Research Article

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The Muting of the Other: The Technological Reconfiguration of Our Auditory Experience of Others

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Abstract: Increasingly privatized auditory spaces resulting from the mutual engendering of auditory cultural practices and sound technologies that separated the sense of hearing and segmented acoustic spaces have had a muting effect on our experience of Others that has intensified since the advent of mobile listening devices. In Section 1 of the article, I outline features of the social realm of the nineteenth to twentieth centuries that made modern sound technologies possible and then features of the technological realm that have shaped today's social realm – all with an eye toward our experience of other people. Then, in Section 2, I reach for a few phenomenological tools from the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, Emmanuel Levinas, and Don Ihde to draw out the phenomenological vectors that have taken shape within the enmeshed sociotechnological context described in Section 1. Specifically, I show how technologically mediated auditory experience has been individualized and how the use of sound technologies on the go – whether wearing earphones or in a car – has had a muting effect on our experience of others.

Keywords: the face, sound technologies, the Look, Levinas, Sartre, Ihde, Latour, mobile phones, automobile, individualization

1 Introduction

Before I dive into an examination of the particular auditory practices and sound technologies this article will be dealing with, I would like to situate my concerns within a theoretical framework, thereby preparing the ground on which the article will unfold.

Although much interesting work relevant to the concerns of this article has been done in the field of postphenomenology, which has become a cottage industry for philosophers concerned with phenomenology and technology, this article's philosophical framework differs. According to postphenomenology, in the human–technology–world relation, there are no pre-given subjects or objects. Instead, the mediation is the source of a particular Being-in-the-world that is enacted in situated technological doings. Postphenomenology, then, "aims to describe the varieties of subjectivities/objectivities that emerge through different embodiments. What sort of subjects do we become (and what does the world become) through the embodiments of the microscope, the telescope, self-driving cars, the computer screen, and so forth?"[1] Though I will be concerned with the varieties of subjectivity/objectivity – the phenomenology –

1 Introna, "Phenomenological Approaches to Ethics and Information Technology."

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arising from the embodiment of technologies of sound, I believe the "empirical turn" characterizing postphenomenology's micro-scale investigation into the ways particular technologies do their co-constituting in specific contexts of use (against a "pragmatic horizon of utility and effect"[2]), my concerns will range further afield. I believe the phenomenological approach would benefit from a macro-scale, hermeneutical clarification encompassing the historical background into which the particular technologies have been articulated in a mutually engendering evolutionary process. In this respect, my approach will be consonant with that of critics[3] who have argued that postphenomenology has neglected the background conditions for the emergence of particular technological artifacts and their contexts of use.

It should be noted that this article's framework could be situated within Ihde's conception of what he calls Heidegger's "second phenomenology" in contrast to Husserl's "first phenomenology." According to Ihde, if Husserl's first phenomenology centers around intentionality and the analysis of "the things that are intended and the acts by which their meanings are constituted,"[4] Heidegger's second phenomenology opens outward, "[understanding] that experience cannot be questioned alone or in isolation but must be understood ultimately in relation to its historical and cultural embeddedness."[5] I will explore this hermeneutic dimension of our technologically mediated experience of others.

However, the perspective of second phenomenology does not address another, fundamental point of difference between this article's philosophical framework and that of postphenomenology. Postphenomenology has assumed that technology is that which is taken to be technology from the perspective of users and thus assumed a sort of unquestioned natural attitude with respect to technology of the sort phenomenology is meant to bracket in the interest of uncovering structures of experience. I would like to avoid this and I think a conception of technology like that of Lewis Mumford[6] or Bruno Latour – who include the social structures that make possible the "wheels, gears, works, and movements"[7] of the natural technological attitude in a more comprehensive understanding of technology – would be in keeping with the hermeneutical clarification I am interested in. For this reason, I shall apply Latour's framework in which the human–technology relation develops in a mutually engendering process of successive "crossovers" in which the social realm and the nonhuman world – technology – have exchanged properties,[8] each one resulting in a transformation of the composition of the enmeshed whole. In one direction, "skills and properties learned in social relations are made relevant for establishing relations within nonhumans";[9] then, in the other direction, characteristics of the nonhuman world are "borrowed from nonhumans in order to naturalize and expand the social realm."[10] Thus, this article will take seriously the claim that technologies necessarily incorporate social relations and, conversely, the social realm is shaped by technologies. My intention, however, is not to exhaustively chart all of the factors involved in the process by which the social world shapes technology, which then shapes the social world in turn, and much less to indicate specific causal links with direction of causation, but to highlight what I think are certain critical elements of the social realm and certain technologies that are relevant to the site of our auditory experience of others.

This is not merely a statement of theoretical allegiance. I believe that a framework like this will make it possible to clarify what Drew Leder calls "phenomenological vectors" – that is, the experiential "possibilities and tendencies that take on definite shape only within a cultural context."[11] My aim, therefore, will be

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2 Zwier et al., "Phenomenology and the Empirical Turn," 327.

3 See Feenberg, "Peter-Paul Verbeek;" Kaplan, "What Things Still Don't Do;" Smith, "Rewriting the Constitution;" and Scharff, "Empirical Technoscience Studies in a Comtean World."

4 Ihde, *Listening and Voice*, 18.

5 Ibid., 20.

6 See Mumford's discussion of the Megamachine in "Tool Users vs Homo Sapiens and the Megamachine," 126–41.

7 Latour "Pragmatogonies."

8 Latour, *Pandora's Hope*, 201.

9 Ibid., 205.

10 Ibid., 204.

11 Leder, *The Absent Body*, 151.

to draw out the phenomenological vectors that give our technologically mediated experience of others the particular shape it has today.

In Section 1 of the article, I will outline certain features of the social realm that were "borrowed" – to use Latour's term – by technologies and then certain features of the technological realm that were reimported into the social realm. Then, in Section 2, I will reach for a few phenomenological tools from the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, Emmanuel Levinas, and Don Ihde to draw out the phenomenological vectors that have taken shape within the enmeshed sociotechnological context described in Section 1. Specifically, I will show how technologically mediated auditory experience has been individualized and how the use of sound technologies on the go – whether wearing earphones or in a car – has had a muting effect on our experience of others.

2 How the social world shaped sound technologies

This article is based on the claim that today's increasingly private auditory spaces mediated by technologies like mobile phones resulted from a previous separation of the sense of hearing manifested in sound technologies like the phonograph, the telephone, and radio. These technologies, which reconfigured the experience of listening, did not appear in a vacuum, however. The people who engineered them were refining and extending certain historical practices and dispositions within a range of possibilities, embodying them in technological form. Let us turn, then, to some of those practices and dispositions. Specifically, I would like to consider the following three:

1. the epistemological and physiological separation of the sense of hearing in medicine,
2. the atomizing of musical and theatrical audiences into silent, individual listeners in the nineteenth century, and
3. the detachment of the individual in urban spaces.

2.1 The epistemological and physiological separation of the sense of hearing in medicine

Some of the features of the social world that were borrowed by the world of sound technology came from the field of medicine. Advances in knowledge of the ear and audition in Enlightenment science resulted in the sense of hearing being conceived of in the nineteenth century as an assemblage of physiological and functional parts constituting the site where hearing takes place, making it possible to think of audition mechanically.

One area of medicine in which advances were made was the practice of dissection (which gained steam along with the institutionalization of medicine and the concomitant legalization of the sourcing of corpses for dissection – they no longer needed to be stolen), which was an important source of anatomic and pathological knowledge. Thanks in part to dissection, audition became a mechanism that could be anatomically and experientially abstracted from the human body and the rest of the senses.[12]

Another series advances in knowledge of the ear and audition were grounded in theory. By contrast with a conception in which the senses communicated properties of the external world, Charles Bell, Scottish surgeon and physiologist, Johannes Müller, German physiologist, and Hermann von Helmholz, German physicist and physiologist, argued that sensation consisted of the communication of the state of the nerves as stimulated by external causes. Thus, one and the same stimulus – electricity, for example – would result

12 Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 62.

in different sensations in different nerves depending on the sensory system it came into contact with. It could be seen as light, felt as heat, or heard as buzzing. The cause was irrelevant – the differences in sensation were due not to the character of the stimulus, but of the physiological and functional features of the system that received it. The ear was an instrument and the processes of hearing could be reproduced mechanically by an instrument mediating between the external vibrations, which are decoded in the brain, and the internal sound they produce. The apparatus of hearing could be conceived as a transducer – like the diaphragm in a microphone, a telephone, or a loudspeaker – which transforms sound vibrations into electric impulses and back again.[13] Audition therefore became a mechanism that could be abstracted experientially from (1) the body and (2) the rest of the senses. It was this conception of audition as a mechanism that paved the way for mechanical models of the ear and then for the mechanical construction of sound technologies.

At roughly the same time that the physiologists Charles Bell and Johannes Müller were positing the physiological separation of the senses, R.T.H. Laennec posited a practical separation of the sense of hearing.[14] While theoretical tools like the separation of the senses were rearranging the body into a field of knowledge, the stethoscope was participating in the same process in a practical manner. The use of the stethoscope as a technique of listening that was instrumental in the construction of the field of knowledge that clinical medicine was based on has been described in detail by authors like Michel Foucault, Stanley Joel Reiser, and Jacalyn Duffin.[15]

Laennec, who is credited with inventing the stethoscope, coined the term "mediate auscultation" to describe a technique of listening that separated hearing from the other senses so that listening could be directed toward the inside of the body while other sounds in the immediate environment were filtered out. Laennec contrasted mediate auscultation with what he called "immediate" auscultation, which referred to listening to a patient's body from the outside without a stethoscope.[16] The stethoscope thus made it possible to partition acoustic space, constructing an individuated, private field of experience around the listener. The same individuation of acoustic space takes place when we use headphones to listen to music, radio, podcasts, or audiobooks on portable media players or smart phones or when we listen while driving around in our cars.

2.2 The atomizing of musical and theatrical audiences into silent, individual listeners in the nineteenth century

Listeners were individuated not only by technological means, like headphones, but also by social convention. This individuation was closely related to three other aspects of the social world that contributed to the individualization of the experience of listening:

1. the silencing of musical and theatrical audiences into individual listeners in the nineteenth century,
2. the detachment of the individual in urban spaces, and
3. the commercialization of sound.

It is here that the social dimension of the individualization of auditory experience – that is, our auditory experience of the other – will become more apparent.

The individuation of acoustic experience is also evident in the gradual silencing of audiences for music, theater, and film. Whereas theater and concert audiences in the past had been noisy and disorderly – like the unruly crowds at Shakespeare's Globe – with the rise of the bourgeoisie and the growing institutional

13 Ibid., 61–2.
14 Ibid., 110.
15 Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*; Reiser, *Medicine and the Reign of Technology*, 1–44; and Duffin, *To See with a Better Eye*, 6–7.
16 Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 100.

prestige associated with artistic music and theater, which demanded greater concentration, audiences quieted down. This quieting resulted in the individualization of listeners, each in their own acoustic space where they could enjoy the concert, play, or film without disruptions by other audience members.[17]

2.3 The detachment of the individual in urban spaces

Another aspect of the social world that conditioned the individuation of experience was the social fragmentation of urban culture and the concomitant detachment of the individual described by Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin.

According to Simmel, the stress represented by "the jostling crowdedness and the motley disorder of metropolitan communication" made urban dwellers retreat from communities held together by increasingly weakened bonds into a psychological sanctuary established by social distance that would help make the stress manageable.[18]

Another factor contributing to the social fragmentation of city life was the experience of being thrown together on public transportation. "The interpersonal relationships of people in big cities," Simmel wrote, "are characterised by a markedly greater emphasis on the use of the eyes than of the ears. [...] Before buses, railroads and trains became fully established during the nineteenth century, people were never in a position to have to stare at one another for minutes or even hours on end without exchanging words."[19] And that social space filled with atomized individuals studiously avoiding eye contact on public transportation or busy city sidewalks began to fill up with a sort of Gaussian urban noise produced by "a million Mr. Browns and Ms. Smiths running around in their private circles or slipping through some more haphazard routines, rarely synchronizing their activities, rarely considering one another"[20] along with the increasingly motorized sounds of industry and transportation. This background city noise was another factor in the retreat of urban dwellers into individualized spaces.

In such spaces, experience in general, and auditory experience in particular, threatened to come apart into fragmented, random sensations, the *Erlebnis* Benjamin wrote of in contrast to *Erfahrung* the integrated, meaningful experience held together by narratives embedded in community life.[21] Because the auditory space during urban commutes was not filled in with any sort of intrinsically meaningful sounds, the space of hearing was ready to be occupied by meaning. Mobile listening devices would play an important role in developing strategies to manage auditory experience by overlaying the *Erlebnis* comprising the haphazard sensations and information that characterize a commercialized world of mass media with meaningful *Erfahrung*.

2.4 The commercialization of sound

These forms of social fragmentation and individuation coincided with the privatization of acoustic space as a prelude to its commercialization. The growing middle class at the turn of the twentieth century set the conditions for the mutual reinforcement of consumerism and individuation. According to Sterne, "listeners

17 Schafer, *Soundscapes*, 117; Johnson, *Listening in Paris*; Nasaw, *Going Out*, 19–33; Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 99–158; and Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*.

18 Georg Simmel, quoted in Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity*, 73.

19 Quoted in Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 191.

20 Schafer, *Soundscapes*, 233–4.

21 Benjamin developed the distinction between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* in such works as *One-Way Street*, "Experience and Poverty," (in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 2*), and "The Storyteller" and "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (in *Illuminations*).

could own their own acoustic spaces through owning the material component [a telephone, a phonograph, a radio] of a technique of producing that auditory space the 'medium' that stands in for a whole set of framed practices. The space of the auditory field became a form of private property, a space for the individual to inhabit alone."[22] This meant auditory experiences could be invoiced individually. According to Critical Theorists like Adorno, this made it possible for the culture industry to substitute its products for a sense of community in a process of atomization that resulted in "the compression of the social network."[23]

2.5 The technological conditions for the substitution of direct experience by technologically mediated forms of experience

Up until now we have been considering aspects of the social world into which the technologies we will be concerned with were articulated. Let us now consider how technologies for recording and transmitting sound shaped in turn the social world and, in particular, our auditory experience of others.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, electro-acoustic technologies such as telephones, and phonographs emerged, embedding mediated sounds within everyday life.

The recording and transmission of sounds made it possible to split them from their original causal contexts. R. Murray Schafer coined the term "schizophonia" to describe this modern form of auditory experience in which "sounds have been torn from their natural sockets and given an amplified and independent existence." The human voice, for example, "is no longer tied to a hole in the head but is free to issue from anywhere in the landscape."[24] Pierre Schaeffer has referred to the experience of listening in which the cause of a sound remains unseen as "acousmatic."[25]

Schizophonic or acousmatic experience enabled, for example, the users of personal portable stereos to turn "away from the geographical and social present [and] construct safe technologized habitats where [they] experience time and place through [a technologically mediated] interiority."[26] Thus, such devices overlay the physically present site of experience with an "alternative presence [...] in which the present becomes consumed by the 'far away'."[27] These sites of experience constitute a "form of 'sanctuary' representing a progressive privatization of the experiencing subject" in which "an imaginary space of personal narrative" could be constituted.[28]

The mobilization of the individual spaces in which listening could take place was made possible by sound technologies and the automobile. Personal stereos like the Walkman and then eventually today's multifunctional smartphones, which make a plethora of curated auditory experiences possible – like podcasts, audiobooks, and museum tours in addition to music – enabled sound devices to become ever-present embodied tools and thereby a medium for action represented another significant moment in the reconfiguration of the site of our auditory experience of others. In another sense, the automobile, which has so profoundly permeated everyday life in so much of the world, closed people up within auditory bubbles that filter out the surrounding soundscapes and enabled people to curate the auditory experience within the automobile. The new forms of curation offered by portable listening devices and automobiles, however, entailed the muting of the voices of other people.

22 Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 160.
23 Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, 15.
24 Schafer, *Soundscapes*, 90.
25 Schaeffer, *Treatise on Musical Objects*, 64.
26 Bull, *Sounding Out the City*, 193.
27 Ibid., 127.
28 Ibid., 74.

2.6 Sartre's other and Look, Levinas' face

In order to see how this auditory experience of others was transformed, it will be helpful to situate our discussion in the context of the phenomenological accounts of our experience of others set forth by Jean-Paul Sartre and Emmanuel Levinas.

Against Husserl, who deals with our experience of others in terms of intentional representation and Heidegger, who deals with this experience in contexts of practical tool use the other/face is neither an intentional object, nor something we meet in everyday practices. It escapes the categories of intentionality and presence-at-hand and readiness-to-hand. Both Sartre and Levinas invoke the way others appear to use in a fundamental, ineliminable sense. The other represents a drain hole in the midst of being, for Sartre,[29] or an indeterminable element that breaks up the unity of my world for Levinas.[30]

For both Sartre and Levinas, the Other, or the face, is neither the "ocular globes" (as Sartre describes the eyeballs which are merely the most common physical manifestation of the Look of the Other)[31] or the reified face. For Sartre, the look, which represents the visceral experience of the other, can be represented as a creaking floorboard or a house on a hill. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes that the face escapes sight: "The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed. It is neither seen nor touched – for in visual or tactile sensation the identity of the I envelops the alterity of the object, which becomes precisely a content" (*TI*, p. 194). To show how this is relevant to our discussion of the experience of others as mediated by sound technologies, consider a man Sartre describes within the context of his discussion of the phenomenological experience of the other who is reading as he walks.

> There, for example, is a man who is reading while he walks. The disintegration of the universe [the drain hole in the midst of being which breaks up the unity of my world] which he represents is purely virtual; he has ears which do not hear, eyes which see nothing except his book. Between his book and him I apprehend an undeniable relation without distance of the same type as that which earlier connected the walker with the grass. But this time the form has closed in on itself. There is a full object for me to grasp. In the midst of the world I can say "man-reading" as I could say "cold stone," "fine rain."[32]

I would like to make two observations here. The first concerns the particularities of auditory experience that are emphasized in the example of the man reading while he walks. The second concerns some features of the inner world of the man reading his book while walking, whose ears do not hear and eyes do not see – except what is in his book.

First, then, unlike Sartre's man with his book, a man with earphones isn't in his own visual world with its horizons, but in his own auditory world with its horizons. When wearing earphones, we can walk about and do many tasks that would be impossible or very difficult without visual input but can dispense with auditory input (travelling – public transportation, cycling, jogging, walking – household chores – cooking, vacuuming, ironing). Such tasks usually involve mobility. That's why mobile phones have "colonized" the dimension of mobile experience. When we can dispense with the visual input of the immediate surroundings we are usually immobile (watching TV, in a cinema or theater, sitting at a desk). However, even when we can't dispense with visual input to carry out activities like negotiating a street as we walk about, our auditory horizon remains open to meaningful experience – to *Erfahrung*.

Sartre's walking reader is striking because he is not only a drain hole in which being escapes me, but he does not even give me an outside because he does not recognize my Look. I become a face in Levinas' sense with its ethical call only when he looks up from his book and registers my Look. But the walking reader, who is likely to bump into someone or stumble into a coverless manhole, is much less likely than a walking listener wearing headphones, who will be able to navigate potential obstacles on a sidewalk while still

29 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 256.
30 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 52.
31 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 257.
32 Ibid., 256.

immersed in his non-present auditory world. Yet for both the walking reader and the walking listener with a mobile phone (even if it is inert until the screen is activated and thereby made available to interaction), I am a mere animated body supporting a pair of ocular globes, a reified face that does not invite communication until he disengages from his own private world of concerns.

2.7 The back stage of inner speech

Ihde reminds us that there is something uncanny about this sort of silencing of the face's call to communication.[33] An encounter in a small enclosed space like that of a train compartment of a few square meters or an elevator produces a similar awkward silence because even though the other is met as face, the call to communicate is suppressed. In the non-encounters of public transportation or city streets, however, we encounter not thousands of looks, which would be unbearable (and perhaps is the cause of many a bad trip), but ocular globes that our eyes flow over as they flow over the myriad shop signs and passing cars.

But each person has a back stage, an inner horizon of inner speech that accompanies the activities of her daily life, which "does not intrude itself into them but recedes as a peculiar kind of background phenomenon that provides a continuity and a 'sense' to such activities."[34]

Ihde provides one way of understanding this mediated alterity within his taxonomy of forms our technologically mediated relationships with the world can take – in addition to embodiment relations, hermeneutic relations, and background relations, he writes of alterity relations, inspired by the quasi-animation and the "technological intentionalities"[35] manifested by devices like mobile phones. They chirp, buzz, responding to our inquiries and demanding our attention like quasi-others. Galit Wellner thus refers to the mobile phone as a quasi face that augments the alterity relation made possible by the screen of a mobile telephone, which, "like the face, serves as a communicative interface."[36]

Nevertheless, the "quasi" is essential here. The mobile phone does not represent a full-fledged alterity within Ihde's scheme of subject–technology–world relations; it is not the alterity of Sartre's other or Levinas' face. When I gaze into my black mirror, I do not have the outside Sartre's peeping Tom acquires when he hears the creaking floorboard behind him and realizes he's being watched. The unity of my world is not broken up; it is suffused in its entirety by the world opened up by the keyhole of my phone. It is only when an sms or the disembodied voice of a caller or the audiovisual representation of a person on Zoom is the animated manifestation of Sartre's look or Levinas' face that I experience the real other. And then the screen of the mobile phone is like the two ocular globes I do not see when I look at someone's face during a conversation (though here it exists in a peculiar phenomenological ambivalence – Heidegger's readiness-to-hand at one moment and the alterity of Sartre and Levinas the next) – if I even look at the screen, that is. I might just answer a phone call with the press of a button on my earphones as I continue navigating the crowded city sidewalk, noting that the pedestrian crossing light has turned red and I have to stop, for example. And the mobile phone isn't the only technological device I use while moving around – I might answer the hands-free in the individualized auditory space of my car as well.

Note here that the experience of the other in the cases of technologically mediation I have been describing is not necessarily visual and it is the mobile nature of the technological experience – which requires a high degree of visual engagement, leaving a barren auditory field filled with disjointed epiphenomena – that gives it an auditory bias.

33 Ihde, *Listening and Voice*, 177.
34 Ibid., 138.
35 Ihde, *Technology and the Lifeworld*, 102.
36 Wellner, "The Quasi-Face of the Cell Phone," 313.

Just as Sartre points out that the green of the grass that appears to the other standing over there on a lawn remains hidden to me like the hidden side of a transcendent thing, so does the "silent" voice of that person's inner speech, an inner speech that remains hidden, silent even when the person is speaking to me.

Just as the peeping Tom hearing the floorboard is given an outside, my ringing mobile gives me an outside.

And just as the Look gives me an outside, it gives the other not just a drain hole, but the intimation of an inside illuminated by the light of an inner speech that is invisible to me. This is an essential aspect of my experience of the alterity of other human beings. And just as other aspects of experience are technologically mediated, this alterity with its back stage in which inner speech gives meaning to our everyday activities can be mediated as well.

When a person is using a mobile phone, there is a context not of inner speech, but of a practical interaction with a non-present world (if the person is searching for a bit of information on the Internet) or communication with someone else. At any rate, that inwardness is hidden, silent to me. And as long as the person is carrying the mobile phone (and it's not turned off or in airplane mode), it represents a pull away from me toward a hiddenness, a silence reminiscent of the awkward silence of that thwarted call to interaction in the train compartment or elevator.

Wellner notes that "if the face is like a theater for displaying feelings and thoughts without exposing the back stage, then the screen is like a theater for displaying multimedia contents [...]."[37] So, there is a sense in which the screen is like a face, inviting interaction. I raise the phone, unlock it, and then look at it as I might look into a face. I might tap away to find out when the next tram is coming or see what's new on my favorite newspaper's app. Here, the phone is an other-less call to interaction.

The phone might invite interaction with another person, too, though. I might get a video phone call during which I look at the screen as I would look at a face. Just as I don't perceive a friend's eyes when I'm talking to her, but rather perceive her Look (unless I look to see what color eyes she has or am asked if I can see what she might have in her eye), I don't perceive the screen, but her Look – the irreducible experience of the presence of another human being. The image might flicker due to a bad connection, but I still perceive her Look. If I get a traditional phone call, without video, I might look at the screen when I answer, but then the other's "Look" is no longer a visual phenomenon, but an auditory one. My experience of the other is not mediated by the screen, but more relevantly by the phone's speakers or the headphones I might be wearing.

And though I might curate my private auditory space into one of meaningful *Erfahrungen* containing conversations with people who are important to me or perhaps music and podcasts while, as Bull writes, I "move through the 'alien' spaces of daily life" that are "devoid of interest and significance,"[38] both the pull of the back stage I carry around with me as long as I have my mobile phone on me and the pull of the curated auditory space inside my car as I drive about represent pulls away from the potential beginning of an interaction with someone directly present before me – for, as Ihde notes, "every conversation, every meeting of the other hides within itself the possibility of a beginning. This beginning may be as prosaic as the generation of new sentences that the linguist today recognizes as a problem in the understanding of speech. Or it may be more intimate as in the beginning of a conversation that opens a friendship for a longer conversation"[39] or perhaps even love. But what sort of conversation can take place in the reduced technologically mediated auditory realm? And, perhaps more importantly, what conversations with those who are directly present are precluded by this permanent (at least as long as I have a charged mobile phone on me) state of potential distraction?

Finally, it should be noted that in the context of our present technological world, this potentiality carries disquieting undertones as well. For unlike the inner speech that is hidden from others in principle (though it is the ambition of lie detectors and truth sera to crack open that silence and access its hiddenness), just as the ocular globes which are the support of the gaze are composed of flesh and run through

37 Ibid., 312.

38 Bull, *Sounding Out the City*, 24.

39 Ihde, *Listening and Voice*, 181.

with nerves, the back stage of the mobile phone is composed of metal, glass, and plastic and run through with circuitry (and "the algorithms operating 'behind the screen'" as Wellner points out) connected to telephone networks and the Internet. And that circuitry makes the world of Internet searches and messages or phone conversations with others in principle available to anyone with the sort of technological access and represent a dark dream come true for those equipped with mere lie detectors and truth sera.

3 Conclusion

So, as a result of increasingly privatized auditory spaces resulting from the aspects of the social world discussed above combined with aspects of the sound technologies – particularly their mobilization, our auditory experience of Others has been muted. This is evident in the reduced contact, both in frequency and depth, with the other people who are directly present in our increasingly urban environments. We are drawn more and more to curate our private auditory worlds, turning them into meaningful experiential spaces alongside the other spaces we live our lives in as we move about in our everyday environments. In the process, the possibility of chance, serendipitous encounters with others that might constitute the basis for meaningful communication and community has been diluted. Of course a reduction in the frequency and depth of chance encounters does not preclude meaningful communication and community with people we are connected to by the bonds of mutual social concern. If I am drawn away from the people who surround me by the voices calling on me from my mobile phone, that's because I'm drawn toward the network of individuals I'm connected to by concrete relationships – family, friends, coworkers, etc. if I am drawn away from the other drivers enclosed in their automobiles on the road by the forces of life pulling me this way and that, that's because I'm heading toward the different places where I am called on to pursue my life projects. There is a danger, here, though, of finding ourselves in a sort of social echo chamber with potentially noxious consequences. Cass R. Sunstein describes them in the context of Internet personalization, but his comments on the dangers of Internet enclaves of like-minded people communicating inside self-sorting communities are relevant in the context of this article as well.

> The Internet makes it easy for people to create separate communities and niches, and in a free society, much can be said on behalf of both. They can make life a lot more fun; they can reduce loneliness and spur creativity. They can even promote democratic self-government, because enclaves are indispensable for incubating new ideas and perspectives that can strengthen public debate. But it is important to understand that countless editions of the Daily Me can also produce serious problems of mutual suspicion, unjustified rage, and social fragmentation – and that these problems will result from the reliable logic of social interactions.[40]

Let us hope that the reliable logic of social interactions drawing us to flock together will not drown out the salutary, enriching influence of people who are unlike us in so many wondrous ways.

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40 Sunstein, "Sunstein on the Internet and Political Polarization."

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