MP3: A Hundred-Year History of a 19-Year-Old Format in Under an Hour

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There are now more mp3s in circulation than all other forms of recorded audio combined. Through a series of episodes, this talk offers history of the format, but also uses the format to point to a longer, general history of compression in the 20th century. Our most basic ideas of what it means to hear and listen, our most basic ideas of information, are tied to the problems and projects of 20th century media. In its everyday combination of sound, information and infrastructure, the history of the mp3 offers a radically different story about the meaning of hearing and the origins of digital media.

Jonathan Sterne teaches in the Department of Art History and Communication Studies and the History and Philosophy of Science Program at McGill University. He is author of The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction (Duke, 2003), MP3: The Meaning of a Format (Duke 2012); and numerous articles on media, technologies and the politics of culture. He is also editor of The Sound Studies Reader (Routledge, 2012).

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