

Audible Networks: Connecting Texts through Music in 16th-Century Swiss Printed Ballads

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In recent years, researchers of early modern print culture, particularly those concerned with news circulation, have increasingly embraced network analysis to account for the flow of information across different regions and media. Even though most of these studies focus on people or cities as nodes and hubs in networks of news distribution, interrelations on a textual level, such as networks of co-citation, have received some attention as well. These approaches, as well as examples of textual network analysis in media history of more recent periods, can serve as inspiration for the study of early modern printed ballads.

Like in other printed objects, connections between different ballads can be discerned on a textual level, i.e. as adaptations of existing lyrics, quotation or the combination of several ballads in one print. However, and perhaps obviously, ballads can also be associated on a musical level. The practice of using already existing, popular melodies as a basis for a new text – commonly referred to as “contrafactum” – has repeatedly been shown to be relevant not only as a mnemonic device, but as a means for alluding to themes of existing songs. Previous studies have suggested that this technique was often consciously employed by the authors of songs in order to add an additional layer of meaning.

This paper will present some early deliberations within the framework of an ongoing PhD project on political ballads of the 16th-century Swiss Confederation. The project as a whole examines songs from a perspective of media history, investigating their role in constructing and transmitting ideas and imaginations about diplomatic relations between the confederates. Using the example of “contrafactum-relations”, the paper will explore how a methodology inspired by network analysis might be useful in this endeavour. Based on an initial corpus of around 150 printed ballads (containing both original songs and reprints or adaptations of earlier songs) printed in Switzerland between 1530 and 1600, it will provide a visual representation of the connection between the different songs as a network in which individual printed songs function as nodes and melodies as edges. This will allow for the identification of particularly influential melodies, chains of “musical references” and clusters of songs which share the same melodies. These results, in turn, may be put in relation to the subject matter of the songs in question and compared to text-based networks, thus not only providing visual and quantitative evidence of the practice of contrafactum, but giving insight into the mechanisms by which information is transmitted through this particular medium.