

What Mixtapes Can Teach Us About Noise: Reading Shannon and Weaver in 2010

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Abstract

One of the most consistently fascinating aspects of sound culture studies is an exploration of the redemptive characteristics of noise.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Archival, Article, Digital Humanities, Mixtapes, Music

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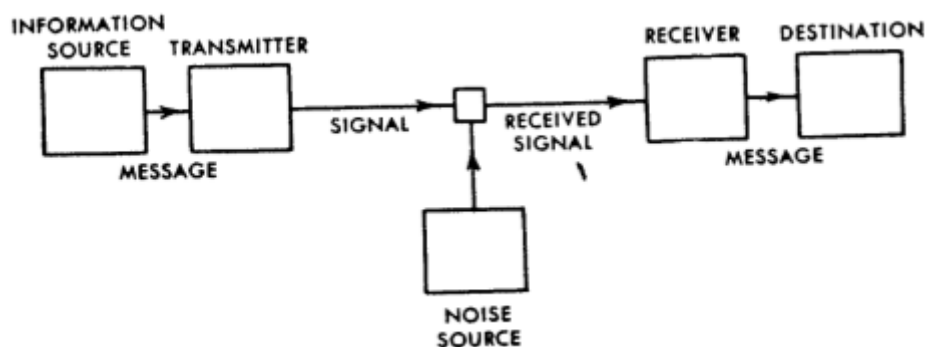
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One of the most consistently fascinating aspects of sound culture studies is an exploration of the redemptive characteristics of noise. Instead of assuming a dismissive attitude toward the role of noise in society (See our exposé on [John Leicester and vuvuzelas](#)), or an uncritical but positive stance (Marianetti, 1909, “[The Futurist Manifesto](#)”), sound culture scholars work to provide a reflexive perspective which contextualizes the various nuances of noise in all aspects of society. In a recent seminar, focusing around communication, media, and information science, I was provided with an excerpt from Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver’s 1949 book, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*. This was a dry but exciting read; it was a very influential text. Not only did academics specializing in communication theory explore it because of how well it helped to define transmission model communication, but Bell Labs funded Claude Shannon and used his research to help establish the global information networks on which we rely today. Telephone wires, cellular transmissions, modems and even instructional manuals all owe this work a debt of gratitude. Simply put, Shannon and Weaver explain that less noise results in a better transmission, so several mathematical algorithms are posited to reduce noise in communication technology.



The Mathematical Theory of Communication, pg.7

The present day information society has defined itself, and has even been constructed upon technologies which require noise reducing mathematical algorithms. These algorithms are so

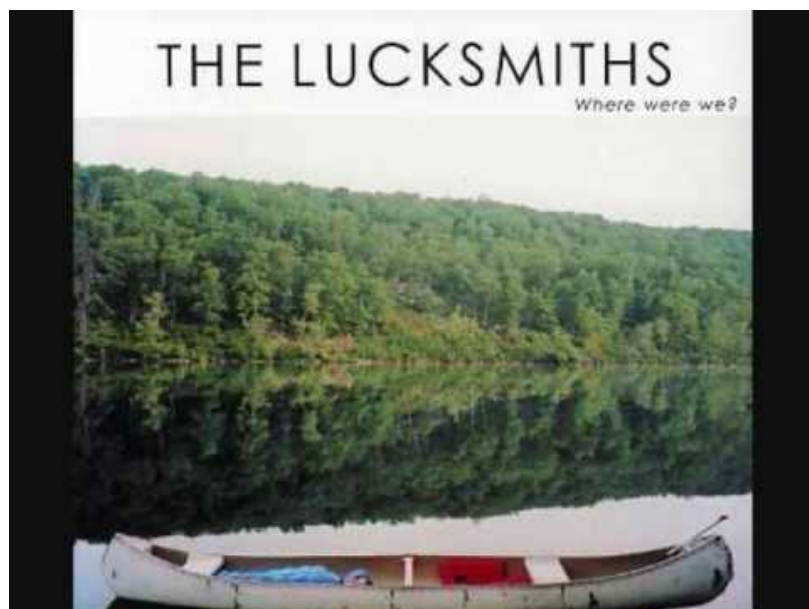
prevalent that we rely on them every day without necessarily noticing or understanding them. As a researcher, I wonder where people embrace noise, as these sites provide clues to the limits of information's value. Although I can think of many, in light of our recent [Blog-O-Versary Mix!](#), I choose to examine one of my most treasured – the mixtape. The mixtape exemplifies a site of resistance specifically because it is 1) a measurably inferior sonic format to CD, MP3 and vinyl, and 2) often mixtapes are used to encode messages meant for an ideal listener. The communities, couples and individuals who circulate mixtapes embrace its status as an obsolete technology, – they perceive its affiliations with noise as a strength, a contour, definition. Mixtapes are a form of symbolic currency where the message is often secondary to the communal connotations encouraged by its form. Noise can be read as a tactic, a space of densely coded inferences which resist traditional modes of authority. To understand a mixtape is to understand the community and contexts within which it circulates; no other explanation could ever prove adequate.

Shannon and Weaver constructed noise as a problem for communication in 1949, and this has certainly had a strong impact on the term's meaning, supporting its negative connotations even today. Noise is a space of social resistance and identification, an organic model of social encoding and decoding where authority is subverted to a subcultural set of rules and rituals. Reading Shannon and Weaver makes me question the sociological: how indebted is today's society to information, and does noise truly serve as a foil?

Here's the essay Claude Shannon Submitted to Bell Labs: [A Mathematical Theory of Communication](#).

[Cassette From My Ex](#) is a site which explores some sites of identification in information resistance.

AT



<https://youtu.be/EWZNcBG5YxU>



