9. Voice, Power and Modernity

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It has been argued that sound is one of the oldest ways of defining, encroaching on and enlarging territorial space, of manifesting power. From the war cries of the ancients, to the howling of the urban mob, one of these sounds has been the human voice. Until the late nineteenth century, however, the radius of vocalised space was limited by the body. From the 1870s, for the first time in human history, this dynamic was utterly transformed by the invention of the sound recording and subsequent related technologies. These technologies permitted a spatial increase that has ultimately become global and, through sound storage systems, a temporal enlargement. The small voice, the local voice, the domestic voice, all clamour for transnational public space, yet they can also be turned against their source through various sound-mixing technologies. With reference to case studies, this chapter will signpost the ambiguous relationship between the voice and power in the modern era.

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So the people shouted when the priests blew with the trumpets: and it came to pass, when the people heard the sound of the trumpet, and the people shouted with a great shout, that the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they took the city.

And they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword.

(The Book of Joshua, Chapter 6, Verses 20–1)

So perished Jericho, reminding us of the great antiquity of the role of the voice in defining territory and identity, of the connection between voice and power. So too when Hannibal faced the Romans in 202 BC in the battle of Zama that ended his campaign. According to Livy, the voice contributed significantly to this defeat:

There were…factors which seem trivial to recall, but proved of great importance at the time of action. The Roman war-cry was louder and more terrifying because it was in unison, whereas the cries from the Carthaginian side were discordant, coming as they did from a mixed assortment of peoples with a variety of mother tongues.¹

My argument here is a very broad brush, extrapolating from a range of case studies that I have conducted elsewhere. I want to take a deep historical perspective on the way in which that relationship between voice and power has
changed, to contextualise the particular contention here: that is, that the re-emergence of the voice from the late nineteenth century to challenge print as a major site of power is one of the keys to understanding modernity.

It has been argued explicitly and implicitly through, for example, ethno-musicology, that sound is the most ancient, widespread and durable way of defining the territory through which human beings project their individual and collective identity. Among the categories of sound deployed for these purposes, the voice, with its capacities for the most finely discriminated sonic semiotics, has been prominent. In Western Europe, the authority of the oral was challenged by the advent of print and the spread of literacy from the late fifteenth century. The new technology achieved two things. First, it enabled the widespread dissemination of information in standardised form far beyond the radius of the human voice. Scholars all over Europe could read the same things and, equally important, view the same images and diagrams. The other outcome was to create a new marker of class: those who could read and those who could not. As London commerce, with its peripatetic peddlers and their street cries, demonstrated, everyone could shout, but not everyone could write.

While we think of sixteenth-century England as being a richly literary culture, in fact by 1558 only one in five men and one in 20 women could even write their names. The written text defined a new site of literal and cultural capital. Thus, coinciding with the rise of capitalism, to be able to read and write became a new interface of class confrontation. Wheale opens his study of literacy in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century England by noting that when Christopher Marlowe presents the seven deadly sins in *Doctor Faustus*, the plebeian Envy has developed a new resentment not apparent in his medieval predecessors: ‘I cannot read, and therefore wish all books were burnt.’ This of course is not to make the absurd suggestion that people gradually stopped talking to each other, and the period was oratorically abundant, in theatre, pulpit and education. But there was a progressive decline in oral and aural sophistication as the dominant position gradually assumed by print in the information economy changed the status of sound in general and of the voice in particular.

These changes over several centuries constitute an instructive study in the complex operations of hegemony in and through intellectual and material culture. While the story of the printed text in England begins in the late fifteenth century, like all technologies, there is a considerable ‘take-up’ time before its impact changed the norms of a society. Kernan dates the arrival of the ‘generally accepted view that what is printed is true, or at least truer than any other type of record’ to some time in the eighteenth century, relating it to the pervasiveness of print in the form of posters, bills, receipts and newspapers—part of the fabric of everyday life. This raises the question, ‘Whose everyday life?’ Samuel Johnson’s works, including his *Dictionary*, can be taken as confirming the triumph of print.
as a form of cultural authorisation, the creation of the community of the ‘common reader’. But of course literacy in the mid-eighteenth century was by no means universal. If the idea of the common reader defined and validated membership of the community, clearly very large numbers of the population did not enjoy such authorisation. If Johnson contributed crucially to the idea of a community defined through its readerly competencies, his Dictionary also created a zone of exclusion. He can be said to have created the English proletariat by creating the proletariat in English. The word had appeared in the 1660s, but the lexicographic authority of Johnson’s Dictionary formally located the category at the lowest level of society: ‘mean, wretched, vile or vulgar.’

This was one of many ways in which the community of the British nation was imagined into existence during the eighteenth century, from a new flag and anthem through to the codification of national pastimes such as cricket. For the purposes of this discussion, I want to foreground the connection between literacy and privileged membership of that community, or, more specifically, what it implies about exclusion. Johnson’s work contributed to the definition of this community as a linguistic entity with agreed protocols of literacy. The lexicon embraced by his Dictionary was thereby given stability and permanence. It became stationed in the landscape of the imagination as a form of British property. I use the word ‘stationed’ pointedly, for its associations also with print and something fixed in space, as opposed to the ‘mob’, a word associated with noise and rootlessness. All that mattered culturally in the idea of the British nation was to be accommodated in, and thus validated by, the community of its common readers. Thus, the playwright for that richly oral forum, the Elizabethan stage, is progressively recuperated as the supreme ‘man of letters’ from the late seventeenth century: Shakespeare as the pinnacle of English literature.

It is notable, then, that Johnson excluded from the lexicon of written English the diction of the underclasses as ‘unworthy of preservation’. The ability to read was already long acknowledged as a privilege in law through the tradition of ‘benefit of clergy’. Johnson’s exclusions from his lexicography enlarged the community deprived of such benefits. His refusal to admit the diction of the labouring classes to the approved lexicon of Englishness was part of their progressive criminalisation, which went back to the long-standing refusal of the courts to recognise the ‘canting’ language of the poor. It also stiffened the disenfranchisement of non-literate cultures (within and beyond ‘the nation’). The spoken language—the cant—of the illiterate proletariat was regarded increasingly as in itself evidence of criminality. Seen in terms of the historical confrontations between literate and sonic information circuits, this represents a further stage in the politicisation of noise. Deprived of an ‘authorised’ (that is, written) language, the proletariat must choose between deferential silence and disruptive and seditious noise. Linebaugh lists a succession of legislative measures
from the early eighteenth century that were intended to repress and regulate the working classes. One of these was the *Riot Act* of 1715, and it is relevant to this discussion that evidence of its violation was the gathering in public places of a noisy, riotous, tumultuous group of 12 or more people. Those whose position in the political economy was defined by making public noise were disruptive and thus also proclaimed the probability of their criminal tendencies.

This is a further stage in the process by which silence became associated increasingly with moral and intellectual gravitas, as reflected in treatises on appropriate comportment for reading, as well as in the increasing acoustic regimentation of congregations and theatre and concert audiences. The right to impose silence increasingly defined relations of power. The pathologies that defined the disenfranchised brought into being by the capitalist order included not just supposed illiteracy, but their immersion in the alternative communication circuit: sound. They make noise, and in doing so manifest themselves as a threat to a hegemonic textuality. The ruling orders maintain their power through print; the subordinated are identified in networks of orality. I am suggesting that the struggle over the right to make noise is a very useful way of tracing the history of relations of power since the medieval period. The rise of the mob, the urban crowd, the embryonic working class or the proletariat—those who were oppressed under capitalism—is figured as the rise of noise. Wordsworth finds London beautiful when standing back from it in the silence of the morning on Westminster Bridge. But when, in Book Seven of *The Prelude*, he actually enters its streets, he is disturbed and disgusted by the noise of its plebeian herd, the oppressive ‘roar’ (line 178), ‘deafening din’ (line 155), ‘thickening hubbub’ (line 211), the ‘uproar of the rabblement’ (line 273).

By the nineteenth century, regimes of silence were imposed on factory workers, and the ‘silent system’ introduced by George Chesterton as a way of degrading convicts in Coldbath Fields Prison in 1834 was universalised in the *Prison Act* of 1865. In colonial Australia, the singing of songs by convict labourers could be penalised by up to 100 debilitating lashes—enough to flay a man. Foucault’s work has led to a fixation on scopic regimes, an obsession with surveillance and ‘The Gaze’. Strangely little has been made of this complementary but sometimes contesting dynamic: the politicisation of sound and the attempts to silence the subordinated orders.

The capitalist underclasses remained relatively illiterate until the effects of the *Education Act* of 1871 began to filter through to the lower middle classes and women in particular, much to the alarm of custodians of civilised culture. These underclasses were defined by their noisiness, which was also a way of consolingly limiting the radius of their power, compared with the reach of print to an international hegemonic class. Authority resided in and was controlled by the scopic, by print and the eye. The growing threat of ‘the mob’ was signalled
in the French Revolution, and one sign of the nervousness thus instilled was a strengthening of the imagined link between civilisation and the visual rather than the oral as the instrument of authority and power. In Jacob Burckhardt’s influential *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*, first published in 1860, he articulated the well-springs of that civilisation as a primarily visual culture. Significantly, he described the work as ‘a vision’.22

Interestingly, it was in the same decade that a technological development that was itself a product of the capitalist urban information economy arrived to dismantle the monopoly of print. In 1877, Edison took out the first patent on a sound-recording device.23 For centuries, print had severed information from sound. The connection was literally rewired with Morse code, a technology generated by the information explosions associated with urbanisation and the internationalisation of capitalism. The proliferation and circulation of commercial data overtook the capacities of the scribal hand, requiring new stenographic technologies. The noise of the typewriter became the new trope of busy-ness, or business, because, like the sound recording, it came into being for stenographic purposes. As with most new technologies, the sound recording’s function was quickly re-defined by the market-place and, like the telephone, it re-audialised society. Other similar technologies have followed, including the microphone, radio, movie soundtracks and audio-internet.

These are not simply technological add-ons to society, but transforming interventions, and in particular they transformed power relations in the modern era. The breaking of the link between scribal silence and the movement of commercial information, for example, completely inverted the gender profile of the ‘keeper of the secrets’: the secretary. You didn’t need a good writing hand to use a typewriter. Before the invention of the typewriter, in Europe, women would be taught to read, but for the most part, they could read only what men had written down. In general, women were not required to write professionally and the teaching of writing to women was erratic. Accordingly, their handwriting was notoriously uneven, ungrammatical and illegible. At the same time, there was an enormous pool of unemployed women: that is, women excluded from the economy, and in particular the information economy. New stenographic technologies transformed these politics. In 1870, only 4.5 per cent of stenographers and typists in the United States were women. By 1930, the figure was 95.6 per cent.24

These new information technologies thus destabilised the foundations of cultural capital, most fundamentally in democratising access to information by bringing it back to the realm of the acoustic. It should not therefore be surprising that those who had enjoyed various kinds of power were frequently suspicious of these new information circuits. The French government led the way in attempting
to regulate ownership of the information stored on sound recordings by drawing
it into the discourses of print. Thus, sound recordings constitute

a special writing, which in the future will undoubtedly be legible to the
eyes and is today within everyone’s reach as sound; that by virtue of
this repetition of imprinted words the literary work penetrates the mind
of the listener as it would by means of sight from a book.  

Early advertising for record players addressed the anxieties of the genteel classes
regarding the product’s vulgarity. Male singers spurned the microphone as a
sign of weakness and effeminacy, ironically leaving it to women (in Australia
at least) to pioneer vocal techniques that defined twentieth-century popular
music. Kenneth Slessor’s ambiguous response to the ‘new woman’ who emerged
after World War I was summarised in her addiction to the telephone, recordings
and the radio. In relation to this argument, in a particularly telling mixed
metaphor, he says of her that ‘her eyes are full of wireless’.  

The image emphasises the new ascendancy of oral networks through the
enormous enlargement of the radius of the voice. Print lost its monopoly in the
mass dissemination of knowledge. Individuals who could be disempowered and
communities that could be atomised by exclusion from a textual culture now
literally found public voices. Once sound could be stored and mass mediated,
it provided an alternative network with a presence far more intense than print.
And, of all sounds, none projected and constructed identities more intensely
than the voice. In 1897, the poet Ernst von Wildenbruch recorded his voice on
to a cylinder and wrote a poem for the occasion, including the lines:

The fawning face can deceive the eye, the sound of the voice can never
lie;

Thus it seems to be the phonograph is the soul’s true photograph.  

Sound technologies thus restored the ancient link between power and the voice,
by enabling the mass circulation of the vocal into spaces that had been dominated
by print throughout the Enlightenment. This remains such an unpalatable truth
to print-based power blocs that it continues to be denied through academic
fixations on the ‘power of the gaze’, and indeed I suggest that the rise of theory
itself in late twentieth-century academia is part of the rearguard attempt to deny
the cultural democratisation achieved through mass-mediated sound. ‘Theory’,
of course, is derived from the Greek word for spectacle.

With the increasing diversification and sophistication of acoustic technologies,
the voice became an instrument of power that outflanked a medium based on
the specialised skills of reading, and the ear again challenged the eye as the
source of information. The case of radio amplifies the point. Radio came into
general public use in anglophone societies in the 1920s, and, by 1931, 50 per
cent of urban families in the United States owned a radio. By 1940, radio news had overtaken the press as the primary source of information and ‘the first source of political news’ in the United States.\(^{30}\) Its importance to political debate changed the personal profile of the successful politician. During the US elections of 1928, Democrat candidate Al Smith lost to Herbert Hoover, in spite of the fact that, in person, Smith was by far the more visually arresting speaker than his stolid opponent. One reason was radio. Smith could not be persuaded to stand still before a radio microphone and the effect of his voice, with its pronounced East Side accent, moving in and out of earshot, was grotesque and his words unintelligible to many in the South and West. By comparison, Hoover, who was a dull speaker, disciplined himself to talk directly into the microphone, have his shyness mistaken for modesty, and give a general impression of Midwestern sobriety.\(^{31}\)

It is likely that Orson Welles’ notorious 1938 broadcast of *War of the Worlds* would not have had the impact it did were it not for the authority in disaster reportage gained from the broadcast of the Hindenburg disaster in the previous year. The power of the medium was recognised by the more far-seeing—or far-hearing—politicians. One of F. D. Roosevelt’s first priorities on gaining office was to set up a committee of inquiry into the role of government in the regulation of wireless broadcasting, and he became one of the most effective pioneers of political broadcasting.\(^{32}\)

Finally, however, let us recognise the ambiguity of the power of the mediated voice. Roosevelt mobilised the energy of Americans against the Great Depression through his celebrated ‘fireside chat’ broadcasts. It is less easy to applaud the agenda of the great pioneer of twentieth-century vocalised demagoguery, Adolph Hitler. He first became aware of his own political destiny through his voice. He later wrote of how, as an education officer at a *Reichswehr* camp near Augsburg in 1919,

all at once I was offered the opportunity of speaking before a large audience; and the thing that I had always presumed from pure feeling without knowing it was now corroborated; I could speak...in the course of my lectures I led many hundreds, indeed, thousands, back to their people and fatherland. I ‘nationalised’ the troops.\(^{33}\)

What makes Hitler so ‘modern’ is not simply his oratorical power, but the effectiveness with which he, along with Goebbels, grafted this to possibilities for mass mediation. In the elections of 1932, through technologised mobility—the aircraft—his energetic ‘Hitler over Germany’ schedule enabled him to deliver speeches personally across Germany.\(^{34}\) But it was sound technology that was crucial. Through sound-film and the distribution of more than 50,000 recordings
of his ‘Appeal to the Nation’ speech, Hitler flooded the country with that disturbingly electrified and electrifying voice. Supplemented by rented Lautsprecherwagons—vans equipped with external loudspeakers—to fill the streets with Nazi speeches and songs, his voice became the basis of his connection with the German people, and would reach an estimated 20 million citizens as acoustic theatre through the new facility of state radio. The careful stage management of these broadcasts explicitly politicised a paradox that crooners such as Bing Crosby had stumbled on: through the radio voice, it was possible to reconcile the mass with the individual, to speak to everyone as though speaking directly to each. No one demonstrated more effectively than Hitler the reuniting of voice and power in the era of modernity.

Later technology introduced further complexities into the relationship between voice and power. In the 1970s, US jazz writer Whitney Balliett observed that recordings ‘take on their own life’. He could not have seen at that time just how profoundly digitisation would vindicate him. So to my last point. Ever since what Serge Lacasse called vocal staging through echoes and ventriloquial effects by ancient shamans and priests, the voice without a visible source has been a bearer of disturbing power. Like the ghost under the stage in Hamlet, the ‘acousmêtre’, as Chion called it, has been used to unnerve audiences with the sense of a pervasive yet ontologically ambiguous authority. When that sourceless voice can be mass mediated through digital technology, it becomes potentially a site of autonomous power, power independent of the voice’s owner. What von Wildenbruch called the guarantee of self, the ‘photograph of the soul’, suddenly becomes capable of violating the soul. Thus, towards the end of the twentieth century, the remorseless rise of an Australian demagogue was brought to a halt partly by a vocal doppelganger.

The arrival of Pauline Hanson on the political scene disclosed previously neglected dynamics in Australian society, and she became such a powerful conductor for those disaffected by the move towards globalisation and cultural diversity that John Howard had to delay calling a federal election until the Coalition had absorbed the implications of her stunning success in the Queensland state elections of 1996. But, by 1998, the momentum had gone, and in that year Hanson lost to Cameron Thompson in the bid for the seat of Blair. Thompson attributed his victory in part to the ‘battle’ Hanson was fighting with her own alter ego, Pauline Pantsdown, during the campaign. Pantsdown was the persona inhabited by Simon Hunt, a lecturer in media at Sydney’s College of Fine Arts, and a gay rights activist. I have published a detailed analysis of this episode elsewhere, but refer briefly to it here as a concluding case study in the radical subversiveness of the recorded voice. Pantsdown’s most effective weapon in his confrontation with Hanson was the latter’s own voice. This was first heard in the dance track I’m a Back Door Man, which was constructed out of digitised
bites of speeches by Pauline Hanson, laboriously reassembled to present this rabid conservative proudly declaring that she was a lesbian committed to the establishment of a homosexual society.

The idea came to Hunt as he listened to Hanson’s voice, with its distinctive cadences and timbres. As we listen to the song and its follow-up, I Don’t Like It, we are again confronted with von Wildenbruch’s axiom. The power of what is spoken lies as much in the voice as in the words, in what is heard as much as in what is understood. What someone says is perhaps of secondary importance to the vocal presence: whose flesh does not tingle at the sound of Hitler’s voice, even if we don’t speak German? Thus, the development of the sound recording on the cusp of modernity was not simply another way of circulating what someone said. It confirmed modernity as an era of neo-orality, and marked the mass deployment of the power of the voice in a way that finally outreached print.

ENDNOTES

2. See, for example, Schafer, J. Murray 1977, The Tuning of the World, McClelland and Stewart, Toronto.
5. Ibid., p. 1.
7. Ibid., p. 240.
9. Ibid., p. 117.
10. The two words ‘stationery’ and ‘stationary’ converge in the fact that printers could not conduct their business as street pedlars, but required fixed ‘stations’ of business. The word ‘mob’ is cognate with ‘mobile’, being on the move and, as such, a threat to fixed property.
11. I have developed this and other arguments cognate with this overall discussion, in Johnson, Bruce, 2006, ‘Divided loyalties: literary responses to the rise of oral authority in the modern era’, Textus, Vol. XIX, pp. 285-304.
14. See, for example, ibid., p. 72.
15. Ibid., p. 17.
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21 Carey, John 1992, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880–1939*, Faber & Faber, London and Boston, see for example, pp. 6, 58.
22 In a letter, he described historiographical knowledge in terms of visual tropes: ‘My starting point has to be a vision, otherwise I cannot do anything. Vision I call not only optical, but also spiritual realization; for instance, historical vision issuing from the old sources.’ (Cited by L. Goldscheider in his ‘Foreword’ to Jacob Burckhardt 1955, *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy: An Essay*, Phaidon Press Ltd, Fifth Printing of the 1944 edition based on S. G. C. Middleton’s translation of 1878, p. x.)
28 Slessor, *Backless Betty from Bondi*, p. 32.
29 Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, p. 79.
31 Ibid., p. 107.
32 Ibid., pp. 325, 336.
34 Ibid., pp. 363, 364, 369.
36 For this information and a general account of the importance of sound in the emergence of the Nazi Party, see Birdsall, Carolyn (forthcoming), ‘Affirmative Resonances in the City? Sound, Imagination and Urban Space in Early 1930s Germany. Thanks to the author for permission to read and refer to a pre-publication draft.
37 Ibid., pp. 433, 440, 453.