

The Sonic Roots of Surveillance Society: Intimacy, Mobility, and Radio

katbat67

Blog post published October 27, 2014 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/wr1pb-10g95>

Abstract

It's an all too familiar movie trope. A bug hidden in a flower jar. A figure in shadows crouched listening at a door. The tape recording that no one knew existed, revealed at the most decisive of moments.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Cultural Studies, History, Information, Listening



Recommended citation

katbat67. (2014, October 27). The Sonic Roots of Surveillance Society: Intimacy, Mobility, and Radio. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/wr1pb-10g95>

Copyright

Copyright © katbat67 2014. Distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.



It's an all too familiar movie trope. A bug hidden in a flower jar. A figure in shadows crouched listening at a door. The tape recording that no one knew existed, revealed at the most decisive of moments. Even the abrupt disconnection of a phone call manages to arouse the suspicion that we are never as alone as we may think. And although surveillance derives its meaning the latin "*vigilare*" (to watch) and French "*sur-*" (over), its deep connotations of listening have all but obliterated that distinction.

Rounding out our series on surveillance, Kathleen Battles offers a historical perspective that shows how early twentieth century crime drama naturalized practices of citizen surveillance. A million eyes were activated as millions of listeners learned that the immediacy of radio and telephone allowed for an unprecedented level of participation in law enforcement. Calling all cars...Calling all cars... -AT

—

[Police Headquarters](#), a 1932 radio crime drama, was produced in the infancy of narrative radio. Containing barely 12 minutes of narrative content, the program opened each episode with a repeating segment of call, connection, and dispatch to quickly establish both the crime committed and how the police responded to it. For example, in the "Payroll Robbery" episode it takes just over a minute and a half to hear a phone call to the titular headquarters, its connection to the proper unit, a radio call to a specific police car, and the responding officers arriving at the assigned location. Compared with the graphically and visually intense images of modern surveillance in contemporary popular culture, this brief exchange no doubt sounds quaint, simplistic, and even banal. After all, radios, cars, and telephones have served as the routine backdrop of most police dramas for some 70 years. But in 1932 the interlinking of these technologies was factually, as well as imaginatively, novel. This essay shows how radio, as "new media," was central to imagining surveillance in sonic terms, prefiguring many features of contemporary surveillance practices.



"Kindergarden of the Air," by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation CC BY-NC-ND.

The introduction of radio and cars into police work took place in the first decades of the twentieth century, [especially during the years between the two world wars that Richard Popp \(2011\) calls "the machine age"](#). He argues that this period witnessed vast transformations brought on by cars and radios, which, when combined with existing technologies like the telephone, forged new communication networks that transformed both work and leisure. These changes were central to the narratives of criminality and policing that emerged during the interwar years. Police were the focus of radio dramas, including [Police Headquarters](#) and [Calling All Cars](#). These dramas played with the intermingling of automobility, telephony, and radio in ways that spoke to the main problems police forces saw themselves facing: organized, professional, mobile, machine-age criminals. Cars, telephones, and automobiles were not just tools to criminals, but they were also the building blocks for a machine age surveillance made possible by the sonic power of radio.

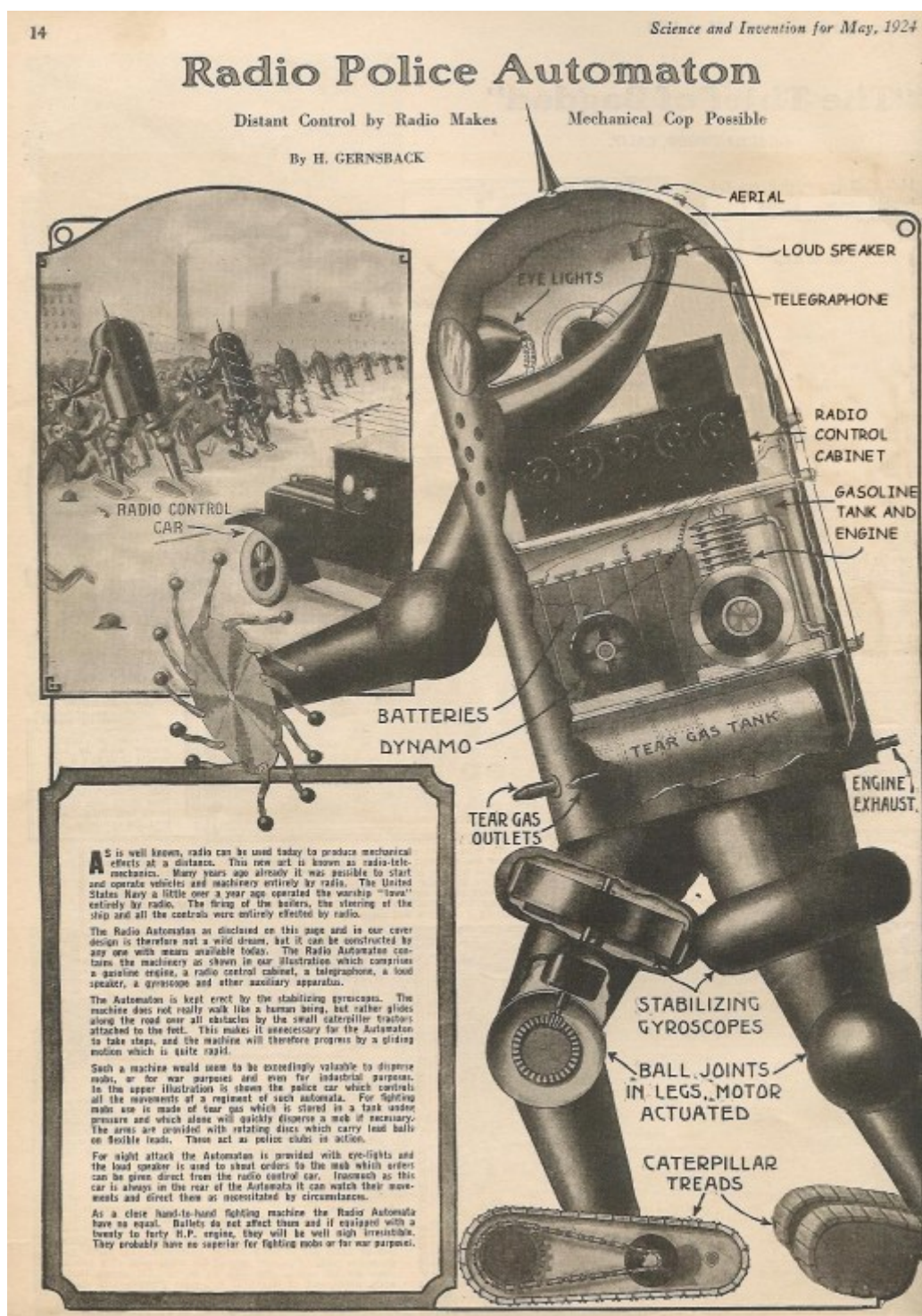
[Recently, Robin James \(2014\) has suggested that the acousmatic is a useful metaphor for understanding the emerging practices of data based surveillance.](#) Acousmatic surveillance listens for patterns in "ambient data environments" instead of profiling individuals in the panoptic sense. At the turn of the twentieth century, radio allowed for a panacoustic mastery of spaces that bridged both panoptic and acousmatic surveillance. Radio also speaks to another key feature of information age surveillance, what [Mark Andrejevic \(2011\) describes as the "redoubling of tools for communication and leisure as technologies for surveillance and security." \(165-66\)](#) The technical capabilities and imaginative potentials of radio help us to consider it both as a police technology

and entertainment medium. The sonic power of radio was often figured as an “Invisible Man Hunter,” whose realignment of spatial and temporal arrangements rendered criminal escape impossible. As an entertainment medium, radio’s aurality was key to understanding its imaginative potential as highly intimate and mobile: invasive *and* expansive.

<https://youtu.be/2MlEmvCqBdM>

In *Police Headquarters* we hear how radio’s sonic and aural qualities come together. Radio acts as the link between the telephone and car, allowing for a swift response to a citizen request. The tactical use of sound effects and narrative compression in the broadcast situate the listener inside a machine like apparatus that presents the police as always available. At their broadest level, radio crime dramas aurally situate communication and transportation technologies, like radio, as key to both the narrative organization of the story and as a plot element. In the opening to the “Stop That Car” episode of *Calling All Cars*, a dispatcher advises for cars to be on the lookout for a specific car involved in a hit and run, including the address of the crime and possible location of the vehicle. Overlaid with sound effects made to signify a car, these openings situate listeners as riders eavesdropping on the adventures of mobile police officers. As the program’s title suggests, each episode opened with a police radio call, often voiced by real life LAPD dispatcher, Jessie Rosenquist. The program’s sponsor was the gasoline company that supplied the fuel for LAPD patrol cars – further linking cars and radio as a key theme. In the opening to the “Two Man Crime Wave Episode,” the very ad for the product is performed as a police radio call.

The conceit of eavesdropping on a police adventure did much to link private life and the police. This theme runs tandem to radio’s sonic immediacy, which allowed listeners to imagine a seemingly instantaneous response to citizen phone calls.. For example, the “July 4th in a Radio Car” episode of *Calling All Cars* situates radio listeners as sonic participants, able to ride along with police from the comfort of their own living rooms. Here, cars respond to a number of calls made by private citizens that bring the policing function into daily life. There is even one call that involves domestic violence, in particular. Throughout the episode, police are situated as an available force – thanks to the telephone, radio, and automobile – to adjudicate all manner of private disputes. In these particular instances the intimacy of radio as a machine age technology is “redoubled” with radio as a police technology. Radio’s intimate address allowed the voices of police officers to enter the private space of the home. At the same time, the machinery of crime fighting required citizen participation, most often figured through the phone call from within the space of the home to the police.



"Radio Police Automation 1924," by Robert Wade, CC BY-NC-SA.

If the intimacy of radio served to cross the divide between public and private, the spatial-temporal collapse achieved by radio made it ideal for sonically monitoring great swaths of space. Intimately linked with cars, radio was understood as especially mobile. Radio's ability to compress the relationship between space and time is frequently dramatized. For example, in the "Crime vs. Time" episode of *Calling All Cars*, the host explains how radio has rendered the average response time to a police call for help only two minutes and forty seconds. The episode then proceeds to

show how radio was used by the police to track and apprehend two men who robbed a movie theater. Representing phone and radio calls, while specifically referencing geographic locations, radio dramatists used radio's aural dimensions to render radio's sonic power of surveillance. Capable of reaching everywhere, police radio, when linked with the telephone and automobile, could be used to sonically pinpoint any *somewhere* that a criminal might try to escape to.

In our era of high-tech and sophisticated technologies, visually rich narratives, and algorithmically driven methods of tracking, there is certainly something simple, comforting, and even nostalgic in these tales of low-tech machine age criminal apprehension. Depression era true crime dramas certainly do not offer the kind of sophistication as information age narratives, such as *The Wire*. The medium's sonic qualities were key to linking together its use as both a police instrument and as a domestic entertainment technology. With sonic forces invisibly and silently crossing the into intimate domestic spaces *and* covering large swaths of territory, radio became key to imagining many features that we take for granted as "new" about the information age: the control of movement across space, the constant availability of communicative connection, the promise of perfect coordination across a field of institutional actors, the marshaling of citizen participation in surveillance efforts, and the construction of increasingly intimate links between domestic life and law enforcement procedures. In serving as central node in refiguring shifting notions of space and time that existing institutions were not prepared to handle, radio's sonic qualities remapped the meaning of police work and helped to establish a relationship between the police and citizen body that still resonates today. While not as technologically sophisticated, machine age policing and police narratives took advantage of radio's double function as both a machine of coordination and medium of entertainment to extend the policing function into more areas of life. This reflects a sonic mode of power that allows neither the interior space of the home nor the exterior world of the road relief from police presence. This moment of technological interconnection, however, evoked the excitement and anxiety that made sonic surveillance at once thrilling and calming; a salve to soothe the woes of a world that now seemed intensely close *and* impossibly far flung. Is it any wonder that while some fret over the power of corporate and state dataveillance today, that some continue to find comfort in the possibility of being recognized as *someone* in a world of ever more intense interconnection?

—

Featured image "Radio for Backup" by Jonathan Flinchbaugh CC BY-NC-SA.

—

Kathleen Battles is Associate Professor and Graduate Director in the Department of Communication and Journalism at Oakland University. Her research focuses on radio history, especially as it relates to issues of policing, sound and surveillance, questions concerning technology and culture, and sexuality and the media. She is the author of *Calling All Cars: Radio Dragnets and the Technology of Policing* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010); co-editor (with Joy Hayes and Wendy Hilton-Morrow) of *War of the Worlds to Social Media: Mediated Communication in Times of Crisis* (Peter Lang, 2013); and co-author (with Wendy Hilton-Morrow) of *Sexual*

Identities and the Media: An Introduction (Routledge, 2015). In addition, her work has appeared in Critical Studies in Media Communication, The Radio Journal, and the Journal of Homosexuality.



REWIND!...If you liked this post, check out:

[Acousmatic Surveillance and Big Data](#)—Robin James

[The Dark Side of Game Audio: The Sounds of Mimetic Control and Affective Conditioning](#)—Aaron Trammell

[À qui la rue?: On Mégaphone and Montreal's Noisy Public Sphere](#)—Lilian Radovac