

Notes from workshop 'Media, Multiculturalism and the Politics of Listening'

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Notes prepared by Tanja Dreher

Workshop details:

http://www.transforming.cultures.uts.edu.au/news_events/media_politics_multicultural.html

Workshop participants:

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Welcome and introductions:

Welcome

Acknowledge Country: I'd like to pay my respects to the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation on whose lands UTS stands. While this protocol may seem to have little relevance to today's discussion, I think the recent National Apology to the Stolen Generations demonstrated something of the crucial importance of listening - listening to untold stories, to difficult and painful histories, to uncomfortable truths. For most of us our participation in the National Apology would have largely been through listening - and perhaps in refusing to listen to Brendan Nelson's response. Indigenous academics and activists often argue that the true stories of Australia's history have often been told - but in the main, non-Indigenous Australians have simply refused to hear them.

The Listening Project:

- highly exploratory, series of conversations
- interdisciplinary
- CRN funded

- Starts from a number of recent suggestions that greater attention to listening is required
- Attempts to address a number of neglected concerns - listening in political theory and media studies
- Highlighting questions of listening has prompted a whole range of interesting responses - the challenge will be to integrate and build connections
- Readings reflect that this is underdeveloped - gestures towards and calls for more attention, but far from a developed framework or a research agenda

The workshop:

- Aims to move beyond the limitations of more conventional approaches to media and multiculturalism - so neither critiques of representation / textual analysis, nor celebration of community, diaspora media and audience activity
- Focus on wider processes and dynamics of mediation, exchange and interaction
- Drawing on political theory and ethics
- Bringing together a diverse group - media practitioners and researchers, experts in multiculturalism and in media
- format: brief intros to themes from convenors, then invite responses, then on to open discussion

Section One: Hearing Diversity

In the case of the SBS, multiculturalism has operated primarily as a redistribution of resources to those linguistically marginalized - ideas of inclusion and access. But multiculturalism also requires a *decentring* of the notion of a common or singular culture or language - raises the question of how to put new demands on those who listen. A new communicative sensibility.

Eg. of learning a language, the embodied experience of listening is difficult - the work of listening - when learning a language I am working hard.

SBS has been crucial in allowing us to hear differently. The decision to subtitle rather than dub has been crucial.

Subtitling is never just a technical act, it is always political.

The privacy of language eg SBS World Watch - a crucial moment where you don't know what is going on. This can be unsettling - makes the viewer aware of the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that are also issues of speaking and listening.

On the ABC we do not hear linguistic diversity - this disables audiences by not enabling them to hear in the ways in which we do in the everyday.

Diversity of accents and what you hear in everyday life depends on your positioning.

Cultural Action: listening is integral to working in partnership. Auburn Poets Group performance for Sydney Writers Festival. 12 people, 7 or 8 languages between them. In-betweenness, everything is in inbetweenness, it is in awareness, indeterminacy. Choose not to enter into binary relations of dominant culture.

The Babel Chorus - an orchestra, voices come in and out. Performers concerned - who is listening? And how? Concerns about alienating the audience

Between performers and audience there is an indeterminate space.

Poetry as music, not privileging English. This is unsettling some in the group.

Assert the right to speak and not have to be translated into someone else's terms.

Subtitling preserves the voices that would otherwise have been obliterated. This is seen as a positive, but subtitling is ambivalent.

Do we need to provide subtitling support for other forms of English? Listeners are absolutely integral to how this plays out.

In contexts where dubbing is the norm, actors specialize in providing the dubbed voices for particular actors eg Nicole Kidman.

Kevin Rudd autobiography in China called 'The PM who speaks Mandarin'.

We all get judged by our accents.

In Australia a big discrepancy between the monolingual mindset and the incredible multilingual resources. The public image is of a monolingualism despite the everyday multilingualism

How can we kickstart cross-cultural exchanges if we only rely on one voice?

Eg. Multicultural radio in Berlin - early experiments were seen as 'too multicultural' - audience put off - what's the balance between too much and not enough multiculturalism?

Theoretical concept of translation is a very audience-oriented approach. A very listener-sensitive or audience-sensitive approach.

ABC obsessed with pronunciation, but it has to be standard pronunciation. Diversity of accents is about class as much as about ethnicity. Who is the audience? There is a genuine concern with the message and how it is transmitted. Journos need to probe 'who is the audience?'

ABC lots of British regional accents

Historically the struggle was to get workers and working class voices on to the ABC - gender also, the Women's Unit, gender, class, ethnic diversity. Complicated by regular moves to amalgamate SBS and ABC.

Innovation tends to come through talks or the women's unit or regional - outside NCAFF

Regulating modes of speech that might demand a different mode of listening. This protects dominant speakers from having to listen differently, from being pushed.

Bickford chapter provocative and deeply frustrating. Keeps going back to the politics of speech. Keeps wanting listening but keeps talking about speech. Constant shifts. Interested in interactions but not in conversation, not in encounters. A mode of inclusion where the power continues to lie with speech.

There is also power in listening. Listening is sensuous and not just political or cognitive.

Dilemmas of 'community leaders' - community politics is not a politics of listening, it is a politics of speech and position taking.

Giving space for speech is not enough.

Listening as sensuous - not just validation, it is also empathetic, it is also a critical act, listening is a sustained act of engagement, not just a moment of speech. Listening is a set of capacities. Eg. two kids in class read as active and passive listening. We have to think of listening as a set of capacities.

If you speak differently you are hyper aware of the listening response or relationship. Some modes of speech are much more conscious and bear a much greater burden of thinking about listening

Media plays a crucial role in developing or not listening capacities - by NOT pushing audiences

Work a lot with different communities, innate middle classness of most schools is what students react against

We come up against listening all the time - it is just so difficult for those outside the margins just to listen.

Thinking about strategies for change, political strategies - whose responsibility is it to effect change? Reflect on the effectiveness of colonization of Australia in wiping out so many languages, the effectiveness of colonization here.

Subtitling is now accepted - but it was kicked off by a policy decision.

But subtitling requires literacy.

Is listening just aural? Or is it about attention giving etc?

An aural experience or a sphere of communicative exchange?

Listening is an important part of citizenship practices - that is why we need attention to decentring the norms. The dominant normative centre - need to challenge and decentre it

The space of listening is generative if you are generous. The space of communication and the ethics of communication. New spaces and practices of listening.

Section Two: Listening to community media interventions

Intro:

- Both research and policy increasingly advocate and funding supports community media interventions eg DIMA/DIAC, HREOC, ADB
- My experience is that in speaking up, marginalized voices or those working with racialised communities have considerable achievements, but also learn hard lessons in what can't be heard and in what the 'mainstream' is not interested in or prepared to listen to
- Shakira Hussein, Alia Imtoul and Waleed Aly all write eloquently on the 'double bind' of speaking publicly and engaging with media - stories can't be told, instead must fit with media or audience expectations - eg Shakira Hussein on media interest in hijab, can't talk about negotiation, must pick the argument of choice or force
- If listening is active then we can also theorise the refusal to listen as active
- Cf small amount of work around Interfaith and antiracism work, where there are constant concerns about preaching to the converted, the need to attract wider audiences or participants, and the dilemmas around tackling difficult issues - how to get people to listen to difficult or painful or challenging stories and histories?

Thus one important reason to ask questions of listening is to avoid reproducing the dynamic which is so prevalent in public debate during the 'war on terror' - whereby Muslims in Australia are constantly asked to speak up and to integrate, to dialogue and to explain themselves. Given the considerable evidence that Muslim Australians and other racialised communities are in fact making enormous efforts to speak up and be heard, we must ask instead, what is the 'mainstream' doing? Where is the centre open to dialogue and listening? Where is it closed? What are the responses to the reaching out and speaking up evident in community media

Reporting diversity project: the criminalization of multicultural news - sad, bad, mad or Other.

Racialised communities are heard with an accent, of language but also through prejudice.

Through gatekeepers and agendas setters.

News media listens as a lecturer or facilitator - more a speaker than a listener

Difficult to penetrate communities quickly. Assignment of newsrounds. Not an active attempt to pursue stories that are outside the norm.

Talkback refuses accents, rejects views which may be seen as controversial or inflammatory.

Research on talkback radio and multicultural communities

We listen without hearing and hear without understanding

The audience of radio is referred to as 'the listeners' - positioned as passive, talkback means that audiences are increasingly talking back and getting involved, active.

Community based interventions especially in regional radio.

Audiences talk about not wanting to be spoken to, want to be listened to and to be heard. Talkback radio is now influencing news agendas.

'we listen to you, you've got to listen to us' - talkback has a democratizing potential.

There is evidence of positive interventions.

For Muslim women, online is a safer space to interact, not visible and not accented

Speaking back in interactive news sites - is it having an impact?

Need increasing interactivity.

Phillipine Daily Inquirer example - encouraged debate around representation of the Muslim Moro people - legislation drafted to outlaw use of the 'Muslim' descriptor.

Stuart Hall - daily news journalism representation is naturalized so far that you can't

see anyone produced it. Research on effects to Inquirer opening these questions up for journalists - finds evidence of some change. There can be dramatic effects if journos are made to listen.

SMH Faces of Islam. SMH journos have become very aware of the contestability of representation.

Intimacy of radio lends itself to conversation.

Resource-mobilisation approach might be useful. Peace-building. In order to bring about change you have to have relationships vertically as well as horizontally. That affects the willingness to listen.

Traditional forms of media are irrelevant to many, especially young people. They are going on to make their own media. Eg Fear of a Brown Planet, an intervention, taking it into their own hands, creating alternatives, not waiting for the mainstream to change.

ICE video blogging project - skills development, creating and screening it is an intervention, it is online..

Creating opportunities for people to be able to create and access their won media, create spaces.

People shouldn't feel obliged to listen, they're not doing you a favour by listening.

Minto residents: we have to tell our own stories

Creating audiences and tapping in to audiences is really important - often white middle class audiences are really interested

There does need to be an audience

We always have to be consciously trying to connect to the world

What about curiosity about the world rather than obligation - how do you teach or engender curiosity rather than obligation?

Sometimes the primary audience is to be able to listen to yourself. Where you have been taught to hate yourself, listening to yourself is crucial. It is about the context, about shedding slogans and rhetoric about social change.

To listen to yourself is essential if you are surviving living in dominant cultures.

Alternative sites of cultural expression - who is listening?

The bigger challenges are to generate a complex, dense public culture

In some settings you are obliged to listen.

In a context of conflict - what are the ethics?

Section Three: The Ethics of Listening

Intro:

- an alternative to the politics of representation and speaking
- listening requires a silencing or muting of the inner voice - an openness to the other
- engagement and interaction
- a willingness to give up power and privilege, control and certainty
- the possibility of change or persuasion

Does lots of participation mean lots of listening?

Difficult conversations around the responses to Brebdan Nelson's speech - what should have been the response? The refusal to listen is wrong in that case, the obligation to listen is there. A public event, a significant moment, the highly public mode of speaking requires an obligation to listen

Publicness vs. community - public as a neutral zone where differences are negotiated - inevitably dissonant and difficult and confronting. There is an obligation to listen and engage deliberately and respectfully

Need to nurture change practices of listening

Just speaking to people who agree with you is not good for democracy

Listening as attention giving and respect

Media moving from speaking to and speaking about to speaking with

Professional ethics

Journos assume - We aren't going to learn anything from our users except for a reflection of our representation

Some journos welcome an ability to connect with their audiences

Not all speaking needs to be heard

Don't forget - not all speech aims at being heard in a public kind of way

Media institutions prevent users from speaking and listening to each other beyond the institutional framework eg, posters have their personal email addresses removed from posts to online forums

Email exchange around op-ed piece in SMH, Rudd's speech congratulating Israel, advertisement repercussions that found its way into the media

Jews Against the Occupation Op Ed piece, rang Op Ed Editor - we've published a Jewish piece and a Palestinian piece and so it is covered

The incredible limits of old media

A limit - a point after which the exchange couldn't go any further

She was listening but also lots else was going through her head

The gate was there

It is a story of exhaustion, frustration and giving up. Three emails is not a lot, need to keep persisting, keep trying. Make 20 approaches - often that is when you get the interview.

Be realistic about what the media are and aren't going to do, don't make the media an easy target. Have a realistic view of what the media can and can't do and how it is that change happens in media organizations.

Flak shakes you into different ways of thinking - you can reflect on and broaden your understanding.

Journalists are trained to be professionally irritating. Three rejections in a normal conversation is the end.

Three rejections is just 'what have you got'? convince me more ..

How do you measure or recognise successful or effective listening?

How do we look at listening?

The exchange might have been a moderate success.

Deliberative democracy research might be useful for how to document and analyse listening

Also think about interviewing

How do we know if the Op Ed Editor has listened at all? Been open at all?

Noel Pearson - audience resistant to what he had to say, didn't want to listen, a lot of discomfort

People were listening intently

Culture wars position public conversation as combat or warfare. The notion of public debate as warfare has been very destructive to a politics of listening - it becomes tactical

Pearson has been an advocate for a certain kind of listening

Don't reduce listening to being nice. It has been associated with gentility eg. British Cultural Studies early debates

Space for listening has often foundered on the assumption that listening is just being nice

Agonistic

The most profound listening often happens between people who hate each other

ABC criticised for being too polite, wanting comfortable M\middle class politeness

'abusive' forms may actually allow listening - but avoid the warfare

Neither warfare nor genteel, safe, nice listening

Insight SBS gives a sense of different positions jostling, get a sense of complexity of issues

Everyone is both speaker and listener

You can actively open up spaces for listening by asking questions - that is what interviewers do

Deliberative democracy too genteel, too structured

Turn-taking is very much culturally bound

Gentle or combative - surely the question is does it move on, does it go somewhere

Power, decisions over who is to be heard and what is to be heard eg. BBC vox pops in lead up to war a sham of openness when actually there was a massive propaganda campaign going on

Where to?

Attention to listening provokes important questions about media and multiculturalism:

How do media enable or constrain listening across difference?

What is the role of mediation in the politics of listening?

How can a diversity of voices be heard in the media?

How are new modes of listening developed or learned (by media producers and by media audiences)?

How can media researchers, producers and policymakers best address these questions?

Methodologies? How do we document and analyse listening? How do we know it is happening or being refused? How can we gauge the quality of attention and engagement, openness and interaction?

These questions entail innovations in methodology - how can we document and analyse listening? How do we even know if listening is taking place? And how do we determine when listening is actually actively engaged and when it is deployed as a conspicuous display? As Bickford asks, 'What is the difference between distorted listening and simply active listening? What kind of effort or action is 'genuine' listening?' (1996: 21).

Wider Project questions:

- Who needs to be heard? How are new ways of listening developed or learned? How are spaces for listening created? What is meant by 'the right to be understood'?
- What does it mean to share knowledge and experience from different cultural perspectives? How do academics and activists learn to listen to one another? How can 'a sense of obligation to listen' to marginalised or unwanted dialogues be engendered amongst those who are used to doing all the talking?
- How can alternative histories and different stories be heard? How is recognition attained?
- Which methodologies can support research into these questions?

Good to hear how the ideas are resonating.

Technologies offer a different take. Mediation - technologies which may enhance or block listening

Think about where listening technologies come from.

The question of too much diversity

Access to media and communication spaces for access

Methodology: Glasgow media group bringing together media producers and listeners in large focus groups - beyond reception studies and content analysis

Excited by the exchange between the Editor and the interest group - the Editor feels a sense of obligation, wouldn't even have responded previously

Engagement between professional practitioners and those who have more time to reflect

Face to face engagement is the most productive

Nick Couldry on media practice

Encouraging journos to see their job as enabling society to talk amongst themselves

Journalism as a social practice - difficult to register and to demonstrate

There are many spaces where listening isn't a choice, it is daily work. The everyday routineness of having to listen - that is also the job of the media to hear and to respond to society. We sometimes under-estimate media as the listening space of society

Methodology: focus on practices. Capture and be concrete about the practices associated with media listening, be very specific about what instances might be generative of new insights

It is really hard to think about listening, it is challenging but important

How is listening enabled or disabled? Start with pragmatic techniques of enabling listening

Couldry and Husband social justice framework rather than ethics - closer to media practice because media is all about outcomes

How is the normative framework operationalised?

Find the space where normative positions engage with professional practice

Curiosity rather than obligation?

Get the users and practitioners together

It is all about audiences. Spheres of listening that we create. How do we get people to listen?

Translation can only ever approximate. There needs to be a motivation to go to that translation or whatever.

Desires

Cultural and spiritual practices that are about not speaking

Look at generational differences

Drive for audience is fundamental to any media organisation

Normative framework of multiculturalism is pointless without an audience.

Uneven distribution of capacities to listen

Focus groups of audiences. Who is listening and why are they listening?

Wrap and thanks.