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Following you: Disciplines of listening in social media

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This paper develops the concept of listening as a metaphor for paying attention online. Pejorative terms such as ‘lurking’ have failed to capture much detail about the experience of presence online. Instead, much online media research has focused on ‘having a voice’, be it in blogs, wikis, social media, or discussion lists. The metaphor of listening can offer a productive way to analyse the forms of online engagement that have previously been overlooked, while also allowing a deeper consideration of the emerging disciplines of online attention. Social media are the focus of this paper, and in particular, how these platforms are changing the configurations of the ideal listening subject. Three modes of online listening are discussed: background listening, reciprocal listening, and delegated listening; Twitter provides a case study for how these modes are experienced and performed by individuals, politicians and corporations.

Introduction

In his book on attention and modern culture, *Suspensions of Perception*, Jonathan Crary reminds us that ‘the ways in which we intently listen to, look at, or concentrate on anything have a deeply historical character’ (1999, 1). He observes that the ways in which we pay attention – and what we pay attention to – shift over the centuries, as part of a larger shaping of subjectivity. Along with new technological forms of display, communication, recording and playback come new forms of looking, listening and interacting; they afford new ways of focusing as well as defocusing attention. In doing so, they also become part of the ongoing reconstruction of the limits of human capacities. They contribute to the sense of what is possible, as well as to the qualities of being.

My aim here is to engage with a set of emerging modes of paying attention online, and to propose that they be considered practices of listening. As a metaphor, listening is useful; it captures some of the characteristics of the ongoing processes of receptivity that mark much online engagement. Nick Couldry argues that aural terms are more able ‘to register media’s social presence’ as they have distinct ‘advantages as a source of metaphors for thinking about the social world’ (2006, 6). He writes of the ‘reciprocal, embodied nature of listening; its embeddedness always in an intersubjective space of perception’ (6). This intersubjectivity is important to the functioning of many online spaces. It is my hope that the concept of listening will allow us to analyse the various affordances of online attention, and to assess the ways in which we listen also shape us as late modern subjects.

Listening online could be considered in any number of contexts: be it wikis, MUDs, blogs, mailing lists, and even RSS feeds. For my purposes here, I am taking the example of social media, and Twitter in particular, as spaces where we can observe various types of

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listening. Twitter is fruitful territory, as it offers a relatively young platform (having launched in 2006), where the norms of use are nascent and contested. It also functions for many users as a continuous background presence, a steady stream of messages that can be briefly focused on then returned to the peripheries of attention. This kind of ongoing yet diffuse engagement is increasingly common, with studies indicating that since early 2009, Internet users were spending more time on social networking services than email (Nielsen Online 2009).

Listening is not a common metaphor for online activity. In fact, online participation has tended to be conflated with contributing a 'voice'. 'Speaking up' has become the dominant metaphor for participation in online spaces such as blogs, wikis, news sites and discussion lists (Karaganis 2007; Bruns 2008). Little research has been done into other forms of participation, such as private email discussions or behind-the-scenes direct messaging in social media environments (Nonnecke and Preece 2001, 2), and even less to the act of simply witnessing the comments of others. 'Lurking' is a common pejorative term for those who are present in public online spaces but do not prominently speak up. I would argue that this term has hampered our understanding of online spaces, and that the concept of listening offers more open and critically productive ground.

There are three categories of listeners that I will address in this paper – individuals, politicians, and corporations. Each faces a set of disciplinary imperatives about developing a social media presence, and how to listen to others when using a service such as Twitter. As individuals, politicians and companies develop a greater capacity to listen to multiple others online, and more people come to expect this form of attention, a greater sense of responsibility to listen emerges. This contributes to the creation of different qualities of listening. I will consider three modes here: reciprocal listening, background listening, and delegated listening, when the act of online listening is outsourced altogether. These modes are not exclusive, nor are they singular: they can be adopted by any category of user, be they representing themselves or acting on behalf of a company or political party. Further, Internet users may regularly switch between modes of listening throughout a day, and listen to particular individuals and groups with varying degrees of attention. But by recognizing distinct modes, we can begin to develop a more granular assessment of the ways in which listening functions in social media.

In my view, social media powerfully invoke an efficient listening subject, drawing together the divergent spaces of modernity in one location – while simultaneously creating a gap between this ideal and what is humanly manageable. A Twitter user, for example, is functionally able to manage an online presence for friends, family and co-workers – and possibly also voters or customers. But there are complex ramifications for how this capacity can be managed across one's working life, family and social life, and political life. Disparities emerge between what users are technically able to do, and the limits of their schedules, desires and bodies. While this is not the place to delve into the detail of how this can be negotiated by individual users, I aim to develop some theoretical paths that will lead to a better understanding of the multivalent nature of listening online.

From lurkers to listeners

Since the days of what Geert Lovink calls 'the techno-utopianism storm' of the 1990s, there has been a glorification of 'voice' as the prime form of participation online (2002, 113). Not only has the metaphor of voice become the sine qua non of 'being' online, but it has been charged with all the political currents of democratic practice. Voice is closely tied to the libertarian model of online democracy that was championed by the likes of *Wired*

magazine, and writers such as John Perry Barlow, Howard Rheingold and Stewart Brand. Expression is paramount for many US-centric techno-libertarians, as Barbrook and Cameron explain: ‘they want information technologies to be used to create a new “Jeffersonian democracy” where all individuals will be able to express themselves freely within cyberspace’ (1997, 45).

This privileging of voice, and particularly voice-as-democratic-participation, still influences critical accounts of online activity. In Henry Jenkins and David Thorburn’s *Democracy and New Media*, the authors argue that the Internet ‘is politically important because it expands the range of voices that can be heard in a national debate, ensuring that no one voice can speak with unquestioned authority’ (2003, 2). This ‘speaking truth to power’ model is a prominent feature of much media and cultural studies analysis, but it has limited the recognition of the variety and reach of the practices of listening online. Listening has not been given sufficient consideration as a significant practice of intimacy, connection, obligation and participation online; instead, it has often been considered as contributing little value to online communities, if not acting as an active drain on their growth.

For example, in the Internet research of the 1990s, lurkers – meaning those who prefer to inhabit the margins of debates, rarely or never contributing in public – were commonly defined as non-participants online. This group has been described as more like readers than writers (Sharf 1999), as more akin to passive TV viewers (Morris and Ogan 1996), and as freeloaders who leech the energy of online communities without offering anything in return (Kollock and Smith 1996). However, there was little by way of substantial studies of lurking during this period. This was an interesting oversight, as lurkers have always constituted the large majority of individuals in most online spaces. Researchers have claimed that over 90% of an online community will only practise light public activity, if any (Mason 1999; Zhang and Storck 2001; Nonnecke and Preece 2003).

More recently greater attention has been paid to lurking, with some studies observing that lurkers have an important role to play in online communities (Nonnecke and Preece 2003; Lee, Chen, and Jiang 2006). Rather than freeloading, lurkers are actively logging in and tracking the contributions of others; they contribute a mode of receptiveness that encourages others to make public contributions. While they may not be contributing public posts, they do not deprive regular commenters of resources nor do they detract from the community (Lee, Chen, and Jiang 2006). They directly contribute to the community by acting as a gathered audience: neither agreeing nor disagreeing, but listening (even if distractedly).

There have been some efforts to replace the term ‘lurking’ with less derogatory labels such as ‘peripheral participants’ (Zhang and Storck 2001) and ‘non-public participants’ (Nonnecke and Preece 2003). While these terms attempt to remove the stigma from lurking, they continue to define this majority group by what they are not: not public, not at the centre. As terms, they fail to offer a sense of what is being done, and why it is important to online participation.

The concept of listening, on the other hand, invokes the more dynamic process of online attention, and suggests that it is an embedded part of networked engagement – a necessary corollary to having a ‘voice’. If we reconceptualize lurking as listening, it reframes a set of behaviours once seen as vacant and empty into receptive and reciprocal practices. Moreover, as a metaphor for attending to discussions and debates online, listening more usefully captures the experience that many Internet users have. It reflects the fact that everyone moves between the states of listening and disclosing online; both are necessary and both are forms of participation.

A consideration of listening practices allows for a more acute assessment of online engagement, and decentres the current overemphasis on posting, commenting and ‘speaking up’ as the only significant forms of participation. Additionally, it allows for the deep sense of connection that listening participants can feel in online spaces, rather than diminishing this form of presence as lurking, with all its linguistic connotations of a sense of threat, ambiguity or concealment. ‘Listening in’, a term derived from older media forms, can also be understood as a process that operates in most online spaces, a vector that runs through user-cultures. The modes of listening have always been present online, and it is a critical (if under-researched) part of the process of experiencing being in networked space.

On background listening

In early 2009, Jay Rosen, a professor of journalism at New York University, posed a question to his 12,000 followers on the micro-blogging service Twitter. He wanted to know why they twittered. Of the almost 200 responses that he initially received via his blog and Twitter account, he noticed an important similarity. ‘Surprise finding from my project’, he wrote on Twitter on 8 January, ‘is how often I wound up with radio as a comparison.’

The comparison may have been unexpected, but it is provocative. Twitter is a social networking service where users send and receive text-based updates of up to 140 characters. They can be delivered and read via the web, instant messaging clients or mobile phone as text messages. Unlike radio, which is a one-to-many medium, Twitter is many-to-many. People choose whom they will follow, which may be a small group of intimates, or thousands of strangers – they then receive all updates written by those people. Perhaps the most obvious difference from radio is that there is no sound broadcast on Twitter. It is simply a network of people scanning, reading and occasionally posting written messages. Yet the radio analogy persists. As MSN editor Jane Douglas writes, ‘I see Twitter like a ham radio for tuning into the world’ (cited in Rosen 2009).

The act of ‘tuning in’ reflects part of the process of engagement with social media. A Twitter user follows a range of people, some of whom will post updates that offer useful advice, amusing anecdotes, or interesting links. But many messages will simply be scanned quickly, not focused on, something closer to being tuned out rather than tuned in. I have described this as a kind of background listening (Crawford 2009), where commentary and conversations continue as a backdrop throughout the day, with only a few moments requiring concentrated attention. The conversational field of activity in these online spaces is dispersed and molecularized, a constant flow of small pieces of information that accrete to form a sense of intimacy and awareness about the patterns of speech, activity and thought across a group of contacts. Like radio, they can circulate in the background: a part of the texture of the everyday. Twitter is itself a word that implies the sonic in both its derivations: either as the calling of birds, or the ‘idle’ chatter of humans.

It is the access to the details of someone’s everyday life, as prosaic as they often are, which contributes to the sense of ‘ambient intimacy’ in social media (Reichelt 2007). The process of background listening is critical to the sense of affinity generated in these spaces; access to the minutiae of a person’s life is something normally reserved for family, close friends and lovers. The intimacy of social media contexts is not always pleasant or positive; it can generate discomfort, confusion and claustrophobia, amongst a range of negative affects. People often express anger, sadness, fear and resentment. They may also misrepresent themselves and lie. Nonetheless, the disclosures made in social media spaces

develop a relationship with an audience of listeners. Further, those background listeners are necessary to provoke disclosures of any kind.

The act of listening to several (or several hundred) Twitter users requires a kind of dexterity. It demands a capacity to inhabit a stream of multilayered information, often leaping from news updates to a message from a friend experiencing a stressful situation, to information about what a stranger had for lunch, all in the space of seconds. Some will require attention; many can be glimpsed and tuned out. The popular desktop clients for receiving Twitter updates, such as Tweetie and Twitterific, provide 'pop up' messages on the user's screen whenever Twitter messages ('tweets') are received, acting as an irregular interruption. With the emergence of 'always on' broadband Internet, messages can be appearing night and day, for as long as an individual's computer is active and connected. This requires a certain loss of volition over when messages are seen, and it differs in important ways from consciously logging on to a website in order to check and read updates.

This relinquishing of control necessitates a 'tuning in/tuning out' response that corresponds with radio listening. As David Goodman has noted, the phonograph made it possible to select sounds in bounded time – a record might play for four minutes and then stop. The invention of radio 'created the possibility of abandonment of choice – you could just let it play on and hear whatever came along' (Goodman 2009, 17). People could clean the house, work, or socialize while the radio played continuously in the background, audible but not focused on. This kind of listening generated considerable concern. In the 1930s, distracted listening was seen as a risky practice, as listening to the radio in an indiscriminate, ongoing way could make people into easy prey for propaganda (31). At other times, public anger has focused on the disruptions of radio noise leaking from homes and cars, or portable transistor radios in public parks. Theodor Adorno once expressed concern that background radio could impair digestion (42). Gradually, normative frameworks developed about what constituted the appropriately attentive listener, and where and how radios should be played.

Currently, debates are emerging about the appropriate uses of Twitter, where it should be used, how it is best employed, and where responsibility lies when engaging with it. Apart from the mainstream media's interest in the service, there are numerous online guides to becoming a better Twitter user, with titles like '5 Ways to Use Twitter for Good' and '20 Twitter Tips to Make You a Better Twitter User' (Brogan 2007; Morgan 2008). Such 'how-to' guides contribute to the development of communication norms, as do more heated debates about 'good' versus 'bad' twittering. One example is the contention over 'retweeting': whether reposting someone else's message is an acceptable way of sharing something important or funny, or contributing an echo chamber of repeated information (Kaplan 2009).

Through guides, debates and habituated patterns of use, a range of disciplinary norms are manifesting: be it about how to respond to messages, where and when to check them, who to follow or friend (or unfollow or unfriend). These norms vary with the type of user. Having considered some of the emerging listening practices of individuals using Twitter, and background listening in particular, I will now briefly consider the listening experiences of politicians and corporations. Each faces expectations about how they will engage with others, and what kinds of listening are expected of them.

On reciprocal listening: Social media politics

Many heads of state currently use social media services to update their activities, shill for support and advise of policy announcements. Barack Obama, Gordon Brown and

Kevin Rudd all have a presence on Twitter, and it has become a significant communications method during election campaigns. Social media platforms give politicians access to millions of users and offer the capacity to build a sense of camaraderie and connection with a wide constituency. But as the popularity of social media increases amongst politicians, important differences are emerging in the ways in which they engage in these spaces. In particular, some politicians engage in 'reciprocal listening' with their followers – which I define as hearing and responding to comments and direct messages – while some continue to adopt a broadcast-only model, leaving no room for dialogue with their contacts.

President Obama used Twitter extensively to send updates about the location and content of speeches and rallies prior to his election in 2008. After that time, restrictions commenced in regard to presidential use of digital technologies, and updates have slowed. But even during the times of heaviest use, Obama's campaign did not reply to followers, or indicate that direct messages were being heard. Australia's Prime Minister Rudd has adopted a similar approach – primarily issuing policy and press conference updates, with only occasional messages to reply to individual users. In the case of Prime Minister Gordon Brown, his 'DowningStreet' Twitter presence is updated frequently, with a focus on the multi-platform content issued during the week: linking to video updates, transcripts, Flickr pages and policy news flashes. Further, many direct questions and comments from followers are publicly answered, generating an impression that responses are being read and considered.

There are also groups that continuously track national politicians using Twitter, such as Twixdagen in Sweden and Tweetminister in the United Kingdom. Tweetminister, for example, re-streams all British politicians using Twitter, observing which topics are most popular, and allowing users to search for their local member online. According to the Tweetminister site, its aims are to 'connect the public with politics' and 'promote better and more transparent communications between voters and Members of Parliament through open conversations'. Yet it remains unclear just how much feedback via Twitter is being heard by political leaders, or if it is taken seriously as a form of communication and public accountability.

As Jason Wilson writes, many politicians using social media services are more like animated corpses – with little personality or life – which amounts to an enormous lost opportunity. 'Users of social media expect, rightly or wrongly, a much more conversational and unaffected style of political communication', writes Wilson, observing that 'there is visible frustration on services like Twitter and Facebook when politicians will not engage in the dialogue that many users take to be the key function these spaces afford' (Wilson 2009). Of course, it is difficult for politicians who have a high follower rate to ensure that a dialogue is maintained. Nonetheless, by maintaining a presence in social media networks, politicians are held accountable. If they fail to respond actively, they will lose followers and run the risk of alienating the very people they are seeking to reach.

It is particularly difficult to define the use of Twitter by politicians as a 'conversation' if a politician is not personally writing the messages, but requiring staffers to reply and engage with online responses. While it may come as no surprise that a politician's communications staff are actually updating a Twitter profile, it produces a degree of distance that is antithetical to genuine communication. Further, when a politician's face and name are connected to an online profile which is clearly being used as a public relations arm by unknown staffers, it evokes something akin to ventriloquism – a pretence of presence, or a consultation puppet-show.

As social media develop and mature, astute politicians will become more adept at providing voters with the sense that they are being heard and acknowledged. Joe Trippi, the campaign manager for US presidential candidate Howard Dean, argues that politicians now have no choice but to engage fully with social media, and be highly responsive (Trippi 2009). But the difficulty remains: politicians that outsource their online presence to staff are not really listening, nor are they fully engaging with that community of users. They are subject to disciplinary regimes of attentiveness, yet are performing a kind of engagement-at-arm's-length. This could be described as 'delegated listening' – a mode where the participant is seen to be listening (and observing the bare minimum of what Trippi suggests) while not spending the considerable amount of time required to be fully present in social media space. This mode of listening – different from background listening and reciprocal listening – can also be observed in the corporate sector.

Corporations and 'listening in'

The corporate sector was quick to see the benefits of using social media to forge a closer relationship with customers, gain information about products, and enhance public personae. While some politicians enjoin staffers to update Twitter accounts, many companies allocate this task to employees. Some choose to hire the services of professional microbloggers to craft a presence for them online. Companies such as *Twit4Hire.com* update microblogs for clients who are, as they explain on their website, 'too busy to add yet another daily task to their burgeoning agendas, but who still want to proactively reach out to their customer base'.

But it remains difficult to outsource the act of listening. When professionals are hired to simulate the presence of a company or celebrity online, communications are commonly reduced to the level of an impersonal, unidirectional marketing broadcast. The benefit of being able to hear customers' views, rapidly respond to their comments and concerns, and gain insight into how the company is being discussed is sharply reduced. Delegated listening is not a perfect analogue for being there.

Dell is one company that has embraced social media, to the extent of appointing a Vice President of 'Communities and Conversations'. The employee with that title, Bob Pearson, is a strong advocate of the need for companies to become ideal listeners. 'Quite frankly, one of the most important things we do with Twitter is listen', Pearson argues. 'I don't think you can hire someone to listen for you' (Soller 2009).

However, a commitment to background listening comes at a cost – the cost of human attention. A senior executive at Dell may underscore the importance of listening to customers, but in practice this means that more than 130 Twitter feeds emanate from Dell Corp., and each is connected back to a staff member who must personally maintain that account while adhering to corporate communication protocols (Soller 2009). This is the labour of listening. But how is this labour to be quantified? As long as listening is not considered to be an important part of online participation, of 'low value' in the process of online engagement, it is difficult for it to be recognized as an important and value-generating form of work. Employees commonly maintain a microblog presence for their company, NGO or university department without financial compensation. Further, there is little by way of research or data to quantify what the value might be of this presence that both discloses information and listens.

For companies, the value of listening could be considered in three ways: being seen to participate in a community and hearing people's opinions; utilizing a rapid and

lower-cost form of customer support (as compared to the telephone); and gaining a dispersed global awareness of how a brand is discussed and the patterns of consumer use and satisfaction. Services such as Facebook and Twitter can, in effect, be used as giant focus groups, where companies can listen in to positive and negative views of their products.¹ While companies may derive a range of direct benefits from their engagement in social media space, they also hold particular forms of responsibility. Corporations are increasingly expected to function in social media spaces in highly responsive and attentive ways: not only do they have new powers to ‘listen in’ but also they must be vigilant with rapid and targeted responses.

Disciplines of listening

While online technologies are contributing to the development of varieties of listening subjects, they are also revealing the limits of these disciplines. Jonathan Crary has argued that it is possible to think of modernity as ‘an ongoing crisis of attentiveness’:

... in which the changing configurations of capitalism continually push attention and distraction to new limits and thresholds, with an endless sequence of new products, sources of stimulation, and streams of information, and then respond with new methods of managing and regulating perception ... But at the same time ... the articulation of a subject in terms of attentive capacities simultaneously disclosed a subject incapable of conforming to such disciplinary imperatives. (1999, 13–14)

Certainly, social networks could be considered as configurations that push our attention and distraction to new limits, and we are already witnessing the creation of new agencies to outsource this work of presence and perception. Crary has noted the emergence of pathologies of attention in the nineteenth century, where subjects were seen as deficient, even sociopathic, if they failed to internalize new disciplinary structures. If networked technologies in general, and social media in particular, generate ideal listening subjects of the twenty-first century – for individuals, politicians, consumers, parents and corporations – they also reveal the human limits of attention.

The emerging use of social media in working environments and educational institutions (e.g. the use of Twitter in university courses) is part of instructing workers and students in the more efficient management and regulation of their social presence. Students learn the regimen of maintaining a social media profile: it can be a research tool, and also a method of maintaining a strong network of contacts and potential employment opportunities. Workers might develop the social face of a corporation by maintaining its Twitter presence (with attentive eyes and ears), but they also develop the ability to stay in touch with their friends, lovers and family while at work.

If the hours are long, a worker can perform a kind of presence, using the ambient awareness of the goings-on in the lives of their loved ones to feel connected, despite being physically removed in an office or work site. At the same time, they may come to feel an increasing *expectation* that they should be using these services, regularly updating and never away too long. If they are not paying attention, are they still a maximally effective student, worker, partner or parent?

Technologies of listening impact not only on the ways in which we can connect with others, but also materially influence the ways in which we account for our own subjectivity. Imperatives of attentiveness impinge on all areas of life, but there is also a force of resistance, a point at which individuals can no longer sustain expectations. This interplay of expanding disciplinary imperatives and human limitations contributes

to the formation and evolution of normative structures, as well as flows of capital and information, which gradually shift as technologies and subjects adapt.

The social practices and normative frameworks for listening in networked media are in their early stages, but the rapid uptake of social media services will result in an accelerated development of norms, habits and conventions. People will find ways to negotiate the terms of their engagement online, how and with whom they engage, and when to switch off and be unavailable, unhearing and unheard. As Don Ihde writes, 'If there is an ethics of listening, then respect for silence must play a part in that ethics' (1976, 180). But equally, there will be advancing demands for increased and multi-channelled attention, and the ability to listen – even if only in the background – to a chorus of voices.

We are still discovering what the thresholds of human listening might be, quantitatively and qualitatively. The study of the listening subject is just beginning: as work on the practices of surveillance and the disciplinary gaze produced an understanding of the observed and observing subject, so we need a better understanding of the listened to and listening subject. While I have sought to introduce some of these ideas here, further work needs to be done in the ways in which online listening constitutes a recognition of others, and how the qualities of listening differ between users and between services.

To my mind, there is considerable value in researching listening practices in relation to online media, as it opens up new ways of understanding the nuances of connection and communication that these spaces afford. For media studies, this requires a re-evaluation of how agency and subjectivity are expressed and developed through listening as much as through voice. Couldry's view that metaphors of listening possess a greater flexibility and capacity for registering the shifting nature of contemporary media seems perceptive when applied to services such as Twitter. Such social media platforms are among the many forms of networked space that are already offering us a glimpse of how the boundaries of human attention and subjectivity are being reconstituted.

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Note

1. This capacity is already being sold as a service by some social media companies. At the World Economic Forum in 2009, Facebook launched its 'engagement ads' system, which allows companies to selectively target Facebook users and pose questions about their products and services (Neate and Mason 2009). This effectively allows Facebook to be used as an enormously powerful and immensely customizable database for market research.

Notes on contributor

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