

Summary of Accessibility-Related News Items December, 2007

Hearing aid immunity levels and wireless phone usage

Many hearing aid and cochlear implant users complain that it's difficult to find a digital wireless phone to work properly with their hearing device. Frequently the user is stymied by feedback (usually a staticky, buzzing noise) that occurs as a result of RF interference generated by the phone. Hearing aids have varying levels of immunity to this interference, and mobile devices generate different levels of interference.

The process of finding an appropriate mobile phone may soon become a bit easier. Members of the Hearing Industries Association (the trade association for hearing aid manufacturers) will now rate and publish the immunity level of their hearing aids. Mobile phone ratings have been published since late 2005, so the consumer will be able to consider both ratings to help select an appropriate mobile phone.

There's actually an easy formula to do so: the consumer can simply add the hearing aid rating number (for example, M2) to the mobile phone rating number (which must be at least M3 to be considered "hearing aid compatible") and ensure the total is 5 or greater.

For further information on this topic:

<http://www.accesswireless.org/>

<http://www.hearinglosshelp.com/articles/hacphones.htm>

Bluetooth and hearing aids

Manufacturers are beginning to offer hearing aids that incorporate Bluetooth receivers, which enables mobile phone reception directly into the hearing aid - thus eliminating the RF interference/feedback problem described above. Oticon's Epoq hearing aid is one example.

For hearing aids that can accept direct audio input, there's a third-party option. The ELI (Ear-Level Instrument) connects Bluetooth enabled devices like mobile phones/PDAs directly into the hearing aid to provide clear, audible hands-free operation. For more information, see <http://elihearing.com/UnitedStatesENG/Docs/Features1.htm> .

Captioning on digital TVs

The US will complete the transition to digital TV on 2/17/09. Digital TV can provide greatly enhanced closed captioning services - for example, users will be able to adjust caption font, color and size to suit their needs.

If you (or your institution) plan to purchase a new digital TV and intend to use captioning - buyer beware! Since 1993 the FCC has required all TV sets larger than 13 inches to support closed captions; however, many purchasers have reported problems with captioning on their new digital TVs, ranging from ease of setup to caption quality to apparent caption unavailability. (I can personally attest to this; a friend recently acquired a new HDTV, and neither of us - both

technologists by trade - have yet been able to activate the captions for TV broadcasts.)

If you do purchase a digital TV for your home or workplace, insist that the vendor demonstrate the captioning with a live broadcast or cable signal. Showrooms rarely offer a live TV feed, so it's often difficult to verify captioning options before purchase.

Can users still keep their existing analog TVs? Yes, but they need to obtain digital to analog converter boxes. FCC rules do require DTV equipment such as converter boxes to support closed captioning.

A number of sites provide more detailed information:

http://www.ce.org/shared_files/resources/159CEA%20Closed%20Caption%20FAQs%20April%202007.pdf

<http://www.nvrc.org/MediaLibrary/Digital%20TV.pdf>

http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/CC_converters.html

<http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/closedcaption.html>

<http://www.dtvanswers.com/>

www.dtv.gov

Captioning on the Internet

The demand for Internet video content continues to increase exponentially. Until recently, hearing impaired users have not been able to take full advantage of streamed or downloaded movies, TV shows, clips, music or other programming, since little content is available with captions.

Recently, several of the largest providers of internet video content (AOL, Google, Microsoft and Yahoo!) approached WGBH and the National Center for Accessible Media (NCAM) with a request to establish and manage an Internet Captioning Forum (ICF). For more detail, see <http://ncam.wgbh.org/news/icf.html>.

More information is also available at <http://www.captions.org/>.

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