



Some of the best tech tips, support and advice takes place in HLAA Chapters across the country. Talking to others with the same issues is powerful.

Technology Saturation

Innovation, consumer demand, and often, legislation, spurs technology.

BY BARBARA KELLEY

In the 1980s, I was expecting a house guest. Let's see... guest room ready, fresh towels and soaps, libations, what else? My visitor had a hearing loss so, wanting to make my home truly accommodating, I went in search of a closed captioning decoder box and a TDD. "What are those?" you might ask.

A captioned decoder box was a piece of equipment, about the size of a VCR player (remember those?). The decoder box was plugged into the old tube TVs to capture a caption signal so broadcasts would be captioned. Back then, you were lucky if a show or newscast was closed captioned, unless it was aired on PBS.

A TDD (Telecommunications Device for the Deaf) was plugged into a wall next to a landline phone. It had a keyboard, screen and two "cups" where you placed the phone's receiver when a call came in. If you didn't have a TDD and could hear, you would get a communications assistant (CA) announcing, "This is Maryland Relay and you have a call from someone using a TDD," then the CA would type what you said for the person on the TDD end to read on the screen. Somewhat cumbersome, but this brilliant invention was all we had.

I rented a caption decoder box from the National Captioning Institute and my guest brought her own TDD (on the plane!). Then, I rolled out the welcome mat.

Technology Works When Other Things Work

We see where technology is today—hearing aids that do more than amplify sound, improved and acceptance of cochlear and other implantable devices, ubiquitous captioning on phones and TV, apps, smartphones that regulate noise exposure, over-the-counter hearing aids, earbuds with noise cancellation, Bluetooth streaming, hearing loops, WiFi, artificial intelligence, virtual reality and more.

How did we get here? It wasn't one straight path or one thing. There were many forces coming together to create change for the better. First, there was demand from a community of people with hearing loss making their needs known, many through HLAA. Second, HLAA took those concerns down legislative and regulatory paths while educating everyone, including consumers, along the way.

Since our founding in 1979, HLAA has been part of nearly every piece of legislation that involves people with hearing loss getting access to communications or hearing health care.

For example, the Television Decoder Circuitry Act of 1990 was passed requiring televisions with screens 13 inches or larger to have built-in capability to display closed captions. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) took it further with other requirements.

Many people use captioning today. A *Wall Street Journal* article (September 17, 2022) says it in the headline: "Why Do All These 20-Somethings Have Closed Captions Turned On?" It goes on to say, "As automatic captioning on TikTok and creative audio descriptions on Netflix go mainstream, so does accessibility."

The adage “build it and they will come” is true. It seems like when something is built for one disability, it proves valuable for everyone.

Have you been in a sports bar lately? The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires that the captions must be turned on if requested, for TVs that are accessible to the public. Very often, the captions are already on for everyone to read when it’s noisy. New Mexico currently has House Bill 89 introduced—the Closed Captioning Act—that would require TV sets in all public venues to have the captions turned on at all times, so no one has to make the request and wait around for it to happen. But pause and think about our friends with vision loss, who can’t see the captions but need to hear the announcers and enjoy the game along with the rest of us. That is where Bluetooth will come in handy for everyone to hear the sound through their own devices.

Captioning is only one example and there’s even more work to do there. HLAA supports new legislation such as the updates to the 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act (CVAA)—called the Communications, Video and Technology Accessibility Act (CVTA)—which will cover internet-streamed content and more. Legislation and regulation have to keep up with new technology. You can count on HLAA to represent people with hearing loss when laws and regulations are passed. Innovation, consumer demand, and often, legislation, spurs technology.

What about hearing aids? A recent *New York Times* article (May 6, 2023) was headlined, “Hearing Aids Are Changing. Their Users Are, Too.” The article highlights a 26-year-old teacher with hearing aids, who often hears “My grandma has them, too” from her students. “But grandma’s hearing aids were never like this: Bluetooth-enabled and connected to her phone, they allow Ms. [Ayla] Wing to toggle with one touch between custom settings. She can shut out the world during a screeching subway ride, hear her friends in noisy bars

during a night out or even understand her students better by switching to a setting labeled ‘mumbly kids.’”

Here’s Proof

Look at these statistics from a survey conducted by HLAA and Cochlear of people with hearing loss during the Covid-19 pandemic:

- 68% of those with hearing loss increased their use of technology during the pandemic to communicate with others.
- 68% say pandemic-related increased use of technology has caused them to become more aware of their hearing loss.

Technology has saturated our lives. We hear words like “hearing enhancement” and “augmented sound” that are important to everyone, not just those with hearing loss. Technology is a boon, we’re immersed in it, but it has to be paired with the human reaction, understanding how to use it and willingness to try something new. Some of the best tech tips, support and advice for using technology take place in HLAA Chapters across the country. Talking to others with the same issues is powerful.

If you’re in the Phoenix area this June, stop in to explore the Exhibit Hall, which is free to the public. You can also register for the convention if you prefer to attend workshops, the Research Symposium and more. See hearingloss.org/convention for information.

We are people first, who happen to have a hearing loss. And, luckily, we live in a time when we’re saturated with technology that can help us stay connected with the world around us. The choice is ours to make. **HL**

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would love to hear from you!

Many of the articles that appear in *Hearing Life* magazine are written by people with hearing loss, educators, professionals in the hearing health care field, or anyone who would like to help others on their hearing journey. Find guidelines at hearingloss.org/submit-an-article. Send submissions to magazine@hearingloss.org.