

Can You Hear Me Now?

Liana M. Silva

Blog post published February 14, 2011 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/jcsf9-dtj64>

Abstract

The New York Times' Brian Stelter posted this tweet earlier this week. It serves as an example of the importance of sound to the media coverage of the protests in Egypt. And Gil-Scott Heron thought the revolution would not be televised. The past few weeks the world has been watching the protests in Egypt.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Field Recording, Islam/Muslim Identity, Listening, Liveness



@brianstelter
Brian Stelter

What is arguably more important than the video of Tahrir, right now, is the *audio* of Tahrir. Kudos to the handful of broadcasters there.

10 Feb via web ☆ Favorite ↗ Retweet ↻ Reply

Recommended citation

Silva, L. M. (2011, February 14). Can You Hear Me Now?. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/jcsf9-dtj64>

Copyright

Copyright © Liana M. Silva 2011. Distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.



@brianstelter

Brian Stelter

What is arguably more important than the video of Tahrir, right now, is the *audio* of Tahrir. Kudos to the handful of broadcasters there.

10 Feb via web ☆ Favorite ↻ Retweet ↩ Reply

The New York Times' Brian Stelter posted this tweet earlier this week. It serves as an example of the importance of sound to the media coverage of the protests in Egypt.

And Gil-Scott Heron thought the revolution would not be televised.

The past few weeks the world has been watching the protests in Egypt. We have not just watched, but we have also tuned in. This is history in the making, especially considering that many of the information we are getting of this protest movement come from the ground, from the protesters themselves, and their requests have gone viral on Youtube and Twitter.

Earlier this week, I was watching CNN and its coverage of the protesters at Tahrir Square after Mubarak's statement that he would not step down. On several occasions the broadcasters on CNN asked viewers to listen to protesters. The grainy images of the mobile crowds had been playing in the background all afternoon, a reminder of what was going on while the broadcasters offered information and analysis. But at times the broadcasters stopped speaking so viewers could listen to the crowds. The grainy images emitted a dull roar, the combination of all of the cries and statements from the protesters. The cameras followed people down streets, but the roar was constant. It struck me how often the plea to listen came up during the broadcast. On Friday, when Mubarak resigned, I tuned in online (from work) to CNN, MSNBC, and BBC America. The broadcasters made the same requests: let's tune in to the crowds at Tahrir Square. See early in this MSNBC video where Brian Williams encourages viewers to listen to the protesters:

https://youtu.be/VdSN8_o6FcE

The newsmedia seemed to offer the sounds to its viewers, but what is at stake when that happens? How are the sounds being coded? Mark Branter's [post on sound and sanity](#) in the context of the Rally to Restore Sanity (which took place on October 30th 2010), reminds us that oftentimes noise and screaming is connected to "irrationality and fear." He points out, "Public noise is senseless sound, while rational debate is meaningful sound." In this context, the constant plea from newscasters for the American public to "listen in" to the crowds at Tahrir Square takes a

different spin. Are we insiders looking at the Other scream and shout? When the newscasters ask us to tune in to the pleas and screams coming from the Egyptian crowds I wonder if the newscasts frame them as senseless crowds because of the way that they present these sounds. In any instance, this presentation of sound is not innocent. Some may argue that it is just a request from Western media to pay attention to what the crowds are saying, but I believe that we cannot truly listen to their cries on Tahrir Square when we still hold in place this analogy of “sound/noise::rationality/irrationality.” Many agreed that Mubarak should listen to the pleas of the crowds, but are we listening to them as well?

The coverage of the Egyptian protests shows us how complicated listening is. The protesters are not just seen but heard (only when the network wants the viewers to listen, mind you) by viewers. The sonic aspect of this movement is reinforced when we think of the [“Speak-to-Tweet” service](#), set up to allow Egyptian protesters to tweet when the Egyptian government turned off all internet communication. We could read AND hear what the protesters were saying.

When media outlets choose to tune in to the protests in Egypt, this is an example of how important sound is to narratives. Visuals are not the only story, is what I get from the protest coverage. (And letting the world hear the protesters is a step in the right direction.) The coverage and its inclination toward the audio of the protesters tells me that it’s not just a matter of shock value but it’s also a statement of the role of audio in the news. It’s supposed to be a reflection of what is going on at the moment, like taking the temperature of the crowds. As others have said on this blog (for example, [Priscilla Peña Ovalle](#)) sound is usually linked to the visual, and the hierarchy of senses in our society always has the visual as the most important. Listening is important, but we must also think about how we listen, and what filters the sounds we listen to.

