IAHA International Association for Hearing Accessibility

Loops to remain essential assistive listening for many years as Bluetooth development progresses

New technologies are under development in the assistive listening sector which aim to create alternative listening experiences in public places for those with hearing loss.

Auracast Bluetooth is an emerging technology that is intended to give everyone listening to broadcast sound a personalised experience. Assuming that it works properly, it will require the development and sale of large numbers of Auracast equipped hearing aids and Auracast broadcast transmitters before it will be an effective alternative to existing technology such as hearing loops and telecoils.

The recent International Federation of Hard of Hearing People (IFHOH) World Congress in Budapest recognised both technologies in its declaration. It welcomed the development of Auracast and offered its support in making the system a success. However, it stated that;

'Until it becomes widely available and proves its promises to the satisfaction of all concerned, it is important that the globally used and proven systems of hearing loops, FM, IR & telecoils not be dismissed.'

It went on to acknowledge that it will take time for Auracast to become stable and reliable and that *'it is important to have both Telecoil and Auracast technologies in hearing aids and cochlear implants until most hard of hearing users will feel they can rely on the new Auracast technology.'*

Hearing loops remain the only assistive listening technology that offers a globally common platform. They are also the only assistive listening system that has an installation standard for commissioning, meaning they should provide the same quality of sound wherever they are found.

They can be used in virtually any setting where sound needs to be heard. They offer clarity, with reduced background noise, in one-to-one settings such as ticket counters, till points, hospital reception areas, in taxis and at check-in desks, as well as one-to-many situations like theatres, cinemas, conference halls, community centres and sports stadia.

Discreet and permanently available, there is no requirement for users to have additional equipment other than their own T-coil enabled hearing aid(s) or cochlear implant, or for them to be familiar with a smartphone. There is also no need to download an app.

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While loops are a well-established technology, with a more than 70-year history, that doesn't mean they are outdated. This needs to be recognised within the assistive listening industry where references to loops as being 'old' technology are neither helpful nor accurate and risk limiting access to information and entertainment for end users.

Indeed, IFHOH stressed that it foresees *'a world where FM, IR and hearing loop systems will function for the foreseeable future alongside Auracast systems. Therefore, all assistive listening systems, hearing aids and cochlear implants need to be A + T (Auracast and telecoil) compatible.'*

The Bluetooth Special Interest Group has recognised this fact too. In a recent blog post on Bluetooth.com, senior director of market development at the Bluetooth SIG, Chuck Sabin, highlighted the IFHOH declaration and the need for telecoils to run alongside Auracast for many years to come.

'The Bluetooth SIG agrees with the IFHOH," he writes. "The coexistence of Auracast™ broadcast audio with existing technology will be essential to enhancing audio experiences for hearing aid users, while offering them greater accessibility in public locations.'

He goes on to state that market saturation by Auracast as an assistive listening solution *'could take years, maybe even decades, to realize'.*

Far from IAHA wanting to cling on to trusted and well-established systems for its own interests, our focus is always on the right solution for the right situation that ultimately gives those with hearing loss the best user-experience. Just as analogue audio stills runs alongside digital broadcasting. The time to switch from one system to another will no doubt come but venues should be confident that embracing hearing loops, and indeed radio frequency (RF) and infrared (IR) systems is still a sound investment.