

historians dispute one another ferociously, as do epidemiologists, as do economists – sometimes over details, sometimes over emphasis, sometimes over fundamental assumptions. Here comes a chance to nail it down, and these techniques offer us insights we couldn't get any other way. Finding the code that I once thought was only hypothetical will revolutionize our view of who we are, how we got that way, and who we might become, just as cracking the genetic code revolutionized biology.

And I'm chronically too modest in my hopes, so you can comfortably hope for more.

Assistive Listening

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I foresee a friendlier future for us 31 million Americans with hearing loss. It's no news that cochlear implants, which were unavailable to my mother, should spare me the deafness that overtook her late in life. But few people are aware that many more of us could benefit by doubling the functionality of our hearing aids.

We can dream of a future where hearing aids serve not only as sophisticated microphone amplifiers but also as wireless loudspeakers that deliver clear, customized sound. In theaters,

auditoriums, houses of worship, airport lounges, drive-up order stations, and home TV rooms, sound signals will be transmitted via in-the-ear loudspeakers, much like wi-fi transmissions to laptops.

Good news! That future has arrived in the United Kingdom and much of Scandinavia, and now in more than a hundred western Michigan facilities, and it is coming to several other American cities (www.hearingloop.org). When people experience public address or TV sound via 'hearing-aid-compatible assistive listening' (made compatible with the flick of a hearing-aid switch), they typically respond with amazed joy. What's more, they report increased satisfaction with their hearing aids.

It's a challenge to persuade a nation to exchange its current hearing-assistive technology (which requires locating, checking out, and wearing conspicuous headsets) for a technology that many more people would actually use. But the results of our western Michigan experiment, and another in 1,000 California homes, supports my optimism. Doubling hearing-aid functionality will greatly increase hearing-aid acceptance and use. With on-the-horizon technology, we can also foresee music buffs with wireless ear-bud loudspeakers. When that day comes, having something in one's ear will become as mundane as glasses for the eyes, and millions of people with hearing loss will be enjoying fuller and more connected lives.