
Soundwork

Something to Work With

ABSTRACT In the 1990s, thanks to digital convergence, many disciplines centrally concerned with the mediated uses of sound from a variety of different orientations—communication, musicology, speech, ethnography, history of technology, journalism, theater and drama, and art, to name a few—began to recognize the need for a new term to indicate their shared focus. Here I propose *soundwork* as that term, laying out the reasons why we need it, how it can change our thinking across a broad range of cultural forms, the kind of cultural and political work it can perform, and how linking *sound* to our understanding of lived experience changes the way that we perceive the world around us. **KEYWORDS** sound, activism, intimacy, podcasting, digital audio

In the 1990s it began to seem as though many disciplines centrally concerned with the uses of sound from a variety of orientations—communication, musicology, speech, ethnography, history of technology, journalism, theater and drama, and art, to name a few—needed a new term to indicate their shared focus. It is not surprising that none existed. Outside of music, which maintains its own traditional disciplinarity, sound remains the most analytically neglected of the major modes of human expression, especially when unaccompanied by a visual component. No central technology, venue, institution, or industry encompasses sound's many social and artistic uses, yet the mediated creation of aural-only texts and experiences—of *sound works*—has a vital history over 100 years old.

The invention of radio and of sound recording in the early 20th century made such work possible; broadcasting sent it around the world and placed it at the center of both everyday life and cataclysmic world events; recording technologies (sometimes) preserved it, and as practices evolved such work became less ephemeral and invisible, more lasting and material, permeating every aspect of cultural life. With the rise of digital media in the 1990s, enhanced conditions for producing, disseminating, capturing, archiving, and seriously analyzing audible work began to enable a vital new sound culture we are only beginning to understand. As John Potts presciently argued in 1997:

The multiplicity of audio experience has probably been the main factor inhibiting the formation of a cultural space called “a sound culture.” As sound is such an intrinsic component of any culture, it is both everywhere, yet often nowhere—invisible and virtually intangible. The escalation of digital multimedia forms, however, offers an opportunity to create a heightened awareness of sound and its many potentials.¹

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Only a few years later, in the early 2000s, a number of digital innovations came together to unleash sound forms from their prior technological and institutional bounds and release a clamorous revolution on the world.

Thanks to digital recording, dissemination, preservation, and archiving, available not only to specialists with dedicated complex technology but also to the digital user at home, we have the ability to both make and experience a hugely expanded universe of work entirely done in the formerly evanescent medium of sound: We can find it, save it to our own audio libraries, listen to it over and over, share it. Such affordances have opened up sound's expressive world beyond fleeting radio and traditional recording. They have encouraged traditional forms of expression and communication—books, poetry, theater, discussion, documentary—to develop sonic forms: audiobooks, podcast poetry, audio drama, spoken-word comedy, long-form journalism, audible history. We now have a burgeoning world sound culture that can encompass the myriad manifestations of aural communication free from traditional boundaries and restraints. And we need a new term to describe it all: *soundwork*.

A soundwork is a sonic *construction*—a work that uses the elements of aural expression (voice, actuality sound, music) to compose meaningful audio experiences that can be heard, understood, and analyzed as distinct, purposed texts. This definition excludes the raw elements that go into such works—oral histories, recorded interviews, talks and speeches, environmental sounds, music recordings—to focus on the work produced from the combination of such elements and presented to a listening public. A soundwork requires the kind of presentational techniques that go into other modes of expression—selection, sequencing, structure, pace, dynamics, mood, timbre, intensity—all through the combination of voice, actuality sound, and music.²

In many ways this is a rather odd argument to have to make, since in most other expressive and communicative fields—poetry, theater, cinema, television, literature, journalism—there are nouns that designate such a carefully crafted product: poem, play, film, show, novel, story, report, etc. Music boasts hundreds, finely differentiated: symphony, opera, sonata, song, ballad, jingle, chant, hymn, and so on. But soundwork cuts across so many social contexts and applications that it needs an analytical category to bring them all together—though in an inclusive, not restrictive way—to show their *connections*, but to allow for differences.

Conceiving of soundwork in this manner allows us to apply the sort of concentrated attention, criticism, and analysis we are accustomed to exerting over other arts and modes of communication. Jonathan Sterne expressed this succinctly in the introduction of his field-defining book *The Audible Past*:

Because scholarship on sound has not consistently gestured toward more fundamental and synthetic theoretical, cultural, and historical questions, it has not been able to bring broader philosophical questions to bear on the various intellectual fields that it inhabits. The challenge, then, is to imagine sound as a problem that moves beyond its immediate empirical context.³

Deploying the concept of soundwork can help us connect sound experiences across traditional fields of study—to focus on, say, what sound-based forms have brought, or

stand ready to bring, to our understanding of politics, or history, or art; how the highly individualized sphere of podcasting, for example, enables a wider spectrum of voices to be heard across a multiplicity of topics than ever before; how yoking *sound* to our experiences of life as it is lived by ordinary people changes the way that we understand the world around us.

These abilities are particularly salient when soundwork is linked to activism, as in this volume. Now, another sense of work enters the picture: work in the sense of effort toward a shared goal, the purposeful use of sound to accomplish specific ends, such as informing, organizing, persuading, alerting—putting sound to work. From early radio documentaries that attempted, against considerable technological odds, to bring the voices of ordinary people onto the air, to the struggles to establish alternative radio, to the spread of community radio, and to the fight to create a space for educational and public radio, soundwork has resonated in the public sphere—for better or worse. The soundwork of war, of hate, of exclusion and propaganda forms a part of this sphere as well.

But the loosening of centralized control and the explosion in digital diversity, of all kinds, has made Kate Lacey's concept of "listening out" more relevant than ever: a new type of "sound work" performed by the listener.

Listening out is the practice of being open to the multiplicity of texts and voices and thinking of texts in the context of and in relation to difference, and how they resonate across time and in different spaces. But at the same time, it is the practice and experience of living in a media age that produces and heightens the requirement, the context, the responsibilities and the possibilities of listening out . . . [It is] an ethical obligation to listen out for otherness, for opinions that challenge and clash with one's own, for voices that take one out of one's comfort zone.⁴

One of the unique capacities of mediated soundwork, as many scholars have argued, is its capacity to blur the lines between the public and private spheres: the public address of the radio broadcast couched in terms of intimate conversation, the publicizing of the "too private" (as in the debate over radio soap operas and sex talk on the air), the enabling of privatized listening (e.g., to radio jazz and later rock 'n' roll records in the teenage bedroom).⁵ The current digital universe has tipped the scales toward a much greater intimacy in sound, as with podcasts proliferating on any number of previously forbidden topics, along with a highly personalized, intimate mode of address spreading out into other forms of sonic production, even on the radio.

Yet the experience of listening to certain kinds of podcasts takes this intimacy, this *privacy*, even further. In podcasts like *Serial*, *This American Life*, *In the Dark*, *Criminal, Uncivil*, and many others, we as listeners hear deeply personal revelations of the experiences, feelings, hopes, and fears of people whose names we may learn but who remain invisible and hidden from us, just as we are from them, often dealing with topics that are not only intimate but also marked as off limits by the broadcast media of the past: suppressed histories, dark secrets, terrible truths, on an individual as well as on a social scale. While podcasts dealing explicitly with private topics such as relationships and sexuality have received most critical scrutiny, a number of podcasting's most popular

genres focus on the small-scale, often individual revelations of political and public policy matters that society has traditionally held too “private” for public discussion and kept hidden from “view.”⁶ Employing the privacy of the podcast situation to reveal not just personal but deeply political matters long denied recognition in the public sphere—many of them having to do with the lived experiences of women, children, minorities, and other less powerful groups—this is a newly enabled type of soundwork that indeed *works* to reveal “voices that take one out of one’s comfort zone” with all the power of the human voice, unchained.

Meanwhile, the digital audio-sphere continues to produce one innovation, or much-needed revival, after another. Audio drama is back, not only in podcast theater but in full-cast audiobooks. The personal essay vibrates with new life in radio/podcasts like *The Moth*. Audio children’s shows have been resurrected. The familiar field of radio music has been supplemented with any number of what might be called music appreciation podcasts. Poetry is back, in a new, enhanced, personalized, political form, as in 2020’s Peabody Award-winning *Have You Heard George’s Podcast?* All manner of sonic non-fiction abounds, covering most fields of intellectual inquiry from history to philosophy to physics. Comedy, sports talk, religion, politics, fan talk; the list is endless: Animated by the power of the spoken word and its aural accompaniments, cutting across all former technological, professional, and disciplinary distinction, this is the way that sound works today. In a word: soundwork.

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NOTES

1. John Potts, “Is There a Sound Culture?” *Convergence* 3, no. 4 (1997): 13.
2. See also Michele Hilmes, “Sound/Soundwork,” in *Keywords in Media Studies*, eds. Laurie Oulette and Jonathan Gray (New York: NYU Press, 2016).
3. Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Culture Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 5.
4. Kate Lacey, *Listening Publics: The Politics and Experience of Listening in the Media Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 195, 198.
5. See Jason Loviglio, *Radio’s Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting and Mass-Mediated Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Martin Spinelli and Lance Dann, *Podcasting: The Audio Media Revolution* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).
6. Mia Lindgren, “Personal Narrative Journalism and Podcasting,” *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media* 14, no. 1 (2016): 23–41.