

## **Transducing Radio Infrastructure: the *Marfa Public Radio Puts You to Sleep* Podcast**

Sound studies scholar Jonathan Sterne defines the unifying aspect of modern sound-recording technology as the use of transducers, “which turn sound into something else and that something else back into sound.”<sup>1</sup> Just as sound anthropologist Jennifer Hsieh, drawing on the work of Stefan Helmreich and Sophia Roosth, expands on the definition of *transduction* to include musical “machines” such as pianos<sup>2</sup>, I would like to expand the definition of transduction when it comes to similar communication *purposes*. As a case study, I’d like to consider a podcast series called *Marfa Public Radio Puts You to Sleep*,<sup>3</sup> a project which “transduces” the utilitarian speech of regulatory language back into another type of utilitarian speech, that of the sleep-inducing podcast.

Marfa Public Radio (KRTS-FM) serves the small town of Marfa, Texas, but also the wider Far West Texas sector of the state. Marfa is an unusual arts hub in the high desert: it’s home to, among other arts institutions, the Chinati Foundation created by minimalist artist Donald Judd. While the public radio station’s reporters cover local issues such as politics, immigration, border policy, and the oil sector, the station is also a place that attracts audio producers who want to take creative risks, such as the station’s Executive Director Elise Pepple. After working for the *Story Corps* project in Alaska, Pepple studied radio at the Salt

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<sup>1</sup> Sterne, Jonathan. *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003 (22)

<sup>2</sup> Hsieh, Jennifer C. “Piano transductions: music, sound and noise in urban Taiwan.” *Sound Studies* 5:1, pp 4-21

<sup>3</sup> Distributed by PRX, the podcast released ten episodes on Oct. 9, 2023.  
(<https://play.prx.org/listen?uf=https%3A%2F%2Fprxu.org%2F5078%2Ffeed-rss.xml>)

Institute for Documentary in Maine. Her website bio says she wants to make Marfa Public Radio “a center for media innovation.”

*Marfa Public Radio Puts You to Sleep* is such an innovation, as it takes the bureaucratic regulations and laws that govern public radio and broadcasting, and — read by station staff and scored with New Age-style relaxing music — transduces this regulatory speech into a “sleep podcast.” The “sleep podcast” genre started in 2013 with self-proclaimed insomniac Drew Ackerman, who found that voices telling meandering and pointless stories could help soothe his anxious mind. The success of Ackerman’s podcast *Sleep With Me* unleashed a vast genre of these utilitarian programs, which do not use speech to convey meaning *per se*, but to induce mental states of calm, drowsiness, or boredom.<sup>4</sup>

As Marfa Public Radio prepared for a new listener fund drive in the fall of 2023, Pepple says she was ruminating on the question of why the public radio system seems to discourage “funny or strange things.” She was also thinking about “how hard it is to run a radio station. Our listeners have no idea. They just hear the broadcast and think, ‘Oh that’s nice.’”<sup>5</sup>

Marfa Public Radio is a 24-hour operation, and in her role as Executive Director, Pepple says she has to address station emergencies at any hour of the day or night. The result for her has been a lack of sleep and insomnia. She has found sleep podcasts helpful to her personally, and she hit upon the idea of combining that format with the regulatory or

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<sup>4</sup> For more on Ackerman and *Sleep with Me*, see *British GQ*, April 2020: “Meet the podcaster helping a worried world fall asleep.” (<https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/lifestyle/article/sleep-with-me-drew-ackerman>)

<sup>5</sup> All quotes from the author’s interview with Pepple, Oct. 18, 2023.

best-practices documents that she and others at the station often encounter as professional broadcasters.

In a letter to station supporters announcing the new series, Pepple wrote:

Marfa Public Radio is literally never asleep. It operates 24/7 (except when lightning strikes) and there's so much that goes on behind the scenes to make this happen – fundraising, compliance, protocols, emergency response, maintenance.

Do you lay awake wondering what FCC compliance entails?  
Ever wondered what NPR's code of journalistic ethics involves for the newsroom?

We may never be able to explain what it takes to operate the station, but we can put you to sleep trying to.

The project is ironic in intent, but sincere in its production style. In the episode titled “FCC Rules and Policies Read by Chris,” Marfa Public Radio’s Programming Director Chris Dyer reads from the Federal Communication Commission’s rules and policies regarding “obscene and indecent” material.

The episode starts with a synthetic harp playing an ascending and descending series of notes. Both Chris Dyer and the show’s co-host and producer, Zoe Kurland, speak in slow, sing-songy tones as they ask the listener to imagine being a program director pitched an “edgy” new program. “There are so many FCC rules and regulations. How do you possibly keep up with them?” Kurland asks. “Why, with *The FCC Rules and Policies for Radio for Air Staff Programmers and Management*, of course. What a load off your mind, with the knowledge you’re about to absorb. Picture that knowledge sinking into your brain, drifting elegantly into each neuron and cell.”

For the next 19 minutes, as Dyer then reads the regulatory language in question, his voice sinks to nearly a whisper, flirting with the auditory style ASMR (autonomous sensory

meridian response). The effect is, at least for this listener who's worked at local public radio stations, hilarious and cathartic as a meta-commentary on broadcast's regulatory super-structure (which is only rarely consulted by broadcasters, in my experience). The podcast also serves as meta-commentary on the tensions between the highly regulated and time-scheduled world of analog broadcast, and the looser, exploratory production model that brought about genres such as "sleep podcasting." It's rare to hear the regulations that govern US radio read out loud, and the listening experience is heightened by knowing some of the history of how those regulations came to pass.

Broadcast radio emerged from technologies and structures built to support wireless telegraphy between transmitting stations on ships, or between ships at sea and relay communication stations on land. The sinking of the Titanic in 1912 revealed inconsistent and flawed monitoring by wireless operators, and soon after, US Congress passed the Radio Act of 1912, setting up the regulatory structure of frequency licensing, station call letters, and inspection that still govern broadcast radio today. In 1919, following Naval control of all radio during WWI, Congress assigned regulatory oversight to the Department of Commerce's Bureau of Navigation. By this point, wireless technology allowed the imprint of voices and music via microphones onto AM transmissions, and the transduction of those signals back into sound. The broadcasting of voices (rather than only Morse code) represented a massive reimagining of inventor Guglielmo Marconi's original project of radio telegraphy. Broadcast radio quickly gained popularity in the 1920s, but the Bureau of Navigation still (as implied by its original mandate to protect and inspect merchant marine vessels in US waters) prioritized to the needs of ship transmissions, especially distress calls. As radio historian Shawn VanCour argues, these early Bureau of Navigation licensing and

regulatory priorities led to practices that favored live broadcast, sound-baffling in studios, sonic parsimony (the separation of voices and avoidance of “cross-talk”) and pre-planned, pre-announced program schedules.<sup>6</sup>

A century later, small station managers such as Elise Pepple feel the burden of these largely-forgotten broadcast origins, because regulatory duties still place heavy demands on a small non-profit operation. Nonetheless, Pepple tells me it’s important, and part of Marfa Public Radio’s mission, to respond creatively to its challenges. Thus the station producers Zoe Kurland and Chris Dyer embraced the idea of a “sleep podcast,” and Marfa Public Radio framed it as an offering to listeners during its pledge drive. In an email to station supporters announcing the new podcast, Pepple called the free offering “a priceless premium” but linked it to the fundraising needs of the station:

It's an unconventional fundraising strategy, but the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 says that public radio should be a free service. That doesn't mean making it happen is free. Just the utility bill to power five frequencies costs over \$35,000 annually. **Because you value the station, put a price on that value and make a donation today.**

In speaking with Pepple, it’s clear also that she’s also worried about the future viability of creative productions such as *Marfa Public Radio Puts You to Sleep* within the wider structures of public radio. While podcasts once seemed like a possible revenue stream for radio stations, production costs combined with economic troubles in the media and advertising sectors resulted in widespread layoffs and show cancellations across

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<sup>6</sup> VanCour, Shawn. *Making radio: early radio production and the rise of modern sound culture*. New York: OUP, 2018.

public-radio-based podcasts in 2023. This downturn creates anxieties among audio producers and managers across the US.<sup>7</sup>

By transducing some of their creative and regulatory burdens into an amusing (and perhaps even effective, in the utilitarian sense) “sleep podcast,” the staff at Marfa Public Radio have managed to make audible some of what scholar Paddy Scannell calls the invisible “care structure” behind any human endeavor.<sup>8</sup> Various episodes of the sleep podcast reveal that care structure to include the bureaucratic voices not only of the FCC, but also the State of Texas, the US Post Office, Creative Commons licensing requirements, the NPR Style Guide, and the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 itself. Through the act of simultaneously mocking and paying tribute to those voices, Marfa Public Radio creates a successful bridge between an older, more codified sonic culture — that of broadcasting — and the newer one of digital audio, where the care structure is less rigid, but also less certain.

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<sup>7</sup> See for example: Folkenflik, David. “NPR cancels 4 podcasts amid major layoffs” NPR.org (March 27, 2023)

<sup>8</sup> Scannell, *Television and the Meaning of “Live.”* Cambridge: Polity, 2013.