Listening – the new democratic deficit

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Abstract:
Although much prized in daily conversation, good listening has been almost completely ignored in that form of political conversation we know as democracy. Practically all the attention has been paid to speaking, both in terms of the skills to be developed and the ways in which we should understand what enhancing ‘inclusion’ might mean (i.e. getting more people to speak).

The argument here is that both democratic theory and democratic practice would be re-invigorated by attention to listening. To ask why listening has been ignored is to enquire into the very nature of politics, and to suggest a range of ways in which listening could both improve political processes (particularly democratic ones) and enhance our understanding of them – including where they don’t always work as well as we might want them to.

Four ways in which good listening can help achieve democratic objectives are outlined: enhancing legitimacy, helping to deal with deep disagreements, improving understanding, and increasing empowerment. This leads to a discussion of the difference between good and bad political listening, with the latter being introduced through an examination of the nature of rhetoric. Some of the issues at stake in deciding what good political listening is are then discussed, before the question of ‘political noise’ is broached (i.e. what should we be listening for). Finally, the listening lacuna in Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality is pointed out, leading to a discussion of the potential analytic power of listening in relation to deliberative democracy in general and one citizens’ jury case in particular.

‘the most effective and insidious way to silence others in politics is a refusal to listen’ (Dryzek, 2000: 149)

Although much prized in daily conversation, good listening has been almost completely ignored in that form of political conversation we know as democracy. Practically all the attention has been paid to speaking, both in terms of the skills to be developed and the ways in which we should understand what enhancing ‘inclusion’ might mean (i.e. getting more people to speak). Once we ask why listening has been so systematically ignored we find ourselves enquiring into the very nature of politics, and there is discussion here in this context of the enduring influence of Aristotle’s view that what makes ‘man’ a political animal is his capacity to speak.

The overall intention of this article is to establish that both democratic theory and democratic practice would be re-invigorated by attention to listening. A case for this is made through considering four ways in which good listening can help achieve
democratic objectives: enhancing legitimacy, helping to deal with deep disagreements, improving understanding, and increasing empowerment. This leads to a discussion of the difference between good and bad political listening, with the latter being introduced through an examination of the nature of rhetoric. Some of the issues at stake in deciding what good political listening is are then discussed, before the question of ‘political noise’ is broached (i.e. what should we be listening for). Finally, the listening lacuna in Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality is pointed out, leading to a discussion of the potential analytic power of listening in relation to deliberative democracy in general and one citizens’ jury case in particular.

Research on the role of listening in politics and democracy is in statu nascendi¹. This article is therefore intended as an amuse gueule rather than the full dish, as it were. Potential lines of investigation are signalled rather than fully explored or fleshed out – and a further set of questions arising from these ones are outlined in the conclusion. This all suggests a long-term project, some elements of which can only be hinted at here². I begin with an assessment of the role of listening in connection with four issues of great moment for democratic theory and practice: legitimacy, disagreement, understanding and empowerment.

**Listening and legitimacy**

Better listening can improve democratic governments’ claims to legitimacy. As John Forester says in connection with planning: ‘Failing to listen, we fail to learn, and we also damage our working relationships with others. If they do not listen carefully to members of the public, planners will lose any reputation for responsiveness or fairness, any public trust they might have had’ (Forester 1989, 109). It is in no democratic government’s interest to be seen to be imposing policies on its citizens without the views of citizens having been listened to. Indeed it is noticeable how, when governments feel they are losing touch with the electorate, they organise something like a ‘Big Conversation’ – like Tony Blair’s of 2003 in the UK - in an attempt to reconnect with them. And the purpose of this conversation is not for the government to talk more – it is to convey the impression that the government is listening. These occasions are a belated recognition that listening is indeed important, but these Big Conversations are usually so poorly conducted that they have the opposite to their intended effect. Citizens often come away from them even more firmly confirmed in their belief that the government is not listening to them: ‘A “conversation” that does not look or feel like a real conversation is open to the accusation of being a misleading gesture: more a cultivated appearance of listening than an experience of sharing ideas’ (Coleman 2004: 118)³.

¹ The lack of research in this area, and particularly in connection with deliberative democracy, is discussed in some detail in Dobson 2010.
² I will be carrying out this project over the next two years, assisted by a Leverhulme Research Fellowship (RF-2011-572), and culminating in a monograph, *Listening for Democracy* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2013/2014)
³ As Susan Bickford points out, one of the difficulties here is making listening visible, as it were: ‘how can listening itself be made visible or audible? How can it appear in public? I think the difficulty of answering this question of how listening reveals itself is partly responsible for the theoretical neglect of listening in political theory, even in the work of theorists for whom it clearly plays a role (e.g., Aristotle, Arendt)’
The question of what makes a ‘real conversation’ in the political context is, however, not at all easy to answer. Some of the characteristics of good conversation in the quotidian interpersonal sense are hard to replicate – to ‘scale up’ – in the political arena. How do we know whether the government is really listening? In daily life it is not so hard to tell if someone is listening to us properly. The signals may be visual (is my interlocutor paying attention to me as I speak?) or dialogic (is s/he asking me questions that show s/he really wants to understand what I am saying?). Neither of these signals is easy to work into the relationship between government and the people. What we notice about these signals is that they are procedural, as it were; they are part of the conversational process itself. When we think of how to judge good listening in the political context, though, we tend to be driven to think in terms of outcomes: I will know if the government has listened properly if it changes its course of action. Yet there is no obvious reason why we should connect good listening with changed minds – surely we can hold to our original opinion and still be regarded as having listened well?

Indeed in the political arena one person’s good listening – judged in terms of a changed policy direction - is usually another person’s U-turn, which is a fatal accusation to lay at a politician’s door. The UK’s present Coalition government appears to have gone back on a number of the pledges it has made since coming to power over, for instance, selling off state-owned forests, reducing the number of coastguard stations to save money, or opening up the National Health Service (NHS) to greater competition from various health providers. In each of these cases the original policy proposal has been either watered-down or abandoned altogether. In the case of the National Health Service proposals, Prime Minister David Cameron ordered a very public pause in the policy trajectory and instituted a ‘Listening Exercise’ called the NHS Forum Review, involving (in principle) the whole population as well as healthcare stakeholders. Over a period of two months submissions were received and considered and while the official Forum report is due as I write, advance notices suggest that the Forum will recommend a scaling back and slowing down of the original proposals.

Three points might be made about this. First, the exercise confirms the contention that better listening can confer greater legitimacy on decisions. The Prime Minister has been keen to regard this as a virtuous process involving listening to the people, and it is clear that ‘virtue’ here is the democratic virtue of legitimacy: the Listening Exercise was carried out to confer legitimacy on Coalition NHS policy. Second, given that changes to the original policy do seem to have taken place, this particular Listening Exercise seems less open than others to the Coleman charge of it being a ‘misleading gesture’. Thus ‘outcome’ does seem to be a way of judging good political listening, even though we might still maintain that good listening can take

(Bickford 1996: 153). I will explore the reasons for the ‘neglect of listening’ in greater detail below. In his own assessment of Blair’s Big Conversation, Stephen Coleman asks, ‘Can a governing party, with all of its entrenched political interests, ideological commitments and institutional pathologies enter into a genuine polylogue with something as amorphous as “the public”, or must such an exercise inevitably descend into a technical, consultative ritual or, worse still, a publicity-driven “monologue in disguise”, presented as if it were a conversation?’ (Coleman 2004: 115).
place without involving a change in outcome. This leads, third, to the point that another way of judging good political listening is as we judge it in daily life, in procedural terms. Naturally, the procedural criteria will be different in the political case – eye contact and regular questions designed to elicit or corroborate are difficult to replicate at this scale, as we observed above. So in the political context we may look for other criteria, such as the length of the listening exercise, the effort expended on drawing in and reaching out to participants, and the way in which views are taken into account. Be these details as they may, and important though they are to a fully worked out account of the role of listening in democracy, they key thing to note here is that listening does indeed seem to play a role in the construction of democratic legitimacy.

Listening and deep disagreements

Second, one of the key problems in both democratic theory and practice is dealing with deep rifts: ‘the centrally most difficult problem of democratic theory and government: how to handle deep disagreements’ (Hardin 1989: 103). These rifts might be ideological, sociological or religious and a number of strategies have been suggested for dealing with them. These include special representation for groups, either in theory or in practice (Young 1989), and attempts at encouraging deliberation between parties who disagree profoundly with one another. The role of listening in these difficult contexts has been underexplored. As Susan Bickford says, ‘We cannot suppose that political actors are sympathetic toward one another in a conflictual context, yet it is precisely the presence of conflict and differences that makes communicative interaction necessary’ (Bickford 1996: 2). Bickford recommends ‘political listening’ as a means of connecting parties in conflict with one another, and she stresses that this is not necessarily a ‘caring or amicable’ practice but nevertheless one that ‘makes politics possible’ as well as being ‘what democratic politics requires’ (Bickford 1996: 2).

Scepticism about the capacity for deliberation to deal with these kinds of problems is rife and apparently well-founded. But the reasons for this skepticism themselves invite reflection on the role that listening might play in improving deliberation’s chances. For instance in his commentary on Gutmann and Thompson’s vigorous defence of the deliberative approach to dealing with disagreement, Ian Shapiro argues that deliberation can’t deal with fundamentalists. As he says:

"the difficulty here is that the fundamentalist believes exactly what Gutmann and Thompson decry as illegitimate: that it is necessary to adopt her ‘sectarian way of life as a condition for gaining access to the moral understanding that is essential to judging the validity’ of her moral claims. (Shapiro 1999: 30-1)"

What Shapiro’s criticism misses is the possibility that deliberation itself has been underdeveloped and undertheorised in not including systematic reflection on the importance of listening to effective deliberation. We shall see later that despite being the closest approximation in democratic theory and practice to ‘conversation’, deliberative democracy has paid remarkably little attention to listening as part of its procedural rules. Of course it might still be that Shapiro’s fundamentalist won’t want to listen, but we should at least consider the possibility that people taking it in turns to
listen has a better chance of developing the required ‘we’ community than people taking it in turns to speak (where there is no listening).

Indeed it is curious that better listening as a method of coping with deep disagreements has not received more attention in democratic theory, not least because we have plenty of experience of the role of listening in other contexts of deep disagreement. It is well known that listening pays a crucial role in truth and reconciliation committees – without careful listening, indeed, they wouldn’t work. The aim of truth and reconciliation committees is not so different from some of the aims of democratic conversation: relation-building, sharing disparate understandings, developing reciprocity, perhaps even empathizing with those with whom one disagrees. Yet while listening plays a central role in truth and reconciliation committees – perhaps the central role – its absence in democratic theory is marked.

President Obama recently gave us an excellent example of the power of listening in the context of overcoming disagreement at the time of the shooting of House Representative Gabrielle Giffords and others in Arizona in January 2011. US politics at the time was characterized by sharply divided opinions across the political spectrum, with the Tea Party squaring up to liberals and Democrats around a range of issues from health care to foreign policy. Obama saw the shooting of Giffords as a chance to draw the American people together, and he seized the opportunity by referring explicitly to the need to listen to one another better. He began his memorial speech by referring to the ‘sharply polarized’ nature of American political discourse and appealed to his audience to ‘talk with each other in a way that heals, not in a way that wounds’. He then. He then exhorted them to ‘listen to each other more carefully’ before laying out a classical list of the characteristics and benefits of reconciliation that can be achieved by more careful listening: humility, expanding moral imaginations, sharpening empathy, generosity, compassion. Overall this is an appeal to ‘civility in public discourse’ with a view to overcoming the ‘usual plane of politics and point-scoring and pettiness that drifts away in the next news cycle’ (Obama 2011). It is hard to imagine a more opportunistic use of a tragedy to try to overcome social and political rift and rupture, nor a clearer example of an appeal to listening and its attributes and consequences as a means for doing so.

Of course we (and President Obama) must confront the possibility that better listening might result in no more than a better understanding of the reasons for disagreement rather than a means of ‘constantly widen[ing] the circle of our concern so that we bequeath the American Dream to future generations’ (Obama 2011), as he grandiosely put it. It could be that listening hard to Obama might just make Tea Party

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4 One issue that needs to be explored further is whether we can ‘translate’ the exigencies of peace and reconciliation processes into the context of democracy. The situations may just be too different. Peace and reconciliation normally follows experiences of great hurt. For instance Donald Shriver describes his book about forgiveness in politics as being about, ‘how human enemies, some or all of whom have greatly harmed each other, can grope toward political association again’ (Shriver 1995: 3). These are exceptional situations, so we need to ask how far the lessons learned there about listening can be used in the more mundane context of functioning democracies.
activists even more sure that the American Dream is not safe in the President’s hands and that he needs to be replaced as soon as possible. In this case listening is not a means of overcoming disagreement but rather of deepening and sclerosing it – even if on a better understood basis. Cate Thill has observed this phenomenon at work in the context of the Australian government’s attempts at reconciliation in the guise of its Northern Territory Intervention, where she points out that, ‘While listening can figure as a way of responding to the other … it is certainly not always open, empathetic or transformative. On the contrary, I would suggest that public debate about the NT Intervention manifests a range of communicative practices, including argumentation, therapeutic and selective listening, which function to preserve rather than transform established hierarchies of attention’ (Thill 2009: 541). As an antidote to these kinds of non-transformative modes of listening Thill, drawing on the work of Charles Husband (2000), recommends ‘courageous listening’. This type of listening steers a course between not listening at all on the one hand, and expecting that good listening will automatically result in consensus, on the other (Thill 2009: 539). The courageous listener backgrounds her/his own perspective and is prepared for incommensurability, which in Thill’s view is a precondition for further interaction (Thill 2009: 540). Here listening plays the role of not so much overcoming deep disagreements but of foregrounding them, so this is a type of listening potentially well suited to agonistic rather than consensus theories and forms of democracy.

More generally, with very few exceptions there is virtually no discussion of the role of listening in democratic theory and practice. One exception is Susan Bickford (1996) and another is Benjamin Barber (1984). Barber’s book on ‘strong democracy’ is one of the most influential interventions in democratic political theory in the past quarter century. It has been pored over in great detail, but four brief pages in it have received virtually no attention at all. These are the pages where Barber explains the importance of listening to his theory, and to democracy more generally. One of his key points is that listening has the capacity to help create the collective sense that anything beyond aggregative notions of democracy seems to require. As John Forester puts it: ‘In listening we create a relationship, a sense of mutuality, a “we”’ (Forester 1989: 10).

In his own account Barber begins where most people begin: with talk. Much like Robert Goodin and other deliberative democrats (Goodin 2008: 65), Barber reiterates the importance of talk to his preferred type of democracy: ‘At the heart of strong democracy is talk’ (Barber 1984: 173). But then he says: ‘Before embarking on a detailed discussion of the functions of talk in democracy, I want to make three general observations. First, strong democratic talk entails listening no less than speaking …’ (Barber 1984: 174). For Barber, democratic listening is ‘mutualistic listening’ (Barber 1984: 175), and this entails an attempt to empathise with the other and to work towards a common understanding in the name of a joint project: ‘“I will listen” means to the strong democrat not that I will scan my adversary’s position for weaknesses and potential trade-offs, nor even (as the minimalist might think) that I will tolerantly permit him to say whatever he chooses. It means, rather, “I will put myself in his place, I will try to understand, I will strain to hear what makes us alike, I will listen for a common rhetoric evocative of a common purpose or a common good”’ (Barber 1984: 175).
Perhaps we can overdo the ‘caring and sharing’, though. As Ben Knights observes (Knights 1995: ix), there are all sorts of listening contexts in the professional world, let alone in the private sphere of friendship and family. Can the lessons learned in these other contexts, and the practices developed there, be uncomplicatedly imported into the political sphere? Or if we do are we in danger of regarding political conversation as homologous to the conversation between a doctor and a patient or a therapist and her/his client? No doubt there is some rather good commonsense advice we could give to people wanting to become better political listeners, like asking questions of one’s interlocutor: ‘questioning is essential to listening well. Asking good questions can be an archaeological and interpretive digging into what matters’ (Forester 1989: 111). But is this all there is to political listening?

Bickford is at pains to point out that political listening must take into account the often adversarial nature of politics; ‘Let me begin by noting that my analysis is located in an understanding of politics that stresses its conflictual and contentious character’ (Bickford 1996: 2), she writes. This is something of a contrast with Benjamin Barber, who sees good listening as an antidote to adversarial politics. While he gives no indication that he believes this aspect of politics either can or should be overcome, he does feel that such politics have contributed to the lack of listening in what he calls the ‘Anglo-American system’ (Barber 1984: 175). As he puts it:

The Anglo-American adversary system, expressed in legislative politics, in the judicial system, and even in the separation of powers into contending branches, also puts a premium on speaking and a penalty on listening. The aim in adversarial proceedings is to prevail – to score verbal points and to overcome one’s interlocutors. In fact, speech in adversary systems is a form of aggression, simply one more variety of power. (Barber 1984: 175)

In this debate as to whether good political listening consists in erasing adversarial politics or listening better across it, even Bickford comes back to the idea of openness – that disposition that Stanley Fish among others regards as crucial to an effective democratic process (Fish 1999: 91). So she writes,

However, when I reflect on the actual practice of listening, I cannot escape the concept of openness. I cannot describe what I am doing when I am listening without coming back to some version of ‘being open to,’ just as ‘closedness’ seems the invariable characteristic of not-listening. (Bickford 1996: 146)

Here, then, listening is confirmed not only as a feature of a good democratic process, but also a means by which certain of the ideal dispositions in that process can be cultivated.

**Listening and understanding**

Third, in a very direct way better listening can lead to better understanding – essential, surely, to one of modern democracy’s principal ambitions: the more effective representation of people’s interests. The good representative will want to know what her/his constituents’ interests are, and it is sometimes all too easy to get this wrong. Careful listening could help. Indeed, it has the capacity to overturn
assumptions about the reasons people act as they do, and can lead the way to more effective resolution of political conflict.

Seyla Benhabib offers a suggestive example – the so-called affaire du foulard in France in 1989 when three female students were suspended from school for refusing to remove their hijabs in class. This was (and is) generally read as a conflict between religion and the French state, and particularly the issue of whether wearing the hijab in school is in conflict with the principles of a lay educational context. Benhabib reports that it wasn’t until the girls themselves were listened to that a different interpretation of the events emerged. The girls were not striking a blow for their religion but rather making a gesture of political defiance (Benhabib 2004: 56).

A common view is that understanding between political actors requires either shared interests or a pre-existing social bond of some kind. Where this is not the case, careful listening – or what Susan Bickford calls ‘a quality of attention inherent in the very practice of deliberation’ (Bickford 1996: 25; emphasis in the original) – can help. And as David Levin points out, the practice of careful listening can contribute to a sharpening of reciprocity between listeners which can in turn lead to new and unexpected understandings: ‘In a group or community where all people are committed to the reciprocity of good listening, each participant develops a clearer, more individual sense of the matter in question by helping each of the others to do the same. Where there really is such reciprocated listening, what is facilitated is not only the sharing of an existing understanding, but also the emergence and formation of new understanding’ (Levin, 1989: 135; emphasis in original). Talking tends to be directed to a determinate end (the speaker wants to make a point, to nail down an argument, to convince a listener), while listening prises open the content of speech and opens up new avenues for exploration.

One other surprising feature of attending to listening as well as speaking is that we come to prize silence as well as noise. We tend to think of a flourishing public sphere as being noisome and full of the sound of voices – the more the merrier. On the other hand we know that a proper conversation requires attentive silence on the part of those who are not speaking: ‘Silence is frequently mentioned as one of the conditions for, or inevitable correlates of, genuine listening’ (Bickford 1996: 153; emphasis in the original). While we know this is true for quotidian conversation, we have paid it very little attention in the political context. Benjamin Barber is one of the few who have:

one measure of healthy political talk is the amount of silence it permits and encourages, for silence is the precious medium in which reflection is nurtured and empathy can grow. Without it, there is only the babble of raucous interests and insistent rights vying for the deaf ears of impatient adversaries. The very idea of rights – the right to speak, the right to get on the record, the right to be heard – precludes silence. The Quaker meeting carries a message for democrats, but they are often too busy articulating their interests to hear it. (Barber 1984: 175-6; emphasis in the original)

This presents something of a challenge, for while we might acknowledge that, ‘in order to hear something, we must first give it our silence’ (Levin, 1989: 232; emphasis in the original), we need to find ways of incorporating silence in the
political process. Just how we are to do this (and how necessary it may be) will vary with the case: the raucous atmosphere of Prime Minister’s Question Time in the UK’s House of Commons contrasts quite starkly with what is generally the more sedate and considered atmosphere of the committee room. One example is that practised by the English and Welsh Green Party which has a one-minute period of ‘attunement’ before each plenary debate. This has the effect of helping to focus delegates’ attention on their new surroundings (they might have been doing any number of things before coming to the session) and what is going to happen there.

The nature and type of silence required therefore need careful analysis and design. One thing they will have in common is that they are attentive silences, for we must always remember, along with Susan Bickford, that, ‘[W]ords that continually fall into dead silence can have no worldly reality and lead to no joint action. This silent refusal, as deliberate not-listening, is clearly a drastic political act’ (Bickford 1996: 155). Political silence must be a preparation for communication, not a refusal of it.

**Listening and empowerment**

A fourth function of listening is the capacity to empower and include. We have already seen Dryzek claiming that the best way to silence people is to refuse to listen to them (Dryzek, 2000: 149). The corollary of this is that empowerment entails listening (Couldry 2006: 57 and Boyte 1989: 57). Barber argues that the political stress on the skill of speaking exacerbates inequalities while listening is an inherently more egalitarian process that demands and encourages empathy and understanding between interlocutors:

> Good listeners may turn out to be bad lawyers, but they make adept citizens and excellent neighbours. Liberal democrats tend to value speech, and are thus concerned with formal equality. Listeners, on the other hand, feel that an emphasis on speech enhances natural inequalities in individuals’ abilities to speak with clarity, eloquence, logic and rhetoric. Listening is a mutualistic art that by its very practices enhances equality. The empathetic listener becomes more like his interlocutor as the two bridge the differences between them by conversation and mutual understanding. (Barber 1984: 175)

Talk of empowerment and inclusion obliges us to distinguish between listening to and listening out for⁵. So far we have been thinking more about the former – i.e. about how to listen better to those already included in the political community and about the positive role that such listening could play in the political process.

Empowerment and inclusion (and especially the latter), though, suggest an absence rather than a presence. We are in effect listening out for voices that have not been heard before. And this in turn raises the question of what a legitimate political voice (i.e. one that has a prima facie case to be heard) might sound like. On the face of it this is a fairly simple question to answer, and we usually draw on something like Aristotle’s definition of the ‘political animal’ in order to answer it. In Book 1 of his *Politics* Aristotle writes that, ‘Nature, as we say, does nothing without some purpose; and for the purpose of making man a political animal she has endowed him alone

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⁵ I am grateful to Michael Saward for suggesting this distinction.
among the animals with the power of reasoned speech’. Speech is what sets ‘man’ apart from other animals, says Aristotle, and it enables us to do something that mere ‘voice’ (which is possessed by other animals) cannot do – i.e. ‘indicate what is useful and what is harmful, and so also what is right and what is wrong’. Aristotle concludes that, ‘the real difference between man and other animals is that humans alone have perception of good and evil, right and wrong, just and unjust’ (Aristotle, 1962: 28-9). So on this reading the political being is a speaking being, and thus ‘[T]o anchor politics to the negotiation of interests or the rational formation of consent presupposes the capacity of all groups involved to be recognized as speaking agents who need to be listened to at all’ (Martin 2009: 22).

**Listening to whom, listening for what?**

The development of this culture of listening is complicated by the way in which our ‘listening for’ is distorted by the way in which we receive certain forms of speech and ways of speaking. There are two aspects to this. First, some speech by some humans is either disregarded or not heard at all (women, for example, have always been speaking but they have not always been heard). Second, if we move beyond an Aristotelian framework and consider speech as just one of many forms of communication, we find ourselves asking what a political noise sounds like. In other words, what are we listening out for?

So first, just as rhetoric involves selected speech, so our listening can be selective too. Cultures determine what legitimate speech consists in, and this is often a reflection of political, social and economic power. The danger is that we only hear what we are ‘permitted’ to hear, and this suggests that there is such a thing as non-strategised listening – a key element of which will be the capacity to ‘hear beyond’ politico-culturally acceptable speech. True recognition will involve hearing people who haven’t been heard before. And this may involve the activity of listening to speech as it is rather than that enunciated in a form that makes it acceptable. Often people speak in a voice that they believe has a chance of being heard, and this may not always be their ‘authentic’ voice. Susan Bickford points out that who we are will determine to a degree how we are listened to: ‘What tends to get heard in public settings is a way of speaking associated with those who control social, political, and economic institutions’ (Bickford 1996: 97).

Acute political listening, therefore, will be sensitive to the ‘authentic’ voice – the voice that expresses the genuine claims of the speaker rather than claims that are ‘always already’ distorted in order to be heard in the first place. Drawing on the feminist concern that the claims of women will not be accurately heard in a patriarchal context, Bickford goes on to say that,

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 … 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: 129)

The vital point here is that listening plays a key role in creating a vibrant, plural public realm – which is as much as to say that it plays a key role in politics itself.

By this point we are effectively asking what a legitimate political noise sounds like. The Aristotelian answer to this question looks clear: it is any communication noise made by a speaking being capable of debating the difference between right and wrong. Yet the discussion above suggests that we may not always hear even that kind of voice as clearly as we should. This can perhaps be remedied by more acute political listening, listening that is sensitive to the layers of cultural, political, economic and social power that distort our listening and prevent us from hearing what are eventually regarded as perfectly legitimate voices once those layers of interference are swept away.

Yet we should also recognise that in this story our listening is conditioned by a *prima facie* understanding of what we are listening for: speech. Might it be that those same layers of cultural, political, economic and social power that can distort our hearing of political speech also distort (restrict) our conception of what a legitimate political noise sounds like in the first place? Let’s not forget that when Aristotle is defining the political animal in terms of the capacity to speak, he rejects the claims of those beings who have voice: ‘Speech is something different from voice, which is possessed by other animals also and used by them to express pain or pleasure; for the natural powers of some animals do indeed enable them both to feel pleasure and pain and to communicate these to each other’ (Aristotle 1962: 29). He rejects the claims of those who have voice, only, on the grounds that the political being must have a conception of what is right and what is wrong and, as far as we know, non-human animals have no such conception. He does say, though, that some non-human animals can experience pain and pleasure and that they can communicate these to each other. This means that they can communicate pain and pleasure to us (human beings) as well, and given that pain and pleasure can be spoken of in the categories of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ then at the very least we should perhaps regard the pain and pleasure noises of non-human animals as political noises.

At the very beginning of her book on listening in politics, Susan Bickford points to the neglect of listening and then says, ‘Two questions come to mind here: why is listening absent in this way? And why should we care - that is, why is listening important? My concern is with the second question’ (Bickford 1996: 1). The

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6 David Michael Levin points out how listening has traditionally been regarded as a ‘feminine’ activity (1989: 218), and Jennifer Richards comments on how rhetoric (or good rhetoric at any rate) was a masculine preserve: ‘Since its inception, rhetoric has been the preserve of a masculine elite. Only male citizens were given training in it because only this group had the opportunity to debate publicly. We see the effect of this in the Roman manuals, which tend to explore the loss of this opportunity or its ineffective application in explicitly gendered terms. For Quintilian, for example, good oratory is manly; it entails wielding arguments as weapons in a quest for domination in the public arena. In contrast, bad oratory, which seeks to please rather than to win, is deemed effeminate’ (Richards 2008: 70-1).
discussion above suggests that the first question needs answering too. In answer to
the question of why listening has been neglected I have argued – much as Bickford
does, implicitly – that this is because Aristotle defines the political animal as a
speaking animal\(^7\). But I have taken this a stage further by pointing out that the
listening exercise itself is curtailed by restricting ourselves to listening out for speech
only. If we think of speech as a form of communication and then think of all the other
forms of communication we might be listening out for (including the ‘voices’ referred
to above), then the range of listening we are required to do is broadened considerably.

By the same token, listening itself is only one form of communicative receptivity –
the aural form. We can receive information from the outside world using any of our
other senses too: sight, taste, smell, touch. And the range of each of these senses
(hearing too) can be increased by using instrumentation (microscopes, telescopes). So
once we turn our attention away from speaking and towards ‘listening’, a host of new
potential political signals come into view. All this suggests that listening is a political
act: ‘as it is an act of participation, listening is inescapably political’ (Forester 1989:
118). And it is political in a particular way – it is an act of agency. When we listen
we make choices, we choose what to listen to. Listening is not a passive act\(^8\) – both
listening to and listening out for are active moments: ‘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: 24)\(^9\).

**Rhetoric – strategised listening**

All this suggests that the political being is as much a listening being as a speaking
being, yet our conception of politics and the way it should be conducted - and even
the way(s) in which it might be ‘improved’ - are indelibly coloured by the Aristotelian
insistence on speech as the primordial political capacity. The centrality of speech has
come to seem such an obvious reference point when we think about what politics –

\(^7\) Bickford (1996: 26) and Dryzek (2000: 145) briefly discuss this aspect of Aristotle
too.

\(^8\) Along with John Forester we need to distinguish between ‘hearing’ and ‘listening’
along these lines: ‘Listening is … active, while hearing is often more passive; and
hearing is often formal, institutionally defined, as in “to grant a hearing”, while
listening seems more ordinary, if not more intimate’ (1989: 108).

\(^9\) Once we begin to talk about communication rather than just speaking, and to think
of active listening as a political act, the range of potential political actors widens.
Building on Habermas, John Dryzek writes that, ‘The key would be to treat
communication, and so communicative rationality, as extending to entities that can act
as agents, even though they lack the self-awareness which connotes subjectivity’
(Dryzek 2000: 148). For Dryzek, this means acknowledging ‘nature’ as a political
actor which we need to listen out for: ‘Recognition of agency in nature therefore
means that we should listen to signals emanating from the natural world with the
same sort of respect we accord communication emanating from human subjects, and
as requiring equally careful interpretation’ (Dryzek 2000: 149). David Michael Levin
makes a similar point: ‘listening as a practice of compassion, increasing our capacity,
as listeners, to be aware of, and responsive to, the interrelatedness and commonality
of all sonorous beings’ (1989: 48; my emphasis).
and particularly democracy - is that it is rarely remarked upon. Drawn virtually at random from the literature, James Martin’s characterisation of democratic politics stands for the vast majority of received opinion on the matter: ‘The medium of any democratic politics is, primarily, speech. Arguing and persuading one’s fellow citizens is a fundamental skill that helps distinguish democracy from other forms of government’ (Martin 2009: 21). By the same token it is instructive to see commentators on listening leave politics out of the range of activities that involves this capacity. Witness Ben Knights ignoring politicians altogether in the list of people for whom his The Listening Reader is written: ‘all those whose role includes practised listening. I am thinking especially of counsellors, social workers, clergy, probation officers, psychotherapists …’ (Knights 1995: ix).

It is worth remembering that rhetoric itself – the art of ‘persuasive speech’ – was developed in ancient Greece and Rome (Richards 2008), building on Aristotle’s definition of the political being as a speaking being. Richards writes that, ‘In these states the importance of speaking well in the public forum or the law courts was essential to political life’ (Richards 2008: 3-4), and that ‘a great deal [was] invested in succeeding’ (Richards 2008: 65). Significantly, far from being a form of speech that engages the listener in non-strategic debate, on one account rhetoric at its best bypasses the listener and undermines her/his critical faculties: ‘Traditionally, rhetoric is concerned with the affective power of language, and with describing and classifying the devices that produce emotion, or develop a logical proof, and so sway the judgement of an audience’ (Richards 2008: 121). Thus this type of rhetoric, far from being a form of speech that invites conversation, aims to avoid it by regarding the listener as an obstacle to be overcome rather than an essential ingredient in the political process.

The skilled rhetorician will take account of the listener but in the opposite way to that required of open-minded democratic conversation. S/he will know the listener in order the better to influence her or him. In one original theory of rhetoric, listeners are divided up into a discrete number of types, and the rhetorician studies these types with a view to saying the appropriate thing at the appropriate time in order to create maximum influence and impact: ‘a certain type of hearer will be easy to persuade by a certain type of speech to take such and such an action for such and such reason, while another type will be hard to persuade. All this the orator must fully understand’ (Richards 2008: 29)10.

We might call this ‘strategised listening’, which from the point of view of a democratic process that prizes non-strategic conversation, is as bad as strategising speaking – which Habermas famously seeks to counter with his ‘ideal speech situation’ (I will discuss Habermas briefly in the next section). As Bickford perceptively notes, ‘there is a difference between political deliberation (as an inclusive, collective figuring out) and deliberative rhetoric (which involves persuading others to the already figured out)’ (Bickford 1996: 46).

Listening, Habermas and (deliberative) democracy

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10 And see Bickford 1996: 43-46
As far as democracy is concerned, we might share Plato’s concern at ‘speechifying’ rather than conversation: ‘From the very beginning of the dialogue Polus is characterized as a speechifier, as someone who is more interested in making longwinded orations than in conducting a conversation’ (Richards 2008: 25). There is a rich strand in democratic theory that sees democracy as being more about debate than decision-making, and this is evidenced by the fact that the legitimacy of a decision in a democracy is determined more by how it is taken rather than by the decision itself. In other words the process is regarded as more important than the outcome as far as democratic decision-making is concerned.

Unpacking this process, we see that listening is both a feature and a catalyser of some of the desirable dispositions associated with ‘good’ democratic process. These dispositions include an enhancing of the capacity for dialogue, openness, and the development of empathy. Indeed we can easily miss the central role that good listening can play in developing these dispositions. Robert Goodin, for example, refers to the importance in deliberative democracy of, ‘[I]magining yourself in the place of another, for purposes of trying to understand what the other is saying’ (Goodin 2008: 42). Listening would seem to be crucial, too, to achieving this kind of empathy.

It is easy to forget that talk is only one part of conversation or dialogue, and that when democratic conversation is properly taking place, good listening acts as a kind of check or bulwark against strategising talk. When the talker listens properly s/he is temporarily silent and is forced to check what s/he is saying against the points or claims being made by the interlocutor. This is why Jurgen Habermas’s theory of undistorted communication is one-sided: it fails to take into account the importance of listening as a check on strategizing speech. Goodin recognizes this in the context of deliberative democracy:

Deliberative democrats redouble the demands of sheer good conversational manners … Listening attentively to one another is part and parcel of what it is to deliberate together. Discursive engagement requires interlocuters to pay attention to what one another is saying and to adjust their own positions and their own remarks accordingly. (Goodin 2008: 110)

Much recent political theorising has of course recognised the dangers of strategising talk, and ingenious ways of overcoming it – at least in principle – have been devised. The most thorough attempt to develop a theory of non-strategising political communication is of course that of Jurgen Habermas, and his influence has been felt well beyond the social sciences of communication. Most significantly for us his

11 Habermas seems to forget that listening can be ‘distorted’ just as speech can (Bickford 1996: 139).
12 The quotation here is the only place in his book where Goodin refers directly to listening, and as I pointed out in footnote 1 the role of listening in democracy in general and deliberative democracy in particular has been underexplored. Here Goodin footnotes Susan Bickford’s (1996) seminal monograph on listening in politics and democracy, but takes his analysis of listening no further. I shall show below how doing so throws new light on one of the deliberative democracy case studies Goodin himself analyses.
impact has been especially keenly felt in the communicative rules that are held to exist (ideally) in deliberative or discursive democracy. As John Dryzek summarises this: ‘Communicative rationality is found to the degree that communicative action is free from coercion, deception, self-deception, strategizing, and manipulation’ (Dryzek 2000: 22).

What is striking about Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality is that the listening element of communication is entirely absent. His ideal speech situation operates as if the listening element is wholly unproblematic. As Michael Levin points out:

Habermas’s account of communicative action unwittingly postulates an unproblematic hearing: a listener who always hears all there is to be heard; a listening which is invariably accurate and complete. There is no theoretical recognition of auditory distortion, ideological deafness, institutional noise, the specific ways in which power channels hearing and listening channels power. It is as if, when it comes to listening, a metaphysics of presence still governed his thinking. (Levin 1989: 111).

Habermas is interested in undistorted communication yet he pays very little attention indeed to the listening skills that might be required for it. Once again speech holds sway, and yet it seems clear that, ‘If ideology involves the systematic distortion of communicative processes, the rational consensus model depends as much on skilful listening as on truthful speaking’ (Levin 1989: 195-6).

Using listening as a tool for analyzing democratic processes

So far we have discussed the way in which listening could and should be a more integral part of the democratic process. We have noted how it has been ignored as a political skill and how its presence could bring with it a range of benefits. What I want to show now is how it can be ignored by theorists not only in this normative context, but also as an analytical datum when it comes to interpreting democratic processes themselves – and especially deliberative democratic processes. I can show this by discussing a case that Robert Goodin analyses in some detail in his recent (2008) Innovating Democracy: democratic theory and practice after the deliberative turn. This is obviously only one case, but I believe that the conclusions I reach could be applied to – and certainly tested against other cases of - deliberative democratic processes. This will only be borne out – or called into question - by more comprehensive work, and my intention here is just to offer a potential line of enquiry. The case Goodin examines is the Bloomfield Track case. The Bloomfield Track is a road that runs through the Daintree Forest in Cairns, Australia, and the policy decision was whether this road should be improved or not. As an exercise in deliberative democracy, the Far North Queensland Citizens’ Jury met to consider the policy options. The deliberative process took four days: Day One involved a visit to the site and background briefings, Days Two and Three were taken up with listening to, and questioning, expert witnesses and community representatives, and Day Four was devoted to the juror’s deliberations.

Deliberative democratic theory has it that deliberation, when conducted properly, has the capacity to change people’s preferences. When confronted by a better argument
the deliberative democrat should change her/his mind. In the Bloomfield Track case
the jurors had five policy options to decide between – and as deliberative theory
might expect, over the course of the process the jurors’ minds changed dramatically.
In fact, as Goodin says, ‘the least popular option at the beginning of the process
turned out to be the most popular by the end’ (Goodin 2008: 46). But crucially, says
Goodin, and contrary to deliberative expectations, the main shift did not take place
during the deliberative phase of the process (Day Four), but during what Goodin calls
the ‘information phase’ (Days 1-3). Goodin’s counterintuitive conclusion (at least
from the point of view of deliberative logic) runs as follows:

we are led to suppose (with contemporary deliberative democrats) that
deliberation – in the sorts of settings that characterize political life, anyway –
consists principally in interpersonal communications, paradigmatically
conversational, dialogic, or discursive in form. This chapter queries that
proposition. Its thesis is that much (maybe most) of the work of deliberation
occurs well before the formal proceedings – before the organized “talking
together” ever begins. (Goodin 2008: 40)

The jurors themselves were asked which of the phases of the process made the biggest
difference to them, and their replies certainly give the deliberative democrat food for
thought: ‘No one thought the “group discussion” was the most important factor in
changing their opinion; three-quarters of them thought it was the least important
factor’ (Goodin 2008: 51).

Goodin then sets out to discuss this somewhat disconcerting set of results. He offers a
series of possible explanations for the conclusion that, ‘it is clear that the bigger
change, by a wide margin, occurred in the minds of jurors before the jury’s formal
discussions began’ (Goodin 2008: 49; emphasis in the original). Among these
reasons are: the order of the phases (whichever phase comes first will be the most
significant), the duration of the phases (the discussion phase was shorter than the
information phase), the idea of discussion as a ‘corrective’ (i.e. not designed to
change minds but to come to the ‘right decision), and the cumulative effect of data
during the information phase which made it difficult for the direction of travel to be
turned round in the discussion phase (Goodin 2008: 52-4). He adds to his list an
extension of the last explanation via the notion of the possible path dependency of the
discussion – i.e. that the path the discussion sets out on, and one’s place in the
discussion order, can affect the decision eventually reached.

These are all plausible explanations and it is not my job here to choose between them.
What I want to do is to add to the list of possible explanations by pointing out that the
role that listening did or did not play in this particular Citizens’ Jury is not discussed
at all, yet it might well have been very significant. Take, first, the information phase
– the phase in which most of the ‘changing minds’ work was done. As Goodin
himself says, ‘The simple process of jurors seeing the site for themselves, focusing

13 It is worth pointing out that at the heart of this belief lies the assumption that people
are listening properly to other people’s views: ‘The riskiness of listening comes partly
from the possibility that what we hear will require change from us’ (Bickford 1996:
149). This assumption, and the absolutely crucial role that good listening plays in it,
is virtually never recognized or discussed.
their minds on the issues, and listening to what experts had to say did all the work in changing jurors’ attitudes. Talking among themselves, as a jury, did virtually none of it’ (Goodin 2008: 58; my emphasis). Each of the italicized words/phrases is a key aspect of what was going on in the information phase, and it appears that it was these activities, and not talking, that changed jurors’ minds. At the very least, then, we might surmise that both as normative objective and explanatory factor, listening (in the widest sense of using all our senses to capture information) should receive greater attention from theorists of deliberative democracy. Thus if it is indeed true that the outcome of this particular exercise in deliberative democracy is ‘contrary to the expectations of discursive democrats who would have us privilege conversation over cogitation as politically the most important mode of deliberation’ (Goodin 2008: 50), then this is because deliberative democracy has come to be too closely associated with talking and not enough with listening.

Something similar might be said in respect of Goodin’s path dependency explanation for the discussion phase of the process not having the decisive effect that deliberative democrats might want. According to Goodin, path dependency is a result of what he calls ‘serial updating’ (Goodin 2008: 119), i.e. each speaker listens to what the previous speaker has to say, then forms a judgement: ‘If we listen carefully and take fully into account what the previous speakers just have said when forming our own view as to what we should say next, the conversation can be highly path dependent’ (Goodin 2008: 119). Goodin’s solution to this problem is to abandon serial updating in favour of a ‘wait to update’ strategy:

Instead of dynamically updating their own beliefs as others speak, they should wait to revise their beliefs until all the private information is on the table. Only at that point should they engage in ‘periodic updating’ of their beliefs, taking account of all the new information now in the public domain. (Goodin 2008: 120)

This is a very sensible suggestion, but what is significant about it is that it turns the discussion phase into something resembling the information phase of the process – during which, we remember, jurors were doing much more listening than talking. What Goodin is in effect asking for is more silence. It might appear ironic that discursive democracy could be improved by having less discussion, but it only appears so because we have got so used to thinking of discursive democracy in terms of speaking. Once we remember that good listening is an essential component of effective discussion – that the ‘ideal speech situation’ requires ‘ideal listening’ too – then the idea that discursive democracy requires less speech and more silence comes to seem less absurd. This would give rise to a more thoroughgoing dialogical understanding of deliberative democracy, with all that this would imply for practising and theorizing it. In general, the implication – once more - is that theories of discursive and deliberative democracy should pay more normative and analytic attention to the theoretical and practical role of listening14.

14 Goodin offers us a helpful table indicating ‘standards of good discursive practice’ (2008: 188) on which he says, ‘there seems to be an impressively broad scholarly consensus’ (2008: 187). If so, then the consensus seems to be that listening is not a part of good practice. Of the fifteen criteria collected under the three headings of ‘maxims of conversation’, ‘rules of political interlocution’, and ‘indices of
Conclusion

In this article I have begun to establish the lack of attention paid to listening in politics in general and democracy in particular, and to highlight some of the benefits of taking listening more seriously. These benefits include increasing legitimacy, dealing with deep disagreements, improving understanding between citizens and elected representatives, and enhancing empowerment. Once we think of politics in terms of listening as well as speaking, a further range of questions arise that need much more detailed attention. What distinguishes political listening from other types of listening? To what extent can the performance of listening in other fields (e.g. therapy) be carried over into the political arena, or to what extent do they need to be modified? Once we know what political listening is, how might it be improved? Can politicians be taught to listen better? What are we listening for? Finally, plenty of thought has gone into institutional design for democratic innovation (Smith 2009), but listening has played very little part in this enquiry. How different would our political institutions and their practices look if we were to take listening seriously?

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deliberative quality’, the only references to anything like listening are, ‘attentiveness’, i.e. ‘pay attention to what is said by other participants’; and ‘respect’, i.e. ‘respect towards counterarguments raised by opponents that contradict their own conclusions’ (Goodin 2008: 188).


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