

We've Looped West Michigan. Could We Loop America?

By David G. Myers

Imagine a future—actually, imagine the present in Britain, much of Scandinavia, and now West Michigan and other parts of the United States—where hearing aids have doubled their functionality, by serving as customized, wireless loudspeakers for the broadcast of television, public address system, and telephone sound.

Picture two worlds, and ask—which one you would prefer? And, which do you suppose most of America's 31.5 million people with hearing loss would prefer?

World One offers assistive listening that is *hearing aid incompatible*. It requires you, and those who are less open about their hearing loss, to take the initiative when entering public venues to locate and check out special equipment, to remove your hearing aids, to wear either ear buds that have been in others' ears or a conspicuous headset, and then afterwards, to replace the hearing aids and return the assistive unit.

World Two offers assistive listening that is *hearing aid compatible*. It requires nothing more than pushing a hearing aid button, whereupon it becomes an in-the-ear loudspeaker that broadcasts sound customized for your own ears.

World One describes most of the United States.

World Two describes 21st century Britain, Denmark (a world center for hearing technology), and increasingly Australia. "The whole of the church is served by a hearing loop," declared the first sentence of Westminster Abbey's program for the 50th anniversary celebration of the Queen's coronation. "Users should turn their hearing aids to the setting marked 'T.'"

Each time I have done this in cathedrals, churches, and auditoriums during the month I spend in Britain each year, I am delighted with the convenience and clarity of this user-friendly assistive listening, thanks to the magnetic signal transmitted from a surrounding hidden wire (a "hearing loop") to my hearing aid telecoils. I activate my telecoils and instantly the speaker's voice comes to me not from some distant loudspeaker but seemingly from the center of my head. It's an extension of the same technology that enables our landline phones and increasingly cell phones, thanks partly to effective Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA) advocacy efforts, to communicate

magnetically via our hearing aid telecoils.

Moreover, this hearing-aid-compatible assistive listening is now appearing in countless transient locations, including the back seats of all London taxis and at designated ticket windows, bank teller stations, post office counters, and pharmacy stations. Tens of thousands of such venues are served either by small area loops or by countertop loop boxes.

On one memorable occasion, I sat in the main departure lounge of London's Gatwick Airport, awaiting updates on my delayed transatlantic flight. Alas, the announcements were a verbal fog. But knowing that this was the UK, I turned on my telecoils and was delighted to hear crystal clear announcements. Much as Wi-Fi was transmitting information to my laptop, the hearing loop was wirelessly transmitting information to my hearing aids, transforming them into in-the-ear loudspeakers.

Back here in World One, I wondered; might hearing-aid-compatible assistive listening work where I live, in Holland, Michigan, and in places beyond?

Looping West Michigan

I started at home, by connecting a small loop amplifier to my TV audio output. Then I ran a thin wire out from the amplifier, around my TV room seating, and back to the amplifier. (I stapled the loop wire to the ceiling studs in the basement beneath.) Voila! My TV now broadcasts to me via my hearing aids. My previous TV listening system, which was hearing aid incompatible, required removing my hearing aids and plugging my ears with a headset. Now I can enjoy the TV loop and still hear the phone ring or my wife talking, thanks to my hearing aids' mic + telecoil (M + T) setting.

With that gratifying result, I next launched, with community support, an initiative (described at hearingloop.org) to introduce hearing loops to institutions serving the nearly 100,000 people living in my community and its adjacent village and townships. A half

dozen years later, nearly all the major worship centers (some six dozen) are looped, as are college auditoriums, high school performing arts centers, senior citizen facilities, library auditoriums, and city government auditoriums

The human consequence was quickly apparent in my own congregation, which went from one person who had used the former hearing aid incompatible assistive listening to ten people using the hearing-aid-compatible loop system. The one former user of the old system said, "The experience of actually hearing such clear sounds was thrilling and hard to describe. One has to experience the improvement. It seemed overwhelming." (As with other assistive listening systems, people without suitable hearing aids can use a portable receiver and headset, though these units rarely get used.)

Thanks to media publicity and word-of-mouth, hearing loops are now spreading rapidly throughout West Michigan, including Muskegon, Grand Haven, Spring Lake, and St. Joseph, where American Academy of Audiology leader Gyl Kasewurm, AuD, has spearheaded a local initiative. As Kasewurm's support illustrates, the West Michigan success story is due partly to supportive audiologists. In the several years immediately after our local initiative, our community's largest audiology practice was equipping nearly 100 percent of its patients with telecoils. As its former owner, Jerry Owens, AuD, explained, "Never in my audiology career has something so simple helped so many people at so little cost."

Todd Billin, the CEO of Ascom, a large West Michigan audio firm, explained what persuaded his company to switch to installing hearing loops instead of hearing aid incompatible systems; "When individuals with hearing loss had a chance to experience the hearing loops or talk to someone who had, the demand for both hearing aids with telecoils and loop systems increased dramatically. After installing our first loop system

and seeing the reaction from the individuals with hearing loss, we immediately shifted our sales focus to loop systems."

As of this writing, hearing loops in Grand Rapids and its environs provide assistive listening in some eighty worship facilities, as well as in dozens of other venues, including the city's symphony hall and throughout its new convention center. As of mid-2008, the two million passengers a year traveling through the city's regional airport can hear announcements broadcast by hearing loops throughout both concourses and in all gate areas. Without detracting from equally important visual information displays, this pioneering American airport installation enables people with hearing loss to hear and to gain access to the detailed information that sometimes accompanies explanations of flight delays and boarding procedures.

The net result has been a huge increase in people who benefit from assistive listening when compared with the former hearing aid incompatible technology. A manager at my city's seven-screen theater complex told me that their hearing aid incompatible units were checked out no more than about once per month per theater. The former president of Hearing Loss Association-Michigan reported that after her city's large public auditorium installed a hearing aid incompatible assistive listening system, she was the first person to use it—one year later. (They unwrapped a receiver and headset, just for her.)

The Rochester (NY) HLA Chapter appreciates this reality: "Many people do not extend themselves to identify their need, collect personal receivers ahead of time, or wear rather noticeable headsets. Such receivers are always required for FM and infrared systems."

Alternative Wireless Assistive Listening Systems

The fundamental point of my advocacy is not to promote hearing loops, but rather to promote affordable, user-friendly, assistive listening that doubles hearing aid functionality, by enabling

them to serve as wireless loudspeakers. Better Hearing Institute director Sergei Kochkin has the same vision: The way to increase adoption of hearing aids, he argues, is to increase their utility. Double their functionality—with simply-operated "miniaturized internal wireless receivers in every hearing aid"—and word-of-mouth advertising will promote hearing aids, and the stigma of hearing instruments will decline.

Might some future alternative technology even better serve this purpose? If so, bring it on. To be widely applicable, such technology will, however, need to be:

- **Inexpensive.** (Unlike the \$3,000 FM boots which I could have purchased to accompany my \$6,000 hearing aids, telecoils are essentially free and most of us already have them for phone use.)
- **Miniaturized** (and thus able to fit in most hearing aids, including in-the-ear aids).
- **Low power** (so as not to drain batteries).
- **Wide range** (and thus workable in auditoriums).
- **Cochlear implant compatible** (which hearing loops are, thanks to the inclusion of telecoils in 21st century cochlear implants).
- **Inconspicuous** (and thus comfortably used by people who are reluctant to wear visible headsets).

For the present, hearing loop technology meets all these criteria. Although ongoing hearing engineering will likely bring us exciting new wireless technologies, Bjørn Christ, president of ReSound USA, tells me that, "Loop systems and telecoils have a tremendous advantage over current and upcoming technologies as regards cost of provisioning. I am hard pressed to come up with competing technologies that will seriously challenge the performance/price equation of loops in even the next five years. And from a cosmetics/stigma point of view, telecoils are even finding

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their way into micro-BTEs (behind-the-ear aids) these days.”

Looping America

So, if hearing-aid-compatible assistive listening is sweeping the UK and West Michigan, why not all of America?

The Hearing Loss Association of America has urged “that telecoils be given the prominence they deserve as a valuable hearing aid feature that will allow the expanded use of assistive listening devices.” Moreover, HLAA has effectively advocated for kindred hearing aid compatibility for telephones. (At no additional consumer cost, hearing loops share the same telecoil that receives signals from hearing-aid-compatible phones.)

Telecoils once were said to come in 30 percent of hearing aids, but now come in half or more of hearing aids, including most of the behind-the-ear aids worn by people with the greatest need for assistive listening. With support from hearing professionals and hearing loss consumers, the Arizona legislature recently passed, and its governor signed, a bill that requires

hearing professionals to explain the usefulness of telecoils to people purchasing hearing aids.

The Michigan and California Hearing Loss Associations have gone a step further, by advocating that newly installed assistive listening systems be hearing aid compatible. “In all new and extensively remodeled buildings, wherever there is a public address system, a loop should be permanently installed,” declares the California association.

Across America, from Silicon Valley, Albuquerque, and Tucson in the southwest to New York City in the east, consumer initiatives have led to countless new hearing loop installations. These include the main chamber of the U.S. House of Representatives in D.C., the Kentucky Derby Museum, the Museum of Modern Art classroom, and, thanks to the initiative of hearing advocate Janice Schacter in New York City, at Temple Emanuel, the world’s largest Jewish house of worship, among other notable venues.

In Santa Rosa, California, audiologist Bill Diles equips nearly all his new patients—more than 1,500 so far—with home TV room loops, which come with the hearing aid purchase.

When he surveyed a sample of his patients in whose homes his assistant had installed loops, he found 53 percent reporting the highest level of satisfaction with their hearing aids, compared to three percent among those without the home loop system.

Following Diles’ lead, Michigan engineer Terry Simon, who is married to an audiologist, is now training hearing professionals nationwide to strengthen their practice and service by installing hearing loops. His Wireless Hearing Solutions anticipates having 180-trained installers by the end of 2009. Additionally, a growing list of loop manufacturers and distributors are selling products to the growing American market (see “If They Build It, Will We Come?”). Also in the works are new articles promoting hearing-aid-compatible assistive listening for hearing professionals’ trade magazines.

All of this leaves many of us increasingly hopeful about the dream of World Two, a looped America. If we can mobilize consumers, hearing professionals, and audio engineers, then maybe the United States needn’t continue to lag behind other countries in providing seamless hearing aid compatibility for both telephones and assistive listening. By doubling hearing aid usefulness, we can increase the appeal of hearing aids, decrease the stigma associated with hearing loss and aids, and increase public support for Medicare, Medicaid, and insurance reimbursement. That would be a better world for us and for all Americans with hearing loss. ■■■

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If They Build It, Will We Come?

Where can we buy a hearing loop, and who can install it for us? (This is the most frequently-asked question at www.hearingloop.org, the non-profit website created by David Myers.)

The growing market for hearing-aid-compatible assistive listening has been served by several manufacturers including Oval Window Audio (an American company), Ampetronic (British-made loops distributed in the United States by Assistive Audio), Phonic Ear (Danish-made and distributed by Wireless Hearing Solutions and HARC Mercantile), and Univox (Swedish-made and distributed by Pure Direct Sound, and others).

To these we can now add, as of September, 2008, two new American loop manufacturers and distributors. The British manufacturer, Contacta, has entered a strategic partnership with an experienced American loop engineer to manufacture and distribute products in the United States as Contacta, Inc. And, Premovation Audio, which has designed and installed hundreds of loop systems in West Michigan and beyond, has just begun manufacturing and distributing Loop America hearing loops. These loop entrepreneurs and their growing list of loop distributors share a common hope, that if they build it we will come.

A Letter from a Reader

I was waiting for my sister's plane to arrive and it was exactly the time to expect it. An announcement came over the PA system, garbled and completely unintelligible because of my hearing loss. This limitation in my life is so unpleasant, and I immediately went into my inner frustration mode. I went to a security person nearby and asked what the announcement was.

He looked at me, shook his head, and said, "I don't know. We can't hear them either."

Betty Onyett
HLAA Member
Paris, Ohio



HLAA Member Vic Krause stands by signage at the Grand Rapids Airport. As of mid-2008, the two million passengers a year traveling through the Grand Rapids regional airport can hear announcements broadcast by hearing loops throughout both concourses and in all gate areas. Without detracting from equally important visual information displays, this pioneering American airport installation enables people with hearing loss to hear—and to gain access to the detailed information that sometimes accompanies explanations of flight delays and boarding procedures.

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