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Deviant Media: Thinking Beyond Noise to Understand It

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What if I told you that to understand noise you need to think beyond it? You need to mute all the noises and start with a new rhythm. This is a position paper about noise, and it is the position you take that will shape how it vibrates and resonates. Instead of finding a fixed and definite definition of noise, we need to take a step back and ask:

- How does noise become noise?
- Who created noise as a category distinct from sound?
- Why did they do this and with what rationale?
- Who does this category serve?

While noise has traditionally been examined by scholars, practitioners and artists from the fields of music, acoustics and acoustic ecology, I suggest that mixing several approaches –specifically media and communication studies, science and technology studies, and feminist technoscience – can create a different soundtrack to our understanding of noise as something that disturbs and disrupts the order of things. In my book *Media Distortions* (Carmi 2020a), I argue that noise is a deviant media category which was created as part of a larger project enacted by media companies to shape how we understand and engage with media by producing deviant categories. The production of deviant media categories changes according to the time period and medi-

um. What in the early twentieth-century media landscape was called noise, in the late 1990s and early 2000s was called spam, and at the time of writing, in the social media age, is now called the 'antisocial'. As I argue elsewhere, '[d]eviant media categories are about the struggles to determine what is human, normal, and social – It is about what makes us as individuals and society, it is about the default settings of our lives' (Carmi 2020a, 252). Noise and other deviant media categories are meant to influence how we understand media and communication, and therefore hold a powerful position in shaping society.

When I started my research on spam I was trying to understand its origins. What I realised is that most of the discourse of spam has been constructed by computer scientists and lawmakers. But when I dug deeper, I understood that a lot of the assumptions and 'common-sense' understanding of it were actually not so clear cut – they were flexible and changing, just like noise before it. So the core thing that I set out to do in my research was not to automatically accept these narratives about spam, noise or any other deviant media category. I understood that spam is part of a larger media category of investigation which can broadly be configured as *the deviant*. Instead, I tuned into the conditions, times and instruments through which deviant categories of media are created and recreated.

How to Understand the Deviant?

So how do we start to understand the politics of deviant categories in media technologies? In my approach, I mix several fields that examine categories and standardisation, but instead of using visual concepts, I use sound. There is not one way of understanding the deviant but, depending on what you want to figure out, it is rather a good practice to cross boundaries – just like sound. In my soundtrack, I use elements from science and technology studies, feminist technoscience, media theory and sound studies. Just like a DJ, I take the pieces that examine the politics of categories and produce a new mix. So what's inside?

After going over the data that I had collected, I identified two knowledge-production processes that media companies enact simul-

taneously in media technologies to produce deviant categories: *processed listening* and *rhythmedia*. The first concept is inspired by Alexandra Supper and Karin Bijsterveld's (2015) modes of listening and feminist technoscience's (Barad 2003; Braidotti 2002) theory of development of process. *Processed listening* is the way media companies selectively tune into different sources through the media apparatus, by using several tools (automatic or manual), in different temporalities, to produce different kinds of knowledge (mainly profiles) for economic and political purposes. This process involves monitoring, detection, measurement, categorisation and recording, which are stored in a dynamic archive/database.

Inspired by Raymond Williams's (1974) 'planned flow' and Henri Lefebvre's (2002) 'rhythmanalysis', *rhythmedia* describes the ways that media companies use the knowledge in the archive produced by processed listening to (re)order people (bodies and behaviours) and the relations between them through media territories (analogue or digital). It is the way media companies conduct repetitious training on people through orchestrating the architecture they design that influences the way they live in mediated spaces. These companies conduct the way architectures change according to the knowledge they gain from processed listening to people's behaviour. Rhythmedia involves (re)organisation, exclusion, removal, deletion and filtering of noise. My argument is that media companies have been using *processed listening* and *rhythmedia* to (re)produce subjects and territories. The outcome is the production of subjects who behave in an efficient and economically desired way through media.

What happens when we apply these two concepts on what deviant means in the early twentieth century and social media? Let's tune into the case of the biggest media company of the early twentieth century – Bell Telephone Company – and how it produced the media category of noise. With devices that it developed and only it could interpret, Bell measured people and spaces in New York City and decided what types of behaviors should be categorised as noise. This processed listening enabled Bell to remove anything that could harm its business. In 1929 the Noise Abatement Committee (NAC) partnered with Bell

to create a map to spot problematic noisy groups of people and practices. The main goal was to turn various spaces across New York City towards commerce-orientated activities. To do that, Bell had to define the people and behaviours that interfered with that goal as noisy. These included street commerce as well as unauthorised house parties, and also union protests in Union Square, mainly targeting lower classes, immigrants and Black-Americans. In this way, Bell conducted rhythmedia by orchestrating the way all the components of a city's sounds (such as people and their behaviours, commercial activities, buildings and cars) were temporospatially ordered.

Moving to social media, to illustrate the connection between 'noise' and today's 'antisocial behaviour', Facebook is a great example of how media companies orchestrate people's mediated experience towards a desired rhythm (sociality) while filtering out problematic rhythms (the antisocial). Social media companies like Facebook offer their services for free because they operate a multi-sided market where people's behavior becomes the product (Zuboff 2015). People's behaviour is traded between multiple third-party companies, mainly advertisers, and, therefore, it is important for them to create a big database, but especially to make a categorical distinction between what behaviours are profitable (social) and what are not (antisocial). In order to do that, Facebook conducts *processed listening* to people's behaviour by using tools such as commercial content moderators (Roberts 2019) and their social plug-ins, which are web cookies and pixels. With these human and non-human tools, Facebook listens to people's actions within and outside its platform to assemble a dynamic database that is updated as the listening is ongoing. To conduct a rhythmedia, the company needs more information to establish which behaviours can harm its business model and hence be categorised as antisocial so that they can filter out their noise. To conduct rhythmedia the company uses algorithms and architecture design in a way that makes possible only the desired rhythm. By doing so, Facebook establishes what types of behaviours have a value and are thus possible on its platform – what type of sociality counts more (Carmi 2020b).

In both of these examples, media companies wanted to produce commercially oriented territories, and to do that they wanted to exclude and filter out the deviant – everything that can interfere with their business model will be categorised as noise or antisocial. What is common with all the media companies I have examined is the normalisation of their exploitative practices. This is dangerous because ordering society in particular ways has consequences for how we understand politics, news, economics and ourselves. So what can we do in the future?

Future Distortions

It is hard to predict what kinds of new deviant categories will arise in the future. But what we can know for certain is that there will always be media companies that want to control, shape, manage and manipulate how we think, understand and engage with media. The 'deviant' always corresponds with the norm, and so the more we challenge what is the 'regular', the more we discover what is the deviant and what are the tensions between them. In short, we need to challenge discourses of power. The way to go forward is to question how different types of discourses seem to be the 'common sense' and to tell different stories about noise. In the context of media and communication, it is about challenging different technology infrastructures and how they are promoted as the only way to do things, from smart cities to facial recognition and artificial intelligence. The power of media companies lies in their ability to present these standards as the exclusive way to experience technology, while in fact there are always multiple ways to develop and use media technologies. Therefore, negotiating noise is important to our political futures – to make our own senses.

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