

Past, future and change: Contemporary analysis of evolving media scapes



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THE RESEARCHING AND TEACHING COMMUNICATION SERIES

PAST, FUTURE AND CHANGE:
CONTEMPORARY ANALYSIS OF EVOLVING
MEDIA SCAPES

Ljubljana, 2013

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Series: The Researching and Teaching Communication Series
Series editors: Nico Carpentier and Pille Pruulmann-Venerfeldt

Published by: Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana Press: Založba FDV
For publisher: Hermina Krajnc
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Reviewer: Igor Vobič
Book cover: Ilija Tomanić Trivundža
Design and layout: Vasja Lebarič
Language editing: Kyrill Dissanayake
Photographs: Ilija Tomanić Trivundža, François Heinderyckx
Printed by: Tiskarna Radovljica
Print run: 400 copies
Electronic version accessible at: <http://www.researchingcommunication.eu>

The publishing of this book was supported by the Slovene Communication Association and the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA).

The 2012 European Media and Communication Doctoral Summer School (Ljubljana, August 12-25) was supported by the Lifelong Learning Programme Erasmus Intensive Programme project (grant agreement reference number: 2011-7878), the University of Ljubljana – the Department of Media and Communication Studies and the Faculty of Social Sciences, a consortium of 22 universities, and the Slovene Communication Association. Affiliated partners of the programme were the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA), the Finnish National Research School, and COST Action IS0906 Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies.

CIP - Kataložni zapis o publikaciji

Narodna in univerzitetna knjižnica, Ljubljana

316.77(082)(0.034.2)

PAST, future and change [Elektronski vir] : contemporary analysis of evolving media scapes / edited by Ilija Tomanić Trivundža ... [et al.] ; photographs Ilija Tomanić Trivundža, François Heinderyckx. - El. knjiga. - Ljubljana : Faculty of Social Sciences, Založba FDV, 2013. - (The researching and teaching communication series (Online), ISSN 1736-4752)

Način dostopa (URL): <http://www.researchingcommunication.eu>

ISBN 978-961-235-639-2 (pdf)

1. Tomanić Trivundža, Ilija, 1974-

267892480

Sound Studies. An Emerging Perspective in Media and Communication Studies

Heiner Stahl

Sound is a decisive element of media routines. The auditory experience shapes the daily consumption of media products and leaves its mark on the practices of navigating through social networks and mediatised environments. The ringtones of mobile phones, the Skype plop-tone or the beep linked to the comment function in the Facebook chatroom announce procedures that are dominated by the presences and possibilities of technological means. In considering the politics of cultural identity, it has to be acknowledged that the competing practices of music, sound and noise are a constructing pillar. When talking about music politics and private and public broadcasting, we speak about figures for viewers and listeners, about artists, songs, TOP 40 shows or the process of community-building through local radio. Only very recently has broadcasting history started to bother with the sound of radio, and become interested in the acoustics of frequencies and the overall auditory adventure of listening (Stahl, 2010; Badenoch et al., 2012).

Incorporating sound into the domain of media and communication studies is an effort that requires disentangling lines of cross-reference bound to acoustic events, auditory exploration and auditive practices. Building an angle between this and the broader 'picture' of mass media production, dissemination and consumption reveals the connectivity of senses in a mediatised world. Listening and hearing are something we do with media, with its products, its applications and its texts.

1. WHAT IS SOUND STUDIES ANYWAY?

Sound Studies is a label that covers a variety of approaches that are linked to a general interest: to examine the social and cultural prominence of listening, of hearing, of eavesdropping. In this respect, Sound Studies deals with auditory experience and acoustic events, with communities negoti-

ating cultural material that can be heard and listened to, with the flow of music, the diverse impacts of acoustic information being constantly emitted into social, cultural and media environments.

In other words, Sound Studies has a stake in understanding the processes of storing auditory memory, as well as a deep commitment to mapping out the diversity of hearing practices. As illustrated in Table 1, hearing and listening are modes of shaping and integrating sound. Both are related to the tactics of fostering social cohesion or containing dissolution. Word diction and voices figure as meaningful and significant aspects in this constellation. Thus, approaches concerning sound explore the connection of media to the means and technology of sound creation. This certainly applies to the soundtracks of films and extends to the capacity of acoustic information to mark and delimit territory in a soundscape.

Table 1: The diversity of hearing practices as mapped out in Sound Studies

SHAPING OF SOUND	PRACTICES IN SOUND
the body politics of music	auditory memory and public spheres
voices and word diction	practices of hearing
technologies of sound creation and reproduction	soundtrack and film studies
sound as a social and cultural frame/territory	sound as a marker of difference
soundscapes, cities and media	sociology of listening

When adopting an auditory perspective on place, space and interaction, we face the challenge that media and communication are 'reading' disciplines, fully aligned to the visuality of letters and numbers. They are dominated by the eye, by the visual. In this visual space, as the Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan (Carpenter and McLuhan, 1960; McLuhan in Norden, 1969) has claimed, eyesight is the main sense for detecting information. Reading photography, newspapers, blogs, television programmes, documentaries, films etc. has massively shaped our way of understanding the interaction of media and men, their interrelatedness.

Sound Studies and media and communication studies may become fully connected when radio broadcasting, in its analogue, digital and virtual

forms, returns anew to the centre of academic concern. In contrast to radio plays becoming rather unfashionable, the representational strategies of speaking publicly, of voices at microphones (Goodale, 2011), talking about word and music diction are gaining relevance. In fact, this interest extends to music displayed on web 2.0 sharing platforms as well as the shaping of the sonic ambience of places.

2. OVERVIEW OF SOUND STUDIES: KEY CONCEPTS AND THEIR CONTEXTS

In the first issue of the journal *Culture*, Raymond Murray Schafer, a Canadian composer and music professor based in Toronto, outlined a theoretical framework that is centred around the term soundscape (Schafer, 1973: 15-52). It stands for the acoustic shape of a landscape and the auditory experience it provides. Schafer distinguishes sounds in relation to their occurrence and their modes of production. If sound is rooted in natural sources or is created manually, then this sort of acoustic information is an element of a *hi-fi* soundscape. A sound that needs amplification to gain presence forms the opposite conditions and pertains to a *lo-fi* soundscape. In terms of an industrial site, a generating plant, a car engine, a siren or a horn, this approach is well suited to examining a specific sonosphere of locations.

The second major aspect in Schafer's toolkit is the management of the acoustic and auditory shape of indoor and outdoor public spaces. He suggests examining the most comfortable ambient sound for the areas and districts of cities by applying an interdisciplinary methodological mix, as for example interviews, field observations, discussion groups, questionnaires, recordings, noise measures with a subsequent quantitative reporting. The aim of Schafer's multidisciplinary effort is not to quieten down urban space, but to explore public means to maintain and regulate acoustic comfort zones. We can reconnect Schafer's approach to the performative settings and frames of public debate and discourses that are most intriguing to media and communication studies. In general, Schafer's work is linked to the distinction between *hi-fi* and *lo-fi* soundscapes, as well as his idea to implement strategies of acoustic filtering in order to manage the auditory dimension of public and private spaces. Schafer's keywords are soundscape, landscape, acoustic ecology and the composition of urban space.

Sounds can be taken to mark the interaction of communities. Regarding

'auditory markers', a conceptualisation developed by the French social historian Alain Corbin (1994), it is important to become sensitive towards the social dimension of hearing. The continuity of a specific sound serves as knots of human interaction, they are nodal points for living in a community. The acoustic presence of bells in the everyday life of French farmers structures social time and strengthens communal rituals. The acoustic and auditory experience of the countryside provides the glue to understand the social, cultural, confessional and symbolic functions of sound. On this point, Corbin offers access, via the audio channel, to analysing community-making/preserving on a larger timescale. This adds a sensory dimension to a perspective that is focusing on what qualifies and maintains a community in transitional phases. It is certainly important to note that 'auditory markers' are symbolic units and entities that delimit social space. Markers, social practices and territory are the terms that characterise Corbin's approach.

Within the world of media theory, the interpretations of Marshall McLuhan's claim about media being extensions of men has condensed the notion that devices and technological solutions are more important than the senses themselves. Devices for media production and reception are gaining the function of prostheses and artificial limbs. Generating an arsenal of media theory which spills over into catchy concepts, his distinction between acoustic and visual space (McLuhan in Norden, 1969) appears to be rather simplistic. 'Acoustic space' is the area of face-to-face communication, of story-telling, of maintaining tradition and tribal knowledge in non-literate social formations. Visual space is where modern men are defined and branded. Printing technology and the techniques of projection have edified a media galaxy of reading and seeing in which literature, press, television and cinema are the satellites.

Sound and media are entangled. This is the case when a user has been accessing the acoustic space of the internet with a modem. In addition, it becomes of importance when one reflects on the means of telematic or cloud communication like Skype, RepTel or the many other means of telecommunication. In this sense, in this updated notion, acoustic space is a concept that integrates machine-men interfaces, for example when thinking about mobile phones. When it comes to measuring and mapping mediated spaces, media environments and domestic landscapes of usages, such a perspective is proficient in reconsidering McLuhan's line of partition between acoustic space, language, direct speech and the variety of technological interfaces.

Museums are public places of memory. They offer audio guide features to stroll and navigate through the display. Media and communication studies can contribute to a broader understanding of processes concerning the politics of remembrance when accepting that the auditory layers are burned into the collective memory. Retrospection is a conflict-generating arena of competing discourses within society, but it is worth including the sensory dimension of these modes of self-imagining community, cohesion and dissent. Regarding this aspect, the cultural historian Mark M. Smith (2001) has looked at the practices of remembering the American Civil War. He analysed the performative shape of songs sung by troops, and moved on to the sensory dimension of the construction of identity. Smith processed the ego-documents of soldiers, officers, nurses and journalists, such as diaries, letters and novels, as a set of empirical data. And as a by-product of his cultural history approach, he evolved a sense for the senses. This offers a different access to reading sources. Understanding the practices of fighting and making war along the lines of political decision-making simply points to a linear narrative of what has actually happened. Smiths' interest in 'auditory memory', in sensory history as a whole, provides an alternative spin to history and reveals content and social and cultural knowledge that would otherwise have been dropped.

Media and communications studies in their present shape would hardly appreciate the body as a medium or an apparatus of communication. As our discipline evolved from examining the press, from understanding the dissemination of news and information and from an entitlement to explain the receptive practices of consumers, we left out the body and the senses as means of constructing reality. Jean-Luc Nancy, a French philosopher, supplies us with ideas that link a (meta-) philosophical approach to the tactics of making the 'world' through factual experience. From this perspective, the body is a zone of resonance, a membrane that converts and transfers vibrations of the outside environment to the interface of perception (Nancy, 2010: 40). Roland Barthes, a French literary professor, looks upon a text as an '*echo chamber*' (Barthes, 1977: 145), a view that is just a short step away from Nancy's terminology. The rhythm of a city or the flow of mediatised information are pulsing, hitting the skin, the sensorial surface of a multimodal detecting device called a human being. Membrane, resonance, silence, voice and vibration are central to understanding Nancy's approach towards the interlinkage of the self and the construction of the world mediated through mass media.

Within the discipline of media and communication studies, media history

is, on a larger scale, a silent zone. Scholars reflect on the rotation press only in terms of anchoring and cheapening the production of newspapers. But the immense noise connected to printing is neglected and ignored. The media history of record labels is usually a story of sales benchmarks, of cultural taste and its negotiation, and of artists and musical styles. Jonathan Sterne (2003), an American cultural historian of media technology, brought the sensory experience of recording and the technological innovation provided by studio equipment back into media studies. Sound is shaped by means of recording, by the aesthetic of studios and the capacity of producers. Music can be notated on sheets, and is read out by the eye. Sound is pressed on a wax cylinder or on vinyl, and can be heard. Hearing and listening are techniques of reception. The debate about the cultural norms of „correct listening“ provides a great deal of material that gives us an idea about the handling of new types of media and its products. Sterne's (2003) claim on the diverse logics of sound reproduction technology has become a landmark in media history.

In his book *Le Son*, Michel Chion (1998), a French composer of modern classical music, reassessed sound as an important field of research, particularly within film and cinema studies. The sonic ambience of films is a distinct layer of interpretation. Chion borrows the term 'acousmatic' from the French musique concrete composer Pierre Schaeffer. On the one hand, it illustrates a scenario in which a character or an environment is to be identified with a branded sound. On the other hand, a hidden sound is a dramatic feature that refers to the caving lines within a plot, before the story even evolves towards its peak. Chion's approach is also appropriate for analysing the ambient sound of Digital Games, their main characters, landscapes and playing situations. It is worth keeping the term 'acousmatic' in mind in order to understand the positioning of sound, melody and hook lines in film plots and the designing of ambiances within media products relating to gaming culture. The Super Mario Theme, created in 1985 by the Japanese composer Kōji Kondō at Nintendo's Division of Entertainment Analysis & Development, signals such an angle as very promising.

Working at the *Centre de Recherche sur l'Espace Sonore et l'Environnement Urbain* (CRESSON) in Grenoble, Jean-François Augoyard and Henry Torgue (2005) linked everyday sounds to sonic experience and the social interaction of communities. They focus on the sonic effects of sound on listeners. Their colleague, Jean-Paul Thibaud, is much more concerned with sound walks, the acoustic management of public spaces and the auditory shape

of urban constellations (Thibaud, 2011). In this respect, promenading is a strategy of observation in the field that media and communication studies researchers need once again to reassess.

Mladen Dolar (2007), a Slovenian cultural theorist, explores the aesthetics of voices. This is an aspect of political communication (Goodale, 2011), of making news and of hosting TV and radio broadcasting programmes, that is widely neglected in media and communication studies. Dolar draws lines between voices on airwaves and voices in public speeches. He points out that the acoustic performance of voices generates diverging layers of relevance. These can be framed as elements of dramaturgy, of performances and of claims for political and charismatic authority. As the totalitarian usage of the voice is not linked to the dimension of the sacral and the ritual, it needs to imitate and to pretend to do so (Dolar, 2007: 158). The voice in public and mediated speeches, transmission technology and the aesthetic means of political communication are prominent aspects within Dolar's approach.

In his piece about the five senses, the French ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1976) examined the myths of native tribes. He reconstructs the subject in relation to the sensory dimensions of life. Lévi-Strauss postulates an auditory limen. He differentiates a noise-making subject from a noise-making tool, and a noise-receiving object with particularly trained techniques of hearing. Auditory symbols have the remarkable capacity to instantly evoke two other sensory codifications, the olfactory (smelling) and the tactile (touching) (Lévi-Strauss, 1976: 203). Lévi-Strauss uses constellations of contrast. What is imagined to be heard in a specific shape and what remains silent and for what particular reason these are the questions that lead Lévi-Strauss to take competing meanings of codification into account. He stresses that a myth, a symbol and a set of practices can be understood at least in a positive as well as a negative direction. This provides the opportunity to reshape the processes of transformation and to make sense of a specific way of imagining a social world, in constructing a virtual world of sensory knowledge.

In Table 2 below, the theorists and the key concepts in Sound Studies are summarised:

Table 2: Summary of theorists and key concepts of Sound Studies

Raymond Murray Schafer (1973)	soundscape, landscape, urban space
Alain Corbin (1994)	auditory marker – social space
Marshall McLuhan (1969)	acoustic vs. visual space
Mark M. Smith (2001)	auditory memory – practices of remembrance
Jean-Luc Nancy (2010)	body, resonance, senses
Jonathan Sterne (2003)	sound reproduction, technology and media history
Michel Chion (1998)	sound, tone and auditive composition in films
Jean-François Augoyard (2005)	sonic experience, everyday sounds
Mladen Dolar (2007)	voice, transmission and political communication
Claude Lévi-Strauss (1976)	senses, myths, liminality, codification

3. CONCLUSION

Media and communication studies is a ‘reading’ discipline. This is true, of course, in terms of articles and books to be cited, transcripts of interviews, forming categories to register Web 2.0 profiles. Doing content and sequence analysis of TV programmes is bound to involve reading moving pictures in order to mark the flow of the programme.

If Raymond Williams (1974) or John Fiske and John Hartley (1978) would have had their ‘ears wide open’ and integrated a ‘listening mode’ into their texts, this might have paved the way for media studies to be done in different ways at an early stage. Or taking Roland Barthes’ (1964) myth of everyday life as an example. He was so engaged in understanding the stories behind advertisements or photos on the covers of magazines that his interest shaped our visual sense of ‘semiology’, of the signifier and the signified. This is a story of what has been left out by these groundbreaking studies, what aspects were not considered to be relevant. How would our discipline have evolved, had the listening experience been assigned a place at an earlier stage? This angle, generally speaking, offers sound theoretical and methodological arguments for further research. Such an interest in

what the senses do with any given information can certainly be extended to the capacities of smelling, tasting and touching. Sound Studies offers a perspective on media and communication studies that takes the architecture of the senses seriously. It favours an insight into the interaction with the environment that integrates the individual means of managing sound into the analysis of media and mass communication.

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