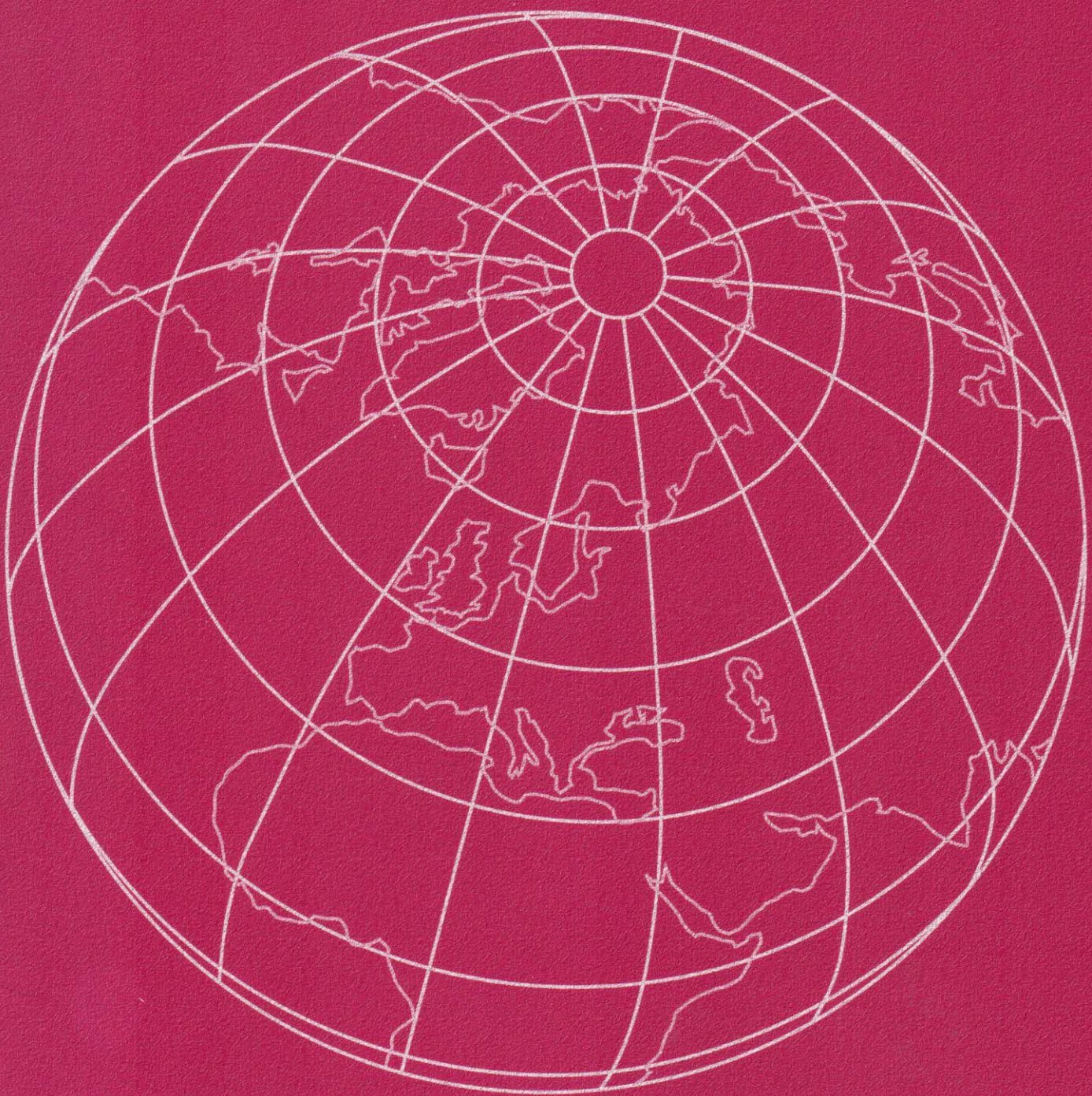
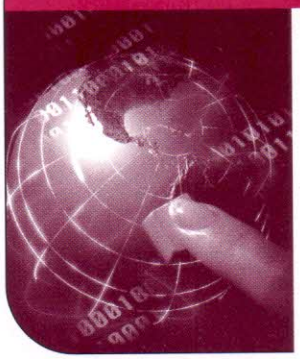
Outwardly Mobile

What can disabled users expect from UMTS, the new generation in mobile communications?



UMTS SUMMARISED



UMTS, as the European implementation of the world-wide IMT 2000 concept of mobile communication, is bound to have a dramatic effect on the lives of every citizen although it appears to be an unknown quantity at the moment. The mobile phone has developed in a short time from a specialised and expensive (and closely regulated) item of business equipment into a commonly available lifestyle accessory. The next decade will see a far greater change as UMTS brings a wide-band capability to the mobile terminal. The Internet has opened new horizons in global communication and information transfer between fixed points, but UMTS and IMT 2000 will remove the connection constraints and make this capability truly portable.

UMTS is therefore much more than an extension of the GSM network of digital mobile phones, although it will evolve from this platform. As well as offering much improved geographical coverage, it will provide high-speed data transmission that will transform the use made of the mobile terminal - mobile phone will then be an inadequate description.

UMTS terminals will be able to send and receive speech, text, music, graphics and data, thereby offering multi-media facilities. A UMTS terminal and a lap-top computer will provide access to the Internet and the Web. The network will function as an information highway, giving access to a range of Internet Protocol based services. It will inter-connect with the PSTN and may ultimately replace it.

Development of UMTS technology and services is quite deliberately being left to commercial market forces, because this is seen as the only way to provide the flexibility and rapidity of response essential in applying a fast-moving technology. Although the stated policy of the EU is to ensure equality of access to the Information Society and, specifically, to provide access for elderly and disabled people, there is a danger that they may inadvertently be left out through the pace of progress. This danger must be recognised, and all instances watched for, so that correcting measures can be put in place just as soon as the technology has stabilised sufficiently to allow of it.

UMTS, standing for Universal Mobile Telecommunications System, is the name given to the third generation of modern mobile telephone services, following on from the first generation analogue cellular networks and the second generation digital global system for mobile communications (GSM). Once that statement has been made there is little to add, except that the consumer is currently offered much conjecture and little hard fact about UMTS. Why should this be? Most major technological developments are trailed well in advance, to whet the appetites of potential customers, to enhance the image of their originators and to steal a march on the competition. Why, then, so much secrecy about UMTS? Is it real or is it science fiction, more prophesy than substance?

UMTS is real enough. It marks the beginning of the end of fixed telecommunications, of digging up streets and hanging wires from poles in order to transmit signals from place to place. It means that the telephone becomes truly personal, with the telephone number being associated with an individual and not with a residence or an office. It means the ability to use non-voice as well as voice telecommunications anywhere, to send and receive fax and e-mail messages on the move, to access the Internet and to download or transmit data packages without having to seek out a fixed terminal. It means that the Information Society will become precisely that.