

# Women's Voices in Radio

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Using audio(visual) sources to re-think (music) history raises a number of different questions. This article aims to discuss a case of biographical research and its relation to political, economic, and sociocultural matters, a case taken from the field of broadcasting, using audio sources and available metadata. The analysis of speech in these sources is an additional focus because it not only contains information about the content of the text that is spoken, but above all, information about the quality of the voice, e.g. its tone, articulation, pauses, and so on. There is a tension between *what* is said and *how* it is said, and the analysis of this tension is only made possible by the availability of the audio sources. In digital audio(visual) archives like the Österreichische Mediathek (Austrian archive for sound recordings and videos)<sup>1</sup> or the Phonogrammarchiv of the Austrian Academy of Sciences,<sup>2</sup> a wealth of different examples, especially of the spoken word, are available. Many of the sources in the Mediathek come from the Österreichischer Rundfunk (ORF, Austrian Broadcasting Corporation) and are recordings of news broadcasts or other radio shows as well as all manner of recordings on the topics of politics, literature, science, art, and everyday life.

To illustrate my arguments and at the same time reflect upon possible approaches to voice analysis, I will take a closer look at the ORF radio program *Von Tag zu Tag*, a live radio interview show, and one of its (more or less) regular presenters, Ilse Oberhofer. Oberhofer was among the first women to present news broadcasts on Austrian radio in the early 1970s.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, I also wish to understand how a woman's career and her activities in raising awareness of women's issues is presented via the medium in which both her professional development and its social effects are documented.

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1 Österreichische Mediathek. <https://www.mediathek.at/>

2 "Phonogrammarchiv." <https://www.oeaw.ac.at/phonogrammarchiv>

3 "Ilse Oberhofer." <https://oe1.orf.at/artikel/208892/Ilse-Oberhofer>

## The Radio Sound—Approaches to Analyzing the Voice in Radio

Radio is unmistakably recognizable as such because of its format, vocal delivery, and production techniques, which are all immediately and easily distinguishable from the auditory phenomena of everyday life as well as from other media—film, television, computer games, telephone advertisements, etc. Up until now, no systematic investigation has been made of the characteristics on which listeners base the identification of the ‘radio sound,’ how these characteristics are generated via editing and production, and how and to what extent the technology and environment of radio shapes their perception. In general, radio research is mostly regarded as a structural problem, and research is focused on the tension between listener ratings and the choice of topics and the journalistic presentation of the respective subjects.<sup>4</sup>

A very important factor in radio is the voice. It is a very personal and individual thing. We can easily distinguish people by their voices on the basis of pitch, timbre, volume, and other characteristic factors, such as dialectal coloring, speech defects, and age-related features.<sup>5</sup> For example, speaker recognition (and related fields like speaker diarisation<sup>6</sup> or speaker verification/recognition<sup>7</sup>) uses the acoustic features of a voice to automatically distinguish between different speakers in audio recordings.

When listening to the radio, especially news programs, there is, in Western culture, a strong preference for lower voices. They are seemingly perceived to be more ‘objective,’ ‘calm,’ and ‘credible.’ Higher voices, on the other hand, are regarded as ‘exaggerated,’ ‘implausible,’ and ‘emotional.’ This may be one reason why, up until the 1970s, women newscasters were rejected, mainly by men.<sup>8</sup> The show I want to analyze, however, is not a news program, but rather an informative interview program which, at times, deals with very personal topics. Nonetheless, the presenter needed to be perceived as being as neutral and credible as possible without appearing distanced and emotionless.

In his article *Radio als Sound*, Kiron Patka writes about the interaction of the room acoustics of the radio studio and the perception of the voice by radio listeners. Most studios have little to no reverberation, which contributes to

4 Föllmer, “Theoretisch-Methodische Annäherungen” 321, 325; Schröter, “Programmanalyse.”

5 Meyer-Kalkus, *Stimme und Sprechkünste im 20. Jahrhundert* 1.

6 “Speaker diarisation,” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speaker\\_diarisation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speaker_diarisation)

7 “Speaker recognition.” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speaker\\_recognition](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speaker_recognition)

8 Sendlmeier, *Sprechwirkung* 15.

the radio voice's sounding as if it were spoken directly in the room where it is listened to, which is a typical aesthetic quality of radio that we so easily recognize.<sup>9</sup>

The use of the voice in a radio show generally depends on the type of show. In the more casual, informal interview setting, the voice sounds more 'natural' than in the more serious news broadcast setting. Depending on the target audience as well as factors such as the time of day—which contributes to the possible demographics of the listeners—or the type of radio station and its sound design, the voice of the speakers may vary. The 'sound design' of a radio station seems to be a very important factor, especially in determining and maintaining audiences.

There are several parameters that can be distinguished in voice analysis: pitch, dynamics, speed, pauses, volume/sound level, timbre, and word choice. The abovementioned parameters are interpreted differently with regard to women and men. Women's voices are typically higher than men's. Low voices are typically considered convincing, authoritative, competent, and dominant; high voices tend to be considered subordinate and less competent, even untrustworthy, and less capable.<sup>10</sup> This may also be a reason why women were denied positions as newscasters. In any case, it was not until the 1970s that women's voices were heard in the news.

## Women at ORF

The position of women in radio is still underresearched, especially in the history of Austrian radio broadcasting.<sup>11</sup> To find out more about the beginnings of her career at the ORF, I interviewed Ilse Oberhofer in January 2020. She recalls her start at the ORF: In 1968 the ORF was looking for young journalists to fill positions in the newly founded news department 'Aktueller Dienst.' Oberhofer applied 'just for fun' and got a position as an aspiring journalist at Ö1 (the first ORF radio channel). During the oral examination she had to take as part of the application process, she remembers that there were about

9 Patka, "Radio als Sound."

10 Sendlmeier, *Sprechwirkung* 73.

11 Regarding the beginning of the radio in Austria as well as its postwar development: Pensold, *Zur Geschichte des Rundfunks in Österreich*.

15 to 20 applicants in total, two of them women. She also recalls that she was selected because of her unconventional ideas and her open mindset.

Most men on the editorial staff had a personal secretary—“of course they were all women, no man would do a job like that,” says Oberhofer. She would soon find out that many of these women had a higher education and would have liked to do the job the men did. But there was almost no chance at all to ‘escape’ the secretary job and become an editor.

Oberhofer talks quite fondly about her start at the ORF, but there were also incidents where men behaved inappropriately.

Oberhofer started her career as a news editor, but she was, in the beginning, not allowed to read the news herself because Gerd Bacher,<sup>12</sup> the general director, did not allow women to do so. Roland Machatschke,<sup>13</sup> head of the news department, once let her take the microphone under the pretense that he had lost his voice; she convinced Bacher to let her host the news program. This development was founded on a broad women’s rights movement which slowly seeped into the mainstream Austrian attitude.<sup>14</sup>

## Von Tag zu Tag

The radio show *Von Tag zu Tag* (“from day to day”) was an interview program which ran almost daily on Ö1, one of the three national radio channels operated by the ORF. The show was produced from June 1977 until 2017 under this name, but it still exists in a slightly modified form and with a new name: *Punkt eins*. The Österreichische Mediathek has made the *Von Tag zu Tag* shows from 1977 to 1989 available online.<sup>15</sup> The start of the series on October 3, 1977 was preceded by a two-week test run of the show during ‘Schulfunk’ (school radio) hours, from 9:05 to 9:30 in June 1977. From October on, the program was broadcast at 14:30.

The concept of the show is that a presenter has a half-hour live conversation with one or more (prominent) studio guests, including questions from the audience, who could phone in live, which was a new concept for Austrian

12 “Gerd Bacher.” [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gerd\\_Bacher](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gerd_Bacher)

13 “Roland Machatschke.” <https://oe1.orf.at/artikel/208886/Roland-Machatschke>

14 Mesner, “Zäsuren und Bögen.”

15 “Sammlung Von Tag zu Tag.” <https://www.mediathek.at/oesterreich-am-wort/sammlungen/sammlung/col/11/cd/show/sc/Collection/gc/24/>

radio.<sup>16</sup> Current topics are discussed, which means that there was usually a particular occasion for the program, e.g. an exhibition, a concert, a congress, or similar event. After the initial success of the program, non-profit organizations came on the show to talk about their work and introduce themselves to a wider audience. Ilse Oberhofer mentions in her interview that she tried to invite her guests on the news program as well, if possible, so that there would be a chance for a deeper discussion of some topics. Irmgard Czerny, the ORF staff member responsible for organizing the show, supported Oberhofer's efforts.

In the first 10 years of its existence, the program welcomed many famous actors, artists, as well as many Austrian ministers and high clergy. People working in the field of psychological counselling were especially popular guests and topics.<sup>17</sup>

The whole corpus of audio recordings of this program is, as mentioned, available online at the Austrian Mediathek. It comprises 2524 different shows from 1977 to 1989 together with the corresponding metadata. After downloading the metadata files in \*.json format and preprocessing them, I ran several statistical analyses. For each show, the Mediathek provides the title, a subtitle ("Titelzusatz"), the length of the audio clip, the show's contributors/participants ("Mitwirkende"), categorized as interviewer/interviewee; the broadcast date; keywords as well as technical information regarding the type of recording (which, in this case, was always "audio"); the archive format (the format/medium in which it is stored in the archive); the shelf number ("Signatur"); and the current format ("Mp3-Audiodatei").

The metadata is not flawless, as is to be expected, but an especially problematic issue is that the airdates are not always correct; some are dated even before the conception of the show. I have (not yet) found a way to correct this, but there are most likely records of all shows in one of the available ORF archives; I have decided to focus on the available information for now. The data in the interviewer/interviewee category was also not always correct, but I was able to fix these classifications relatively easily (although I can't be completely certain that no mistakes remain).

The first set of information I was able to obtain from the available data is the amount of shows that each interviewer/presenter did. Volkmar

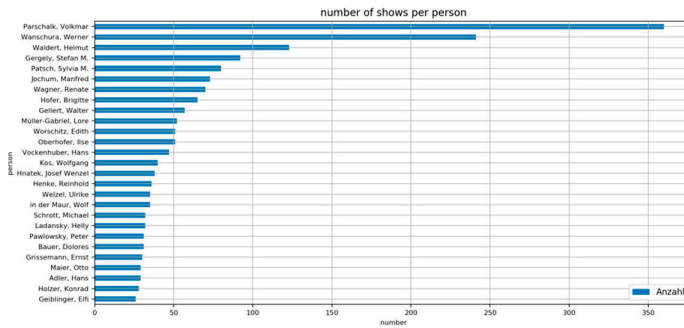
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16 "Von Tag zu Tag: 10 Jahre 'Von Tag zu Tag.' 1. Teil." <https://www.mediathek.at/atom/11742D66-153-00386-00000598-1173A532>

17 Ibid.

Parschalk,<sup>18</sup> one of the founders of the show, hosted the most broadcasts by far, 360 shows in total. There are 185 different presenters listed in the metadata, some of whom only did 1 or 2 shows. The number of men is 153 and the number of women 32. Ilse Oberhofer hosted a total of 51 shows, about half of them on topics related to women.

Figure 1: Number of shows per person (more than 25 shows only).



I also attempted to analyze the provided keywords in a graph analysis, but the results were not meaningful or significant in any way because the keywords the Mediathek uses are very generic and are often used to describe different topics. The resulting word cloud does show the more frequently occurring topics of the show more prominently, but correlations between shared keywords cannot be detected.

Every show starts with the theme song, a striking trumpet melody playing over the quickly repeating chords of a string section and a rising bass line. It is taken from a song on the soundtrack to the 1968 film *Barbarella*, overdubbed with the words “Von Tag zu Tag.”

In order to demonstrate my findings and my analytical approach to the audio clips with an example, I would like to take a closer look at a show hosted by Ilse Oberhofer and broadcast on March 7<sup>th</sup> 1978 called *Von Tag zu Tag—Internationaler Frauentag* with the subtitle *Gespräch mit der Feministin Erica Fischer*, which translates to *The International Women’s Day—An Interview with the Feminist*

18 “Volkmar Parschalk.” [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volkmar\\_Parschalk](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volkmar_Parschalk)

Figure 2: Wordcloud with the visualization of the most commonly used keywords associated with the *Von Tag zu Tag* shows in the Mediathek.



Erica Fischer. The metadata lists Erica Fischer as a guest and Ilse Oberhofer as the presenter.<sup>19</sup>

The structure of the show follows the usual *Von Tag zu Tag* format. After the theme song, Oberhofer opens with some welcoming remarks in her seemingly 'standard' radio voice, which is interspersed with deliberate pauses. Then there is a change in her voice and she begins to present the topic of the show: Erica Fischer is quickly introduced by Oberhofer and proceeds to speak about her organization, the AUF (Arbeitsgemeinschaft unabhängiger Frauen—The Association of Independent Women) which, among other things, provides support to women who are victims of domestic violence. During the show Oberhofer takes three calls from listeners.

19 "Von Tag zu Tag: Internationaler Frauentag." <http://www.mediathek.at/atom/oBF6A337-31B-000E6-0000D50-0BF5F1D5>

Ilse Oberhofer presents the topic of the show as follows:

“Ich tu mir diesmal ein bissl schwer zu sagen, wen diese Sendung in erster Line angeht, wen sie vor allem betrifft, wer sich betroffen fühlen soll. Ganz sicher einmal die Frauen, aber vielleicht doch auch nicht ausschließlich nur die Frauen, vielleicht wär’s auch gar nicht so schlecht, wenn sich auch die Männer angesprochen fühlten, als doch auch indirekt Mitbetroffene, als Mitschuldige, manchmal vielleicht sogar an dem, was wir heute da zur Sprache bringen wollen.”<sup>20</sup>

Seemingly struggling for words, she explains that the following topic is not only addressed to women, but that even men should listen. Oberhofer does address the problem of a lack of male awareness of feminist issues in some of her other shows. In her search for the right phrase she uses three different wordings to describe ‘whom this show should concern.’

Oberhofer uses a combination of pitch variation, deliberate pauses, and syllable stretches to emphasize important words. For example, in the phrase “ich tu mir diesmal ein bissl schwer” (“this time I find it a little difficult”), we hear a stretched “e” as well as a pitch variation in her pronunciation of “schwer.” Comparing the opening remarks with the ones just mentioned, we find that the pitch of her voice changes slightly and she increases the amount of pitch modulation in her voice. Pitch variation as well as breaks and pauses can be analyzed using Praat, a piece of free software used for speech analysis in phonetics.<sup>21</sup>

She uses pauses before some words to emphasize them (e.g. before “Männer” and “indirekt”), perhaps with the intention of making (male) listeners more attentive.

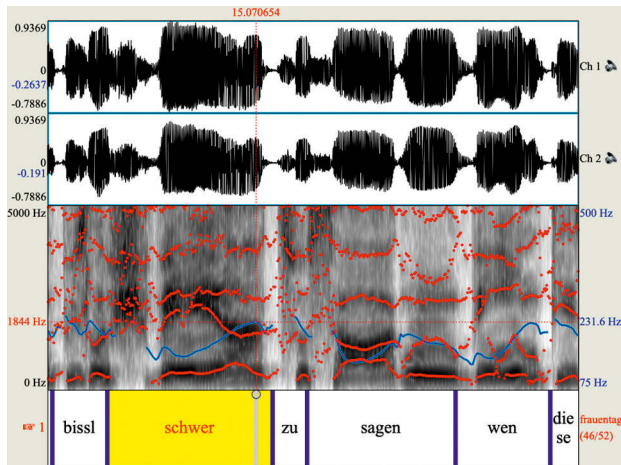
The speed at which the words are spoken varies considerably. Some words or syllables are stretched out (e.g. in the word “schwer,” the “e”), others delivered very quickly and connected to each other. In the first part, for example: “... Damen und Herren, ich freue mich ...”, a phrase she presumably uses very

20 Ibid.: 00:26–00:56. “This time I find it a little difficult to say who this show primarily concerns, who it concerns above all, who should feel involved. Certainly, the women, but perhaps not only the women, perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad if the men also felt addressed, as indirectly affected, as complicit, sometimes even in what we want to bring up today.”

21 Praat. <http://www.fon.hum.uva.nl/praat/>



Figure 3: Screenshot of the Praat program. The pitch modulation in the word “schwer” is visualized as well as in the word “sagen.”



often in her shows, is spoken in a very condensed manner. However, Oberhofer uses pauses and breaks in most of her phrases to make the content of her speech clearly understood. A calm tone of voice is maintained during the interview with Erica Fischer, which contributes to the seriousness of the show's rather upsetting topic. The two women do not want to appear (too) emotional—a frequent accusation directed at women, as Oberhofer mentions in another episode of *Von Tag zu Tag*.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

Oberhofer consciously uses her voice to get attention: in the opening, mainly pauses and stretched-out syllables are used for this purpose. In radio, the voice is very powerful and emotions are indeed conveyed, but women are often labelled as too emotional; they have to remain very calm to be perceived as professional. Pitch is a concern as well. Women sometimes lower their voices

22 “Von Tag zu Tag: Alice Schwarzer über Feminismus.” <http://www.mediathek.at/atom/1084428D-186-0013E-0000F64-10836E0F>

to be taken more seriously, or preference is given to women with naturally lower voices in the first place. I think it is important to listen to women and their speech and investigate if there are differences and specify what those are.

Oberhofer was criticized for her style of speaking on the radio.<sup>23</sup> She used to speak very freely, laughing often, seeming too emotional and personal. The combination of the women's rights movement in the early 1970s and Ilse Oberhofer's career as a newscaster is not, I think, coincidental. Having been put into a position where she could use her platform (e.g. *Von Tag zu Tag*) to talk about women's 'problems' and present them on the radio on a well-regarded show, she does get emotional, or rather uses the 'emotionality' of the topic to get attention—by using her voice. In the interview with her guest she remains more 'neutral' (or seems to be 'herself'). Both women do try to stay very calm, even when talking about abuse and sexual harassment; this is perhaps done on purpose to not seem 'hysterical' and hence be taken seriously.

The voice is a highly complex, individual thing whose timbre, volume, dialectal coloring, speech defects, etc. are influenced by a wide variety of factors which we unconsciously note in our everyday perception to recognize and classify people by their voice. This example analysis is intended to show that listening to audio clips, made possible by the (online) availability of AV sources, is an important part of historical research, and that it may be possible to gain further insights that can contribute to (music) historical research.

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