

Deborah Thomas: [00:00](#) Hello. My name is Deborah Thomas, editor-in-chief of American Anthropologist and this is Anthropological Airwaves.

Kyle: [00:23](#) Hello and welcome back to Anthropological Airwaves. My name is Kyle Olson, your host for this episode. This time we'd like to share a conversation between Nooshin Sadeq-Samimi, one of our producers and our guest, Laura Kunreuther, a linguistic anthropologist at Bard College who works in Nepal. Nooshin and Laura discussed two of Laura's recent works, a monograph entitled "Voicing Subjects: Public Intimacy and Mediation in Kathmandu" and a recent piece in Cultural Anthropology called "Sounds of Democracy: Performance, Protest and Political Subjectivity". We'll put links to both in the show notes. In the interview, Nooshin and Laura focus on how voice and sound figure into politics in the Nepalese context and their broader implications. For example, in many democracies around the world, voice is often a metaphor used to describe political action, or, voice can be a metaphor for political participation, or, as a function of representation in the sense that elected officials can be the quote unquote voice for the many. In fact, it appears that the liberal democratic ideal is that every adult citizen in a nation has a voice that should be heard and counted in this way. Voices and the language that they use are central to democratic practice. It turns out though that sound and voice are equally as important as voice, even though sound and voice are often seen as disruptive, as unruly, as non-rational. But as Laura argues, rational discourse has its limits and sound is a crucial vector for opening up and connecting to the effective and embodied aspects of the doing of politics. Indeed, it is a key part of people coming together and acting in coordination with each other. She asks what gets left out of our understanding of political action and subjectivity when we operate without critiquing or going further than the metaphors of voice, and with that I'll turn it over to Nooshin.

Nooshin: [02:23](#) Today I'm here with Laura Kunreuther and we're going to talk about Sounds of Democracy. Hello Laura.

Laura: [02:31](#) Hi. Nice to be here.

Nooshin: [02:32](#) Thank you so much for being here with us and jumping straight in. Could you outline for our listeners the association between voicing and democracy?

Laura: [02:43](#) Yeah, that's a question that has animated a lot of my work. Democracy, of course, depends on several different understandings of voice as a kind of central leitmotif. And I explore this in my book, Voicing Subjects, where I began to

think about the metaphor of voice used to describe political action in the relatively new democracy in Nepal, as well as an understanding of voice as an articulation of different social personae that highlights the voice as a medium through which social meanings emerge.

Laura: [03:24](#) In my more recent article, Sounds of Democracy, I discuss two different understandings of voice as central to democracy. The first [is] the sort of liberal democratic ideal, that every adult citizen quote has a voice, and that it can and should be heard and even can be counted by voting. So, votes and voices are sort of seen as functionally equivalent to each other. And you know, scholars of democracy, often emphasize the use of language as central to democratic practice. So we get, you know, obviously the classic Habermas texts on the public sphere, social media that many recent anthropologists have talked about, face to face debates in tea houses or coffee houses in South Asia. Frank Cody has written really nicely about this, or, the well-crafted oratory tales that Barney Bate has written about. And so the voice comes to serve as a metaphor for political participation.

Laura: [04:38](#) The second idea of voice that's part of political representation and democracy is something I also touch on in the Sounds of Democracy article. So the popular notion [is] that in a representative democracy, [an] elected official will be the voice for many, right? And will somehow be that representative for many. And often these metaphors of political voice usually refer to discursive speech or analytic reasoned discourse. Um, but some of the more recent scholars have showed that, you know, there are other kinds of political utterance that rely on sound such as, you know, voices shouting or chanting or you know, the noise of protest, et cetera, that make up a lot of the practices of participatory democracy. So that's where I was going in that article on Sounds of Democracy.

Nooshin: [05:44](#) So how does your work intervene in debates about, as you put it, the affective, and sensory, and embodied dimensions of political subjectivity, especially in light of the prevailing view that noise is somehow pre-political and non-reflexive. And what in your view are the implications that come out of your work on avaz for mainstream discussions of the performance of politics in the rational, quote-unquote public sphere?

Laura: [06:15](#) Okay. There's a lot there, and I'll try. Yeah. You know, noise is often thought of, as you say in your question, as a kind of non-reflective or unintentional, incidental aspect of urban life. Or any kind of life, just living. Just things that you're doing create

noise, or in the more politicized understanding of noise, it's often associated with premeditated sounds linked to kind of subaltern, you know, or crowds. As you know, several recent scholars have begun to discuss and oppose the more rational understanding of the public sphere. And so you have this kind of crude dichotomy, and many scholars are breaking this down, but if you want to put it crudely, the sense of noise being associated with crowds and disruption is opposed to the more reasoned, self-measured, silent publics, of the public sphere.

Laura: [07:34](#)

Right. And I'm drawing on a lot of work, especially feminists scholars who are trying to think of what my old advisor, Ann Stoller, calls affective states, when thinking about politics or the performance of politics. So these are people who are, you know, people like Judith Butler, or Athena Athanasiou's recent work, who are talking about the performance of politics as intensely embodied experiences and embodied performances. And many of these scholars, you know, mention sound, but they don't really analyze sound. They don't take that as their analytic. I think this is the work that many ethnomusicologists are doing. My work is kind of connecting to, so people like Marie Abe, Ben Taussig, David Novak, and I'm very much inspired by their work to show that one ought to look at the actual sounds that are being created in terms of the avaz intervention.

Laura: [08:41](#)

So avaz is a term that actually comes from the Persian آواز [āvāz]. So we say "awaz" in Nepali, but it actually comes from the Persian term avaz, which you know, probably, means, you know, song or voice and sound, but a calling, a kind of calling. So in the South Asian context in particular, and I believe in the Persian context, and you can correct me on this, but, it is a kind of vernacular of the public sphere. It's a way of referring to, what we might call voice, but about a kind of public voicing, right? So many newspapers are named "Avaz". Awaz was in the 1920s, you know, throughout South Asia, and in Nepal in 1950s, there were newspapers named Awaz. So when you unpack that term, I think it means both voice in the kind of metaphorical sense, but it also really means sound.

Laura: [09:50](#)

If you ask somebody on the street what does awaz mean, they would probably, the first thing that they would say is it means sound, but it is a media discourse as well. And anyone who was involved in activist communities might answer, you know, it means voice, like raising voice, "awaz zotowni". So why awaz instead of voice? I feel like avaz/awaz, draws our attention to aspects of political action that the kind of reification of voice, the sort of dominant global discourse of voice doesn't draw our

attention to. And so it both signals media discourse because it's often coming from newspapers or novels or TV programs. But, and often, as I said, is the term for many programs, and it's self-referential in that sense. But because it also connects to sound, it doesn't reify the person in the voice in the same kind of way that the global discourse of voice does. So the practice and the concept of awaz, as I've said in my article, helps us look at these connections between the rational and the affective, between what's articulate and what's inarticulate. And it asks us to sort of expand our notion of language beyond words and expand our notion of media beyond technological mediums.

Clip: [11:27](#)

[inaudible]

Clip: [11:46](#)

[inaudible] back.

Nooshin: [11:51](#)

So in your 2018 article "Sounds of Democracy," you include several embedded audio clips to convey to the readers the sonic phenomena that you discussed. In addition to directly answering the question of what does a participatory democracy sound like, what work are these media clips actually doing? And could you tell us more about your process and how you see it intersecting with broader trends in a multimedia and, or a multisensory anthropology?

Laura: [12:27](#)

Yeah, sure. So, you know, this is an aspect of the article that's in some ways speculative and experimental. I don't actually know how readers or listeners have heard these clips. And so, um, I wanted to think about using the kind of strategically using sound similar to the way that the activists and the artists in the piece. We're also strategically using sound and to think about that as part of my writing process. I think part of this worked, and part of this didn't work. I became very committed to -- as I said in this panel that I was recently on multimodal anthropology at the AAA meetings -- I was committed to having auto-play so that when the readers scroll down, the sound would go on automatically. And so that there was an integration between the text and the sound on some level that they were speaking to one another.

Laura: [13:35](#)

But just as we were about to be published, Safari disabled their auto-play function. So suddenly the editors were like, we can't do this auto-play function. And I said, I was still very committed to it. And I said, please can you figure out a way? And they said, well, we can't have different browsers doing different things. So I then said, ummmm okay. And the technician said, "let me just think of a solution." So he came up with this great solution, which was that you toggle, if you look at the article, and again

you can only see this on the online version, which is sort of ironic because I always have my students still print their articles. So I was kind of working against myself in this case. But you know, you basically have to read it online in order to get this feature and you have to toggle [sound on/sound off] at the top. It says "enable auto-play." Well that worked for a while when it was published, but right now at this point it no longer works. So clearly the technology, we're not quite up to par with the technology.

Laura: [14:42](#) Now why was I committed to that? I wanted to think about the readers as both readers and as listeners and what does it mean to be both a reader and a listener? And what does it mean to listen closely? Because I think this is a central aspect of being a good ethnographer. And it's also, I think a central aspect of working in a functioning democracy. So what I created was, the first piece that I created was a kind of fictional day. It was recorded on different moments and even on different days in consultation with many Nepalis that I was working with about what were some of the iconic sounds in Kathmandu.

Laura: [15:30](#) And it was also in relationship to the sounds that the activists were using. So of course these are sounds that are kind of part of their vernacular that they were picking up and using in a different way. So the bells that happen in the morning for Pooja became incorporated into those same Pooja bells are used in many protests, but they're done a little bit differently. So the idea was that you would be able to hear a kind of fictive day from dawn until night that had some of these iconic sounds that then you hear later in terms of how the activists are deploying this. And now the artists I used, her actual clip of broadcast crying that you hear in the article. But, a lot of the things that they use are not part of my fictive day.

Laura: [16:31](#) But that was a pretty striking sound because it was broadcast across all the radio stations for an entire hour. And I talk in detail about how she did that in the article. And then, I'd say the other thing about these sound clips is that in some ways they're quite different than the use of sound by people like Steven Feld and some of his colleagues and students, who were trying to do really amazing work and bringing high-fidelity equipment into places that hadn't been heard by much of the world, and to produce these really high-quality sound pieces, of the rainforest, et cetera, that he did. And these [in my article] sounds are not produced on any, you know, fancy equipment. And most of the ones in the articles are not done by me, but they are done by people who were the artists or activists who are using sound in order to do their work.

- Laura: [17:37](#) And they generously shared those sounds with me. So it's a little bit of a different process, ethnographically, I would say.
- Nooshin: [17:45](#) Could you tell us a little bit more about how do you see your work connect with and intervene in ongoing debates in the current political climate?
- Laura: [17:56](#) I think that, you know, we're in a moment where the public sphere is in many ways generating all kinds of things and is under siege and in great danger. And I think in this moment, there is a temptation certainly on the side of certain left-leaning political activists to reject everything that has to do with feeling and emphasize a kind of rational discourse that needs to take place. And I'll say I'm not against rational discourse, but of course that's not the only thing that works in politics. And so I think the elimination of feeling in this moment is actually not a good strategy.
- Laura: [18:52](#) I mean, I think the Democrats have just failed in many ways in this field. I was at a protest in my hometown of Hudson, and there just were speech after speech after speech for, you know, way too long. And people just were leaving. So I feel like, you know, how do we get these kinds of affective connections? Well, I think sound is actually crucial here and sound actually brings about a kind of embodied affective dimension of politics. And I think, you know, obviously there's... What kinds of feelings are helpful in this moment? Um, as Martha Nussbaum has talked about in her book on the Monarchy of Fear, certain sentiments like fear are right now destroying us... are very problematic. But cultivating sense of unity, a sense of hope, a sense of love, you know, a sense of somehow coming-together, sound I think is actually really crucial for that.
- Laura: [20:03](#) And ironically, it becomes a way to bring together people who have very different perspectives. And you know, somebody once asked me, well, if you're talking about sounds of democracy, what would be the sound of say fascism or of another kind of political view? And I think that I don't, I haven't studied so much sounds of fascism as much and I'm very much limited in terms of my knowledge in Nepal and my own participation here with various democratic movements.
- Laura: [20:41](#) But I do think that the variety, you know, something like the People's Mic, where you have lots of different ripples of lots of different sounds coming across is different than a person with a megaphone, which might be the way you would characterize a kind of fascist soundscape [i.e., the megaphone]. And again, I say that knowing that I really haven't done that research. You

know, fascism itself I guess comes out of a mass democracy anyway. It's roots are already in places that have already been established as mass democratic places. So I do think that sound is a way to create a sense of connection between feeling and reason and these categories needn't be opposed to one another.

Nooshin: [21:38](#)

Laura, thank you so much for being here today and chatting with us.

Laura: [21:42](#)

Thank you.

Kyle: [22:01](#)

Thanks for listening to our conversation with Laura Kunreuther. We hope you enjoyed it as much as we did and have come away with the same impression as us. What do we stand to gain in scholarship and in politics from a deeper appreciation of sound and of noise? This episode was produced by Nooshin Sadeq-Samimi and edited by me, Kyle Olson. As always, if you like what you've heard, please rate and review us wherever you get your podcasts and tell a friend or colleague. If you have any questions or comments, you can email us at mandpodcast@gmail.com or look us up on Twitter and Facebook. We'd love to hear from you and we hope you tune in next time.