

Should You, as an Audiologist, Wait for Auracast?

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A day or two ago, an audiologist asked for information about a hearing loop in a library in her community. Another audiologist suggested waiting for Auracast technology, and another chimed in. A fourth audiologist made the recommendation to get my opinion.

Formulating a response took a bit of time, and then I found the original post deleted. Yet, I believe that the “wait for Auracast” comment needs addressing.

My short answer to the original audiologist: Consumers need to hear today. The library should install a hearing loop now and, down the road, add an Auracast transmitter. Email me at jsterkens@hearingloss.org, and I will gladly provide further information for you or the librarian.

Read on if you want to know the basis for my short answer.

Having been involved locally, nationally, and internationally with assistive listening technology for some 15 years, I have given assistive listening much thought and concluded that professionals using best practices and connecting consumers to assistive listening systems is vital. Consumer-friendly hearing loops, installed to the IEC 60118-4 standard, properly maintained, and checked regularly, used by consumers with hearing aids that include built-in telecoils that meet the Nordic telecoil standard in the programmed setting (rather than a telecoil in a remote), lead to very happy consumers (we have testimonials from hundreds of consumers).

If professionals do not fit telecoils (“I do not fit telecoils because there are no hearing loops in my area”), they are denying their clients the benefits of hearing in hearing loops around the country and the world, as well as the ability to hear via ADA-mandated neckloops used with FM and infrared systems in thousands of theaters, courtrooms, senior centers, etc. including in the city/community where they practice. Professionals, therefore, must set up clients for success and fit Public Access Ready hearing aids (with built-in telecoils, rather than telecoils in accessories) whenever possible – see <https://hearingreview.com/hearing-products/amplification/assistive-devices/how-public-access-ready-hearing-aids-could-offer-a-competitive-edge>

Having followed the Auracast developments from early on, including before it was even called Auracast, and having recently attended an industry demonstration by Cochlear in Sydney, Australia, I, too, am excited about what the future will bring for EVERY hearing aid/CI/wireless earbud user as, I, too, am looking for an easier assistive listening solution and Auracast appears to have great promise.

BUT (there is always a but) a transition to a new technology is not ready yet. It will be YEARS – likely a decade or longer. And it is not just me saying this – so say Andrew Bellavia, Peter Mapp, and Chuck Sabin from the BT SIG group (with whom I have been on panels discussing the future of assistive listening technology.) These experts speak of a transition of a decade or longer. Read more about this here: www.hearingloop.org/auracast.

These experts all recommend installing telecoil-compatible assistive listening systems for the foreseeable future as a transition to an “Auracast World” will take years because:

- (1) The IEC 60118-17 specification (Electroacoustics - Hearing aids—Part 17: Assistive listening system for hearing aid users based on 2.4 GHz audio streaming) is currently under development. Publication is expected sometime around 2027 (possibly 2026 if all goes according to plan). For some context of new technology adoption: We have "only" been talking about direct-to-hearing aid transmission using BT tech since 2001—does anyone remember Project BlueEar? So, what could possibly go wrong?)
- (2) Studies must be completed to ensure that Auracast may be used as an assistive listening system and provide real-time interference-free assistive listening with minuscule latency in venues of all sizes.
- (3) The hearing industry must (yet) develop a way for consumers to “push a button” on a hearing aid to link into the Auracast stream, similar to how telecoils can be activated today. (EHIMA has promised this.)
- (4) Number (3) is important because today's ADA Standards only recognize directly hearing aid compatible systems. Systems that require a user to use BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) are NOT recognized as meeting the ADA's direct-compatibility-with-HA-guidelines, nor may they meet the assistive listening guidelines in the UK and Europe. Of course, this can change in the future, but processes like this take time. A new system shall not exclude many clients using these future systems – clients who may not be tech-savvy, do not own smartphones, or are aging and losing their tech-savviness. (My mom (97), who used to bank via the web years ago and email with the best of them, can no longer handle a smartphone...yet she can still turn on her telecoils – IF reminded. She is incapable of downloading an app, opening an app, or choosing the correct Auracast stream.)
- (5) If a site has no assistive listening system and waits for Auracast, the site will be out of compliance with the ADA Standards.
- (6) It will be 5-7 or even 10+ years before EVERY hearing aid user and CI user owns Auracast-compatible devices. Just think how long it will take before our country has built the necessary infrastructure to charge EVs at every gas station.
- (7) All assistive listening systems will coexist for users to access clear speech anywhere they go. This means that these folks STILL need access to the current analog systems (hearing loops, FM, and infrared systems). No venue owner will be required to change systems.

😎 Building an Auracast “ecosystem” around the country - and the world, for that matter – will take a long time. Hopefully, it will happen in my lifetime.

Resources for audiologists

- <https://hearingloop.org/audiologists/> CEU training, Verifit instructions, handouts, library resources, Starkey research on hearing loops, etc.