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# Leveling the Playing Field Through Technology

*By Philip W. Bravin*

Many people might not realize how technology in general has leveled the playing field for deaf and hard of hearing children. Before attempting to define this, let us take a historical journey with respect to technology back to when I was a little boy in the late 1940s before we look at the landscape today.

When we speak of technology, we refer to devices or services that adapt the environment around a deaf or hard of hearing child to make communication accessible. As a young child, I had access to two-pound bilateral hearing aids that required a harness to hold them. In my classroom, I had to suffer the weight of earphones that made my ears very red due to heat and lack of circulation. When watching movies at my deaf school, my classmates and I had access to about 10 captioned movies that were recycled over and over to the point that I still remember the storyline of those movies to this day. There was no captioned television, no access to radio, no access to telephones, and very limited availability of interpreters (they were usually offered at deaf schools but not in the community).

Fast forward to 2015. We have captioned television, access to radio via Twitter (which I consider "visual radio"), access to telephones via a videophone, and access to interpreters in almost every place in the United States. How did all of this happen? We needed two things: 1) technology, which made it possible to adapt the environment around us, and 2) the force of laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act, the

Television Decoder Circuitry Act, the Telecommunications Act of 1996, and, recently, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act and a few others.

Leveling the playing field is an important concept. No deaf or hard of hearing person has the same degree of hearing loss nor the same degree of speaking ability—even with such things as hearing aids or cochlear implants, the range of comprehension varies. With those environmental adaptations, along with the use of sign language, the playing field becomes level as the use of technology fills those gaps each individual has. One interesting effect of technology is the fact that some of the things developed for deaf and hard of hearing people are now enjoyed by the general hearing population. We often see hearing people watching captioned television in restaurants; children and families with limited English proficiency learning English through captioning; and hearing people using programs like Skype, Hangouts, and FaceTime to communicate via video.

What does the future hold for us? Being a geek for 50 years myself (and proud of it!), I happen to fully appreciate the potential of technology and how it can further level the playing field down the road. While most of the laws written today take into account the possibility of changes in technology, we must be ever vigilant that the laws which protect our access are not weakened or diminished in any manner. However, one thing is for certain: when the playing field becomes level, the deaf or hard of hearing child, in the words of I. King Jordan, "can do anything ... except hear."

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