

UNIUYO JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION STUDIES (UJCS)



DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION ARTS

VOL. I, NO. 2

ISSN: 2607 4365

OCTOBER 2017

BLENDING SOUND PRODUCTION ELEMENTS INTO AN EVOCATIVE TELEVISION PACKAGE

Uwem Udo Akpan

Abstract

Sound is complementary to visuals in television production and, as such, if sound is badly handled, it can jeopardise the entire production. Therefore, understanding and harnessing the production elements of sound is indispensable if sound, and, by extension, television output, is to deepen the aesthetic experience of the viewers. This paper examines how the different production elements of sound can be blended to produce a programme that creates mood and makes the audience to feel same. The paper also highlights the various aesthetic factors of sound and how they can be employed in the making of effective television production. It is recommended that the producer should strive to identify the things that matter in sound production, including the choice and use of microphones. Again, a television producer should always determine whether the various elements of sound used make sense within the context of the message.

Introduction

Television is first and foremost a visual medium, but it needs and actually draws the complement of sound to convey its message more effectively than if it were visuals alone. Without the sound complement, the visuals on television would be boring and sometimes meaningless. Therefore, television relies on sound for its completeness and beauty. Sound helps the visuals on television to deepen, clarify and intensify the experience of viewers.

The above demonstrates the indispensability of sound in television production. However, since television is primarily visual, some inexperienced producers tend to overlook sound in television production, devoting almost all attention, as it were, to the visual elements. Not surprisingly, this lackadaisical treatment of the sound component often manifests in poor sound quality that detracts from the overall production quality and questions the esteem of the station in the eyes of its numerous audience members.

It is important therefore that sound be as consciously managed as possible so that it can effectively complement the visuals to deliver a production that sustains the attention of the audience. It should be noted that production is like a chain - different links hold it together - and a chain is as strong as its weakest link. If the sound or visual in television production is poor, it is certain that the entire production would be defective and consequently ineffective. Truly speaking, both visuals and sound combine to ensure a package that causes the audiences to be involved while watching a programme.

As Hausman, Messere, O'Donnell and Benoit (2010, p. 187) state, "modern communication theory points out that getting a message across depends on more than the validity of the message. Reaching people with a message also involves pulling their emotional strivings - creating a mood of excitement, perhaps, or a feeling of identification. These emotional activators can often be turned on and off by means of... production

techniques”.

By means of a careful handling of the sound elements, the beauty of a television production is enhanced. Bad audio is as bad as bad picture. At the end the verdict is poor production (Zettl, 2007). Shook (2005, p. 135) takes the point further: “Achieving good quality sound is a matter of learning to listen for sound and to differentiate between what is acceptable and what is not... Good sound is the absence of bad sound; bad sound is sound that is distorted... Distortion is any signal that unintentionally sounds different on output against input.”

This paper is concerned with how production elements are combined to produce sound aesthetics that can assist in achieving an effective audio-video relationship. That is what is meant by blending. On the other hand, an evocative package is a production in which all or most aesthetic factors have been applied in such a way that audience members are not only captivated and excited but have their involvement deepened by the experience of watching the programme. In this work, the word aesthetic, creative and artistic are used synonymously.

Sources of Audio in television

The cradle in the production of creative audio is the identification of the sources of audio in television production. There are two sources of audio: microphone and pre-recorded sources. Pre-recorded sources are music, sound effects and recorded speeches.

The Microphone

The microphone functions as a transducer which converts sound waves into electrical impulse or sound signals whereupon it can be conveyed from one point to the other where another transducer - the loudspeaker - reconverts the electrical impulses back to (normal) audio that can be picked up by the human ear. It is important that the producer is grounded on microphones to enable him to select the right one for the right occasion. Burrows and Wood (1980, p.34) state that:

The microphone comes in a wide variety of types and sizes, designed for a multitude of specialized purposes. They vary as to *frequency response*; some will pick up low frequencies well, while others respond best to higher frequencies. Microphone differ as to pickup *patterns*; some will pick up everything around them (omnidirectional), while the performer has to stand directly in front of other microphones (unidirectional) to be heard well. Microphones vary in the technical construction of their transducing elements – the way they actually transform sound waves into electrical energy. As a result, some are more rugged than others. Microphones vary in *physical design*, to be used in different ways; some are to be placed in mike stands, some are hand-held, others are worn around the neck or attached to special boom stands.

Zettl (2007, p.116) underlines this point:

Although all microphones fulfill the same basic functions of transducing sounds into audio signals, they do so in different ways and for different purposes. Good audio requires that you know how to choose the right mic for a specific sound pick up...Despite all the brand names and numbers, you can make sense out of the different microphones by classifying them how well they hear, how they are made, and how they are generally used.

Therefore, the producer should be conscious of the potentials of each microphone vis-à-vis the type and venue of production. For example, an omnidirectional microphone - which picks up sound equally well from all directions – may be good for a live concert or sports event to capture the excitement of the audience or spectators but may not be good for vox pop on the streets because of its ability to also pick up the ambience which may constitute noise. The bottom line is that as much as possible, the microphone should be used to reduce or possibly eliminate noise – unwanted sound - while heightening communication - the needed sound.

Understanding the transducing potentials of microphone is similarly crucial. Some microphones are rugged and so can withstand all kinds of weather and rough handling, for example, the dynamic microphone. The condenser microphone is much more sensitive to physical shock and temperature, yet produces higher quality sounds. The ribbon microphone, though very sensitive in its pickup, can easily be damaged by a sudden loud sound close to it (Zettl, 2007; Bielak, 1995).

In addition to understanding and applying microphones according to how well they hear, how they are made and how they are used, it is necessary, in the build up to quality sound production, to emphasise that microphone placement is equally important. Two factors determine microphone placement – aesthetic and acoustical - according to Burrows and Wood, 1980, p.47):

The aesthetic consideration is usually the desire of the director to avoid calling attention to the audio pickup device by trying to hide the microphone...Acoustical considerations for microphone placement can be thought in terms of two areas: audio direction and microphone distance. Audio direction refers to having the source (voice or musical instrument) squarely in the path of the directional pick up of the mike. This applies, obviously, only to unidirectional and highly directional mikes – since omnidirectional microphones are, by definition, non directional. If the audio source is not in the directional path of the microphone, or “on the beam”, then the resulting pick up will be off mike. This results in a hollow, distant effect similar to being too far away from the microphone.

Still on microphone distance is the need to understand the “inverse square law” in physics.

The law states that as microphone-to-source distance is doubled, the loudness is reduced to one fourth (Burrows and Wood, 1980). Reduction in loudness implies a drop in the sound pressure.

Pre-recorded Sources

The second category of source of sound in television and of course radio is pre-recorded sources. These sources are music, speeches and sound effects. Singly or in a combination, these pre-recorded sources of sound play a vital role in enhancing the aesthetic package of a television programme.

Aesthetic Use of Production Elements

According to Hausman et al.: "Production elements are features that are useful in creating an effect and reinforcing a message...Production elements also blend into one total package". The production elements in this regard are music, voice, sound effects, colouration of sound, timing and space and scripting or copywriting.

The Element of Music

To a great extent, music is the mainstay of broadcast stations. Television is not an exception. It is one of the elements that draw and sustain a broadcast audience through the emotions and excitement that it creates among the audience. Hausman et al. (2010, p.190) describe music as "an evocative tool that...is used in a great many...production tasks". For them, "music reaches deep into the human psyche. Music has moved people to march to war and has waltzed couples into matrimony" (Hausman et al, 2010, p.190). Shakespeare had understood and appreciated the evocative power of music when he wrote in *Twelfth Night*, Act One, Scene One, lines i-iii: "If music be the food of love, play on; Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting, the appetite may sicken and so die".

Music is best employed when it outstandingly contributes to the communication of the idea. But like food, music, overused or wrongly used or used for its own sake, is distracting and counter-productive.

Hausman et al. (2010, p.191) provide a working guide for the use of music. Use music:

1. When you can find a logical reason to do so. Use music to create a mood and reinforce a theme.
2. When the music has a logical purpose and fits into the format of your station. A hard-rock music background for a public service announcement will not complement the sound of a station playing a light music format...The producer must respect the integrity of the station's format.

Do not use music:

1. Strictly as a reflex. Many times you'll be better off without it. (Don't do because others are doing it). Doing it differently can be similarly effective.

2. Indiscriminately. Do not use popular music when it does not serve to reinforce the message.

The producer should first be conversant with the lyrics of the music he intends to play and should know about its duration which in any case is always displayed on each track on the CD or DV. The lyrics should be relevant to the programme at hand.

Similarly, the presenter should be careful in using vocals under his voice. Using vocals as background music for a voice over or a DJ wrap often times makes both the lyrics and the announcer or presenter unintelligible. It is best if the background music is instrumental and very low, so that the lyrics of the music do not compete with the voice of the presenter or announcer. If the ultimate goal of production is to achieve an effect by creating an image in the minds of the audience through a message, then music, as a production element, must be used in a way and manner that supports the central theme in order to create an effect.

Sometimes, announcers and DJs start and end a music piece abruptly. Just as the music hits the audience on its entry, it leaves the audience hanging, dissatisfied and desperate as it exits with a bang. Aesthetically, music should be faded in and faded out. The primary element that identifies a programme in the minds of the audience is music, and should be so employed as a signature to create instant identification in the minds of the audience.

The Element of Voice

Voice, whether recorded or live, is an essential production element that gives integrity and special identity to a station. Voices on the air are peculiar to a station, and their quality does not only identify but also brands the station. Therefore, the voice on the air should be given the same level of consideration that is given to other production elements to enhance the delivery of any evocative package to the audience. Again, "voice quality is the overall image that an announcer's voice projects" (Hausman et al., 2010, p. 195). Thus, the announcer's or presenter's voice may make or mar a station; it not only singles out a station but partly defines it. In Nigeria where the mother tongue influence on English Language is strong and in some sections of the country people pride themselves in it, it is easy to ascertain, within a second, the section of the country where the broadcast originates through the voice of an announcer or presenter.

Some programmes demand a certain voice quality. Some may demand a female voice, some a male or young voice. For example, a programme to persuade women to take their children out for immunization may be more convincing if the presenters are women. A voice that has quality should be without impediments or defects. These impediments may include stammering, improper breathing, gasping for air between phrases etc. They all constitute a distraction on the air and are certain to affect both the quality of delivery and the perception of the audience on the programme and station.

In the early days of broadcasting in Nigeria, and before the entry of private broadcast operators into the scene as well as the liberalisation of broadcasting, managers of the airwaves gave due diligence to voice quality, correct pronunciation and other necessary factors. Now, these considerations are daily overlooked in both government-owned and privately run stations. This laxity at the point of recruitment is all evident on the air. For example, Akpan, Udeze and Asogwa (2014, p.6) note that:

Until recently, the pride of a broadcaster lay in correct pronunciation of English words or at least as close as possible to the way the owners of the language pronounced. Then, children and students alike were all too eager to listen to broadcasters to learn from them. Indeed the broadcasters were a model and reference point... Much bad or poor pronunciation has crept into the airwaves through broadcasters. Either out of complete ignorance or as a form of pride, some broadcasters have bastardised the airwaves with poor pronunciations. And the youths are learning the wrong pronunciations.

Boyd (2001, p.169) emphasises the ideal qualities for a broadcast talent as authority, personality, credibility, clarity, warmth, professionalism, good voice and good looks:

Credibility and authority - qualities every newsreader needs - are derived largely from personal confidence... Professionalism comes from having a cool head and plenty of experience. But it means more than remaining unruffled when all around you are performing their headless chicken impersonations... Consistency in presentation is vital, irrespective of whether you got out of bed the wrong side, or whether you slept at all last night, whether your curry is giving you heartburn or your wife just left you... (Good microphone voice) usually means a voice that is reasonably rich, crisp and resonant and free from obvious impediments, such as a hare lip, stammer or lisp....

Akpan and Etuk (1990) similarly stress the need for the voice on the air to be aesthetic-minded in presenting programmes. They state that the voice can be consciously manipulated to produce communication that affects the mind of the audience member. Words can be expertly pronounced to create deep feeling and effective meaning-sharing. Whereas a speaker does not consciously worry about his speed, tone, accent, pitch, stress and volume, a film or television narrator or a radio narrator must show concern in these matters, he cannot transfer his style of speaking in everyday-routine situations to his professional assignments. In fact, at times he has to exaggerate his manner of speaking a bit in order to stimulate response in his audience.

The Element of Sound Effects

Penney (1991, p.197) defines sound effects as “all sounds other than synchronized

voices, narration and music, which may be recorded on the sound track of a film". It has the abbreviation, SFX and can be created manually by the producer through recording of scenes such as gun shots, car crashes, small or large crowd, uproar, jet engines, train crossing bell and glass breaking. It can also be obtained from sound effects library – “an index or a catalogued of the most commonly used sound effects that are on hand at a production house or recording studio (Penney, 1991, p.197).

The effects can be used separately or alongside “real sound” and they are meant to be highly creative in a manner which effectively conveys the message intended by the producer, announcer or presenter. The determining factor in the use of sound effects is its appropriateness. Used appropriately, sound effects add value to the message and enhance the clarification and intensification of experience. Inappropriate use may suggest amateurism and may make the message seem commonplace, timeworn, lacking in originality, clichéd and off the mark.

Sound effects, apart from adding creativity and enhancing the impact of a programme, can be used to save time and words. Much of the wordy description that would have taken place would be represented by a sound effect which would last a few seconds and therefore shorter than some verbiage. Sound effect can also be used to introduce or pump some drama to reinforce the message in order to grab audience attention.

However, sound effects should not be used just because they are available. Where there is no explicit necessity for sound effects, then their use becomes a question of profligacy, gimmickry and purposelessness rather than need. It is also important to mention that an overused effect is hackneyed. Sound effects purpose-oriented - they should be used only when they serve a purpose and are logical. Logical because they support and enhance the central theme of the programme.

Colouration of Sound

Colouration of sound involves the shaping and amplification of sound. It is a desirable and intentional distortion of sound. Shaping, a creative function of sound, is the “altering of tonal qualities of the sound” (Burrows and Wood, 1980, p.27). Through the use of the pot or mixer, shaping is one of the many ways in which a sound signal can be changed to suit a specific purpose. Selected frequencies can be emphasized to produce richer voice or musical quality. With the help of an equalizer, levels of different frequencies can be increased or decreased to enrich high or low pitches.

Many signals, particularly from the microphone, are often weak and need strengthening before they can be mixed with other signals. Amplification takes place by means of multiplication of a component's electrons while retaining the same essential wave pattern (Burrows and Wood, 1987). That way, the weak signal is boosted and brought to the level that it can be blended with other signals.

Timing and Space

Every programme on the air works with timing and space determined by the

producer according to the nature of the programme but which ultimately affects the mood and the message. For example, music and sports presentations are generally faster relative to other programmes such as a documentary on the life and times of a statesman. Similarly, the pace of news delivery is and should be different from that of other programmes. Each programme demands its pace for it to be meaningful on the audience. A wrong pace comes from poor professional judgment and impinges on the production quality of the programme and the ultimate effect on the audience.

The Element of Copy Writing

Much of the bad delivery on the air is traceable to broadcast scripts. Every broadcast copy, presumably, has a message to deliver to the audience, but as Akpan (2009, p.1) says, not everyone is able to heighten the feelings of the audience: "Simply put, such a copy has not been written in a way that can arouse the emotions of the audience".

The broadcast copywriter should ensure that his message arouses the desired emotions (reactions) from their audience members (through the involvement of the sense of hearing or vision or a combination of both). He should apply aesthetics to his copy in order to appeal to the feelings of his audience (Akpan, 2009). It is important for the copy writer to understand the nature of the broadcast medium so that he could tailor his message to suit the nature of the medium. In particular, broadcast messages are fleeting; they are transient, and this compels the broadcast copy writer to adapt his message to a medium where retention is difficult. In broadcast one writes for the eye and the ear. According to Akpan (2009, p.2), "this attribute challenges the journalist, or any broadcast script writer, to adapt his content to appeal to the senses of sight and sound of the receiver. If the news copy fails to accomplish this, the intention of communication may not be fully achieved".

Many a time, the starting point of poor delivery on the air is poor scripting. It is necessary, therefore, for the script writer to know the rules of grammar. A script couched in grammatically incorrect sentences, and lacking in logic, leaves the copy incomprehensible and without sense. It ultimately tasks the personnel involved in delivering the copy on the air as much as it tasks the receiving audience. A script that makes meaning to the audience is founded on sentence constructions that help the announcer or presenter in his delivery that drives home the message, rather than confuse the audience.

The copywriter would do well to listen first to what he writes, i.e., read aloud to himself; should be sure of his spellings because there is a high probability that words correctly spelt would be correctly pronounced on the air. Good pronunciation is central to the audience's understanding of the message. The scriptwriter should retain an informal tone; be careful in the use of abbreviations and acronyms; ensure that logics are easily understood; be careful in the use of punctuations and figures and possibly eliminate symbols and signs from his script. All this is to enhance good delivery and audience understanding without which the effectiveness of the communication leaves much to be desired.

Basic Aesthetic Sound Factors

There are at least five basic aesthetic sound factors identified by Zettl, (2009). These are environment, figure/foreground, perspective, continuity and energy. These factors separately or in combination can affect the way sound is presented or perceived.

Environment

Environment refers to the ambient sounds – sounds from the environment in which the action or event is taking place. In the field, ambience indicates the location of the event. An omnidirectional microphone will pick up the ambience automatically. While the environmental sound may be desired to communicate the location or actuality of the screen event, it can also be a source of noise - sound that does not communicate!

This tasks the creativity of the producer in post production. To enable the producer to manage the ambience the way he desires, it is advisable for him to use different microphones with differing abilities to record. For example, if he is carrying out a vox pop in the streets, he should use a unidirectional microphone for the interviewees on one sound track and use an omnidirectional microphone for the ambience. At post production, he will have the liberty to select and mix, depending on his motive.

Perspective

According to Zettl (2009, p. 184), “sound perspective means that close-up pictures are matched with relatively nearby sounds, and long shots correspond with sounds that seem to come from farther away. Close sounds have more presence than distant sounds - a sound quality that makes us feel in proximity to the sound source”. Shook (2005, p.141) also emphasises that “not only must sounds be of impeccable quality, but they should have the same perspective as the pictures they accompany”. The producer must therefore understand perspective and know that close up sounds have more presence while distant ones have less presence.

Continuity

Continuity means that the sound maintains its intended volume and quality over a series of edits. This demands maintaining the quality of sound when combining various sound sources. Oftentimes, the change in location and microphones gives recordings distinctly different qualities which would be obvious in the final production if unattended to. During production and post production, the producer has to plan to cover these “cracks”.

Zettl (2009, 184) recommends a solution:

The easiest way to restore the background continuity is to cover up these silences with recorded ambience. Always record a few minutes of “silence” (room tone or background sounds) before and after videotaping or whenever the ambience changes decisively (such as a concert hall with and without an audience)...A rhythmically precise piece of music can help a

disparate series of pictures seem continuous. Music and sound are often the important connecting link among abruptly changing visual scenes.

Energy

This refers to matching the force and the power of the pictures with a similar intensity of sound. For example, high energy scenes such as a close up of boxers or wrestlers in their boasts should be matched with similar sound intensity. On the other hand, a low energy scene such as a long shot should be matched with a low energy sound emanating from that scene. If the energy of sound and picture is not at the same level, the disconnect between the visual and the sound would be obvious.

Figure/Ground

The aesthetic factor of figure/ground requires an emphasis on the most important sound source over the general background sounds. For example, the sound of someone in a close-up in a noisy and busy environment should be louder than the ambience. However, while showing someone in a long shot, his sound should be softer and that of the environment louder. The idea is to maintain sound balance between the background and foreground.

Using Sound in the News

News is a major offering on television and therefore demands a careful use of sound. The following tips are offered:

1. It is advisable to use strong natural sounds because such sounds help to tell the story.
2. Sound bites should be kept short. Sound bites work best when they are brief (five to 15 seconds). Sound bites should enhance the story, yet they should not be regarded as indispensable to the extent that their absence would destroy the story. "Sound bites can be used effectively to help prove the story you are showing. They are less effective when they are used as substitutes for your own reporting. An effective approach is to think of sound bite as a exclamation point, both to help enhance the visuals and to punctuate the story content" (Shook, (2005, p.12).

Another word of caution on sound bites is that content already read by the reporter or newscaster should not be repeated in the sound bites, neither should the content of a sound bite be repeated by the reporter or the news caster. It is always displeasing to the ear when the above occurs, and it smacks of unprofessionalism and/or lack of understanding of the function of sound bites.

Conclusion

From the discourse above, it is evident that sounds do create excitement, create immediate identification and evoke emotions. Sounds, especially music, can make us laugh or cry, feel happy or sad. They can underline the overall happy or sad and ominous context

of the screen events. Words can evoke moods.

To achieve sound that is evocative, many, if not all, of the production elements should be harnessed. Production elements should blend into one total package. The burden is on the producer.

Recommendations

Based on the above discourse, it is recommended that:

1. The producer, in judging various production elements, should determine whether the elements make sense within the context of the messages.
2. He should determine if the sound effects get the point across and if music makes the message stronger or if it would constitute a distraction.
3. As a sound person, the producer should be aggressive but unobtrusive.
4. He should strive to identify the small things that make sound in the environment where the recording is taking place.
5. The producer should not give up if the sound is bad: he should keep trying different variations until he gets clean, usable sound.
6. Above all, he should ensure that decisions are not left to chance.

References

- Akpan, Emmanuel and Udo Etuk (1990). *Aesthetics: Philosophical and Artistic Dimensions*. Uyo: Modern Business Press.
- Akpan, Uwem (2009). The Imperative of Aesthetic in Broadcast News Writing Style. *Journal of Media and Aesthetics*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (pp 1-15).
- Akpan, Uwem; Sunny Udeze and John Asogwa (2014). Dysfunctional Trends in Nigeria's Broadcast Content and Slide towards Educational Paucity of the Nigerian Child. *New Media and Mass Communication*, Vol. 30, pp. 1-7.
- Bielak, Mark (1995). *Television Production Today*. Lincolnwood Illinois: National Textbook Company.
- Boyd, Andrew (2001). *Broadcast Journalism: Techniques of Radio and Television News*. Oxford: Focal Press.
- Burrows, Thomas D. and Donald Wood (1980). *Television Production: Disciplines and Techniques*. Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown Company Publishers.
- Hausman, Carl; Fritz Messere; Lewis O'Donnel and Philip Benoit (2010). *Modern Radio Production: Production, Programming and Performance*. Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Penney, Edmund F. (1991). *The Facts on File Dictionary of Film and Broadcast Terms*. New York: Facts on File, Inc.
- Shook, Fred (2005). *Television Field Production and Reporting*. Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Zettl, Herbert (2007). *Video Basics*. Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Zettl, Herbert (2009). *Television Production Handbook (10th ed.)*. Belmont: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Zettl, Herbert (2011). *Sight, Sound, Motion: Applied Media Aesthetics*. Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.