

Athens Report 13-14 June2003
(Carlo Romeo - Rai)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. I believe it is appropriate, first of all, to tell you what the Social Action Department of RAI is. Let's see, to start with, what its company *mission* is.

RAI's Social Action and Public Liaison Department has a company mandate to manage relations with organisations and associations prevalently operating in the sector of volunteer services, to pursue specific social interests, in particular, to safeguard the more vulnerable segments of the population. In this context the Social Action Dept. supervises the Audio-descriptions, sound subtitles (teleaudio) that enable the blind to follow television programmes. The Company mandate also envisages the definition and the realisation of specific activities and initiatives, aimed at drawing the public's attention toward social problems. It oversees the social programming and the specific commitments in this field, prescribed in the Service Contract drawn up between RAI and the Ministry of Telecommunications. Our department also follows relations between RAI and the public.

2. Your speaker is the director of this department. I spent almost twenty years as a reporter, then I directed two regional branches of RAI and in June 2000 I was appointed to this post. I was a member, specifically, of the RAI Commission "Superamento dell'Handicap" (overcoming handicaps), and in 2002, a member of the mixed Commission of RAI and the competent Italian Government Ministry to draft RAI's Service Contract, the contract that makes RAI a public service for three years. As we will see, this aspect is very important. I was called, finally to be part of the Communications Commission of the Italian Government for the European year of People with Disabilities.

3. **Communicating Disabilities.** For some years RAI has been closely following these issues, which, in Italy in the past years have changed their signs and context. From a sort of pietism, deriving in the best cases from tolerance, efforts have been made to pass to communication that has at its centre the concept of integration. The process is still under way but the first results are beginning to be seen.

I want to say at this point that my report will be short and that further data and deeper studies can be found on our Internet site www.sas.rai.it. The English version of the site, already quite substantial, should be completed this summer. Consulting this site you will find a number of useful elements that integrate what we are about to discuss.

4. <http://www.sas.rai.it/codici/ucad/inglese/index.html> The first difficulty, as you know very well, is to develop a homogeneous and correct culture in our communicators, whether they are journalists, directors, authors, etc. On this topic, in the Department's site, among the codes tied to various issues, such as development (handled by the FAO) or the environment, in collaboration with the WWF, we have also prepared a text on disabilities (it can also be seen in English) that gives useful instructions and advice to anyone who has to or wants to deal with these themes.
5. The search for communicative languages and contexts is determining for us. We have prepared, in collaboration with RAI radio and television programming, a series of programmes that go more deeply into these issues. For example, with Radiotre, the rf channel most involved with culture, we arranged a day dedicated to Michel Petrucciani, focusing on the artist and on his contribution to music, pointing out also the difficulties he had to overcome. This is merely one example among many that we could mention. Again, you can refer, as I said before, to the index of our department's site: it lists over a hundred initiatives tied to these themes and realised with the editorial services of RAI.
6. Particular attention and consequent resources were then dedicated to providing access to TV programmes to individuals with sensory disabilities (the deaf and the blind). This leads us to make an interesting comment. Programmes for the blind are broadcast on medium wave radio waves and they include the most popular programmes like fiction. A voice in the background fills in the story for the listeners allowing them to follow the programme along with their families. One "audio-described" series that was very successful was Derrick, and then Il Commissario Montalbano. The comment I wanted to make, however, is that these facilities, arranged for persons with sensory disabilities, become a precious opportunity for so called "normal" persons, too. If, for example, you are travelling by car from Rome to Milan and you don't want to miss an

episode of the Commissario Montalbano, a series that has drawn incredible audience levels, this system, that was created for the public with disabilities, becomes an opportunity for everyone.

7. Obviously a great deal depends on the Service Contract that I spoke about before. The new Service Contract, valid from the first of January 2003 to the thirty-first of December, 2005 affirms in Article 1:

Paragraph 1 - General Principles

Article 1

The Mission of the Public Radio and Television Service

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3. The parties, in full agreement, recognise the following as priority commitments of the public radio and television service:

to guarantee the freedom, pluralism, objectivity, completeness, impartiality and the correctness of information, to favour civil growth and social progress; to promote culture, education and the Italian language; to safeguard national and local identities; to ensure services of social utility; to extend to the general public the advantages of new broadcasting technologies; to ensure, furthermore, a balanced and varied programming able to maintain an audience level suitable to fulfil its functions and guarantee the attainment of the quality of the offer within the entirety of the types of programmes.

4. To fulfil these commitments RAI undertakes, with the modalities and conditions set forth in this contract to:

- ...
- offer an ample range of television, radio and multimedia programmes directed to the totality of users reserving, in all hour segments, also those of maximum audience, an adequate and proportioned number of broadcast hours for information, education, training and cultural promotion;
- to favour access to its programmes founded on the principle of equal opportunities, with the most rigorous respect for the dignity and the centrality of the person along with the cultures of diversities:
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Article 7

Social programming and programming dedicated to individuals with disabilities

1. Rai agrees to promote and encourage social communication and the consequent representation of the pluralities of the social situation in its television, radio and multimedia services, with a particular focus on individuals, groups and communities with special needs in specific areas linked to environment, health, quality of life, consumers, civic rights and duties, team sports, disabilities, new trends and the job market, immigration, integration and multi-cultures, equal opportunity and senior citizens.

Moreover, Rai agrees to establish and create specific activity and initiatives aimed at developing public attention and awareness on these topics, possibly by established new media languages effective in terms of listening.

2. Rai agrees to cooperate with the above institutions to create, produce and disseminate specific programs aimed at fighting and preventing paedophilia, violence towards minors and the prevention of drug addiction and the awareness of the consequences from using drugs and mood-altering substances as well as the social cost these phenomenon have for society as a whole.

3. RAI in reiterating its commitment to produce and program in complete observance of the Amsterdam Antidiscrimination Treaty and the resolutions of the European Forum of disabled persons of Madrid, places particular focus on cultural promotion for the integration of disabled individuals and overcoming disability through targeted social campaigns and special programs in collaboration with specific national and local institutions.

Moreover, RAI agrees to guarantee access to its multimedia services to individuals with sensory disabilities, through specific audio-described programming on OM channels and broadcasting with telesoftware procedure for blind individuals and subtitles with special Teletext pages and with video translators for deaf individuals, and for this purpose, putting into place the following initiatives:

increase the volume of the specific services mentioned above by 10 percent annually in relation to 2002 both in terms of quantity and program genres, including cultural programs and in-depth and specific subject programs;
maintain the current subtitling service for news and add at least one more edition of the news in a higher viewing time band;

improvement of the audio-description signal quality in terms of broadcasting resources dedicated to the specific service;
promotion of technological research in order to improve access to multimedia services for disabled individuals and those with reduced sensory capacity;
communication to the public of the undertaken initiatives.

8. These are, of course, just words, but they are words that entail a number of consequences as they are written in a contract that also requires the Italian Government to disburse a subscription fee amounting to some millions of Euro.

The criteria of communication cannot ignore a determining aspect. It is well known that a veritable revolution is under way in the world of telecommunications. Internet is only one of the latest developments and anyone working in the field of social communications cannot ignore these changes. We cannot remain anchored to TV or to the radio or to the Web. Neil Postman wrote: *The Europeans seem to understand that the change taking place in the media is ecological not additive, that when a new means of communication, such as television, enters a culture, the result is not the old culture plus the new means of communication, but a new global culture.*

It is difficult to share the Europeistic optimism of an American like Postman, historical heir in every sense of Marshall McLuhan, who spoke so much and in such a way of mass media (now we can say of the last century) that he became a point of reference for everyone. It is, however, true that Europe has succeeded in gathering this constant media transformation better than the American cultural world. And in the first place, in a period of profound multimedia revolution, the institutions and the media field must keep well in mind that in the world of the media we do not add, we transform.

Postman's words were spoken more than ten years ago, when there were only the first glimpses of the Internet revolution, and only for those who wanted to see it, and the time passed has not changed much the general picture represented in synthesis by Postman, if not to add further value. Here then, this context applied to a fundamental theme like the one that we are treating today suddenly becomes determining.

9. Having said this, it is necessary and opportune that those who work in the field of social communication, and therefore also the communication of diversities, and work with these every day, should provide a real and fundamental contribution today in this meeting. It is known that the so-called social communication must generally take into account many company behavioural schemes that are not all easy to manage, not only in RAI, such as, for example, tighter and tighter budgets or certain attitudes that are often ill-disposed or superficial, or audience ratings that, in fact, do not always depend on themes but too often on how they are treated.

Are social issues boring? We need only think of Blade Runner (the best film on handicaps ever made) or of Rainman in the cinema and to come out of the disability context "Supereremo anche questa" (We'll Overcome this, too), a programme of the Israeli TV. An example, this last, which is worth examining if we are speaking of service programmes. It was January 1991; Tel Aviv was under attack and the missiles may have chemical warheads. I was in that city in those days; I was still a reporter and it was my penultimate war. How well I remember the atmosphere.

The Israeli TV was broadcasting a programme for children. It was teaching them how to use their gas masks and how to give themselves injections against nerve gas. I have never seen a more pleasant and cheerful programme, and I've been working in radio and television for twenty-five years.

10. A search for languages, then, for operators, but also for a more mature audience, more accompanied by certain themes, such as disabilities. In line with this, for the 26th of June in the Sala Arazzi in Rome, we have organised a workshop with the best European TV formats on disabilities to present and discuss with our programme directors, authors etc. We have the models and an exchange of experiences and knowledge about them is fundamental.

We need to work to see that disabilities are no longer an important element in the work market, also in the world of communications. Unfortunately in Italy, due to a number of circumstances, this is still rare. There are excellent reporters as reporters, I think of Franco Bompreszi, for example, but they are still exceptions and this is a serious matter. We are certainly not asking that the disabled should speak of disabilities, but

rather that there should be disabled professionals who deal with sports, with fiction and with programme scheduling.

This is not easy, also because we need to free ourselves of the culture of the welfare state and give up some apparent privileges if we want to follow the road of integration. We need to work like constructors of bridges to build passages that will lead to a continual exchange of values, of languages and of contexts. One of the reasons for this European Year and for this Forum is precisely to serve as a bridge for those who build bridges, if you will allow me the play on words. And it is a precious work.

11. I want to conclude with two quotations that perhaps do not seem very pertinent to our discussion. I'd like to draw your attention, just to give us something to think about, to the TV advertisement that RAI prepared for the European Year of Persons with Disabilities. It is the ad, I repeat, of RAI that in this campaign wanted and wants to play an active role, and not simply be, as has occurred in the past, a vehicle of the more or less valid messages of other parties. The protagonists are the Emperor Hadrian of Marguerite Yourcenar and Giorgio Albertazzi, the actor whom all of you know and who took *Le Memorie di Adriano* (The Memories of Hadrian) to theatres of all the world, Athens included. In fact, the third protagonist is the Villa Adriana (Hadrian's Villa) at Tivoli. He says:

Our most serious error is that of trying to awaken in individuals those qualities that they do not possess, neglecting to cultivate the ones that they have.

As you can see, it is a new way of speaking, or perhaps of not speaking, of disabilities, to bring them out of the segregated places of social communication and transform them into universal messages. Our writers have worked with humility for this and have acted as a bridge with the networks that have broadcast the ad, with advertisers, with the institutions and associations. Not by chance was it presented in its advance preview in Bari on the occasion of the opening of the European Year.

12. Speaking of bridges, and of those who are committed to building them, one of George Schultz's old comic strips comes to mind. Snoopy is leading his little bird-scouts through the woods. They come to a ravine and the little beagle stretches himself from edge to edge (like a

bridge) to help his scouts pass. The birds cross him and continue their walk leaving him there, blocked into a useful but rather uncomfortable position. Night falls; Snoopy thinks about the situation and comments " People don't think about it, but if you are a bridge at night, you feel lonely". It is a feeling that at times strikes all of us who, in the field of social communication, have to act as bridges.

It happens, but I don't think it is enough to discourage any of us, not now, at least.

Thank you.