

Celebrated voice calls out for new legislation for disabled people

He has done stand up for Comic Relief, trekked across a desert in northern Kenya and is one of the best known voices on Radio 4. But Peter White MBE, Disability Affairs Correspondent for the BBC, was not an early adopter of technology.



Peter White MBE, Disability Affairs Correspondent BBC

'I am not a computer expert and not an especially good problem solver,' he told a packed audience at the annual general meeting of the British Assistive Technology Association (BATA) in London. Like many others he was slow to embrace technology which he attributed to an understandable and all too common 'fear of the new'.

However as a blind Braille user he was also exceptionally adept with old technology. Despite the cumbersome nature of the Perkins Brailler, he succeeded in the competitive world of media. producing and reading his own scripts. 'I was a fast Braille reader and won awards,' he said. 'In fact, I was praised by TS Eliot and patted on the head by the Queen Mother.'

What converted him to computers was the increasing realisation that he was not a 'good colleague.' He could not collaborate with sighted people at the BBC because they could not read Braille and he could not see print. They needed to find a format which would work for both blind and sighted writers. Fortunately a technology enthusiast took him in hand and pointed out that he was missing out on a lot of good books if

he just relied on Braille.

Early attempts to use the technology were not always plain sailing, Fifteen minutes before going on air for his In Touch programme, the Braille Embosser linked to a printer ate his script and he had to improvise. On another occasion his script was printed out in Grade 1 Braille. 'It is very difficult to adapt if you have if not read it for 30 years,' he recalled, 'so I used a mixture of reading and desperate ad libbing: not an ideal combination if you are trying to explain the complexities of the benefit system.'

Despite being a convert to technology, Peter is concerned that new developments leave disabled people behind. Access to the digital world is as important as the right to text books or to equipment. The Equalities Act and Disability Discrimination Act have given disabled people physical access to buildings but he is calling for legislation to compel manufacturers to provide equal access to their products and services.

[BATA](#) supports this stance. With members drawn from charities, commercial organisations and specialist schools, BATA provides expert and informed opinion and impartial advice to government departments and agencies. They are calling on government to improve the availability of communications aids and assistive technology in schools.

'As I get older I get more enthusiastic about the potential of technology.' said Peter. 'Speed of development must not leave blind people behind. New vistas have opened. It is crucial these opportunities are not snatched away.'

'Technology, Special Needs and Disability '- Peter White MBE ,Disability Correspondent, BBC was sponsored by BATA member Noel Duffy from Dolphin Computer Access

Barbara to make BATA bigger and better

The British Assistive Technology Association (BATA) has been making its presence felt in recent weeks with a highly publicised export seminar and news that they have appointed Barbara Phillips, CBE, as Executive Director.



Martin Littler and John Crick at BATA export seminar

With recent gloomy predictions for companies in the educational technology sector, it was feared that BATA, which represents assistive technology companies at home and overseas, would disappear.

Martin Littler, chair of BATA, has bounced back from recent setbacks. His own company Inclusive Technology has had to shed jobs and will not be sponsoring the Special Needs Fringe at the Hilton in 2012.

He feels that buoyant export markets will offer, “significant business opportunities” in the coming months. While sales are falling in the USA and in Britain, there may be opportunities for companies in emerging markets such as Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and The Gulf States.



New blood
Barbara
Phillips

BATA is not just a trade organisation. It also campaigns on behalf of disabled people who need assistive devices to remain independent, to communicate and to access education and training.

To strengthen this role they have just appointed Barbara Phillips as Executive Director. A former senior civil servant, she has the vision and clout to raise BATA's profile, "We want to change public perception of assistive technology and make it more accessible to those whose lives would be better through its use. Being able to bring about change like that is what motivates me – and I like a challenge!