

## Media, multiculturalism and the politics of listening

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### ***Abstract***

*To date both research and policy on media and cultural diversity have emphasised questions of speaking, whether in mainstream, community or diaspora media. There is also a vast literature examining questions of representation, including stereotyping, racialisation, hybridisation and self-representations. This paper extends these discussions to focus on questions of listening. Attention to listening provokes important questions about media and multiculturalism: How do media enable or constrain listening across difference? How can a diversity of voices be heard in the media? Drawing on recent work in ethics and political theory, this paper explores the productive possibilities of a shift from the politics of representation to a politics of listening in both media studies and media advocacy work concerned with understanding across differences. To highlight listening shifts the focus and responsibility for change from marginalised voices and on to the conventions, institutions and privileges which shape who and what can be heard in media.*

This paper explores the productive possibilities of a focus on listening for both research and strategy around media and multiculturalism. Three vignettes illustrate the importance and the value of analysing listening.

The first story concerns a training workshop and was told to me by a social worker who works in a call centre. The scenario that the social workers and service providers were asked to discuss went something like this: a woman phones the call centre asking for assistance in dealing with correspondence from the relevant department. The Customer Service Officer (CSO) asks the client to go through the translation service – the CSO says, “I can’t understand you”. The customer refuses to use the

translation service, saying her English is perfectly adequate. She says that the CSO needs to listen carefully, needs to try harder. The social workers spent a long time discussing the scenario, what they would do, what are the various rights and responsibilities. My friend who told me the story felt that to insist on using a translator would be to violate the clients' right to refuse service.

The second vignette refers to a performance by the Auburn Poets Group in western Sydney, organised as part of the Sydney Writers' Festival. The performance was based on readings of the poet Rumi to coincide with UNESCO's International Year of Rumi, marking 800 years since the birth of the most revered of Sufi poets. Rumi lived in the lands that are now Turkey and Afghanistan, and is popular throughout the Muslim world. The performance was in English, Farsi Dari, Turkish, and Arabic and included music. Some sections were translated, with an English version recited in conjunction with a reading in Farsi, Turkish or Arabic, but most sections were not, so over the hour and a half of the performance, there was a considerable amount of listening to a performance that couldn't be fully understood at the level of language. What made it particularly interesting was the wide range of languages in use, so that not only the audience but also all of the performers were, at least at some stage in the proceedings, listening without fully understanding the words. Even the director, Alissar Chidiac, was directing what she did not fully understand. Everyone experienced moments of quiet attention, everyone moved in and out of modes and levels of listening. The performance struck me as an exercise in a politics of listening – in quiet and in contemplation and in patience and witnessing and respect and listening itself as a contribution to a beautiful and moving experience.

The final example concerns the National Apology to the Stolen Generations delivered by the Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, on February 12, 2008. In Parliament House in Canberra, the PM spoke, and around the country people gathered in front of TV screens and radios to listen. Large crowds and small groups maintained an attentive silence during the speech, most erupted into applause, tears and cheering as the PM concluded. When the Leader of the Opposition, Brendan Nelson, made his speech in response, the dynamics of listening were very different. The evening news

showed footage of audience members turning their backs on TV screens in public spaces across the country. In Perth the audience demanded that the TV feed be switched off, in other gatherings the speech was drowned out by clapping. In Parliament House where I witnessed the apology, I left the room before groups of people throughout the room turned their backs. Around Australia hundreds if not thousands of people refused to listen to significant sections of Brendan Nelson's speech.

These vignettes suggest some of the issues at stake in paying attention to listening – the crucial role of listening in engaging across differences, the ways in which listening can either enable or constrain another's ability to speak freely, the ways in which a refusal to listen can operate as an exercise of power and privilege, and also as protest, the creative and ethical possibilities produced by attentive and respectful listening, the ways in which institutional structures and conventions can shape relations of speaking and listening. Yet these examples have relatively little to say about media. The aim of this paper is to explore the ways in which the dynamics, dilemmas and possibilities of listening highlighted in the examples above might inform innovative and productive thinking about media and multiculturalism. This requires an expanded sense of what is at stake in listening across differences – moving from the issues of language and translation highlighted by the first two examples, to engage with concerns of discourse and mediation, social communication, practice and exchange.

### ***The neglected question of listening***

To date both research and policy on media and cultural diversity have emphasised questions of speaking, whether in mainstream, community or diaspora media. There is also a vast literature examining questions of representation including stereotyping, racialisation, hybridisation and self-representations. Where research and policy around media and multiculturalism have been interested to address racism or misrepresentation in media, and to promote an inclusive media space, the emphasis has largely been on questions of speaking and representation – from giving “voice to the voiceless” through community media to ensuring ethical reporting of cultural diversity and greater attention to the dynamics and dilemmas of representing “the

Other”. Drawing on long debates within Cultural Studies and Anthropology, Elfriede Fuersich (2002) advocates a “politics of representation” which would problematise the conventions of representation themselves. Fuersich provides a highly developed account of the “politics of representation” initially advocated, although only loosely defined, by Stuart Hall (1997). In regards to representing the “other”, Fuersich argues for representation strategies which reveal the conditions of production, which actively seek out “other” voices and which dispense with closed narrative structures in favour of fluidity and complexity. Media Studies work has thus contributed a great deal to the important task of thinking through the ethics and politics of speaking across differences through media – both in terms of self-representation and in representing others.

While the attention to speaking and the politics of representation has produced vital insights and productive strategies for media and multiculturalism, it has largely neglected the processes of listening which can enable or constrain, engage and shape speaking. The neglect of listening is hardly unique to the study of media – Susan Bickford (1996) has analysed the near absence of listening in political theory, while Levin (1989) has explored the dominance of visual rather than aural metaphors in modernity. Where both media research and media policy have recently emphasised questions of speaking and representation, there is a need to also attend to questions of how previously marginalised voices can be heard. It is important to acknowledge the limitations as well as the significant insights gained from the well-established critique of media representations and a focus on opportunities for marginalised voices to ‘speak up’. Where much media critique and working for change has been broadly underpinned by a politics of speaking and representation, I argue for a wider framework of speaking *and* listening, with an emphasis on listening to shift the focus and responsibility for developing multicultural media.

My interest in listening arises in part from several years of research on and participation in strategies of ‘speaking up and talking back’ to racialised news reporting developed by Arab and Muslim communities in Australia after September 11, 2001 (see Dreher 2003, 2006, Dreher and Simmons 2006). Having facilitated a

dozen media skills workshops for a wide range of community groups and analysed the diverse and creative strategies adopted by people working with racialised communities, it has become quite clear to me that teaching people subjected to news racism how to speak up in the media also means teaching all the reasons that stories they are interested in can't be heard, and all the things that the 'mainstream audience' isn't interested in listening to.

A number of Muslim Australians who are experienced media operators have written eloquently of the dilemmas of listening and being heard which shape and constrain the ability to speak in the mainstream media. Shakira Hussein (forthcoming) writes that Muslim women face both a "double bind" and a "double responsibility":

Muslim women feel constrained against dissatisfaction with gender norms within their communities by the likelihood that their voices will be appropriated by those hostile to Muslims in general. Thus while the 'double responsibility' impels a particular type of speech, the 'double bind' generates silence. (Hussein, forthcoming, n.p.)

Alia Imtoul (2005) argues that Muslim women are impelled to speak such that it becomes a wearisome obligation – and speakers are compelled to respond to stereotypes of oppression with yet more stereotypes. Hussein writes that the constant invitation to speak operates not as a platform:

...from which Muslim women can discuss their fears, frustrations and hopes for the future", rather media and public discussion on gender and Islam acts as a "catch-22 confronting Muslim women: when they do wish to speak out against anti-Muslim discrimination and harassment, they do so with the encouragement and support of Muslim communities, but are too often treated with hostility or indifference by those outside those communities. On the other hand, if they wish to speak about dysfunctional gender norms within Muslim communities, they have little difficulty in finding an audience among non-Muslims, but their voices are appropriated and woven into anti-Muslim discourse, and they risk being labelled as disloyal by some members of their own communities. (Hussein, forthcoming, n.p.)

Waleed Aly (2007), a highly experienced media commentator and opinion writer, argues that terms such as 'moderate Muslim' and 'fundamentalism' are actually

meaningless, despite their widespread use in Australia's mainstream media. According to Aly, this creates an intractable dilemma, whereby Australian Muslims must use these meaningless terms in order to be heard in the media, and yet the very meaninglessness of the terms creates "layer upon layer of mutual confusion and misunderstanding". The dilemmas confronting Muslims in the Australian media are not simply questions of speaking – there is no shortage of articulate and savvy spokespeople and commentators – but more importantly the difficulties of being heard. The ability to speak in the media is surely shaped by the perceived interests of the audience and what media producers assume that the audience will listen to. Entrenched news values and existing story agendas often work to shape listening and speaking – focusing on addressing the stereotypes and concerns of a 'mainstream' audience rather than providing an open forum for the marginalised to speak up.

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 interventions?

### *A politics of listening*

If the politics of representation and speaking is a necessary but limited framework for research and strategy around media and multiculturalism, what might a politics of listening entail? Drawing on recent work in ethics and political theory, I begin to outline the productive possibilities of a shift from the politics of representation to a politics of listening. Bickford provides perhaps the most comprehensive and productive exploration of the 'politics of listening' in her work on listening, conflict and citizenship, *The Dissonance of Democracy* (1996). Bickford argues that political theory has consistently focused on the politics of speaking, but paid scant attention to listening. In addressing this omission, Bickford highlights the productive and

challenging implications of theorising 'listening'. Crucially, attention to listening shifts the focus and responsibility for change from marginalised voices and on to the conventions, institutions and privileges which shape who and what can be heard in media.

Media sociologist Charles Husband has long argued for a "Right to be Understood" (1996, 2000) to complement the (assumed) right to communicate in a "multi-ethnic public sphere". The right to be understood would confer upon all a crucial obligation – to actively seek to comprehend the Other. More recently Downing, drawing on Husband's work, has argued that that constructive cultural change is contingent on engendering "a sense of obligation to listen" to those historically marginalised from public communication (2007). Downing describes this "active listening" as a key component of citizenship. Husband's conception of the right to be understood is a collective right and obligation intended to balance the individualism and egocentrism inherent in an emphasis on communication rights as "free speech". For Husband, a multi-ethnic public sphere requires not just the privileges of speaking but also the obligations and responsibilities of seeking understanding:

The right to communicate in this third generation mode carries with it onerous duties. The right to be understood requires that all accept the burden of trying to understand. Without the inclusion of the subordinate claim of the right to be understood the right to communicate becomes too easily a unidirectional and egocentric democracy of Babel. (Husband 1996)

Bickford suggests that we must begin with a realisation that how we listen shapes the ways in which others can speak and be heard. She draws on the philosopher Hannah Arendt's argument "that others' perceptions of us affect how we can be present in the political realm" and feminist concerns "that patterns of oppression and inequality result in the systematic distortion of some people's appearance and audibility" (Bickford, 1996, p. 5). In a chapter devoted to the contributions of critical race feminism, Bickford offers a compelling argument for the responsibility to listen:

Just as speakers must reflect on how to speak (and what to say), listeners must be self-conscious about how they listen (and what they hear). Taking responsibility for listening, as an active and creative process, might serve to undermine certain hierarchies of

language and voice. If feminist theorists are right that “silence and silencing begins with the dominating enforcement of linguistic conventions (Alarcon 1990, 363) – that is, if oppression happens partly through not hearing certain kinds of expressions from certain kinds of people – then perhaps the reverse is true as well: a particular kind of listening can serve to break up linguistic conventions and create a public realm where a plurality of voices, faces, and languages can be heard and seen and spoken. (Bickford 1996, p.129)

Bickford’s argument here resonates with the two vignettes which opened this paper – and demonstrates the productive possibilities of a shift from attention to speaking to the responsibilities of listening. It suggests that an equitable speaking and listening exchange requires responsibility for the call centre CSO to actively listen and seek understanding, and acknowledges that the quiet attention produced by the Rumi performance might indeed create a more open model for speaking and listening. The argument for a responsibility to listen is central to my conception of the politics of listening and its productive potential. However, there is a need to develop Bickford’s analysis beyond the attention to differences of language addressed here, and to engage also with listening and speaking across differences of ideology, culture, religion, identity, etc.

Alongside this shift in responsibility, a politics of listening requires a muting of the inner voice in order to allow an openness to the Other. As Bickford reminds us, listening requires the listener to quiet their inner voice, and to listen is to leave oneself open to persuasion. Listening thus entails an incompleteness, an openness to difference. To extend Bickford’s emphasis on listening as active, we might also analyse the refusal to listen as active, as a refusal to quiet the inner voice or to open up a possibility of connection with the Other. Indeed, a refusal to listen might be seen as a manifestation of privilege and power – it is not simply absence or lack or indifference but rather an active exercise of the privilege not to hear.

Audrey Thompson (2003) also engages debates within feminism and antiracism and argues that “the call to listen is a radical call. It is a demand not just to register or include the voices of women of color but to change how we as white women act and



think. ... Inclusion without influence is not enough” (p.89). She offers a deliberately provocative account of what is required for the privileged to “rethink patterns of listening”:

You need to learn to become unintrusive, unimportant, patient to the point of tears, while at the same time open to learning any possible lessons. You will also have to come to terms with the sense of alienation, of not belonging, of having your world thoroughly disrupted, having it criticised and scrutinised from the point of view of those who have been harmed by it, having important concepts central to it dismissed, being viewed with mistrust, being seen as of no consequence except as an object of mistrust. (Thompson, 2003, p. 89)

For those who are accustomed to speaking, a politics of listening entails a silencing of voice so as to make room for others to be heard. As Thompson insists, this means listening, not only to unfamiliar languages, but also to painful and confronting stories, histories and criticisms. Learning to listen means “learning to stay with the hard questions” (Thompson 2003, p.91). This is possible only when those accustomed to setting the agenda and to having their interests shape the interactions are prepared to put those expectations aside.

Bickford, however, argues against an understanding of listening as self-abnegation:

Rather, in listening I must actively *be with* others. Listening as an act of concentration means that *for the moment* I make myself the background, the horizon, and the speaker the figure I concentrate on. This action is different from trying to make myself an absence that does not impose on the other. [...] That is, we cannot hear our inner voice and the other’s voice at the same volume. [...] Listening is not passive, nor does it require the assumption of substantial shared interests or the suspension of strategic motives. Rather, it involves an active willingness to construct certain relations of attention, to form an ‘auditory Gestalt’ in which neither of us, as parts of the whole structure, has meaning without the Other. Listening to another person cannot mean abnegating oneself; we cannot but hear *as* ourselves, against the background of who we are. But without moving ourselves to the background, we cannot hear another at all. [...] This interdependence, in which speaker and listener are different-but-equal participants, seems particularly apt for describing listening as a practice of citizenship. It makes

listening, and not simply speaking, a matter of agency.(Bickford 1996, p. 23 - 34)

Thus a politics of listening does not simply allow an Other to speak, but rather foregrounds interaction, exchange and interdependence. This may well entail a shifting of privilege and power, but it also requires an active engagement.

Listening is challenging in that it opens up possibilities – for learning and connection, but also for challenge, conflict, dissonance and persuasion. The possibility for change is also a ceding of control and certainty. Active, attentive listening then involves not simply what we want to hear, but also allowing possibilities for change and persuasion, for different outcomes and decisions, for learning and for being proved wrong. Thus political listening “demands that we resist the desire for complete control” (Bickford 1996, p.5) in favour of interaction. As Cynthia Cockburn (2007) reminds us, listening can mean stepping outside the ordinary and your comfort zone. A focus on listening highlights incompleteness and connection rather than knowing and mastery. In this sense listening might entail the recognition of not knowing as well as knowing. Opening up possibilities through listening can entail a decentring and denaturalising, it might mean unlearning as well as learning. Thus listening can be a burden and can require work and effort. For those who enjoy the prerogative of not listening, it means giving up that privilege. Listening is open to learning and joy and play but also to being challenged. This entails not merely polite conversation or consensus, but also risk and conflict, the possibilities of discomfort and difficulty rather than absolute safety and security. At its most simple, Bickford’s “bias towards listening” is oriented simply to “keeping the conditions for action open” (1996, p. 40).

### ***Questions for research and strategy on media and multiculturalism***

A focus on listening provokes many productive questions around media and multiculturalism. As this work is highly underdeveloped, there are likely to be many more interesting questions than there are easy answers, or even available models for pursuing answers. It is also worth noting here Bickford’s insistence that we do not choose to focus solely on either listening or speaking – of course both are crucial. But

given the conventional neglect of listening in political theory and in media studies, and the over-emphasis on speaking, there is a strong argument for a shift of focus.

Bickford's groundbreaking work pays scant attention to the role of media in political listening – an omission which is hardly surprising given the conventional neglect of media in political theory (Couldry, 2006). When she does address media, in a brief epilogue, Bickford relies on highly negative assessments of media culture as 'dumbing down' political debate and discouraging participation. Instead, she sees hope in models such as televised town hall meetings and participatory media. While these are certainly interesting suggestions – they ironically foreground greater opportunities for citizens to speak rather than developing the emphasis on listening explored throughout the book. There is thus much work to be done to develop a framework of listening which acknowledges the central place of media in contemporary social and political life. As well as thinking about how media might provide more opportunities for more people to speak, we need also to think about how to change conventions and hierarchies of listening – how can the ways in which media shape listening across differences be shifted and contested and changed?

Recent research on Australia's Special Broadcasting Service suggests the ways in which subtitling practices may contribute to listening across differences of language and an openness to Otherness and processes of translation (Ang & Hawkins, 2008). In recent Australian research several thought-provoking accounts of media-making have drawn on relational ethics. In an analysis of documentary television, Gay Hawkins draws on Levinas to put forward a concept of responsibility as "response-ability" or "*responding to* and seeking to understand the experience of the other" (2001, p.416). Poynting, Noble, Tabar & Collins (2004, p.250) contend that an ethics of care and reciprocity is necessary to counter the production of fear and insecurity in the face of cultural differences. Ghassan Hage (2003) argues for an ethics which includes Lebanese-Australians as the imagined *audience* and not merely the objects of news reporting. Hage writes that this requires a shift from imagining news as "a conversation between White Australians about the 'Lebanese problem' to asking what Lebanese-Australians might expect of reporting" (Hage, 2003, p.77). The alternative

is an unethical journalism which rests on an image of the audience which excludes “Lebanese” from the imaginary of what it means to be Australian, or to be human (ibid, p.78). These arguments all suggest something of the importance of ‘listening’ for changing news and developing ethical media, albeit in very different ways.

Husband has provided perhaps the most developed framework for engaging with media, multiculturalism and listening. Like Bickford, Husband argues that liberal democratic theory offers only very limited resources for analysing and strategising around listening. Where Bickford turns to critical race feminism, Husband draws on the rights traditions developed in Africa. Both emphasise solidarity, interconnectedness and intersubjectivity. Husband writes:

In both of these third generation rights there is a practical requirement for the recognition of difference without pre-judgement, and a proactive engagement with the interests of the other. Certainly this requires a major transformation from the individualistic ego-ethno-centric, *Weltanschauung* that is current in Western democracies; and particularly exaggerated through neo-liberal economic theory. The ethos of solidarity, at the core of the project I am outlining, requires a moral sensibility which underpins a reflexive self-consciousness in regard to in-group values, and an imaginative recognition of the fundamental solidarity of self with others (1996, p. 4).

Where Husband is keen to explore the implications of this re-thinking at the level of media policy, regulation and political economy, it is also important to expand the analysis to engage with listening in research around media professional practices, audiences and media cultures – in fact in ‘media practices’ as broadly conceived (see Couldry, 2006).

Bickford provides us with a useful starting point: “Just as the megastate disposes us toward certain kinds of citizenship, the media shapes us as certain kinds of listeners. [...] What kinds of attention do various media foster, what kind of citizens do they work to construct, what forms of power do they produce or prevent? (1996, p.180) To emphasise the context of multiculturalism and difference, we might ask: How do media enable or constrain listening across difference? How can a diversity of voices

be heard in the media? Which media forms or spaces encourage listening and action across differences? Where and how do media sustain privileges of refusing to listen?

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, p.21)

Clearly then, there is much work to be done to develop a research agenda around media, multiculturalism and the politics of listening. While this is a complex and challenging task, I nevertheless hope that this paper has suggested something of the importance and the value of greater attention to the dynamics and the dilemmas of listening across difference in and through media. This shift in focus offers innovative possibilities for research, policy and strategy. Perhaps most importantly, it is a shift which moves some of the burden of responsibility for justice and change in media from marginalised voices, and brings in to focus privileged individuals and powerful institutions.

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