



Sonic influence: The politics of sound

Catherine John

Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Joseph's College, Moolamattom, Arakulam P.O., Kerala, India

Abstract

The question who assigns meaning to what one hears is debatable. As of now, there are striking theories on sound that are sidelined as delusional conspiracies. Overall, we perceive sound as a tool for communication, but the postmodern reality has started to undermine this superior notion and view sound as political. What categorizes a sound as noise has become dependent on the social and cultural norms within which one is immersed. The power heads running the world have mobilized sonic technologies to manipulate the public. Sound is crucial in defining our reality to the extent that it can fabricate false narratives that obscure reality. The increasing reliance on technology has rendered us more susceptible to being under the clutches of diverse influences that we are not even aware of.

Keywords: Sound, politics, gender, AI, reality

Introduction

“And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.” If perceived from an alternate view, before the intended phenomenon, came voice, or in strict terms, sound. It was not light that by itself distinguished itself from darkness, but the voice that “separated the light from the darkness.” More than a presence over which there exists controversies, the voice of God is less argued upon. It is the voice that brings into being. The thundering voice assumes authority and distinguishes itself from human blabber as ‘the word.’ The same notion is endorsed in many books of Holy Scripture. In Psalms it is said, “by the word of the Lord, the heavens were made.”

But humans always assign more value to presence than to its representative. But the long-neglected and deserted voice has always made its presence audible. It has always been a ‘voice from the desert’ rather than a ‘presence in the desert.’ Now the question is, is sound just a representative presence or is it something more? By its representative attribute, does it drag politics along with it?

Though it sounds sarcastic, unlike any other sense, we cannot close our eyes to sound. Its role in articulating the world around is colossal. With sound, a simulated reality is constructed. If any glitch is created in this matrix, the fabricated reality crumbles and we are exasperated. Even the slightest of alteration in this reality becomes unbearable for the ones living it. And as already held, none escapes the matrix. The reality that has been made sense of in a particular way in one’s mind if witnessed any way different from the mental picture he has of that reality, ‘his’ reality is shaken. Through sound, ‘his’ reality already hailing stays erect.

IPL had matches without audience during the pandemic. The stark reality of a match without any audience was not acceptable to human mind. The reality was simulated with the buzz of the audience from pre-pandemic matches leading to the false assumption that there are people in the stadium watching the match. One is aware of the absence, yet imagines the comforting presence i.e., one lets ‘the willing suspension of disbelief’ take over.

One cannot imagine a movie in which Lal Paul Michael or Janardhanan, two actors in Mollywood having a voice

different from their original voice. Their husky voice always stands out and if any change is brought to this reality, the spectator is very much likely to get irked. The same voice becomes political when it takes over identities through the act of mimicry. Othering is evaded during the act. But the act itself becomes the othering factor before and after the act.

The voice becomes even more political when it starts reinforcing problematic norms (Patch 2009) [2]. A fine example is the AI voice assistants widely used nowadays. Many developers insist that the AI they create is gender-neutral, but research suggests otherwise. Digital assistants like Siri are among the most popular AI service gadgets and just by its gender-aligned moniker, it might evoke gender stereotypes. Safiya Noble, professor at UCLA said that AI voice assistants can “function as powerful socialization tools, and teach people, in particular children, about the role of women, girls, and people who are gendered female to respond on demand” (Schumacher 2022) [1]. Majority of the programs use a gendered voice, with most of them having a female voice as default. Through the female assistant voices, we are being preconditioned to go back to the old stereotypes associated with the image of women in general. Female voiced AI assistants give men the kind of satisfaction he gets on submitting a woman. They command and the woman takes the order. One might argue that Google Maps has the female voice directing the man to his destination. But, if looked closely at this, it is the man specifying the destination. Speaking out about the issue, Georgetown University professor of linguistics Deborah Tannen says, “it is fascinating to think about what the effect is of all these electronic voices being women’s voices. I can think of two possible and potentially opposite effects. One might be that women are able to do everything, that there will be more respect for women in public positions and the other might be it is going to reinforce this impression that women are all there to just help you out with whatever you need.” (Schumacher 2022) [1]. Studies have found that both man and women prefer a female voice, whereas male participants reported an even stronger preference for women than female participants did on explicit measure.

Assigning a gender to a voice or not does not have the little impact one might assume. A study conducted at Stanford University showed that “vocal cues embedded in a machine are sufficient to evoke sex- based stereotypic responses” (Schumacher 2022) ^[1]. Though all the participants were made aware that they were interacting with a machine, gender stereotypes around the topics of computer, love and relationship were applied by the participants, showing how embedded this biased thinking is. The choice of voice is crucial when integrating speech technologies into a machine interface. The designer or engineer's selection of a specific voice establishes a spectrum of assumptions related to the voice's gender.

Understanding the other dimensions of sound is crucial in this era of deconstruction. Somewhere it is suppressed, somewhere it is heard and somewhere it is neglected. Apart from serving the purpose of communication, it propagates ideologies. And as seen, it even constructs reality for us. Though primary importance is given to its major form, it is also imperative that we delve into its other forms as well. On taking a deeper plunge, it will be crystal clear that the acoustic waves have meanings that we are not aware of.

References

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