

Sound Dominates, We Just Forgot to Listen

Dr Iain McGregor

Research Lead, Applied Informatics
Edinburgh Napier University

Date of Publication: 25 May 2025

License: Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)

You may share and adapt the material with attribution.

Abstract

This public commentary explores the under-recognised role of sound in perception, memory, protest, and shared space. Challenging the assumption that humans are primarily visual beings, the piece argues that sound is more immediate, socially shared, and neurologically fast-processed. It considers how listening affects presence, inclusion, and cognition while often going unnoticed. Drawing on research in sound design, auditory development, protest regulation, and sensory culture, the article advocates for greater attentiveness to how sound shapes public life. Originally written for a general professional audience, it contributes to public discourse around accessibility, spatial design, and the politics of listening.

Sound dominates, we just forgot to listen

People outside of the audio world often assume that vision is our dominant sense. But what if that belief reflects not what is most primary, but what is hardest to share?

This piece reflects on how sound, often overlooked since it is so immediate and collective, may in fact be our most fundamental way of sensing, remembering, and resisting. I would welcome your thoughts, especially from those working in sound, design, education, accessibility, or public space.

We grow up in a culture that treats vision as our dominant sense.

Screens dominate our work and attention. Social media privileges images. Our language reflects this: “I see,” “clear as day,” “point of view.”

But perhaps we are a sound-first species that has overcompensated for its weaker sense. And the more we ignore sound, the more quietly powerful it becomes.

We sometimes refer to the famous distorted image of the human body (sensory homunculus), with its oversized hands, lips, and eyes, as if it reveals what matters most to us. But that image maps cortical effort, not meaning.

This mapping reflects how much neural processing different inputs require, not how fundamental they are to social or shared experience. Sound, by contrast, often requires less translation and more immediacy. It is processed, shared, and remembered differently.

We hear before we see

Hearing begins before birth. The auditory system is functioning by the third trimester. In the womb, we experience rhythm, pitch, and voice. We come into the world orienting ourselves through sound, locating others, sensing danger, calming distress.

We also process sound faster than sight. Auditory signals reach our brains in milliseconds, often before we know what we are looking at. Sound alerts us, prepares us, and often arrives first, even when both senses are active.

Long before we read or interpret shape, we hear tone, emotion, and proximity.

Vision comes later. It depends on light and works only where we direct our gaze.

Sound surrounds us

It moves around corners and through walls. It enters the body as vibration. Even in sleep, sound reaches us.

Sound does not need focus to act on us. It is not directed, but shared. That is why it is harder to escape and harder to ignore.

Yet we rarely name what we hear. Our vocabulary for colour, texture, and shape is rich. For sound, we rely on metaphor. But this is not a sign of neglect. It is a sign that sound is already understood. We do not need to describe it to feel it.

We just listen.

Even reading is auditory

Many people hear a phantom voice when reading silently. Brain scans confirm that reading activates the same areas as listening and speaking. Writing may be visual, but comprehension is auditory.

The architecture of thought remains built around sound.

How sound stays with us

A voice, a melody, or a familiar sound can unlock a memory decades later. We do not choose to hold on to sound. It stays with us anyway, and try consciously forgetting its meaning and impact.

Sound requires presence

Vision separates. It allows distance, precision, and control, but also detachment. Sound, by contrast, requires presence. You cannot hear without being there. You cannot hear in a crowd without also being with others.

The politics of sound

It unites. It spreads. It resists ownership.

In the UK, protest noise became a legal threshold in 2022, with 70 decibels defined as “serious disruption.” Yet in workplaces, exposure up to 80 decibels is permitted before hearing protection is even required. Authorities were given powers to restrict demonstrations not for what was said, but for how loud people were when saying it. Volume, rhythm, and collective voice became risks.

The Chinese government understood this in Hong Kong. Protest chants were criminalised not only for their meaning, but for their repetition and resonance. These chants could not be ignored, and they could not be silenced without visible force.

Sound does not need amplification to be powerful. It only needs to be shared.

Sound is not always heard

Even when hearing is limited or absent, sound still moves through vibration, rhythm, and space. It is not confined to the ears. It is embodied.

For many people with limited or no vision, sound becomes a primary tool for orientation, depth, and interaction — not a secondary sense, but a foundation for navigating the world.

That is why inclusive design so often starts with sound, not sight.

Noise pollution reveals our priorities

Noise does not only affect humans. It interferes with how many species communicate, find food, navigate, and survive. We damage entire ecosystems through sound that is rarely noticed but constantly present.

Unlike plastic or carbon, noise pollution can be stopped overnight. It is not inevitable. It is the result of how we treat sound, as background, as waste, as an afterthought.

But sound is not passive. It shapes behaviour, mood, and attention. It affects learning, health, and rest. It deserves care, not control.

We do not need to be taught to listen. We just do.

Perhaps the most powerful thing about sound is that it does not require our attention to shape us. It works in the background, structuring perception and emotion without needing to be named.

If we began to recognise how sound shapes our shared lives, we might finally design our spaces, systems, and politics to reflect that truth.

Of course, the way we describe and prioritise sound varies across cultures. Oral traditions are considerably older than written ones, and arguably more effective at conveying lived and shared experience. They place listening at the centre of memory, knowledge, and identity, not as a fallback, but as a primary mode of understanding the world.

There is, of course, a quiet irony in expressing all of this through written text and a visual medium. But even here, many will hear the rhythm of a voice as they read, listening not with their ears but with attention.