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Smart radio and audio apps: the politics and paradoxes of listening to (anti-) social media.

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One of the interesting developments in mainstream radio, both on air and online in recent years, is the way in which it connects with social media – to the extent that it makes ever less sense to talk about them in separate terms (cf. Gazi et al, 2012; Bonini, 2014; Lacey 2008). The *tweets* that get read out on air, or the comments made on a station's *Facebook* page are no less a part of the radio 'text' than any of the other content. Similarly, the audio files posted on social media platforms are also in the business of broadcasting their content to dispersed or distant listeners. But it is also the case that these kinds of media convergence have long since been a part of the radio landscape. Broadcast radio was always already a multimedia text. Even in its most classical, 'golden age' guise, radio persistently re-mediated visual and textual as well as oral and sonic culture, and from its earliest days it always found ways to incorporate a variety of audience responses, both on air and off, and always generated a plethora of extra-textual phenomena. Some of these phenomena also produced forms of social networking around particular programmes or celebrities; and there have been radio forms, from DXing to CB radio, that can be seen as prescient incarnations of the current affordances of social media. It is certainly possible, furthermore, to make the case that it was radio broadcasting that paved the way for a continuous stream of information around the clock, available via mobile and ubiquitous technologies. In other words, radio has long since shared many (though not necessarily all) of the characteristics and attributes now associated with 'social media' (see Van Dijck and Poell, 2013, for a useful discussion of what they identify as a 'social media logic'). Certainly, whatever we say about the 'new media', we have to be careful about what we are claiming is precisely new, and it is always instructive to situate these new audio technologies in the context of much longer media histories.

Vocal Social Media

To that end, this article begins by interrogating the claims for novelty that abound in the promotional repertoires circulating around a growing number of social media that use sound and voice as the central medium of communication. This crop of audio social media applications appeal to users in terms of getting their voices heard loud and clear. Indeed, it is striking how often verbs like ‘shout’ and ‘boast’ and ‘brag’ are associated with microcasting platforms with such noisy names as *Shoutcast*, *Audioboom*, *Hubbub*, *Yappie*, *Boast* and *ShoutOmatic*. In other words, these vocal social media are often promoted in rather *anti-social* terms.

This is just one of the contradictions that comes to light in analysing the promotional discourses surrounding these new applications. Meanwhile, many of the new forms of online or ‘smart’ radio sell their services to listeners as offering ‘bespoke’ or ‘responsive’ programming (or ‘audiofeeds’), building up a *personal* listening experience that will meet their individual needs and predilections. The role of listening in this new media ecology is characterised, then, by similarly contradictory trends. Listening is increasingly personalised, privatised, masterable and measurable, but also newly shareable, networked and, potentially, public.

Although the online sharing of user-generated audio content enjoyed its first wave of public attention with the development of ‘podcasting’ around a decade ago, it is still true to say that the social media are predominantly associated with text and image (Lacey, 2013a). There is, of course, a long history of sharing music files, from the earliest days of pirated file sharing on platforms like *Napster*, until today; and most online video does come with a soundtrack of some sort (Nyre, 2008). But it is still possible for commentators to speak of sound as ‘the next big thing’ in social media as far as the spoken word is concerned (Bea, 2013; Wilson 2012). Many seem convinced that the race is on for developers to come up with something like ‘Instagram for audio’. Already there are applications like *Picle* that enable users to add a few seconds of sound to *Instagram* images, or *Audiotweets* that sounds out *Twitter* text as speech, or *SoundGecko* that turns any online document into audio. But the big prize is widely held to be a dedicated microblogging application for voice. None of the current versions has taken off to the same degree as their visual and graphical counterparts, at least in the English-speaking world. However in China, to give just one example, the *WeChat* (Weixin) multi-platform

app, which launched in 2011 and whose dominant feature is 'Voice chat', is winning users over from *Weibo* - around 300 million at the time of writing, making it probably the most-used microblogging site in the world. Its rapid adoption is at least in part because of its currently superior privacy settings in the constricted communication sphere in China (From Weibo, 2014; Svensson, 2014).

There is a great deal of volatility in the audioblogging marketplace, with lots of startups, takeovers, and rebrandings, as well as many rather shortlived experiments. For example, one of the more successful user-generated content (UGC) audio sharing sites, the location-based sound media app, *Audioboo*, was recently (June 2014) bought up by the investment group OneDelta, and rebranded as *Audioboom*. In advance of that takeover, the UGC social media aspect was downplayed in favour of providing more professionally produced content from major media corporations and sports organisations (London Stock Exchange, 2014). It now brands itself as 'Radio Reinvented' (although it is striking how its own shift from a microcasting to a broadcasting form does rather closely follow the pattern that radio followed during the first decades of the twentieth century). Nevertheless, despite the current fits and starts for audio social media, the normalisation of VoIP applications (Voice over internet Protocol) like *Skype* and *Viber*, and voice messaging via apps like *WhatsApp* as well as voice-based interaction with search engines, such as Apple's *Siri*, or *Google Voice Search*, together with the spread of voice chat applications, not least for multiplayer videogames (for example, *Vylo*, *Dolby Axon* and *C3*), suggests that there is a more fertile landscape developing for vocal social media to take root. The latest ripple of expectation surrounds the potential of wearable technology, not least the 'Apple Watch', in which keyboard functions are replaced by a microphone on a device that could be literally hand to mouth (Holmes, 2014).

This is not the place to engage in futurology or to speculate about why social audio applications have not (yet?) taken off in the way that texting and photo messaging have (cf. Alcorn, 2014; Athas, 2014). Nor does this article set out to analyse their adoption or usage. The aim is rather to investigate the promotional discursive frameworks of an indicative selection of these various new radio and radio-like applications for sharing speech online, and to interrogate what these discourses reveal to be at stake, in terms of the ongoing politics, experience and ethics of listening in a mediated world.

Sociable social media?

Although their names often suggest that audioblogging is about struggling to be heard above the babble of the crowd, a review of the taglines associated with these new applications reveals that the introduction of the voice is presented as really putting the social – or at least the sociable - back in to social media. *Hubbub FM*, which claims (wrongly, as it happens) to be ‘the first real sound social network on the web’, announces that ‘Sound Goes Social’; *Boast* declares it’s time to ‘Talk with Friends. For Real’; *Yappie* promises that its download will enable you to connect ‘in a way that is truly social’. At the heart of these claims are two key ideas. The first is that vocality is the key to individual expression. One app, *HearMeOut*, makes this abundantly clear with its tagline, ‘Your Voice. Your Personality. You’, in its attempt to persuade users that this is ‘the new way to share the real you’; while the Australian developers of *Voicebyte* claim their app brings to social networking the emotion and authenticity it has been lacking thus far in its reliance on text; or, as *Voisak* puts it in their caption, ‘Tell the story with more emotion and feelings’.

Another prominent feature of the marketing of these apps is the emphasis laid on the *ease* of communication. This might be highlighting the simplicity of the interface, as in *Chirbit*’s simple strapline, ‘Share Your Audio Easily’; or *Shoutomatic*’s injunction to ‘Stop Typing, Start Shouting!’. Alternatively, it might privilege the way in which vocalisation allows for messaging on the move and while multi-tasking, as when *Hubbub FM* promotes itself as ‘hands-free social networking’, or when the business-oriented *Voxer* app promises to ‘take efficiency to the next level’; or it might be to give the sense that the need for any sort of technological mediation is all but overcome, as in the instructions for how to record a *Yapp*: ‘simply say what’s on your mind, add a filter, and you’re good to go!’

It is not only producing messages in audio format that is supposed to be easier, but receiving them too. However, the fact that sound has to unfold in real time and can’t be captured in a still frame does pose particular challenges for audio applications, most of which do rely to a greater or lesser extent on some graphic or visual interface. Another way to get around the problem is simply to make the audio clip very short, something being tried, for example, by *SoBo* (Social Sound Board), for example, an audio-based app that aims to emulate the success of *Vine*, the six-second video-sharing platform.

All of this is about celebrating a more embodied and unmediated access to communication, and a rejection of the artifice and labour associated with the written word. More than one of these sites draws comparison with the onerous 140 taps required to send a conventional tweet, saying that you can get your message out there with just three taps, or even none at all. *Mixlr*, for example, sells its service with the phrase, 'Broadcast to the World with Just One Click'. There is a rhetoric of liberation from the machine, in this case most often expressed in terms of freedom from the tyranny of the keyboard and the expressive limitations of the written word. Just as with radio before it, much is also made of the possibility of listening in situations – mostly on the move or while doing other things - where it would be inconvenient to browse the web or type a text. There is an implicit egalitarianism suggested here too – for there are fewer technical and social barriers to speaking and listening than writing and reading, hence the focus on the *ease* of this form of communication. Again, there are echoes here from the early days of radio, when many commentators had hoped that a return to the 'natural' accessibility of speech would engage a wider range of the population than and reinvigorate the public sphere. There is also, clearly, a rhetoric of technological progress and a certain sense that sound will inevitably come to social media in the way that sound 'inevitably' came to film because we inhabit an audiovisual world. One of the straplines for *JustSayin'*, for example, the voice-led multimedia app that comedian Ricky Gervais launched in 2012, is 'Twitter No Longer Silent', while its parent company, *CloudTalk* describes itself as 'Bringing Voice to the Social Web'.

But the rhetoric of a return to the original, embodied and embedded communicative contract between speaker and listener is belied by the host of additional services afforded by these applications. First of these is the transcendence of the acoustic limitations of time and space in face-to-face communication. Connected to this is the promise of extending, sharing and performing the conversation with engaged networks from the most local level to the global, not least by their integration with other already established social networking sites, most notably *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *Google+*. Second is the promise to be able to track and archive the resonance of your speech or conversation. And following on from that, third, is the possibility of 'monetising' either the act of speech and/or the act of listening. This can be achieved either by more or less conventional methods of quantifying the reach and scale of the audience, or by more novel means,

such as the use of QR codes to give access to audio clips, codes that can be printed on any number of material artefacts from greetings cards to mugs and t-shirts.

A World of Listeners?

To turn first, then, to the possibility that is advertised of ‘speaking’ at a distance, to both individuals and groups, either friends or strangers, and of speaking both ‘live’ and in asynchronous time: these attributes are sold to users either as if they are entirely new, or they are compared to the similar features afforded by text-based social media. Rather rarely are references made explicitly to the older audio technologies which first offered solutions to the ‘problem’ of vocal communication over time, distance and group allegiance - namely the telephone, radio and the phonograph and all its technological descendents. The ‘legacy’ media most often directly referenced seem rather to be the bespoke one-to-one technologies like voicemail and the walkie-talkie – the latter particularly in relation to the range of ‘push-to-talk’ applications for mobile phones, apps like *HeyTell* and *Zello* (formerly *LoudTalks*) that seem to reclaim the mobile phone’s technological heritage as a portable two-way radio – live peer-to-peer communication that is not reliant on a WiFi or cellular network connection. Interestingly, these ‘mesh networking’ applications that tend to work within a range of a few dozen metres seem to come in to their own when people are gathered together in large numbers and when the cellular network is under strain, for example during rural music festivals, or large protest gatherings. The *FireChat* app, for example, has attracted both thousands of new users and a good deal of press interest during the so-called ‘Umbrella Revolution’ in Hong Kong in 2014, when protesters feared that the network might crash or be closed down by the authorities (Cohen, 2014; Hern, 2014).

These references in the promotion of social media apps to interpersonal forms of mediated communication would seem to be in keeping with the predominant focus on the advantages the new technologies bring to users as individuals wanting to be heard by already-defined others - a focus, in other words, on users as speakers, and listeners as pre-determined recipients. However, there is another dimension to the rhetoric which does begin to acknowledge a family resemblance to mainstream broadcasting, and that is the variety of attempts to put the user as speaker at the heart of an infinite network of strangers. The tagline for *Bubbly*, for example, is a social media site that invites you to ‘Sign Up to Share Your Voice with the World’; similarly, *Blaving* promises that it will ‘Let

You Speak Out to the World!'; while the promotional video for *ShoutOmatic* celebrates the fact that, 'At Last the World is within Shouting Distance!'. Slogans like these seamlessly mobilise two powerful ideas – the sovereign power of the individual and the inalienable right to freedom of expression. Elsewhere on these sites there will inevitably also be reference to 'listening' and 'communities' and 'sharing', but these are in almost all cases secondary to the primary message that users can find a global stage from which to project their voice.

Of course, at one level these kinds of statements are just run-of-the-mill advertising hyperbole, but they also speak directly to the ideology of neo-liberal individualism, and underscore the impression that everyone who has a voice has something to say – and that the world is waiting to hear it. What is striking about these kinds of formulations from a media-historical point of view is the way in which they are tapping into an idea of broadcasting, but stripping away almost every vestige of its heritage as a collective endeavour at either the level of production or reception. This is the promise of a form of broadcasting so decentralised that every individual has a voice. And yet each individual is promised the chance to be a voice that speaks to millions, to be listened to across the world. Those listening millions are not defined as individuals, but are conjured up as an indeterminate mass – an image more associated with the height of monolithic media, not the dispersed and disaggregated multiple publics of the digital age. This kind of marketing language seems, then, to speak to a fantasy of decentralised centralisation, and evokes images of the democratisation of propagandistic power. It doesn't matter that everyone involved – the app developers, the advertisers, the consumers – sees through the hype. This knowing disavowal is how a commodity fetish works – we know, but all the same... (Dean, 2005, 60-66).

Smart Radio?

If vocal social media don't tend to sell themselves as radio, then that might be because there is already an established tradition of DIY radio online. The language in which many of these 'stations' are promoted draws more explicitly on a broadcasting past, but in terms of underlining the power of the individual to reach out to listeners across the globe, it is remarkably similar to that on the microblogging sites. *Spreaker* was one of the first social radio networks for smartphones – and one of its early taglines was 'Talk to the World' - the other was, 'Free the DJ Inside You' - (Young, 2011); *Live 365* invites you to

‘connect to millions of passionate listeners’; while *blogtalkradio* suggests one reason to start broadcasting is to ‘Share your passion, expertise, cause or brand with the world’. The fact that websites like these present themselves in the guise of a recognisable institutional form, that of radio, does, however, mean that ‘broadcasts’ do tend to be channelled into recognisable forms and genres - however multiplicitous and finely tuned - in order to find an audience. In the end, the curation is undertaken by the umbrella website and its algorithms.

There is another breed of DIY radio, however, where the creative input of the user lies solely in the act of curation for one’s own listening pleasure and interest rather than the production of new content per se. Some of these are long-since established online, such as *Last.FM*, which describes itself as ‘a music discovery service that gives you personalised recommendations based on the music you listen to’. Different audiostreaming services hand over different levels of active curation to their listeners, but many of them do include some kind of predictive element based on previous or analagous listening choices, perhaps the most well-known of which is *Pandora*.

There are also mobile apps that offer a platform to curate audio and other digital material in a personalised stream that is described as ‘radio’, or even ‘smart radio’. One such is *Stitcher*, which, according to its website, ‘organizes and delivers the world of talk radio fresh daily. Listen whenever and wherever you want’. Another is the Australian site, *Omnyapp*, which offers its users the chance to ‘combine podcasts, radio shows, music and personal updates into your own radio station’. Such apps produce a bespoke stream of audio content for the individual listener. Some of these apps allow this curated stream to be shared – to become, in effect, a radio station; for example, *YourListen* asks, ‘are you ready to discover new music and sounds and share them with the world?’.

While these curatorial apps tend to concentrate on music and other entertainment genres, there are also versions that are dedicated to news and journalism. News aggregation has a long history, and aggregators that produce personalised newsfeeds in textual form are common (Skaggs, 2012). Improving text-to-speech technology is now allowing these feeds, often incorporating social media posts as well as more conventional news updates, to be streamed in sound. One of the more prominent versions is the iOS app, *Winston*, which has been described as ‘your Siri personal assistant for news’ (Hodgkins, 2013).

‘Winston’ is presented as a charming and indefatigable English butler (as imagined by American popular culture, at least) who will prepare and serve you up the news of your choice at your convenience. Once again, the technological potential to engage with the outside world is framed in terms of the world being served like neatly ironed newspapers over breakfast for the aristocratic individual at the centre of his or her own universe.

To be clear, while it would be easy to critique the distorting effects of the ‘filter bubble’ (Pariser, 2011) that is clearly part and parcel of such media, the technological affordances of any of the platforms discussed here are, in principle, neutral; or rather, their meaning or social application is not pre-determined by the technology in any straightforward way. It might be a very good thing for people to garner their news from a variety of sources and have them delivered in a convenient format that enables them to keep abreast of the affairs of the world. It might be encouraging to frame this in terms of personal growth. For example, above the strapline, ‘Radio that instantly connects you to any conversation’, *Stitcher’s* website has a rolling banner that matches a series of verbs against the verb ‘Listen’ – ‘Learn’, ‘Laugh’, ‘Know’ and ‘Grow’. And it might, of course, be a very good thing from the point of view of democratic values like plurality and political participation. But the notion of the public good is not something that often appears in the promotional framing of these applications. Whatever the civic potential and evolution of this re-auralised public sphere, its new users are primarily being drafted in not in their identity as citizens, but as apparently sovereign consumers.

Of course there are exceptions. It would be perverse to think that there is only one story to be told across all the vast expanse of the internet, or to think that the whole range of applications could be captured in a single short article. But let two examples for now stand in for the kinds of exceptions that are available: one from the global North, one from the South. The first is *Broadcastr*, a social media platform for location-based audio – where users could create and download shared pieces of audio on an interactive map. One of its more prominent ‘users’ was the 9/11 Memorial Museum’s Permanent Archive, which shared its oral history archive to allow members of the public to listen to witnesses’ stories and other memories in situ (911memorial.org, 2012). The other is *Gram Vani* (Voice of the Village) a mobile audio social network in India that is voice-based to help rural communities in the northern state of Jharkhand, where illiteracy rates are high and internet penetration low, to produce and exchange information explicitly to foster

social development. From the listening perspective – in part because sound files cannot be scanned as easily as screen-based content - the 2000 or so daily contributions are moderated and curated into topic areas by an editorial team. The network, which describes itself as ‘a *social* social media platform’ is also connected to local NGOs who regularly engage with and respond to local issues raised by contributors (Gram Vaani.org; Da Costa, 2013).

A Listening Perspective on (Social) Media

Social media are ostensibly all about communicating sociably and in real time. The promotional framework of these new audio apps, is that with vocalisation the social media are ready now to return to the primary communicative exchange of speaking and listening. Audio tweeting, or audio blogging is described as easier, more natural, more authentic: a better way of conveying personality and emotion than with the sterility of text, the artifice of the keyboard and the kitschiness of emoticons – the banner headline on the *VoiceThread* social media site states ‘Text Can’t Replace You’ next to a sad emoticon superimposed on a young boy’s photo, and further down the page adds, ‘VoiceThreading is a more human way to connect’. There is then, a certain nostalgia and reverence for unmediated communication running through much of this promotional discourse, or an implicit faith in the imminent achievement of that sublime technological moment when the apparatus of mediation dissolves back into nature.

Yet this kind of rhetoric notwithstanding, it is important to recognise that social media already operate in a conversational mode - at least to the extent that the dominant metaphor of even the text-based social media ecology is that of speaking up, finding a voice and being heard. These voice-based platforms are distinctive, but they are not distinct from the broader social media ecology. Attending to the language of these particular applications, with their focus on voice and speech and listening, does, however, potentially bring this dominant metaphor into sharper relief. It also suggests that it could be productive to mobilise the idea of listening as the dominant mode of social media reception – whether or not the voice of the text is played out in sonic form (Crawford, 2009). For example, the extent to which being connected is to exist in something like a permanent state of receptivity, makes the act of consuming social media even in the written form of text, more like listening than reading, listening out for the next iteration in an unfolding and unstable multitextual universe.

Now the idea of reading as a kind of sublimated listening is a long story, going back at least as far as the invention of the phonic alphabet – arguably the first example we have of a kind of sound recording. For centuries, reading was habitually done out loud, restoring to sound the encoded speech of writing. By now, of course, except in rarified auditoria like the newsroom or the academic lecture theatre, silent reading is the norm, part of a long tradition that has perhaps made us forget the central place that listening occupies in the public sphere. It is also a tradition that invites us to speak of all mediated output, regardless of their form, as texts that can be *read*. But inasmuch as we also think of textual output as speech acts, then there might be something to be gained from thinking about textual reception as acts of listening. This is more than just word games, since reading is, broadly speaking, a privatised and abstracted activity, whereas listening is potentially at least, both share-able and embodied. As media become more immersive, so do the three-dimensional spherical properties of sound and listening become richer analytical tools to understand our mediated relationships.

Auditing Social Media Listening

The facility to share sounds online is characterised by two apparently contradictory trends – listening that is increasingly personalised and privatised, but that is also networked and available for measurement. It is increasingly personalised both through active choices made by listeners navigating their way through the proliferation of audio material available online and by impersonal algorithms pushing similar and familiar content listeners' way on the basis of their previous choices or inputted preferences. It would be easy to construct an argument that saw in these developments the closing down of the public horizons of auditory experience into zones of comfort and conformity, gated-in sphericules of safe and predictable listening in to slight variations on already familiar fare. Such an argument could be underscored by how the power of conventional formats and genres, the continuing dominance of the big media players, and the simple convenience of habitual tastes give rise to a culture of re-circulation within and between sites, so that there continues to be a concentration of content via familiar central distributors, belying the superficial proliferation of voices and outlets. This culture of re-circulation in itself, however, provides a powerful counter-argument to the idea that any sense of a common public sphere is in terminal decline, since it is evidence of a continuing engagement in a shared culture. It is also a clue that there is

increasingly less clear separation between different media forms, as illustrated by the practices of aggregation and curation mentioned above.

Another contradictory aspect of this new media landscape is the way in which listening is newly represented and exchanged. Listening has long been overlooked precisely because of the difficulty of representing or capturing it. The freedom of expression is enshrined as a democratic human right not least because it was first conceived as a property right. The things that people said and wrote could be straightforwardly identified and attributed to individuals as their property. The act of listening, not least in the age before sound recording, could not be so conceived. With the rise of radio and other audio media, various techniques were gradually developed to capture, measure, analyse and commodify listening, but it was almost exclusively an activity undertaken by professional market researchers and academics. Now, with online and social media, listeners routinely share their listening to their social networks and track their own and others' online listening in real or archived time. Social audio platforms like *SoundCloud* offer different packages with different levels of statistical feedback on a track's listenership, from 'basic', through 'extensive' to 'comprehensive'.

The whole system of recommendations and rankings is based on sharing informationalised listening practices and preferences, but it also rests on people's adoption of the language and logic of commercial radio, to the extent that popularity and prestige is represented through a quantifiable definition of listening – who listened to what, where were they listening, how many other people were listening to the same thing, and so on. Moreover, listening in these formulations is inevitably tied to particular media texts and generally refers to little more than evidence that a link to some sound file has been clicked. Nevertheless, despite their limitations and problems, these new practices of control and individualisation do also signal, paradoxically, a persistent desire to create and partake in forms of collective listening to mediated music, sound and speech, albeit in virtual space.

Incidentally, it is worth noting that the phrase 'social media listening' is widely used as the more acceptable synonym for social media monitoring, a term that circulates most notably in the realm online market research (Tam, 2014). It is striking that this usage picks up on the acoustic character of social media as a whole, but very much works

within the ‘listening in’ paradigm in the sense of surveilling, or rather, eavesdropping on the polyphony of online conversation. Perhaps in an online world increasingly subject to surveillance of both the commercial and state-sponsored kind, it is not surprising to find versions of these audio apps that promise, for whatever reason, not to leave any obvious trace (although just like most other social media users do, knowingly or not, trade aspects of personal data for access to the benefits offered). For all that they are in the business of offering vehicles for connecting with ‘the world’, most will also offer various assurances about their privacy settings, particularly in relation to peer-to-peer conversations. The business app, *Voxer*, for example, goes as far as to list among its features, ‘military grade security and encryption’.

Other apps are actually replicating another feature of unmediated spoken language – its ephemerality. *ChitChat* is one such example that offers to do in audio form what *SnapChat* offers for text messaging – namely the ability to send a message to a contact that disappears after being heard. Services like these are, some claim, part of a trend reacting against the erosion of the demarcation between public and private, and against the culture of connectivity and exposure on the web towards a more secretive, more ‘anti-social’ social media (BBC, 2014).

Now of course there are contradictions and exceptions, and there could never be a one-size-fits-all for all iterations of social media, whatever the dominant trends. But inasmuch as there is a clear case that can be made about an ongoing privatisation of listening in the media age (a composite process of individuation, domestication and commodification that can be traced throughout ‘the long twentieth century’), even at the same moment as this privatised listening is more public in some ways than ever before, perhaps a counter-movement is to be found in the trend for curated listening events in public spaces where radio plays and other sonic works are listened to by an audience sharing the same physical space in the darkened comfort of a moviehouse or planetarium without visual distraction or stimulation (e.g. *In the Dark*; *Sound Threshold*; *The Invisible Picture Palace*; and *Hoerkino*). The discipline of listening in public, listening to sounds chosen and presented by others, falling silent to listen, and attending to the shared engagement of being a member of an audience, is being described as ‘liberating’, precisely for demanding the kind of concentrated attention that is rare in an age of constant overlapping and overwhelming digital distraction, an age that insistently demands your response and your

feedback rather than your contemplation and repose. It is a return, to this extent at least, to a kind of radio in the classical sense of the word. But it is also a recognition of the potential riches of a curated listening experience that is ‘intimate yet public, collective but anti-social’ (Fisher, 2009).

However, these sorts of events are equally bound up in the interconnected web of radio and social media. There is no virtue in understanding these events as simply nostalgic for a kind of embodied and collective and interactive listening experience, although that is certainly part of their appeal. These are events that exist in reaction and in relation to other situations of mediated listening. They are events that are organised and commented on via social media sites. They are events that often re-present material that has been broadcast or shared on media before. And they are events that have plenty of historical precedents as people often came together in the past to listen, socially, to recorded and broadcast sounds.

Radio studies, like the rest of media studies when it considers the audience, is still predominantly pre-occupied with the act of listening *in* – how producers target particular audiences, how those audiences react and respond to what they listen to. The audience is either produced by, or at best, predicted by the text. However different the critical intent of such research, there is a good deal of cross-over here with the conceptualisation and surveillance of the audience on the part of commercial interests and ratings organisations. I have argued at length elsewhere that listening in the media age encompasses not only the act of listening *in* to particular sounds, but also the act of listening *out*. In other words, there is an elective affinity between listening and a civic, or a public disposition (Lacey, 2011, 2013b; Penman and Turnbull 2012; Macnamara, 2013). This is to some extent counter-intuitive in a culture that continues to privilege the freedom of expression as the sine qua non of a democratic polity, and that reads - excuse the pun - listening as the epitome of passivity. Listening *out* for difference and plurality – literally *auditing* the public sphere – is, nevertheless, a critical democratic practice in both senses of the word. The preceding analysis of the prevailing discourses surrounding the latest generation of mediated listening opportunities has revealed the persistence of certain tropes about the passivity of listening, the celebration of speaking up and the fantasy of participation and choice. It is easier now to listen to a greater variety of voices more easily than ever before, more possible to listen out for difference and plurality; but

there are also great countervailing forces – technological, political, psychological, cultural, pragmatic – enticing us to listen in to more of the same. The struggle over the meanings and practices of listening has perhaps never before been this urgent.

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