

# LISTENING AS PARTICIPATION: SOCIAL MEDIA AND METAPHORS OF HEARING ONLINE

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## Abstract

The popularity of social media forms such as Facebook and Twitter has multiplied the avenues for people to 'have a voice' online. But what are the roles of listening in these fora, and how does listening function? This paper examines the concept of listening as a metaphor for forms of receptivity online, and considers the ways in which listening is both present and absent in online participation. The metaphor of listening can offer a productive way to analyse the forms of online engagement that have often been described passively or negatively, such as 'lurking', browsing, or non-participation. In particular, this paper develops the concept of listening in social media services: from the 'background listening' that may occur between friends, family and acquaintances, to the kinds of 'active listening' that are increasingly available to organisations using these technologies. Twitter, the microblogging service, is used as a case study for considering the various forms of listening online, and the different ways it is being adopted by individuals, political parties and companies.

## Keywords

Listening, participation, social media, Twitter, Facebook, lurking, background listening, politicians and social media, corporations and social media, metaphors of hearing.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Jonathan Crary has observed that the ways in which we 'intently listen to, look at, or concentrate on anything have a deeply historical character' [1]. He argues that the ways in which individuals pay attention and experience distraction are intricately linked, and that together they shift over hundreds of years as part of a much larger shaping of human 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. Further, developing norms of attention and distraction inspire much public debate, with certain modes being identified by some as problematic: be it watching too much television, texting on mobile phones during face-to-face conversations, or using iPods to disconnect from public space.

In internet studies, certain forms of attention and engagement have been valued over others. In particular, much attention has been given to the concept of participation, and the value of 'speaking up' in online spaces of debate such as blogs, wikis, news sites and discussion lists [2]. Online participation is often discussed within a frame of democratic potential, of citizens contributing their 'voice' to a wider forum and playing their part in creating an online public sphere. Participation is generally understood as posting in public or semi-public spaces, and rarely is attention given to other forms of participation, such as private email discussions, or behind-the-scenes direct messaging in social media environments [3].

The corollary of this emphasis on (and often celebration of) public participation has been a disparagement and lack of critical interest in what is viewed as non-participation, or 'lurking'. Lurking is generally used as a pejorative word to define those who inhabit the edges of online debates, rarely or never contributing to the public back-and-forth. In the early years of internet research, this group was described as preferring to be readers rather than writers [4], as more akin to passive TV viewers [5], and as free-loaders who draw on the energy of online communities without offering anything in return [6]. Moreover, lurkers themselves are often uncomfortable with their lack of public participation, and are more concerned about their behaviour than those who actively post [7]. Many people move between active and inactive status, spending most of their time lurking but emerging when a discussion moves into their own area of direct interest. But relatively little research has been conducted into lurking until recently, despite the fact that lurkers constitute the large majority in most online spaces. Several studies claim that over 90 percent of an online community will only practice light public participation, if any [8].

Recent years have seen the first flush of research into lurking, with some studies discovering that lurkers may have an important role in an online community [9]. Rather than free-loading, lurkers are actively logging in and tracking the contributions of others; it is a form of receptiveness. While they may not be contributing public posts, they do not deprive regular commenters of resources nor do they detract from the community [10]. In fact, it could be argued that they directly contribute to the community by acting as a gathered audience. Some researchers argue that lurking is too negatively slanted as a term, and instead suggest ‘peripheral participants’ [11], and ‘non-public participants’ [12]. 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 main purpose of this paper is to suggest a reconceptualisation of participation online to include practices of listening. If the activities commonly described as lurking and non-participation are understood as forms of listening, they shift from being vacant and empty figurations to being active and receptive processes. Moreover, as a metaphor for receiving and 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 deeper consideration of listening practices allows for a more critical assessment of what participation means, and decenters the current overemphasis on posting, commenting and ‘speaking’ as the only significant form of engagement in online spaces. ‘Listening in’ becomes a mode of contribution which is present in all spaces; a vector that runs through user-cultures. As Tiziana Terranova writes, from its inception the internet may be thought of ‘not only as diverse communication systems, but also drifting and differentiating communication modes’ [13]. The mode of listening has always been present online, but neglected as a form of participation and often denigrated.

However, this paper is not seeking to replace ‘voice’ with ‘listening’ as a somehow more significant metaphor for online engagement. Rather than supplanting the current emphasis on ‘having a voice’ online, the aim is to supplement it with an analysis of listening as a concomitant practice, one that ideally occurs in tandem with the many forms of speaking up online. In sum, this is a preliminary investigation into the role of listening online as a vital part of the activity of online communities, and in particular, the importance of listening to many forms of social media. Finally, I offer an outline of some of the ways in which individuals, politicians and corporations are increasingly discovering the benefits (and responsibilities) of listening to each other online.

## 2 MODELS OF ONLINE PARTICIPATION

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 [14]. Not only has the metaphor of voice been important as 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. By speaking up, individuals were fully participating in the co-creation of ideas, debates and online communities. Further, they were considered to be actively engaged in resisting the one-to-many flows of mainstream broadcast media by developing alternative spaces and counterpublics. Expression is paramount for these U.S-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’ [15].

This privileging of voice, and particularly voice-as-democratic-participation can be seen even in later critical account 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’ [16]. Having begun with this proposition, Jenkins and Thorburn do take some initial steps to qualify it. They recognise that while speaking is important, it is mere sound and fury if it is not matched with a concomitant process of listening. However, even in this admission there is a narrow focus on *who* they hope to be listening:

The Web is a billion people on a billion soapboxes all speaking at once. But who is listening? The old intermediaries are in place, not likely to wither away any time soon, so long as they command national and international audiences and thus retain their power to deliver commercial messages to millions [17].

In this vision of online communication, the focus is on people being heard by the masses, and challenging the role of major media organisations, which previously had the sole capacity to speak to mass audiences. This is

assuming a desire to ‘out-do’ mass media, and with the presumption that this will have wide-ranging political manifestations. Jenkins and Thorburn wonder if the proliferation of online voices will ever be able replace traditional institutions with ones that more accurately reflect the opinions of the democratic public.

Indeed, there are several historical and political reasons why cultural and new media scholars would adopt this ‘speaking truth to power’ model. However, it could be argued that this has limited their interest in the concept of listening, particularly the ways in which powerful institutions (the media, the state, the financial sector, the resources sector etc) do attend to, and then make decisions based on, popular opinion. Instead, the dominant approach is that speaking expands democratic power, listening is demonstrated by having one’s ideas acted upon, and the result is social and political change.

But this view of power in the relationship between speaking and listening overlooks the ways in which listening can function as an agentic power itself, and it certainly fails to acknowledge the forms of everyday listening online that can generate powerful bonds of social intimacy and connectedness. Such a perspective is not attuned to the forms of listening that occur between individuals and between groups online, those that are not directed solely towards the purposes of democratic change, debate or resistance. Listening has not been given sufficient consideration as a significant practice of intimacy and connection online, and it is rarely if ever considered a vital element of participation on the internet.

These pre-existing assumptions grounding the concept of online participation can also be evidenced in the design and deployment of popular collaboration technologies on the web. Wikis, for example, are web sites that allow for multiple authors to contribute or edit content, with Wikipedia being one of the best known examples. Ross Mayfield, co-founder of Socialtext, a company that designs enterprise uses for wikis, has emphasized that only by contributing writing are people genuinely engaged – the rest are ‘free riders upon community value’ [18]. In Mayfield’s ‘Power Law of Participation’, reading is given the lowest rating for participation, with writing, moderating and ‘leading’ given the highest engagement [19]. Participation, by this definition, means writing, and reading is of only peripheral importance to an online community. In many regards, this is simply a continuation of the early mistrust of lurking that emerged in the literature of the 1990s. While the so-called Web 2.0 technologies have developed more variety in the modes of online communication, collaboration and social engagement, the analysis and definition of participation remains powerfully slanted towards write-only – the act of reading and ‘hearing’ is not highly valued.

### **3 MODELS OF SOCIAL MEDIA LISTENING**

#### **3.1 Background listening**

In early 2009, Professor Jay Rosen posed a question to his 10,000 followers on the micro-blogging service Twitter. He wanted to know what they all used Twitter for. This was to aid him in researching an article for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, which had commissioned a story about Twitter, and wanted to know the reasons why Rosen finds it useful. In order to contribute to his understanding of the wider reasons for using the service, his followers could send their answers via Twitter itself, or by posting a comment to his blog. Of the almost two hundred responses that he initially received, he noticed an important similarity. ‘Surprise finding from my project’, he wrote on Twitter on January 8<sup>th</sup>, ‘is how often I wound up with radio as a comparison’ [20].

On the surface, the similarities between Twitter and radio seem limited. Twitter is a social networking service (SNS) 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 by mobile phone as text messages. Unlike radio, which is a one-to-many medium, Twitter is many-to-many or many-to-few, depending how many followers a user has. People choose whom they will follow, which may be a small group of intimates, or thousands of strangers. Further, Twitter accounts can be public or private: each user chooses whether their own messages are in the public domain, or restricted to a circle of friends. Most obviously, there is no sound broadcast on Twitter. It is simply people scanning, reading and occasionally posting written messages. However, the radio analogy is common. As MSN editor Jane Douglas writes, ‘I see Twitter like a ham radio for tuning into the world. There’s a lot of static but some interesting operators too’ [21].

The act of ‘tuning in’ reflects part of the process of engagement with social media forms such as Twitter or Facebook. A user follows many people, some of whom will post updates that offer useful advice, or are amusing, or work-related. But many messages will simply be scanned quickly, not focused on, something closer to being tuned out rather than tuned in. This could be described as a kind of listening ‘in the background’ [22], where commentary and conversations continue throughout the day, with only a few moments requiring concentrated attention. The conversational field of activity in these online spaces is more dispersed and molecularised, a flow

of small pieces of information that accrete to form a sense of intimacy and awareness. It is this sense of knowing the details of someone's everyday life, as prosaic as they often are, which give this sense of 'ambient intimacy' [23]. This process of 'background listening' is critical to the sense of intimacy generated in these spaces; access to the minutiae of a person's life is something normally reserved for family, housemates, and lovers. Further, the receptive audience of listeners is required to provoke disclosures in social media space. There are few Twitter or Facebook users, for example, who post their updates and update their pages for an audience of none.

But the act of listening to several (or several hundred) Twitter users requires a kind of dexterity; 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 screened out. The popular tools for receiving Twitter updates, such as Twhirl 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 kind of relinquishing of control over when messages are seen, and it differs in important ways from consciously logging in to a web site in order to check and read updates. Similar shifts have occurred in other media forms over the last century. As David Goodman writes, the phonograph made it possible to select sounds in bounded time – a record played for 4 or five minutes and then stopped. But 'radio also created the possibility of abandonment of choice – you could just let it play on and hear whatever came along' [24]. People could clean the house, work, or socialise with friends and family while the radio played continuously in the background, audible but not focused upon. This practice of distracted radio listening has many parallels with the kinds of everyday engagement that individuals experience with Twitter; it is not passive or 'free-loading' lurking, but more akin to allowing messages to come and go, and only occasionally 'tuning in' and responding.

However, there is a history of concern about the practice of background listening. In America in the 1930s, discussions of radio and distraction were deeply connected to fears about propaganda. Distracted listening was seen as a threat, as people who were listening to the radio in an indiscriminate, ongoing way could be easy prey for messages of political intent [25]. As the society at large endeavoured to comprehend and harness the social power of radio, debates continued about the wide range of possible dangers of undisciplined listening practices. Public anger has been focused on the disruptions of radio noise leaking from homes and cars, on portable transistor radios in public parks, and even the possible harm to digestion from background music on the radio [26]. Normative frameworks developed about what constituted the appropriately attentive listener, and where and how loudly radios should be played. As media scholar Lesley Johnson writes, early radio listeners were entreated to be 'responsible in choosing from the array of goods' available on the airwaves [27].

Currently, public debates are emerging about the appropriate uses of social media, how it is best employed, and where responsibility lies in engaging with it. For individuals, they are participating in the construction of a range of norms: be it about the appropriate places and times for checking messages, who to follow or friend (or unfollow or unfriend), or whether and how to respond to direct addresses. But norms of online listening behaviour vary between groups, and particularly so between categories of users. In addition to individual users, politicians (on behalf of their parties) and companies are joining social media networks, and each face different expectations about how they will engage, and what kinds of listening are expected of them.

### **3.2 Politicians and active listening online**

On the occasion of President Obama's first address to a joint session of Congress in 2009, he was surrounded by the elected representatives of the USA. Not only did they listen to his speech, but many senators also contributed a running commentary on Twitter. Commentators were generally unimpressed with this flurry of social media activity, with one newspaper headline observing that 'Politicians twitter throughout address to Congress like bored schoolchildren' [28]. Views are still divided as to whether the use of services such as Twitter represents a useful engagement with voters. Certainly, many heads of state such as President Obama, Prime Minister Gordon Brown and Prime Minister Kevin Rudd use social media accounts to augment to their election campaigns and send updates on important policy announcements – even when it is their staffers doing the work of writing messages. For politicians, services such as Facebook and Twitter give access to millions of users and offer the capacity to build a sense of camaraderie and connection with their constituency. But as the popularity of social media increases amongst politicians, important differences are emerging in the ways in which they (and their staff) engage in these spaces. In particular, some politicians are actively listening to their friends and followers – by which I mean recognising and responding to comments – while some continue to adopt a broadcast-only model.

In the case of Twitter, at the time of writing, President Obama has close to 350,000 followers, and he follows approximately 331,000. His campaign team used Twitter extensively to send updates about the location and content of speeches and rallies prior to his election. After that time, restrictions commenced in regard to presidential use of digital technologies, and updates have slowed to a trickle. Even during the times of heaviest use, Obama's campaign did not directly reply to any followers, or indicate that direct messages were being heard. Australia's Prime Minister Rudd has adopted a similar approach with his 10,500 followers – primarily broadcasting policy and press conference updates, with occasional messages to reply to individual users' questions. While some of the updates are written in the first person, many are signed 'KevinPM Team', acknowledging that parliamentary staffers are updating the account. In the case of the UK's Prime Minister Gordon Brown, his 'DowningStreet' Twitter presence is followed by 161,500 people, and it is clearly designated as the 'official Twitter channel for the Prime Minister's Office'. Doing without the pretense that the Prime Minister is writing himself, this channel is used actively by his staff with a focus on the multi-platform content issued during the week: with links 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 track and archive all national politicians using Twitter, such as Twixdagen in Sweden and Tweetminister in the UK. 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. The site aims to 'connect the public with politics' and 'promote better and more transparent communications between voters and Members of Parliament through open conversations' [29]. However, it remains unclear just how much feedback via Twitter is being heard by political leaders, or is taken seriously as a form of communication and public accountability. It is also difficult to define such engagements as a 'conversation' if a politician is not personally writing the messages, nor encouraging staffers to reply and engage with online responses.

As Jason Wilson writes, many politicians on Twitter and Facebook are more like animated corpses – with little personality or life – which amounts to a lost opportunity. 'Users of social media expect, rightly or wrongly, a much more conversational and unaffected style of political communication,' writes Wilson, and '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' [30]. In order to be considered dialogue, however, politicians need to move beyond broadcasting and begin to listen. As social media fora develop and mature, astute politicians will not only provide voters with the sense that they are being heard and responded to, but will also use these spaces to 'tune in' to how a policy is being received, and which issues are generating the most debate. While it could be argued that Facebook does not represent a genuine cross-section of a population (and Twitter even less so, with only 6 million users, skewed toward the media and technology sectors), they do represent different kinds of conversation in public space. In order to effectively participate, politicians will need to engage reciprocally while recognising the different patois of social media spaces: to listen and respond with a good ear, as well as update and inform.

### **3.3 Companies and 'listening in'**

Companies are also seeing the possible benefits of using social media to forge a closer relationship with customers, gain information about their products, and enhance their public persona. While some politicians enjoin staffers to update Twitter and Facebook pages, many companies and celebrities 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 offer to update microblogs for clients who are 'too busy to add yet another daily task to their burgeoning agendas, but who still want to proactively reach out to their customer base' [31].

This approach effectively transfers all responsibility for engaging in a social media space to a third party. However, it remains difficult to outsource the act of listening. When professionals are hired to simulate the presence of a company or celebrity online, they are commonly reduced to the level of an impersonal, unidirectional marketing broadcast. The benefit of being able to hear customers' views, respond to their comments and concerns, and gain insight into how the company is being discussed is sharply reduced. As Bob Pearson, vice president of communities and conversations at Dell argues: 'Quite frankly, one of the most important things we do with Twitter is listen. I don't think you can hire someone to listen for you' [32].

However, a commitment to background listening comes at a cost – the cost of human attention. While a senior executive at Dell may underscore the importance of listening to customers, in practice this has meant that each of the 130 Twitter feeds emanating from Dell Corp. are connected back to staff members who must personally maintain at least one Twitter account each [33]. This is the labour of listening. But how is this labour to be quantified? For while 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 be recognised 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. Comments such as those from Pearson, however, indicate that there is a direct value created by listening, and underscore the importance of further research into the detailed processes of listening online.

For companies, the value of listening could be considered in three ways. First, there is the value of being seen to participate in a community, and being present to hear people's opinions. Second, there are benefits to customer support: by responding within a social media network to negative feedback or offering assistance, they reduce the load on phone-based support, but also have an ongoing connection to the customer. This allows them to ascertain that a problem has been resolved in the longer term. Finally, they are able to search for every mention of their brand or product, gaining an immediate sense of customer user-patterns and satisfaction. Services such as Facebook and Twitter can then effectively be used as giant focus groups, spaces where companies can listen in to both positive and negative views. At the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2009, Facebook launched its 'engagement ads' system, which allows companies to selectively target Facebook users and pose questions about their products and services [34]. This effectively turns the social networking service into an enormously powerful and immensely customisable focus group for market research.

There are several ethical implications to this kind of listening in. While users of Twitter can avoid being directly searchable by companies who are seeking to develop databases of user opinions and usage patterns by opting to have a private account, Facebook members have no such choice. Their data is owned outright by Facebook and they have little say in how it will be used or who will use it. This was brought into focus again in February 2009 when Facebook sought to change its terms of service to give it full rights over all the information that users upload in perpetuity – regardless of whether the user had deleted their account [35]. After widespread anger from users, and the creation of several Facebook groups protesting the decision, the company eventually reversed its decision and returned to its previous terms of service. The company also agreed to let users have more ability to participate in the development of new terms of service [36]. This series of events demonstrates both the problems generated when a company fails to ask for the views of its own constituency before changing its governance structure, and how important it is to listen to users and incorporate their views. Facebook's problems began when it overlooked the need to listen to its users, even as it was attempting to sell the capacity to 'listen in' to its user base to corporate clients. However, the response from Facebook users also revealed a growing expectation for companies to listen, and preferably respond in collaborative ways to customer concerns. With the growing presence of corporations on social media services, this expectation of listening and responsiveness will grow, and will underscore the responsibility that companies need to accept if they are to successfully engage with these spaces.

In the influential book by economist and political theorist Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice and Loyalty*, he emphasizes the importance of voice (speaking up) and exit (leaving the association) as the two core responses to organisational decline [37]. In the example of Facebook's fracas over its terms of service, some users chose to leave, while others aired their complaints. What is under-emphasised in Hirschman's otherwise insightful argument is the role of listening in such scenarios. As Romand Coles writes, Hirschman 'gives paradigmatic expression to a focus on voice to the preclusion of listening', which has had ramifications for the many political and economic thinkers who have adopted Hirschman's model [38]. Similarly, while much of new media theory has developed extensive and productive forms of understanding participation in the form of user produced content, such as writing blogs, making videos, and joining debates in online communities, it has offered relatively little analysis of the importance of practices of listening and receptivity. Beginning that process requires an awareness of the many forms of listening, and how they are adopted by a variety of users, including companies and politicians.

## 4 CONCLUSION

'Vision is a spectator, hearing is a participator,' wrote John Dewey in 1927. He argued that listening is vital to the way in which the 'flow of social intelligence' is facilitated through the 'communications of the local community' [39]. Social media ecologies, I argue, also rely on listening to enable the flow of social intelligence as users interact and engage with each other. Both passive listening (without responding directly in public space) and active listening (hearing and then responding) are a critical part of online participation. Social media networks can act as useful case studies to see how listening functions in select communities, and assists in distinguishing between the ways in which users listen, and how this shapes their form of participation.

The dominant emphasis on ‘speaking up’ in public spaces as the definition of online participation has meant that we have only considered half the story. The pejorative use of ‘lurking’ in the internet research literature of the late 1990s and early 2000s has hampered a more nuanced and productive analysis of the many ways in which people participate online. As a metaphor, listening is useful; it captures the ongoing processes of receptivity that mark much online engagement. Writing about the advantages of metaphors of hearing to better understand the social, Nick Couldry writes of the ‘reciprocal, embodied nature of listening; its embeddedness always in an intersubjective space of perception’ [40]. This intersubjectivity is important to many online spaces and forms of participation. When following friends, family and acquaintances in social media services, the process of ‘background listening’ is a means for users to maintain a dispersed awareness of the thoughts and actions of several others, strengthening a sense of connection and intimacy. For politicians and companies in these fora, the more effective participants maintain an ‘active listening’ presence, which involves tuning in to comments, complaints and suggestions and responding directly where needed. As we have seen in the emerging network Twitter, there are several examples of how this is being done well and poorly. Further research is needed into these issues, such as the labour implications of companies, politicians, and individuals using social media services to further their reach with constituencies and customers.

This paper has sought to underscore the importance of listening as a critical part of online engagement, but this is not done at the expense of public ‘spoken’ communication. The process of participation online incorporates both speaking and listening subjects, and often a rapid alternation between these roles. Speaking and listening online function together in order to constitute effective engagement. By giving more concentrated attention to the developing practices of listening, we open up alternative understandings of online engagement, in all its multifarious forms.

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