

Obituary: Remembering Jonathan Sterne (1970–2025)

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We are profoundly sad at the passing of Jonathan Sterne, a true scholarly titan and a beloved teacher, mentor, colleague, collaborator, and friend. Jonathan was James McGill Professor of Culture and Technology at McGill University, Guggenheim Fellow, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation Fellow at the Harvard Radcliffe Institute, Fellow of the International Communication Association, and Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada.

Jonathan's groundbreaking scholarship on the cultural dimensions of sound, media and technology, and disability was unbounded by disciplinary orthodoxies, and has had a transformative impact on diverse academic fields including media and communication studies, sound and music studies, voice studies, and disability studies. His corpus of published works is prolific and wide-ranging, including his award-winning books *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Duke 2003), *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Duke 2012), and *Diminished Faculties: A Political Phenomenology of Impairment* (Duke 2021), his field-defining edited volume *The Sound Studies Reader* (Routledge 2012), his co-edited volume *The Participatory Condition in the Digital Age* (Minnesota 2016), along with dozens of articles and book chapters.

As a person, Jonathan was larger than life. He was the absolute best and rarest of our kind, a brilliant, visionary thinker and towering figure of tremendous import, but without any ego or airs about him. He was charismatic and magnanimous, exuding boundless grace, warmth, and generosity of spirit, an inexhaustible intellectual curiosity, abundant joy and optimism, and a profound sense of community, integrity, and justice. Jonathan was a true beacon of wisdom and hope in a broken world and an oftentimes demoralizing profession. To be in Jonathan's midst was to feel at once inspired and at ease, to feel seen, heard, and valued as an equal, to feel a profound sense of belonging.

These exemplary qualities are shared by Carrie, his beloved spouse of thirty-five years and closest interlocutor. Together, Jonathan and Carrie welcomed people into their orbit and home with open arms, cultivating friendships and building community among a vast international network of like-minded scholars, activists, musicians, artists, and fellow cat-lovers. Side-by-side, Jonathan and Carrie advocated for justice, led with courage, care, and integrity, and lived a joyous life, instilling a profound desire among those who knew them to live up to those values.

Jonathan was utterly adored by his students and mentees. A foundational part of his teaching and mentorship centered on what Carrie described as his tremendous “ability to see and feel the full personhood of others... he ‘got’ people in all their specificity.” Jonathan embraced his PhD students just as we were, and celebrated and nurtured our uniqueness so that it might permeate our scholarship, teaching, and our individual ways of being in the profession. In an email he sent me after reading the third chapter of my dissertation, he wrote, “There’s great stuff in here. You just need to up the Jess-ness.” Each time he has helped me prepare for a job interview over the years, Jonathan’s final and most important piece of advice was always, “Have fun with it, and just be yourself!”

Jonathan saw possibilities in his mentees’ scholarship that they couldn’t have possibly discovered on their own and equipped them with the tools to develop that potential.

He regularly created meaningful professional opportunities for his mentees by leveraging his own prestige for their benefit. Jonathan once spontaneously called on me as “the expert in the room” during a Q&A for a panel he spoke on at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference in 2015, giving me, his PhD student, an opportunity to speak *in his place* to a room full of high-profile scholars about my work on music and disability. That was Jonathan’s way. Through his unwavering confidence in his mentees, he taught us to be imaginative and audacious, to practice intellectual risk taking, to take up space, to cultivate, step into, and inhabit our expertise as scholars. Jonathan routinely solicited our input as colleagues and collaborators, ultimately co-authoring numerous publications with his current and former graduate students as well as contributing work of his own to their edited volumes and special issues. Jonathan’s mentorship has been consequential for all those who have had the privilege of studying with him, and his commitment to our professional development and personal well-being has endured well beyond our time in graduate school, as he has carried us through triumph, trials, and setbacks alike.

A major part of Jonathan’s legacy is how he created new space for diverse ways of being in academia through his candor around the lived experience of disability and illness. In *Diminished Faculties* and in his blog, Jonathan wrote openly and generously from his vantage point as a cancer patient and disabled person as he navigated the evolving and unpredictable nature of his illness, all the while relishing in the wonders and joys of everyday life. Jonathan gave others the courage to be themselves, to resist, to foreground and lead with vulnerability, while building more accommodating, inclusive, and just worlds.

Jonathan continued to give so much of himself to others right up until his final days, and Carrie made so much space for friends and family to say their farewells in the midst of her own sadness and grief. As I sat at the foot of his bed and spoke the words of this tribute to him, I marveled at the way he radiated joy in spite of it

all, and the many poignant insights he shared with me that day, which I will forever cherish.

Jonathan was a precious gift. He shaped countless careers and lives through his research, teaching, mentorship, musicianship, and just by virtue of who he was as a person. I would not be who I am without him, as is the case with so many others. His legacy lives on in me and all the other scholars he has inspired and mentored, in our work, our classrooms, our students, in the relationships we cultivate with one another, our advocacy and leadership, and in the communities that we build. We will endeavor to live up to his shining example, and to pay it forward!