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IN THE LOOP
The newsletter of Loop New Mexico ● www.LoopNM.com ● LoopNM@Gmail.com

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News that's not news

... hearing loops were the preferred assistive listening technology of the respondents...

Millions of people with hearing loss regularly use assistive listening systems or captions when attending events in large public venues. Millions more could but do not. Why is that?

To search for answers, last fall, the Committee for Communication Access in America (CCAA) was organized to conduct a survey on the matter It took some time to compile and assess the results when the survey ended in late September. The committee has now released a report on the results. The survey found a number of things that may be news to many, but not to the vast majority of people with hearing loss.

Among the survey results was the finding that hearing loops were the preferred assistive listening technology of the respondents who leaned heavily toward the severe to profound hearing loss classification. Another finding was that if only one assistive technology was to be available, the respondents opted for CART of captions of some sort. Yet another non-news finding was that over half of respondents learned about telecoils from some source other than from their hearing care provider. These are things experienced hard of hearing people have known for years but they're news to the general public, many hearing care providers, and the majority of A/V technicians. These and myriad other results of the survey detailed in the report can be reviewed and/or downloaded at the Committee's website (www.ccaa.name) along with graphs and pages of actual comments from participants.

The survey was a retrospective cross-sectional study of individuals with hearing loss or some other hearing related condition. The 1,519 respondents were heavily weighted toward people with a severe to profound hearing loss so many questions were cross-tabbed to get an accurate picture of various subgroups. The intent was to acquire accurate information on the preferences and use habits of hard of hearing people when utilizing assistive communication systems. That information will enable providers of services to people with hearing loss to inform clients of the many benefits of the various assistive technologies. In addition to information and observations on assistive listening and captioning systems, the survey collected detailed information on:

Degree of hearing loss
Age and years using hearing devices
Type of hearing devices used
Features of those devices
Affiliation with hearing loss support groups
Assistive devices selected to supplement hearing aids.

Among the many surprises in the findings was the preponderance of people with severe to profound hearing loss as participants, and the importance of communication technologies to them in comparison to people with milder hearing loss.

About the Committee for Communication Access in America

The CCAA was an ad hoc committee of seven nationally known advocates for people with hearing loss who came together to gather and then share information on the use of assistive communication technology. Members were: Stephen O. Frazier, Chair; Abram Bailey, AuD; Blake Cadwell; Carol Clifford, AuD; Kevin Liebe, AuD; David Myers, PhD; Juliette Sterkens, AuD. Further details on the committee and its members are posted at the Committee website: www.CCAA.name.

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Captions could be required

…will be enforced by the new Civil Rights Division of the NM Attorney General's office.

The CCAA survey on assistive communication technology clearly demonstrated that, if captions are available, people with hearing loss will use them. A number of US cities have enacted regulations mandating that captions be turned on at all times on TV sets visible to people visiting what the ADA terms "places of assembly." Albuquerque and Santa Fe, NM are among them but lack of publicity and cumbersome enforcement procedures have rendered them pretty much ineffective. That may change.

There's a bill (House Bill 89) currently before the New Mexico legislature that addresses this captioning conundrum. Termed the Closed Captioning Act, The bill is the work of members of the Santa Fe chapter of HLAA and is being carried in the House by Rep Cynthia Borrego (Cynthia.Borrego@nmlegis.gov) and in the Senate by Sen. Michael Padilla (michael.padilla@nmlegis.gov) both of Albuquerque and well known for their support of people with hearing loss.

Unlike the ADA that only mandates that captions be turned on if a viewer requests it, HB89 would require that, in NM, all TV sets in all venues open to the public have the captions turned on at all times (if the TV is on) during business hours if the TV is in use. If passed, HB 89 will be enforced by the new Civil Rights Division of the NM Attorney General's office. This appears to be a workable enforcement solution that promises to raise awareness of and adherence to the law.

Readers who believe this is a good law are encouraged to enhance the chances of this bill passing by sending an email to their Representative and Senator and request that they vote for the bill should it come before a committee on which they serve, or when being considered by the full chamber. Those email addresses can be located here. Emails can also be sent to both Rep. Borrego and Sen. Padilla that they can then show to other legislators.

HB89 has been referred to the House Rules and Order of Business Committee. An email could also be sent to the chair of that committee, Rep. Andrea Romero (andrea@andrearomero.com) in support of the bill, containing a request that she share it with the members of the committee.

Readers who are not residents of New Mexico could still send emails supporting this bill and stating that there are people throughout the country who are watching whehter New Mexico is concerned for the needs of people with hearing loss.

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Hearing loops landing at more airports

The terminal is equipped with hearing loops available at all guest experience desks.

Last year saw the opening of the new Terminal D at New York's LaGuardia airport and one of its claims to fame was that all departure gates feature hearing loops. Following right behind that looping news was the announcement that the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey had adopted a new policy regarding accommodations for people with hearing loss at all air, rail, bus and boat terminals managed by the Authority in the greater New York area. That policy mandated the installation of hearing loop technology in any new or significantly upgraded terminal.

A sign that this policy is being observed was announced recently. As part of the redevelopment of La Guardia, Terminal B was designed to be accessible for guests with hearing, vision, and mobility disabilities. The terminal is equipped with hearing loops available at all guest experience desks in addition to numerous other accessibility features, earning the terminal the distinction of being the first American airport facility to achieve the highest possible rating for accessibility in the Rick Hansen Foundation Accessibility Certification TM (RHFAC) program. The terminal earned a Gold rating from the Canada-based foundation dedicated to raising awareness, changing attitudes, and removing barriers for people with disabilities. Terminal B at LaGuardia is served by American, United, Southwest and Jet Blue American carriers and also by Air Canada.

Providence, RI airport in line for takeoff

Last May, *In the Loop* carried a story about the Colorado Springs airport's planned introduction of hearing loop technology. Then, previous to the debut of the new loops at LaGuardia, it was announced that management at the Providence, RI TF Green International Airport has signed a contract with Hearing Loop Systems of Holland, MI, a division of Parkway Electric and Communications, to loop the concourses and all twenty-two of the airports departure gates. They will also be installing counter loops at the airline ticket counters. It's anticipated that the installation will be completed sometime in the first quarter of 2024. It will become the 22nd US airport to adopt hearing loop technology as an accommodation to travelers with hearing loss.

Albuquerque, NM Sunport on the taxiway

Though this upgraded LaGuardia terminal does not add a new airport to the list of known US airports that are now “in the loop”, the Albuquerque New Mexico Sunport may soon do so, becoming the 23rd name of the growing list of such facilities. The Sunport, in partnership with Delta Airlines, is now testing a pair of countertop portable hearing loops at a Delta departure gate and a ticket counter. The looping of all of the airport departure gates was under consideration but has been "back burnered" for the time being.

A list of known US airports that feature some form of hearing loop technology in their terminal is posted at www.loopnm.com/news.html. There is also a very partial list of some of the many overseas airports that are in the loop. Hearing loops are found in all of the major airports in Australia, the UK and much of Europe including all four of Moscow's international airports, but are just establishing a presence in the US. The Gerald Ford International Airport in Grand Rapids, MI was the first American airport to install the technology. Now, airports ranging from major hubs like Phoenix and Minneapolis to smaller ones such as Oshkosh, WI have followed the recommendation of the Hearing Loss Association of America to, “Get in the Hearing Loop”.

Other transportation applications for hearing loops

Elsewhere in the transportation industry, the New York and San Francisco subway lines have installed hearing loops at their information/fair kiosks. The former has 1,000 new subway cars on order that feature hearing loops and the latter already has most of a planned 775 fleet of “looped” cars in service. Amtrak has ordered 83 new trains made up of about 500 passenger cars that will be “looped”, and has an option on an even larger number.

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Auracast – It's here now...

It could still be several years before there will be enough hearing aids in use with the capability of connecting to an Auracast assistive listening system (ALS)...

The much-anticipated introduction of Bluetooth's® Auracast™ in consumer products by a major manufacturer has now been announced. On August 29, 2023, Samsung Electronics Co., Ltd. announced new software updates to Galaxy Buds2 Pro and Samsung Smart TVs[1], reshaping the audio experiences across even more connected devices. The new updates extend LE Audio capabilities to Samsung TVs with Auracast broadcast audio technology, enabling rich and complex audio transmission to nearby Bluetooth devices.

LE Audio, an advanced Bluetooth audio standard, broadens the spectrum of audio experiences to deliver more complex and richer sound that goes beyond providing better-sounding music, but also allows users to share sound with others as they personally experience it. As a pioneer of innovative technologies, Samsung has been leveraging new LE Audio-based features that further elevate sound experiences, including 360 Audio Recording, enabling Galaxy smartphone users to capture sound on video precisely as they hear it without the need for professional equipment. Additionally, the select Galaxy Book3 devices[2] offer a crystal clear listening experience with improved latency — perfect for immersive gaming and multimedia consumption.

ReSound first to offer Auracast in hearing aids

Wearers of the new ReSound Nexia hearing aids will not need to invest in Samsung earbuds to connect to Auracast capable TV sets – they will be able to do so using their hearing aids. Better yet, it they have some other brand of TV or an older Samsung set, they can equip it with the new Resound TV Streamer+. With that device, in addition to their hearing aids, audio can also be shared with other Auracast capable devices when they become available.

Resound says their new TV-Streamer+ gives users immediate speech clarity at their preferred volume. Devices can be paired with MagicPairing by using the ReSound Smart 3D app to access the new sound program and connect to the TV-Streamer+ or they can stream calls with a double-tap on the ear or the hearing aids.

Who will be next?

Many of the newest prescription hearing aid models reportedly use the latest Bluetooth LE and there is speculation that they will soon be able to mimic Samsung and ReSound and release a software update to make their hearing aids Auracast capable now that there are devices that will broadcast an Auracast

signal. Surely Apple and Sony will also be on board before this ship exits the harbor and enters the unchartered waters of Auracast.

There were already other devices on the market that can both transmit and receive an Auracast signal. Taiwan electronics firm Nexum has marketed VOCE transceivers that can both broadcast and receive Auracast transmissions or traditional Bluetooth®. Available on Amazon.com, they also offer a dongle that will transmit sound from a computer to multiple VOCE transceivers equipped with wired ear buds or earphones. Moor Technology, another Taiwan maker, also offers a transceiver and a dongle and they go one step further, offering a two different Auracast receiving loudspeakers and Auracast earphones..

What does this mean for hearing loops?

It could still be several years before there will be enough hearing aids in use with the capability of connecting to an Auracast assistive listening system (ALS) to justify installing such a system. The AARP reports that, “Thanks to ordinary wear and tear, plus damage from ear wax and moisture, the average lifespan of a set of hearing aids is about five years.” That's an average and, for some, with proper care eight or even ten years can pass before they are replaced. Consequently it could be a decade, or even longer, before a venue with a hearing loop system could turn off their loop and rely on hearing aid wearing hard of hearing patrons being able to connect to an Auracast ALS.

It seems likely that, at some point in the future, Auracast systems will be installed to supplement existing or new hearing loop systems. In the meantime, the growth in the availability of hearing loops continues. Particularly in Western Europe and Australasia, it's finding its way into buses, trains, transportation terminals and other locations. More and more airports around the world at installing the technology to assist travelers with hearing loss.

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There's a place for Audio WiFi

Hearing access is not just for the hard of hearing

I'm an unabashed advocate for hearing loop technology but I can see instances where Audio WiFi is a better solution for providing information to people with hearing loss and serving the general public at the same time. Unfortunately, many in the hard of hearing community are strongly opposed to using WiFi and make no distinction as to where it could actually be the best, or even the only, means of improving communication access. Millions with hearing loss would join their hearing friends in using this the technology in appropriate settings.

Looping purists’ objection to WiFi Audio is because of the sometimes-dramatic latency of sound (echo effect) inherent in these systems. A recent survey of hard of hearing people who had experienced such systems reported that nearly 18% found the latency objectionable, just over 35% found it distracting, and over 47% were not conscious of it. The latency reported by most manufacturers of these systems is in the area of 50 microseconds (ms) and research has found that many people will still be aware of latency when it exceeds around 15 ms. Musicians are likely to sense it at even lower level.

I experienced the technology at the Santa Fe, NM convention center and found it to be completely unacceptable. Only if you turned off the hearing aid mics and tried to rely on the sound from the WiFi being streamed to your hearing aids by your smartphone was the latency even bearable.

All of that being said, in the quest to create inclusive and accessible spaces, various public gathering places have begun integrating an assistive listening feature into existing WiFi systems to make an ALS available to patrons at a bargain basement price. The offering of audio WiFi systems has been a significant step in providing improved auditory access to information and events for all visitors to these establishments. Many of these are settings where other ALS technology would be either impractical or impossible.

The following highlights the diverse public facilities where audio WiFi systems have been implemented to enhance accessibility for those with hearing impairments and also to benefit the general public:

1. Sport Bars and Gyms: These venues use it so patrons watch and hear the TV with the game or event that interests them. The ADA mandates do not apply to settings like these so patrons download the appropriate app and they use their cellular phone as a receiver for the WiFi signal. They review the list of available channels on that app and then set it for the sound channel offering the play by play they wish to hear. Their smartphones stream the sound to Bluetooth capable earbuds or hearing aids.
2. Museums and Art Galleries: An example is the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City that has integrated audio WiFi systems to provide detailed descriptions of artworks and exhibits to visitors with hearing loss. The British Museum in London utilizes audio WiFi technology to offer narrated guides for its diverse collections, ensuring an inclusive experience for all patrons. In these instances each “station” on the tour has a pre-recorded description of the items on display and that description can, because of the multi-channel capability of WiFi systems, be offered in a variety of languages.
3. Tour buses and excursion trains: T*he North Shore Scenic Railroad in Duluth, MN, the Skagway Street Car in Alaska and the to*ur buses at the New York Botanical Gardens are examples where the WiFi technology is successfully used. The venue can make special WiFi receivers and earphones or earbuds available to the travelers or, to save them the trouble of returning the devices at the tour's conclusion, tourists can download the appropriate app and use their smartphones as their receiver.
4. Public transportation hubs: Grand Central Terminal in New York City utilizes audio WiFi systems to broadcast announcements regarding train schedules and platform changes, ensuring individuals with hearing loss and other passengers receive essential travel information. Heathrow Airport in London employs audio WiFi technology to provide important announcements and flight information to all passengers including those with hearing impairments.
5. Commuter trains: In the UK, a new onboard digital service providing hard of hearing passengers and others with personalized journey information in both audible and readable formats has been trialled. Called the Hearing Enhanced Audio Relay (HEAR), it enables passengers connected to the onboard Wi-Fi to receive journey announcements on their smart devices in real-time, specifically tailored to that passengers’ preferences, for example only informing them of announcements relating to their destination or including other information.

The implementation of audio WiFi systems in these diverse public gathering places signifies a significant step towards inclusivity for individuals with hearing loss. While the current technology primarily focuses on audio transmission via WiFi, its presence in cultural, educational, entertainment, religious, and transportation settings is a promising development in creating a more accessible environment for all.

However, acknowledging the potential expansion of assistive technologies to encompass a broader array of solutions, including captions, hearing loops, FM, and IR systems, is essential to further enhance inclusivity for the hard of hearing community in public spaces.

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If you are aware of a newsworthy story regarding hearing loops, neckloops or telecoils and would like to have it considered for publication in a future edition of this newsletter, please send the details to: intheloop@juno.com.

Submissions are welcome from any of the private individuals, hearing care providers or looping advocates, installers, distributors and manufacturers receiving this newsletter.

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