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From Airwaves to Algorithmic Soundscapes: Sonic Citizenship in an Age of Populism and War

Tanja Bosch, Centre for Film and media studies, University of Cape Town, tanja.bosch@uct.ac.za

Abstract

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This paper argues that sound functions not merely as media content but as civic infrastructure that shapes how publics know, feel, and participate in collective life. Drawing on examples from radio, streaming, and social media, it develops three interlinked concepts: algorithmic soundscapes, sonic citizenship, and listening as method. Algorithmic soundscapes describe the platform-mediated circulation of sound through recommendation systems, AI synthesis, and remix culture, where algorithms curate civic audibility. Sonic citizenship reframes participation as aural practice in which listening, remixing, voicing, or silence become political acts that negotiate belonging and exclusion within uneven infrastructures of audibility. Listening as method invites scholars to attend not only to speech but also to silence, absence, and affect as forms of civic meaning-making.

Through case studies ranging from Trump's populist soundbites to protest audio from Gaza and community radio in South Africa, the paper traces how algorithmic listening cultures intertwine intimacy, solidarity, and control. It argues that to listen today is to take a civic stance, whether by amplifying or refusing, aligning or resisting, and calls for research that cultivates attentive, plural, and just sonic publics in an age where audibility itself is unevenly distributed.

Keywords

algorithmic soundscapes, sonic citizenship, listening, media infrastructures, platform governance, digital publics, political communication, algorithmic curation, civic participation, digital citizenship, listening as method

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Sound is not just content, but a form of civic infrastructure, shaping how publics come to know, feel, and participate in collective life. This commentary explores how practices of listening, production, and circulation are increasingly mediated by digital systems and political economies of attention. To develop this argument, I introduce three key framing concepts.The first is *algorithmic soundscapes*: digital platforms increasingly mediate how sound circulates, how it is discovered, and how it is heard. From Spotify's curated playlists to TikTok's memetic loops, algorithms shape not just what we listen to but result in listening becoming embedded in everyday digital rhythms (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2018; Noble, 2018). When we speak of algorithmic soundscapes, I refer not only to playlists shaped by recommender systems, but also the growing use of generative AI for voice, speech synthesis, and automated production.

The second key framing concept is *sonic citizenship*: the idea that listening and sound practices are civic acts. Civic participation is not only casting one's vote or attending a protest; it could also comprise calling into a radio talk show, sharing a WhatsApp voice note, or remixing a political soundbite into a meme. Listening itself can thus be a form of citizenship (Bickford, 1996). Such sonic practices construct publics, identities, and forms of belonging, comprising the practice of giving 'voice' to democratic life.

And thirdly, to understand how sound shapes public life, we must also consider *listening as method*. Listening is not passive; it is an attuned, situated, and political act. Whether we are listening to the radio, a podcast, or a remixed soundbite, we are participating in meaning-making. As scholars, adopting listening as a method invites us to engage with sound's affective, embodied, and infrastructural dimensions, to listen not only to what is said, but to how it is voiced, where it travels, and what remains unheard. Together, these three concepts: algorithmic soundscapes, sonic citizenship, and listening as method, allow us to rethink radio not as a relic of the past, but as part of a reconfigured mediascape. Remixed soundscapes travel through deeply polarized political contexts: they are not neutral, but entangled with war, populism, and authoritarian politics, from the ongoing genocide in Gaza to Trump's soundbite campaigning in the U.S., and the rise of far-right parties across Europe in 2025; while ordinary citizens simultaneously circulate counter-memes and sonic traces of protest.

Hybrid listening cultures: Radio meets social media

One of the most striking developments of the past decade has been the way radio has migrated into new forms. The boundaries between broadcast and digital platforms are no longer clear. Today, radio content moves fluidly into podcasts, live streams, and social media feeds, creating a set of listening cultures that are both participatory and mobile centred (Bonini, 2022; Llinares, Fox & Berry, 2018). Programmes that once aired only on radio now live on as podcasts, with their own production values, editorial rhythms, and audiences. This evolution reflects both continuity and change: the podcast inherits the intimacy and portability of radio, but it is also shaped by platform logics, designed for on-demand listening and algorithmic discovery on Spotify or Apple Podcasts. Richard Berry (2016) and others have shown how podcasting reinvented radio for digital environments, while retaining many of its core features. At the same time, live talk radio debates no longer remain confined to the airwaves. They now unfold in parallel on social media, where hashtags amplify the discussion and listeners interact directly with hosts and each other in real time. The call-in has been supplemented or even replaced by the tweet, the meme, or the voice note. This makes audience participation both more visible and more networked, expanding the reach of broadcast dialogue into digital publics (Lacey, 2013).

Streaming platforms also play a central role here. Spotify, Apple, and YouTube increasingly act as intermediaries for radio and podcast content. Their algorithms influence what is recommended and what is heard, creating platform-curated radio. Platforms operate as civic infrastructures. But Tarleton Gillespie (2018) and Safiya Noble (2018) warn that algorithmic curation both empowers and constrains: it allows niche voices to find audiences far beyond broadcast range, yet it also reinforces global hierarchies by amplifying content that aligns with platform priorities. This points to a new kind of listening culture: one where radio remains central but operates across multiple platforms, shaped by algorithms, social interaction, and mobile access. It is no longer possible to separate broadcast from digital media; instead, we are dealing with an ecology in which sound travels, mutates, and recirculates across different channels (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). This hybridity is not only technical but cultural, reshaping what it means to listen, to participate, and to belong in a mediated public. But these participatory possibilities

are not evenly distributed. The politics of voice, silence, and sound remain central. Whose voices are heard, who gets amplified by the algorithm, and whose silence goes unnoticed? In many cases, digital platforms reproduce the exclusions of earlier media systems, even as they offer new affordances for expression. Sonic publics are shaped as much by absence as by presence, and we must listen closely for both.

Algorithmic soundscapes

If hybrid listening cultures remind us that radio now circulates across podcasts, streams, and social media, then algorithmic soundscapes take us one step further. We are now living in environments where sound circulates not only through broadcast towers or live microphones, but through platforms, feeds, and code. Sound today is sorted, filtered, and made audible by algorithms that shape what we hear, when we hear it, and how we come to care about it (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2018). Platforms like TikTok, Spotify, and YouTube don't just host sound, they orchestrate listening. TikTok's memetic remix culture, for example, relies on short audio snippets that become viral templates. A single voice, laugh, or soundbite might be repurposed in millions of videos, each instance generating new meanings and publics. Spotify's editorial playlists and algorithmic recommendations subtly structure musical discovery, making some voices hyper-visible and others inaudible. YouTube's auto-play and recommendation queues guide attention, repetition, and affective investment in particular kinds of sonic content. These infrastructures are not neutral: they reflect and reproduce structural inequalities.

This is not just a shift in distribution, it is a transformation in power. Algorithms are now curators, editors, and gatekeepers. They shape the audibility of civic discourse and the texture of public life (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Algorithmic moderation in India, Brazil and elsewhere systematically privileges some political voices while muting dissent. This uneven audibility is a defining feature of algorithmic governance in 2025. One example is the controversy surrounding Spotify in relation to the genocide in Gaza. Beyond questions of recommendation and visibility, the debate has centred on the platform's policies around content removal and its corporate entanglements. Pro-Israel advocacy groups have

pressed Spotify to take down songs critical of Israel under the company's hate speech policy, while many artists and listeners have accused Spotify of silencing Palestinian voices and called for boycotts[1]. These concerns have been amplified by revelations that Spotify CEO (Daniel Ek) has invested in an AI weapons company, raising broader questions about the ethics of platform governance. What is heard and what is silenced is thus not simply a matter of cultural preference. It is infrastructurally and politically decided, mapping directly onto circuits of war, capital, and power.

Sonic citizenship

If algorithmic soundscapes shape how sound circulates, then sonic citizenship invites us to ask what kinds of civic practices emerge through sound and listening. This concept expands our understanding of participation beyond formal political acts. It asks us to consider how everyday sonic practices contribute to the formation of publics and the negotiation of belonging (Lacey, 2013. Although the term sonic citizenship has appeared in sound studies, often referring to everyday acts of communal attunement (e.g., Højlund, Vandsø & Breinbjerg, 2024) or the communal production of acoustic space (Andrisani, 2017), my framing diverges in several ways. First, it shifts the focus from the micro-social to the political-structural, asking not only who 'sounds', but under what systems of power, surveillance, and exclusion. Second, I weave sonic citizenship into anti-capitalist praxis, positioning listening not as aesthetic participation but as a site of refusal, solidarity, and restructuring of attention economies (Bosch, 2025). Finally, I treat sonic citizenship as a methodological and institutional intervention, a call to redesign infrastructures, governance, and civic responsibility around who gets to be heard and what it means to listen politically.

This builds on my earlier work on digital citizenship (Roberts & Bosch, 2023), where we argued that citizenship in digital contexts is affective, relational, and unevenly distributed. I extend that framework into the sonic domain, asking how listening and sound practices themselves function as civic acts, shaped by infrastructures of power and exclusion. Citizenship is often imagined as something visible: marching in the street, voting in elections, signing a petition. But sound

[1] https://www.theguardian.com/music/2025/sep/18/massive-attack-remove-music-from-spotify-to-protest-ceo-daniel-eks-investment-in-ai-military

offers a different mode of engagement. It is affective, embodied, ephemeral. When someone calls into a radio talk show, leaves a WhatsApp voice note for a community station, or remixes a political speech into a TikTok meme, they are participating in a civic conversation; they are performing citizenship through sound. Sonic citizenship thus foregrounds listening as a political act.

In digital contexts, sonic citizenship takes new forms. A protest chant recorded on a smartphone can go viral across platforms. A marginalised voice can speak truth to power in a podcast episode or remix. But these possibilities are always constrained by platform logics. The same algorithm that amplifies a sound on one day could obscure it the next. The same platform that hosts a voice note today may remove it without warning. Sonic citizenship is therefore unstable and contingent. It is always negotiated through structures of power and infrastructures of mediation. It can be radically inclusive or subtly exclusionary. What matters is not only who speaks but who listens, and how listening is made possible or foreclosed.

Sonic citizenship also invites us to think about refusal. Sometimes participation is enacted through silence; through choosing not to speak, not to record, not to engage. In a datafied world where voice is often captured and commodified, silence can be a powerful tactic. Listening to silence is therefore just as important as listening to sound. Refusal reminds us that not all publics wish to be rendered audible; sometimes opacity itself is a form of resistance. For example: refusing algorithmic capture by omitting hashtags/metadata to resist trending logics or refusing to translate by staying in local languages/dialects on radio or podcasts rather than shifting to English. In the UK context, Kate Lacey reminds us that listening in troubled times is work, not a passive reflex but civic labour that keeps channels open across difference. She calls this listening out: a deliberate, risky, and effortful practice that prepares the time, space, mood, and techniques for others to speak. In an environment of polarisation and algorithmic funnels, this labour resists the drift toward voices that sound like our own and insists on plurality as a democratic good (Lacey, 2023).

Sonic citizenship also invites us to think about solidarity. To listen in the present is to choose a civic stance. Listening to far-right rhetoric without critique risks normalising hate. Listening to the silenced, whether indigenous radio in the majority world or the muffled testimonies from Gaza, is an act of solidarity. Sonic

citizenship today is therefore both a responsibility and a political struggle. Ultimately, sonic citizenship helps us rethink what it means to belong. It is not about being always audible, but about being recognised and resonant within a community of listeners. Whether through remix, refusal, or resistance, sound remains a powerful mode through which people claim space, express identity, and engage with the world.

The politics of listening

As Tanja Dreher (2010) has argued, the problem is not that marginalized groups fail to speak, but that dominant institutions and publics often fail to listen. A politics centred only on voice risks putting the burden of change on those already excluded, requiring them to translate themselves into terms deemed 'newsworthy' or acceptable. By shifting our attention to the politics of listening, Dreher reminds us that responsibility lies with the centre: with editors, algorithms, and audiences who decide whose voices count. Listening here is not a neutral or passive act but a contested practice of power, shaping whether speech resonates, disappears, or is appropriated. In algorithmic soundscapes, this insight is vital: asking who listens, and on what terms, reveals as much about civic life as who speaks. Read alongside my call for anti-capitalist praxis (Bosch, 2025), this reorients sonic citizenship toward building conditions where difficult speech can be heard without being domesticated by algorithmic or editorial frames. Listening becomes labour, but also governance: a commitment to redistribute attention, resources, and risk. This serves as a reminder of how we need to study sound today. Not just what is said, but how it's voiced and just as importantly, what is left unsaid. We need to follow how sounds move, fade, and mutate across platforms, and attend to the affective layers, the silences, distortions, and background noise. And crucially, our research is never neutral. It requires reflexivity, humility, and care, because as researchers we're not outside the soundscape, we are part of it.

Listening as method

In contemporary soundscapes, listening thus becomes both object and method. What we hear is shaped by platform infrastructures, but so too is how we listen as researchers, citizens, and publics. Listening as method invites us to attend not only

to the content of audio, but to its circulation, affective charge, and embedded politics. This is where we must confront the politics of voice, silence, and sound. In algorithmic soundscapes, not all voices are equal. Some are boosted through platform affordances and algorithmic amplification. Others, especially those that speak in minor registers, unfamiliar languages, or forms of refusal, are silenced, drowned out, or made unintelligible. Listening politically means tuning into these absences, asking not only what is audible, but what has been made inaudible, and by whom.

What emerges is a reconfiguration of sonic publics: no longer bound to the national broadcast imaginary, but shaped by translocal algorithms, shifting platform politics, and new affective economies of listening. In algorithmic soundscapes, radio's logics persist, but they are now entangled with new forms of power, intimacy, and control. Understanding this moment means holding together the histories of broadcast sound and the futures of platform-mediated audio-- and it means listening with intention, reflexivity, and care.

If we accept that sound is not just content but infrastructure, practice, and politics, then we need to adapt our methods and our questions.First we need to take listening seriously as a method. This means not only analysing what is said but also how it is voiced, where it is recorded, who gets to speak, and who is excluded (Lacey, 2013). It means tracing how sounds travel across platforms, mutate in remix culture, or disappear into silence. It means listening with attention to absence, distortion, background noise, and the everyday textures of audio life.

Second, we need to pay attention to infrastructures of listening. Radio towers, microphones, mobile phones, data bundles, and platform algorithms all shape who gets to listen and how. These infrastructures are often uneven and embedded in histories of inequality. Third, we need to engage with sound as a civic practice. Whether we are studying radio talk shows, community podcasts, or viral TikTok sounds, we are observing how publics are made and remade through audio. Fourth, we must rethink what counts as a public. Sonic publics may be fleeting, intimate, or partially imagined. They may form around a single radio show or disperse through a viral meme. Studying these publics involves following sound across time, space, and platform rather than anchoring it to a single medium. Finally, research itself must become more reflexive and attuned. As scholars we

are not outside the soundscape. We listen through our own biases, technologies, and positionalities. Our very presence may influence what is voiced or withheld. Embracing listening as method therefore involves humility, slowness, and attention to context. This is especially important in majority world contexts where sonic practices are sometimes embedded in oral traditions, mobile cultures, and creative economies. Here sound is not just media but memory, resistance, connection, and joy. To study it is to listen carefully to the lives it holds; to practice listening as solidarity with the silenced, and to honour refusal as a strategy of survival and dignity.

Conclusion

Sound has always been political, but in algorithmic soundscapes the stakes are sharper than ever. To listen today is to choose a civic stance: to amplify or to ignore, to stand in solidarity or to remain complicit in silence. Sonic citizenship asks us to listen with care, with critique, and sometimes with refusal. The challenge, and the opportunity, is to cultivate publics that are attentive, just, and resonant in an age where audibility itself is unevenly distributed. Sonic citizenship today is inseparable from global politics: listening is a political act that takes sides, because audibility itself is uneven and silence carries weight. AI is reshaping our sonic environments, from text-to-speech podcasts to voice cloning and recommendation engines. But the risks of bias, linguistic exclusion, and surveillance are as present as the promises of efficiency and creativity. What does sonic citizenship look like in an era when our listening is increasingly mediated not by human editors, but by automated systems? (Fox, 2025). Sonic citizenship asks us to choose carefully, to listen critically, and sometimes to refuse capture altogether. The question we are left with is: who, and what, will we listen to?

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