

## Noise, from Dos Passos to Bob Pollard

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It is often said that the United States is a post-industrial society with an information economy. The American enterprise is now driven by services and the creation of intellectual property, in the form of entertainment, pharmaceuticals, software and other forms of “information.” Most thinkers have linked this shift to two big changes: the widespread introduction of computers, and the connecting of all these computers through modern telecommunications, including advances in phone, cable, and satellite connectivity. Whole disciplines of information science and information theory have emerged since the 1940s to interpret this new infrastructure of communication, and we have grown accustomed to treating all expression, all thought, all interaction as a statistical, quantifiable transmission of information. Anything that gets in the way of that transmission is noise. And in a system that seeks the fastest, most profitable ways to make, move, send, sale, and receive information, noise is a potential threat.

The anthropologist Brian Larkin has written thoughtfully about the aesthetics and political implications of noise in his work on video piracy in Nigeria. The noise generated by endless copying takes on a life of its own. “Cheap tape recorders, old televisions, blurred videos that are the copy of a copy of a copy,” Larkin says. “These are the material distortions endemic to the reproduction of media goods in situations of poverty and illegality...” The distortion is an imprint of the conditions under which such goods are made and distributed, a disordered society. The circulation of pirate goods is also a sort of noise in the total system of communication from the perspective of Western media corporations, who would rather see the leaks that disseminate bootleg distortion around the world plugged up. Bootlegs stand in contrast to the vision of efficient delivery of sound and vision that media companies would desire in a perfect world.

It is little wonder that we tend to think of communication as the sending of a signal from point A to point B. In a society that worships the ideals of the market, we have

come to imagine our communication with each other purely as a matter of exchange, not as an encounter or engagement between two or more people – what Heidegger would call “being with.” We are not being with each other when we talk; we are sending things to and from each other.

But is the dream of perfect communication – the pure, unimpeded transfer of information from one to another – anything more than an elusive ideal? To better understand what’s at stake culturally in the so-called “information economy,” we need to examine the way theorists have thought of the relationship between epistemology and technology. Students of communication always deal with how people come to know things. Jacques Attali, George Myerson, Paolo Virno and others have argued that particular ideologies about how we learn and speak accompany the emergence of various media; people usually create a new device with a particular notion of ideal communication in mind. How communication is defined can have dramatic consequences for how we live.

We can start from the premise that there is an external world, and that we are born with some means and invent others for processing information about it. The medium, which is in the middle, strives to render its inputs in useful ways, which implies some kind of (greater or lesser) correspondence between what is perceived and the perception. We can change the media in various ways – their nature is as dynamic as the world inside and out. As Torben Sangild has written, “There is a constant discrepancy between the essentially indescribable object and the attempt to verbalize and understand it,” but people have aimed to minimize this gap in most media.<sup>1</sup> “Long before it was given... theoretical expression, noise had always been experienced as destruction, disorder, dirt, pollution, an aggression against the code-structuring messages,” according to Jacques Attali.<sup>2</sup> The goal has been to produce a recording that captures sound clearly, or a photograph that resembles as much as possible what the human eye perceives in a given time and place.

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<sup>1</sup> Torben Sangild, “The Aesthetics of Noise,” *Ubuweb* (2002), accessed 8 April 2006, at <http://www.ubu.com/papers/noise.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 27.

Perfect accuracy would mean that the picture perceived is identical to the outside world in all relevant details. It is possible to conceive of such a situation, even if its realization would be unlikely or even impossible. Clarity in literature, technology, art, social organization, construction or philosophy extends both productive and destructive possibilities. It would be wrong to fault this yearning for accuracy as a wholesale flaw of modernism, capitalism, science or some other bogeyman. Desire for efficiency can lead to elegance of expression and material abundance. Blinders help people to see and function, while also introducing the danger of missing or dismissing important information.

One version of the search for clarity would ultimately attain perfect communication – signals that are smoothly transmitted, instantly understood, and enacted without flaw. One can draw an analogy from the relationship of the external world, the sensory organs, language and the mind to the operation of a telephone system.<sup>3</sup> Ideally, what exists on one end would appear in the highest resolution on the other, unpolluted. The best computer would find the exact file you want as soon as it comes to mind; this dream stretches back all the way to Vannevar Bush's pre-digital idea of a "memex" tape machine of the 1940s, which followed "associative trails" marked and remembered during one's work in a microfilm library.<sup>4</sup> A command to open would open, and nothing would ever crash, because no confusion could occur within the machine as to what should be done when.

When David Brent, the nightmare boss of BBC's *The Office*, declared that "a company runs on efficiency of communication," he was not just mouthing a management cliché. This satire of white collar misery neatly summarizes the model

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<sup>3</sup> Paul N. Edwards has identified a number of metaphors for understanding human thinking that have entered into wide usage after World War II, such as "The brain is hardware," "The brain is a rapid, complex calculating machine," "The mind is software," "Thinking is computation," and "Memory is looking up stored data." See *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America* (Boston: MIT Press, 1997), 161. A popular evangelist has even taken up the metaphor to encourage listeners to install Christian belief as their "software": Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential* (New York: Warner Faith, 2004), 113-114.

<sup>4</sup> Vannevar Bush, "As We May Think," *Atlantic Monthly* 176 (1):101-108 (July 1945).

of communication toward which technology and modern administration strive. A richer example can be found in a 1996 commercial for Lotus office software. A young boy named Mikey Powers writes a letter to Lotus declaring that “business is boring,” and computers should be used for fun and “surfing.” Suddenly, actor Denis Leary appears in the bedroom and tells Mikey to go to bed. “You can’t handle the fact that big companies are using the web to save a billion dollars and get their products to market faster,” Leary snarled. “All you care about is fooling around on your computer, right? Well, who pays for that fancy computer? Your parents. How do they make money...? Business.”<sup>5</sup> Investment in technology demands that “fooling around” be subordinated to the more legitimate purposes of business. Communication is a means to practical ends in the strictest sense – order, efficacy, productivity, and, as Lotus suggests, ever greater acceleration.

The organizing zeal of capitalism reveals the darker side of the Internet and Adrienne Rich's "dream of a common language."<sup>6</sup> The World Wide Web uses uniform protocols (i.e. rules and procedures) so that a computer can hook up to it and exchange information with any other, from Bangladesh to the US. Computer scientists called this "end to end" programming, because it did not matter what was actually happening on one computer or the other – a card game, a spreadsheet or word processing – the parts in between were simple, effective and similar enough for communication to happen anyway.<sup>7</sup> In other words, TCP/IP can be viewed as a common language or lingua franca, the pragmatist's Esperanto. The brilliant ideas of Tim Berners-Lee and other key programmers have opened up a flexible and expansive medium for the use of many people in the world. Some critics argue, though, that the Internet language eliminates difference and sucks things great and small into one flat, homogeneous medium.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Edward Samuels, *The Illustrated History of Copyright* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2000), 109.

<sup>6</sup> Adrienne Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems, 1974-1977* (New York: Norton, 1978).

<sup>7</sup> Lawrence Lessig, *The Future of Ideas: The Fate of the Commons in a Connected World* (New York: Vintage, 2001), 35.

<sup>8</sup> For a consideration of the Internet as a hegemonic technology, see Bosah Ebo, *Cyberimperialism?: Global Relations on the Electronic Frontier* (Westport, CT: Praeger,

Paul Edwards argues that the metaphor of the human body as an information processing machine – a computer – provided the basis for the new cognitive psychology that developed out of World War II, with clear political implications. The war presented communication as an immensely practical problem, since soldiers often could not hear commands against the din of tanks and bombs. The solution required cutting of many kinds: scientists working for the Department of Defense had to find ways both to reduce noise *and* to strip language down to its barest, instrumental essentials. The integration of humans into high-tech weapons systems encouraged a view of the human brain as a computer, receiving and acting upon signals according to an internally defined set of procedures. In such a scenario, communication consists of “transmissions through a command chain.”<sup>9</sup> Military researchers inadvertently betrayed many of their underlying assumptions with the name chosen for a new gizmo, the “ear warden,” which ensured that sailors could discern instructions from the surrounding sounds of combat. “Noise caused chaos by breaking the links of the chain of command,” Edwards writes. “Ear Wardens restored order.”<sup>10</sup> Anything other than the effective movement of instructions is, like the rattle of a battlefield, useless noise. Effective technology and management would police the boundaries of perception.

This ideology extends far beyond military applications or even the academic psychology that grew out of defense research. The goal of clear transmission of orders toward practical ends pervades the consumer market and the workplace. Our socialization to technology mimics our ideal for machinery. You are at home with the new device when you can pull the cell phone from your pocket, unlock the keypad, open your message box, and bring the phone to your ear through muscle memory, with the minimum attention possible. Thought can then be allocated to other tasks, increasing your general efficiency. It would be frustrating to contact a call center for some corporation and find that the person on the other end does not

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2000), 191. Benjamin Barber, “Jihad vs. McWorld,” in Robert Griffith et al, eds., *Major Problems in American History Since 1945* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 544-5.

<sup>9</sup> Edwards, *Closed World*, 222.

<sup>10</sup> Edwards, *Closed World*, 213.

know which button to push, or the best way to navigate through options on a computer screen to find the solution to your problem. I used to work the phone at a pizza place, and I surely inflicted some angst when I could not figure out how to punch in a special deal on so many wings and so many breadsticks for \$5.99. I recall also that I got annoyed when the customer continually changed from one topping to three to two, or wanted blue cheese dressing instead of the originally stated preference for ranch. If only Jimbo Cloninger had planned out his choices in advance and proceeded in an efficient manner.

If demands and commands could be conveyed otherwise, the need for language as we understand it could disappear. What would be needed instead is a code and a system to deliver it, which would report information and convey instructions. George Myerson investigated these dystopian tendencies in his work on Martin Heidegger and Jurgen Habermas. In a sense, he says, both the mobile phone and the computerization of service industries seek to minimize communication. Although it is possible to use the text messaging function of a phone to express a lengthy meditation on a complex subject, the medium does lend itself (both in its function and pricing) to swift, abbreviated bits of information: "Dinner at my house," or "Meet at 7."

Myerson uses the example of a Starbucks coffeeshop that allows people to call in their orders. While walking to the shop, a person could use a mobile phone to type in the order (half-caf, skim milk, etc.) using a menu of options, pay with a credit card, and pick up the drink – without actually talking to anyone at all. The servants, both the barista and the computer, would receive instructions and carry them out with nary a hitch.<sup>11</sup> The person who bought the coffee might work in much the same way, in an office, shop floor, or classroom somewhere. "In the mobile [phone] vision," Myerson observes, "we have millions of goal-seeking atoms, making basic contacts through the network." Heidegger and Habermas, in contrast, argued that human interaction should be slow, deliberate and carefully considered, with two

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<sup>11</sup> George Myerson, *Heidegger, Habermas, and the Mobile Phone* (London: Totem Books, 1997), 26.

people sharing information in order to reach a mutual understanding.<sup>12</sup>

So goes the dream of enhanced humanity, flawless telecommunication and maximum efficiency. You can imagine the "Invisible Hand" multitasking and micromanaging, or Thomas Frank's Market God truly coordinating some idea of the greatest good for the greatest number.<sup>13</sup> The possibility remains that a fully accurate means of perception could confront an organization of details so complex and lapidary that a new kind of "noise" would emerge from the arrangement of information, even if each piece were delivered to the mind in identical form. One can imagine a computer screen filled with so many tiled or transparent windows that cacophony results, although the limitations of information processing could possibly be overcome. At present, neither our minds nor our machines can comprehend any way to encompass, interpret and ultimately regulate the vast system of cause and effect in the weather. There are too many undisclosed variables involved, and interactions are too complex and mercurial to be recorded and manipulated. The noise and the margin of error include all those things we cannot perceive, process or anticipate.

Attali argues that dissonance can contribute to more accurate perception or even generate new ways of seeing. "Noise is the source of... mutations in the structuring codes," he writes. "For despite the death it contains, noise carries order within itself; it carries new information." From this perspective, noise is true, or another part of the truth to be precise. It comes in from the side-view mirror, usually closer than it appears. "The very absence of meaning in pure noise or in the meaningless repetition of a message, by unchanneling auditory sensations, frees the listener's imagination."<sup>14</sup> The malfunction can jolt an individual from the hold of habit and procedure.

Reproduction in general and piracy in particular offer the possibility that production

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<sup>12</sup> Myerson, *Heidegger*, 27.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Frank, *One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism, and the End of Economic Democracy* (New York: Anchor, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Attali, *Noise*, 33.

under less regulated conditions will result in novel outcomes: more production, more variations, more noise. The tools available to the ordinary person, in both rich or poor nations, are almost always less advanced than those used by corporations and government. This fact often, but not always, means a competitive disadvantage for the small producer, but in any case the products created by the masses are likely to be different in nature than those produced by large industries. These differences could prove to be irrelevant to people, or they could accumulate and lead to new content, styles and uses.

Fondness for technical shortcomings, limitations and noise has a rich history in twentieth century culture. John Dos Passos swiped clippings from newspapers and magazines to create a sort of background noise in his epic novel, *U.S.A.*, a literary sampling so unexpected that *Esquire* and other magazines provided instructions to help readers make heads or tails of the passages.<sup>15</sup> In this way, Dos Passos employed consternation as a creative force; and, as Sonic Youth suggested early in their career, perfect clarity is not always a virtue. *Confusion*, after all, *Is Sex* (1983). Lev Manovich points to the unexpected shortcomings of digital representation for a more recent example. On its face, digitization seems to conform neatly to the efficient, clarion ideal of communication discussed by Edwards, Myerson and others; computers can convert any words, sounds or images into an exact numerical code, which then can be transmitted and recreated digit by digit, pixel by pixel.

However, these data require a great deal of storage, and scientists have devised ways to compress information by carefully deleting parts of the representation. “While, in theory, computer technology entails the flawless replication of data, its actual use in contemporary society is characterized by loss of data, degradation, and noise,” Manovich says. Despite the hype, analog and digital media both involve distortion.<sup>16</sup> In the Nigerian context, Brian Larkin has described the effects of distortion as an aesthetic of “technological collapse,” pointing to the cases when media do not work well as opposed to when they do. Kim Cascone argues that

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1997), 172.

<sup>16</sup> Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 52-53.

composers in the late twentieth century have sought to exploit the imperfection of technology as a style in itself. The whirring, buzzing static of media machines that crash has taken center stage for some. “Failure’ has become a prominent aesthetic... revealing digital tools to be only as perfect, precise, and efficient as the humans who build them,” she writes. “New techniques are often discovered by accident or by the failure of an intended technique or experiment.”<sup>17</sup>

In much the same spirit, several distinct genres in popular music have either intentionally incorporated noise, or embraced the consequences of lagging technology and low funds as a sign of pride. Punk rock in the 1970s famously sought to rip the fussily pristine music of the mainstream to shreds, stripping rock & roll to its roughest elements. Initially, many thought such a break would liberate and contradict bourgeois ideals of craft and capital investment in culture. “All the other music was like watching color movies,” singer Michael Stipe recalled of first hearing punk, “but this is like watching staticky black-and-white TV. And that made incredible sense to me... Their whole Zeitgeist was that anybody could do it.” Sangild observes, though, that the artists who delved deeper into noise after punk often used the sound to represent “melancholy, pain, fear, death, excess, perversion – in short, what the philosopher Georges Bataille... has called “the heterogeneous.”<sup>18</sup> Such a style may implicitly criticize social norms, but one also recognizes these same emotions from Attali’s account of how traditional societies conceived of noise.

Alongside “No Wave,” “noise rock” and other clanging subgenres, the notion of “lo-fi” also took root – independent music created with the cheapest means of home recording, accepting static and emphasizing spontaneity. Such music could present itself as a populist folk form, substantively different because of its freedom from financial and technological barriers to self-representation. In the 1980s and 1990s, for example, Guided By Voices recorded about eight hundred short, fragmentary songs, which suggested that the formulas of composition would also break down

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<sup>17</sup> Kim Cascone, “The Aesthetics of Failure: ‘Post-Digital’ Tendencies in Contemporary Computer Music,” *Computer Music Journal* 24:4 (Winter 2002).

<sup>18</sup> Sangild, “Aesthetics of Noise,” n.p.

alongside the quality of sound.<sup>19</sup> On a representative record, twenty-eight tracks add up to forty-one minutes; each would take about a half an hour to record, played into bottom-of-the-line microphones from Radio Shack positioned among beer cans and garbage. The techniques resulted in a deliberately tinny sound, wrapped around surrealistic song “snippets” that recalled transistor radios as much as the cut-up methods of the Oulipo and Burroughs.<sup>20</sup> The sounds also bore the mark of their modest birthplace – a four track tape recorder in the bedroom of a Dayton, Ohio elementary school teacher.

But in music, noise cannot refer only to sonic roughage, like a bludgeoning rhythm or background noise. It also applies to the juxtaposition of dissimilar or unexpected elements one finds in much electronic music, where bits from a variety of sources can be combined into a sound collage – a snatch of classical sitar, a George Clinton bass line, and a programmed beat. Hip-hop emerged alongside the underground market in recordings, and business, government and musicians’ groups viewed the techniques of DJs and samplers who assembled old sounds in new configurations as another form of piracy. Public Enemy dramatized the legal conflict in the 1987 recording, “Caught, Can I Get a Witness,” in which the sampler is busted like a common thief. “Caught, now in court ‘cause I stole a beat,” Chuck D said. “This is a sampling sport, but I’m giving it a new name. What you hear is mine.” D talks of the sound as a “mineral” found in the earth, which, as with John Locke of old, became his own because he transformed it into something new.<sup>21</sup>

For Chuck D, ownership comes from consciously changing a sound by putting it into a new context or distorting it, while others have celebrated unconscious appropriation. By sampling, recontextualizing, and transforming bits of other works, artists stand against the idea of musical culture as a smooth, frictionless market of bought-and-sold sounds, easily measured. No one knows how many “copies” of a given recording exist in one form or another, and an otherwise easily

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<sup>19</sup> James Greer, *Guided By Voices: A Brief History: Twenty-One Years of Hunting Accidents in the Forests of Rock & Roll* (New York: Black Cat, 2005), 2.

<sup>20</sup> Greer, *Guided By Voices*, 97. *Alien Lanes* technician Bob Ludwig also mastered Bruce Springsteen’s four-track experiment, *Nebraska*, which was a folk piece of a more literal kind.

<sup>21</sup> Public Enemy, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (Def Jam Records, 1987).

quantified business becomes unmeasurable. Sounds, otherwise for sale on the market, go in unpredictable directions and end up in strange places. Poet Kenneth Goldsmith's *Head Citations*, for instance, consists of popular song lyrics that, misheard, morph into bizarre variations. The songs might have come out garbled because of a radio station badly tuned, a scratchy record, or plain bad hearing on the part of the listener, but they all resonate with the broader culture through the creative associations that the mind makes to cope with noise. "This is the dawning of the age of malaria," Goldsmith begins, going on to note, "We built this city on the wrong damn road," and "What a man, what a man, when the money comes in."<sup>22</sup>

There are, then, two types of noise: political and literal. The first directly contravenes the authoritarian model of perfect communication promoted by capitalist technology (interrupting the flow of instructions, appropriating intellectual property from the mainstream market) or proposes an alternative model of expression (talk that does not convey orders). This activity is noise from the perspective of management. It is extra, redundant, unnecessary and sometimes damaging communication – things that do not need to be or should not be said. The second describes the specific qualities of expression through the new devices of cultural reproduction, which fall short of an ideal of crystal-clear representation and sometimes do so creatively.

The post-industrial society must find ways to handle these phenomena, because the tools it uses to control, supervise and manage are often the ones that can be used to express and appropriate. The systems of surveillance and coordination that allowed capitalism to transform itself in the 1970s developed right alongside new practices like sampling, piracy and home recording, which disrupted old patterns of production and ideas about property and creativity. As Gilles Deleuze argued, "The societies of control operate with machines of a third type, computers, whose passive danger is jamming and whose active one is piracy or the introduction of viruses."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Kenneth Goldsmith, *Head Citations* (New York: The Figures, 2002). These examples refer to "The Age of Aquarius/Let the Sunshine In," recorded by the Fifth Dimension (1969); "We Built This City," by Starship (1985); and "Whatta Man," by Salt-N-Pepa (1993).

<sup>23</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October* 59 (Winter 1992): 6.