

Taking Me Out of the Ball Game: Advertising's Acoustic Pitch

Oswaldo Oyola

Blog post published December 19, 2011 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/bmt7v-kdg57>

Abstract

This past week the Commercial Advertisement Loudness Mitigation Act (CALM) went into effect. The law requires broadcasters to use technology that regulates the difference in volume between normal programming and commercials.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Advertising, Article, Listening, Sound Studies, Sports

Recommended citation

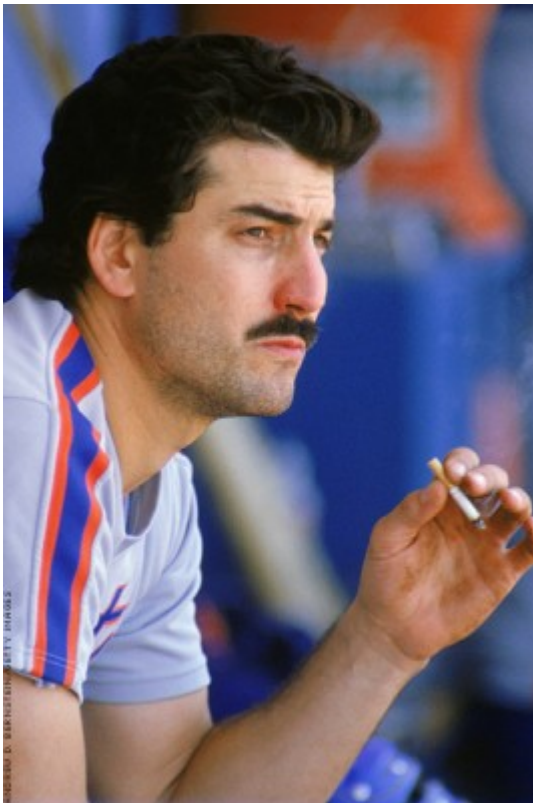
Oyola, O. (2011, December 19). Taking Me Out of the Ball Game: Advertising's Acoustic Pitch. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/bmt7v-kdg57>

Copyright

Copyright © Oswaldo Oyola 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.

This past week the [Commercial Advertisement Loudness Mitigation Act](#) (CALM) went into effect. The law requires broadcasters to use technology that regulates the difference in volume between normal programming and commercials. As Congressperson Anna G. Eshoo mentions in [a letter to the FCC](#) on the legislation she sponsored, “[I]n 21 of the 25 quarterly FCC reports on consumer complaints between 2002 and 2009, abrupt changes in volume during transition from regular programming to commercials was the top consumer grievance related to radio and television broadcasting.” The complaint and resultant law suggests that, despite television’s reputation as a primarily visual medium, advertisers understand that it is sound that captures the attention of viewers ready to move on to do other things during the commercial break.

This disparity in volume seems all the more egregious during sports broadcasts, where [the need for live sound-mixing makes adjusting for difference all the more difficult](#). I should know, as I spend about half the year listening to the television—baseball season. From early April until sometime in October, baseball broadcasts are the “background noise” at my place. Five to seven nights a week, I watch—but really listen to—Mets games.



Keith Hernandez – former MLB player, ex-smoker and current SNY broadcaster.

There is something about the rhythm of baseball—maybe it is really the rhythm of the broadcasts—that allows the viewer to do other things while following the game. Baseball does not demand every moment of your attention and yet, any moment—any pitch, any swing of the bat, any dash between bases—can be dramatic, stellar. While some friends have ribbed that my ability to split my attention really serves as an indication that the game must be boring, I prefer to think of

baseball as moving at life's rhythm. I love listening while I cook, running into the living room to catch a play (or replay) when I hear [Gary Cohen's voice](#) get pitched in the way it does when something exciting is happening, like a bang-bang double play or when he [calls a homerun](#). And even if I am in the room with the TV, I am reading a book or futzing on my laptop, looking up when the sound alerts me.

Commercials are an important part of this listening practice. Since commercials come fairly often in baseball (every half inning and during pitching changes), they are an important signal to me that I can stop my active listening and focus more intently on the book I am reading, the student papers I am grading, or the garlic I am chopping. No matter how shrill the voice of used car dealers or how annoying the jingle for a local aluminum siding installer, I can usually tune out the commercials and pick up the game again when the timbre of the general sounds change back to the flaring music and subdued baritones the announcers use when not shouting their excitement.

For the last few seasons, however, the [NY State Smoker's Quitline](#)—a frequent sponsor on the SNY channel—arrested that ability to tune out the commercials, to ignore them by not seeing them, by introducing sound to their [graphic images of tumor-ridden lungs and clogged aortas](#) as a way to dissuade smokers.

<https://youtu.be/87LyzUXFARE>

An early example of these commercials was a series featuring Rinaldo Martinez, who narrates his tale of throat cancer through an electrolarynx.



<https://youtu.be/mhN4CxTHKQo>

This particular commercial's use of the intersection of voice and baseball through Martinez's now unattainable dream of being an umpire is crafty because the sounds of the game around Martinez could fool a listener into paying attention because the ad relates the public service announcement to the mode of entertainment with which the listener is primarily engaged. However, played as much as these commercials are (probably eight or nine times over the course

of a game), I was able to ignore it as well, the electrolarynx voice becoming the cue to cease my active listening.

The emphysema cough commercial from this past season is not so easily ignored. The loud arresting sound is deeply troubling. The captions between shots of the man coughing may explain the daily misery of the disease, but they are superfluous compared to the sound itself, which tells the story the way no verbal retelling can accomplish. In fact, the commercial's visual elements seem designed to foreground the sound, as the featured smoker sits with his back to the camera, and the eventual close-up focuses on his mouth. The man's wheezing and the desperation that it evokes as he tries to get a decent breath is difficult to ignore. The pathos of the commercial is that much more visceral when divorced from the personalized suffering of the electrolarynx commercials. The coughing disrupts the rhythm of the baseball broadcast experience (including the ignorable commercials) to suggest that such an affliction does not obey the patterns of sounds and actions that might bring us comfort.

Truly, there was not a time that that pained coughing would echo through our apartment that my partner did not complain about how disturbing it was, or that my cooking, grading, reading, writing was not interrupted for a moment—even if I succeeded at not looking at the TV. And now, long after the season is over the commercial resonates with me. I cannot speak to its effectiveness in dissuading smokers (having quit smoking over 15 years ago), but in terms of making an impression on TV listeners, there is no doubting its effectiveness.

While equity of volume between shows and commercials can be legislated, ultimately, it is the context of sounds that make an advertisement stand out. Furthermore, the experience of repeatedly hearing this commercial has made the role of sound in how and what we view exceedingly evident—telling us when to look (or look away). The loudness of TV commercials may be mitigated, but the way in which their sounds can capture our attention, disrupt our activities or haunt our days without recourse to the visual calls on critical viewers to also be critical *listeners* to become aware of their enduring influence.

—

Oswaldo Oyola is a regular contributor to Sounding Out! He is also an English PhD student at Binghamton University.