls must not last more than 20 minutes.

Noah, whose home country does not provide a national VI service, stated that:

I use the web-cam with friends but never with interpreters, because here in [name of country] deaf people are still oppressed. The government does not provide financial support.

Those who took part in the post-survey interview preferred VI to text-relay. The ability to make contact in sign language is central to this preference. Nowhere in Europe were full-time services reported. Interviewees from some countries said that access to VI was further constrained to ‘first point contact’ only (i.e., they were permitted to use VI to contact the administration desk at the doctor’s but not the healthcare staff themselves; or to reach the corporation’s switchboard but not the staff offices). Others reported being allowed to use VI only for uses relating to their employment needs.

As TRS vary across EU Member States, we compared preferred use with actual use. Thirty-two of the 74 EC respondents indicated that both text-relay and VI services are available to them. Twenty-eight per cent of the respondents who have access to both services prefer text-relay, while 72% prefer VI. Lara explains why she opts for text-relay instead of VI:

I prefer to use the text-relay service, simply because I have more control. I do feel more relaxed using a signed language, but using an interpreter means I have less control over
privacy about my clients. It’s tricky ... I don’t want them to know anything, because I’ve suffered enough. I’ve had my entire life dictated by other people. So I want to keep my own control over my own life …

Eighteen of the respondents reported currently using only text-relay services; in doing so, 44% are using the service of their choice, while 56% would prefer to use a VI service. Five of the respondents who prefer to use VI never use text-relay. Lucas, despite having access to both text-relay and VI, explains:

I’ve been using [VI] for the past three years (at work) and I would say it’s been very positive; aside from the occasional technical problems it has worked well. I also like being able to receive calls like everybody else. Hearing callers can contact me in the normal way. The whole system is as discreet as possible … I use it with my colleagues and clients all the time.

Twenty-one participants do not have current access to either text or video-based services; 24% would prefer to use text-relay and 76% would prefer to use VI. When respondents were asked to state for what purpose they would use these facilities, they identified a range of domains. If available, text-relay calls would be used predominantly for work calls (71.5%), medical/health calls (57%) and calls to friends (57%); VI would mostly be used for work calls (88.5%), medical/health calls (88.5%) or banking (71.5%).

**Attitudes towards services**

Almost all of the VI users (98%) confirmed that they would welcome the opportunity to access a pan-European, multilingual TRS. Among respondents who prefer VI services, it is clear that they consider VI preferable because of the immediacy of contact (93%), its fit with their natural language (88%), and because they can use it with their own mobile phone and/or tablet (74.5%) – see Figure 3. But the reason most commonly cited for preference was that this form of communication enables direct peer-to-peer communication (98%), where both parties use their natural language to engage over the phone. However, the same respondents also expressed a level of doubt about the reliability of internet connections during a VI call (56.6%) and the reliability of the technology generally (almost 53%).

Furthermore, more deaf callers who use VI than text-relay services confirmed their concern about the cost of making calls (60%), accessing the internet (54.5%) and meeting technological requirements (e.g., buying hardware and software) (58.2%). Another concern raised by interviewees was around the lack of interoperability of the different applications. Issues around interoperability place deaf people at a disadvantage compared to hearing people who are able to make audio contact regardless of the manufacturer of their device or their network provider:

One service will use Skype while another company will use a different one and so this constantly causes interoperability issues, and I have to work out which is the right program to use. (Marc)

As with text-relay services, deaf VI callers are concerned when it comes to the interpreter managing video calls effectively and accurately. The greatest concern is accuracy of the interpreted message (54.6%). Forty per cent are still concerned with the (lack of) speed; and 40% are also concerned about the confidentiality of their call. However, despite these concerns, 45.5% still trust interpreters’ abilities. As already identified, not all users
have actually experienced using VI in person: around 16 participants (29%) who would prefer VI do not actually have access to such a service.

When interviewees were asked how VI providers could alleviate concerns around trust and competency, they felt that there was still a need for further training, and a need to recruit only highly skilled call centre interpreters who could manage a range of calls on a variety of specialist topics. Although these would be ideal conditions, Luca suggested including facilities to filter calls to particular interpreters:

If I needed to make a call about a particular [...] topic relating to my job, then I want my call to be channelled to one of the interpreters who has the skills and knowledge to interpret that kind of conversation. It should not be randomly allocated to any interpreter. I want to be able to select an interpreter from a menu.

Interviewees reinforced their preference for onsite interpreters and considered VI services a back-up option, as confirmed by Sofia:

Without a doubt I prefer to have an interpreter on site. You are able to build much better rapport with the interpreter when you’re familiar with them and you’ve had time working with them. When you don’t know an interpreter very well it can be difficult and it takes
time to develop that relationship. That doesn't mean I’m against using video interpreters – not at all. There is some value to having the [VI service] interpreters.

**Contacting European institutions**

Well over half of the respondents (63.5%) from EU Member States stated that they would be interested in contacting European institutions through a dedicated TRS. Several interviewees commented on the need for their national government to follow suit and become more accessible in this way. The remainder said that they did not need to make such contact or were not interested. Other respondents stated that they did not know that one could contact members of these institutions (27%).

For those respondents who expressed an interest in contacting one of the European institutions, VI was the preferred communication medium (94%). There was also a clear agreement that European institutions should offer VI to deaf people in IS (74.5% yes, 8% no), but national sign languages were always the preferred option. As Marc explains:

> Obviously I would prefer Danish Sign Language but I’m comfortable with International Sign. Since it is an EU project it should really be inclusive of all sign languages across Europe.

When asked whether they would use a Europe-wide service if it were available to them, participants commented positively:

> Because of my work, there are occasions where I’m part of a project connected to the EC and so it would be good to have that facility to contact the EC. (Marc)

> I have been following the EUD more and more over the past two years. I’ve been learning a lot and becoming more aware. So I do think there is the possibility that maybe one day I would use this service myself. (Ida)

Some limitations may have influenced the outcomes of the research. The sample is obviously relatively small, so we cannot claim that the data represent the views of all deaf European citizens. The fact that so many respondents were from the UK also means that comments are coloured by views of UK services. Conducting the survey and interviews in IS may have meant that only those comfortable using IS responded to the call for participants. People who already use IS are more likely to have participated in various European contexts. Therefore, these people may have a particular interest in seeing a service such as *Insign* made available, as they would be more likely to want to contact European institutions.

**Conclusions**

The data discussed attest that European deaf citizens are equipped with ICT devices that support access to text- or video-based TRS, yet are not always able to make use of the service of their choice. Most European countries only offer a text-based service and provide insufficient support to satisfy deaf people's preferences. The inadequacy of state support for these citizens restricts access to the kinds of TRS choices deaf people regard as necessary. The data confirm that limited provision affects motivation and confidence in making use of communication services.
The majority of respondents to this survey came from a sign language background, so it was not surprising to find a higher preference for VI (72%). VI was considered highly desirable because of the ability to conduct calls in sign language and at speed, as also found in other research in the UK, North America and Australia (see Pilling et al., 2006; Power et al., 2007; Russell & Demko, 2013). The 53 participants who described VI as their preferred form of telecommunication did so because they consider the service to be quicker (93%) and because it meets their language preference (87%). Those respondents who have access to national VI services provided mixed reports on their personal experiences. Deaf people are concerned about quality and efficacy of interpreting services. If the deaf caller cannot choose the interpreter, then there is pressure on the provider to source or train highly skilled interpreters to manage the range of calls. Respondents therefore welcomed the concept of a multilingual, pan-European VI service of assured quality, expressing a desire to engage with the European institutions and commenting on the need for national governments to provide an identical service.

If deaf people cannot engage in political participation on a local or national level because of inadequate access, how will this impact on deaf individuals’ willingness to engage with European politics? Our survey demonstrated that different types of service, quality of interpreters and operational hours had an impact on deaf people’s experiences of, and confidence in, using national VI services. A Deaf citizen’s contact with EU political institutions would be likely to be sustained over multiple calls (and would therefore probably engage a number of interpreters). If a service does not make regular contact appear viable ab initio, then its potential to increase political participation is less likely to be realised. Although we are not suggesting that the provision of a multilingual, pan-European TRS would resolve at a stroke the barriers to deaf community political participation, this study confirms that deaf people would be keen to use such a service in order to enact their citizenship by making contact with European institutions.

More broadly, a successful outcome from such a project could have significant implications. It would facilitate politicians’ direct access to information about deaf lives, with the potential to enhance politicians’ appreciation of often very different experiences. It would permit relevant European institutions to explore new scope for communication technologies to support their intention of being accessible to every citizen in the EU. And it would enable deaf people – historically excluded from assuming political responsibilities, along with other disabled people (Symeonidou, 2009) – to step that bit closer to the levers of power. This would open up the promise of emancipatory outcomes, including the stronger prospect of greater deaf representation in public life, enhancing political participation and improving access to information and communication in society.

Notes
2. For example, European Parliament, European Commission, European Courts of Human Rights.
3. The Insign project was thus funded by the European Commission Directorate-General Justice (JUST/2013/RTSL/PR/0015/A4).
4. The authors’ role in this project was to provide underpinning research and dispassionate evaluation of outcomes: we therefore in no sense write here as product developers or service providers.

5. See http://cad.ca/issues-positions/political-participation-and-activity/).

6. See http://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/)

7. ITU definition of Total Conversation: an audiovisual conversation service providing bidirectional symmetric real-time transfer of motion video, text and voice between users in two or more locations. This real time text differs from instant messaging systems because it is the transmission bi-directionally of one character at a time. This gives the user the feel of real-time communication. (www.itu.int/en/ITUT/studygroups/com16/accessibility/Pages/conversation.aspx)

8. International Sign is a form of ad hoc communication between sign language users with divergent linguistic backgrounds who do not necessarily have a common sign language. One form of International Sign is partially conventionalized and functions as a lingua franca in the international Deaf community, in particular in the context of meetings and conferences of international deaf organisations (Rosenstock, 2015). International Sign is increasingly used to convey information to the international Deaf community through websites and as part of research projects (Rosenstock & Napier, 2015). The pictorial icons were taken from a shared vocabulary of visual language: The Noun Project, http://thenounproject.com/about/

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Professor Graham H. Turner is the Chair of Translation & Interpreting Studies at Heriot-Watt University. An active researcher in the field of Sign Language Studies since 1988, he has been the Director of the Centre for Translation & Interpreting Studies in Scotland since 2005 [email: g.h.turner@hw.ac.uk].

Jemina Napier is Professor and Chair of Intercultural Communication in the Department of Languages & Intercultural Studies at Heriot-Watt University where she teaches signed language and spoken language interpreting students at undergraduate and postgraduate level. She is an interpreter researcher, educator and practitioner and has practiced as a signed language interpreter since 1988 [email: j.napier@hw.ac.uk].

Robert Skinner is a British Sign Language (BSL) and English interpreter practitioner with more than 16 years of experience. Robert’s area of specialism as an interpreter include video remote interpreting. Robert is currently a Ph.D. student at the Department of Languages and Intercultural Studies at Heriot-Watt University and was the Research Associate for the project this paper reports [email: R.Skinner@hw.ac.uk].

Mark Wheatley has lived and worked in Brussels since 2007 as the Director of the European Union of the Deaf [email: mark.wheatley@eud.eu].

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