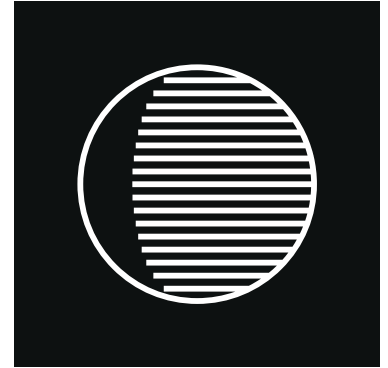
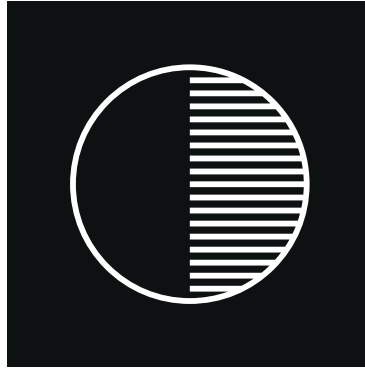
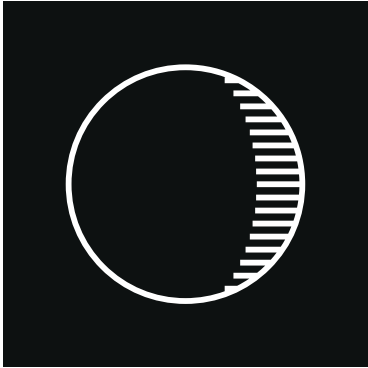


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Ella Finer

Acoustic Commons Evaluation

*Soundcamp 2020 / The Reveil Platform /
Acoustic Commons*

02.05.2020 / 22.10.2020

1.

The early history of radio abounds with visions of a world without borders, united through sound. Radio contained the promise of listening in to intended sounds across geopolitical boundaries. But it also contained the promise of listening out towards an unknown world.

Today we were doing exactly this: listening to multiple places, multiple streams, collapsing distances, picking up old conversations, bringing places into being through various signals.

Listening, then, is a kind of portal, and so too is the pandemic.

Tom Western, *Acoustic Commons Study Group Response*, May 2020 ¹

¹ Tom Western, *Acoustic Commons Study Group Response*, 2 May 2020 (composed as “correspondent listener” for the ACSG) <http://soundtent.org/docs/TomWestern%20ACSG%20response.pdf>. Western’s piece references Arundhati Roy’s *The pandemic is a portal*, April 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>

3

Today is 2nd May 2020, and I am returning to this today from another in late August, and another in late October 2020. Distanced from the event of 2nd May – international dawn chorus day – on which for the first time Soundcamp made its base entirely online, I am writing now living in another part of this “unknown world” we are always “listening out towards”. We did not know on *that* today, as we met each other across the Globe online, just what kinds of sociality and solidarity we would need to sustain us through the months to come, we did not know how bodies would once again take to the streets in defiant protest and proximity, we did not know that we would be travelling through this portal “from one world to the next” still, and although we may have expected it, we did not know where we would be in the journey. ² I begin with Tom Western’s response to the remote gathering of the Acoustic Commons Study Group in the chat- room of the Reveil Platform for what he marks of attuning to *today* and *out towards*: to the complexity of listening to the time and space of a planet and the life moving with it; to what we think we know about time and to all that we do not.

² From Arundhati Roy, *The pandemic is a portal*, April 2020.

No one invented time. It's just that the sun and moon did what they did and we felt it.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *M Archive*, 2018 ³

2.

We live in radio, listening to there from here, here from there, and I am here (Gumbs). At the same time, we are here (Khalili). I wonder what being here means right now for my friends across the globe, when here is actually virtually located like never before.

Ella Finer, *Listening in Common in Uncommon Times*, May 2020 ⁴

By the early days of May 2020, radio had already taken on a new power and currency as connective force. In the wake of world-wide lockdowns, once-physical art events were

³ Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *M Archive: After the End of the World*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2018. p.141.

⁴ Ella Finer, *Listening in Common in Uncommon Times*, May 2020. <http://streams.soundtent.org/2020/projects/acoustic-commons-study-group>

being re-imagined as radio stations, shows and online broadcasts. Zoom was re-purposed from conference platform to broadcast medium while quarantine pirate radio stations, bedroom broadcasts and podcast series began to fill the airwaves with content, assembling communities in the ether. Now, only months on from these first shifts towards audio as a primary means of gathering listening audiences together across distance, the acoustic world is rich with offerings; of all the terrestrial, local projects taking flight in sonic form.

For Soundcamp, each year a rich correspondence of grounded occupation of space (the camp) and global broadcast (Reveil), 2020 would be the year the overnight camp went virtual. The online Reveil platform was built to hold/host multiple modes of *being with* the project, underscored by the Reveil broadcast continuously unfolding dawn after dawn. The resulting 24-hour concurrency of Reveil, multiple distinct projects, and the dedicated IRC chat created a mixing desk of possibilities for listening-engaging alongside a global community. Strangely, for a time of extreme “social distancing”, this platform brought the different elements of, and contributors to,

Soundcamp closer in proximity to each other than ever before – here was an experience of sonic sociality, of being close at distance.

3.

following the line of first light. windowsills, deep sea hydrophones at first not sure where we are...

These are the first words I note down as I tune into the Reveil Platform, and I can't be sure they are my own. I may have heard them from Grant Smith guiding us in voice, I may have copied them down from the chat box, or they are from the mixture of words

and sounds picked up in this acoustic commons. Attuning to the platform is like acclimating to a new kind of existence – every sense wired into and responsive to the sonic and written cues. On arrival to the platform there is a lot to take in, to adjust to, to locate oneself in relation to. I watch a while as the chat box fills with named and numbered guests asking questions to pitch-up in the virtual campsite.

05:17 #acousticcommons: <web49> Where can I find “THE” broadcast? Is there a MIX?

05:56 #acousticcommons: <web45> This is beautiful – can anyone tell me where we are listening to?

The IRC chat, hosting waves of activity throughout the day, is an orienting space – a kind of common room – for visitors to the project's platform. The chat does multiple things: hosts both programmed and spontaneous interventions and discussion, provides live programme information about what projects are about to begin and where in the world Reveil is playing from, as well as ensuring a check in/check out process - a log of who is joining and leaving the online community of listeners. ⁵ At times the movements of those coming and going is more audible in text form than lone stranded comments, or greetings like “Good morning”, lost in the noise of traffic at day-break.

⁵ 11:27 #acousticcommons: <amycutler2> I like that this conversation is partly just people trying to get in and out and assign themselves names. like we are all standing in one big doorway.

05:38 -!- web7886
[b49624de@185.181.117.6] has joined
#acousticcommons

05:38 -!- web66
[d5cdf1b7@185.181.117.6] has joined
#acousticcommons

05:38 -!- web1
[4f490da6@185.181.117.6] has joined
#acousticcommons

05:38 -!- web1
[4f490da6@185.181.117.6] has quit
[Connection closed]

05:38 -!- web97
[01886e36@185.181.117.6] has joined
#acousticcommons

05:39 #acousticcommons: <Taylor>
Good morning 05:39 -!- web50
[5284f0c2@185.181.117.6] has quit
[Connection closed]

05:39 -!- web63
[b49624de@185.181.117.6] has joined
#acousticcommons

05:39 -!- web50
[5284f0c2@185.181.117.6] has joined
#acousticcommons

05:40 -!- web66
[d5cdf1b7@185.181.117.6] has quit
[Connection closed]

05:40 -!- web56
[d5cdf1b7@185.181.117.6] has joined
#acousticcommons

When I return to the chat late into the night of May 2nd, I see for the first time how the chat functions temporally, rolling its content gradually up and out of the box as time passes. At night (my night in London) the chat is quiet, only the odd comment moving slowly up the screen, and a reply some dark space later. The way the frequency and amplitude of the chat mimics our human daytime and night-time behaviours in relation with the dawn breaking again and again leads me to wonder where are people mostly listening from? Or, put another way, does the UTC programming of Soundcamp structure the day accordingly for listeners whose daytime corresponds with the programmed night-time? It strikes me that while the continuous dawn chorus of Reveil suspends us as listeners in timelessness, as we

are perpetually acoustically reset to daybreak, the timed programming of the day (much more visible this year on the Reveil Platform and IRC chat) ties us to one-time standard. The day's clock time marks the projects listed on the left hand side of the screen, while the IRC chat logs time passing from many Good mornings to midday "Good morning Hawaii" through to "Goodnight Europe // Good morning Australia". What would Nightcall Radio and Night Blooms sound like programmed out of sync with their UTC referent? ⁶

6 I learn from Dawn Scarfe that Jiyeon Kim's walk "was a dawn chorus 'project' programmed in the evening from a UK perspective" as was the Cyberforest Audio Census: "another 'daybreak' project programmed in the (UK) evening". Dawn's feedback makes explicit the "disturbances in the mix" as she puts it. That things are not temporally what they might (at first) seem is seductive: there is scope to attend to ever deeper layers here.

4.

You can almost see it as a wave... You can see the seismic quietening spread over time, starting in China in late January and then moving on to Italy and beyond in March and April.

Stephen Hicks, Seismologist, Imperial College, London, July 2020 ⁷

A seismic "wave of silence" moved across the globe as human noise levels lowered in lockdown. The Reveil broadcast of 2020 is now a sonic time capsule of the new quietude, a document of the way the loss of human noise in cities offered up a new urban habitat for other than human agents. Humans are only ever implied presences in the Reveil stream, rarely appearing audibly, consciously. And so listening to Jiyeon Kim's broadcast from Seoul is a charged experience within the mix because she sounds her acoustic presence. Her stream places the human in the scene of the largely uninterrupted bird world, footsteps

7 <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2020/jul/23/wave-of-silence-spread-around-world-during-coronavirus-pandemic>

loud on the ground as the birds sing. Jiyeon Kim's concern in her feedback to Dawn Scarfe is that "people might have felt it too long or repetitive in foot steps". She adds "I should've tilted up the mic position...". She is, unusually, a streamer on foot, with a moving rather than fixed microphone. Jiyeon Kim's walk blurs the imagined boundaries between the continuous dawn chorus and the concurrent programmed projects ranging across workshops, talks, performances. Her walk reminds us that the boundaries, between the distinct elements on the platform, are of course both defined *and* porous. Footsteps walk into another dawn, another project, into the chat and out of it.

Such moments of overlap happen for every listener's chosen mix, grounding or suspending people differently. For some "the eternal morning", as Arjuna Neuman names Reveil, plays alone or is muted to attend to a project broadcast (borders defined); for others sounds are played concurrently (borders porous). From a closing conversation with the Acoustic Commons Study Group we found all of us had experienced the shifts in focused and fractured attention. With even fractured or pluralised attention commanding a kind of focus:

12:13 #acousticcommons: <Flora_P> Extraordinary Chris. I have just heard it now also. Also mixed in and out of the stream. I've been on this stream since it started (sleeping in and out) and the metallic screeches of your recording in there are quite comforting somehow in a metropolitan way

The IRC chat links us to bodies, named or unnamed, known or unknown. We hear birds and we "chat" with humans. We share in identifying what we are hearing without seeking to categorise or contain, and I experience the chat as full of the joy in sound playing tricks: in birds sounding like other things, sonic signals recurring ('not the fly again') or sounding too late, dogs sounding like reverb has been added as effect. At one point, during the study group hosted by the IRC chat, Vibeke Mascini imagines we become ear witness to something other than the dawn chorus, as if in some speculative Cluedo:

13:57 #acousticcommons: <VibekeMascini> All of a sudden I imagine we sound witness some crime scene taking place...our testimony would be so absurd

13:58 #acousticcommons: <EllaFinerCHROME> We'd all have different testimony hahaha

13:58 #acousticcommons: <EllaFinerCHROME> it was a bird, wolf, dog, duck

13:58 #acousticcommons: <Sheilareborn> They would have to question about four sheilas

13:58 #acousticcommons: <VibekeMascini> a total mess! "It was Mexico, Ecuador, the Ocean"

I am trying to remember Reveil from 2019 and whether/how the atmospheric tone has changed. Social distancing effects how we listen and how we listen back, as much as what we listen to. As I try and recall, I realise how little of Reveil I actually heard last year as I was with the first meeting of the study group in Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park. I was with people who are here now online in 2020.

5.

When I read the news and grieve, my mind has more than once turned to vesper flights, to the strength and purpose that can arise from the collaboration of numberless frail and multitudinous souls. If only we could have seen the clouds that sat like dark rubble on our own horizon for what they were; if only we could have worked together to communicate the urgency of what they would become... Swifts have, of late, become my fable of community, teaching us about how to make right decisions in the face of oncoming bad weather.

Helen Macdonald, *Vesper Flights*, August 2020⁸

In the weeks and days before 2nd May my mind is all over the place. I returned to a city suffering a kind of desperate lag in communication and in urgency, from another city beginning a careful lockdown. The clouds like dark rubble *were* visible from a long way off. Epidemiologists knew

⁸ Helen Macdonald, *Vesper Flights*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/29/magazine/vesper-flights.html>

the risks of the small scale beginnings of the pandemic, their readings of the split second cross-species transmission like forecasts of distant weather.

There *are* communities who can pick up near imperceptible signs, as the swifts do. Scientists, psychics, sentinel species. *If only we could have worked together to communicate.* Now, how do we work together to communicate the urgency of the dark clouds still so vastly unknown to us? The collective energy and mix-desk platform of the entirely remote Soundcamp produced new navigational instruments and methods for “listening out towards an unknown world” – across and with the missed connections, manifesting infrequently as delayed/dropped acoustics, lost chat comments, forgotten “dates” with project broadcasts. Strangely for me it is still the “fragile streams” that remain some of the most tangible moments of connection throughout the day into night.

The rich acoustic commons Soundcamp produced this year feels especially important; we are all attuning to this crisis differently, we are asynchronous, attempting to find methods and modes of communication across the lags (in hearing, finding, connecting,

understanding...). *We are all meeting out of time.* When I say to Grant Smith, Dawn Scarfe and Glenn Boulter in early conversations that my mind is all over the place and apologise for losing an element of the project I am evaluating here, Grant describes Reveil as “a machine that *puts* your mind all over the place”. There is, in this framing of Reveil, a kind of symmetry and sympathy in coming to the platform lost in lockdown space-time. This is a machine *stewarding* our leaps across time-zones and time-senses, a way of simultaneously losing and finding ourselves in a community of fellow listeners.

And I want to underscore the practice of stewardship here, in relation to the wider ongoing project of Acoustic Commons as ‘an ethic that embodies responsible planning and management of resources’ in and for the common good.⁹ This multifaceted project is stewarded by its organisers in most generous and open ways in conversation with *us*, the user-listeners of the Reveil platform. We are the acoustic commoners, also with responsibilities for attending to the living resources and giving back to the collective project by sharing our own acoustic

⁹ Guy Standing, *Plunder of the Commons: A Manifesto for Sharing Public Wealth*. London: Pelican, 2019. p.50.

environments at daybreak, planting new seeds of conversation, staying with the stream for however long we can.

00:46 #acousticcommons: <DanStowell_>
I’ve been listening for about 16 hours now. Some interesting recurrences – it makes me smile to hear the cockerel again, I think we’ve heard a live cockerel heralding the dawn every few hours today

00:49 #acousticcommons: <Karina_T>
I’m struck by just how much I’ve thought of Stave Hill Ecology Park over the day. The soundscape has evolved around me but I’ve been semi-static within it. So strange.

00:50 #acousticcommons: <Karina_T>
Like my heightened awareness of the planets’ movements around a ‘seemingly static’ world.

00:52 #acousticcommons: <Karina_T>
So oddly

I’m feeling at the centre of everything. A tiny atomic particle looking out. I don’t mean “the

centre of everything” but that I’m peering out through an incredibly clear window.

00:53 #acousticcommons: <DanStowell_>
yes, with this remote version I’ve felt a very clear imaginative impression of travelling with the line of first light

This short flicker of correspondence in the IRC chat illuminates some of the dark hours on the platform, as well as the near invisible- inaudible stewardship of those behind the scenes dedicatedly mixing the different dawns, moderating the chat, communicating with projects about to “go live”. This 2020 remote Soundcamp cancels out the noisiness of bodies and their activities on location, and in turn some of us, as evidenced in the night-time chat room – or in response to far away footsteps – become more vibrantly aware of the smallness of our human scale.

6.

If you send something on a radio wave it just keeps going...

Kate Donovan, in conversation, 4 September 2020

In conversation with Kate Donovan, one of the commissioned project artists, she talks about natural radio and nightingales syncing with the earth's forces, about methods of attending to the 'quieter signals of the earth'. I had listened to Donovan's *Nightcall Radio* broadcast on the platform at 20:15. *I'm calling...* her voice carried over and through Reveil's dawn chorus; the solitude of her search for receivers sounding like a signal from/to an uninhabited planet.

On the Reveil platform this sense of solitary work beaming in is strong. And while listening, I keep becoming aware of the varying acoustic shades of remote practice I am hearing and how they shift me, however 'semi-static' I am – from Manja Ristić in Belgrade I hear the hollow acoustics of interiors elsewhere, from Ljubljana I hear Anthropic Frequencies' energy etching of sound-space and later

Lee Patterson's M60/M62 motorway in audible proximity. PITCH's *Leaving a Trace* brings voices and hands together, the percussive clapping again reminding how much this day is about attunement as a practice of more than one. These shifts we make – through sonic sites in which the recorder is only ever partially perceptible – are part of our acoustic commoning work: adjusting, reorienting our hearing/sensing. We shift, as P.A. Skantze writes "to become by motion aware of what was just out of range of vision, of hearing, of sensing".¹⁰

As Kate Donovan reminds, radio is a living medium. What radio as method offers us in the context of Soundcamp and the wider Acoustic Commons project is a way of appreciating how we attune to what is moving, to what "just keeps going".

07:08 #acousticcommons: <Annick-VoicesthatShake> Listening to Katerina's stream I think: For me the sea is the one that separates.

¹⁰ P.A. Skantze, "Shift Epistemologies: Gap Knowledge", *Misperformance: essays in shifting perspectives*, ed. M. Blažević and L. C. Feldman. Ljubljana, 2014. Accessed author's manuscript with kind permission.

My sister is on the other side of a sea. My family is on the other side of a bigger sea.

07:09 #acousticcommons: <frgmt> i don't hear no sea anymore

Listening together is also to be perpetually falling in and out of sync, when memory might keep us in a particular acoustic moment, as others move on. For Annick Metefia, writing "live poetry" in the IRC chat, the sea is still sounding in her memory of hearing it; she has spun the sea into the distance of her separation from her family. These listening experiences and where they take us are tenderly our own.

7.

What can we say is in common? And where is our place of commoning? Where are the offline commons now? The cost for keeping "connected"—that not everyone can live on air, or online—is becoming explicit in ways exposing broadband as luxury. Are web-based commons still commons if not everyone can access them from where they call home?

Ella Finer, *Listening in Common in Uncommon Times*, May 2020

On the day I finish writing up these reflections I receive a returned parcel. It has taken the parcel 6 months to travel to Lagos and back to London. Holding the object that has travelled so far and never landed I think again about the swifts who "never come down", the birds who journey and sleep on the wing. I think about Sheila Chukwulozie, the near-missed receiver of the slow post and her brilliantly witty reincarnations in the IRC chat room.¹¹

¹¹ Artist Sheila Chukwulozie, as part of ACSG Wave Study in the IRC Chat.

13:02 #acousticcommons: <Sheilagain>
My internet is so weak on this side
of the world that I might have three
hundred names by the end of the hour
cuz I keep refreshing

She lost her connection, her name, her virtual body to return as Sheilaagain, Sheilaforawhile, Sheilareborn. Many of us over the past months have had to learn quick how to live in suspension, to treat the ground as temporary while also being vitally aware – and coming into new awareness – of the many more who have already lived with and through suspension, or the many more who live in flight every day.

I hold the rebounded parcel and the missed connections weigh more heavily. I am reminded of the words I wrote at the beginning of lockdown, framing the meeting of the Acoustic Commons Study Group in the Reveil Platform IRC chat. Moving towards the next iterations of Soundcamp and moving with the evolving project of Acoustic Commons I wonder how this body of work, created largely in the lived intensity of a day's action at the beginning of a global pandemic, will underscore what comes next, and how it will exist in the space of the year between Soundcamp events. The Reveil platform is accessible now mid-year as a sort of

emptied once-live stage, unusually sparse, the chat blank. The stillness of the online site feels appropriate in that it is holding the space – laying fallow – for the next intensive early May day. At a time when we are counting the human and environmental costs of surplus production, Soundcamp's ethos encourages a kind of online *uncultivation*, preserving the project through its dispersal of people, sounds, ideas into the world, into their local communities, *offline*. The online Acoustic Commons is sustained and powered by this offline activity of the commoners, those who will, in time, gather and return.

12:30 #acousticcommons: <Flora_P>
@mhacker I went for a walk to Canary Wharf immediately as lockdown started and I thought: next year we'll all be living here – in abandoned offices worth nothing – total collapse of the capitalist system

12:30 #acousticcommons: <Lia> i went to canary wharf on my bike. The wind

was blowing so heavily around these huge buildings. Like trees in a wrong forest ¹²

There are still some lost sounds in my experience of the Reveil platform, of streams and projects I missed on the day, many of which are not stored as documents on the site. Grant Smith describes the project and by extension any experience of the project as “intrinsically incomplete”. The incomplete hearings and the missed connections are conditions of the live, asking from us a particular form of attention which does not, *cannot* rely on playback. As the user-listeners of the platform we are live, living, with this radio broadcast which will not wait for us to catch up. Acoustic Commoning, as practiced in/through Soundcamp as *sharing the focuses of listening*, foregrounds that attending to some things well and letting other things go are actions of care.

And so, where does all the sound go, if we cannot listen live? What happens to the documents of the Reveil broadcast and the distinct project live-streams? Or the rolling IRC chat

12 <https://www.independent.co.uk/environment/plant-trees-climate-crisis-where-greenhouse-gas-emissions-a9455671.html>

(that produced its own documentary evidence in real time on a home printer)? ¹³ The relationship of Acoustic Commons to archival practice is of particular interest to me. The commons adjusts in relation to its use. Those who use it, the commoners, come to understand – by tending it – what and where it will produce, and in turn they effect how it produces. While the sound archive, like this project, will always be “intrinsically incomplete”, it is incomplete *also* because of modes and methods of selection approaching institutional administration, however careful the task of curation is. Acoustic Commons relies on its commoners as curators of the incomplete, care-takers of material that appears to dissolve as soon as it is sounded, of ideas

13 In this year where everything is going virtual, project assistant Christine Bramwell makes an observation that causes me to think about what kind of evidence will or will not remain in the longer term. In conversation Christine talks about the printed scroll of the IRC chat proceedings: “this is the only thing we have to show it [Soundcamp] was virtual” she says as she describes how the Wi-Fi connection was lost and a smear of ink smudged the page as it stopped.

that may grow again a following year, or may not. ¹⁴ I am thinking the Acoustic Commons here through the Soundcamp 2020, in lockdown.

What this experience has allowed me to apprehend more clearly than before is that the cycles of Soundcamp are important. Like the land-based commons from which the creative and intellectual commons get their analogue, the acoustic commons is served by waves of activity as maintenance and periods of rest. The Reveil platform analytics must look like a lone steep spike in a flat land, while the public

¹⁴ Preservation of the commons is a collaborative effort – preservation as process, perpetually unfolding. This reminds me of Johanna Hedva’s writing on open source in “Belonging in the mess” (2017): “To participate in the community of open source, you have to do something. You have to be a maker. Unlike proprietary software, which requires only a purchase of the license for you to be a “member,” open source demands that you get your hands dirty, that you become an active part of the project itself. It’s not enough just to buy your way in. You have to devote your time, your attention and intention, and it’s not enough to think through whatever issues arise, or to merely talk about them. Something has to be done, which is another way of saying that something has to be made.” See: <https://medium.com/processing-foundation/belonging-in-the-mess-3d3ad0577499>.

facing site resists any pretence that the day can be re-played, re-sounded, stored up for re-runs. ¹⁵ Today has gone, there will be another.

¹⁵ While contributors and commissioned artists on the Reveil platform can manage their own project pages, uploading any recordings from the day, the pages are tended to slowly, in each contributors’ own time.

With deep thanks to the *Acoustic Commons Study Group: Wave Study* invited contributors: Emma Bennett, Sheila Chukwulozie, Amy Cutler, Helen Frosi, Christopher Heighes, Dan Hall, Joe Kelleher, Vibeke Mascini, Lia Mazzari, Arjuna Neuman, Flora Pitrolo, P.A. Skantze; to the *Wave Study* correspondent listeners Urok Shirhan and Tom Western and to everyone who was part of the chat.

