

The Hearing Loop Movement is Accelerating

By David G. Myers, PhD



"I THINK THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT," observed International Federation of Hard of Hearing People president Dr. Ruth Warwick at the close of last June's Second International Hearing Loops Conference. "Telecoils and hearing loops used to be the past, and now they're the future."

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Warwick expressed the excitement of the 235 attendees from 11 countries who gathered for the culmination of the "Get in the Hearing Loop" joint initiative of the Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA) and the American Academy of Audiology. The animating vision that energizes this consumer-initiated and now audiologist-supported advocacy is simply this: America can better serve people with hearing loss by enabling hearing aids to serve as customized, wireless loudspeakers in all sorts of venues.

In the United Kingdom and Scandinavia, this vision has become a reality. In tens of thousands of venues—including the back seats of all London taxis, 11,500 British post offices, and countless worship places, auditoriums, and ticket windows—hearing loops magnetically transmit sound directly to hearing instruments outfitted with telecoils. So why not in the U.S. as well?

Telecoils, as hearing professionals know, are inexpensive magnetic sensors that facilitate both telephone listening and assistive listening in looped facilities. For such reasons, the HLAA "strongly suggests" their inclusion in hearing aids. It "strongly recommends" that consumers elect hearing aids with telecoils. And it urges that "telecoils be given the prominence they deserve as a valuable hearing aid feature."

Happily, telecoils have become available in approximately 69 percent of hearing aid

models,¹ including 68 of 69 in-the-ear and conventional behind-the-ear models. Telecoils also now reportedly come with all new cochlear implants.

Alternative wireless technologies can helpfully connect us to our phones and TVs. But, as a person with hearing loss, my home TV and office phone loop systems already do that for me. Moreover, they turn my hearing aids into wireless loudspeakers when I worship at virtually any facility in my looped West Michigan community, when I attend lectures in my campus and community auditoriums, and even when I hear gate announcements at Michigan's second largest airport. With no fussing and no extra equipment, my telecoils are a simple and universal assistive listening tool in venues small and large.

The response to the looping of several Michigan venues has been gratifying. Where there are hearing loops, use of hearing assistance soars. When struggling to hear, most people with hearing loss will not take the initiative to locate, check out and wear conspicuous headsets that deliver generic sound. Headsets get checked out about "once per month per theater," a manager at my community's movie multiplex told me. But people will push a button that effortlessly and invisibly transforms their aids into customized wireless loudspeakers!

Are telecoils and hearing loops the last word in assistive listening? Probably not. But any technology that eventually supplants them will, we can hope, be similarly:

- *simple*—just push a button, with no extra equipment needing pairing or charging;
- *affordable*—hearing aid manufacturers pay an average of \$2 per piece when buying telecoils in bulk;

- *available* with most hearing instruments—as telecoils are;
- *energy efficient*—telecoils consume zero battery power;
- *flexible*—via hearing aid mic + telecoil (MT) settings, allowing a user, while watching TV, to hear conversation in the room or the phone ringing;
- *scalable*—from discrete places (New York City's 453 newly-looped subway booths) to the huge (12,200 fixed seats of Michigan State University's looped basketball arena);
- *universal*—with the same magnetic signal serving everyone, no matter what manufacturer makes their hearing aid.

Hearing loops, as Ruth Warwick noted, are a classic technology now in modern forms and undergoing a renaissance. New companies that design and install loops have arisen. Grassroots hearing loop initiatives have emerged in Wisconsin, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Florida, and New York. The big idea—that we can double hearing aid functionality with assistive listening that is directly hearing aid-compatible—has begun to capture media and public attention.

As we approach the tipping point—at which telecoils will, as the HLAA advises, be included in nearly all hearing instruments, and newly installed assistive listening becomes directly hearing aid compatible—America will become more hearing-accessible. Think about it: The surest way to lessen the stigma of hearing aids and to increase their adoption is to double their usefulness. As Sergei Kochkin, PhD, executive director of the Better Hearing Institute, has urged, "Put miniaturized internal wireless receivers in every hearing aid."

Let's do it! Let's put a simple-to-use, virtually free, universal wireless receptor—a telecoil—in every hearing instrument. Let's loop America. And then let's look forward to a day when demand will grow for these customized, wireless in-the-ear loudspeakers (a.k.a. hearing aids), and when hearing aids for challenged ears become as commonplace as glasses for challenged eyes. lbpn

REFERENCES

1. *Hearing Products Review*. Jan. 2009; Jan., Feb., May/June, Sept., Oct. 2010