

# GOOD NEWS FOR PEOPLE WITH HEARING LOSS

*Imagine a future—actually, the present in Britain and now in west Michigan—where hearing aids could become wireless loudspeakers for TV, telephone, and public address systems.*

**by Dr. David G. Myers**

I recently sat surrounded by several hundred others in London's Gatwick Airport departure lounge, straining to hear announcements about my delayed flight. Alas, the loudspeaker sound was too distant and foggy for my hard-of-hearing ears.

But hold it. This was the United Kingdom, a country whose cathedrals, churches, and auditoriums now broadcast sound wirelessly to hearing aids. "The whole of the church is served by a hearing loop," began Westminster Abbey's program

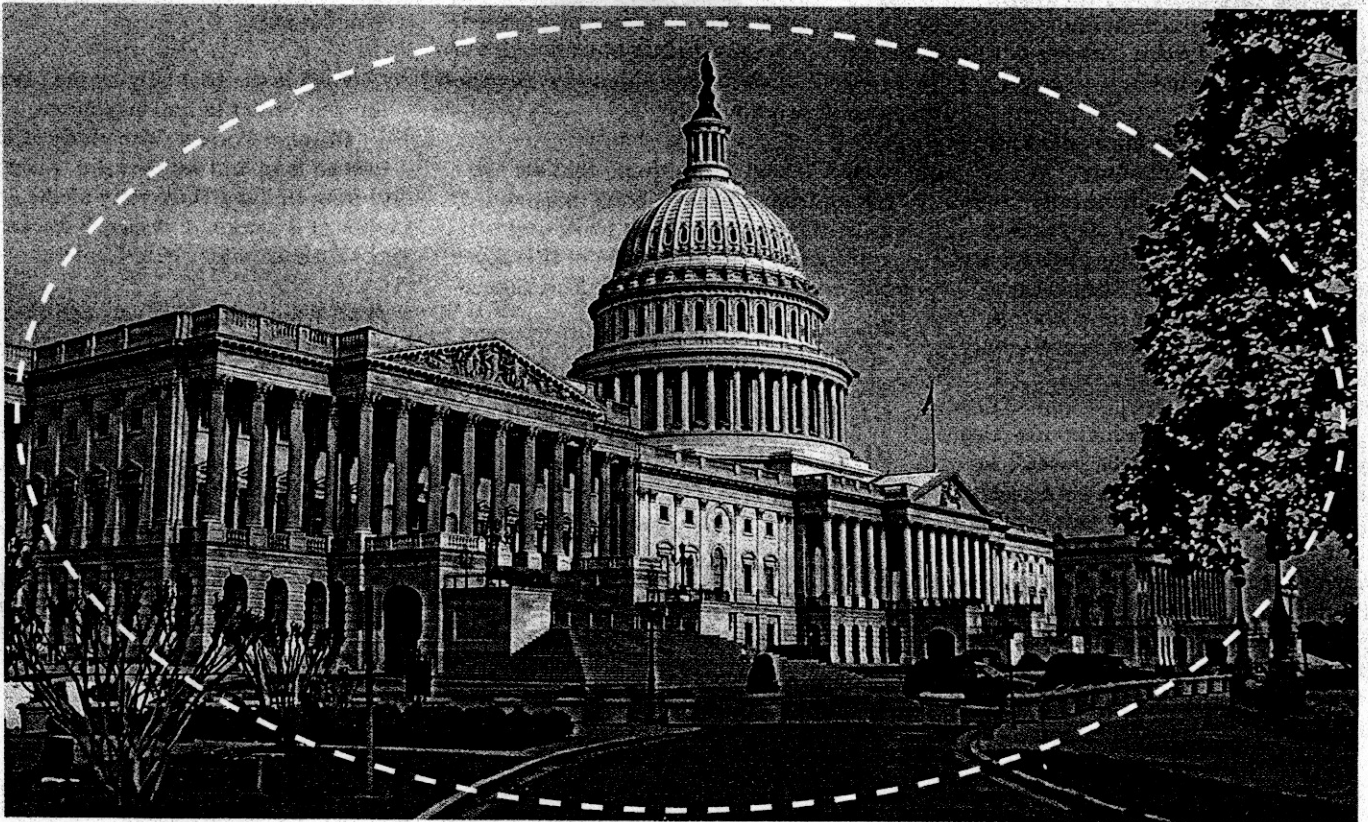
for the 50th-anniversary celebration of the Queen's coronation. "Users should turn their hearing aid to the setting marked T." Doing so activates a tiny "telecoil" receiver that instantly transforms hearing aids into in-the-ear loudspeakers.

Knowing all this, at the airport I turned my hearing aids to their T setting. Voilà! Suddenly I was hearing announcements broadcast from inside my ears. Just as my laptop was receiving information wirelessly, so were my hearing aids (via magnetic signals sent through a wire loop in-

visibly surrounding me).

Britain now also broadcasts sound directly to hearing aids at designated post office, bank teller, and train ticket windows, and before long at all London Underground ticket windows and in the back seats of all London taxis. In such transient venues, the only feasible assistive listening is wireless broadcasts via one's hearing aids (which, unlike headsets, also deliver sound customized for one's own loss).

Having many times benefited from the UK's user-friendly assistive listening, I wondered: why not also the



*Induction loops surrounding the U.S. House and Senate chambers transmit audio pickup wirelessly to telecoils in hearing aids, turning them into in-the-ear loudspeakers for the hard-of-hearing public. Such systems can be used to enhance hearing in public buildings such as airports, courtrooms, auditoriums, theaters, shopping malls, ticket windows, churches, offices and even in automobiles so that hard-of-hearing drivers can better pick up the sounds of ambulance sirens and car horns.*

USA? Our prevailing assistive-listening systems expect people to locate, check out, wear, and return conspicuous receivers. The headsets (which are also available with loop systems for people without telecoils) often work well. But few people willingly suffer the hassle and mild embarrassment. (How often have you seen one of us 28 million Americans with hearing loss using an assistive-listening headset?) A manager at my city's largest theater complex told me that her headsets get used about once per month per theater.

So, has the time come to loop America? A new Ohio State University survey finds that 48 percent of new American hearing aids now come with telecoils, which some people call their "telephone coil" (because it also receives magnetic signals from today's hearing aid-compatible phones, enabling clearer, stronger sound). Telecoils are inexpensive and will fit in all but those tiniest of hearing aids which are sometimes marketed with ads implying that visible hearing aids are something to be ashamed of.

For starters, I installed a \$295 loop system in my TV room. Now, when my kids watch TV with me, they hear the TV speaker sound at whatever level they wish; I hear the TV broadcasting from my own hearing aids (at a volume I dial on the loop amplifier). In my looped office, I hear phone conversations broadcast through both ears, with greatly increased clarity. When taking voice-mail messages, I can set down the handset and let my hearing aids do the listening.

When, next, I proposed that my own city of Holland (and adjacent Zeeland), Michigan, become a test demonstration of hearing aid-compatible assistive listening, the response was gratifying. Today, Holland-Zeeland is arguably America's most supportive community for people with hearing loss. Most of our major churches, most of our high-school and college auditoriums, and many other public and business facilities—more than 80 venues in all—have installed hearing loops that broadcast sound to people's in-the-ear loudspeakers.

In my church, where one person used our old system requiring headsets, ten people soon were inconspicuously using our new \$2,000 loop system. One man reported, "The experience of actually hearing such clear sounds was thrilling and hard to describe. One has to experience the improvement. It seemed overwhelming."

"If you build it, they will come."

Another church initially had no users of its newly installed loop system, but eight months later, it had three long-absent hard-of-hearing members worshipping again, along with three newcomers attracted by the easy accessibility.

By equipping their clients with telecoils, our local audiologists have been a key part of our community initiative. "Never in my audiology career has something so simple helped so many people at so little cost," reports the owner of our largest audiology center.

The initiative has now spread to nearby Grand Rapids, where loop systems are in the works for the city's convention center, symphony hall, and many college and worship auditoriums. Interest also grows nationally (see [hearing-loop.org](http://hearing-loop.org)). When President Bush delivered his State of the Union address in the newly looped chamber of the U.S. House of Representatives, our hard-of-hearing legislators and their guests were able to hear his voice broadcasting from speakers inside their own ears.

Terry Portis, the executive director of Self-Help for Hard of Hearing People ("the nation's voice for people with hearing loss") believes, "Our country will never be accessible for people who are hard of hearing unless we make hearing-aid compatible assistive listening a reality." Imagine a future where hearing aids have double their present functionality, where they serve not only as microphone amplifiers but also as wireless loudspeakers in venues ranging from home TV rooms to airport lounges and movie theaters. In this dreamed-of world, perhaps enhanced by new technologies, hearing aid use would greatly increase. The stigma of hearing loss would diminish. Support for insurance and Medicare-Medicaid funding for hearing aids would grow. And our country will have become a much friendlier place for the increasing millions of us who struggle to hear. ★