

Oratorical Footing in a New Medium: Recordings of Presidential Campaign Speeches, 1896-1912

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When Edison invented the phonograph in 1877, the capacity of the new invention that most impressed him was that it provided the means to overcome the ephemerality of human speech; it made the spoken word durable and available for future reproduction. But what kinds of speech were worthy of being recorded? Understandably, the preservation and dissemination of oratory seemed an appropriate and desirable use for the phonograph. As early as 1896, the new technology of sound recording was employed in political campaigns; by 1908, the new medium had become sufficiently well established to be enlisted in the campaign for the presidency.

The recorded texts of these campaign speeches and other historical records relating to the use of sound recordings in political campaigns signal the ambiguity of a new medium whose capacities had not yet assumed—or been disciplined into—a clear shape; the campaign recordings were unsteadily poised between varying alignments to an audience and other aspects of context. In this paper, we analyze how this work of contextualization was effected, with special attention to how the recorded speeches were aligned to various publics, constituting or reconstituting those publics in the process.

1. Introduction

Theorists and historians of the public sphere, from Habermas onward, have been appropriately concerned with technologies of communication. The enabling and shaping influences of print have loomed large in considerations of the public sphere, though few scholars have been as attentive as linguistic anthropologists would like to matters of form and genre in charting the structural transformations of public discourse. When it comes to the advent of subsequent media technologies, however, while we are beginning to get some interesting work that attends to the discursive construction of media as cultural formations, there is as yet an utter paucity of form- and genre-sensitive analysis. What we offer in this essay is a synoptic sketch of what happened to a quintessentially public

speech genre, political oratory, as it was assimilated to the new communicative technology of sound recording, a technology that is characteristically ignored in studies of the transformation of the public sphere, as historians of the process skip from print journalism to radio and television.

2. Imagining Recorded Speech

When Thomas A. Edison hit upon the mechanical means of inscribing sound on paper, in the summer of 1877, the capacity of the “speaking phonograph,” as he called his invention, that most impressed him was that it allowed its user “to store up and reproduce automatically at any future time the human voice perfectly” (Edison, 1989a, p. 444). In other words, it provided the means to overcome the ephemerality of human speech; it made the spoken word durable as such, unlike writing, which required the transformation of the word into material and visual form for the sake of preserving it. The immediate question, then, was what kinds of speech were worthy of storing up toward future reproduction. One of the applications that Edison anticipated was the preservation of great oratory: “It will henceforth be possible to preserve for future generations the voices as well as the words of our Washingtons, our Lincolns, our Gladstones” (Edison, 1878, p. 534). This was speech worthy of fixing and storing up, not just as words—which could be accomplished in print—but as performance, in its living voice.

An article in the *New York Times* of November 7, 1877,¹ in considering that “the phonograph will render it possible to preserve for any length of time the words and tones of any orator,” anticipates that “this invention will lead to important changes in our social customs.” The principal change, however playfully it may be framed in this article, amounts to the recontextualization of public culture to private settings: “The lecturer will no longer require his audience to meet him in a public hall, but will sell his lectures in quart bottles, at fifty cents each; and the politician, instead of howling himself hoarse on the platform, will have a pint of his best speech put into the hands of each of his constituents.” In a word, the *Times* article anticipates the movement of public oratory to domestic space, “the home circle.”

The question we want to pursue here has to do with how that transition was negotiated during the formative period of commercial sound recording, from the mid-1890s to around 1915. We will deal here with only one small piece of the larger whole, that is, commercial recordings of political campaign speeches. The question is how the alignment of campaign oratory to a public was recalibrated with the advent of the new communicative technology of sound recording.

3. 1896 Bryan and McKinley

The earliest notice we have of commercial recordings of speeches keyed to a current political campaign comes from a catalogue of the United States Phonograph Company issued during or shortly after the Presidential campaign of 1896. The catalogue notice of New Talking Records lists four speeches by William Jennings Bryan, the Democratic candidate, and one by William McKinley, the Republican nominee:

¹ References to newspapers and newsletters (*Phonoscope* and *Edison Phonograph Monthly*) will be given in the body of the text.

- (1) HON. W. J. BRYAN'S CROWN OF THORNS AND CROSS OF GOLD SPEECH. The Peroration of the famous Address that won him the Presidential Nomination at Chicago. Very loud and distinct. Applause. No Announcement.

MAJOR MCKINLEY'S SPEECH ON THE THREAT TO DEBASE THE NATIONAL CURRENCY. As delivered by the distinguished Republican Nominee at Canton, July 11th. Very loud and distinct. Applause. No Announcement.

HON. W. J. BRYAN'S SPEECH AT THE NOTIFICATION MEETING IN NEW YORK. A part of his Address at the great Demonstration in Madison Square Garden, New York, on August 12th. Very loud. Applause. No Announcement.

HON. W. J. BRYAN'S REPLY TO THE CHARGE OF ANARCHY. From the Candidate's great Speech in Hornellsville, before 15,000 people in the open air. Very loud and distinct. Applause. No Announcement.

HON. W. J. BRYAN'S OPINION OF THE WALL STREET GOLD-BUGS AND SYNDICATES. As delivered at the Buffalo Ratification Meeting, where he declared that the Creator did not make Financiers of better mud than he used for other people. Very loud and distinct. Applause. No Announcement.

The catalogue listings, though brief, do a lot of contextualizing work, linking each recorded bit of oratory to one or another of the respective candidates, the larger speech from which it was taken, the event and site at which the speech was delivered, even its place in the ongoing campaign dialogue of charge and countercharge, as in "Hon. W. J. Bryan's Reply to the Charge of Anarchy." Note that each listing also contains the descriptive note "Applause. No announcement." The latter point refers to the early convention of announcing the title, performer, and record company at the beginning of each recording; the departure of these recordings from the convention requires acknowledgment.

Interestingly, all of this contextualizing work serves to establish certain dimensions of ambiguity concerning the recordings. On the one hand, it allows for the interpretation that these recordings were made in situ, at the public events where the speeches were delivered, and that they feature the candidates themselves as speakers before a copresent audience. It points, in other words, toward what was still the default situational context for political oratory: a large scale, heightened, formal (Irvine, 1979) platform event (Goffman, 1981, p. 165) involving a featured performer addressing a gathered audience which expresses its appreciation of the message and the performance by means of applause.

But these recordings were, in fact, simulations. They were reanimations of extracts from the candidates' speeches, most likely by Len Spencer, an early studio performer who worked for the United States Phonograph Company at the time. These factors point in the opposite direction, toward the detachability of texts from their originary settings and recontextualizability in other contexts. To be sure, this was not news: there was a long history, reaching back to classical antiquity, of inscribing speeches in writing, preserving them for their literary and historical interest, and reanimating them in recitation. What is

interesting here is the element of simulation, the reenactment of the performance event allowed for by the capacity of the technology to reproduce the living human voice and by the inclusion of applause. This was an early form of mediated political simulacrum.

Interestingly, the capacity of the new technology of sound recording for dissimulation was recognized quite early, almost immediately, in fact, after the phonograph was invented, with political oratory as the object of fabrication. One of the first commercial exploitations of the phonograph was as popular entertainment: exhibitors took the new recording machines on tour, giving demonstrations before enthusiastic audiences eager to see—and hear—this marvelous invention. There is an account of one such exhibition in the *St. Louis Evening Post* of May 30, 1878: “‘Now, then,’ said the gentleman in charge of the phonograph, to the crowd of spectators, ‘we will have a mass-meeting.’” The speaker then turns to the machine:

- (2) “Fellow citizens,” begins the operator in a high key as if addressing a crowd of 10,000 people from the Court-house steps, “we have met here this evening to discuss the political situation, and as the first speaker who will address you I have the honor of introducing Hon. Berry Mitchell, of Cahokia Creek, who will address you on the issues of the day. Before the gentleman begins I propose three cheers for Mr. Mitchell, which I know you will give. Now, again, hip, hip, hurrah. Now once more to close up on.”

Into the ear of the phonograph the gentleman pours all these excited utterances. He then changes his talk. Assuming another voice, supposedly from some disgruntled member in the crowd, he calls out, as people always do at political meetings, “Put him out.” “Let’s hang him.” “Pull down his vest.” “Down with the fraud.”

The exhibitor then calls for music to calm the crowd, and a cornet player comes forward to play a strain from “Garry Owen.” The exhibitor again steps forward, “and indulges in a loud and ironical laugh, supposed to come from some scornful member of the crowd, who repudiates the speakers and the music, and despises in advance the political sentiments that are about to be promulgated.” The recording is then played back:

- (3) “Fellow citizens, we have met here this evening,” the exact tone of the speaker being imitated perfectly, and then come the scornful remarks and the derisive laughter, the cheers, the hoots and yells, and all the usual accompaniments of a political meeting, including the music, which is reproduced perfectly.

This is a remarkable performance, a simulated enactment of a political meeting featuring an oratorical performance. But it is also an illusion: one man, assisted by a musician, enacting multiple roles and contributing multiple voices to the recording. Moreover, the simulation is a highly condensed representation of a political meeting, employing a few diagnostic devices of the typical performance event and its constituent genres, which are so fully familiar to the audience that they are able instantly to recognize what is being enacted, aided, to be sure, by the performer’s framing announcement, “we will have a mass-meeting.” The introduction of the speaker, the call for three cheers, the heckling, the music—“all the usual accompaniments of a political meeting”—are indexical icons par excellence of the real thing.

Note, then, the contrastive yet complementary constructions of recorded oratory that coalesced almost from the moment of Edison's invention. On the one hand, there existed a rhetoric of speech "faithfully," "accurately," "exactly" reproduced, reproduced with "fidelity" (e.g., Edison, 1989a, pp. 616, 696; Johnson, 1877, p. 304; Prescott, 1877, p. 848; "The speaking phonograph," 1878, p. 1828), while, on the other, actual exhibition practices laid bare the technology's capacity for simulation and illusion. We shall return to this point later in the paper.

4. The Campaign of 1900

With the approach of the 1900 campaign, the nascent sound-recording industry and political managers began to think in more imaginative ways about the potential applications of the new technology to political campaigns, perhaps even leading to "a complete revolution in campaigning methods," in the suggestion of an article in the *Phonoscope*, a journal that served the fledgling recording business (*Phonoscope*, 1900, 4(2), p. 6). The article is somewhat tongue-in-cheek, but the imaginings to which it gives expression suggest the range of possibilities that might be envisioned. "It is now suggested," reports the article, "that instead of making a laborious campaign, candidates devote their time at home talking into a funnel and leave the campaign committees and the Phonographs to distribute their views to an admiring public" (1900, 4(2), p. 6). In suggesting sound recordings as surrogates for living orators, the *Phonoscope* article is actually recreating a vision that appeared in an early newspaper speculation shortly after the invention of the phonograph, building upon the sensation caused by Edison's demonstrations of his invention in Washington, including an appearance before Congress. Imagining congressional uses of this new invention, a writer in the *Philadelphia Times* (April 25, 1878) suggests that "There will be an overwhelming demand for a common kind of phonograph that can make a fair stump speech full of expressions of love for the people, to circulate to the various Congressional districts."

Playing precisely on the mediated quality of sound recording, the *Phonoscope* article suggests the advantages that might accrue from the decoupling of voice from copresent, embodied speakers:

- (4) Timid aspirants to office can obviate the embarrassment of facing an audience of doubtful sympathy, while the audience run no risk of shock either from the appearance or mannerisms of the speaker.

Campaign managers, finding that the eloquence of their nominee is tiring the hearers, can promptly switch off the speech and switch on a song by the eminent baritone of Washington, D.C.

In this manner the campaign manager can keep his finger on the public's pulse, and upon the slightest indication of irritation or weariness can promptly change the subject of the discourse. (1900, 4(2), p. 6)

Of course, the piece continues, the mediated nature of the communication might work to the candidate's disadvantage as well, especially in the case of "[c]andidates whose personal magnetism or pulchritude increase their chances of success" and who would not be nearly so popular if it were their speeches alone and not their attractive persons that were accessible to the public.

The *Phonoscope* for April, 1900 (4(4), p. 8) reported that "The Republican National Committee have a plan under way now by which reproductions of political speeches will

be made for the Graphophone and Phonograph, and they will figure largely in the present campaign.” The article envisions that the strategy would not be confined to one party alone, but that “Orators of renown, such as Senator Depew, Wm. J. Bryan, representatives Cannon and Hull, Senators Allison, Spooner, Wolcott and Fairbanks, will make records of their most famous efforts, and same will be distributed broadcast for the edification of the wavering voter” (1900, 4(4), p. 8).

Some Washington Democrats devised an organized project to distribute speeches by Democratic orators to Democratic organizations around the country, “thus affording small rural localities that would not be visited by great political lights the privilege of hearing the questions of the hour discussed by these national celebrities in their own voices, the same as though they were actually present” (*Phonoscope*, 1900, 4(6), p. 7). Apparently, they secured recordings of short speeches by various luminaries, including Bryan, their presidential candidate Adlai E. Stevenson, their candidate for Vice President, and endorsements from others, such as Senator Murphy of New York, J.G. Johnson, chairman of the National Executive Democratic Committee, and William Randolph Hearst, newspaper publisher and president of the National Association of Democratic Clubs. The project seems to have foundered, though, for lack of sufficient funds to see it through (1900, 4(6), p. 7). And McKinley, standing on the dignity of his office, decided that “it would be highly improper for him to talk into the machines,” and so quashed the plans of those campaign visionaries who had been urging him to do so (*Phonoscope*, 1900, 5(6), p. 8).

Although these campaign recording projects do not appear to have come to fruition, the bases and terms by which they were envisioned are revealing. A significant part of the medium’s appeal lay in its anticipated multiplying effect: speeches by star orators might be reproduced and widely used at “every cross road and corner grocery throughout the land” (*Phonoscope*, 1900, 4(4), p. 8), with the recorded versions, reproduced in many copies, standing as surrogates for the political orators themselves. Here, it is the medium’s capacity to exploit and multiply the power of presence by reproducing the candidates’ “own voices” that represents its greatest attraction. The passage quoted above is a benchmark use of the term “broadcast” in reference to the capacity of sound media, a metaphor drawn from the agrarian sense of the term: sowing seeds by scattering them widely. It has become a dead metaphor for us, but in this early usage—indeed, the earliest we have found—it pointed up the expansive communicative potential of recorded sound to carve out broad, dispersed publics constituted by listening in common—though not together or necessarily at the same time—to the same speaker.

5. The 1906 Hearst Gubernatorial Campaign

The next time we encounter the recording of campaign speeches is in the New York State gubernatorial election of 1906. William Randolph Hearst, ever the mass-media innovator, was the candidate of the Independence League, running against the Republican candidate, Charles Evans Hughes. The *New York Times* of October 10, 1906 reports “Hearst Speech ‘Canned’ for Up-State Farmers. He Talks It and Gestures It into Phonograph and Camera. A 12-Cylinder Harangue. The Absent-Treatment Candidate Will Be Projected in Sound and Shadow Before the Voters of the Remoter Regions.” The article goes on to say

- (5) A canned Hearst speech is the latest wrinkle in the up-State campaign of the Independence League’s editor-candidate. Mr. Hearst will try it on hamlets

and villages in remote sections of the State which he either will not have the time to visit or which his luxuriously appointed special train cannot reach for the reason that there is no railroad leading to them.

Hearst, we recall, was one of the luminaries recorded in the abortive plan by the Democratic Party to circulate recorded campaign speeches in the election of 1900. Now, it appears, he put the plan into action in his own gubernatorial campaign.

Recognizing that the votes of upstate farmers, “born to the Republican Party,” would be critical to his hopes of being elected, Hearst’s campaign “conceived the idea of reaching the voters with talking machine records and moving pictures.” Accordingly, Hearst “talked at the graphophone against the trusts and other things,” and arranged to be filmed delivering a speech at the Hudson County Fair.” Continuing in a classic New York City vein when treating of the rural hinterlands, the *New York Times* reports that Hearst’s plan was to send “reliable agents” to “the out-of-the-way places, where a real campaign speech is rarely heard, even in a Presidential year, and where the farming population, practically cut off from all contact with the outer world after the last Summer boarder has left, will gladly drive many miles to listen to a talking machine and see a moving picture show.” Hearst’s agents were to offer their oratorical show in local halls, or, “where there is no hall, Mr. Hearst’s agents will set up the graphophone in a corner grocery and turn on a Hearst speech whenever the village lights have tired of eating raisins.” They also conceived the idea of circulating the recordings on a kind of lending library basis, as many farmhouses already had talking machines, “which are kept to furnish entertainment in the long Winter nights by rendering the latest vaudeville hits.” The *Times* of October 28, 1906 reports a trial run showing in Irvington-on-Hudson, which, the Hearst campaign boasted, “evoked almost as much enthusiasm as Mr. Hearst himself would have done.” Apparently, “the mechanic who ran the show had to let the talking machine repeat Mr. Hearst’s speech and the biograph da capo its entire performance.” He did the show again at the train station and several times in the smoking car on his way back to the city. The article goes on to note the tour schedule for five of “the canned speech outfits” as they fanned out over the state.

Hearst, the mass-media innovator par excellence, is exploiting here the perceived capacity of the new communicative technologies, sound recording and moving pictures, to extend the immediacy of a platform event involving a gathered, copresent public to a dispersed public that is beyond the reach of the interaction order. To the living voice of the sound recording, the film representation adds the gestural movement of the living body. Moreover, the film was four minutes longer than the speech recording (ten minutes to the sound recording’s six), so the film, as reported by the *Times*,

- (6) will not only show Mr. Hearst in the act of delivering his speech, but will exhibit the hand-shaking scene that followed. Mr. Hearst will be seen entering his carriage. The pictures will pursue that carriage to the station and then show the Hearst special train pulling out with the multitude giving him an ovation.

Also under consideration, apparently, was filling in the sound component with another recording of “a new campaign ditty got up for rural consumption.” So, continuing in the terms provided by Goffman (1981, p. 167), the Hearst media offers to the dispersed audiences aspects of the spectacle as well as the game, eliciting their participative engagement in the mediated performance.

Note again here the capacity for simulation that arises out of the conjunction of the two media, sound recording and film. The first known proposal for combining motion pictures with sound recording had suggested political oratory as ideal subject matter:

- (7) By combining the phonograph with the kinesigraph I will undertake not only to produce a talking picture of Mr. Gladstone which, with motionless lips and unchanged expression, shall positively recite his latest anti-Turkish speech in his own voice and tone. Not only this, but the life-size photograph itself shall move and gesticulate precisely as he did when making the speech, the words and gestures corresponding as in real life. ("Talking Photographs," letter from Wordsworth Donisthorpe, *Nature*, January 24, 1878).

The verbal text, in Hearst's case, was recorded in a studio in New York City, while the delivery of the speech and its associated activities were filmed at the Hudson County Fair. When the two were combined, however, the speech was rekeyed: the spectators were induced to connect the speech they were hearing from the phonograph with the one they were seeing on the screen, perceiving them as complementary facets of a single event. The two media together conveyed an even stronger sense of immediacy than either alone could accomplish, even if the lack of synchronization meant that any correspondence between individual phrases and gestures was lost.

The *Times*, reliant on the older communicative technology of print, is not so sure about all this media razzle-dazzle. An article on October 19, 1906 suggests that the audiences that might be reached by this media package will "have more attention for the method of presentation than for the matter presented. Such a 'number,'" the article goes on to say,

- (8) would be watched attentively by anybody while it remained a novelty, but it is hardly possible that it would inspire thought on any political question, and not even imaginable that it would change a vote or strengthen a determination. The old confidence in oratory as the best way to 'reach the public' is waning fast. It would not yet be safe to abandon the plan, but the real work of every campaign is probably done now through the newspapers, which have voices that carry vastly further than those of any candidate or waged spellbinder.

What we have here is a wonderful moment of historical juncture, when the relationships linking oratory, communicative technology, and publics are up for grabs. The power of live oratory and the gathered public is still there as a frame of reference, though in the face of a growing recognition that this traditional nexus is waning and forms of mediation are in the ascendancy. Newspapers, the medium of print—though still metaphorically assimilated to the "voice"—have the largest reach in constituting and reaching a dispersed public. And these new-fangled technologies of sound recording and film are gimmicks, more significant for their novelty value, as entertainment, than as instruments of serious political engagement. Once again, though, the sour-grapism of the print medium should be recognized as the interested representation it is. The entertainment value of oratory, including political oratory, has been recognized for millennia, though ideologized in different and contested ways. Everything else we know about Hearst would indicate that he knew very well that his media package would be attractive as entertainment, and so much the better.

In response to Hearst's media initiative, participants in Hughes' campaign devised a counter-offensive that also exploited the capacities of sound recording. The leader of the Lower East Side Hughes organization, Mayer Schoenfeld, announced a plan to deploy twenty-five wagon-mounted phonographs throughout the East Side area, accompanied by brass bands to play in the intervals between speeches. "Each phonograph will get a permit to address its audiences in public meetings," the *New York Times* reported (October 10, 1906), but the speeches to be "reeled off" by the phonographs were not those of Hughes himself, who said he knew nothing about the project and expressed no opinion on it, but campaign addresses presented by his supporters in Yiddish and Russian.

The first trial run of the Lower East Side media blitz was apparently no great success. A brief article in the *Times* (October 24, 1906) records that

- (9) Two brief speeches were reeled off in English to small and unappreciative audiences. The first was entitled "A Voice from the Ghetto." "Gracious!" exclaimed an old man. "I hear speeches, but I don't see no mans." Then he hastened away.

Apocryphal though this anecdote may be, it reminds of the strangeness, in those early years of sound recording, of hearing a disembodied voice. Schoenfeld still predicted success for the effort once recordings were offered in Yiddish, but there seems to be no further record of this initiative, and we suspect it was abandoned.

This abortive project is noteworthy nevertheless, alongside Hearst's effort, for what it reveals about the nascent uses of sound recording technology in the construction of political publics. Whereas Hearst was exploiting the potential of recorded sound to disseminate his voice over large spaces by deploying multiple reproductions of his speeches throughout upper New York State to reach "the farmer vote" (*New York Times* October 28, 1906), the English-speaking constituency conceived as a core element in the American polity, Schoenfeld and his anti-Hearst allies in the Hughes campaign envisioned a similar strategy in going after the urban ethnic "ghetto" vote: make multiple recordings and disperse them more locally through the Lower East Side. Key to this effort was the recognition that these sectors of the electorate were most effectively addressed in their own languages. Interestingly, in spinning the rather unspectacular results of his initial experiment with recorded speeches to the *Times* reporter, Schoenfeld suggested that in the next phase "he expected to create a sensation and win votes for the Republican ticket when his talking machines turn loose in Yiddish on residents of the east side letters written by Jacob H. Schiff and Oscar Straus to the Jewish Daily News" (*New York Times*, October 24, 1906). That is to say, Schoenfeld apparently saw the phonograph as a means of recontextualizing and reanimating political discourses cast in another genre and composed for print—letters to the newspaper—in a living voice, and not the voice of their authors, at that. His vision of the new medium was still closely tied to the old medium of print journalism, but it recognized the ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity of the polity. Both efforts, Schoenfeld's and Hearst's, targeted constituencies in terms of their distribution in space: Schoenfeld's more local and Hearst's more broadly—if still regionally—dispersed.

6. The Presidential Campaigns of 1908 and 1912

We see the same processes even more strongly at work in connection with the elections of 1908 and 1912, the next point at which commercial recordings figure in

presidential campaigns. Between May and September of 1908, all three major companies—Edison, Victor, and Columbia—issued recordings by William Jennings Bryan, the Democratic candidate, and William Howard Taft, his Republican opponent. In the campaign of 1912, Edison recorded only Theodore Roosevelt, candidate of the breakaway Progressive Party, whom Edison himself supported, while Victor issued recordings of all three candidates: Roosevelt, Taft, and the Democrat Woodrow Wilson. The 1908 and 1912 recordings represented a new departure: political speeches of great situational immediacy, keyed to an impending election, addressed to “burning topics,” as one advertisement put it, recorded by the candidates themselves, and available for home consumption in mediated, commodified form. The very process of recording campaign speeches for wide dissemination itself became a campaign issue, as Bryan criticized Taft for copycat tactics in “using the talking machine as a means of reaching the public” (*In Their Own Voices*, 2000, CD-1, track 10). The critical point here is that the commercial recordings were themselves part of the campaign process; citizenship was assimilated to consumerism. “No matter how you vote,” says an Edison advertisement, “get the Records of both candidates.” Another ad states, “The Victor makes no comment on the political situation, but merely offers the views of the candidates, so that each citizen may be helped to a wise and intelligent decision.” These are formative moments in the development to which Habermas alerts us, when “private enterprises evoke in their customers the idea that in their consumption decisions they act in their capacity as citizens” (1962/1989, p. 195).

Edison, ever attentive to economic payoff, was explicit about the element of commodification and his desire to reach a mass market with his company’s recordings. The *Edison Phonograph Monthly*, a house organ for Edison dealers, kept up a constant barrage of sales promotion ideas from June to December of 1908. Dealers were urged to advertise in newspapers and by direct mail, to distribute handbills in their communities, to solicit their local newspapers to run editorials touting the new campaign medium, to mount promotional window displays and posters featuring the campaign recordings, and the like. The trade journal offered a steady stream of potential ad and display copy:

- (10) Don’t Talk Politics
 Get a Taft or Bryan Record and Let It Do It for You
 35¢
- Taft or Bryan?
 Edison Records with the Speeches of Both
 (*Edison Phonograph Monthly*, September 1908, p. 13)

Sample copy for a direct-mail solicitation offers, “Should you want a genuine Edison we will sell you one for \$12.50 or \$25.00, on terms as low as \$1.00 a week. The Records are only 35 cents each. Do not fail to call” (*Edison Phonograph Monthly*, July 1908, p. 9). An exhortation to “Push the Bryan Records” proclaims, “You ought to be ashamed to look your Phonograph business in the face if you fail to sell a lot of machines on the strength of the Bryan Records” (*Edison Phonograph Monthly*, July 1908, p. 9). Edison’s optimistic projection to his dealers was that “The Bryan Records should go a long way towards offsetting the present trade dullness” (*Edison Phonograph Monthly*, July 1908, p. 6).

Nor did the marketing hype end with the election. After the election was over, the campaign speech recordings were rekeyed from the time-bound topical urgency of “burning issues” to collectors’ items, capitalizing on the aura of the Presidency and significant now as “something absolutely unique in the history of the world, namely,

phonograph records made by the ruler of a great nation. . . . A year ago, the mere suggestion that it would be possible to buy records made by the President of the United States would have been received with incredulity,” but now they are commercially available “and may be had at a price within reach of the poorest.”

In tacit acknowledgement of the restrictions on length imposed by the medium, Edison ads also make explicit that the recordings offer “selections” or “telling passages” (*Edison Phonograph Monthly*, June 1908, p. 6) from the candidates’ speeches but emphasize nonetheless their mimetic fidelity: “You can hear not only the exact words, but the exact tone and inflection of each Presidential candidate as he makes his speeches...each one a life-like representation.” Or again, “They are among the plainest and most natural Records we have ever turned out” (*Edison Phonograph Monthly*, June 1908, p. 6); the listener will hear “not only the sentiments of the two candidates upon public questions, but also their actual voices and inflections” (*Edison Phonograph Monthly*, September 1908, p. 15). Together with claims such as these, however, emphasizing the transparency of the medium—its immediacy, if you will—we find other statements that make a point of the technological mediation of the recording process, noting, for example, that “These records, the first ever made by THEODORE ROOSEVELT, were prepared with great care by our recording experts who have successfully brought out the forceful and convincing logic of his arguments” (*In Their Own Voices*, 2000, liner notes, p. 23). In an allied vein, a 1908 Victor ad for the recordings of Taft’s speeches states, “William H Taft Speaks to the American Public through the Victor” (*In Their Own Voices*, 2000, liner notes, p. 12), neatly summing up the essence of the innovation, focusing on speaking, the communicative medium of co-presence, but here addressing the dispersed American Public through the mediation of the Victor talking machine recording. An ad for the Bryan records notes that “Bryan decided that Mr. Edison’s perfected machine would do full justice to his oratorical powers in reproduction, so he delivered extracts from ten speeches into the horn of an Edison” (*Edison Phonograph Monthly*, July 1908, p. 13). Note again the acknowledgment of *reproduction* and mediation here.

One interesting feature of the reproduction and recontextualization of spoken oratory was that it rendered the deictic center of the utterance ambiguous. Traditional oratory is always conspicuously sited in public spaces and scheduled in the program of public, collective events: these are defining attributes of the kinds of cultural performances in which political oratory characteristically occurs. The deictic calibration of recorded oratory was rendered problematic in a number of ways; we will deal with a further aspect of this dynamic later on. It will be of interest here, though, to suggest how deictic ambiguity entered into the framing of the campaign records, specifically in the devising of advertising copy. Among the ideas for window posters suggested in the *Edison Phonograph Monthly* are “Bryan Speaks Today” and “Taft Speaks Tonight in an Edison Phonograph” (September 1908, p. 10). A homemade window sign, sent in by one of the dealers, adds some paronomastic ambiguity to the deictic ambiguity (*Edison Phonograph Monthly*, November 1908, p. 20):

- (11) Come in Here
 And Hear
 Them Speak!
 Who?
 The 2 Bills

—that is, William Jennings Bryan and William Howard Taft. When is the “today” or “tonight,” and where is the “here” for the campaign speech in the candidate’s “actual voice”?

This deictic play with immediacy and mediacy was all part of the larger process of making sense of the new medium as a vehicle for campaign oratory. The various framings and applications are illuminating. Consider, for example, the following extract from a letter sent out by the chairman of the Kansas State Democratic Committee to all county chairmen:

- (12) I want to suggest to you the use of the Phonograph with the Bryan Records. The Phonograph has been used in a number of Kansas counties long enough to test it, and for a school-house meeting it is a great success. In every instance the report has been that where a Phonograph meeting has been advertised at a school house they have had an overflow meeting. (*Edison Phonograph Monthly*, November 1908, p. 7)

This is essentially the application imagined—but not realized—by some visionaries for the 1900 campaign and actually carried into practice in the Hearst gubernatorial campaign of 1906. Here, the recording stands as a surrogate for the candidate in a gathered, public meeting, a political assembly at the schoolhouse.

Larger in scale and more complex was an event held in Des Moines, Iowa:

- (13) One of the most unique affairs ever held in this country took place in Foster’s Opera House, Des Moines, Ia., on October 9th. It was announced as “The First Phonograph Debate in History” and was, in fact, a joint debate between Mr. Bryan and Mr. Taft, carried on by means of Edison Phonographs. The affair was arranged by the *Des Moines Capital* and was carried out with the co-operation of Hopkins Bros., the Phonographs being operated by John Hopkins and D. F. Hopkins, of that firm. The Opera House was packed with an audience of 1,500 persons, all of whom seemed much pleased with the affair. The machines were plainly heard in all parts of the house. The debate was interspersed with vocal and instrumental music by local artists. At the close of the affair a number of miscellaneous selections were played on the Phonograph, including some of the Amberol Records. The event was voted a great advertisement for the Edison Phonograph. (*Edison Phonograph Monthly*, November 1908, p. 5)

This event has all the features and accompaniments of a full-scale political debate: held in a large public auditorium before a large gathering of people, featuring live music as well as recorded selections. This is just the kind of event in which audiences were accustomed to hearing campaign speeches; the only difference, again, is that the phonographs stood in for the living candidates—and, of course, that it was not only a political event, but an advertising event for the Edison Phonograph.

This conventional context becomes the basis for imagining a recontextualization of oratory from the public event to a new space—the “here” of the ad poster quoted earlier—and a flexible time—“today,” “tonight,” “at your convenience” (July 1908, p. 14), or any time the recordings are played. A pair of 1912 Victor ads captures especially effectively

the ambiguous and emergent understandings of this new communicative technology vis-à-vis political oratory, poised between a visionary imagining of its unique capacities on the one hand and a conservative framing of its representations on the other.

- (14) Would you accept a special invitation to hear Mr. Taft, Mr. Wilson, and Mr. Roosevelt speak from the same platform? Then come in and hear them discuss the important topics of the campaign, just as you would hear them if seated in a convention hall with these three great men speaking to you. (*In Their Own Voices*, 2000, liner notes, p. 21)
- (15) The Republican, Democratic and Progressive candidates have decided to present their views to the people through that greatest of all public mediums, the Victor, which will bring directly into the home the actual voices of the aspirants for Presidential honors.
 Heretofore, only a very small proportion of the people were able to listen to the candidates in person. Now, for the first time in the history of our country, the Victor makes it possible for the people to hear the actual voices of the three nominees in a discussion of the principles involved in the campaign. This debate, an intensely interesting one, fills eighteen records, most of which have been combined in double-faced form, thus insuring the widest publicity for the discussion. (*In Their Own Voices*, 2000, liner notes, p. 22)

Both advertisements are exercises in virtual reality, setting up for an undifferentiated mass of potential customers conditions in which those who accept the invitation to buy the records will be transposed from the dispersed settings of the record dealer's shop or their individual homes, listening to the technologically mediated, disembodied and fragmented voices of the separate candidates, into the selected, gathered, audience at a live political debate. As a member of that select audience, you are the directly targeted addressee of the great speaker's words. The force that actualizes this complex virtual reality is "the actual voices" of the candidates, mediated though they are through the Victor talking machine, "which will bring into the home the actual voices of the aspirants for Presidential honors." You might even imagine that the presidential candidate himself has come to your home. The model advertising letter offered in the *Edison Phonograph Monthly* in July 1908 sets up just such a virtual scenario: "If William Jennings Bryan offered to deliver his favorite orations in your home, you would consider you had a very great privilege, would you not? Well, we make you an offer that practically amounts to the same thing" (July 1908, p. 9). The power of presence embodied in the voice is the pivot-point around which the new experience of hearing campaign speeches in the shop or in the privacy of domestic space is assimilated back to the more familiar—if less widely accessible—experience of listening to campaign speeches by live political luminaries in convention halls. Now the reader of the ad in the first example is asked to imagine himself or herself back in public space. But interestingly, the ad turns at the end from this imagined restoration of the speeches to the context of a live debate to invoke a dispersed, distributive public, for it is through the diffusion of these recordings that "the widest publicity for the discussion" can be achieved. The reader of the ad in the third example is asked to imagine that the public orator has come to his or her home. Thus, although the distribution of campaign speeches by commercial recording shifts the venue from large-scale public events to the intimate domestic setting of the home, it can be viewed as widening public access to the political process. Formerly, the ad argues, "only a very small proportion of the people" could hear the voices of the candidates, notwithstanding the scale of the gatherings in which they

delivered their speeches, whereas now “the people”—the implication is, all the people—can hear them on recordings; provided, of course, that they can afford the records and the machines to play them. This is very much an expansion of the bourgeois public sphere.

There is also a gendered component to the construction of a dispersed public by means of commercial recordings. In the lead-up to the 1908 election, the Edison company several times makes a point to its dealers that the Bryan records “will appeal very strongly to women as well as men” (*Edison Phonograph Monthly*, June 1908, p. 6).

- (16) ...don't make the mistake to think that men are your only possibilities. Far from it. Women flock to hear Bryan whenever he speaks. It takes a large 'men only' sign to keep them away, and even then they do not stay away through choice. . . . indeed, you cannot afford to overlook the ladies. (*Edison Phonograph Monthly*, July 1908, p. 9)

Here there is at least the suggestion that women may have unrestricted access to political oratory through campaign recordings played in domestic space. Still years away from having the vote, and barred by “men only” signs from certain public events at which candidates hold forth, women may nevertheless be an important part of the commercial market for the recorded speeches as commodities, and that is what counted for recording industry entrepreneurs like Edison. It is still the case, however, that the recordings might bring their “men only” history with them, creating a disjunction between past and present contexts, as in the use of the vocative “Gentlemen” to open a speech (*In Their Own Voices*, 2000, CD-1, track 11).

The recorded texts themselves likewise signal the ambiguity of a new medium whose capacities have not yet assumed—or been disciplined into—a clear shape. For example, the cylinder and disk formats available at the time allowed for recordings of around 2.5 to 4 minutes in duration. This impelled the recorded speeches toward topical and formal closure within the relatively brief and bounded span of a single recording. Pulling in the other direction, however, were the generic expectations of the campaign speech, which tended to be considerably longer and more complex, both in argument and form.

The candidates seem to have negotiated this tension in different ways. Bryan apparently composed short speeches expressly for the recordings, drawing themes and occasional phrases from his longer speeches. The technician who recorded him reports that “Mr. Bryan had his speeches in typewritten form, and had timed himself several times in getting them the right length. Nevertheless we found on trying the first that it was too long to get on the Record, so it had to be cut down and another trial made” (*Edison Phonograph Monthly*, July 1908, p. 16). Taft, on the other hand, expected to draw extracts directly from his longer speeches, though according to the *New York Times* (August 4, 1908), he did rehearse beforehand in an attempt—unsuccessful, as it turned out—to adapt his performance to the new technology:

- (17) Judge Taft has consented to make several short speeches into talking machines for reproduction. As the process of making a phonographic record is somewhat different from making a campaign speech from the back of a car platform or from a front porch, Mr. Taft to-day found Mrs. Taft laughing at him as he was doing a bit of rehearsing for the real records. Several experimental talks were made and reproduced with varying degrees of satisfaction.

The article goes on to note that Taft's preparation also included listening to one of the recordings made earlier by Bryan. The recording manager for Edison provides further insight into Taft's attempts to prepare for his recording session:

- (18) He had a large scrap book in which news paper copies of his speeches had been pasted. He had gone through these and marked the portions he wanted to use in the Records. It was so marked up, however, that he had difficulty following it. These were the first Records he had ever made and he remarked that it was a little different from what he had expected. So, he gave one of his secretaries instructions to make typewritten copies of the marked portions. (*Edison Phonograph Monthly*, 1908, p. 4)

After his uncertain start, however, Taft apparently really got into the process and wound up recording a total of 12 speeches instead of the four originally intended. One of the extras was an after-dinner speech on "Irish Humor," which is largely a corny travel account of his trip to Ireland with a declamation of the popular recitation piece "Shandon Bells." While this may well have been a bid for the Irish vote, it represents an instance where the appeal of oratory as entertainment supercedes the topical and rhetorical urgency of the campaign for office.

Given Taft's *modus operandi* of snipping excerpts from his longer speeches, it is not surprising that there are instances on the campaign recordings where the disassembly of longer speeches into short, bounded, and finalized units is imperfectly accomplished, leaving traces of the cohesion that tied the original text together. For example, the Taft recording entitled "Republican Responsibility And Performance; Democratic Responsibility And Failure" (*In Their Own Voices*, 2000, CD-1, track 24) begins with this parallel sequence:

- (19) I have already pointed out that the Republican Party long ago passed the Antitrust Law and is vigorously enforcing it. I have already stated that it passed the Interstate Commerce Law and its amendments, the Elkins Law and the Rate Bill, and is vigorously enforcing them. I have already dwelt on the great change for the better that has been brought about by this administration.

As this is the beginning of the recording, Taft has not "already" done anything. Nor does this deictic adverb point to any of his other 1908 recordings. The recorded speech comes from a much longer speech—the recording amounts to about 13% of the whole—delivered at Hot Springs, Virginia, August 21, 1908, and occurs about midway through the text, after Taft has indeed "already" said the things he indexes in this clip (Taft, 2001, pp. 24-26).

Also revealing is the deictic alignment of the recontextualized speeches to situational contexts of utterance as well as to co-text. Consider, for example, the following passage from another 1908 Taft recording: "I am not here tonight to speak of foreign missions from a purely religious standpoint. That has been done and will be done. I am here to speak of it from the standpoint of political governmental advancement" (*In Their Own Voices*, 2000, CD-1, track 21). What time and place are indexed by "here tonight?" The recorded utterance has carried some of its history with it in the process of recontextualization from the gathering at which it was originally spoken—the referent of

“here tonight”—to the recording session, and the newspaper transcript most likely published the following morning, to beyond that to each playing of the record. This marks it as a reiteration of words originally spoken at another time and place, even if the author/speaker is the same individual. Unlike many of the other campaign recordings, free of such deictic baggage, this recording cannot appear as fully fresh talk, and thus cannot take full advantage of the immediacy that the speaking voice can evoke.

To take another example, a 1912 recording by Theodore Roosevelt, entitled “Why the Trusts and Bosses Oppose the Progressive Party,” opens with the sentence, “Now this statement of Mr. Archbold represents but part of the truth” (*In Their Own Voices*, 2000, CD-2, track 14). “Now this” appears to be a double deictic, but where is it anchored? “Now” actually serves here as a discourse marker signaling a transition in an ideational sequence and is therefore anomalous at the beginning of an utterance such as this with no antecedent co-text; the demonstrative adjective “this” demands an antecedent as well. As it happens, though, the preceding recording (as determined by the serial numbers) does introduce a statement by Mr. Archbold of Standard Oil (*In Their Own Voices*, 2000, CD-2, track 13), and the “Now this” of the recording at hand expresses a cohesive link that was fully motivated in the original, unified text.

The point is that the campaign recordings were unsteadily poised between varying alignments to an audience and other aspects of context; they are unsure of their footing in Goffman’s sense (1981, pp. 124-159). Much of the work of contextualization is devoted to negotiating the transition between the gathered, co-present, co-participant public of those events in which political speeches were conventionally delivered, addressed directly to the assembled audience, and the dispersed public of record buyers, sited in private, domestic space, listening to commodified speeches, for which the targeted addressee was not clear, by an absent orator, who was nevertheless still somehow present through his voice.

7. Conclusion

The experiment of disseminating campaign oratory via sound recordings was short-lived. No campaign recordings were made for the election of 1916, and the campaign of 1920 marked the advent of radio, which opened an entirely new chapter in the relationship between politics and media. Brief though it was, the recording of campaign speeches represents an arena in which some of the basic work was done in effecting the transition from political oratory as a means of constituting an assembled public to the mediated political address of radio and TV in relation to the dispersed political public that is a feature of contemporary political life. Habermas suggests that

The bourgeois ideal type assumed that out of the audience-oriented subjectivity’s well-founded interior domain a public sphere would evolve in the world of letters. Today, instead of this, the latter has turned into a conduit for social forces channeled into the conjugal family’s inner space by way of a public sphere that the mass media have transmogrified into a sphere of culture consumption. (1962/1989, p. 162)

The examination of how political oratory was adapted to early commercial sound recording suggests how this transformation was initiated. In particular, we have examined the shifts in alignment to a public that attended the recontextualization of political oratory from live performance to sound recording.

A key outcome of this process, we have argued, was the refiguration of an oratorically constituted public from what we might identify as a gathered, assembled, copresent public, characteristic of the large-scale cultural performances—political rallies and other ceremonial occasions—that were the conventional context for political oratory to the dispersed public, consisting of individuals and strong groups listening to political speeches on commercial recordings in private, domestic space. Although this recontextualization was imagined very early, almost at the moment that the phonograph was invented, the process was gradual and experimental, as the developers of the new technology of sound recording tried to figure out the capacities of the new medium and imagine how to exploit them.

Clearly, the contextual association of oratory with large-scale, gathered events remained salient, such that producers of recorded speeches felt the need to preserve elements of the default context as an orienting framework to evoke the immediacy of the performance event. Paradoxically, this impulse toward immediacy and verisimilitude required dissimulation and illusion, as in the inclusion of applause—provided by recording studio personnel—on the recordings of speeches from the 1896 presidential campaign, and the ambiguation of the animators of those speeches by omitting the opening announcements of the performer that conventionally framed early recordings.

A complementary way of retaining the contextual expectations of political speeches on record was to use the recordings as surrogates for live speakers within the same kinds of gathered events that represented the default context for political oratory: campaign rallies, political meetings, and the like. The speeches were disembodied in the recording process, but then reinserted in conventional contexts for oratorical performance.

Yet another demonstration that the established orienting frameworks for the production and reception of political oratory had staying power was Hearst's coupling of his recorded speeches with films of a larger event featuring political oratory, the Hudson County Fair, including visual recording of the other constituent events surrounding the oratorical performance, such as shaking hands with members of the crowd, the departure of the candidate for the train station, and so on. And even as the record companies targeted the commercial recordings of campaign speeches by the presidential candidates in the elections of 1908 and 1912, they invited potential consumers to imagine themselves as participants in gathered public events, enjoying the immediacy of copresence with the speaker, which the preservation of his "living voice" on records made possible.

At the same time that the producers of campaign recordings worked to invest them with contextualization cues that continued to align the recorded speeches to a gathered public, the speeches themselves carried elements of their originary context with them: deictic references to time and place, vocatives, cohesion devices—a special problem because of the temporal constraints of the recordings—and the like, which rendered their footing uncertain and ambiguous.

The element of commodification itself contributed to the alignment of the recorded speeches to a public. The casting of the public as also a market gave the producers of the recordings an interest in maximizing the circulation of the recorded speeches through sales of the records and the machines on which to play them. Thus, for example, while women were not included in the electorate, they could certainly be included among the consumers of the records as commodities. In general, the potentially broad circulation of campaign speeches on records beyond the limits allowed by the carrying capacity of live political

events, while it might be cast as a contribution to civic inclusiveness, was in fact conceived in terms of the cultivation of the bourgeois market, the constituency with the economic means to buy the recordings and phonographs. Also market-driven was the reframing of the campaign recordings from timely discourses on current and pressing political issues, keyed to the ongoing campaigns of 1908 or 1912, to the durability—even timelessness—of collectibles, after the elections were over.

What we are offering then, is an historical window on a communicative technology still in its formative stages, somewhat inchoate, open to imagination, still keyed in significant part to antecedent expectations, orienting frameworks, and practices for the production, repetition, and circulation of discourse at the same time that it anticipates a highly consequential refiguration of the public sphere. And there is, we should say, far more to the story: the campaign speeches we have discussed were but one representation of political oratory on early commercial sound recordings, and our engagement with them is part of a more comprehensive project on sound recording and the formation of political publics that also takes account of a much broader range of recorded representations of the rites of citizenship. Our overall goal in this project is to elucidate in close historical terms, consistent with the careful attention to form-function-meaning interrelationships that our commitment to linguistic anthropology demands, the role of communicative technologies in the discursive construction of social formations.

We live in a time of great preoccupation—in some quarters bordering on obsession—with the transformative effects of new technologies of communication—economic, social, cultural, cognitive, discursive. Oracles of the internet or computer multimedia or hypertext proclaim the revolutionary impact of these new media. George Landow, one of the most frequently quoted prophets of hypertext, proclaims, for example, that

Electronic text processing marks the next major shift in information technology after the development of the printed book. It promises (or threatens) to produce effects on our culture, particularly on our literature, education, criticism, and scholarship, just as radical as those produced by Gutenberg's movable type. (Landow, 1997, p. 21)

Landow, like most others who are engaged in constructing the ideology of the computer as a technology of communication in the guise of attempting to anticipate its effects, invokes the advent of print as a frame of reference, in tacit acknowledgment of just how powerful the ideology of the print revolution is in the symbolic construction of modernity.

But a closer analogy, in some ways, might be the invention of sound recording, a communicative technology scarcely a century and a quarter old that has in that brief time extended its reach throughout the globe and that has been accompanied by significant social transformations of its own. Where it took several centuries before intellectuals began to speculate self-consciously on the social and cultural implications of print or on its potential for commercial exploitation, the invention of sound recording technology in 1877 was accompanied from the moment of its accomplishment by projections about how it could be commodified and what social transformations might follow in its wake. Because these commodifications and transformations had a formative influence on contemporary social and political life and the constitution of the public sphere, they can afford us an illuminating reflexive vantage point on our contemporary condition, both in regard to the configuration of the political public and in regard to our imaginings of how the newest communicative technologies may influence the shape of our future.

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