

Terje Colbjørnsen, Associate professor at the Department of Archivistics, library and information science, Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway, [terjec@oslomet.no](mailto:terjec@oslomet.no)

*Book review:*

## Sound reading. Exploring and conceptualising audiobook practices among young adults

*Elisa Tattersall Wallin (2022). Sound reading. Exploring and conceptualising audiobook practices among young adults. Doctoral thesis. University of Borås, Faculty of Librarianship, Information, Education and IT.*

Do you listen to audiobooks? Surely you have noticed the people on trains and buses with headphones or earplugs. You may have speculated about what category of audio was currently streaming from the smartphone in hand to the phones in ear. Chances are, they were listening to an audiobook. Perhaps you considered for a moment if this practice can actually be termed *reading*?

Elisa Tattersall Wallin's thesis *Sound reading* takes the emergence and popularity of audiobooks in streaming services as a starting point to examine how young people today read -- by listening, by seeing and by touching -- and how audiobook listening practices fit, *or are made to fit*, with everyday life. It is a well-crafted and original contribution to the emergent field of audiobook research, packed with concepts and findings. The thesis is positioned within the field of library and information science (LIS), but crosses paths with a host of other research traditions: book history, media studies, publishing studies, comparative literature, sociology, reading research, sound studies and more. While the relevance of all these disciplinary neighbours is not thoroughly discussed in the thesis, there is little doubt that Tattersall Wallin's empirical and conceptual contributions should be a reference point across disciplines for future work on audiobook listening.

The title of the thesis is “Sound reading. Exploring and conceptualising audiobook practices among young adults”. That is a good title, especially because it highlights key issues and concepts in the thesis. It is about reading and sound, and about practices that are examined both empirically and conceptually. The title is also a play on words, signalling that what is regarded as “sound reading” is a subject of debate, historically and in the current moment.

The author takes a stand on the side of the readers/listeners: Let us just see (and hear) how they read! The stated aim of the thesis is to “develop knowledge and conceptualisations of audiobook reading practices in the context of subscription services and apps” (p. 4), particularly exploring the temporal and spatial aspects of young people’s usage and practices.

Tattersall Wallin’s work builds on different types of data and materials, from transaction logs provided by the streaming service BookBeat to semi-structured interviews and software analysis. In terms of theory, she positions her work within LIS, but most explicitly employs three imported theories or broad concepts as the analytical foundation: Practice (theory), remediation and affordances. Both methods and theories come across as relevant for the topic and the questions asked.

The thesis comprises four articles and a summary essay. On the whole, I find that the different parts combine very well. The overall research design and coherence of the project is very convincing and one of its clear strengths, as I see it. The four articles emerge from a clearly outlined motivation to understand audiobook practices, both through empirical investigation and via a discussion of new and old concepts. While each study contributes something of its own, the articles also build upon the same overall idea for the project and relate to one of the main research questions.

Article 1 is called “Time to read: exploring the timespaces of subscription-based audiobooks” and was co-authored with Jan Nolin and published in *New media and society* in 2020. The aim of this study was to explore patterns of audiobook use on a large scale, to understand the temporal listening patterns of users of an audiobook service. Building on a transaction log from the BookBeat service, the authors find patterns of everyday usage, suggesting that audiobook listening is tied up with other everyday practices across what the authors call *daytime*, *weektime* and *yeartime*. Perhaps the most intriguing finding from this paper is the sheer amount of time spent listening to audiobooks for users of the BookBeat platform: 94 minutes per day for women and 98 minutes for men (mean values). While the differences between user groups are quite small, it seems worth noting that young men (18-20) listen most of all (100 min.)

The second article is the main theoretical contribution from the thesis. Entitled “Reading by listening: conceptualising audiobook practices in the age of streaming subscription services”, it was published in *Journal of Documentation* in 2021. Further developing the concepts and ideas introduced in the first article, the ambition for this article was to identify, clarify and conceptualise crucial issues for contemporary audiobook researchers. It is a rich and solid contribution, introducing a number of useful concepts, including the central notion of “reading by listening”.

My favourite of the bunch is article three, where Tattersall Wallin digs deeper into some of the issues raised in the previous articles and incorporates interviews with young people (aged 18-20). The article is called “Audiobook routines: identifying everyday reading by listening practices amongst young adults” and was published in *Journal of Documentation* in 2022. By asking the informants about everyday listening routines, the author identifies a wide range of audiobook practices, some *mobile* (“commute listening”, “exercise listening”, “chore listening”) and some *stationary* (“homework listening”, “schoolwork listening”, “leisure listening”). Perhaps the most intriguing findings are related

**Colbjørnsen:** *Sound reading. Exploring and conceptualising audiobook practices among young adults (book review)*

to how young people routinely use audiobooks for *wellbeing* purposes, like destressing, to keep company or to help with falling asleep. In this article, the informants come to life, and I get to see how audiobooks form part of everyday life for young people. Take, for instance, this quote:

“Usually, on a school day, I start it [the audiobook] in the morning. When I go to make breakfast, I put my headphones on, it’s almost the first thing I do in the morning. And later I will sit down and do my makeup and get ready, and then I usually have the book on, but not with the headphones. Then I have it playing out loud [from the smartphone]” (Tattersall Wallin, 2022, p. 272).

The interplay between the individual, the technology and the situations is really complex and fascinating! I will happily recommend “Audiobook routines” to scholars even outside of LIS, as it brings insights into media usage in the digital age more broadly.

Finally, the fourth article (unpublished at the time of writing) looks at the concrete features of audiobook apps and how they afford different types of reading practices among a group of young audiobook listeners. While still a bit unpolished, the paper supplements the other articles nicely, especially as it brings technology into the mix.

First and foremost, the strength of the work lies in the empirical contributions. These will help push audiobook research forward, specifically as they deal with the actual usage of audiobooks (i.e., practice), rather than their place in the literary landscape or book industry distribution channels.

The notion of practice is derived from Ted Schatzki’s theory (e.g., Schatzki, 2009). Tattersall Wallin cites Schatzki’s definition of practice as “an organized, open-ended spatial-temporal manifold of actions” (p. 25). Practices, as she (and co-author Jan Nolin) sees it, are organized around clock time, localized routines and everyday actions, folding into “timespaces”, to quote Schatzki (2009) once more. The choice of this theory is apt, and the basic definitions are well covered. The application of practice theory in articles 1 and 3 is fruitful. Not least, practice theory provides Tattersall Wallin with a smart entry point to discussions around the status of the audiobook and whether listening to an audiobook constitutes reading at all:

“This thesis explores the use of audiobooks as a form of reading practice. A practice approach involves studying reading as it is carried out, without preconceived notions about how reading should be done. The interest lies in the settings of reading and activities that people are doing when they read” (p. 4).

However, the full “backstory” of Schatzki’s practice theory (with Heideggerian and Wittgensteinian influences) is left rather unexplained in the summary essay. Other practice theories in the social sciences and humanities are only mentioned in passing, if at all. Brief conceptual discussions are also characteristic of the summary essay’s handling of the remediation and affordances concepts. A thesis cannot cover everything and anything that a reader might think of, but I still think this lack of theoretical background is a pity, not least because these concepts are particularly rich and evocative. Something to elaborate on in future publications, perhaps?

All in all, Elisa Tattersall Wallin’s thesis is a solid and thought-provoking examination of media and information practices, and one that researchers of audiobooks will need to be familiar with.

#### *Declaration of interest*

Terje Colbjørnsen served as external examiner at Tattersall Wallin’s thesis defence.

**References**

Schatzki, T. (2009), "Timespace and the organization of social life", in Shove, E., Trentmann, F. and Wilk, R. (Eds), *Time, Consumption and Everyday Life: Practice, Materiality and Culture*, Berg, Oxford, pp. 35-48.

Tattersall Wallin, E. (2022), "Audiobook routines: identifying everyday reading by listening practices amongst young adults", *Journal of Documentation*, Vol. 78 No. 7, pp. 266-281.  
<https://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JD-06-2021-0116>