Listening Publics
For Adam, Madeleine and Lance
Listening Publics
The Politics and Experience of Listening in the Media Age

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## Contents

_Acknowledgements_  vi

*Preface*  viii

Listening Overlooked  1

1 Listening In and Listening Out  3

2 The Modernization of Listening  22

Listening in the Age of Spectacle  51

3 Listening in Good Faith: Recording, Representation and the Real  53

4 Listening Amid the Noise of Modernity  72

5 Listening Live: The Politics and Experience of the Radiogenic Ways of Listening  92

6 The Privatization of the Listening Public  111

7 The Politics and Practices of Collective Listening  113

Listening in the Public Sphere  132

8 The Public Sphere as Auditorium  157

9 Media and the Ethics of Listening  159

*Notes*  182

*References*  200

*Index*  211
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Preface

This book is about listening in the modern mediated public sphere. It traces how listening changes in relation to successive media forms and how the act of listening figures in modern public life. In so doing, it deals with an aspect of modern life that is ubiquitous and significant – but that has been strangely overlooked. Ever since the late nineteenth century, the recording, manipulation and transmission of sound has opened up the possibility of new industries, new prospects for the commodification of sound, new artistic practices, new cultures of listening, new subjectivities and, not least, new publics. And yet listening has been a curiously absent category in most treatments of media history and in most theorizations of the public sphere. It is a curious absence because listening is actually right at the heart of questions of communication and public life. Listening is essential to the engagement with most of our media, albeit that the act of listening which is embedded in the word ‘audience’ is rarely acknowledged. It is a no less curious absence in theories of the public sphere, where the objective of political agency is often characterized as being to find a voice – which surely implies finding a public that will listen, and that has a will to listen.

The starting point for this book is the idea that the arrival of sound media gradually ‘re-sounded’ the modern public sphere that had been ‘de-aural-ized’ in the age of print, and that this has had profound consequences for the conduct and experience of public life, not least in the way in which the cultures and practices of listening have come to take on a renewed public significance alongside those of reading and looking. The central argument is that thinking about listening as an activity in public life opens up profound questions for the understanding of mediated experience, public participation and civic engagement. In short, Listening Publics aims to reveal listening as a critical category that can enhance our understanding of modern media, politics and experience.

Kate Lacey, Brighton, June 2012
Listening Overlooked
1 Listening In and Listening Out

Listening has long been overlooked in studies of the media as well as in conceptualizations of the public sphere. It is a curious oversight, given the centrality of listening to communicative, experiential and public life. The aim of these first two chapters is to offer an overview of just how critical is the role of listening in mediated public life.

The curious neglect of listening in relation to media and the public sphere has a long and complex history, but is crucially bound up with a cultural hierarchy of the senses that privileges the visual over the auditory (witness the trio of visual metaphors in the paragraph above!), and a logocentric frame in which listening is encoded as passive in opposition to the acts of writing, reading and speech. This widespread association of listening with passivity has rightly been called ‘one of the worst ideas ever to infest cultural criticism’ (Peters 2006: 124), and this book will present ample historical and theoretical evidence to challenge that association. In so doing, it will also engage with the way in which the active/passive distinction is one of those critical and complex binaries that tends to be mapped all too easily onto other powerful (and often gendered) binaries, not least the public/private distinction. Indeed, it is the association of listening with passivity and with the private sphere that has surely hindered it being properly attended to either as a critical public disposition or as a political action.

Defining Terms

These central binary oppositions – active/passive, public/private – are conceptually problematic, often paradoxical, but remarkably persistent and powerful. Clearly there is little chance of arriving at a single definition of ‘public’ or ‘private’ to encompass all the contradictory uses; yet neither can the distinction simply be ignored, since it is clearly meaningful, for all its inconsistencies. They are not simply adjectives to describe the social world but rather ‘tools for arguments about and in that world’ (Gal 2002: 79). Such arguments include ideological and normative debates about the ‘proper’ separation of the spheres, with all the concomitant fears from either end of the political spectrum about the ‘colonization’ or ‘contamination’ of one sphere by the attributes and practices of the other. Though the terms
persist, their meaning is neither stable nor absolute, their referential content shifting according to context and perspective. Linguistic anthropologist Susan Gal (2002) has usefully suggested that the public/private divide – and, by extension, I would argue, the active/passive distinction – should be thought of less as a simple binary opposition than as a series of *fractal* distinctions, a recursive division that can be projected onto different social objects and in broader or narrower contexts, with often contradictory outcomes. For example, the dictionary definition recognizes listening as active in relation to hearing, yet listening at the same time is insistently described as passive in relation to other communicative actions. Similarly, the individual reception of impersonal public speech via public media in private spaces begins to illustrate the kind of complex and contradictory ways in which the terms are invoked against the backdrop of an ever-changing media landscape. The proliferation and variety of ways in which the terms have been invoked in different times and places have to be taken seriously while at the same time not mistaken for a single overarching distinction.

Of course the ‘activity’ of audiences has long since been acknowledged in terms of how people engage with the media and the variety of ‘readings’ they bring to bear on the texts they encounter. Audiences are understood to be ‘at work’ in accessing, decoding and mobilizing mediated communication. But contemporary reception studies have been fascinated by the television viewer, the film spectator, the reader of magazines, romances and newspapers and the user of web pages. There are astonishingly few studies of contemporary audiences as *listeners*, except perhaps as listeners to music – despite the fact that modern audience research began with the study of listeners to radio. So, while the notion of the active audience in principle extends to the listening audience, the absence of particular accounts of active listeners has served to perpetuate the commonsense understanding of listening as a passive mode of reception. And even if listening is recognized as an audience activity, the recognition has rarely been extended to thinking about the potential forms and consequences of that activity as a political phenomenon in the public sphere.

But if this project was initially born of a frustration with the neglect of listening in relation to the media and the public sphere, during the intervening years between conception and completion, it has been nurtured by a resurgent interest in the auditory – a veritable ‘sonic turn’ in cultural studies (Drobnik 2004: 10) – that is not unconnected to the increasingly prevalent place that the auditory plays in contemporary culture, in terms of wider access to the production, manipulation and consumption of sound in all its forms. Certainly this book is not unique in arguing that an acoustic
dimension be restored to the standard visualist histories of technological and social changes that have characterized the modern mediated public sphere. This book draws on and supplements some of those histories, but the focus is not on sound itself, nor sound technologies per se, but rather the way in which the new possibilities for recorded and transmitted sound shaped – and were shaped by – the idea of listening as a public act, and the consequences that had for what it means to be a member of the public. It is, then, the qualities, practices, experiences and interpretations of listening as a communicative activity in the public sphere that is the central concern.

Although the notion of the public sphere is no longer exclusively associated with the model that Habermas (1962/1991) set out, it is, nevertheless thanks to a creative translation of his term ‘Öffentlichkeit’ (literally, ‘openness’ or ‘publicness’) that the spatial metaphor of the ‘sphere’ is introduced into Anglophone discussions of politics and civil society (Peters 1993: 542–3). This accident of translation is perhaps particularly fortuitous for an analysis of listening as a public activity. Sound surrounds, and can be approached from any and every direction, whereas the visual field is fixed and has to be presented face-on. These different qualities of sound and vision are as much cultural constructs as they are descriptions of physical or physiological reality, but as such they have been enormously powerful as metaphors mobilized in competing models of subjectivity, communication and public life. The spherical character of acoustic space was particularly significant in the work of Marshall McLuhan who, since his early collaborations with the ‘communications group’ in Toronto, had contrasted it to the linearity of visual space in terms that will echo through the discussions that follow (Carpenter and McLuhan 1960; Schafer 2007: 83–4; Cavell 2010: 142–5). In *Law of Media*, written with his son Eric, he offered the following summary of what was at stake in the contrasting conceptualizations of space:

Visual space, created by intensifying and separating that sense from interplay with the others, is an infinite container, linear and continuous, homogenous and uniform. Acoustic space, always penetrated by tactility and other senses, is spherical, discontinuous, non-homogenous, resonant, and dynamic. Visual space is structured as static, abstract figure minus a ground; acoustic space is a flux in which figure and ground rub against and transform each other (McLuhan and McLuhan 1988: 33).

For McLuhan, visual space is an intellectual construct, a technological effect of alphabetic perception. Acoustic space, by contrast, is grounded in experience. Visual space is conceived as a unified field of perception; acoustic