



Listening Practices

Workshop presented as part of The Listening Project

Friday 31 October 2008

12 - 5 pm

University of Sydney

Convenors: Penny O'Donnell (USyd) & Juan Salazar (UWS)

Supported by the ARC Cultural Research Network & the Transforming Cultures Research Centre, University of Technology, Sydney; in conjunction with the Department of Media & Communications, University of Sydney



The University of Sydney

Workshop Location

Common Room,
Level 3, Room 480
John Woolley Building
A20
Science Road
University of Sydney

Map (ref E12):

<http://db.auth.usyd.edu.au/directories/map/largemap00a.html>

Workshop Program

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| 12.00 noon – 1.00 pm | Lunch |
| 1.00 pm | Welcome and introduction |
| 1.15 pm | Small group discussion of framing questions |
| 1.45 pm | Group discussion |
| 2.45 pm | Afternoon tea |
| 3.15 pm | Group discussion |
| 4.45 pm | Closing remarks |

The small groups are:

1. Juan, Jo, Caitlin, Alissar and Cate T.
2. Penny, Mark G, Susan, Anna S. and Tiffany
3. Tanja, Virginia, Kate A, Antonio and Sally G.
4. Justine, Ellie, Justo, Edison and Wendy C.

The Listening Project: Background

The Listening Project is a program of collaboration that will generate sustained discussion and publication around the politics, technologies and practices of the cultural literacy of 'listening'. The project develops a new area of study through an innovative model of networking, bringing together researchers across a range of disciplines as well as media and cultural producers. The program will examine the neglected dynamics of 'listening', an emerging focus in Media Studies and citizens' media interventions. Habitual critiques of representation and the politics of 'speaking' (or giving voice to the voiceless) are giving way to investigation of more active possibilities for social inclusion and change based on recognition, dialogic engagement and acceptance.

The final project event for 2008 is the *Workshop on Media and Listening*, with Professor Charles Husband, to be held on Thursday 13 November at the University of Technology, Sydney. Postgraduate and Early Career Researchers are invited to participate in this full-day workshop on 'Media and Listening' with international guest speaker, Professor Charles Husband. The workshop will include a presentation and thematic discussion of Charles Husband's recent work on media, multiculturalism, listening and understanding, as well as opportunities for participants to discuss and gain feedback on their own research projects.

This workshop concludes a year-long exploration of the social and cultural construction of 'listening'. Other workshops have explored topics such as media and multiculturalism, conflict, disability and technologies. We are keen to include previous workshop participants as well as welcome researchers and scholars who will join us for the first time.

Tanja Dreher, Justine Lloyd and Penny O'Donnell, Project Conveners

Workshop Rationale

“It is as if we must stop speaking only in the terms we ourselves prefer and know best, in order to open up a space where we can hear others with whom we may share at least a commitment to the greater value...of living well together. It is this that the media must help us to do, which requires an evaluative framework to which it is open to everyone affected by media to contribute”
Nick Couldry, Listening Beyond the Echoes, 2006.

This workshop will explore the significance of listening in contemporary media culture. We define media broadly --- from mainstream print, broadcast and online media, to citizens’ media interventions that seek to complement, confront, or remain autonomous from mainstream media. We are interested in specific examples of media practice in which media/cultural practitioners encourage audiences to hear/listen to issues/events in different and/or unexpected ways, and where listening is an explicit part of the rationale for the media practice. The workshop participants are invited to collaborate in the development of a shared archive of listening practices by talking about and/or bringing along examples of things that people do and say in relation to media and listening. Thinking about the media and listening has the potential to extend our capacity to both experience and theorise more open and inclusive forms of communication that are generative of media/social change --- and to challenge the recurrent use of ‘speaking’ and ‘voice’ as metaphors for ‘democratic’ media participation and reform. Listening, speaking, practice, recognition, agency and justice are key categories in this workshop. Media-oriented listening activities that raise questions and offer insights about struggles for justice in the global political context --- including responses to the structured inequities of the global media system --- are one area of focus.

Framing Questions

1. Listening practices: why emphasis on practices?

What is the primary theoretical focus of research on media-related 'listening'? What distinguishes it from, say, the media studies' traditions of audience research (media effects) or reception studies (understanding media consumption)? Does a conceptual focus on practice reveal otherwise neglected power relations embedded in media, and connect them to wider patterns of social and cultural power?

2. Case studies/Best practice

We begin with general questions: what strategies do media and media activists employ to encourage new ways of listening or being heard? What do media and media activists want audiences to listen for, and do they encourage multiple ways of listening and being heard? What do media, media activists and their audiences say about listening? Is there evidence that audiences recognise and acknowledge initiatives aimed at developing new kinds of media listening?

3. Listening and emerging communities: Finding a voice/finding a listener

How might experiences of community development and empowerment through media self-representation be extended through attention to media-related listening practices? What is the place of listening in critical thinking about multicultural, alternative and community media? Are listening practices connected only to audio-visual media or are there ways of defining media-related listening that encompass print and online media as well? Are multicultural, alternative and community media communities better listeners than mainstream media audiences?

4. Listening and counter-publics

What is the relationship between listening, knowledge and public life? How do you respond to Charles Hirschkind's (2006) claim* that the affects and sensibilities honed through popular media practices such as listening to cassette sermons in Egypt are as 'infrastructural to politics and public reason' as formal institutions and information networks? Public sphere theory (including modifications of Habermas so as to recognise alternative or counter-public spheres) is a growing area of theorisation within community media studies. For example, attention has been drawn to the use of online media in the building of counter-publics to dominant and hegemonic media spheres. In what ways can we think of counter-hegemonic forms of listening? [*see following pages for extract of text]

5. Communication rights and listening

What is the role of international human rights law in establishing frameworks for who has rights to speak, to be listened to, and to be understood and responded to? How can communication rights extend understanding of the importance of listening? How do we encourage media/journalism to extend free speech/press freedom rationales to encompass ideas about communication as a process listening and being understood as well as speaking?

Hirschkind, Charles 2006, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*, Columbia University Press.

Blurb: In *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counter Publics* (Columbia University Press, 2006) Charles Hirschkind boldly stakes out new theoretical territory in his ethnographic exploration of the moral auditorium of cassette sermons in Cairo. As the paradigmatic media form of the Islamic Revolution, he effectively shows us, cassette sermons shape the affects, sensibilities and perceptual habits of their city audiences. Exploring the sociality invited by these sermons, he provides an historical review and rhetorical analysis of a genre of homiletic speech and the affective, kinesthetic, and gestural dimensions of contemporary auditory knowledge in urban environments. In so doing, Hirschkind revisits the hierarchies of the senses naturalized by modernity. Through consideration of the embodied performance of listening as a technique of self-fashioning, he illustrates how ethical subjects in Cairo assume a virtuous habitus that predisposes them to engage in new kinds of political practice. Elegantly written and beautifully structured, this volume is simultaneously a contribution to the anthropology of the senses, political anthropology, and the anthropology of religion. Nonetheless, the author implicitly challenges the constitution of anthropology's subdisciplines while providing a commentary on the limits of modern categories of thought for appreciating current configurations of power and knowledge. Hirschkind does so, moreover, by making an intelligent and moving intervention into the Western public discourse of immoral panic that surrounds "Islamic fundamentalism". *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counter Publics* exemplifies the enduring value of ethnography in addressing contemporary moral challenges.

Extract: The Politics of Sound

"From the inception of the practice in the late 1960s and early 1970s, cassette-sermon audition has been an important and integral part of the Islamic Revival. While this movement encompasses a wide variety of phenomena, from political parties to underground militant organizations, in Egypt its broadest section has always remained grounded in grassroots efforts to revitalize Islamic forms of knowledge, pedagogy, comportment, and sociability. As a result of this movement, many in Egypt from across the class spectrum, and particularly younger people, have increasingly found it important to deepen their knowledge of the Quran and the multiple disciplines it mediates, to participate in mosque study groups, to acquire competence in preaching and recitation techniques, and, more generally, to abide by the dictates of what they consider to be virtuous Muslim conduct in both their religious and nonreligious activities.

The effects of this movement are evident throughout Egypt but most strikingly and pervasively in the popular quarters of Cairo's lower-middle and lower classes, where a renewed concern with Islam is visible in everything from dress styles to mosque attendance to the prevalence of Islamic welfare organizations. Indeed, networks of Islamic charitable, service, educational, and medical associations, many of them directly affiliated with local mosques, have increasingly proliferated in such popular quarters and have further enhanced the function of mosques as centers of neighborhood

life (see chapter 2). These developments have been accompanied by the creation of what might be called Islamic soundscapes, ways of reconfiguring urban space acoustically through the use of Islamic media forms. Rooted in this amalgam of forms of association, practice, learning, and sensibility, the Islamic Revival has exerted a profound effect on Egypt as well as other Middle Eastern societies over the last few decades. Its paradigmatic media form is the cassette sermon.

In Cairo, where I spent a year and a half exploring this common media practice, cassette-recorded sermons of popular Muslim preachers, or *khutaba'* (sing. *khatib*), have become a ubiquitous part of the contemporary social landscape. The sermons of well-known orators spill into the street from loudspeakers in cafes, the shops of tailors and butchers, the workshops of mechanics and TV repairmen; they accompany passengers in taxis, mini-buses, and most forms of public transportation; they resonate from behind the walls of apartment complexes, where men and women listen alone in the privacy of their homes after returning home from the factory, while doing housework, or together with acquaintances from school or office, invited to hear the latest sermon from a favorite preacher. Outside most of the larger mosques, following Friday prayer, thriving tape markets are crowded with people looking for the latest sermon from one of Egypt's well-known *khutaba'* or a hard-to-find tape from one of Jordan's prominent mosque leaders. The popularity of sermon tapes has given public prominence to these orators that the Egyptian state, despite its attempts to silence such figures through rigid censorship policies, has been able to do little about.

During my stay in Egypt, I spent much of my time meeting both with the *khutaba'* who produced sermon tapes and with young people who listened to them on a regular basis. Ibrahim was one of the men who would often take time to listen to sermon tapes with me and explain their significance. A recent graduate of Cairo University now working for a small publishing company, Ibrahim had first become an enthusiast of sermon tapes while he was a student. He would often listen to them when he came home from work, either alone in his room or together with his younger sister and his parents. His sister, Huda, a university student herself at the time, also greatly appreciated cassette sermons and would frequently bring home new tapes she had borrowed from friends at school. As her brother had when he was a student, Huda participated in a study group at the university in which she and other students would sit and discuss current issues and events they considered germane to their lives as Muslim men and women. Like many of the young Egyptians who make up the backbone of the Islamic Revival, the siblings both condemned the violent tactics of Egypt's militant Islamic groups while agreeing with many of their social and political critiques. For both brother and sister, and many others like them, cassette sermons were at once entertaining, politically informative, educational, and ethically nourishing, a media form consonant with the challenge of living as a Muslim in today's world.

This book explores the practice of listening to such taped sermons and the forms of public life this practice serves to uphold in contemporary Egypt. In the popular neighborhoods of Cairo, sermon tapes are part of the acoustic architecture of a distinct moral vision, animating and sustaining the ethical

sensibilities that enable ordinary Muslims to live in accord with what they consider to be God's will. Recorded and rerecorded, passing through worn-out electronics, bustling crowds, and noisy streets, the vocal performances resonate both within the sensorium of sensitive listeners and outside, around them and between them. In doing so, they create the sensory conditions of an emergent ethical and political lifeworld, with its specific patterns of behavior, sensibility, and practical reasoning. To call this lifeworld "fundamentalist," to chalk it up to the contortions of the religious mind in a secular age, misses the point of this ethicopolitical project. The reduction enacted by such terms blinds us to a variety of ambitions, goals, and aspirations, foremost among them the desire on the part of ordinary Muslims to live in accord with the demands of Islamic piety within a context of rapidly changing social, political, and technological conditions. As I show in chapter 4, this attempt entails the creation of new discursive forms for collectively arguing about and acting upon the conditions of social and political life. The emergent public arena articulated by the circulation of cassette-recorded sermons connects Islamic traditions of ethical discipline to practices of deliberation about the common good, the duties of Muslims in their status as national citizens, and the future of the greater Islamic community (the umma). These deliberative practices are not oriented toward politics as it is conventionally understood: their purpose is not to influence the formation of state policy or to mobilize voting blocs behind party platforms. Rather, the activities that constitute the public arena I describe are political in a way close to the sense Hannah Arendt (1958) gives to the term: the activities of ordinary citizens who, through the exercise of their agency in contexts of public interaction, shape the conditions of their collective existence. As conceived by its participants, this arena constitutes that space of communal reflexivity and action understood as necessary for perfecting and sustaining the totality of practices upon which an Islamic society depends.

To explore this lifeworld requires that we confront the inadequacies of such binaries as moral/political, disciplinary/deliberative, and emotion/reason, that have shaped our normative understandings of both political life and the public sphere wherein aspects of that life are explicitly thematized and worked upon. Indeed, one of the central arguments of this book is that the affects and sensibilities honed through popular media practices such as listening to cassette sermons are as infrastructural to politics and public reason as are markets, associations, formal institutions, and information networks. My analysis, in this sense, follows upon a growing recognition by scholars that the forms of thinking and reasoning that constitute our political discourses are profoundly indebted to evaluative dispositions outside the purview of consciousness, to what political theorist William Connolly refers to as "visceral modes of appraisal" (Connolly 1999). This book is a study of the contribution of a popular media practice to the fashioning of such modes of appraisal, and of the religious and political constellations this practice sustains within Egypt today".

Finding a Voice: Making Technological Change Socially Effective and Culturally Empowering.

New Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) can contribute to the development of marginalised communities, but they need to be introduced in ways that recognise local social networks and cultural contexts. This research takes a participatory approach, aiming to empower people through finding their own 'voice', which is defined as inclusion and participation in social, political and economic processes, meaning making, autonomy and expression. We have established a network of 15 local media and ICT initiatives across India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. Local, embedded ethnographic action researchers work in each of these initiatives, with the goal of understanding how creative engagement with ICTs can be both effective and empowering for positive social change.

Preliminary Findings of Finding a Voice Project

Andrew Skuse, Joann Fildes, Jo Tacchi Kirsty Martin, Emma Baulch – UNESCO, October 2007.

Excerpt pages 32-33.

“There is often a neo-liberal logic applied to ICTs in terms of technology flowing freely to users and facilitating access to 'useful and useable' information that is somehow empowering in a politico-economic sense. Though only preliminary, our emerging research shows that whilst there are 'success stories' that can be highlighted, the poor still tend to 'lack political visibility and voice in the institutions and power relations that shape their lives' (Marker et al. 2002). Whilst access to and use of ICTs are perceived as a potential panacea to this problem SDC/PANOS (2005) suggest that one of the principal values of ICTs, and one that the Finding a Voice project focuses upon, is their potential to empower the poor by giving them a voice in decision making.

Whilst voice, like access to ICTs, is framed by political economic realities, the term 'voice' usefully captures some of the practical expressions of the related term 'participation'. Yet, 'realising a voice' and 'getting it heard' remains fundamentally difficult in societies where some kinds of technology (such as computers and the Internet) are often socially constructed as the domain of the burgeoning middle-classes. Our multi-sited research seeks to explore the relationship between voice, decision-making power and aspects of individual and group 'empowerment'. In exploring this relationship important questions are inevitably raised that we begin to address in the next section. For example, what are the ways and means through which 'poor' or marginalised people can have their voices heard in local or national contexts using ICTs? How can better access be mediated in community ICT and new media initiatives?”

Community Radio National Listener Survey', McNair Ingenuity Research, August 2006 at p.22

“Increased funding for the above areas of content development and production responds directly to the latest research findings on the reasons why an increasing number of Australians are choosing to listen to community radio: *“The most cited reason for listening to community radio is because the listen for ‘local information/local news’.* Half of all community radio listeners provided this response. Another common theme for listeners is the local nature of the content, with almost half stating that *‘they play Australian music/support local artists’* as their reason for listening, 46% saying that they listen because they have *‘specialist music or information programs’* and almost 4 in 10 saying *‘local voices/local personalities’* as their reason for listening”.

Participants

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| Penny O'Donnell | Workshop convenor, University of Sydney |
| Juan Salazar | Workshop convenor, University of Western Sydney |
| Tanja Dreher | Project Convenor, University of Technology, Sydney |
| Justine Lloyd | Project Convenor, Macquarie University |
| Cate Thill | Project Officer, University of Technology, Sydney |
| Kate Ames | Central Queensland University |
| Antonio Castillo | University of Sydney |
| Alissar Chidiac | University of Technology, Sydney |
| Wendy Coates | CBAA |
| Justo Diaz | University of Western Sydney |
| Susan Forde | Griffith University |
| Sally Galovic | University of Western Sydney |
| Mark Gibson | Monash University |
| Nancia Guivarra | Indigenous media |
| Tiffany Lee-Shoy | Fairfield City Council |
| Alana Mann | University of Sydney |
| David McKnight | University of New South Wales |
| Virginia Nightingale | University of Western Sydney |
| Elli Rennie | Swinburne University of Technology |
| Anna Schinella | SBS Radio |
| Jo Ann Tacchi | Queensland University of Technology |
| Caitlin Vaughan | Information and Cultural Exchange |
| Edison Yongai | Mission Australia IHSS |