The Corona Diaries

written by Ian M. Cook
April, 2020

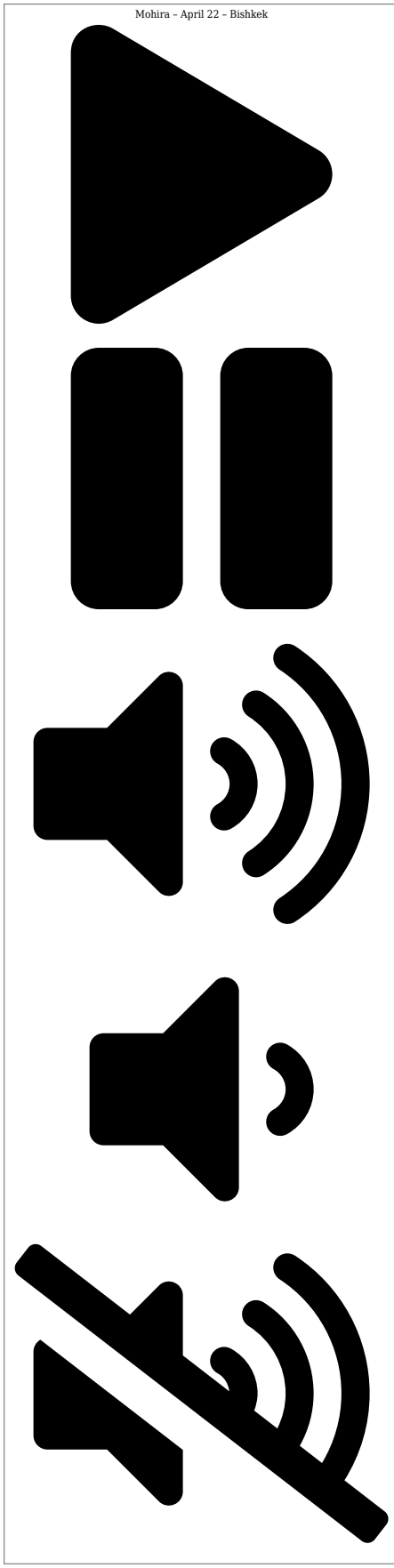
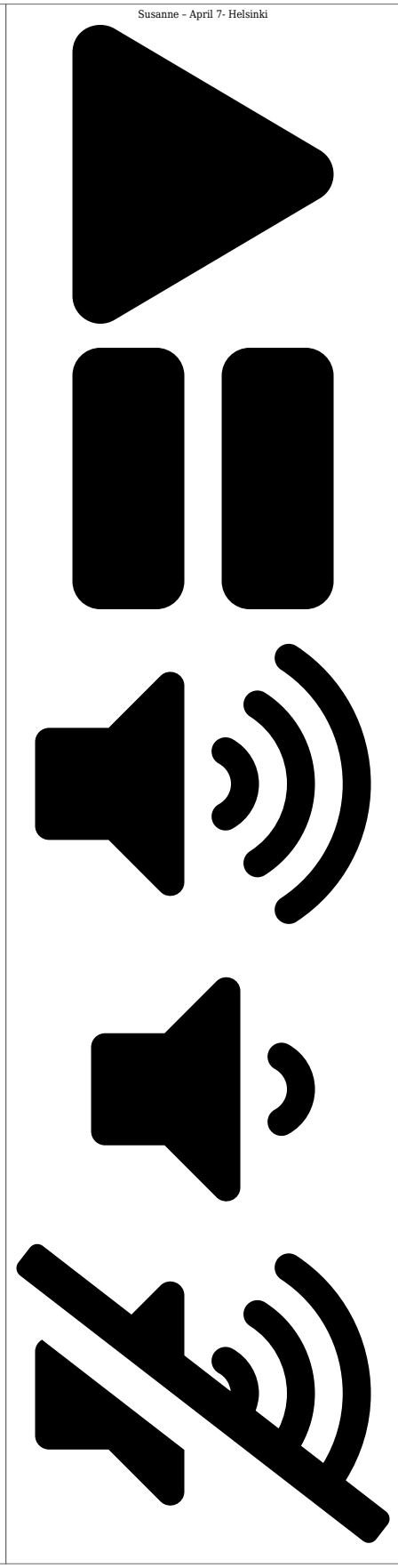
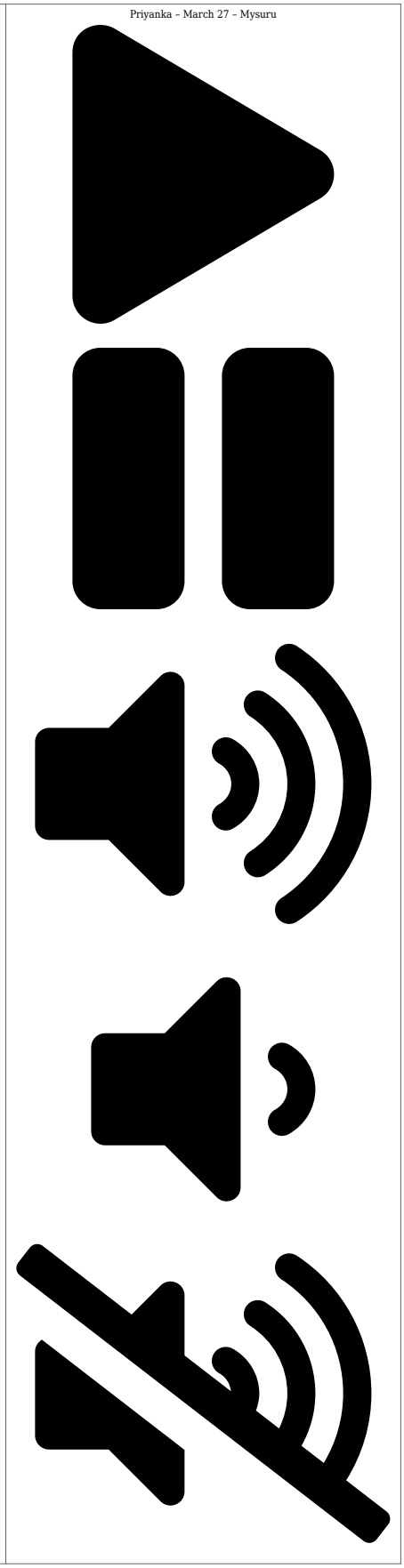
Welcome to The Corona Diaries from Allegra, first recorded in April 2020 as part of the Corona thematic thread.

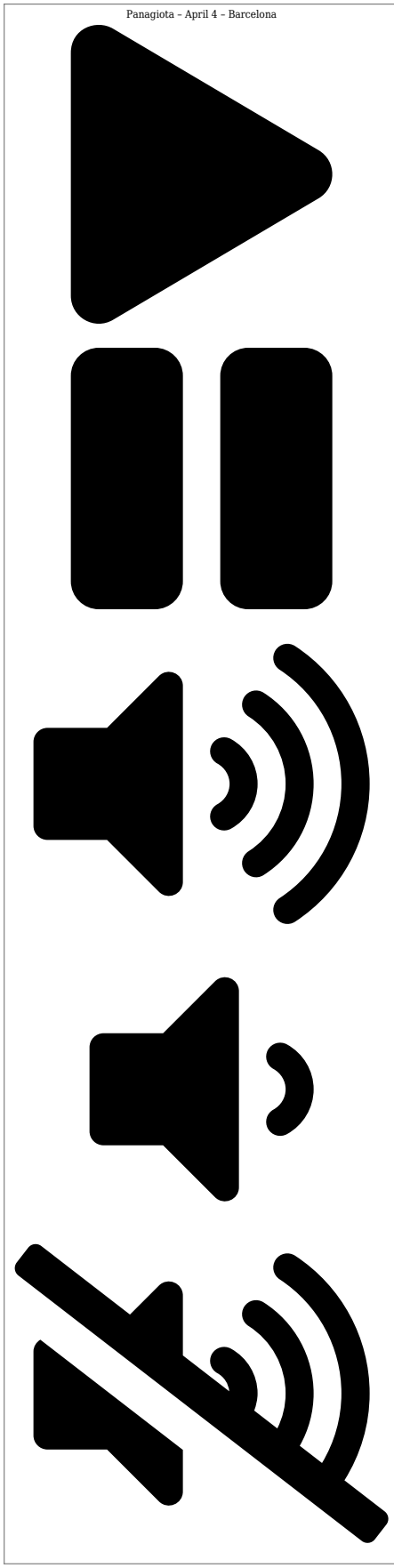
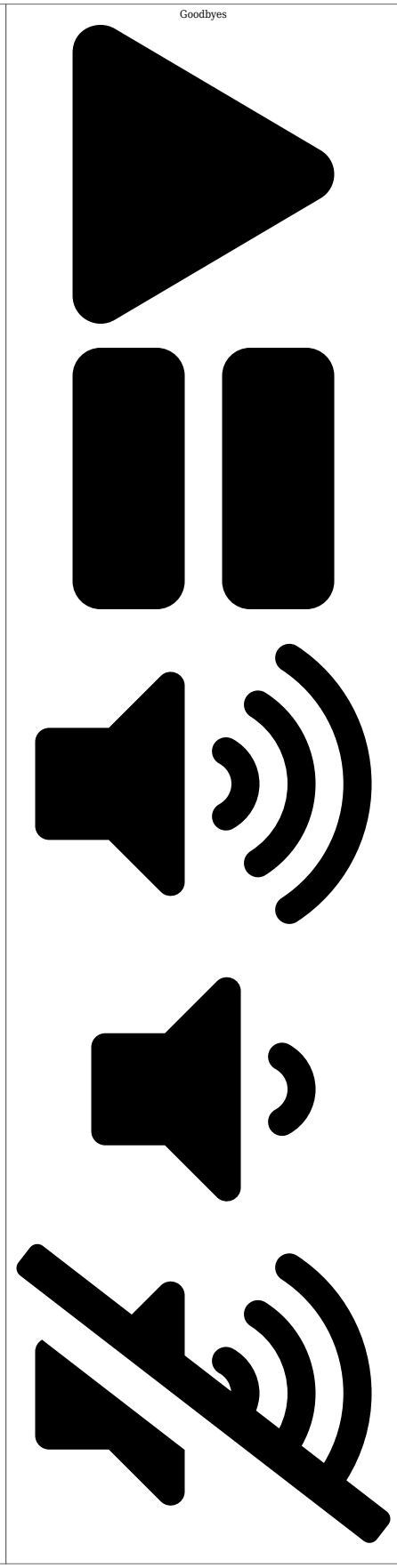
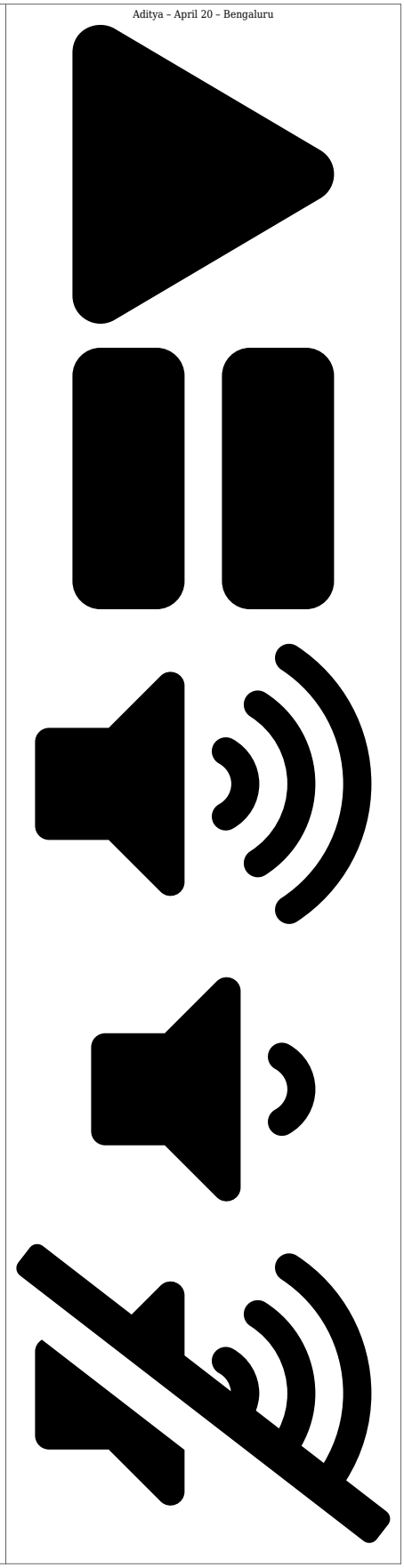
The diaries, published once a day, spoke to many of the same themes and topics that those writing for Allegra at the time were also concerned with. These included the pandemic-induced changing relationship to the city and its public spaces (Stallone 2020), overwork and under-appreciated invisible labour (Cook 2020), middle-class privilege during confinement (Blanco Esmoris 2020), the need to think about public good, social justice and solidarity in political terms (Billaud 2020) and how anthropologists and social scientists more generally can reimagine our research (Kiderlin, Hjalmarson, and Ruud 2020) and prudently assert our importance in public debate (Beyer 2020).

Now we offer up the diaries again, reimagined at the end of the year in a new format.

You can now play multiple audio files at once. Make your own meaning. Explore your own cacophony. Go on, try it.

(unless you're using a mobile phone, then it won't work well, sorry!)

Mohira – April 22 – Bishkek	Susanne – April 7- Helsinki	Priyanka – March 27 – Mysuru
		

Panagiota – April 4 – Barcelona	Goodbyes	Aditya – April 20 – Bengaluru
		

Nonlinear Diaries

As you can hear, in April 2020 people were speaking a lot about corona. I asked seven diarists – one per day of the week – to reflect on the following questions:

How do we socially and culturally adapt to isolation? How do we experience empty spaces? Are new forms of solidarity emerging? How does it feel to have to work in hospitals, assembly lines or shops when others stay at home? What new questions are we asking ourselves about our parenting and being a child? What new forms of exploitation emerge from the increased digitalisation of work? What new spaces of freedom have emerged? How can we understand social media's role in the pandemic? How are our modes of communication changing in general? What role does humour play in our new shared experience of an absurd situation without precedent?

It was quite intense, at least for me, to listen to these short but intense personal political performances each night before going to bed.

Wednesdays: Mohira Suyarkulova, Sociologist, Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic

Thursdays: Justin Spike, Journalist, Budapest, Hungary

Fridays: Priyanka Krishna, Urban Researcher, Mysuru, India

Saturdays: Panagiota Kotsila, Political Ecologist, Barcelona, Spain

Sundays: Tamara Buble, Public Education Executive Officer, Zagreb, Croatia

Mondays: Aditya, Content Developer, Bengaluru, India

Tuesdays: Susanne Ådahl, Medical Anthropologist, Helsinki, Finland

I thought the method of audio diaries would offer richness and depth in real time,

capturing diarists own narratives about their own experiences, and opening avenues to unexpected data (Bernays, Rhodes, and Jankovic Terzic 2014), and for the most part this was the case(1).

Though I called them 'audio diaries', some of the diarists and listeners preferred to refer to them as 'podcasts', which they certainly began to feel like when integrated into digital podcasting infrastructures like Apple Podcasts, Spotify and SoundCloud. However, these platforms made it impossible for our Kyrgyz Republic based diarist, Mohira Suyarkulova, to listen as all platforms were prohibited where she lived.

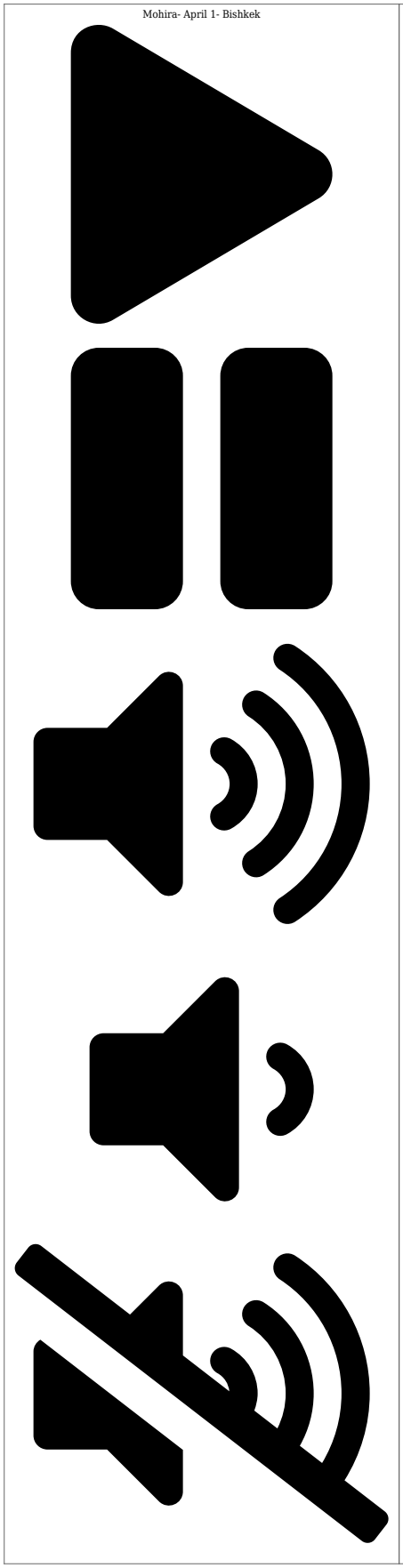
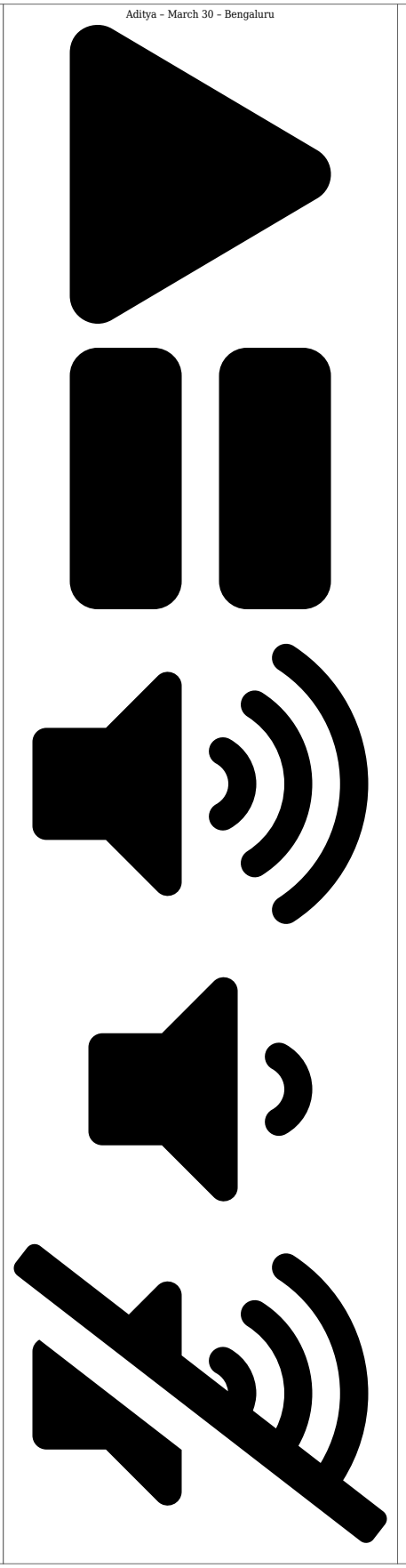
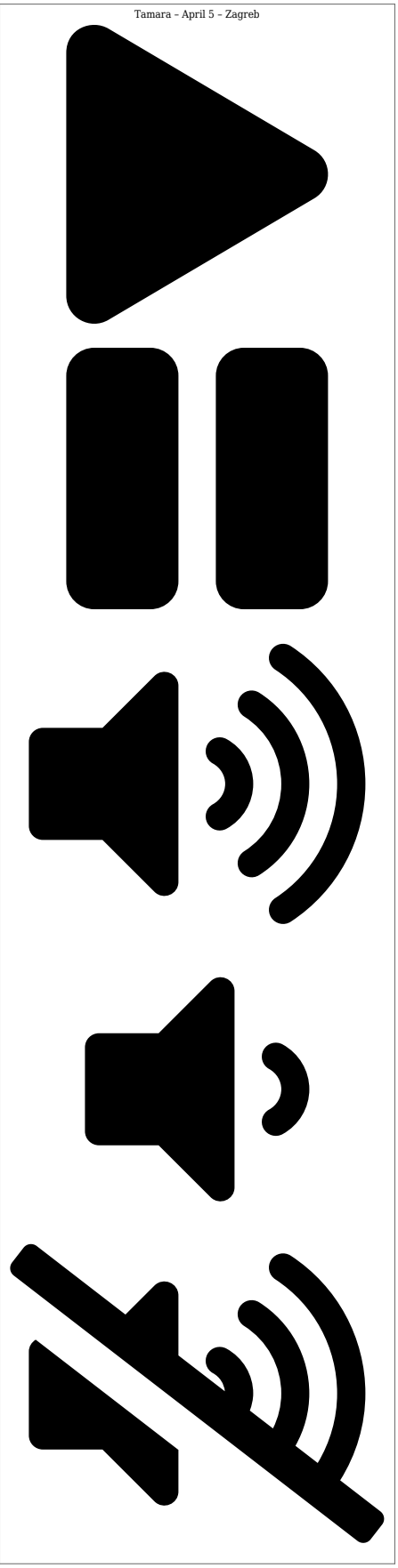
This compelled us to think we should upload them directly to the Allegra site.

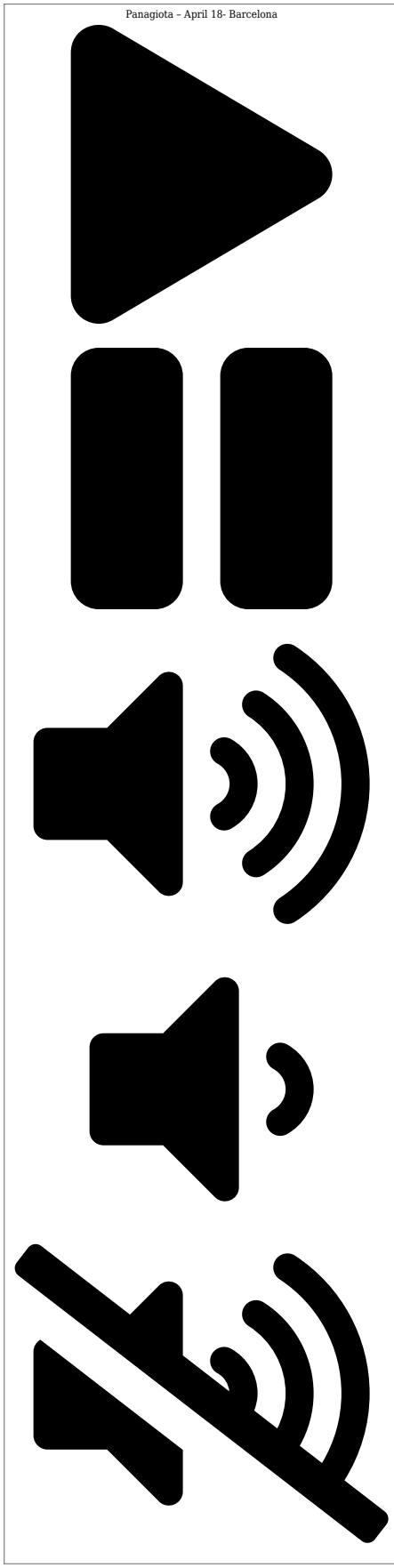
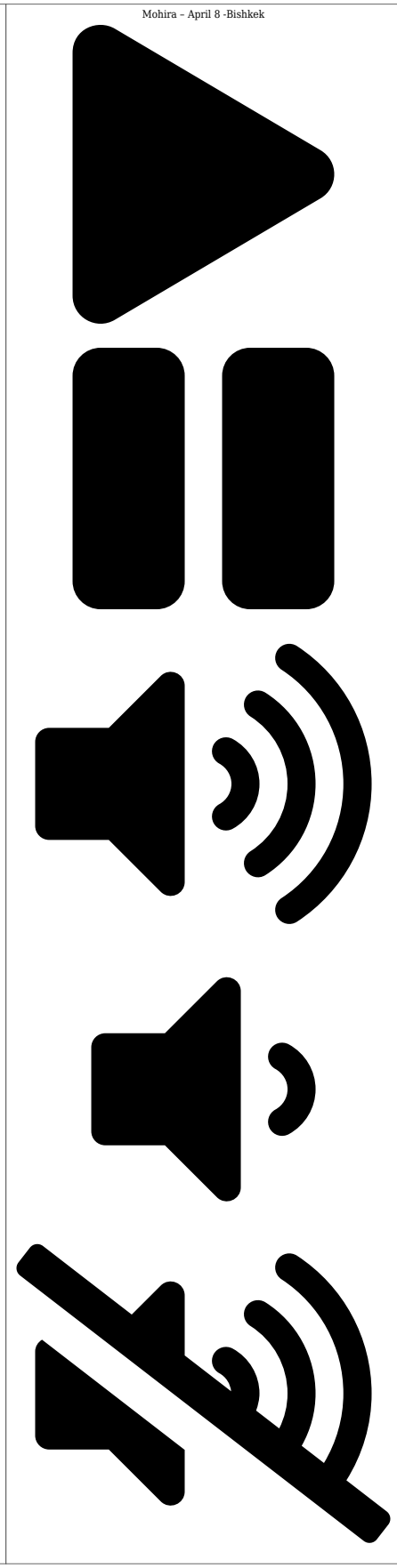
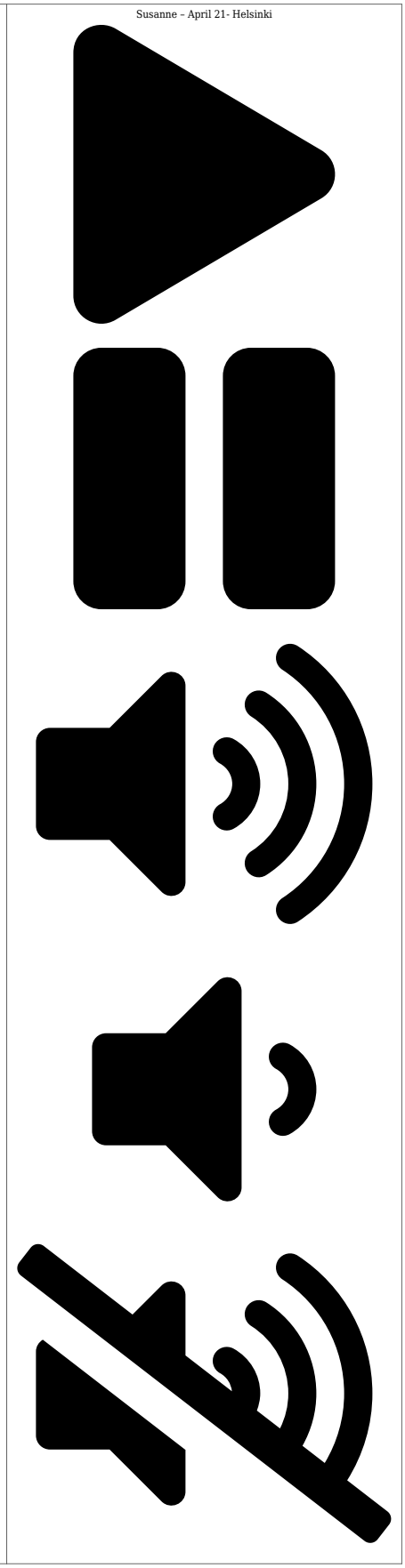
However, now it no longer made sense to follow the traditional serial logic of podcasting. It worked well at the time as it allowed listeners to follow the daily changing updates in the lives of our diarists, with listeners receiving the audio files directly to their phone through RSS feeds. Eight months on, however, we are no longer bound by the need for linearity or timeliness.

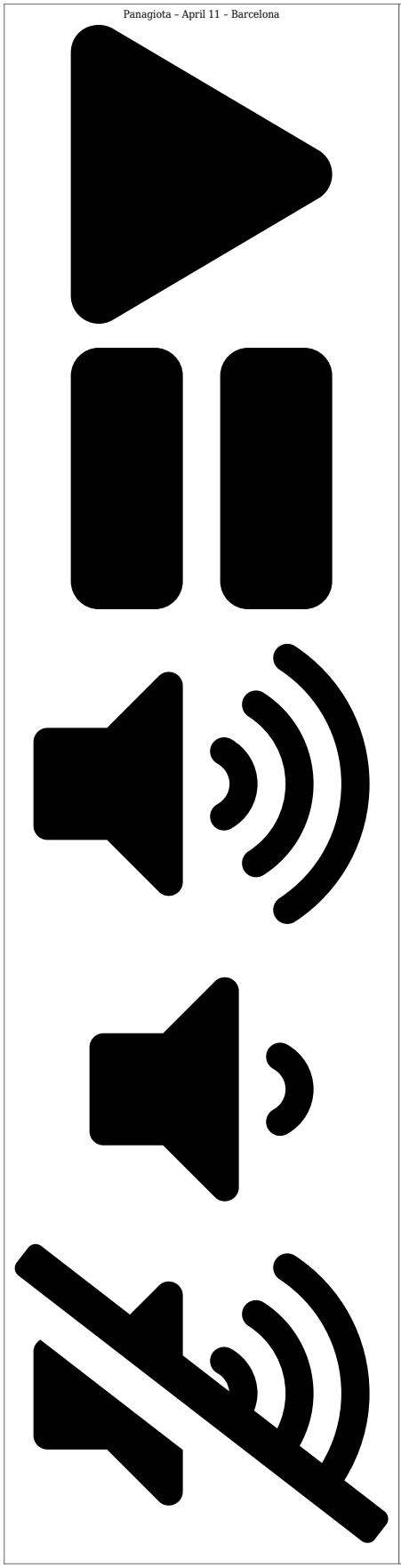
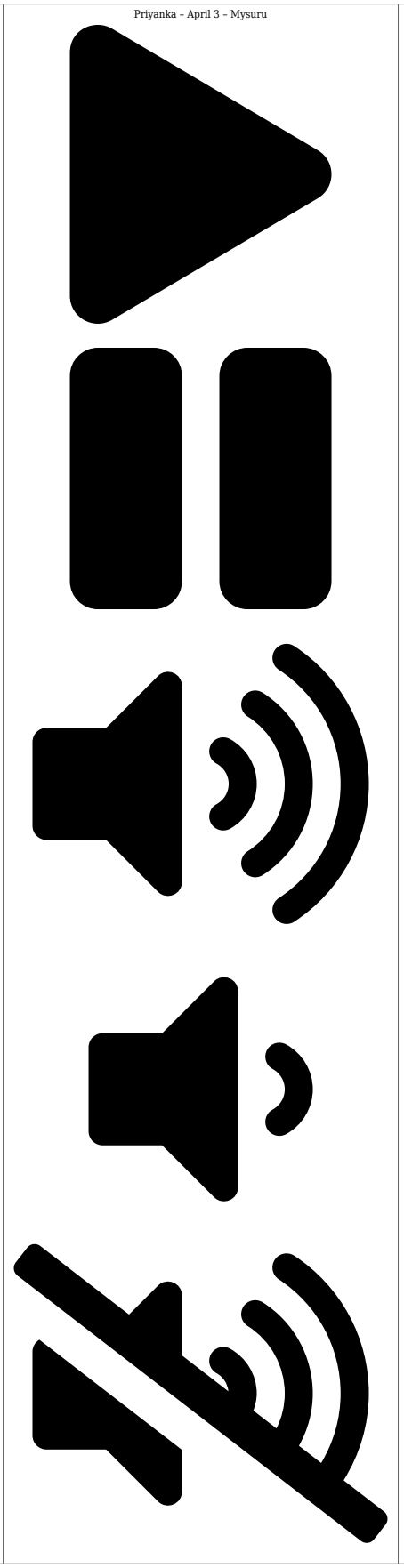
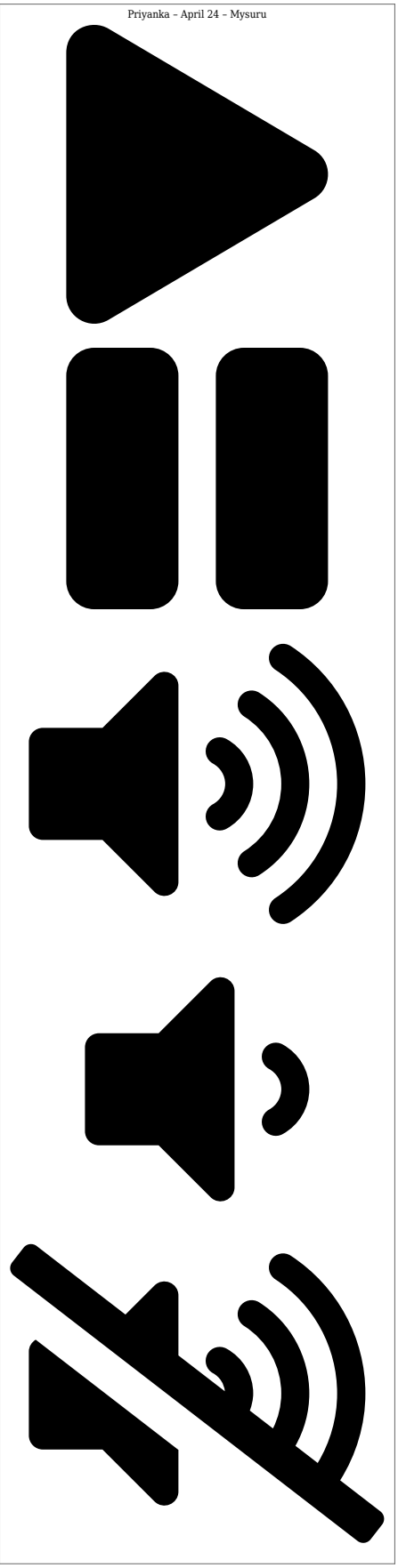
As such, whereas The Corona Diaries was originally 'an exploratory, curated academic project' similar to other pandemic audio projects, such as City Road's brilliant 'Listen to the City in a Global Pandemic' (see: Rogers et al. 2020) it can now become something else; be given a new lease of life.

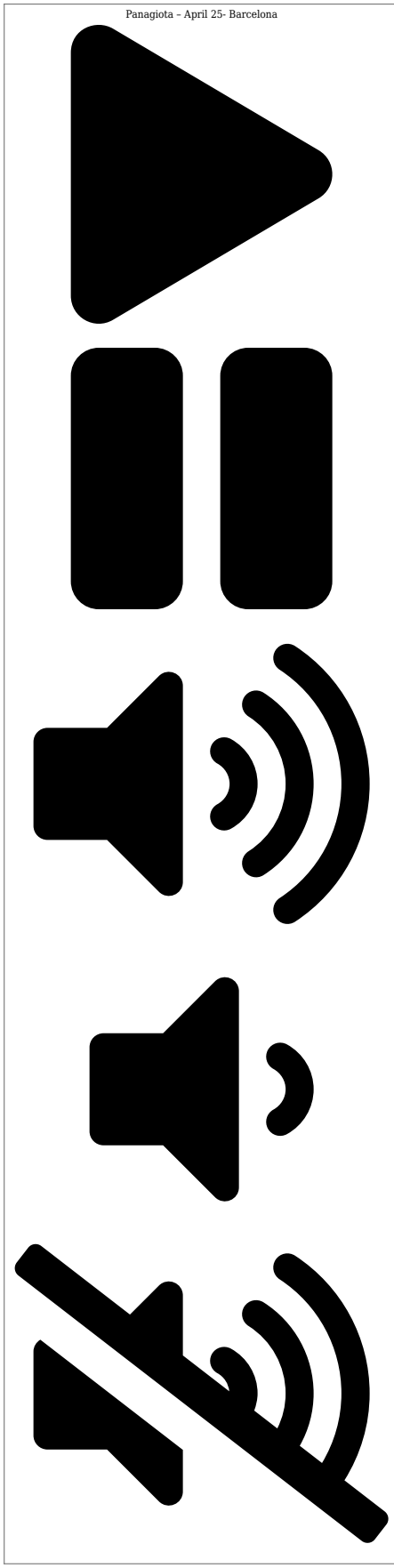
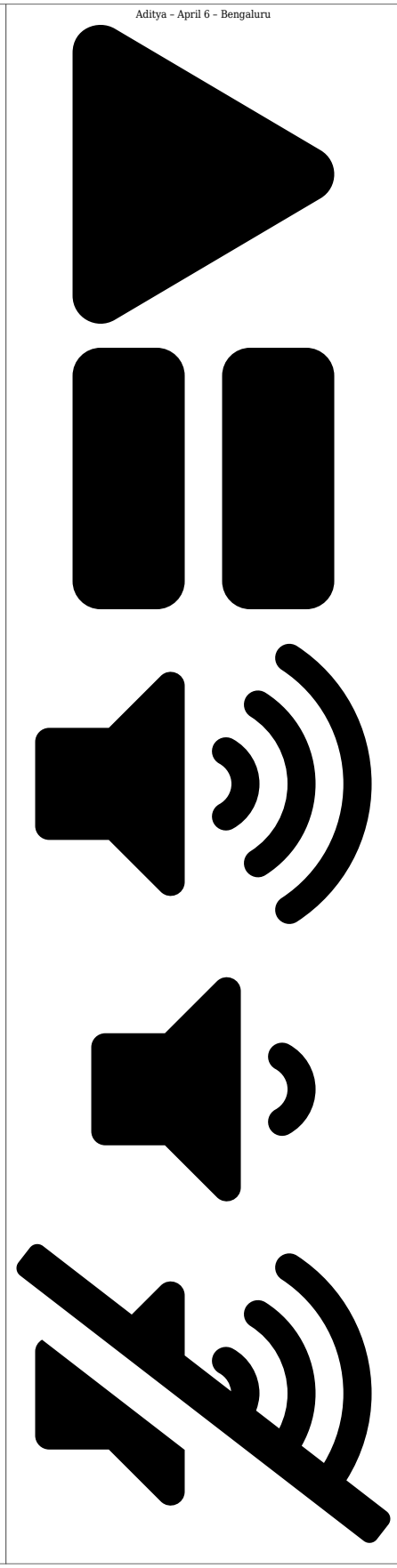
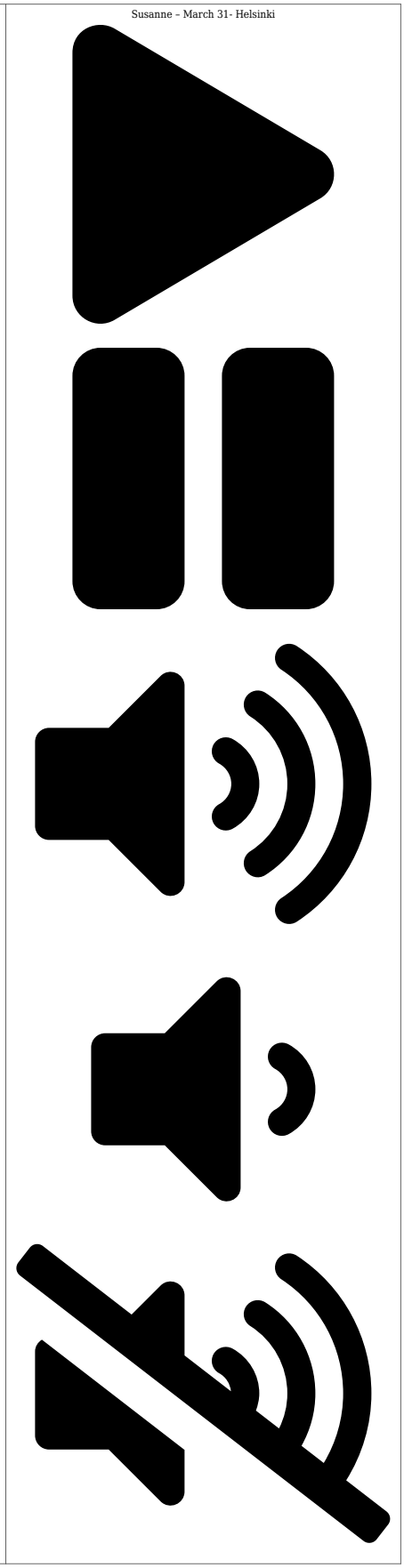
Inspired by multimodal anthropologists' call to create multisensorial, performative and inventive anthropological knowledge rather than only that which is textual, representative and descriptive (Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamón 2019), this reimagined corona diaries is noisy and messy. It allows the user to navigate their way through the five entries by each of the seven voices. In this sense, it embraces multimodal anthropology's potential to create an 'entanglement' –"an adventure, a desire line through a data … [that] calls to mind excitement, risk, confusion and matters of the heart." (Nolas and Varvantakis 2018, 2).

More directly, I ~~stole~~ borrowed the idea from Claudiu Cobilanschi, a Romanian artist who did something very similar with Ceaușescu's speeches (sadly no longer online).

Mohira- April 1- Bishkek	Aditya – March 30 – Bengaluru	Tamara – April 5 – Zagreb
		

Panagiota – April 18- Barcelona	Mohira – April 8 -Bishkek	Susanne – April 21- Helsinki
		

Panagiota – April 11 – Barcelona	Priyanka – April 3 – Mysuru	Priyanka – April 24 – Mysuru
		

Panagiota – April 25- Barcelona	Aditya – April 6 – Bengaluru	Susanne – March 31- Helsinki
		

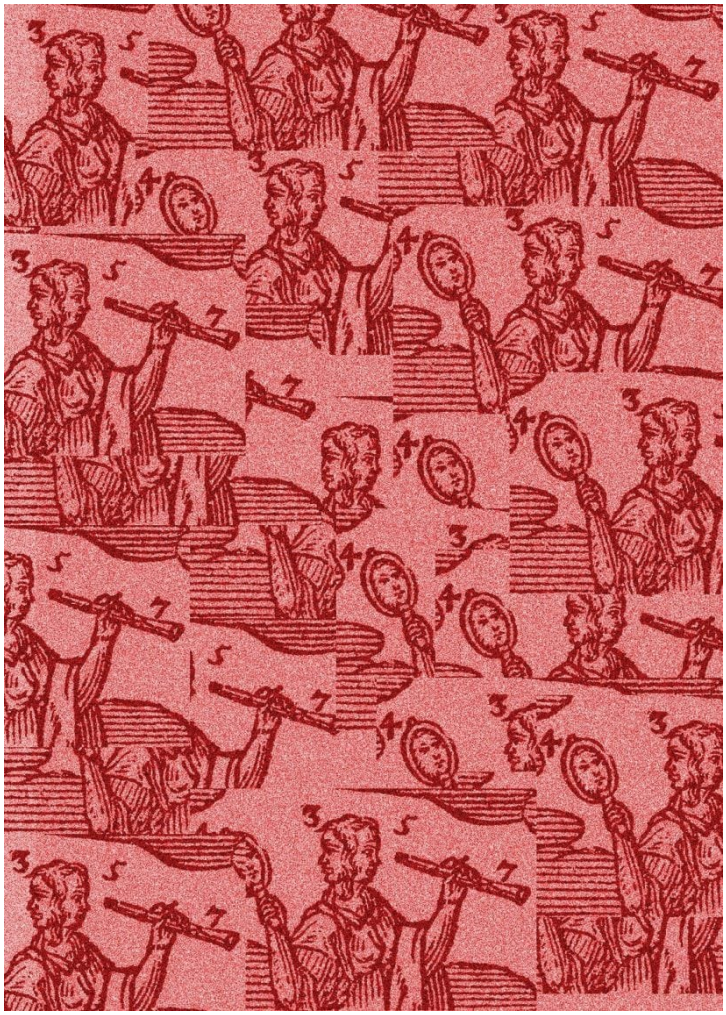
Online Auscultation

More than half a year on from the original diaries, we're still speaking about corona, although in a different tone. Maybe a bit more tired, a lot sadder, and slightly more sceptically hopeful. But are we also listening differently?

Back in Spring 2020, the podcast Das Corona Virus from Norddeutscher Rundfunk with virologist Christian Drosten became a hit in the German speaking world. It was suggested that its popularity lay in people being able to get reliable updates about the virus direct from a scientist (Schmitz 2020).

Subscribing to this type of podcast is to engage in a listening practice that seeks to hone in on a particular type of 'expertise', whilst cutting out the surrounding noise (from traditional media, armchair experts on social media and politicians). This digitally-enabled listening is different from the listening we do when we hear experts' rushed soundbites on the radio: it's more concentrated and selective from the listener's side.

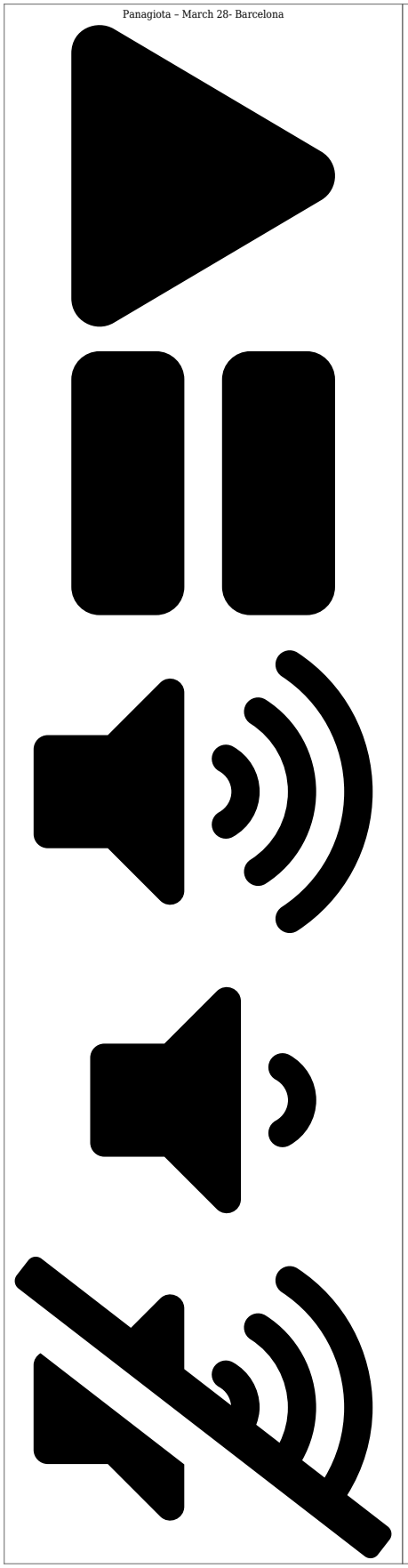
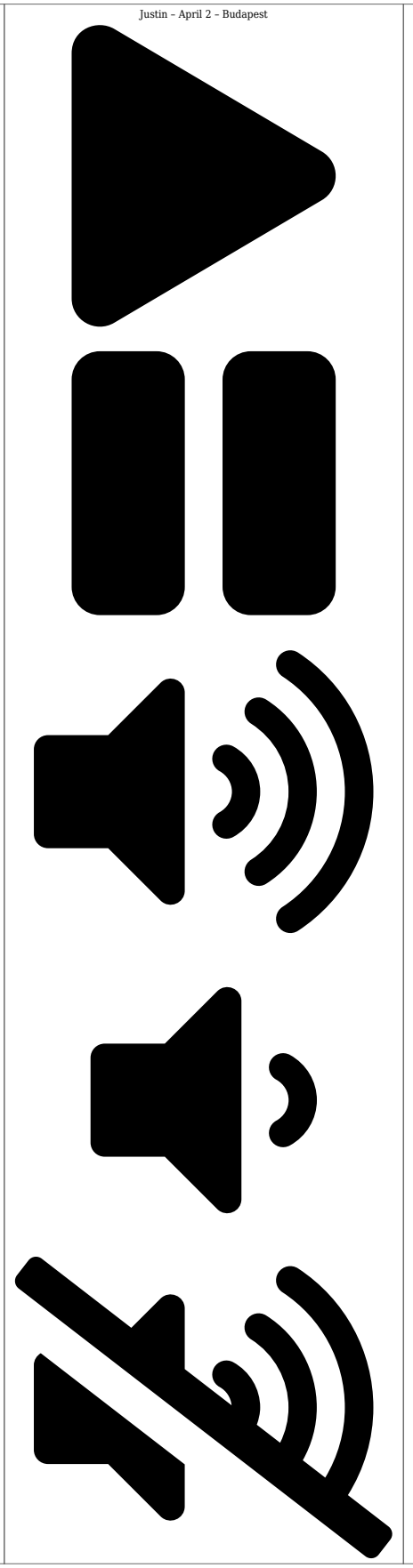
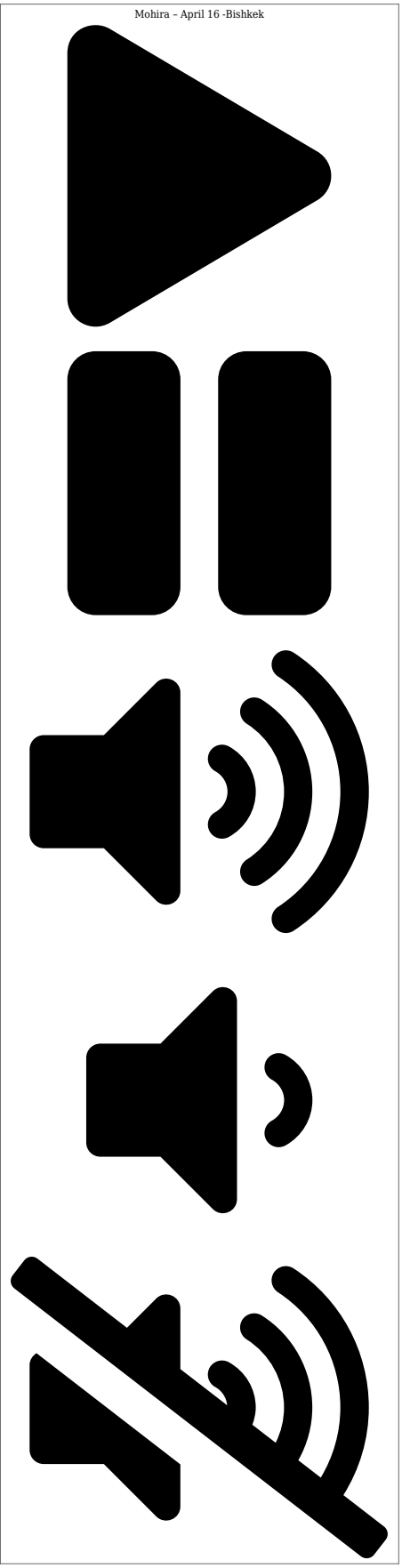
Such new ways of listening develop alongside the emergence of new auditory technologies, in this case RSS feeds and smartphones. Such listening practices change in relation to the affordances offered by these technological changes, but also in relation to the cultural and historical contexts from within which they emerge, including any auditory predispositions (Rice 2015).

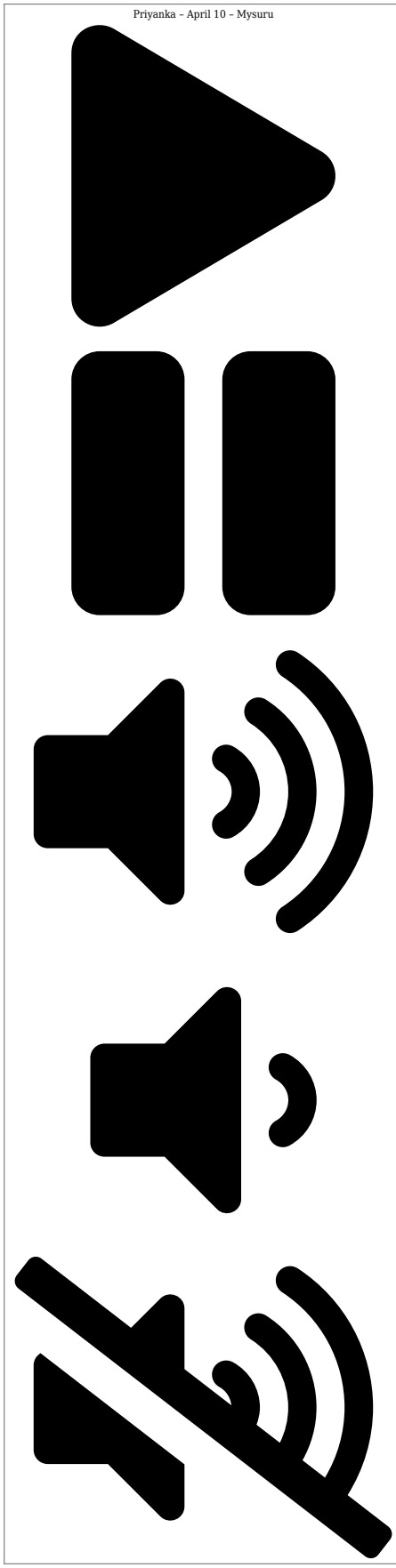
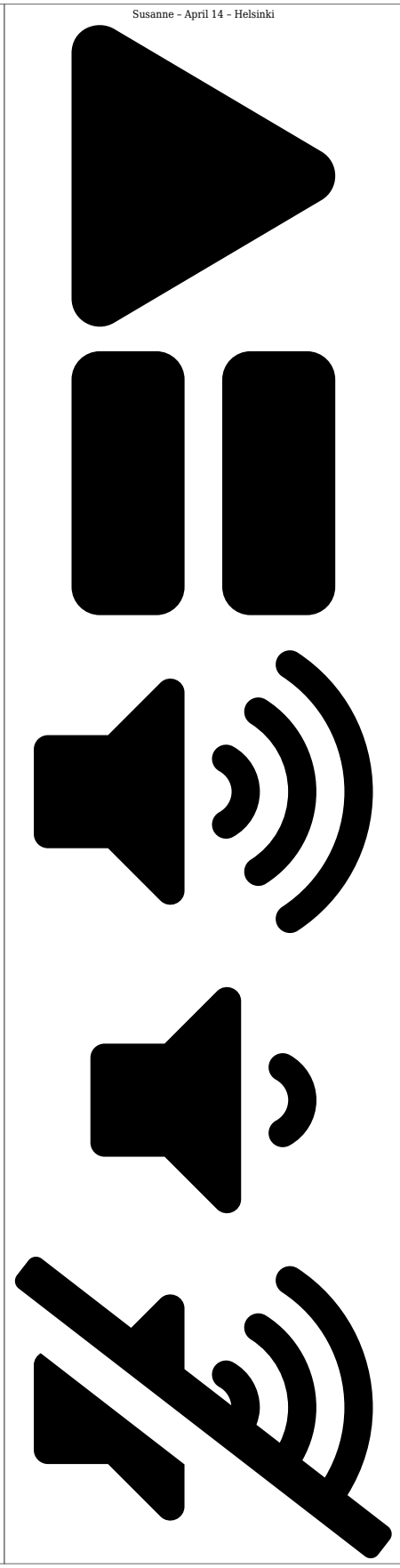


Listening, formed through the intersection of technology and culture, can also be diagnostic. Think of how doctors practice auscultation – listening to the internal sounds of the body, such as the lungs using the stethoscope. As Tom Rice (*ibid*) argues, such listening practices are key to the production of medical knowledge, but can also destabilise it. Moreover, as he shows through hospital-based ethnography, such modes of listening require both a proximity and detachment. Doctors need to get close to and touch the patient but are also separated by both the instrument they listen through and the need for detached state of mind.

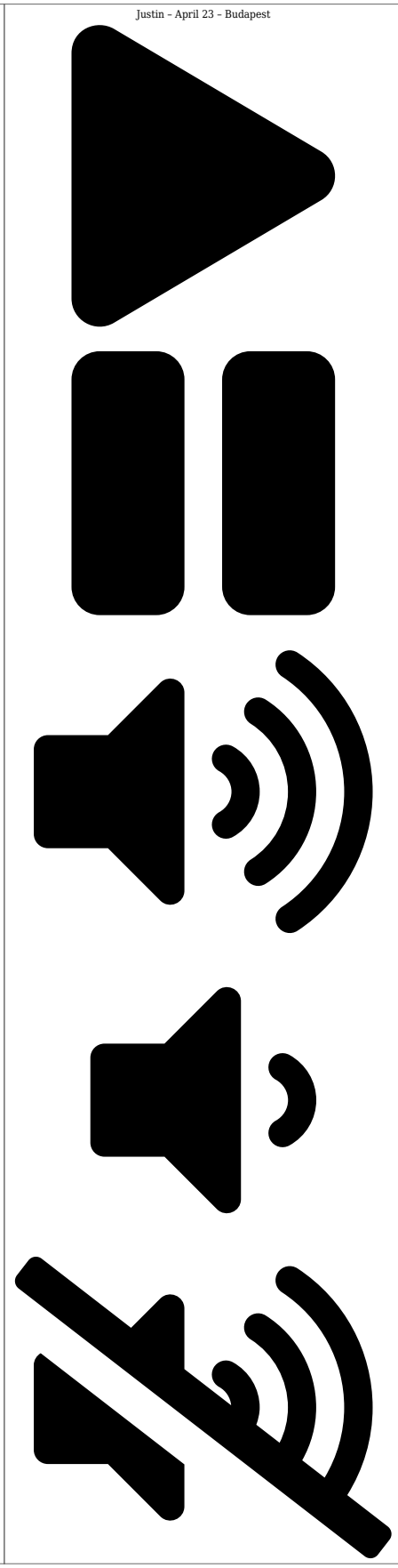
I was reminded of this near-far dialectic when thinking about what type of listening takes place when we subscribe to updates about a deadly global pandemic by someone like virologist Christian Drosten. Listeners to such podcasts make an active choice to subscribe to reliable sober detached updates that are at

the same time delivered through the proximate intimacy of the podcasting medium (Llinares, Fox, and Berry 2018; Spinelli and Dann 2019); they allow voices into their head, which are transduced by the technological apparatus of the headphones.

Panagiota – March 28- Barcelona	Justin – April 2 – Budapest	Mohira – April 16 -Bishkek
		

Priyanka – April 10 – Mysuru	Susanne – April 14 – Helsinki	Tamara – April 12 – Zagreb
		

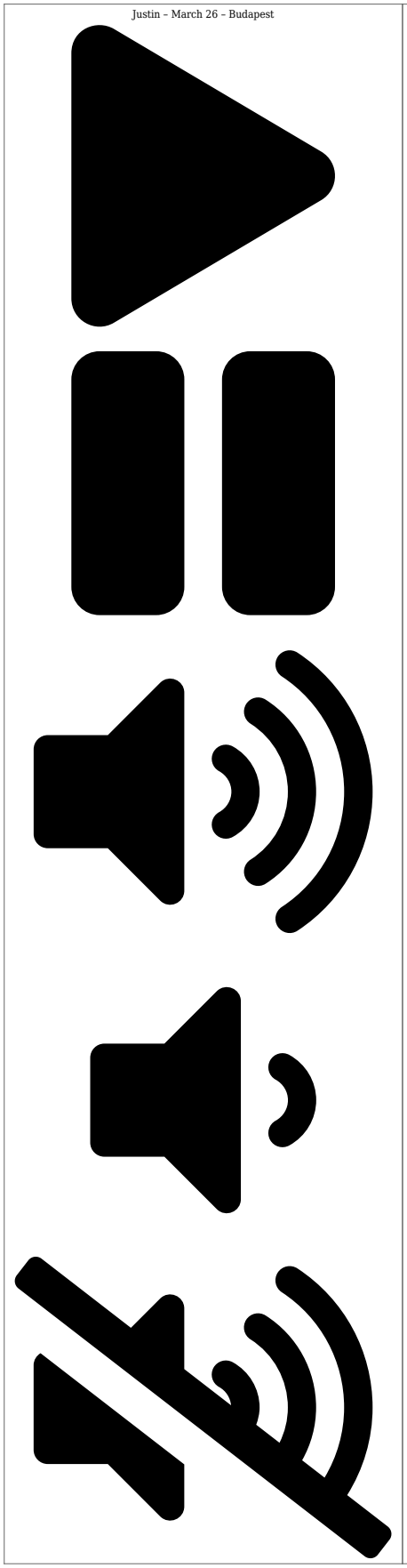
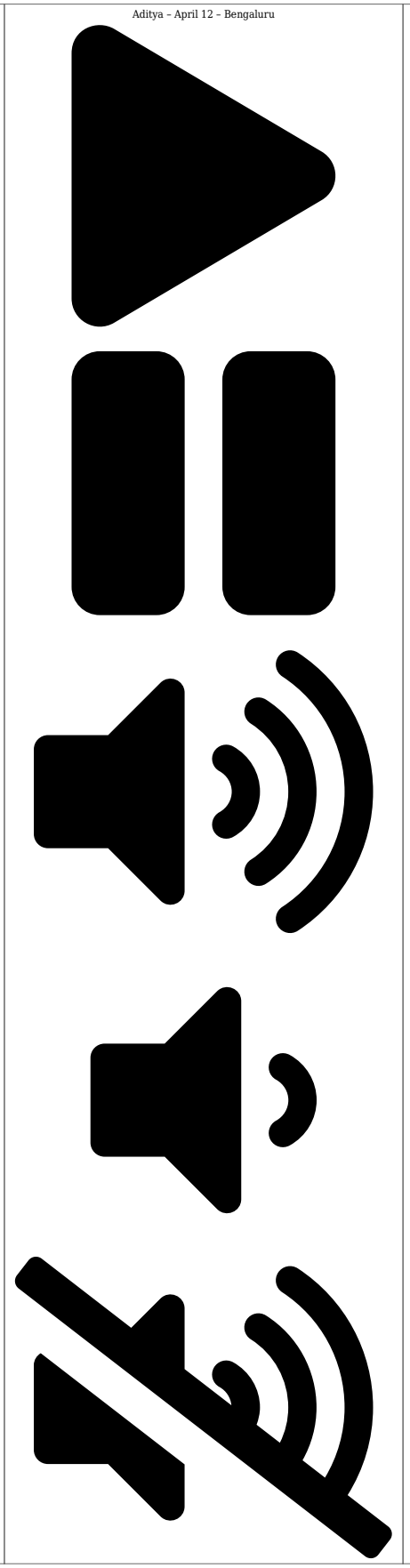
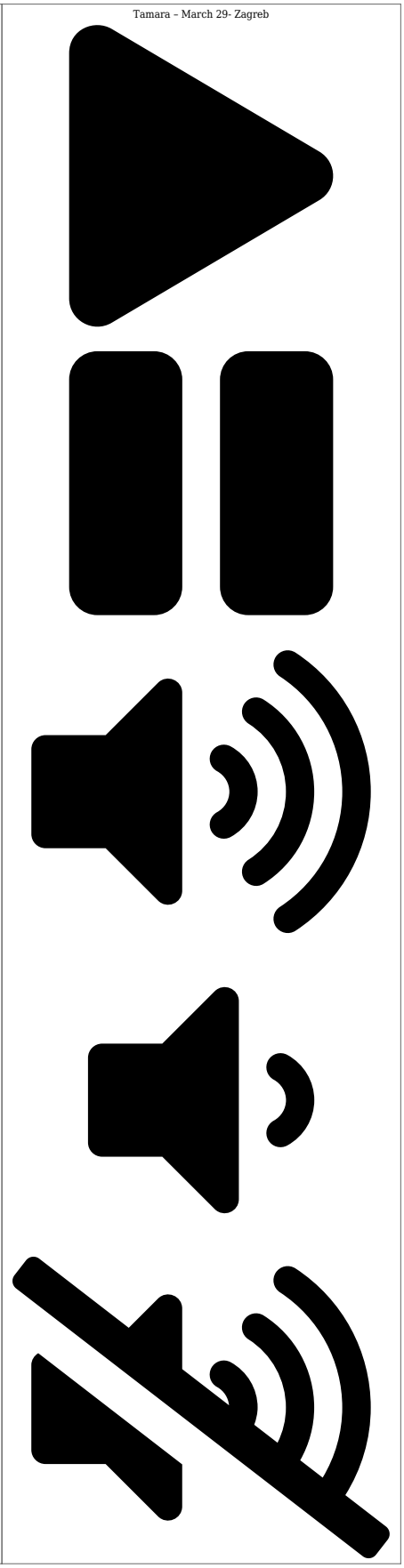
Justin – April 23 – Budapest

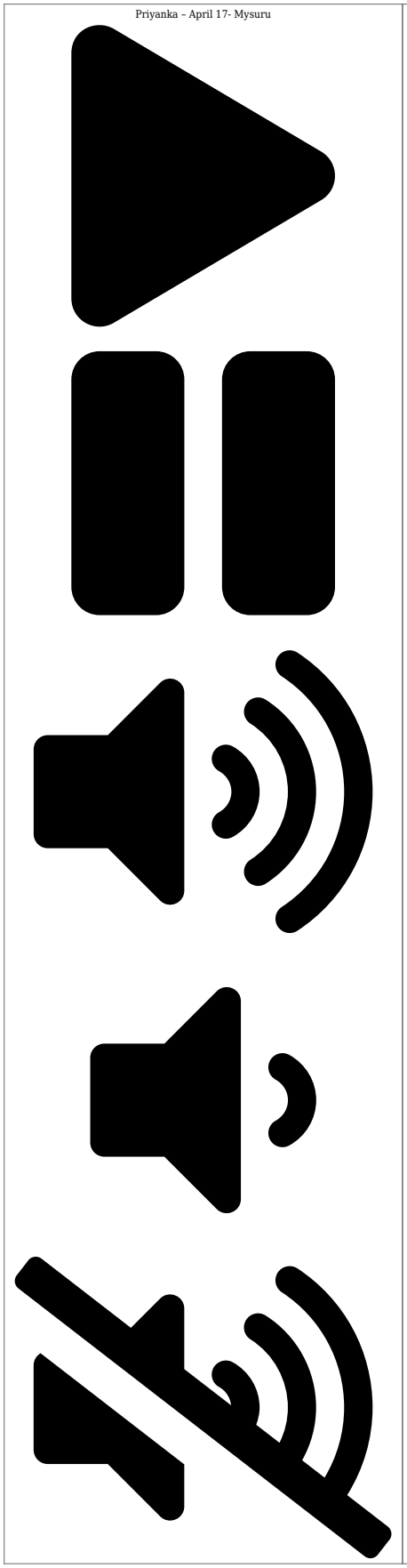
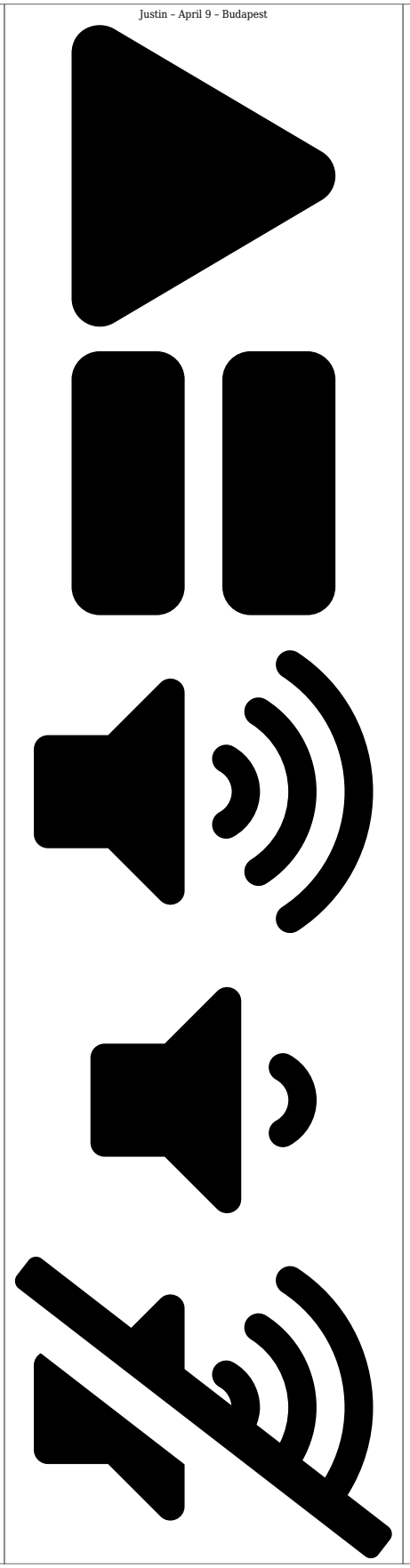
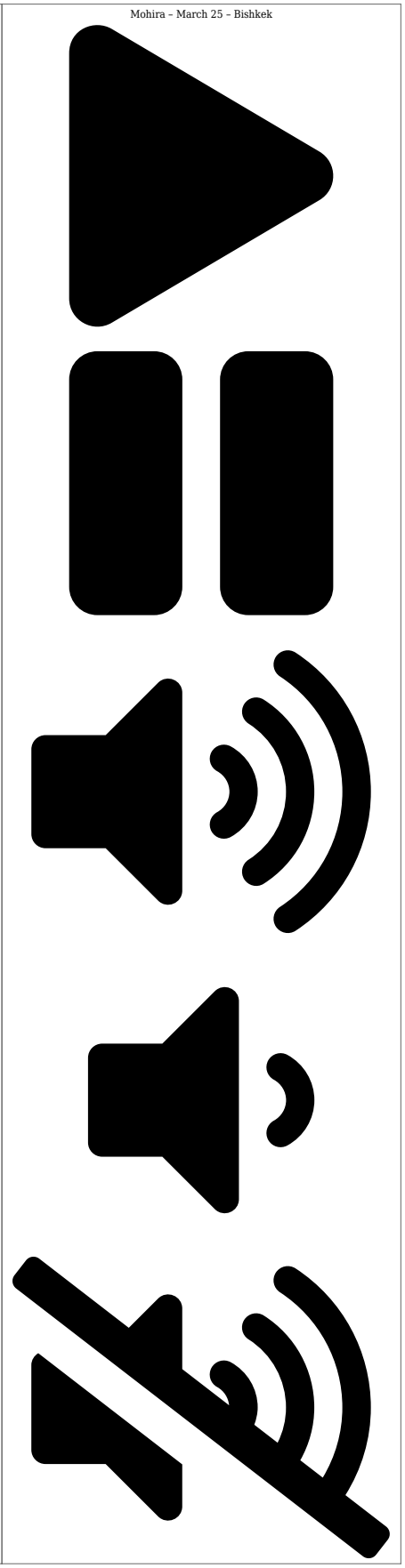


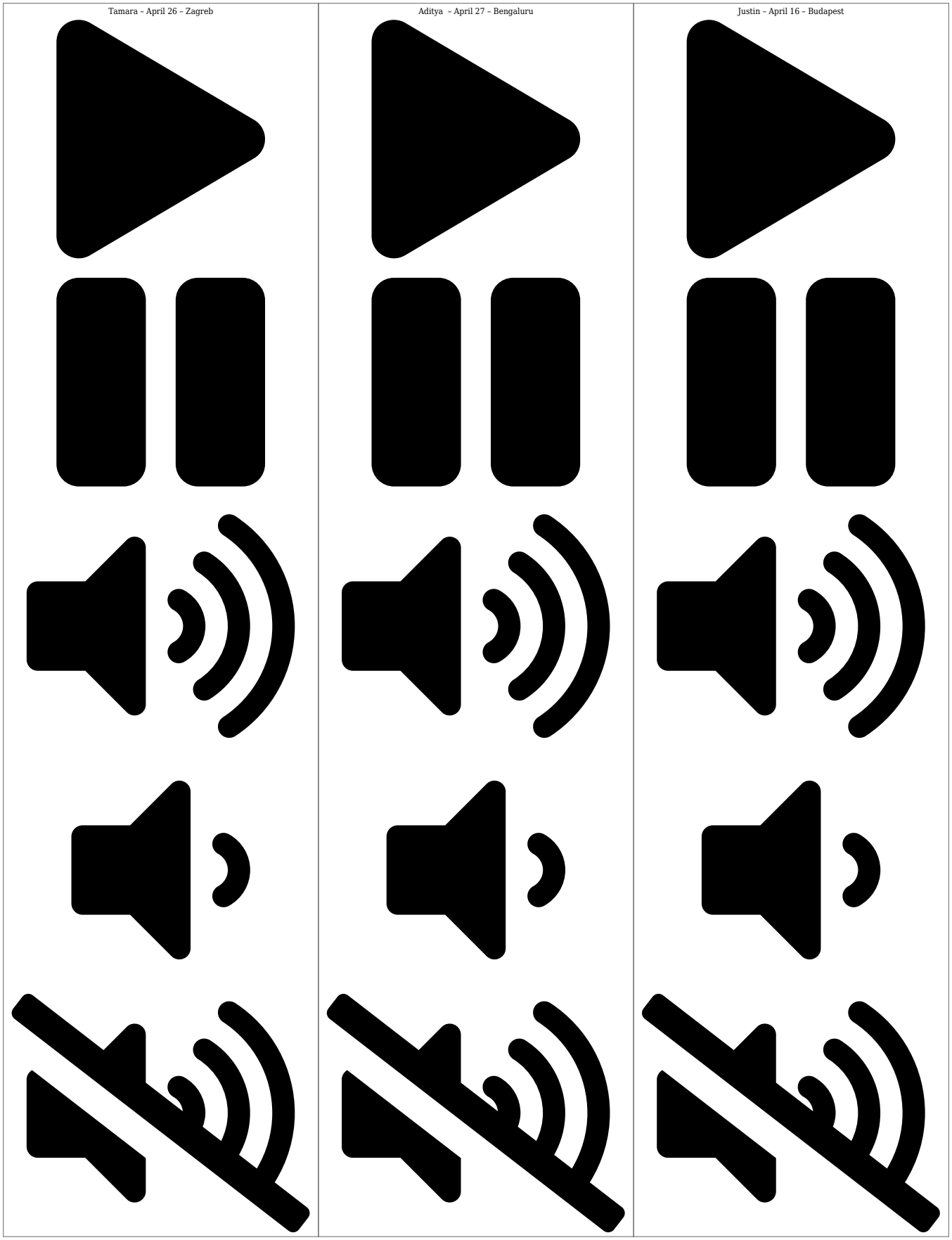
Cacophonic Meaning-Making

The audio diaries rearranged here aim to engender a different sort of listening. One that invites listening with an added layer of agency. Not only a ‘listening to’ the audio diaries, nor only a ‘listening in’ to the lives of the diarists, but also a type of ‘listening for’ – a ‘listening for’ in which listeners can make their own meaning through digitally-enabled combinations of voices recorded at different moments during the first suffocating lockdown.

Stop making sense. Start making noise.

Justin – March 26 – Budapest	Aditya – April 12 – Bengaluru	Tamara – March 29- Zagreb
		

Priyanka – April 17- Mysuru	Justin – April 9 – Budapest	Mohira – March 25 – Bishkek
		

Tamara – April 26 – Zagreb	Aditya – April 27 – Bengaluru	Justin – April 16 – Budapest
		

Concept & text by Ian M. Cook

Many thanks to the amazing technical assistance from Emilie Thévenoz & Sara Jormakka

Review

Would you like to review The Corona Diaries? We are currently soliciting open post-publication reviews. We are also happy to receive reviews of this piece. Please contact judithb@allegralaboratory.net for more information.

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(1) We did not expect being a diarist for Allegra to be inherently empowering (Jones et al. 2015), and recognised issues around confidentiality and oversharing (Williamson et al. 2015), but as the 'goodbye' entries revealed, the diarists found making the diaries a positive experience, even if, for some, it became another task to do within increasingly messy schedules.

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