

Beyond Voice: Prospects and Challenges of Listening in Democracy

A one-day interdisciplinary symposium jointly organised by the University of Canberra's Centre for Deliberative Democracy and News & Media Research Centre in collaboration with the University of New South Wales.

Conveners: Selen Ercan (UC), Kerry McCallum (UC) and Tanja Dreher (UNSW).



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Symposium Overview

Democracy is commonly associated with finding a voice, speaking up and out, making oneself heard. The crucial role of listening in this process is often neglected or merely given lip-service. Listening is important for voice to operate not only as speech but as communication. It is an important theme in both democracy and media studies particularly in a time characterised by increasing opportunities for communication in both online and offline settings.

This interdisciplinary workshop brings together scholars from both fields to explore the prospects and challenges of listening in contemporary democracies. It seeks to examine political listening in diverse settings and policy contexts such as environmental politics, identity politics and Indigenous affairs. Using case studies from these and other policy areas, the workshop will respond to the following questions:

- What are the normative and practical conditions for effective listening in a democracy?
- Can a digital media environment realise its promise to foster political listening?
- How do marginalised communities innovate to encourage political listening?
- What are the theoretical and empirical issues that media and democracy scholars face when studying the prospects for listening in a democracy?
- Are there political contexts or issues when listening is not suitable, desirable, too difficult?
- How can we listen to those with no voice (for example nonhuman nature, future generations)?

Speakers

Emily Beausoloeil (Massey University), Romand Coles (Australian Catholic University), Nicole Curato (University of Canberra), Tanja Dreher (University of New South Wales), John Dryzek (University of Canberra), Selen Ercan (University of Canberra), Carolyn Hendriks (Australian National University), Kerry McCallum (University of Canberra), Cate Thill (University of Notre Dame Australia).

Symposium Program

9.00- 9.30	Arrival & Coffee
9.30-9.45	Welcome & Opening Remarks Selen Ercan (UC) & Kerry McCallum (UC)
9.45- 11	Panel 1: Listening and Democracy Chair: Selen Ercan Tanja Dreher (UNSW) Dissonance and Difference: Key concepts for listening and democracy John Dryzek (UC), Listening in the deliberative system
11- 11.30	Morning tea
11.30-12.45	Panel 2: Listening to Marginalised/Unspeakable Chair: Tanja Dreher Emily Beausoleil (Massey University) Listening to Claims of Structural Injustice Nicole Curato (UC) Listening to the Unspeakable: Deliberative democracy and the problem of misery
12.45- 1.30	Lunch
1.30-2.45	Panel 3: Listening in Difficult Policy Contexts Chair: Emily Beausoleil Kerry McCallum (UC) Mediating Critical Conversations: Listening in the Royal Commission into institutional responses to child sexual abuse Carolyn Hendriks (ANU), Selen Ercan (UC), Sonya Duus (UC) Everyday Listening: How citizens listen to each other in polarised debates
2.45-3.00	Afternoon tea
3.00-4.15	Panel 4: Innovating New Modes of Listening Chair: John Dryzek Romand Coles (ACU), Dramatic Receptivity in a Time of Anti-Receptive Shock Politics Cate Thill (University of Notre Dame Australia), Listening with Recognition for Social Justice
4.15- 5.00	Beyond Voice: Next Steps for Listening Research Facilitator: Kerry McCallum (UC)

Abstracts

Listening to Claims of Structural Injustice

Emily Beausoleil (Massey University)

Listening appears as difficult to achieve as it is crucial to democratic life. This is particularly true in conditions of inequality, where dominant groups benefit from long histories and habits of inattention and, when enlisted, unethical responses of denial, defensiveness, and resentment. What, then, might enable listening in such contexts? To answer this question, this paper sets itself three tasks: first, it develops an account of listening, particularly in the context of structural injustice. Second, it interrogates how inhabiting positions of relative advantage shapes whether and how people listen to such claims. And third, it explores the implications this has for the design of democratic processes that seek to engage advantaged groups regarding structural injustice. Tracing its way through all three of these endeavours in the longer paper is the specific case of growing socioeconomic inequality in Aotearoa New Zealand – the fastest growing than any other OECD country – as well as the concerted and tireless work of eleven organisations across the country seeking to reach, move, and mobilize various communities to address it.

Listening to the Unspeakable: Deliberative democracy and the problem of misery

Nicole Curato (University of Canberra)

My presentation is based on my book project entitled *Democracy in a Time of Misery: From Slow Violence to Deliberative Politics*. The book puts forward an ethnographically-inspired theory of deliberative democracy that is responsive to ‘unspeakable’ problems of suffering, pain, and dispossession. This is based on my three-year fieldwork with disaster-affected communities in the Philippines. I begin the presentation by problematizing the complex relationship between misery and deliberative democracy’s focus on voice. Unlike most contexts where voice is a desirable resource, the literature on social suffering is defined by the tensions between the ethics of silence and the ethics of voice. I propose a polyphonic conception of democracy to bridge these tensions. A polyphonic conception not only foregrounds the range of speech cultures in deliberative practice but also its extra-linguistic components which includes reflection, listening, bearing witness, and everyday deeds. For this workshop, I will focus on listening and bearing witness, and theorize how these components can cultivate a deliberative stance among global spectators and distant sufferers.

I am fairly new to the field of listening, so I am looking forward to comments that challenge, inspire, and speak to my work on democracy and misery.

Listening in the deliberative system

John Dryzek (University of Canberra)

The reflection that is at the heart of deliberative democracy requires effective listening. In light of a distributed account of virtues within a deliberative system, reflection (and so listening) may be sought in different locations from justification in the system. These reflective locations, involving for example lay citizen deliberation as opposed to partisan justification, may also be able to enhance listening to the nonhuman world and future humans who otherwise have trouble being heard.

Everyday Listening: How citizens listen to each other in polarised debates

Carolyn Hendriks (Australian National University), Selen Ercan, Sonya Duus (University of Canberra)

This paper examines the everyday modes of listening that occur between citizens in the public sphere when polarised policy issues are at stake. It considers the various roles that these more informal and sometimes even accidental modes of listening play in a democracy understood in deliberative terms. For empirical insights, the paper analyses a case study of a polarised debate playing out in several small communities in regional Australia on a proposed coal seam gas project. The in-depth case analysis reveals that in polarised contexts citizens do listen to each other, yet the form and function of listening differ from conventional understandings of listening. The research identifies five types of everyday listening that occur within and across polarised groups: enclave, monitory, transformative, social and accidental listening. The research finds that in a polarised context, everyday listening involves like-minded citizens connecting with each other, and being strategic towards opponents and the public. Other more nuanced forms of everyday listening between those who disagree with each other are also uncovered. We discuss the role of each type of listening for democracy and conclude that in polarised settings, both formal and informal mechanisms may be required to break down listening barriers, and foster more diverse and open-minded listening between diverse publics.

Dramatic Receptivity in a Time of Anti-Receptive Shock Politics

Romand Coles (Australian Catholic University)

In the United States today, we are witnessing a sublimely hyperbolic form of cultural shock and awe. This form combines radical unanswerability (e.g., a regime of ceaselessly contradictory utterances, unaccountable to its own tweets moments before, let alone receptivity to others) with aggressive and unabashed assertions of ‘shock doctrine’ (e.g., a regime that initiates harsh talk about Puerto Rico’s debts and obligations before the flood waters have receded). In such contexts, how might we foster the modes of listening, receptivity and responsiveness across difficult differences that are so integral to generating broad democratic coalitions and political powers necessary for resistance and transformation for the better?

In this presentation, I offer a theory of dramatic receptivity. By this I mean not so much those types of receptivity and responsiveness that are cultivated in quotidian face to face practices and relationships, but rather those which move boldly into broader public spaces and spheres. Dramatic receptivity, I suggest, acts in tremendously surprising ways that tend to relax and disarm both shock culture and more pervasive forms of defensiveness and indifference. It simultaneously employs political arts that draw people into dialogical engagements that open unexpected possibilities for a more inclusive democratic politics of complex and plural commonwealth. Extensively engaging the works of theatre director and theorist Augusto Boal, and drawing upon insights from Naomi Klein and Sigmund Freud, I seek to advance large-scale forms of street politics that move beyond the imaginary of protestors shouting into bull horn, and toward experimentation with assemblies of dramatic receptivity.

Dissonance and Difference: Key concepts for listening and democracy

Tanja Dreher (University of New South Wales)

Recent scholarship and practice in media studies and in political theory has engaged with the conventionally under-valued practices, ethics and politics of political listening. For both disciplines, Susan Bickford's pathbreaking book *The Dissonance of Democracy* (1996) has been a vital resource. In this paper I focus on two of the key concepts explored by Bickford – dissonance and difference – and argue for their continued relevance as the scholarship on listening and democracy develops. First, I discuss the importance of dissonance, as opposed to consensus, with reference to the Huffington Post's 'Listen to America' tour following the election of US President Donald Trump. Secondly, I draw on Bickford's interest in difference and critical race feminisms to analyse the twitter-based project Indigenous Health MayDay (#IHMAYDay). Both examples underscore the need for unsettling and shifting entrenched hierarchies of speaking and listening and close attention to power relations and colonial legacies.

Mediating Critical Conversations: Listening in the Royal Commission into institutional responses to child sexual abuse

Kerry McCallum (University of Canberra)

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (RCIRCSA) (2013-17) offers an unprecedented opportunity to investigate the role of media in commissions of inquiry at a time of profound change in the global media landscape. This paper will draw on a political listening framework (Dreher 2009) to examine the Royal Commission as a 'mediated national conversation'. The paper seeks to explain the role and significance of media practices in this national-level 'witnessing' through an examination of the communicative dimensions of the RCIRCSA. In media and communication theory, 'Witnessing is an intricately tangled practice. It raises questions of truth and experience, presence and absence, death and pain, seeing and saying, and the trustworthiness of perception – in short, fundamental questions of communication' (Peters 2001: 707). The paper will introduce a new project that is analysing the royal commission's use of emerging digital technologies and innovative organisational procedures to 'bear witness' to the previously silenced voices of child abuse victims. The research draws on the commission's

extensive web-based archive of documents, public hearing transcripts, media releases and speeches by its Chair, to establish a detailed description of the commission's media-related practices. It will examine at both national and local levels how individuals, affected communities and advocacy organisations used diverse media platforms to connect and have their voices heard in this critical national conversation, to shift public understanding of child sexual abuse, and prevent future institutional failings. At the same time, the unbounded nature of the digital media environment poses challenging questions about the extent to which national listening events such as the Royal Commission can deliver on public expectations and ensure justice is upheld for victims of child sexual abuse in institutional contexts.

The paper is co-authored with Lisa Waller (Deakin University), Tanja Dreher (University of New South Wales), Kristy Hess (Deakin University), and Eli Skogerbø (University of Oslo)

Listening with Recognition for Social Justice

Cate Thill (University of Notre Dame Australia)

Although recognition has been the dominant framework for understanding the democratic struggles of cultural, social and political movements over the past two decades, nevertheless the concept of listening addresses a significant gap in this framework and offers a more transformative alternative. Across its many different formulations, conceptions of recognition fail to address the question of how recognition claims get heard. The tacit assumption is that the moral force of demands will somehow produce the outcome of recognition without careful analysis of the *process* between claims and outcomes. Further, drawing on the work of Glean Sean Coulthard (2014), I demonstrate that the framework of recognition is affirmative and assimilationist rather than transformative. While they argue for a politics of refusal and self-recognition, however, this decolonizing strategy alone leaves the onus for change on Indigenous peoples. I argue that social justice-oriented listening opens the possibility of more transformative responses to the politics of refusal and self-recognition.

While there are recognized challenges to applying recognition in practice, I argue that social-justice oriented listening is a useful methodology to address these challenges. It provides a framework for understanding how recognition claims get heard, which challenges established relations of power and privilege and thereby opens the possibility of responding to subjugated knowledge claims on their own terms. In this paper, I apply social justice-oriented listening to examine the extent to which the recognition claims of the First Peoples Disability Network Australia (FPDN) have been listened to. FPDN is an advocacy organization that is both governed by and gives voice to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with lived experience of disability. This important case study amplifies the transformative contributions of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Disabled Persons Organisation (DPO) to democratizing the policy process and its resistance to the routine framing of First Peoples and people with disability as objects of policy.

Participants

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