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Hadley Presents

Apps, Gadgets, and Vision Loss

Presented by Ricky Enger

Ricky Enger: Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host, Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax and enjoy a conversation with the experts. In this episode, tech podcaster, Steven Scott joins us to discuss useful apps and gadgets. Welcome to the show, Steven, so great to have you.

Steven Scott: Oh, thank you, Ricky. It's great to be here.

Ricky Enger: For people who don't know who you are, why don't you just give us a brief intro? Tell us a bit about yourself and where people might find you podcasting.

Steven Scott: I'm a broadcaster, I'm a podcaster, I'm a TV presenter. I'm lots of different things. Basically, wherever they tell me to go, I go. I have worked in this business now for 20 years this year, actually. My first paid gig was 20 years ago. It's been incredible. It's been an incredible ride to be doing this, working in initially commercial radio and then moving into what essentially is called in the UK, charity radio, which is community-based content. And the community radio here is a little bit, it's either community by location, by geography, or by interest. I was part of the RNIB, the Royal National Institute of Blind People in the UK who had a radio station. They were building and I went along and presented a morning show for nine and a half years. Did the newspaper show first thing in the morning. That was great fun. I loved it.

I realized that there was one thing missing in our world and that was with all the rising mainstream technology out there, there was nobody talking about it. And so, I invented a show called Tech Talk, which went on air for 10 years. It was an incredible show because it was the first show of its kind really that was on radio, that allowed us blind people to understand how mainstream tech, we talked about how that could be accessible. Now, some of it wasn't accessible at that time but we talked about the workarounds that blind people used so that it could be accessible. From there, I started working with accessible media in Canada and we created Double Tap Canada, the radio show and then later they invited me to do a TV show to which I laughed. I thought it was a joke.

They said, "No, it's not a joke. Seriously. We'd like you to do this." And I said, "Well okay, let's try it. I'm always up for a challenge." And when I left RNIB last year, November last year, I decided I wanted to take this all the way and create a podcast that was kind of based out of the UK. I wanted something that started from the UK, that talked about UK issues and that was “Blind Guy Talks Tech.” Here we are all these months in and it's already very popular. Lots of people getting in touch and sharing their stories and we talk about tech, but we also talk about our journeys with sight loss as well. We're very open. And the conversation has really evolved from, wow, this is a great feature, or this is a great app, or this is a great product, to actually how these products are infiltrating our lives, what they mean in our lives. It's interesting to see how technology has become part of our life, rather than just being some geeky thing. Everyone uses it. We're all talking tech in one way or another.

Ricky Enger: Exactly. And that's why I thought it would be so great to have you here because I think we both probably love our apps and gadgets a bit too much but not everybody feels that way and yet technology is essential in so many ways and can do things beyond just being fun to play with. It actually does affect our daily lives in some pretty significant ways. I thought that we would share maybe it's our favorite technology or just something that we feel like people should know about. The first category that we have is just in general health and wellness. Do you have a favorite app or gadget that kind of fits into this category that really has affected you in some way, just in daily life?

Steven Scott: I'm a, you might say a traditional Scottish man in the sense that feelings are to be suppressed and never to be brought out in public. These days though, thankfully that's changed. I did find an app and I think it's a fantastic app. I always get ridiculed for how I say it, but it's Calm, C-A-L-M, Calm. Some people say it's calm. I don't know how you're supposed to say it, but I say it as Calm. It is such a wonderful app because it kind of gives you two options, really. You can have stories read to you at night. I did go through a bit of anxiety, especially during the pandemic. Getting to sleep at night was a challenge. I know for a lot of blind people sleep is a real problem. And for me it was a case of well, I need to try and find a way of dealing with this. And I found this app is wonderful because they're just stories told to you in a very soft, relaxing, calm way. I'm able to fall asleep to that. And it was really, really pleasant.

You've also got the sound effects. A lot of people love noise for a lot of different reasons. And actually, it's important to say and I think that the pandemic certainly brought this out in people. People who lived alone would actually go on to things like YouTube and find sounds of an office or sounds of a cafe or something to make them feel like they were actually somewhere. This really matters to people. And I think we should never shy from it because it's important that we feel connected to the world in some way. And ironically, I think as much as technology does connect us, it also isolates us. I think sometimes these apps can bridge that gap a little bit. It's not obviously the same as human contact but it's not bad, especially when you're on a lockdown, you have no choice.

Ricky Enger: Okay, so Calm. I'm definitely going to check this out. And I think one thing that has been problematic for me when it comes to mindfulness apps, and such is that a lot of them tend to not be really user-friendly. And so here I am trying to relax and by the end of it, I want to throw the phone across the room. It's nice to know that there is an app, not only that has really good content but that's usable as well without raising your blood pressure.

My- it's a sort of an app and a gadget for this health and wellness category and it initially feels like one of those things that's really frivolous. Really, you need technology to do this particular thing? And turns out, yeah, it actually has helped. My device is a smart water bottle, of all things. That's called Hidrate but it's spelled with an I, so H-I-D, Hidrate. The way that it works is it's a nice metal bottle, so it will maintain the temperature of whatever you put in it. It has an area on the bottom of the bottle that you tap against your smartphone when you have finished drinking the water inside and it automatically tracks it for you. The app also will send reminders if you haven't had anything in a while or you haven't tapped that area on the bottle in a bit, it will remind you to, hey, you might want to drink some water and it has these clever little sayings. It's not just go drink stuff. It's kind of funny, kind of clever sayings to encourage you to do that.

And I've found it helpful because I like drinking water. I don't mind it but it's so easy to get distracted. And, oh, I've been at my desk for four hours and suddenly I'm just exhausted and oh, you know what? I didn't drink water all morning. Let's do that. It's just a nice water bottle on its own and then to have the added benefit that I can look at the end of the day, see how much water I've had and be reminded when maybe I'm falling down on the job a bit. It's been cool.

All right, so how about, so this particular category is just around the house. Pick a room, any room. Tell me about a piece of technology that has really helped you just generally in the home.

Steven Scott: This is a difficult one because gadget-wise, I could pick from a range. I could say, well, it's the smart bulbs that make a difference in my home. My wife and I are both visually impaired and I need as little light as possible, and she needs as much light as possible. And having the ability to just tell the old Amazon Echo over here, I can tell her to switch it to my profile or to switch it to suit me, set Steven's lights, and set my wife's lights. And it really does help because then she can come in, she can have the lights anyway she wants per room. I can do the same. That's really cool.

I have to say though, there's one thing I've been using a lot of. More recently, I've been paying for the service, but I've been paying for it for months, haven't used it and now I am using it and that is Aira. And I'm using that a lot at home. And I know a lot of people use it outside for lots of different things, for navigation and for finding your way if you get lost. Brilliant for all of that but at home, a lot of the tasks I struggle with at home and it's on my computer if I'm honest. On my computer I have a lot of, sometimes I need to go and download an app and I maybe get as far as the software download page, and then I'm lost. You're thinking, okay, how am I going to find this? You just get Aira on the call. They jump on, on TeamViewer and they just fix it. And they tell you what they're doing. And they go through the whole process.

And one situation where I had an app downloaded, I managed to get the app downloaded and the agent said, "Would you like me to install it for you?" That would be great. And then we went through the install and then she read through the entire application feature set. And it just, it kind of brought a lot of things to life. If we download something or we use something, we maybe use that bit of what we need but we never really venture beyond that because we weren't aware it was there. We maybe don't have the brain space to be able to go through it all and learn it all.

Ricky Enger: And just a brief description, if you haven't heard of Aira, it's wonderful and you should check it out. It is a visual interpreter service where you can call someone who can either connect to your computer or use the camera in your smartphone and assist in accomplishing tasks that require some sort of visual input. Maybe it is looking at your computer screen, as we've talked about here, or maybe it is, I have dropped something on the floor, and I have no idea where it went. I just need that pair of eyeballs to look around and find it. And I have to completely agree with you both in using Aira for computer tasks and for a lot of other things that I can accomplish if I spend the time to do it but I think I've just come to the point where I recognize that my time is valuable just as anyone else's is and would I rather spend that time fighting with an inaccessible app or trying to figure out the buttons on this new gadget on my own? Or would I like to really be more efficient about it, call someone up, have them describe this to me, and complete the task rather than spending a lot of time fighting with it?

Steven Scott: This is where our conversation often goes on our podcast. We often talk about this and how it's about having control but not giving up all of the control. It's the middle ground. Now, an example of this was I bought for myself and for my mother, a humidifier. I often sometimes wake up coughing. I have terrible dry eyes. Now this thing arrives from Amazon. It's there and here we are. And I opened up the box and all these bits fall out. And there's that moment of dread, you're thinking, how does this work? And I don't know, do you ever get this where you just sometimes sit there thinking, this is just going to go back in the box and we're just going to forget this ever happened.

But actually again, Aira, I get them on the call, and I say, "Look, I want to set this up and use it." They're off and loading the manual. They're looking it up. They're figuring out how to do it. Take this part. This feels like this and grab this and put this together. And the best thing about that was when I take the other box, which is my mom's one right into her house, she has no idea what to do with it. I said, "Don't worry, I'll do it." So it's completely empowering. It's so not only have I learned how to do it myself, I'm able to help other people and then so no longer is it, can you do it? I'll do it for you.

Ricky Enger: Yes. I love this discussion because I think we all struggle with what does independence mean. And for some people, if they've had vision and they're losing it, not only do I have to do everything myself, but I have to do it in the same way that I did before even if it takes, say eight times as long.

Steven Scott: The way to look at this is, it's many doors but they all lead to the same room and you're just taking a different door. That's it. That's all you're doing. You learn this. This is just a different way into the same place.

Ricky Enger: Yeah, exactly. My gadget is one of those things that I went for years and years and years without having. It's a small thing but it's a really important thing. A thermostat, keeping the room the temperature that I want it and knowing if someone else has changed it and being able to say, "Oh, that's the temperature, is it? Well, let's change that back." And I have a Nest. There are other smart thermostats as well but going from a thermostat that was, you could adjust it manually, but it was this little slider on the side, and you might push it just the tiniest bit and suddenly you've gone four degrees or not at all and you never knew which one. With the Nest and other smart thermostats, I'm able to control it from a smartphone app. These smart thermostats can work with assistants as well. We have Google Home in my case and you're able to ask the current temperature, the current humidity, switch from heat to cool and do all of those fun things that I think most people take for granted. I couldn't live without my thermostat.

Once we have our environment all set up where we're nice and warm and comfortable and all of that, it's time to relax and get into some entertainment. What kind of thing and I'm sure it's hard to choose one single thing, it was for me but what single thing entertainment wise, could you just not live without?

Steven Scott: Again, one thing is so difficult to say because some of them are all connected, I guess. In terms of entertainment, I do like good audio and funnily enough, I actually started using just maybe in the last few months, again, my, as I call them the HomePod Big because you've a HomePod Mini now. The HomePod Mini, which does exist but the HomePod Big, which is now discontinued, the original HomePod, as some might say, the sound of these things is incredible. I wish they still sold them. I have a hunch something is coming that will fuse together Apple TV in the Apple HomePod.

For me, it's good sounds, so I think good speakers like that are good. The one thing I can't live without and it's a very UK thing, so I apologize Ricky but my satellite box, which is now you have I believe is Comcast. Comcast, I believe were one of the first companies to come out with an accessible set top box, I believe in the States. Well, Comcast owns Sky TV here in the UK and they have brought the learning from Comcast to the UK and the Sky boxes we have here. So Sky satellite television set top box, which was generally inaccessible for a long time and now it has voice guidance. It has obviously got audio description. The one thing it doesn't have at the moment is any kind of on-demand option for content. That's a bit of a nuisance at the moment but I believe that's being worked on. But the fact is now I can control the box entirely on my own and that's the first time that's been possible and that only came in last year.

I feel like I can utilize the massive subscription cost I pay for that service per month whereas before I couldn't. I don't know if I'd go quite so far to say I couldn't live without it. I probably could if I'm honest, but I do like TV. I do like watching film but it's getting access to what's available. And there's even, for example, an option where you can use the voice remote, and you can ask it to show you every single thing on there that's got audio description. Everything that's coming up, everything that's available. That is really good.

Ricky Enger: And it actually plays really well into what mine is, my device that I want to talk about is an Amazon device, it is the Amazon Fire Stick. The Amazon Fire Stick is, it is a way that you can use multiple services that you connect to this tiny little device that plugs into your TV. From this one device and this nice, tactile remote, it's nice, tactile, remote. It also has A-lady integration, so you can speak to it and search for certain things and all of your services like again, Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime Video, even things like HBO Max, and other streaming services that you might have a subscription to, you're able to access them all from this single device, which speaks and also has some low vision features on it.

And so, you're able to navigate, find the things that you want to watch and then enable audio description for them. And of course, you have to unfortunately enable audio description on each service. I wish there were a switch that says anything I play, if there's audio description, give it to me but sadly, there's not yet. The cost is fantastic, and I like that I can do so much from it. Even if I just had the device and Amazon Prime Video and YouTube, it would still be worth it.

The final category that we have is just the miscellaneous category, if there is a thing that you have been dying to mention from any category that maybe a lot of people don't know about.

Steven Scott: The problem is that technology companies, everything has become so simplified. If you were to wanting to buy a product today but if you actually think about it, there's not as many products available. Everything's kind of eaten everything else. The iPhone killed off so many different devices and gadgets. And I think about an app I use called Voice Dream Scanner. I can get an app that costs me eight pounds on an iPhone I already have, it just works. I can grab documents. I can instantly read text off the documents, I like that text, use it. A good example was recently had to use it for my passport. I scanned the passport with Voice Dream Scanner, and I was instantly able to get my passport number and so you can just grab the text from the iPhone. You can copy it and then you can paste it straight into the form field I needed to paste it into on my Mac. When you just think about that, it's so cool. I think for me, in terms of the product and the ecosystem, I'm kind of all in on the Mac world.

The one that I guess I've used most recently that is because I like keyboard. I'm a bit of a keyboard-obsessive Ricky. I have so many keyboards. My favorite keyboard, if I was to recommend a keyboard to anyone, I recommend the Logitech MX Keys. Now, this is a keyboard which has got such a great, tactile response to it. It's not a mechanical keyboard so you need something fairly quiet. These are but again, goods key travel on these keys. And also, each key has a bit of a recess in it so you can actually feel your fingers slide into the key a little bit before you type. It's really nice kind of circle recess that every key has.

This has stuck with me for a long time. And even though I've tried different keyboards, I've never wanted to let this one go, because I love the recessed keys. I love the key travel. I love the fact that you can have three devices connected to it. I can switch between my iPhone, my iMac and my Mac book easily just with a simple key press. I could do this with my Apple TV if I wanted, I could use my PC that way. It's all by Bluetooth. You do get as well, which is kind of handy, a little dongle as well that comes with it. And that's handy for say a PC that doesn't have Bluetooth in it. You can hook it straight into that.

It's just a lovely keyboard and it's got backlight on it, if you need that, if that's useful to you and it is a full-size keyboard. It's got your num pad on there, it's got proper size cuffs or keys. It's just a really nice keyboard. And I think it's one of the ones that I've found, it is well built, solid, powered by USB-C so you can charge it up and it'll give you, I use it a lot so I charge mine quite a lot, but you can get a good few weeks out of it without having to charge it. But I will say one thing I and it's like all these things, the software that comes with it to control it is pretty naff. But the only reason I would use the software and there are some reasons you might want to. For example, it does have an additional above the number pad, there are four extra function keys that you can assign to anything you want but you have to get some support to do that because it's not accessible through the app.

And the other function is that some people use the app for is to convert the function keys or the function row to be function rows like F1 to F12, as opposed to the media keys. Here's the pro tip, you don't need to have the software for that because if you just, and this is the case for most keyboards now, if you hold down function and escape, that will convert that for you. Now, it doesn't work on all systems, but most systems will let you do that, even on a laptop. If you want to ever lock those function keys in, hold down function, press escape once and that usually function locks the keys so that you're able to use them as F1 to F12.

Ricky Enger: Oh wow. That's super useful. My most useful or can't live without gadget is interesting because there are very few blindness-specific things that I use anymore because there are so many mainstream options that are usable by everyone, including people who are blind or low vision. There's one though that mainstream, I guess, hasn't had a reason to crack and that is color identification. There are ways of course that you can mark your clothing once it has been identified and you can put in labels for things and actually some really great solutions for that, including Way-Around tags that you can use with your phone, where you write your own description of whatever you're tagging, be it clothing or something else. But this is a standalone device. It's very small. It is called the Color Star. And the thing that I like about it is that you can tell what color something is and it's actually really, really accurate.

And you can also run this device across your clothing and if there's a pattern, that pattern is going to be detected and you'll hear different audible tones, depending on whether there is a different color or a change in the material. Sometimes you may place this device on something, and it says it's bright green. And you think, okay, I know what color that is except that it turns out, it's this nice floral shirt that has multiple colors in it and the Color Star will tell you about those things if you're interested.

One thing that it does do, that's beyond just, hey, I want to know what color my clothes are or even, is my fruit turning a different color? You can put it against anything. But one thing that it does that can be useful is what color is the light that I'm pointing at? Sometimes you may have lights on a gadget, a cable modem or something or other and when you call tech support, they're like, "Is the red light on?" With this you can point it at a light and determine the color of that light. I'm pretty picky about buying things that are blindness-specific because I found that so many mainstream items can do things just as well, if not better but there are instances where it makes sense to have something built for blind and low vision people and this is an example of that. I really love the Color Star.

Steven Scott: You actually made me think about this because I've had this situation so many times. I'm colorblind so even though I can see a little bit and I can certainly see light to some degree, I couldn't tell you what color it is, what color it should be. I wouldn't have a clue, but it does make it very difficult to identify colors or they all merge into one. We actually had a guy get in touch with us on the podcast who talked about very similar, well not similar product, but a similar thing. Keeps talking about identifying food labels. And he talked about a product called the ID Mate, which is now discontinued, I believe.

And that was the thing because it was such a good product and he demonstrated it for us. I was on eBay trying to find one, second-hand, thinking this must be available somewhere because it's such a good product. And I think you're right, there are some instances where specialist wins but it is a case of the iPhone is out to eat them all. It's the Pac-Man of gadgets, it's off eating them all up. That's the reality of where we are now, everything's becoming an app.

Ricky Enger: For some reason, as good as these cameras are, they can't seem to get color right. Everything is either gray or brown.

Steven Scott: It's all lighting, isn't it? It's all to do with the lighting. And these other devices obviously are able to handle that and that's where they stand out.

Ricky Enger: Exactly. They emit their own light so you're holding it against this thing and no additional light is getting in, which is nice because you don't have to think about, oh, are the lights on? Is my hand creating a shadow? And just things that you might not ever think about that turn out to be important for accomplishing the task at hand.

Steven Scott: It's always tools for the job I feel and that's the case when I mentioned Aira. And it's interesting, I use the tool relevant to the need and I think it's just often, and it's like when you're out and about, you may…One app I love as well just to mention briefly is Soundscape, which is an incredibly good app. And for people who don't know, Soundscape is a brilliant app. Essentially, it's an ability to some degree, if you're trying to say, find the bank and you want to know where it is. You just put the location in, and you'll get an audible beep from the direction of where that bank is. And it obviously doesn't solve the last 10-yard problem that we always have finding the door or finding the specific thing, but it gets you in the right area.

And it obviously gets you to a location which is key. We need just need to get technology a little bit better to be able to identify, for example, if it's a cash machine or it's an open door we're trying to find, that it could help us with that. But it's definitely improving, and technology is good. I say to people, "Get a smartphone, your life will change." Most people who tell me they don't ever want to use a smartphone and I've heard it from a lot of people, once they do it, once they actually get into it, their life changes.

Ricky Enger: Oh, I so agree. It can feel really, really overwhelming for a number of reasons and it's important to recognize that there is that learning curve but it's also important to recognize that on the other side of all that learning is just a whole host of possibilities that you never thought about before.

Steven Scott: And look, I know there are people who can't use it for many different reasons, for motor issues, for people who've got certain disabilities. Absolutely that is not going to be the product for you but for people who are just not doing it because they just don't want to put the work in, I think you're actually causing yourself more work in the long run. This could actually make our lives easier and to access the world we live in, we have to be part of it, and this is part of it now. This is how technology is going. Smartphones are not going to disappear. The Nokia 3310 is not going to make a massive comeback.

Ricky Enger: Well, Steven, I think that we could talk all day and have a thoroughly enjoyable time doing so but I think we should wrap up for now.

Steven Scott: You said this is 30 minutes. I don't know how you can handle this. I love podcasts because they don't restrict me on time. I love it.

Ricky Enger: [laughs] Well, thank you so much for stopping by. And perhaps this is the first of many. I appreciate your sharing all the great info and just sharing some of your insight and your experiences. It's been great.

Steven Scott: Oh, it's been great, Ricky. Thank you so much for letting me on.

Ricky Enger: Got something to say? Share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@hadley.edu. That's P-O-D-C-A-S-T @hadley.edu or leave us a message at (847) 784-2870. Thanks for listening.