

## Reflections on workshop by Tanja Dreher

'Media, Multiculturalism and the Politics of Listening' held at UTS, 16/4/08

In the weeks since this workshop I've noticed yet more examples revolving around 'listening' - National Australia Bank has rebadged their tellers as 'listeners', federal politicians and the Sex Discrimination Commissioner travel the country on 'Listening Tours', at an informal meeting of academics interested in researching around Redfern a colleague suggests that the most valuable research might be to analyse the ways in which 'consultation' processes around redevelopment in the area actually serve to silence community concerns, and another colleague researching Hong Kong students studying cultural studies in Australia describes those students saying that Australian students speak but don't listen. According to my colleague, the cohort of Hong Kong students don't feel listened to, feel like the Australian students just don't think they have anything relevant to say, Hong Kong students always have to find something relevant to the Australian students in order to be listened to, and they need to listen a lot to find out what others think and only then feel they can speak.

Despite these many references to listening, the four hour 'Media, multiculturalism and the politics of listening' workshop was a reminder to me of just how hard it is to focus on listening. Even in a discussion designed to highlight listening in thinking about media and multiculturalism, there was a strong pull and a constant drift back to speaking. While it is clearly important to think in terms of listening *and* speaking, nevertheless I was struck at the difficulty of paying close attention to listening and of clearly defining listening and what might be at stake in paying greater attention to listening within media studies. There seems to be a relative lack of available intellectual resources for the task. In the background readings set for the workshop, both Charles Husband and Susan Bickford seem to find that liberal democratic theory is inadequate to address their interests in understanding and listening. Both turn to other traditions - Bickford to critical race feminism, Husband to African rights traditions.

The workshop discussions highlighted a number of productive tensions which might provoke further explorations around the themes of media, multiculturalism and the politics of listening. Much of the conversation turned on the tension between curiosity-driven listening and obligation-driven listening, and on the tension between normative theory and the pragmatics of media practice. At several points participants argued that not all speaking needs to be listened to, and listening isn't doing anyone favours. The example of the Babel Choir was also a wonderful reminder of the creative, exhilarating possibilities of listening, difference and in-between spaces. As the work of the Auburn Poets and Writers Group demonstrates, listening across differences invokes possibilities and innovation - the opening up to uncertainty required for listening also allows for new things to happen, as well as possibilities for discomfort and hard work.

The workshop discussions also highlighted for me the crucial question of methodology and the importance of developing a clear but nuanced definition of listening. The background readings suggest several features of political listening or listening which aims for understanding across differences. Drawing on Susan Bickford's work, listening can be understood as an active giving of attention which requires openness and engagement on the part of the listener. This openness entails a muting of the inner voice and possibilities for change or persuasion. Such a conception of listening

emphasises ongoing interconnection and interaction rather than individual expression, highlighting the creative possibilities of listening, while also bringing in to focus the discomforts and responsibilities of listening across differences. Here listening is understood as a shared responsibility to maintain connection and engagement, opposed in Charles Husband's work to the 'egocentrism' of an emphasis on speaking rights.

If there are obligations to listen as discussed in the workshop, it is vital to specify when, how and for whom such responsibilities might apply. Where Charles Husband seems to infer a universal obligation for all to seek understanding of each other, his long-time collaborator John Downing has recently argued for a more specific responsibility: the obligation to listen to historically marginalised voices. My interest in listening has been motivated at least in part by the development of critical race and whiteness studies where the aim is to shift research attention from the 'victims' of racism to instead understand the operations of networks of power and privilege. The focus on the privileges of whiteness underpins my own interests in listening, with an aim to shift some attention in studies of media and multiculturalism from marginalised speakers or misrepresentations, and on to the 'mainstream' or the ways in which privilege shapes possibilities for speaking through what will and won't be listened to. The challenge for media reform then becomes not only to provide opportunities for speaking - although this is vital - but also to shift the privilege of not listening across differences.

In terms of methodology it seems vital to ask - how do we know when listening is happening and how can we document and analyse the quality of listening? To return to the examples of political listening in Listening Tours and Redfern consultations mentioned at the start of this reflection, it is important to ask - when is political listening effective or genuine? How do we know? How can we differentiate between active, engaged listening which is open to change, and strategic displays of disengaged politeness? Can we distinguish between curiosity-driven and obligation-driven listening? What are the impacts of different modes of listening?

A crucial and largely unanswered question raised in the workshop was, 'how is a politics or an obligation to listen operationalised?'. The discussions begun in the workshop suggest a number of productive possibilities for further research and analysis which might move the conversation closer to answering this question. I have listed some of the possibilities below.

For further research:

- Develop a complex, nuanced and robust definition of listening / unpack the concept of listening
- Research into activities explicitly organised around listening across differences (eg. SULHA Listening Circles, Living Libraries, the Babel Chorus, Coffee with a Palestinian Nakba event, audiencing 'Fear of a Brown Planet' performances). How do organizers and participants experience and understand these listening practices? What is the role of media / mediation in these activities?
- How are media interventions and alternative media heard? Do practitioners feel they have been listened to? How do they know? Does it matter?
- How do media producers understand themselves as listeners? As facilitators of listening?

- How is listening mediated?
- How is listening learned or inculcated? How might we understand listening as a cultural literacy?
- Methodology: how can we document and analyse political 'listening'? Listening across differences?
- Explore the place of 'listening' in debates on communication rights at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).