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Telecommunications for people with disability: This year's Christopher Newell Prize-winning papers

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Abstract

This editorial provides a brief history of initiatives taken within the Australian telecommunications industry since 1980 to assist people with major disabilities to remain 'connected' via modern telecommunications. It provides background to the annual Telstra-TJA Christopher Newell Prize competition, running since 2010, and concludes by announcing the winners of the 2013 Telstra-TJA Christopher Newell Prize competition.

> 'An NDIS will ensure people are no longer "shut out" from opportunities and from independence by providing the appropriate and necessary supports that allow people with disability to reach their full potential' – from the ?What is an NDIS?? website [5] May 2013

By the time you read this article, the National Disability Insurance Scheme legislation will have been presented to the Australian parliament and passed, given the statements of support in principle from across the federal parliament.   This is great news for all Australian citizens under 65 with serious disabilities.

Telecommunications has had, and will continue to have, a significant role in supporting those with disabilities from being "shut out from opportunities and from independence".   It is not widely known that in the early 1980s, a self-styled 'ComSkill' group of volunteers arose within Telecom Australia, led by Graeme Malouf and including design engineers Barry Dingle and Graeme Goeby, which designed and built the prototype 'Access Dialler' – a telephone with two large pads replacing the normal dial pad so that those unable to use a standard dial pad or keyboard could use their elbows or a prosthetic limb to dial their telephone calls. Telecom's Managing Director Mel Ward arranged for a production model to be engineered and made available at heavily subsidised rates. Later in the 1980s the ComSkill group designed a very low power, long battery-life communication board for people with speech disability.

Other relevant initiatives have been the Telstra Disability Forum [6], meeting regularly since 1999, the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman Disability Action Plan [7] (2003), the Communications Alliance's industry guideline G586 Disability matters: access to communications technologies for people with disabilities and older Australians [8]' (2006), and the Australian launch of the Global Accessibility Reporting Initiative [9] by the Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association and Mobile Manufacturers Forum in 2009. In 2003 ACIF (the Australian Communications Industry Forum, predecessor to the current Communications Alliance), set up a Working Group on Any-to-Any Text Connectivity Options, to investigate Internet-era alternatives to the TTY (teletypewriter) service that is supported by the Standard Telephone Service, but neither industry nor government took up its recommendations.

The National Broadband Network, with its high-speed upstream and downstream capabilities, offers great potential for advanced tele-health, assisted communication and tele-education services (as well as sign languages) for those who are relatively immobilised, as well as the means by which people with disability – or their carers – can more effectively manage their lives. The policy challenge is to make the NBN affordable for all those who need to use it – and the National Disability Insurance Scheme will hopefully contribute significantly to the communication costs of those found eligible.

Four years of the Telstra-TJA Christopher Newell Prize competition

In March 2009 the then Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities, the Hon. Bill Shorten MP, challenged the telecommunications industry to fund an annual competition for the best original paper to be published on the application of telecommunications to help people with disability. Telstra took up the challenge, and has now been funding the Telstra-TJA Christopher Newell Prize competition annually for four years.

The winners of the 1st Prize in the previous three years are shown in Table 1.

2010: 1st Prize	Denise Wood	University of South Australia	'Communicating in Virtual Worlds through an Accessible Web 2.0 Solution'
2011: equal 1st Prize	Melissa McCarthy	Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children (RIDBC)	'Using technology to support children with sensory disability in remote areas: The RIDBC Teleschool model'
2011: equal 1st Prize	Robert Morsillo	Swinburne University & Telstra Consumer Affairs	'One down, two to go: Public policy in service of an available, affordable and accessible National Broadband Network for people with disability'
2012: 1st Prize	Rob Garrett, Toan Nguyen	Novita Children's Services, SA	'Together We Can Find Telecommunication Solutions For People With Complex Communication Needs'

Table 1 – Previous Winners of the Telstra-TJA Christopher Newell Prize

It can be seen that the previous judging panels for the Prize have interpreted 'telecommunications' broadly, to include the whole range of potential Internet and web-based services based upon modern telecommunications infrastructure. In addition they have interpreted 'the application of telecommunications' to include research on policy proposals in telecommunications that could have wide potential benefits for people with disability.

The 2013 Judging Panel has taken a similarly inclusive approach to the topics covered by the six papers submitted to this year's competition. All six papers are original and valuable, and TJA is pleased to be able to publish all of them in this special issue of the Journal. Of the six, four papers were considered to have sufficient merit to share the $15,000 pool of prize money, which will be distributed as shown in Table 2. TJA congratulates all the winning authors.

1st Prize of $10,000	Gunela Astbrin, Will Tibben	GSA InfoComm, University of Wollongong	'The role of public procurement in improving accessibility to ICT[10]'

2nd Prize of $3,000	Parimala Raghavendra, Emma Grace, Lareen Newman, Denise Wood, Tim Connell	Flinders University, Novita Children?s Services, et al.	' "They think I'm really cool and nice": The impact of Internet support on the social networks and loneliness of young people with disabilities. [11]'
Equal 3rd Prize of $1,000	Marion Hersh	Glasgow University	'Deaf people?s experiences, attitudes and requirements of contextual subtitles: A two-country survey [12]'
Equal 3rd Prize of $1,000	Erin Wilson, Robert Campain, Megan Moore, Nick Hagiliassis, Jane McGillivray, Daniel Gottliebson, Michael Bink, Michelle Caldwell, Bob Cummins, Joe Graffam	Deakin University, Scope, et al.	'An accessible survey method:Increasing the participation of people with a disability in large sample social research [13]'

Table 2 – Winners of the 2013 Telstra-TJA Christopher Newell Prize

Sincere thanks are again due to Telstra for sponsoring the competition, and to the six members of the Judging Panel: Dr Mark Bagshaw, Bert Ciavarra, Barry Dingle, Dr Peter Gerrand, Professor Gerard Goggin and Wayne Hawkins.

Finally, I draw your attention to the fine memoir that Robert Morsillo has separately written on Christopher Newell, which TJA is pleased to publish in this issue. It helps explain why the memory of Christopher Newell continues to inspire people working for improved access for people with disability, especially in the telecommunications sector.

History of telecommunications

Christopher Newell

Telecommunications solutions for people with disabilities

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