Introduction: Podcasting's listening publics

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Abstract:
Podcast reception is often considered in terms of listening. As individual consumers listen to podcasts, their reception contributes to the formation of and interaction within audiences and publics. This does not mean that podcasts – and their listeners – are entirely separate from other media, but that podcast listening affords distinct experiences within these larger formations. When listening is conceptualized beyond its basic physicality and used as a model for interaction within publics, how people experience and interpret podcast listening becomes significant in understanding the bonds the medium forms. This introduction highlights a few key concepts in studying the intersection of listening and publics and uses those concepts to contextualize the articles in this section.

Keywords: listening, publics, audiences, reception, podcasting

Introduction:
Listening is essential to the engagement with most of our media, albeit that the act of listening which is embedded in the word 'audience' is rarely acknowledged. It is a no less curious absence in theories of the public sphere, where the objective of political agency is often characterized as being to find a voice - which surely implies finding a public that will listen, and that has a will to listen. (Lacey loc. 132)

As podcasting moves through its adolescence, a period of flux in which reformations of the medium's technological and industrial organization are having fundamental effects on

the next phase of its evolution, the ways in which podcasting encourages listening and reception practices are also undergoing fundamental development. The nature of this development depends on the communities, listening publics, and audiences the podcasts serve and/or participate in. As Martin Spinelli and Lance Dann have noted, podcasting always implies a relationship between creators and listeners but 'while individual listening might be the moment in which a podcast 'happens' in some sense, it is possible, and indeed necessary, to consider larger formations of podcast *audiences*' (13). For Spinelli and Dann, these podcast audiences are 'much more 'knowable' than the radio audience, and the interaction (particularly in fandom) [is] more intense' (13-14). In an attempt to trace the 'knowability' of podcast audiences, this Themed Section centers podcast listening and investigates the relationship between listening practices and podcasting publics.

In studying listening, Kate Lacey's *Listening Publics* argues for the importance of reception in understanding mass-mediated publics. Listening is not only the act of hearing sound, or directing one's attention towards sound, it is a way of participating in the public sphere by being open to the thoughts and ideas of others (loc. 388). It is, Lacey rightly points out, 'a cultural practice that changes under changing historical and material conditions,' including, but not determined by, technological ones (loc. 478). As podcasting takes part in these changing conditions, it influences the cultural practices that make up listening and, by extension, the way listening informs reception practices within publics.

To say that podcasting participates in the cultural construction of listening and public participation is not to say that podcasting itself forms a single, mass-mediated listening public. As many others have pointed out, the concept of a public, or publics, is itself relatively open for interpretation. The ideal of a Habermasian salon has been thoroughly critiqued for the breadth of its claims as well as its exclusion of groups that do not fully engage in dominant discourses, yet still holds critical value in many contexts. Counter-publics (Warner, Fraser) and intimate ones (Berlant) also provide valuable insights into the workings of these groups and, even though they sometimes contradict each other, can be productively used in research that includes podcasting. Sarah Florini's *Beyond Hashtags* is an example of how work on publics can include analysis of podcast content to great effect and more research should be done in this style. Even though the exact nature of how podcasts work within publics depends on how one theorizes the public, Lacey's point on the importance of reception in general, and listening in particular, within public circulation remains valuable. Speaking, or production, is not solely responsible for the formation of (the) public(s). Listening informs interactions within many kinds of publics and learning more about listening within culture – and how it works in different contexts – can shed light onto reception within public discourse.

When publics are viewed in terms of reception (listening) alongside production (speaking), they overlap with many conceptualizations of 'audience'. Lacey argues against theorizations of audience that presuppose passivity, stating that listening is itself an action and audience 'a collective noun for the activity of listening' (loc. 379). A listener is then an individual, and an audience a collection of those individuals in ways that intertwine with

various theorizations of public(s) and public participation. Making sense of listening is an approach to understanding the activity of reception within an audience and is exceedingly valuable to scholarship on podcasting.

It is perhaps unsurprising that there is a drive to learn about podcast audiences within both scholarly and industrial contexts, even if these audiences are elusive in an increasingly complex media ecosystem. The potential of the RSS feed to provide solid quantitative data as to download figures affords an analytic grounding as to the take-up and listening patterns of shows and series and is one way of studying podcast listening. And yet podcasting's use of platforms has often made these statistics contested and unreliable (Cridland). Podcasting's move to proprietary, platform specific distribution, with the big tech companies Apple, Google, and Spotify attempting to stake out territory in an increasingly aggressive battle for audience share, has amplified the ring-fencing of data as intellectual property and made it increasingly difficult to include reliable statistics on listenership within academic research on podcast listening. Edison Research is perhaps the most widely cited producer of podcast statistics and, even though their work is extremely useful, their questions generally serve their own marketing audience ('The Infinite Dial'). Even when they are made available, these ways of learning about podcast audiences are tied to commercial interests and are therefore forms of knowledge-making that do not always respond to the questions that drive academic research.

Despite these challenges, conceiving of listening broadly as a form of receptive interaction can unite a myriad of disciplinary approaches to podcast studies and help us understand podcast audiences. In the articles collected here, these approaches include the use of affective embodiment (Clevenger & Rick), participatory culture and popular seriality (Groß), intertextuality and marginalized lived experience (Donison) and the relationship between podcast and radio listener experiences (Morais et al.). These approaches show how listening, and the concept of listeners, extend beyond the material action of consuming audio and into how listeners identify and interact with media. 'Knowing' an audience in this context is not reducible to standard metrics of downloads or impressions, it lies in reading listening as *the action* that audiences *do* and how podcasting works within a larger media environment to construct listening as an action that, in turn, mediates publics. As much as the approaches in this section illuminate podcast listening in its specificity, they also connect that listening to other media: learning about listening in podcasting is not important because it is specific and isolated, but because it is connected to other media and plays a part in the receptive action of public circulation.

The individual affective experience of listening influences how podcasts mediate listening publics. Samuel Clevenger and Oliver Rick's essay 'The Uses of Imperfections: Communicating Affect Through the Lo Fi Podcast' focuses on how podcasts create physical, affective connections through sound and listening. The contribution positions podcasting as an arts-based medium with the ability to communicate the affective dimensions of active body contexts, such as sports and physical culture. The authors reflect on their own arts-based podcast series about research on sport to argue that the integration of music and

soundscapes within podcasts affords an affective listening experience of 'sensual dimensions of embodiment through a non-representational mode of communication' (p. 323). This embodiment connects to the affective physicality of the listening body, creating a connection between lo-fi sounds produced by the podcasters' bodies and the listener. Clevenger and Rick also refer to their own integration of interview audio and ambient sound to create an affective aural atmosphere within their podcast. Through sound and listening, the authors argue that podcasting's affective physicality presents an alternative to traditional text-based research publication. Listening, for Clevenger and Rick, can present physicality, embodiment, and affect more effectively than other forms of research communication.

As much as listening can be a physical, affective experience, it is not separate from larger transmedia forms of reception. Florian Groß' article '*The Bowery Boys*: Podcasting Serial Historiography Within and Through Participatory Culture' considers the role of listening within participatory culture. Using the non-fiction podcast *The Bowery Boys: New York City History*, Groß describes the podcast's participatory potentials, serial poetics, and longevity. Incorporating Jenkins' notion of convergence culture into the process of podcast formalization, Groß traces how *The Bowery Boys* works within a transmedia environment to encourage interaction among its listening audience. This interaction, Groß argues in part, is built within the podcast's serial historiography of New York: there is a feedback loop between listeners and creators in which creators anticipate listener needs and create content to fit those needs. Groß adds to an understanding of podcast listening as participatory, interactive, and responsive to serial poetics through *The Bowery Boys*' use of podcast aesthetics and audience integration as well as its professionalization into a transmedia franchise. Groß's emphasis on transmedia shows how podcast listening cannot be fully grasped in isolation, but as always in relation to other media, even when it concerns the listenership of a single podcast.

Jeff Donison's 'Listening to History Podcasting and the Intertextual Stories of Silence: A Canadian Perspective' zooms out to focus on Historica Canada's podcast mini-series *Residential Schools* and its embedding in intertextual digital networks. His article traces how the history podcast provides educational resources for non-Indigenous listeners about the legacy of residential schools in Canada while at the same time addressing a listening public of indigenous peoples based on belonging and cultural memory. Donison's textual analysis of the podcast and its paratexts emphasizes how indigenous experiences are told to incite particular listening experiences for the diverse audiences interacting with these stories and how intertextual historical podcasts can amplify marginalized voices. He finds that the podcast's focus on lived experiences within the context of Historica Canada's online resources allows for an intertextual educational listening experience, highlighting both the specificity of podcast listening and its connection to other media.

Where podcasting is often lauded for its ability to work within cultural niches, it is often set up in opposition to radio's larger mass-mediated publics. This dichotomy works, along the lines of Richard Grusin's *Remediation*, to culturally construct both podcasting and

radio in relation to each other. And yet the interrelation between podcasting and radio is complex and each medium influences what listeners expect from the other. Ricardo Morais, Fábio Giacomelli, Tâmela Grafolin and Fernando Rocha's study, 'Audience Transformations and New Audio Experiences: An Analysis of the Trends and Consumption Habits of Podcasts by Brazilian Listeners,' takes an initial step towards investigating this interrelation in podcast and radio audiences. In their analysis of a 2020 audience survey on Brazilian podcast listener motivation, the authors explore the connection between radio and podcast consumption. Morais et. al. posit that podcasts have come to complement radio listening in the Brazilian context as podcast content is perceived as generally offering more diversification. Podcasting's niches are here interpreted as a diversity that works within the same media environment as radio. Through this lens, podcasting's contribution to publicness can be interpreted as a diverse supplement existing within a larger public that includes mass media. Morais et al. also facilitate a better understanding of podcast listeners' motivations, highlight the topics preferred by these listeners, and comment on the role of social media for the discovery of new shows. Where Groß's case study analyzes how a single podcast works within a largely online transmedia environment, Morais et. al. take a broader approach to contextualize podcast listening as part of a media environment that is deeply related to radio and includes social media.

As the podcast environment changes due to increased platformization alongside other cultural and technological developments, its relation to other media and audiences changes with it. These changes inform listening and, by extension, the function of reception within publics. This Themed Section is a step towards investigating how podcast listening informs contemporary publics and we hope it encourages further, much needed discussion about podcasting's evolving listening audiences and their practices. The current pandemic further impacts how podcast audiences approach listening, be it in how much they consume podcasts (Webster) or in the kinds of podcasts being made and listened to and is a particularly fruitful area for future research. If podcasting's audiences truly are more 'knowable' than other audiences, trying to learn how they act through listening can teach us a lot about how contemporary publics work.

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