

21M.380 · MUSIC AND TECHNOLOGY  
RECORDING TECHNIQUES & AUDIO PRODUCTION

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT 1 (WR1)  
EDISON'S LIST

DUE: MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 2016, 9:30AM  
SUBMIT TO: MIT LEARNING MODULES ▶ ASSIGNMENTS  
3% OF TOTAL GRADE

In an article for the *North American Review*, Thomas Edison (1878) imagined 10 possible use cases for his new invention of the *phonograph*:<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sterne 2003, p. 202.

1. Letter writing and dictation without the aid of a stenographer.
2. Phonographic books for the blind.
3. The teaching of elocution.
4. Reproduction of music.
5. The "family record" – a registry of sayings, reminiscences, etc., by members of a family in their own voices, and the last words of dying persons.
6. Music-boxes and toys.
7. Clocks that should announce in articulate voice the time for going home, going to meals, etc.
8. The preservation of languages by exact reproduction of the manner of pronouncing.
9. Educational purposes such as preserving the explanations made by a teacher, so that the pupil can refer to them at any moment, and spelling or other lessons placed upon the phonograph for convenience in committing to memory.
10. Connection with the telephone, so as to make that instrument an auxiliary in the transmission of permanent and invaluable records, instead of being the recipient of momentary and fleeting communications.

## 1 Instructions

Prepare a written reply for an in-class discussion:

- Sort Edison's list according to actual usage today (from frequent to rare), according to your best personal estimate.
- Assign a percentage to each item that in your opinion reflects its contemporary significance (should add up to 100%).
- For the purpose of the discussion, let's extend 'the phonograph' to any sound recording technology in general use today. You can be liberal in your interpretation of Edison's list in terms of contemporary technology.
- Argue in favor of your list. You can make use of statistics and other published information to make your case, but I'm primarily interested in your personal view on recording technology's cultural significance in different areas. Try to consider cultural and social contexts other than your own.
- Why are the items at the bottom of your list there? Will some of them become more significant in the future? Speculate about underlying technological, social, and cultural developments!
- Offer a personal critical perspective on how technology has developed (and will continue to develop) since Edison's invention. Consider the sociocultural changes that accompany these developments, to which degree you are in favor of them, but also in which respects you are not.<sup>2</sup>

## 2 Submission format

Submit a single-page PDF file named `wri teup . pdf` (300 words max.).

## References & useful resources

- Edison, Thomas A. (1878). "The Phonograph and Its Future." In: *The North American Review* 126.262, pp. 527–36. JSTOR: 25110210.
- Sterne, Jonathan (2003). *The Audible Past. Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 450 pp.  
MIT LIBRARY: 001141682.

<sup>2</sup> Remember that technology does not just 'fall from the sky'. At MIT, we are directly involved in the process of shaping future technologies, probably more so than in most other places. A HASS class like this one demands that you adopt a critical view on such developments.

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