

# Turn on, tune in

The introduction of full subtitling across all their programmes will be a revolution for many public TV channels, writes Lidia Geringer de Oedenberg

**D**uring the April mini-plenary in Brussels, parliament's president Hans-Gert Pötering announced the adoption of a written declaration that I put forward concerning the introduction of subtitles to programmes for all public TV channels in the EU. The declaration was supported by 427 MEPs and was transmitted to the European Commission, which will prepare a legislative proposal. This initiative is aimed at allowing hearing-disabled people full perception of all programmes offered by public TV. Subtitles should not replace dubbing and should be an additional option.

The problem of complete or partial deafness affects more than 83 million people across the EU. With Europe's ageing population increasing, this problem is set to rise. About 55.5 per cent of people over 60 and 93 per cent over 80 have hearing problems, and the number of deaf people in Europe is expected to rise to 90.5 million by 2015.

However it is now possible to provide subtitles for all TV programmes, including those transmitted live. In 2004, the parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe acknowledged public TV as one of the most important socio-political institutions of the 20th century. Since

political debate has moved to TV, subtitles are also important in terms of democracy. Hearing-disabled people who are unable to follow the political debate do not vote and, as a consequence, feel excluded from democratic society.

In 2003 the parliament adopted a resolution on television without borders, which obliged member states to construct national plans with the aim of facilitating access to TV for disabled people. Subtitles already exist on many public and commercial TV channels. However, the number of programmes involved varies. In some cases, they can be seen in the most important news programmes, but also in advertisements. This depends on the legal obligation or editors' choice.

Sometimes subtitles only cover spoken text or as summaries, sometimes they also cover soundtracks or other sound effects.

The champion of all public TV channels is the BBC, which has been offering subtitles since the 1980s. In April this year it was the first public TV channel in the world to have subtitles across all its programmes. This is possible thanks to the UK's 2003 communications act, which obliged broadcasters to subtitle at least 80 per cent of their programmes by the end of 2008. This figure rises to 90 per cent by 2010.

In France, the first legal regulations relating to subtitles were introduced in 1984. The present law provides that all channels which reach an audience share of over 2.5 per cent must introduce subtitles by 2010. At the moment about 25-35 per cent of programmes have them. In the Netherlands, 75 per cent of programmes on public TV have subtitles. By 2010 all public and private channels must be subtitled.

In Spain about 25-50 per cent of programmes are subtitled. In Ireland about 90 per cent of broadcasts between 18.30-23.30. In Norway, about 50 per cent of programmes are subtitled, in Sweden, 50 per cent of new programmes, in Germany about 1000 hours of subtitled programmes are produced every

year. In Denmark, despite the lack of legal regulation, 23 per cent of programmes are subtitled.

Producers of TV programmes often excuse themselves by saying that subtitles are expensive. However, in the Netherlands, they cost only one per cent of TV's budget. Of course, there are some costs at the beginning, but the bigger the scale of the project is, the lower the costs per unit are. Moreover, subtitles can bring material profit, since they bring more viewers. Hearing-disabled people are also consumers. Subtitles are especially helpful for hearing-disabled people, but they are also used by viewers who do not have hearing problems. In the UK, about six million people use the subtitles option while watch-

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Polish MEP Lidia Geringer de Oedenberg is vice chair of the legal affairs committee and was editor, manager vice president of the programming board in Polish public TV for 17 years

ing TV. Many people appreciate the different facilities subtitles offer. Children can learn to read while watching their favourite TV cartoons, foreigners learn the language and ordinary viewers find it easier to understand foreign accents.

So, why are there so many TV channels in Europe that have not introduced subtitles yet? The answer is quite simple; it is because there is a lack of adequate legislation at national level. Should it therefore be introduced at EU level?

That was the idea I had. Although we will have to wait some time for the new directive and member states will have some time to implement it, it will be a real revolution for some public TV channels. They will have to train their employees and spend some additional funds to start this activity (maybe with EU help). However, access to information, education, culture, politics and entertainment will be opened up to millions of Europeans. ★