



**Damon Krukowski.** *The New Analog: Listening and Reconnecting in a Digital World.* New York: New Press, 2017. 240 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-62097-197-0.

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### **Cutting through All the Signal: A Review of Damon Krukowski's *The New Analog*.**

In an increasingly digital world, consumers are bombarded daily with the benefits of new technologies and services. Thirty-second advertisements dart between breaks in playlists to promise faster download speeds, affordable subscription rates, and, above all, more readily available choices. After a few taps and a credit card number, you can access hundreds of thousands of hours of new or archived content. Some media, like most podcasts, are even free; no bank account necessary, just a tolerance for more promise-laden ads.

Damon Krukowski's *The New Analog: Listening and Reconnecting in a Digital World* confronts readers with a very different proposition. He asks what is lost when consumers switch from analog to digital platforms and whether those losses are worth exchanging for perks like convenience or affordability. He zeros in on the history of sound engineering to explore such a vast topic and consequently offers readers an accessible interpretation of digital media that is largely absent of the half-baked cynicism of under-researched think pieces. While the book overwhelmingly focuses on the music industry, there is still much to consider for scholars and everyday listeners of podcasts. An overabundance of choices and the disorienting experience of streaming on demand affects fans of

both *This American Life* and Beyoncé. However, the applicability of Krukowski's conclusions to the production and consumption of podcasts is limited by his characterization of digital media and sparse engagement with recent scholarship on the genre and its predecessor: radio.

Each chapter of *The New Analog* centers on a changing relationship between signal and noise, or "whatever is not regarded as signal" (p. 11). The fifth, for example, explores the "loudness wars" initiated by rock bands in the mid-1980s (p. 125). Over-the-top performers, like Gene Simmons, cranked up the volume of their analog recordings to create new experiences for listeners. Nonetheless, those bands were limited by the interference of noise, which increased in volume along with the shrieks of their electric guitars. Digital recordings in the 1990s and 2000s, in contrast, could isolate signal and eliminate noise, "pummeling our ears and our bodies with the maximum signal they can absorb" (p. 160). In the process, new CDs, and eventually digital downloads, destroyed the "context for noise and reduce[d] our ability to understand it" (p. 160). Ultimately, Krukowski argues that digital media conveys less noise, and therefore less information, to consumers. By leaving analog behind, we relinquished large proportions of data

necessary to orient ourselves and communicate with others.

The strength of Krukowski's argument lies in the evocative examples he presents to readers. One may not understand the technical difference between signal and noise, but they can compare their experiences (or those of their elders) with, say, a landline telephone and a mobile device. In a conversation with my mom on the former, I could often hear our pets' nails clicking across the kitchen floor or chicken sizzling in a frying pan. "Cooking dinner?" I might have asked her. Now, as we converse via cellphones, I simply hear her voice against a flat, monotone background. Our 1990s landline telephones, like so many telephones before them, transferred noise (the kitchen sounds) as well as signal (my mom's voice) across vast, wire-connected distances. Cellphones, however, isolate signals and—if the background does not overpower the speaker and become the signal—digitize voices. I can no longer tell if my mom is cooking or whether she's alone or accompanied by patting paws. In sum, I receive less information and can draw fewer conclusions to contextualize our conversations.

The disorienting, information-light environment that digital media amplifies envelops the production and consumption of podcasts today. A saturation of content (or signal) can overwhelm listeners, making it difficult to sift through an abundance of shows and platforms. Likewise, content creators may struggle to communicate information to audiences amidst a relentless sea of choices. Signal also exists independent of time and, when delivered via streaming platforms, is "all equally available in the present" (p. 169). Spotify, Luminary, Apple Podcasts, and Stitcher all provide opportunities for "ahistorical listening" as consumers can cue up episodes months and even years after their initial airdates (p. 169). Those episodes may also differ (unbeknownst to the listener) from the originals; producers can edit and rerelease content in real time since digital "sounds

are unchanged by decisions, and can be shaped and reshaped ad infinitum" (p. 168). Podcasts, like digital songs or phone conversations, punt noise in favor of signal and sacrifice context in the process.

As persuasive and applicable as Krukowski's examples are, there are limits to his analysis. The evolution of different forms of digital and analog media sometimes gets lost amidst his larger interpretive generalizations. Broadcast radio, for instance, emerges from the author's work as a constant, unchanging, and largely preferred mode for consuming real-time information. Listeners may not be able to DJ their own music, Krukowski explains, but they can receive updates on a Red Sox game before a digital television signal relays a walk-off homerun (p. 181). If the author had engaged with recent scholarship on radio, his estimation of the medium would be more nuanced and useful to readers perusing *The New Analog* for insights on podcasting. For example, radio programming may be set by a host or DJ, but Americans in the twentieth century often used the radio to organize community events which could, in turn, affect the content of future broadcasts.<sup>[1]</sup> Despite its digital platform, podcasting allows for similar levels of community building, especially when shows feature questions from viewers or connect listeners via social media pages. The long form of podcast recordings also differs from the historically contained, advertisement-driven segments of broadcast radio. Podcast interviews can end when a conversation reaches its natural close; the financial repercussions of dead air are mitigated by digital recording technology. In this case, digital podcasts can convey more information than broadcast radio, and both can foster interactive communities.

More problematically, Krukowski overemphasizes the inhumanity of digital content. Throughout the book, he defines analog as continuous, sensory, and, therefore, human (p. 9). Digital content, alternatively, is discontinuous, discrete, and, by extension, antithetical to the communicative pro-

cesses that have fostered human interactions for thousands of years (p. 9). Digital mediums may not be as tactile as analog, but they were created and are used by people. Digital, like analog, is human because we exercise agency over and through it. Digital signals do not oversaturate a market or leave the names of a producer off a song listing. People do those things *using* digital mediums. Stressing the part that people play in digital communications would only strengthen Krukowski's final message to readers: "might we not opt for more noise" in the future (p. 208)?

Note

[1]. For historical examples of community building through radio broadcasts, see Marie Melody Vidal, "Radio as a Sociability Space," *Journal of radio & Audio Media* 26, no. 1 (2019): 75-78; and Timothy J. Shaffer, "Democracy in the Air: Radio as a Complement to Face-To-Face Discussion in the New Deal," *Journal of radio & Audio Media* 26, no. 1 (2019): 21-34.

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