

# 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

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# Texthelp's award winning software helps the Fire Brigade

✘ I am just back from a week in Boston and Chicago. I was amazed at the number of fire engines I saw and wondered if we were about to have a second Great Fire of Chicago but Jimmy, the 77 year old taxi driver and self-appointed guide to the city, told me that in the USA fire engines don't just put out fires, they often act as paramedics too.

When I thought about it , the same thing is happening here. If ambulances are busy in rural areas, often a fire engine will be dispatched and they have always cleaned up after road traffic accidents.

So I was very interested to discover that Texthelp, a company well known for its Read and Write Gold software, is working with the Fire Brigade Union (FBU). Texthelp has long been used in schools, especially secondary schools, and has proved its worth with young people who have problems with reading, writing and the research necessary for compiling projects and revision for exams. But why the FBU?

The answer is that they are now subject to the strictures of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA . They used to be exempt, along with police and prison officers and people who work on board ships, aircraft or hovercraft.

These days firefighters need a lot of training to keep up to date with new procedures. They have to be experts in fire fighting techniques, hazardous chemicals, first aid, dealing with trauma and using breathing apparatus correctly. Modern

firefighters also needs IT skills for the administration they have to do such as logging incidents and writing reports.

Trevor Shanahan of the FBU was aware that a number of fire fighters were anxious about their literacy levels and would welcome some help . He had heard about Read&Write GOLD through other unions and invited the company to show what they could offer.

Read&Write GOLD is now used both on the service's computers and on home computers too. It works with common programs such as Microsoft Word, Internet Explorer, and Adobe Reader. It will read text out loud so firefighters can upload training materials and listen to them instead of straining to read them and only get half the message. It is very versatile and is ideal for users with dyslexia as all the settings can be tweaked. Among other functions, Texthelp has an inbuilt dictionary, word prediction and a homophone checker for those common similar sounding words.

Now when I give way to a fire engine, I am much more aware of the hours of behind the scenes training and admin which keep fire fighters on the road. Thanks to Texthelp, those with dyslexia are now a little more confident and competent and that has to be good news for all of us.