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Heard in Passing: Vital Signs of Past Practices and Extremis

Abstract

The decline of old technologies affords similar research opportunities to moments when old technologies were new: when media depart—after decades and even centuries of cultural entanglement—they engender conditions in which social distance may be reimagined and renegotiated. Approaching media decline in this way means searching for traces of past communication practices, not after they were dead, but while they were dying; the goal for historians is not to identify a corpse, but to scour the scene for signs of a struggle. This presentation examines the threshold between the quick and the dead by considering the decline, in Europe and North America, of audible practices that employed tower bells. As quintessential public broadcasters, bells never entertained private audiences, yet they participated in exchanges that were equivocal, dissimulative, and humorous. Ringing, tolling, and chiming (and conversations about ringing, tolling, and chiming) could communicate more than met the ear because the meanings of these techniques in specific contexts was public. As these meanings slipped from public awareness into the recesses of memory and nostalgia, subtle and ironic exchanges grew infrequent.