

Sailing but also diving: in-depth sound by José Luis Fernández

*Navegar, mas também mergulhar: o som em
profundidade por José Luis Fernández*

Interview with
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THE INTERVIEW WITH Professor José Luis Fernández highlights a pivotal moment in his research as explored in his work *Las Cuatro Revoluciones Invisibles* (2024), delving into profound reflections on the sound industry, particularly at the intersection with an interactive and challenging audience. His current contributions to the study of sound/audio mediatization focus on the phenomenon of podcasts, questioning the revolutionary nature of the medium itself while revisiting characteristics present since the early days of the radio industry. José Luis Fernández holds a Ph.D. in Social Sciences from the University of Buenos Aires, where he serves as a consulting professor. He is also a former president of the Argentine Association of Semiotics.

His work invites readers to navigate the waves, but also to dive deep into an obscure ocean that remains largely unexplored by the academia, the market, and the audience. According to the author, understanding the profound impact of the sound industry on society is crucial for grasping contemporary culture and politics, while the products stemming from this industry are significant tools in the construction of individual identity.



MATRIZes: What was the main motivation—or curiosity—that led you to begin studying sound revolutions and their respective audiences?

José Luis Fernández: I belong to the last generation that, as children, played at home having the radio as background noise, controlled by our parents. There is my first, non-melancholy memory of the interaction between social action and a reception that, albeit somewhat distracted, left vivid memories in me. From that emerged the first intuitions about a mode of reception that differed from what would later be imposed by television: even without supposedly focused attention, meaning was still generated.

Already installed in the study of mass media, it seemed to me that radio discursivity was underappreciated and more nostalgically evoked than investigated from a semiotic perspective. In my first book, there was already a chapter titled “Telephone, Phonograph, Radio: The Radio in its Systems.” Sound media was an inadvertent system and hearing was a mythologized mode of reception. This gave rise to the idea of the revolutionary in the sociocultural aspect of sound/audio mediatizations, and for over 30 years, I have been studying and publishing on various related phenomena, from their relationship with urban spaces to their impact on the expansion of the diverse lives of music.

MATRIZes: Between the popular mass revolutions and those initiated by the so-called “audionauts,” we see a clear shift from the collective distribution of sound/recording industry products towards individualized consumption. Based on your observations, what is the biggest challenge this consumer presents to the industry?

JLF: I think there’s a fundamental aspect here, dating back at least to the 1930s, which has recently become more apparent with the expansion of digital platforms and networked lives: the mobile listener is at an inevitable intersection between the socially mediated production of meaning and the uniqueness of their mode of reception. Cultural industries have generated two types of products for their audiences: narrative and argumentative discursivity, which demands attention and continuity, as seen in major narrative and essayistic works, narrative cinematography and its offshoots in radio drama and soap operas, and organized information, more mythical than deep; and mosaic discursivity, brought back by Abraham Moles, constructed through the articulation of discursive capsules that do not propose a general meaning for each text but at most a certain general trend in the sociocultural sphere.

There are different types of capsules: news flashes, music, weather reports, sports results, horoscopes, cooking recipes, and more. Central mediatizations

based on mosaics include newspapers and magazines, nearly all radio, and public spaces—a system of mediatizations also largely forgotten.

Sound/audio mediatizations are based on mosaics, and their reception is well-suited for various mobility situations: the sound/audio ecosystem connects stable-format capsules, such as news and popular music, among others, with the nuances of conversations or audio message exchanges, whether emotional or professional in nature. This transition is revolutionary and remains so, as it continues to be largely unrecognized by the academic system.

MATRIZes: Regarding the use of the word “audionaut,” at first, it leads the reader to draw a direct parallel with the term “internet user,” (*internaut*) conveying the idea of a technologically mediated subject who navigates the waves but also interacts within their space. What is the most defining characteristic of being an audionaut, and how does it differ from the “listener” that record labels and streaming platforms still use to refer to the audience?

JLF: In my view, the two major technological revolutions with disruptive consequences across discursive practices are the mediatizations of sound/audio and those of digital media. Both permeate the entire socio-cultural and economic life: from spatial to temporal, from commercial transactions to information exchanges, from musical to fictional, from entertainment to academic life, from the utmost macro- to the absolute micro-social. Sound/audio revolutions took place earlier and have been linked to mobility from a very early stage, starting in the 1930s and expanding significantly from the 1960s with miniaturization. Therefore, the audionaut predates the internet user, although the former has also expanded from the latter’s position. The “listener” is a functionalist creation of the figure of the receiver, based on the idea of group reception in front of the audio receiver, excluding musical and telephonic experiences. This is evidenced by the earliest advertisements for radio and phonograph devices, with groups listening in front of speakers, after an initial phase that relied on headphones and amplifier tubes. The listener would engage with serenity, while the audionaut is in motion, mixing moments of distraction and attention, building personal syntheses of meaning that can be articulated with their community. This multi-skilled receiver is similar to a newspaper reader on public transport or a passenger engaging in roadside communications. Such skills are essential for navigating the Internet and its various tangled up platforms. From this perspective, cinematography is a system linked to the arts, while television is an audiovisual parenthesis that fascinated academia and politics, but concealed other reception processes that are only now taking the spotlight.

MATRIZES: Today, we see a push for the mediatization of sound content by the distributors themselves. Playlists, albums, and podcasts deliver visual content with the same intensity as audio content. Do you think the mediatization process between “listening and sharing” is the main mechanism through which consumers influence the industry? Is it the mediatization of sound that defines the success of a content/channel/artist?

JLF: First of all, the socio-cultural and economic system has always tried to intervene in pure sound/audio discourse from the very beginning. However, it never managed to make it disappear; it only caused its importance to become increasingly overlooked.

The telephone, phonograph, and radio ecosystems are the core of the music industry. Since the 1930s, there have been records of phone requests to radio stations asking for musicians to attend or to broadcast their recordings. The digital ecosystem challenges the industrial music system, which is based on the centralized production of musical themes approximately 3 to 4 minutes long, covering a wide variety of genres and regions, and supported by advertising in the media. Since the 1960s, listening to music has been an on-the-move activity.

There is no musical success outside the mediatization of its texts. The novelty of the digital age is the intervention of so-called users—what I refer to as audio-nauts—who can produce, remix, intervene, and distribute musical products without altering the format of the music. For now, this growth has largely occurred independently of the industries, which are now regaining ground, but they must buy already finished and highly successful products, which is more challenging for them and reduces profitability from the artist’s path to reaching the masses.

This part of the revolutionary process is still ongoing.

MATRIZES: The podcast format is an important subject of your studies in your latest book, and although it has broken away from some production and consumption patterns, it’s still difficult to understand just how revolutionary it is. Could you give us some examples of innovations brought by podcasts and the impact they have had on the sound industry?

JLF: Podcasting is a new form of mediatization that seeks to capitalize on the evident growth of streaming platforms dedicated to musical sound. This process is still unfolding, and we should be seeing its full extent over time. For now, there is a clear progressive enrichment of its multi-genre discursive offerings. In the book, I clarify two common misconceptions: on one hand, there is an attempt to link podcasts to radio, but I believe the fact that they are recorded is fundamental for differentiation. On the other hand, the *podcasting* ecosystem being built is not directed at other sound media but is related to

platforms and influencers. Therefore, it seems to me that it is not part of the sound/audio ecosystem but rather another product within the platform, and in that sense, only competes to capture listeners within the already established sound/audio ecosystem. Of course, the significance of podcasts will be defined by their ability to attract audiences, not by the enthusiasm of producers and academics who study them. How can podcasts be compared to radio? By studying the similarities and differences in their discursive exchanges, both technologically and in terms of genre and style, as well as the listening proposals and uses, whether successful or not.

MATRIZes: TikTok has also become an important “mediator of success” for both music and artists, creating trends among consumers of dance related content, in particular. Additionally, the platform offers a series of editing tools that alter the original sound content before distributing, mixing, and creating new music/sounds. Do you think the productive capacity of consumers—as well as audio users—on social media makes them competitors of record labels and producers? Given that content created by them can go viral more than a song produced by a record label, for example, does the audionaut become a fundamental part of the creative sound industry?

JLF: I believe this goes beyond the contributions that can be made to music from a platform like TikTok. I believe this platform will get to the point of competing against YouTube, which remains the largest music distribution platform, besides all its other offerings. It’s important to consider that much of the music distribution on YouTube is minimally audiovisual, often featuring just a few photographs or images of the album cover or performers. At least for now, it’s not clear that the audiovisual aspect is what matters most in the music/YouTube relationship. In any case, once again, it will be the content creators and their various audiences who shall define if music will become stable on TikTok.

MATRIZes: Algorithmic logic has a significant influence on the individualized experience of the audience, but do you think the audionaut is capable of hacking this imposition, or is all consumption and interaction already predetermined by the network?

JLF: This is a crucial question, both due to the growth of algorithms and the resistance to their dominance. For now, at least in music and radio, the situation appears to have reached a standstill: there are as many playlists curated by the platforms as there are by users, and both coexist within the individual. This could be an important example of these new relationships between individuals and the sociocultural, without either area being imposed on the other. But we



must always remember that social sciences study the sociocultural, and the individual represents a boundary. I'm aware that the social sciences are fascinated by the individual, but also believe that this is one of the sources of our current weakness in understanding the genuine transformations that are occurring.

MATRIZes: We often talk about new formats, but let's go back to radio, which still holds an important place within the media ecosystem. What reasons do you attribute to this resilience/consistency of radio even after so many transformations in the production, reception, and interaction with sound content?

JLF: I believe that radio is destined to persist as long as large segments of the population are interested in maintaining contact with their socio-cultural lives while on the move: driving cars, riding bicycles, motorcycles, or skateboards, or simply walking. This fluctuating attention allowed by sound capsules that don't require visual content is a fundamental condition for the resilience of radio and its derivative products.

MATRIZes: Do you believe it's possible to pinpoint the most important revolution in the history of the sound industry? That is, the revolution that brought the most significant impacts and transformations to existing models. Or would you say that these revolutions have meshed up into one "great permanent revolution," and that the divisions serve only for thought organization?

JLF: To simplify, while still synthesizing the entire process: the capture of sound and its manipulation to build different audio positions is a total and transversal revolution, only comparable to the digital revolution, which builds on its achievements and adds a few new ones. This sound revolution discursively structures the ongoing permanent revolution of its audiences, whose figure is the audionaut—permanent because it is still unfolding, and its limits cannot be seen. The two major revolutions necessary as discursive supports for these transversal revolutions are the radio discourse revolution, as the first live mass discourse, and the popular revolution of expanding and defending the music format as the core of the great entertainment industry of its time. In my opinion, such revolutions constitute a transformative socio-cultural ecosystem, one that the academic system has failed to grasp fully, just as the major industrial conglomerates of sound and audio are being forced into a transformation they cannot fully sustain, or only partially endure.

MATRIZes: Beyond podcasts and their developments, what do you observe as the most innovative sound products that you still want to investigate?

JLF: There is a general phenomenon that impacts almost everything mentioned above: the platformization of sound/audio. We have seen some of its consequences and while others should be expected, not every novelty will be revolutionary. As I mentioned earlier, for now, I don't see podcasts as related to the entire sound/audio ecosystem but rather to the platform in general.

Within the mediatization of sound, two very different aspects catch my attention, and I plan to investigate them. On the one hand, voice commands, which seem to be expanding despite being at odds with the general circumstances of social life. It seems absurd to me that we might all spend our lives giving orders to machines, as if the role of an assistant/secretary were accessible to everyone. The idea of this endless murmuring strikes me as dystopian. However, I believe that in various situations of loneliness or, even more so, in active and self-managed mobility, they could occupy an important place in everything related to the Internet of Things. On the other hand, at the cutting edge of sound/audio discursive exchanges, I find the most innovative aspect of radio to be the presence of recorded fragments that interact with live broadcasters. Thanks to sound manipulation software and apps, even drivers are sometimes forced to respond to interventions proposed by the operator, often outside the script. I believe there is the potential for new spatial-temporal discursive games that lead to a transformative effect on radio, bringing about the new discursive presence of the operator, who until now was merely a technical support. Revolutions make path to new positions within the ecosystems touched by them.

MATRIZES: Finally, how are your projects and publications in Portuguese coming along?

JLF: I've been in contact with colleagues from Brazil and Portugal for many years. I've already presented some of them at conferences in Argentina and Brazil. Additionally, I've published in Brazilian journals, though always in Spanish. However, only now has the opportunity arisen to have my work translated into Portuguese. To me, this is a great opportunity to enhance interaction with the teams working in our two countries. ■

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