

# Technology Access Here and There

By **Dr. Yerker Andersson**

When TDI asked me to write an article about the availability of telecommunications and media around the world, I looked back at what I have experienced in different countries. As expected, deaf people around the world had for a long time been fighting for better access to telecommunications and media. Text telephone and television captioning devices had been improved considerably even though they still are mutually incompatible. In my opinion, the 9000 models of Nokia were - and still are - superior to all other text telephone devices, including American-made TTYs and pagers. Let me give you an example. During the 1999 WFD Congress in Australia, I asked the hotel receptionist to make a voice call to reach and give my message to a Finnish interpreter at another hotel, but she and the other hotel were unable to page or locate that interpreter. Dr. Liisa Kauppinen of Finland who happened to pass by, saw me and offered to use her pager, a Nokia 9290, to send my message to the interpreter. The interpreter responded via her own pager, again a Nokia 9290, within 2 minutes! It was hard for me to believe how the Finnish-made Nokia 9290 could work well in Australia. Liisa claimed that she had never any problem in communicating across country borders with her Finnish friends. Borrowing a Nokia 9290 from a Swedish friend of mine, I had a TTY communication with my deaf brother from Spain and another one later from Italy to Sweden where he lives. This Finnish-made Nokia was compatible with my brother's Swedish text telephone.

As GSM, the standard required for Nokia 9290, is now available in the US, it will probably become one of the most popular

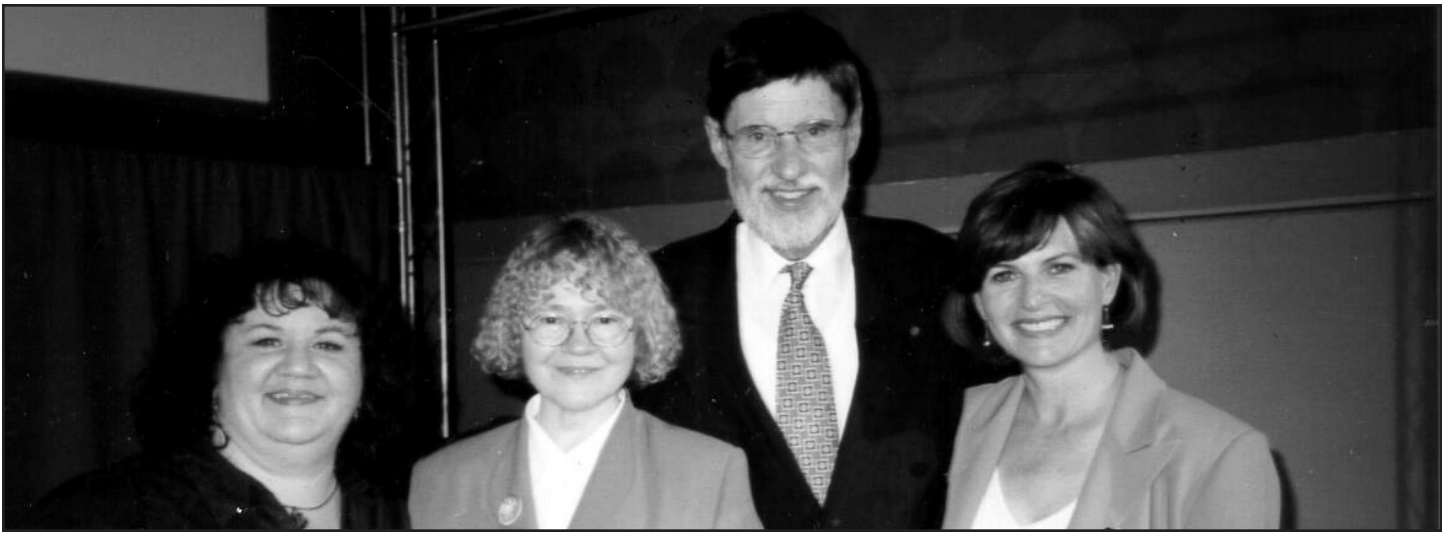
TTYs or pagers in the near future. Nokia 9290 and its earlier models have, in fact, been able to send TTY, email, or fax messages via the worldwide GSM standard, to or within most countries since the 1990's! In addition to the above-specified capabilities, Nokia 9290 can function as a PDA (calendar, calculator and world clock and a few computer programs), a mobile phone, and a hands free speakerphone, and can even be used for transmitting photos or data. Whether Nokia 9290 can be compatible with American-made TTYs is still an open question. As far as I know, other wireless devices do not have all such features within a single device. One drawback for the Nokia 9290 is that it needs a vibrating alarm accessory. The US-made Blackberry 5810, may be considered the closest equivalent to Nokia 9290. It uses GSM for both placing and receiving phone and email calls, in addition to access to Internet, however, only within the United States. I do not know whether it is capable of making TTY calls. The GSM mobile phones with text messaging capabilities, i.e. Motorola P280, Samsung N105 and Samsung Q105, have been known to work well in about 84 countries.

However, I must hasten to add that as Nokia 9290 is very expensive (about \$600), deaf people in most countries prefer the much cheaper mobile phones with text messages on either a low rate or prepaid plan. They claim that the mobile phone is adequate for communication with their hearing and deaf friends. Last year, when I was conducting a leadership training seminar in Portugal, I found that 18 young participants had a mobile phone with text messages and only two others could afford to have the luxurious Nokia 9290. During breaks, they always checked their mobile phones and typed messages very quickly and effortlessly - a beautiful demonstration of not only their typing skill but also their courtesy, indeed. Fax is the preferred method of telecommunications in Japan and China because a TTY is not feasible because their characters would require a much larger keyboard than our QWERTY. Deaf persons in several countries still prefer fax to TTY because fax gives them time enough to think over before they write a response. Unfortunately, US and foreign TTYs still are not compatible. Of course, relay services are found in most industrialized countries. But unlike the US relay



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*From left to right: Carol-lee Aquiline, Liisa Kauppinen, Yerker Andersson and Carol Padden at the 50th anniversary of World Federation of the Deaf in Rome, Italy, October 2001.*

services, the relay services in Europe are supported by the government. Some of them do use a nation-wide number.

The Wyndtell pager is probably the only device in the world offering a special option: requesting from-text-to-voice and vice versa contacts for auto emergency services. Several US-made pagers also are able to send and receive TTY calls and instant messaging. These features have not appeared in other countries yet.

The access to television programs for deaf viewers varies from one country to another. Several TV programs in both the US and other countries are captioned, but not in the same way. Video stores in the US and a few other English-speaking countries can sell or rent videotapes and DVDs, which can give viewers the option

to accept or reject their captions. The worldwide Teletext system can superimpose captions on videotapes except during live television broadcasts. Instead, national federations of the deaf in some countries have to take over the responsibility for the distribution of selected domestic videotapes with subtitles among its local affiliates for rental. Such a difference has not been acknowledged in literature or periodicals yet. Many television stations in foreign countries are government-owned which does not necessarily mean that their programs are censored. The government-owned stations in several countries offer a weekly program in sign language, usually managed by deaf professionals, - a feature not found in the United States. The television program I once watched in Russia showed a signing broadcaster dominating on its screen with

a small insertion of a talking broadcaster - another feature I have never found in other countries.

Inasmuch as I know, organizations similar to TDI have not emerged outside the United States but national federations of the deaf in many countries instead have a committee dedicated to telecommunications and media. Only the TDI's GA-SK, NAD publications and a monthly periodical of the deaf in Germany still publish ads with pictures of telecommunication devices. Directories of TTY numbers have been either published or inserted as a special section in the national and local deaf periodicals. The local phone directories in Sweden can add the number of relay services to each TTY number of deaf users upon request - a feature I have not found in other countries.



*The executive director of a Thai local club of the deaf greets Yerker Andersson, February, 2002.*  
*(Taken by Mike Kemp)*

Finally, the most surprising trend is the rapid increase of websites where you can easily find the addresses of local, national and international organizations of the deaf, information about local, national and international events, pictures of finger alphabets and selected signs, and so on. Many of the websites are beautifully designed. Another interesting fact is that while costs for unlimited Internet access in the US are based on a flat rate for local calls, all local calls in other countries must be charged per minute, like long distance calls! Internet access has become an empowering tool for deaf, late deafened and hard of hearing computer users even though computer literacy still is low in most countries.