

Do You Hear What I Hear?

by David Myers

Keeping those with hearing aids in the loop.



The aging of the population and the cumulative effects of amplified music, power mowers, motorcycles, and blow dryers have made us hard-of-hearing folks a fast-growing group—some twenty-eight million Americans and 350 million people worldwide.

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To appreciate the challenges that hard-of-hearing people face in public settings, including churches, imagine yourself taping your favorite radio program from across the room. Alas, when you play back the program the words are muffled and barely audible. Moreover, you have also taped the neighbor's leaf blower, the kitchen dishes clanging, and the kids bickering in the next room. Next time, you record the broadcast by jacking your recorder directly into the radio. Now you find the sound delightfully clear and without distracting noise. That contrast conveys what I experienced the first time I enjoyed the full benefit of sound delivered from microphones

straight into my head via my hearing aid tele-coils (T-coils).

Common in Europe

I discovered this new joy of listening in Europe. It's not that the technology is unknown in North America. I already knew that with a simple button push my hearing aids can shut off their microphones and receive, via their T-coils, the magnetic signal from any recently manufactured phone. Bingo! In a noisy setting, the hearing aids block room noise and the telephone broadcasts right to my eardrum.



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Pretty nifty. But not nearly so nifty as what I first experienced a few years ago in Scotland while worshiping within the high stone walls of the 800-year-old Iona Abbey. Amplified but reverberating off the Abbey's hard surfaces, spoken words posed a challenge. Or so they did until my wife, Carol, noticed a sign indicating an induction loop system (ILS)—which transmits from an amplifier through a mere wire surrounding the seating area. When I switched on my T-coil, the result was dramatic. The babble of people was replaced by the sweet harmonies of musicians playing in front of microphones across the Abbey. My mouth fell open. It was like listening to a CD over a headset. I was in ecstasy, feeling a little like the blind man who, having adapted to blindness, now reveled in the vision restored by Jesus. The scales had fallen from my ears.

When the service began, my astonishment increased. The leader's words seemed to travel straight to the center of my head, her voice deliciously distinct. If I pulled the hearing aids out, her words went out of focus. Other hearing-aid settings boosted the foggy sound from distant loudspeakers, bounced off rugged walls, yet left me guessing at words.

With the T-coil back on I was in auditory heaven.

Returning to Scotland the next summer for a Royal Society of Edinburgh conference, I found myself surrounded by great minds with soft, low voices. Even when I positioned myself centrally I heard no more than half the discussion, and one hates to risk seeming a fool by jumping into a half-heard discussion. But the lecturers all had microphones, and I discovered that the Royal Society's lecture hall and seminar room have an ILS. Voila! The speakers' voices became exquisitely clear. No reverberation. No amplified extraneous noise. No long-distance from the sound source. Loop systems effectively put my ears where I'd like them—in the microphone, a foot from the speaker's mouth.

Venturing out to Edinburgh's Usher Hall for a symphony concert, to St. Giles Cathedral for worship, and later up to St. Andrews where we worshiped at two local parishes, I found induction loops everywhere—as common there as they are rare here.

Rare in North America

It's not just the U.K. that leads North America. Corresponding from Denmark, the Rev. Jan Grønborg Eriksen, president of Churchear, told me that "the sad thing about the American situation is that so few of your hearing aids [about 30 percent] have a T-coil...compared to 85 percent in my country. Here we can just install a good loop system in a theater or a church building or any meeting room (and we do—our churches are almost 100 percent covered now), and ask hard-of-hearing attendees to switch to T-position."

Understandably, induction loop systems are said to be undergoing a worldwide renaissance. Compared to infrared and FM systems they are less expensive because they require no special receivers. (T-coils are now a standard feature on many new digital aids and add less than \$100 to the cost of others.) Loop systems are an invisible solution to an invisible problem (we're more likely to use a hearing assistance system that doesn't

require getting and wearing a klunky receiver and headset). Moreover, loop systems harness our hearing aid's customized output.

Back in the United States, I've recently tried switching on my T-coil in churches, auditoriums, and theaters. The routine result is silence. At looped Canterbury Cathedral and Westminster Abbey I have enjoyed sparkling clear sound. At Washington D.C.'s National Cathedral I recently spent a long hour with hardly a clue as to what was being said.

Clear Communication

My college offers an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter for major events. It's wonderful for the third of a million Americans who are fluent in ASL but not for the millions of hard of hearing. In hostile listening environments our common experience is frustration, embarrassment, isolation, and stress. Like deaf ASL speakers, we, too, would welcome clear communication.

And why not? Induction loops are too affordable and effective not to be routinely installed. Amsterdam's Schipol Airport and Boston's Logan Airport have looped many areas, enabling hard of hearing passengers to hear clearly when their plane will board or why it is delayed. Alas, Detroit's massive new main terminal, although sensitive to people with other disabilities, is slated to provide no loops for the hard of hearing.

If airports, auditoriums, theaters, lecture halls, council chambers, courts, tour buses, and senior citizen centers would install loops as part of their amplification systems, millions more people would be motivated to buy T-coil-equipped hearing aids and would find their lives enriched. Designated "counter loop" systems could also assist T-coil wearers as they stood on a pad in front of a ticket or teller window. Looped TV rooms in homes and hotels could likewise broadcast sound directly into our hearing aids, minus background noise. The possibilities are exciting and the lesson is simple: Where there are loudspeakers, let there be loops.

The problem is that with two-thirds of

hearing-aid wearers not having T-coils, most would not benefit initially. Moreover, most North American T-coil wearers have little clue how wonderful loop systems could be. Ergo, there is little demand.

But the situation is a Catch-22. Many people don't buy (and many audiologists don't sell) T-coils. That's partly because of vanity (they're not available in those hidden "in-the-canal" aids), but also partly because the opportunities to use the technology are so few and far between, apart from telephone usage. If loop systems were everywhere, audiologists would promote T-coils and patients would demand them.

Churches Can Lead

Churches serve the growing hard-of-hearing population. Churches want their people to hear the Word. And churches are called to lead and to witness to the wider culture. Having installed expensive ramps to make churches accessible to the physically challenged, why not now install comparatively less expensive loops to support better the auditorially challenged?

Imagine what would happen if most churches here, like their counterparts overseas, installed and publicized loop systems in their sanctuaries and gathering areas. Delighted parishioners with T-coils would extol the innovation. They would encourage their hard-of-hearing friends to get T-coils in their next hearing aids. Gradually, as word spread, hard-of-hearing people would urge other public facilities to follow their church's lead. As with any such technological innovation—radio, color television, wireless phone transmission, e-book content—some organization must offer the technology before many can use it. Why not the church? If we build it, they will come. ■

