LISTENING OVERLOOKED

AN AUDIT OF LISTENING AS A CATEGORY IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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Abstract

This article suggests how listening might be re-thought as foundational to theories of the public sphere and the forms of communication that take place in public. Listening, as a communicative and participatory act, is necessarily political but political theory tends to concentrate on the rights and responsibilities of speech and expression. Attending to the rights and responsibilities of those listening opens up surprisingly far-reaching speculations about the guarantee of plurality and offers a powerful conceptual corrective to communication models based on an idealised dialogic encounter. The analytical separation of "listening out" - an attentive and anticipatory communicative disposition – from "listening in" – a receptive and mediatised communicative action – opens up a space to consider mediated listening as an activity with political resonance. Rethinking audiences as listening publics, offers productive new ways to address the politics, ethics and experience of political communication and public life.

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Introduction

This article has two ambitions: first, to suggest how listening might be re-thought as foundational to theories of the public sphere and the forms of communication that take place in public; and second, to argue for listening to become a critical category in thinking about media and publics in general. Listening, as a communicative and participatory act, is necessarily and inescapably political and – while it would be absurd to claim listening as a self-sufficient political activity – the premise of this article is that attending to listening as a constituent part of the democratic process opens up new ways of thinking about the modern mediated public sphere. Whereas political theory has concentrated on the rights and responsibilities of speech and expression, the contention here is that we also need to examine the rights and responsibilities of those listening. This apparently simple switch of focus opens up surprisingly far-reaching speculations about the guarantee of plurality and a powerful conceptual corrective to nostalgic communication models based on idealised notions of the face-to-face dialogic encounter. In short, the liveness, embodiedness and intersubjectivity of the act of listening make it a hugely productive category for re-thinking mediated publics. In other words, beginning from a perspective that takes listening seriously usefully recasts some of the most fundamental tenets of political and communication theory.

"Listening" has undeniably entered the language of everyday contemporary politics. Politicians, particularly when on the backfoot, pledge to "listen" to the people, and participate in "listening projects" and "big conversations." In an attempt to re-engage a disaffected electorate, the political classes are keen not to appear to be talking *at* the voters, but listening *to* them. Whether or not this shift is more than merely semantic, it can be seen as symptomatic of a broader shift away from conventional hierarchical models of communication towards an embrace of more participative, interactive models that are based not only – nor even necessarily primarily – in the enhanced interactivity of new media, but rather in the slow but insistent expansion of new and more personalised forms of political discourse and expression (Coleman 2005, 275). But I would go further, and suggest that the new emphasis on the politics of listening, rather than marking a bold new departure, actually serves to draw attention to the neglected role that listening has always played in the public sphere, both as an embodied activity and as a metaphor for an interactive politics and communication.

Nevertheless, it is certainly the case that the act of listening has been neglected and under-theorised in studies of the media, particularly in comparison with the other acts of reception such as reading or spectatorship.[1] Indeed, to call listening an "act" is already to resist the widespread association of listening with passivity. This is beginning to be redressed with the recent surge of interest in sound and audio cultures, but still most treatments of listening within media and cultural studies tend to privilege the action of listening *in* to something, to use the telling phrase adopted in the early years of radio. "Listening" in such formulations has traditionally been relatively unproblematised, presented as a more or less natural mode of reception of messages in sound. The act of listening, reduced to little more than simple exposure to sound recordings and broadcasts, has the advantage of being easily describable and, more to the point, measurable. Listening, then, conceived of

as listening *in,* has been ripe for commodification and exchange by media industries, albeit effectively disguised within the catch-all term, "audience."

Meanwhile, although the activity of audiences has long since been acknowledged in terms of how people select and "read" the media texts they encounter, almost all studies centre on the television viewer, the film spectator or the reader of magazines, romances, newspapers and web pages. There are astonishingly few studies of contemporary audiences as *listeners,* except as listeners to music. And even where listening is recognised as active, there is rarely anything said about the potential forms and consequences of that activity as a socio-political phenomenon. In the burgeoning literature on auditory culture, for example, the apperception of sound tends to be examined at the level of intimate, individual experience, skill or taste, most often in the realm of interpersonal or professional communication.

The challenge, I would suggest then, is not just to think these different aspects of listening together – the mediated and the sensory – but also to address the *public* aspect of listening, an aspect which has as much to do with listening *out*, as listening *in*. Listening from this perspective is conceived as a form of radical openness, literally *Öffentlichkeit* – the German term famously translated as "the public sphere." I want to argue that the analytical separation of "listening out" – an attentive and anticipatory communicative disposition – from "listening in" – a receptive and mediatised communicative action, can open up a space to consider mediated listening as an activity with political resonance. In so doing, I will argue that, just as the term "audience" has been appropriated in relation to visual as well as audio media, so "listening" becomes an appropriate term for engagement with all media in the public sphere.

Listening and Political Action

Listening has been similarly almost entirely neglected in political theorising, or at least has received very little sustained attention. However, the listening relation is often present, albeit *sotto voce.* The act of listening can be construed, for example, as a pre-condition for political action. In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt contrasts the *vita activa* – the realm in which human labour, work and political *action* takes place – with the *vita contemplativa*, the realm of thought and contemplation that is separate and free from material needs and desires. In the tradition of Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas, Arendt concurs that the *vita contemplativa* requires peace and quiet, although she resists the classical privileging of the contemplative life over the life of action (Arendt 1958, 17). In the classical and Christian traditions, absolute quiet was required for the contemplation of Truth and the eternal. For both Aristotle and Aquinas, contemplation required the subordination and exclusion of all bodily movement, sensations and cravings of the flesh – and isolation from the *noise* of the world, both literally and metaphorically. Philosophers and writers might still recognise this kind of withdrawal. In his recent philosophical treatise on listening, for example, Jean-Luc Nancy suggests that the philosopher is someone, "who cannot listen, or who, more precisely, neutralises listening within himself, so that he can philosophise" (Nancy 2007, 1). If the contemplative life requires closing one's ears to the noise of the world, then it follows that the active life is one in which activity is defined by being open to listen to the world and engage with it. Listening, then, perhaps counter-intuitively, is at the heart of what it means to be *in* the world, to be active, to be political.

The Public Sphere as Auditorium

If political action is bound up with listening in the world, then it might make sense to think about the public sphere as an auditorium, a space in which the political is, literally, sounded out.

Although the notion of the public sphere is no longer exclusively associated with the model that Habermas (1990) set out, it is nevertheless, thanks to a creative translation of his term *Öffentlichkeit* (public), that the spatial metaphor of the "sphere" takes root (Peters 1993, 542). This accident of translation is perhaps particularly fortuitous for an analysis of listening as a public activity. Marshall McLuhan long ago described acoustic space as "spherical," contrasting it to the linearity of visual space. By this he meant that sound surrounds, and can be approached from any and every direction, whereas the visual field is fixed and has to be presented face-on. It is ironic, then, that Habermas' Öffentlichkeit, forged as it was in the abstracted, linear culture of the age of print, should have been accidentally ascribed the properties of a sphere. The properties of spherical acoustic space do, however, offer some productive ways of rethinking the construction of public space, that is to say, rethinking the public sphere as auditorium.

Visual space created by intensifying and separating that sense from interplay with the others, is an infinite "container" – linear and continuous, homogenous, uniform and static. Acoustic space, always penetrated by tactility and other senses, is, by contrast, spherical, discontinuous, non-homogenous, resonant, and dynamic (McLuhan 1988, 33). Visual space is an intellectual construct, a technological effect of alphabetic perception. Acoustic space is grounded in experience. Visual space breaks up into categories and groups; acoustic space is a "resonant sphere" with no centre and no margins. Finally, acoustic space significantly sits somewhere between the physical and the virtual, just as the public sits somewhere between the real and the imaginary.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were witness to a series of profound revolutions in art, science and technology that for McLuhan together represented a technologically determined return to the "common sense" of acoustic space. If the visual space of print culture was associated with rationality, objectivity, abstraction, linearity, individualism and nationalism, then McLuhan argued that electronic culture reverses those attributes to favour partiality, involvement, experience, simultaneity, collectivity and globalism. The impact of the electronic age was in treating the eye as an ear, offering immersive, mythic communication, a trend only accelerated by the internet, with its "anywhere-and-everywhere" web of connections (Levinson 1997, 66).

Whatever the limitations of such a technologically determinist account, it is not insignificant that these developments also map on to a paradigmatic shift in representational practice in this period, namely the technological capture of sound which was, in John Durham Peters' words, "perhaps the most radical of all sensory reorganisations in modernity" (Peters 1999, 160-1). Moreover, the possibility of recording and transmitting sound opened up new industries, new prospects for the commodification of sound, new artistic practices, new cultures of listening and, not least, new publics. Where the modern idea of the nation and the national public sphere had been grounded in the imagining and practices of a reading public

(Anderson 1983), the re-introduction of sound and, in particular, the sound of the spoken word into the public sphere, re-activates the idea of a *listening* public.

The Silencing of the Word ...

Of course, until writing was invented, public life had been lived out in acoustic space where citizens could be within earshot of each other. With writing, language was, to some degree at least, disembodied and transplanted from the realm of the auditory into the realm of the visual. What had once been ephemeral, intangible and audible became permanent, material and mute. Plato (1956, 69) has Socrates explain to Phaedrus how the written word goes on saying the same thing over and over forever. Like paintings, they maintain a solemn silence that will have profoundly negative implications for both memory and understanding. But, leaving aside the oft-noted irony of this written appeal against the written word, what is striking here, for the purposes of the current argument, is the recognition of a world of discourse falling silent, being muted. There is nothing left to *listen* to. Listening, in other words, is implicitly identified as being at the very heart of the dialogic and dialectical process. For Plato's Socrates, writing is passive, conservative, unresponsive and ultimately deadening. It is in the act of listening that the word is kept alive.

Of course, over time and with the expansion of populations, the acoustic limits of public space were of necessity overcome by the adoption of representative politics – through delegation on the one hand and symbolic mediation on the other. Indeed, in the modern world there *is* no public before or outside of representation. No longer do citizens appear before each other "im-mediately" in shared acoustic space. It is precisely the mediation of the public sphere – the reflexive circulation of discourse, in Michael Warner's terms – which makes possible the imagining of a collective subjectivity and which serves as a common frame of reference (Warner 2002). The move from the ear to the eye in public affairs was, then, literally a *dislocation*, from embodied auditory space to the disembodied, abstracted and imagined community.

While it is easy to overplay the extent to which writing silenced public speech, it is nevertheless the case that the invention and application of audiovisual technologies gradually helped to challenge the hegemony of the printed word and heralded a reconfiguration of the public sphere. Walter Ong famously called this the move to an era of secondary orality, but in privileging the act of speaking the phrase is misleading. In fact, Ong's own discussion of the term fully recognises the listening relationship and, moreover, stresses its *publicness*:

> *Like primary orality, secondary orality has generated a strong group sense, for listening to spoken words forms hearers into a group, a true audience, just as reading written or printed texts turns individuals in on themselves. […] In our age of secondary orality, we are groupminded self-consciously and programmatically. […] We are turned outward because we have turned inward* (Ong 1982, 136).

Here, then, is a recognition of the political *action* of listening in and on the mediated public, and an indication of just how profound a change to politics, and to political subjectivity would be enabled by the *re-sounding* of the public sphere. The shift from a reading to a listening public involves, as I shall elaborate below,

a shift in emphasis from the individual to the plural, from the subjective to the intersubjective.

Resounding the Public Sphere

The introduction of sound technologies into the public sphere forced participants in that sphere to think about the act of listening. This is nowhere clearer than in those instances where early broadcasters were faced with the challenge of translating the conventions of print media into acoustic form. The absence of visual clues, the impossibility of interlocution with the speaker, and the heterogeneity and dispersal of the listening public meant that simply reading aloud from printed material designed for other purposes was soon found to be thoroughly unsatisfactory as a listening experience – the director of the first German news service, the Drahtloser Dienst, for example, warned that writing for listeners as if they were readers would be like "trying to take a photograph with a violin" (Räuscher 1928, 196). The company set out lengthy guidelines for its contributors, reminding them, for example, that: "*Sentences must be calculated for the ear that are short, without subclauses and not 'paperly'; reading out loud is the preferred means for checking for 'listenability'*" [Hörtauglichkeit] (Bericht … 1927, 98).

From the perspective of a multi-media universe, such a document and countless others in the same spirit during this period seems to be quaintly stating what has since become simply commonsensical. But the very fact it had to be set out in this way is just one indication of the radical shift in the practice of public journalism required by the introduction of sound. This was more than just a superficial stylistic change. Over time, directives like this one, worked out and refined by people struggling to define and place the new medium, represented a more fundamental shift in terms of attuning to the conditions of reception and, by association, to the receivers, of a message. At the same time, the anonymity of the listeners – in principle, anybody and everybody out there could be listening in – meant that nothing could be taken for granted, and a mode of address had to be found which was accessible and meaningful to a *general* public, not like the striated and specialist reading publics that had become established in the silent world of print. In other words, here in the formative years of radio as a public medium is a key moment in which the institution and recognition of the *listening* public has profound consequences for the communicative practice of the public sphere.

Broadcasting, as a technological form, seemed to pay scant regard to physical, political or social boundaries. Of course the technology had been developed by vested military, commercial and political interests, and of course access to both production and reception was hardly universal, but it came, nevertheless, to be marked by a distributive – or in some cases redistributive – ethic that equated listenership with citizenship. This was underscored by the medium of a common, spoken language that seemed to require no special skills in media "literacy." These attributes were cause for both celebration and alarm in different quarters – with radio celebrated either as a public good, or feared as a dangerous tool of propaganda. The different interpretations hung, ultimately, on whether listening could be countenanced as a political activity.

Take, for example, Adorno and Horkheimer's well-known contrasting of the telephone as a democratic medium with radio as an authoritarian one, based on

radio's lack of "the machinery of rejoinder" (Horkheimer 1988, 129). The telephone, by mid-century firmly established as a medium between two private individuals, is considered more democratic than the radio with its involvement of whole populations simply because the mark of democratic participation is "to speak" and not "to listen." Even those who would celebrate the democratic potential of radio would do so in terms of it providing information to enable subsequent political participation, or providing a platform from which to speak. Here again, listening is granted little status as a political activity in its own right. This bifurcation of the public sphere into its "informing role" and its "conversational role" is something that can be traced back in debates about the press, where the "passivity" of reading also struggled at times to be recognised as a political activity.

Listening as Political Action

There is something strangely counterintuitive in thinking about listening as an act, let alone a political action, but I would argue that it is a critical category that ought to be at the heart of any consideration of public life. We normally think about agency in the public sphere as speaking up, or as finding a voice; in other words, to be listened to, rather than to listen. And of course, democratic theory places great weight on "the freedom of speech," without quite recognising that speech is sounded out, and therefore demands a listener.

There is potentially much at stake in recovering an understanding of that listening relation if only because modern citizens habitually spend a significant proportion of their lives as members of audiences in one form or another. For all the attention to "the spectacle" in modern culture, there are in fact few spectacles that unfold in utter silence. But paying attention to listening does more than simply add a soundtrack to the age of spectacle. It does something much more profound: it shifts our attention from the subjectivity of the individual to the intersubjectivity of the public, plural world.

"To listen" is both an intransitive and a transitive verb. In other words, it is possible to listen without necessarily listening *to* anything. Listening can therefore be understood as being in a state of anticipation, of listening *out* for something. A listening public in this sense is an always latent public – attentive, but not determined by what is being listened *to*. Any intervention in the public sphere is undertaken in the hope, faith or expectation that there is a public out there, ready to listen and to engage. "Listening out" is the necessary corollary of the indiscriminacy of public address. There is a faith in the moment of address that there is a public out there, and there is a faith in the act of listening that there will be some resonance with the address.

The Freedom of Listening

Of course it goes "without saying" that one of the central tenets of modern democratic theory is the freedom of speech. Since what is really at stake is the freedom of *shared* speech, another way of putting it would be the freedom to be heard, which by implication raises questions about the freedoms and responsibilities of listening. I will return to those questions below, but first I will argue that the privileging of speech over listening in political theory can be challenged on logical, philosophical, historical and ethical grounds.

To start simply – logically, without a listener, speech is nothing but noise in the ether; more to the point, without a listener there would be no reason, no *calling*, to speak. And if the speaker is not also at turns a listener, only a perverted version of communication remains. Mikhail Bakhtin argued that in fact the distinction between speaker and listener is a "scientific fiction" only sustainable in the abstract, and only if the critical perspective is skewed to the speaker's point of view. If listening is properly understood as an active, responsive attitude rather than a passive, receptive one, then it follows that, "[a]ny understanding is imbued with response and necessarily elicits it in one form or another: the listener becomes the speaker" (Bakhtin 1986, 68).

Bakhtin is not just referring to the notion of turn-taking here, but is suggesting a much more radical rejection of the dichotomy speaker/listener. Speaking and listening are understood rather as interchangeable elements in the communicative process, a process in which the silence of the listener also speaks because it always already speaks and is heard, and in which the speaker is also always already a respondent because "[h]e is not, after all, the first speaker, the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe" (69). The listener's response may not be verbally articulated, and may not follow immediately, but this does not diminish the fact that by this definition all listening as distinct from hearing is always actively responsive.

It is apposite to think of speech as *resonating* with the listener. Resonance is a property of acoustic space that is a form of causality, but not the linear causality associated with visual culture. Resonance is about responsiveness, but it need not be responsiveness in kind. A speech can resonate with a listener without the listener responding in speech. Moreover, resonance can generate a great deal of acoustic energy from a small sound event so, to continue the analogy, a speech act is effective to the extent that it resonates with those listening who may well, in terms of broadcasting, for example, number in their millions.

Despite all this, the figure of the listener is a shadowy one in political theory. And yet, inasmuch as the listener is the Other of the speaker, the listener is inescapably present in the formulation of the idea of freedom of speech. The right to free speech, then, is intimately bound up with the responsibility to listen, a responsibility that is *shared* between the speaker and the listener. Indeed, Susan Bickford has argued that politics itself could be described at its most basic level as the dynamic *between* the act of speech and the act of listening (Bickford 1996, 4). The speech act alone is static; only the presence of an active listener introduces the dynamic, the element of intersubjectivity.

Listening to another, as Bickford elucidates, is not necessarily to silence one's inner voice in order to hear the external world, but to modify and switch the focus from one to the other. Speaker and listener are mutually interdependent, but it is the *openness* of the listening position – on either side – which produces the space in and across which communication can take place. The situatedness of the embodied listener is important. Since listeners cannot entirely abandon listening from their own perspective, and must recognise that the perspective of the other is doubly filtered through the speaker's perspective and their own as listener, the act of listening involves opens up a space for intersubjectivity. For Hannah Arendt, this "in-between," this sense of relatedness and difference, is both the precondition and the motivation for communication and for politics.

So if listening is clearly so fundamental to the question of communication, why has it been so neglected in media and political theory? I'd suggest there are three main reasons: the problem of property, the problem of dialogue, and the problem of consensus-building.

Listening and the Problem of Property

First of all, the idea of free speech arose in the historical confluence of print culture, capitalism, nationalism and the Enlightenment. The modern public sphere that was formed in the crucible of these forces was constituted as a reading public that privileged the eye over the ear. Moreover, the Enlightenment tradition is concerned with the freedom of expression rather than the freedom of communication. It is a freedom caught up in the idea of the liberty of the individual, where individual expression is treated like a property, to be defended and protected insofar as and as long as the rights of others are not violated in the process. The speech act as "self-expression" was conceived as a product to be circulated and exchanged in the free marketplace of ideas.

The act of listening could not be conceptualised in this way; it could not belong to an individual subject. The defence of the freedom of speech could not, then, be extended to embrace the freedom of listening or the freedom of communication more broadly. The freedom of speech is, ultimately, a right ascribed to the individual, and is concerned with the communicative context only insofar as that individual right to self-expression is guaranteed. The freedom of listening, by contrast, inheres in the space between individuals, and is concerned precisely with guaranteeing the context within which freedom of expression can operate as communication.

Listening and the Problem of Dialogue

The next problem to acknowledge is that a dialogic model of communication has been sutured onto print and mediated culture and into dominant political democratic theory on the basis of its status as a universal and primary form of human communication. Predicated on face-to-face interaction, it easily connotes all sorts of positive qualities: sincerity, spontaneity, reciprocity, egalitarianism, complexity, warmth, reason. It is a personable form of communication often contrasted with the impersonal forms of mass mediation. Normative democratic theory is full of references to the forum, the coffee house, the town hall meeting, and so on, with all their dialogic connotations of assembly, participation and interaction that are simply out of kilter with the scale and organisation of modern states. They tend, in other words, to enact a nostalgic fantasy of a golden age of unmediated and effortless interaction, and a longing for "presence" (Peters 1997, 6; 2006).

Public speech in any case only exceptionally takes the form of a dialogue in the usual sense. The speaker, even in the public auditoria of ancient city states, would speak to many listeners – all of whom had, crucially, the potential to speak back, but who in practice were more often and more continuously in the position of listener, listening not only to the present speaker, but also listening to the other silent listeners, in the sense of bearing a responsibility to the potentiality of those listeners to break their silence by speaking. In this Bakhtinian sense, even the speaker does not give up the responsibility to listen in the act of speaking.

These listeners actively constitute the public – they are not mere bystanders. They are not members of a public by virtue of their mere presence or by virtue of

their "identity." They are members of a public by virtue of the act of listening, by the active decision to participate in the discursive address. A public is therefore contingent on there being people willing to actively take up that address, to listen. The agency of a public, which is an imaginary association with no institutional form or formal power, rests on this active will to be addressed, this active mode of attention (Warner 2002, 61).

So there is a problem with the dialogic model in principle, as well as in practice. Warner has argued that a public must *by definition* be a relation among *strangers* because it unites people by their participation in the discourse that constitutes them as a public, not by any pre-given or positive sense of collective identity (Warner 2002, 58). A public is constituted precisely in its *impersonal and indefinite* address – in other words, a mode of address diametrically opposed to that of the face-to-face encounter.

A dialogic model of public speaking is hardly adequate, then, even in apparently ideal conditions of co-presence and a shared culture and purpose. Indeed, holding dialogue up as the measure of public communication inevitably leads to the denigration of those participants in the process who listen more than speak, or those who never speak. From a dialogic perspective a speech that is not reciprocated *in speech* can only be deemed to be a monologue. And if that monologue is addressed to a multitude of silent listeners, then it is but a short step to deem it propaganda.

Acknowledging the active, responsive attitude of the listener offers a different approach that does not restrict reciprocal public communication to the dialogic form, and therefore is better able to accommodate forms of communication – mediated or otherwise – between two *or more* participants. This is important when we consider the obvious but easily forgotten fact that it is possible for more than one listener, indeed a whole multitude of listeners, to listen to a single speaker, whereas more than one uncoordinated voice speaking at the same time becomes hard to decipher, becomes babble. A dialogic model, however, in seeking to restore the balance between the two sides, tends to suppose that the multitude of listeners would listen as one, and that the one has been stripped of its voice and its potential to reciprocate. Here is the root of the distrust in "mass" communication as dissemination, indeed as representation – and it rests in the failure to recognise the activity of the listener.

It might be argued that the concept of the active responsive listener has also been derived from a dialogic, face-to-face model of communication, albeit a model that does not *a priori* privilege the speaker over the listener. But the use of the singular here is misleading. Even with just one additional participant to the "dialogue," we are likely to find two listeners to one speaker at any one moment, if there is not to be communication breakdown. The listener can be, indeed arguably most often is, part of a collectivity. The experience of listening is, both potentially and very often in practice, an experience of plurality. The experience of speaking, in the moment of speaking, is, by contrast, an expression and experience of singularity.

This is especially evident if we consider how the media pluralise the audience not only in terms of multiplying the potential number of listeners, but also in terms of dispersing them across space and time. The listening public of any particular instance of recorded expression can in principle be almost infinitely expanded across continents and across the generations. It can even be expanded to include the

"speaker," listening back to a recording of their own speech. Moreover, a "public" is rarely constituted in relation to a single text although a single text can address a public. Rather a public is constituted in what Warner calls the "concatenation of texts through time" (Warner 2002, 62).

The Freedom of Listening and the Problem of Consensus

Such a radical dispersion not only strains the metaphor of the dialogue, but could also be seen as detrimental from the point of view of conventional notions of a public that rest on ideas of consensus, and consensus-building. However, if we follow Arendt and say that plurality is not only the *condition* for politics but its *achievement* (Villa 1992, 717), then this dispersion of the audience is cast in a more positive light. Consensus, after all, can too easily slide into conformity, or be abused to universalise particular interests. Harmony, in the end, is only achieved by the exclusion of discordant tones.

Plurality as a democratic virtue is normally conceived of in terms of a plurality of voices guaranteed by the freedom of speech. But plurality, I would argue, also has to be guaranteed by the freedom of listening. This is more than a question of simply being heard. Hearing is not yet listening. Listening inheres in an active, responsive attitude. Plurality is guaranteed by the freedom of listening because an individual experiences, or *inhabits* plurality in the act of listening more than in the act of speaking. It is only in listening, indeed, that we can apprehend and acknowledge the plurality of voices. If the public sphere is an auditorium where the freedom of speech is exercised, then it is the members of the listening audience who become the "auditors" of public exchanges and performances. The listeners, in other words, hold the responsibility not to close their ears to expressions of opinions with which they might not agree, and, by extension, to ensure that the whole spectrum of opinion gets to be heard. Plurality is not, in fact, guaranteed by the freedom of speech, or at least not by freedom of speech alone, for those who speak might all speak with the same voice, either through choice, coercion or the conditions of the marketplace. It is in the freedom of listening that limitations on plurality are registered, whether that be the dominance of certain voices or the absence, marginalisation and censorship of others.

There is a certain courage required in this political listening, the courage to be open to the opinions of others, neither refusing to listen, nor simply identifying uncritically and selflessly with the position of the speaker. It requires an attitude, as Bickford puts it, "somewhere between sheer defiance and sheer docility" (1996, 152-3). Listening in this way forms the bedrock of a democratic practice. If "speech" can stand in for all forms of political expression, then "listening," rather than "reading" is the more appropriate term to stand in for all forms of public reception.

I am proposing the freedom of listening, then, as a normative ideal that encompasses not only a right to listen in, but a responsibility to listen out. It is, therefore, distinct from the freedom *to* listen. The freedom *to* listen, understood in terms of a right of access to and participation in public debate, is of course integral to any practical definition of democracy. Accessibility is measured in terms of economic, social and cultural capital. The freedom *to* listen, then, is as much a material condition of the freedom of listening as it is a constituent part of the normative ideal. However, when the freedom to listen is understood only as a right and not also as

a responsibility it is a poorer guarantor of plurality, for listeners might decide to exercise their right to listen only to those speakers whose opinions resonate with their own. This constitutes a refusal to listen, itself a powerful exercise of power and censorship.

If the freedom of listening is a normative ideal that – while rarely acknowledged in these terms – underpins the freedom of speech and is identifiable in unmediated forums of democratic communication, it is arguable that it became an increasingly urgent freedom in the era of mass and mediated communication when access to the dominant public forums of debate as "speakers" became increasingly restricted, both by the technologically transformed *scale* and specialisation of the forum, and by the vagaries of the marketplace which tend to concentrate ownership and favour conformity. But even the contemporary proliferation of outlets, the rise of "user-generated content" and modes of interactivity have not diminished the relevance of the freedom of listening. It is there, for example, in contemporary debates about the digital divide, net neutrality, and the fragmentation of the public into self-selecting identity and interest groups (Dahlberg 2007).

Above all, the potential of listening as a profoundly democratic activity opens up new ways of understanding and assessing non-dialogic, non-interactive forms of mediation – still the dominant media mode. If the public sphere is to be understood as a space in which a plurality of voices can be heard, then those voices must be able to express themselves in a plurality of ways, not just in the image of a dialogue. There must, clearly, be a place for films and for broadcasting, for presentations and performances. The freedom of expression is not – and should not be – confined to a dialogic mode, but it *does* presuppose an audience, and, implicitly, an audience with active choices and with active responsibilities; an audience – that is to say, the listening public – constituted not of individuals in splendid isolation along the lines of the reading public, but of listeners inhabiting a condition of plurality and intersubjectivity.

Media and the Ethics of Listening

Finally, we come to the questions the freedom of listening raises for thinking about an ethics of communication. To consider the ethics of listening in public is to look for a way to balance the proper concern about how the media should construct and target their address, with a concern about the ethics of *being addressed*. Roger Silverstone made a significant contribution in his last book, *Media and Morality*. Here he addressed the question of media ethics in terms of Ulrich Beck's discussion of the cosmopolitan condition, which is empirically one of *plurality:* of being rooted "in *one* cosmos but in *different* cities, territories, ethnicities, hierarchies, nations, religions – all at the same time" (Beck 2003, in Silverstone 2006, 14). The ethical response to cosmopolitanism in media terms is, in Silverstone's words, "an obligation to listen." This obligation is a moral one that is laid at the door of media producers and corporations but also, significantly, to "us" as "readers, audiences, citizens" (ibid). For Silverstone this translates into the pressing question of media "literacy" on an analytical as well as a political level. He suggests that Ong's "secondary orality" requires the propagation of a "secondary literacy" (178-9) that would extend beyond simple technical competency to include critical self-reflexivity, responsibility and ethical judgment.

While the broad point is well made – that there is an evident need for participants in the "mediapolis," whether producers or consumers, to have the requisite competencies of encoding and decoding – it is surprising that Silverstone retains the notion of "literacy" in this context, when "secondary listening" might seem to be more apposite, both in relation to the "spokenness" of "secondary orality" and in relation to his own arguments about there being an "obligation to listen." The easy elision of listening as an appropriate term for the critical responsibilities of the audience is both telling and disappointing. It is telling inasmuch as it belies the ongoing dominance of visual and print-led frameworks in media critique, and it is disappointing inasmuch as there are specific qualities in the listening relation that might have something new to offer the debates about media ethics and that might better reflect the tenor of mediated representation in its instantaneity, its embodiedness and its sensory appeal. There are evident synergies between the plurality of the cosmopolitan condition and the pluralism of the listening subject. Whereas the visual subject is fixed in space, inhabiting and *in possession of* a singular point of view, Stephen Connor has described the listening subject as more like a "membrane" – permeable, liminal, flexible, and inhabiting "a more fluid, mobile and voluminous conception of space" (Connor 1997, 207). The sonic qualities of transmission, resonance, vibration, reverberation and echo emphasise the *inter-relationships* of objects in space and the possibility of transference, movement, conversion, synaesthesia and transgression of boundaries. Moreover, the ear is capable of perceiving a plurality of signals and is generally *tolerant* of such plurality. All these qualities are, I would propose, literally and metaphorically suggestive for an ethics of communication.

Silverstone went on to explore the "obligation to listen" in terms of "hospitality," namely the requirement, "to welcome the other into one's space with or without any expectation of reciprocity"; it is "the mark of the interface we have with the stranger" (2006, 139). He proposed taking unconditional hospitality as the normative ideal for the "mediapolis." Despite inevitable constraints, such an ideal at least reminds us of the requirement to respect "those who speak in public space" and "to grant, without qualification, a right of audience to those who would otherwise be beyond the pale" (142). This right of audience is understood as a right *to be heard*. Silverstone also constructs the notion of the *universal audience* to accommodate the presumption that the right of audience is matched by a right to be a member of an audience, a right *to listen*. But as I've been explaining, I would go further, and argue that the freedom to listen is just part of a more profound freedom that is bound up with ethical obligations, the freedom of listening.

Listening, Experience and Citizenship

Listening, therefore, as a political activity, carries a heavy burden of responsibility. In the context of social movement theory, Romand Coles has argued that learning how to listen is dependent on listening to different voices in different locations and contexts. For Coles, this means "literal bodily world travelling," a travelling between spaces of familiarity and strangeness, between home and elsewhere, walking "receptively" through unfamiliar neighbourhoods, listening to others' stories and other ways of telling stories. The combination of listening and "world travelling" results in a lived *experience* of plurality, and not merely an *imaginative*

act of "representative thinking." Coles argues that the radical openness of listening is precisely what is needed in contemporary antagonistic societies, to get "into the skin" of others' lives. Listening and travelling, then, are thought together in terms of a democratic practice that: … *at once* embody *principles like equality, justice, freedom, and democratic engagement, and at the same time enable us to re-articulate the meaning of these in different contexts with different people.* (Coles 2004, 692).

The significance of this approach is precisely that it does not only see listening as a means to an end – the valorisation of more voices – but to a certain extent as an end in itself, as the development of a democratic sensibility.

Such "lived" encounters are no doubt important and necessary, but they are inevitably limited in scope and reach for most people. Time, geography, resources and inclination all impose their limits on the capacity for the kind of radical democratic listening described in locally-based social movements. The question of how listening and travelling can operate through representation, through *mediation*, must then come onto the agenda.

Listening and travelling can, via the media, happen at a distance – and they must. In other words, if the twin practices of listening and travelling are accepted as being fundamental to the development of a democratic sensibility, then they must be thought through in proportion to the kinds of involvement in political communicative practice that most citizens engage in and that can be squared with the national and global scale of contemporary politics.

The usefulness of importing these terms into a media ethics is that it poses ethical responsibilities for the audience as well as for the media producers. It poses an ethical responsibility for the media not only to travel and to tell different stories, but to listen to the variety of ways in which those stories are told. In other words, alongside the ethic of hospitality, we should add an ethic of travelling or visitation. Hospitality, after all, means welcoming others into your home, your space. Someone else is paying the call. By the same token there is also an ethical responsibility for the audience to travel adventurously among those stories, listening out for voices that are unfamiliar or uneasy on the ear.

Interestingly, these two terms, listening and travelling, come together in the German verb *erfahren*, which means "to experience" but can also mean to hear about something or to learn about something, and which is built on the root verb *fahren*, to travel. *Erfahrung* is an important term in the German tradition of critical theory represented by Benjamin, Kracauer, Adorno, Negt and Kluge, summed up by Miriam Hansen as, "that which mediates individual perception with social meaning, conscious with unconscious processes, loss of self with self-reflexivity" (Hansen 1991, 12-13). The new media technologies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were "both symptom and agent" of the transformation of *Erfahrung* in industrial society (Hansen 1987, 182). Broadcasting, for example, represented a distinctive recombination of individual sense perception and social reality, and thus helped to redraw the social horizon of experience. It was a pioneering medium that, through engaging the act of listening, remediated the relationship between the public world and the private experience of everyday life.

The experience of mediation is by now a thoroughly commonplace experience, fully integrated into the everyday, available for appropriation as part of the mundane, of "being in the world" with all the ethical implications that entails.

Audiovisual media in all their variety have introduced the possibility of listening to distant others, of inviting strangers into the home, of collective listening and intersubjective experience, of constituting communicative spaces that can transgress physical, political and social boundaries. But our models of what constitutes political agency and public engagement continue too often to rest on a restricted vocabulary constrained by the logic of the visual. Listening is a profoundly important activity that has too long been overlooked or taken for granted by scholars of the media and the public sphere. By paying attention to audiences as listening publics, I suggest that we will find productive new ways to address the politics, ethics and experience of political communication and public life.

Note:

1. There are notable exceptions, not least the work done under the rubric of "The Listening Project" based in Sydney, Australia (see *Continuum* 2009). This article is based on a public lecture given under the auspices of the project at the Transforming Cultures Research Centre, University of Technology, Sydney in December 2009, see: http://www.thelisteningproject.net. See also Couldry 2006 and Back 2007.

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