

The tactile traveler script Show #11
Nick Isenberg

From KDNK Community access Radio in Carbondale, Colorado, in the United States this is program #11 of the TACTILE TRAVELER-EMPOWERING BLIND AND LOW VISION PEOPLE TO EXPLORE THE WORLD AND HELPING OUR SIGHTED FRIENDS SEE THE WORLD IN A NEW WAY.

I'M Nick Isenberg.

When blind people go places, we don't experience them like our sighted friends. We don't see towering mountains, or romantic sunsets. The goal of this program is to identify and even create experiences that are more meaningful, and just more fun for us and for our sighted traveling companions. Frequently as people lose their eyesight, they become more and more isolated.

The Tactile Traveler hopes to empower people not only literally to go around the world, but around the block to new adventures in their lives.

Blind ranges from people who are visually impaired and glasses and contact lenses no longer help them to live a normal life to people, like me who are totally blind. And to sighted parents who have a blind child to blind parents who have sighted children. And, people of all ages, interests and physical abilities.

On today's program:

We'll learn about echolocation, a way to hear to see

How to deal with miserable pillows in hotel and motel rooms

How to avoid accidentally becoming the hunted during hunting season

Getting the most out of Amtrak

What to do when you forgot your chargers

And a trip you won't have to take for a really secret ballot

NICK: Our first story begins very quietly. So, don't worry if you have trouble hearing it at first.

(NAT SOUNDS SOFT CLICKING)

What you're hearing is of a way blind people can see. I'm going to increase the volume in case you're in a car or other environment with loud background sounds or you're hard of hearing.

(NATURAL SOUNDS OF CLICKING LOUDER)

NICK: A number of blind kids have figured out that they can ride bicycles by clicking their tongues and listening to the sounds echo off obstacles in their way.

The clicking you're hearing is being produced by Daniel Kish, who figured out that he could click his tongue to find out what's around him long before he was old enough to ride a bike. Soon after he had his second eye removed because of eye cancer, at about 13 months old, his parents found him on the floor, where he had climbed out of his crib. He was making clicking sounds with his tongue and seemed to be able to avoid bumping into things.

Now in his mid-fifties, he is president of World Access for the Blind, an organization that teaches blind people all over the world how to use echolocation.

Daniel Kish: Echolocation can be defined as another way to see, another way to be aware of one's surroundings. If you're using a form of active echolocation, we call it flash sonar, where you're emitting your own signal, a signal that you've designed for yourself. It can be in the form of a tongue click, or some other kind of click. That signal goes out in the environment. It reflects from surfaces throughout the environment, returns to the user with experience. The user learns to construct images based on the pattern of reflections from all of those surfaces.

The principle is actually very similar to vision, very similar to the use of light to see with, you're just using sound instead of light. So, turns out the brain can really use any form of sensation to construct images of its surroundings and one can learn to deploy the visual system of the brain to do this, to use alternative sensory information other than eyesight to construct images of one's surroundings and you could even use the images to know what's around you, where you are, where to go, how to get there securely, efficiently and effectively.

Nick: Brains scan have shown that echolocation stimulates the same parts of your brain as sight

Daniel Kish: It's been described as three-dimensional fuzzy geometry. So, echo location, it does provide spatial images, in other words, images of the space around the user, particularly in regards to surfaces. So where are spatial boundaries? Where are walls? It tells you where things are and what things are. So it gives you a perception of density, texture, shape or contour, it gives you a form factor of various surfaces and objects out to a considerable distance. I mean, practiced users detect large enough objects and large surfaces for dozens or even hundreds of meters. So there's a considerable distance factor here as well. It gives the user spatial layout of one's surroundings and also information about what things are.

It does not have the definition or the same degree of detail that vision typically has and so that's where the idea of fuzzy geometry comes from. Since the edges tend to be blurred, objects that are close to each other tend to blur together, etc. etc. It's not necessarily a one to one replacement to vision in that sense. But, it does provide much of the same information that vision provides. Certainly enough information to make a vast and often decisive improvement in the security and efficiency and effectiveness in the way one travels.

Nick: I interviewed Kish on the phone while he was walking down a street near his home in California. Notice that he's clicking while carrying on a conversation. He's talking about how echolocation can be used while participating in sports.

KISH: There are a lot of activities where echolocation becomes what I would call (laughing) "part of the experience" or a partial support to the experience. Echolocation is necessarily always "the whole thing." So for example, yes, in an activity, something like mountain biking or skiing or lots of schools activities, you're using echolocation to facilitate that activity, to know where things are around you and to have a better idea of where you're going, to have a better idea to know if something's in front of you, not to run into something.

But, you will often need to integrate other skills, possibly other supports, to engage in the full range of that activity. So for example, you have some kids, and adults too, who like ball sports, and they can use echolocation around a sports area whether it's a field or an indoor area, they can use echolocation to know where other people are, but they won't necessarily be able to tell where the ball is using echolocation. So you may still need to modify the ball to somehow make some kind of a noise or also you may still need to mark up the sports area with some kind of raised marking, ropes, because of course you can't use echolocation to detect lines and other demarcations. So echolocation is a very, very, good facilitator of lots of activities and it's used in combination with a full skillset and a whole set of experience.

NICK: Daniel Kish encourages blind people to learn to use echolocation when they're very young. But adults can learn it too, it may take longer and they'll have to work harder. Derrek Twene is 52 and lost almost all of his sight three years ago. My hearing is bad enough that I'm considered deaf/blind and I misunderstood his name and pronounced it incorrectly in program 10. More about that in a moment.] Derrek lives in Godespelt in the Netherlands. He's learning how to use echolocation from one of Daniel Kish's associates in nearby Belgium

Derrick Twene: It's working quite well. I mean, it takes some time, it's not something that switches on. Because I have seen a number of videos called World Access for the Blind that normally do a three day course and they're completely switched on. So effectively, what I mean about completely switched on is that the clicks become like images in their head, the images go into the individual cortex of their mind. I haven't got that yet. What I see is like a darker blackness, so I know it's there because it becomes like a denser darkness. So then I can say "that's a tree or a lamppost." It's coming along but it's one of those techniques, like a language, that you need to continue to practice it, to hone it, to get the skill level and accuracy to the level that you need to have it to navigate yourself around.

I have two kinds of clicks. I have a loud click. (SOUND OF DEMONSTRATING FOUR LOUSE CLICKS). And a softer one that gives me more details (DEMONSTRATING FOUR MORE RAPID SOFTER CLICKS). That gives me more information around me and the bigger click is more or less like a scanning which sort of tells me objects that are around in the direction I'm clicking. It's more or less like you use that to scan and then I hone in with the softer click, well for me personally, and that seems to work. I have to say at night time when the light is poor then my vision is almost non-existent. But using the clicks I'm able to sort of move around and find obstacles like lamp posts and posts that are in the way, or people for example, that are in the way and I'm able to actually now sort of oversee them and be able to navigate myself around so it's coming around quite nicely but obviously never as fast as I'd like it to come along but that comes from doing more practice myself. Like anything, you have to practice to make it perfect.

Nick: Even many people who are hard of hearing can use echolocation. They can ask their audiologist or hearing aid providers to adjust their hearing aides to BETTER hear their clicks.

For more information on echolocation, click on worldaccessfortheblind.org and visioneers.org.

Nick: Sometimes staying in a hotel or motel can be a pain in the neck. Lydia Ekert has a suggestion you may find useful.

Lydia: It's those huge pillows you have to use in many hotels and motels. They make the room look really impressive when you first walk into your room, if you can still look. But, they can make your neck hurt so much the next morning, it can take a lot of the fun out of your trip.

The awful pillows come in two sizes. King, which are half the width of a king bed, and body pillows which are the entire width of the bed.

So, if you want a good night's sleep, after being duly impressed, call the front desk and or housekeeping and ask for standard size pillows. But if they hate their guests and don't have any, there's another way to get a good night's sleep.

Instead of laying your head on one of the pillows, pull two of them together and place your head between them. You'll find that you can adjust them so that your head is comfortable.

But I found a good use for those miserable pillows, they're cozy if you use them as blankets.

Sleep tight and don't let the bedbugs bite. Better yet, if there really are bedbugs, you might want to find another hotel with better pillows.

Nick: Thank you, Lydia!

NICK: It's hunting season where I live and in many parts of North America. That means if you hike, or just walk where there may be hunters, be prepared. I've covered too many people killed by accident during hunting season, including two kids on mopeds, who the perpetrator swore looked like deer.

Since we can't see hunters, we have to be extra careful to make sure they see us. That means wear a hunting vest when you're in the woods, or walking on roads near woods. They come in two colors, fluorescent orange and bright pink. You can buy them in the sporting goods department in most stores like Target and at sporting goods stores, along with matching hats. And, big box pet stores may carry reversible dog sweaters that are either fluorescent orange on one side or bright pink on one side and tan on the other.

Use these cautions and you and your guide dog won't end up on the wall in some hunter's trophy room.

You're listening to the Tactile Traveler Empowering blind and low vision people to explore the world and helping our sighted friends see the world in a new way. I'm Nick Isenberg.

NICK: A good way to really see, or experience America is by rail.

Instead of flying from New York to San Francisco in as little as six hours in the air, you can spend all or part of four days riding across America by rail.

Jason Strother has some tips on how to get the most out of your train travels for the least amount of money.

Jason: It's by using an Amtrak pass. It allows you to get off the train and stay somewhere for a couple of hours, or a couple of nights so you can visit the local attractions, hear the local accents, taste the regional cuisine, smell the air and feel the weather.

But you need to plan carefully, because an Amtrak pass doesn't allow you to get on or off as many Amtrak trains, or busses, as you can, or may wish to. For example: A 15-day pass for \$459.00 only allows you to board a total of eight Amtrak trains, or busses. A 30-day pass for \$689 dollars is good for 12 trips and a 45-day pass is good for a total up 18 departures. If you have a disability, like being legally blind, or are over 65, subtract ten percent from the pass price. And kids two through eleven years old go for half price.

And if a sighted companion is accompanying you, who is between the ages of 12 and 64, can also get ten percent off. But sleepers and meals cost extra.

Amtrak passes can be a great deal, but pay attention to the routes. For example, if you are going from Chicago to Boston via Washington, DC, that takes up four bookings. Let me break that down for you: Chicago to Washington, Washington to New York City, New York City to Albany, then Albany to Boston.

But if you take the Lake Shore Limited, you can go all the way from Chicago to Boston with one ticket and not have to change trains.

But if you want to board more Amtrak trains and busses than your pass allows, figure out what would be the shortest route and buy an extra ticket. Sometimes, it might make more sense to use other forms of transportation for short journeys. For example, maybe you're going from Newark, New Jersey to New York City, here you should use a local commuter train service, like New Jersey transit or Path.

Amtrak passes are only valid in the United States, so don't plan on making any trips to Montreal or Vancouver in Canada, otherwise you'll have to pay an extra charge.

Be creative. One time the Tactile Traveler met a couple who were on a multi-city book tour. They traveled to their next destinations at night so they avoided paying for a hotel.

So if you're ready to hit the rails, give Amtrak a call, or look them up on line.

A-m-t-r-a-k.

For The Tactile Traveler, I'm Jason Strother.

All Aboard! (train conductor sing-song emphasis)

Nick: Thank you Jason!

Have you ever arrived at your hotel and realized that your phone charger is at home instead of in your suitcase?

We'd like to welcome our newest reporter Adreyan Hickox who has a tip you might find useful.

Adreyan Hickox: Cell phones are important to everyone. But they're even more important when you're blind or have low vision because of all the apps that help us figure out where we are when we can't read street signs or the names of business, like our hotels.

But frequently there is a solution for that empty feeling you get after you've emptied your suitcase without finding your charger, or chargers.

Go to the front desk and tell the desk clerk that you forgot your charger and ask if they have one that you could borrow.

Usually, a miracle happens. A big box or basket of chargers guests have left in their rooms and never claimed suddenly appears in front of you. Probably one that fits your phone or gadget. They'll not only lend it to you, frequently they'll let you keep it, eliminating a lot of stress for the rest of your trip.

Nick: Thank you Adreyan!

Our next program will be on election day. This story is about a trip you won't have to take to vote in privacy in 25 and an increasing number of states.

Curtis Chong is the voting rights spokesperson for the National Federation of the Blind of Colorado, which is one of those states.

He says a problem facing blind voters, and people with other kinds of disabilities is the ability to cast a secret ballot.

Curtis Chong: Colorado, first of all, is a vote-by-mail state which means that all registered voters will receive in the mail a piece of paper or two which constitutes the ballot. If you're a person who has tremendous problems with motor control, you may not be able to use the pencil, or pen, or whatever it is to mark the mail ballot and certainly a person who is blind "enough" that they cannot see the print on the ballot would not be able to mark that ballot independently without some help from another person, which by definition eliminates the secret ballot concept. So now your votes are being shared with the person who is helping you.

Nick: Chong says a system has been developed to change that.

You can vote on your computer by going to myballot.sos.colorado.gov. In other states, call your county election office to get your web page address.

Chong: You say, I want to vote my ballot. And then what happens is it asks you for information about who you are; what is your name? What is your birthdate? What county do you vote in? And then you indicate that you are requesting an "Accessible" ballot as opposed to an emergency ballot or something else. Then it verifies your identity by having you indicate either your state ID number which is on your ID card which most of us I'm sure don't know, or the last four digits of your social security number.

Once all of that has been validated, a web page pops up which represents the entire ballot. It's got a bunch of contests listed with names and check boxes. And so each contest will tell you what the contest is, it will tell you the name and how many positions you should mark.

So once all that's done, you mark the ballot, you get an opportunity to review the ballot, this is all using a computer or smartphone, and once you verify that, then you want to print the ballot. So the ballot document is printed on your printer, and then there's one more step. I want to download and print what's called the Ballot Return package. This is a sheet of paper which will have been filled in by the software with your identifying information. It has been, the bottom third of the page is completely blank and that's where they want you to sign your name.

Now you have two pieces of paper, well potentially three, depending on how big the ballot is, and you want to take all of those pieces of paper and put them in an envelope. You can either use the ballot envelope that you would have gotten in the mail, or if you're like me and you want to get a jump on everything, you can create your own envelope and address it to your county clerk. There's a list up on the state's website that lists everybody's county clerk, and you can either drop it in the mail, or if you're adventurous enough or close enough to one you can just walk it over to an authorized ballot drop box and drop the whole thing in.

They want you to write OFFICIAL BALLOT ENCLOSED on that envelope so that there's no doubt about what it is.

Nick: Chong says the biggest flaw in the system is that lots of people don't have printers.

Chong: We don't know how it's going to look yet but we do know that military voters and citizens who live overseas have a way to get their ballots in electronically, without having to print them and so we would like to find a way that we the people with disabilities and the blind could have the same capability.

NICK: Any voter covered by the Americans With Disabilities Act is eligible to vote using this system.

(SOUNDS OF DIGITAL SCALE BEEPING AND ELECTRONIC VOICE)

NICK: It's my talking scale reminding us that we'd like you to weigh in on how we're doing. Please let us know by sending an email to thetactiletraveler@gmail.com we spell traveler the American way with one quote "L." We'd also like to hear your story ideas from all over the world. Send us an email with story ideas in the subject line at thetactiletraveller@gmail.com .

If you would like to help underwrite this program please send us an email with underwriting in the subject line at thetactiletraveler@gmail.com .

Transcripts of this program are also available for our deaf listeners by searching The Tactile Traveler in any search engine.

This program is also being broadcast on the Audio Information Network of Colorado and in additional states.

It's also available by typing the tactile traveler into any search engine and available wherever you get podcasts and by asking your smart speaker to play the podcast THE TACTILE TRAVELER.

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(UPBEAT WESTERN MUSIC PLAYS UNDER TO FADE AND CLOSE THE SHOW)