

**DEMOCRATIC LISTENING:
WHAT IS IT AND HOW CAN WE TEACH IT?**

**DR. JANICE NEWTON
YORK UNIVERSITY, TORONTO, CANADA**

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Contact Author: jnewton@yorku.ca

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the idea of democratic listening. I pose four central questions. First, what kinds of listening lapses arise in the contemporary political context and why do these lapses create problems for democracy? Second, what is distinctive about the democratic listening context? I will explore the answer to this question in three sections. A) What are the relevant categories of speakers in a democracy? B) How do we understand “voice” in the democratic context? C) Who listens (or not) in a democracy? Third, how does one’s concept of democracy influence how we understand democratic listening? Finally, I reflect on the implications of this for how we might teach democratic listening more effectively.

1. LAPSES IN LISTENING: LAPSES IN DEMOCRACY

At first blush, listening is perhaps not one of the paramount skills evident in modern liberal democracies. Complaints about the quality of listening in the democratic context abound. The parliamentary debates Canadians witness on the nightly news are invariably framed by one party setting out its position and attacking the opposing party’s position, with little evidence of any party addressing or “listening to” its opponent. We rarely witness a party acknowledging merit in an opponent’s position. Question period could be characterized as “unanswered question period” as the government parties frequently ignore (do not listen to) the evident thrust of opposition questions, responding with its own agenda or position. The media rarely focuses on the behind the scenes collaboration that often occurs in parliamentary committees where parties often reach consensus on issues precisely because they have “listened to” each other’s concerns.

Frequently we target politicians for their failure to listen, with potentially disastrous consequences. Canada’s current Prime Minister refused to listen to the head of our nuclear agency when she recommended the shutdown of the Chalk River Nuclear Plant for safety reasons. The plant, situated on an earthquake fault line, was not equipped with back-up systems to maintain cooling in the event of an earthquake. Harper fired her. With the hindsight of Japan’s unfolding nuclear disaster, we can appreciate the devastating consequences of such failures to listen.

We perceive fellow citizens as ignorant when they do not listen to public debates but others can also refuse to listen. During the 1993 election campaign, PM Kim Campbell stated that discussing a complete overhaul of Canada’s social policies in all their complexities could not be done in just 47 days: “an election campaign was not the proper time to debate important issues.” (CBC) She lost that election. Lobbyists from across the political spectrum urge us to listen to their “expert” views on key public issues. When the public defers to expert wisdom, dramatic consequences can follow. Witness the recent financial meltdown.

When competing interests in both the public and private realm fail to listen to each other, we often pay a high social cost. Fisheries experts repeatedly warned government

and the public that the cod stocks off the Grand Banks were disappearing. The ground fishery lobby disputed the expert evidence in an effort to save their communities dependant on the in-shore fisheries, while international governments flagrantly ignored these dire warnings and continued to use unsustainable fishing methods on the Grand Banks off Newfoundland. Governments, both national and international, failed to listen to the experts, with devastating consequences for both the cod and the fishing communities that relied on them.

During elections, the absence of listening among competing candidates and parties is even starker. Public debates often degrade into shouting matches, where not even the public can listen and follow the debate. Even as radio and TV moderators attempt to force candidates to speak one at a time, rarely does the audience to a political debate witness a genuine exchange of ideas where one candidate listens to an opponent and responds to the substance of their comments. Attacks on one's political opponent are frequently selective; candidates ignore aspects of their opponent's position in order to show their own position to advantage. A good example of this technique was Prime Minister Harper's repeated attack on the Liberal Party's 2008 election platform to create a carbon tax. He implied that the Liberals were in favour of increasing taxes, while consistently ignoring (not listening to) the other part of the platform which proposed to offset those tax increases with cuts in income tax and corporate tax, such that the overall tax impact would be neutral.

We live in a political culture that echoes the culture of competitive sports: teams compete such that one team wins, the other loses. Citizen spectators watch from the sidelines and cheer for their team. This sport of politics makes no room for genuine listening including compromise, collaboration, building common understandings or community. In this climate, public opinion of politicians sink to unprecedented lows. A recent Angus Reid poll has Canadians ranking their respect for politicians at the bottom of a list of professions, lower even than lawyers.¹ While we can connect some of this distrust to scandals, we can also connect some distrust to the rabid partisanship that fuels this non-listening culture in our democracy. Up to now, I have not even mentioned the capacity of government bureaucracies to listen to citizens. I will let my patient readers draw their own conclusions on this count.

I am not willing to ground my understanding of democratic listening from these behaviours. Given these complex challenges we face, sustainability being one of the most important in my view, democracies require substantial listening skills from all the actors in the public arena to face the challenges of our global era. How can we think about teaching democratic listening skills when the democratic context is so vast, complex and varied and when we have so few laudable examples to instruct us? I suggest that we need to start with a close analysis of what is distinctive about the listening context in democracy. The section that follows analyzes some of the distinctive features of the democratic context and reflects on its relevance for democratic listening.

¹ "Politicians Hit Bottom," Editorial, *Toronto Star*, Friday October 10, 2008, Online <http://www.thestar.com/article/420910>.

2. WHAT IS DISTINCTIVE ABOUT THE DEMOCRATIC LISTENING CONTEXT?

As a relative newcomer to the study of listening, I find much of the listening theory seems to have been developed with one of two listening contexts in mind: contexts that typically involve either interpersonal listening (therapeutic, relational, medical, or sales contexts, etc.) or one-way listening (lectures, listening to media, appreciative listening etc.). Democratic listening fits uneasily into these two contexts, exceeding their boundaries in important ways. Although people certainly can engage in interpersonal exchanges about political issues, and one-way listening situations are prevalent in democratic politics, in a larger sense, most of us would accept that a healthy democracy involves a larger kind of “social listening” among political actors.

a) Who are the main actors in the democratic listening context?

Part of the complexity of the democratic listening context immediately becomes apparent when we begin by identifying those who either “speak” or “listen.” We distinguish democracy from other political systems because of the important role citizens play either in choosing their representatives or through direct participation in the political system. Six different categories of actors in the democratic arena engage in democratic speaking and listening in different ways.

i. Individual citizens

Individual citizens have important roles both to express their voice and to listen to make judgements about issues. Democracy recognizes the importance of their voice in the universal franchise.

ii. Interest Groups

People acting in concert are often heard more clearly when they organize interests groups, advocacy groups or join Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to represent their collective interest. I distinguish these collective actors from individual citizens because in the process of finding a voice to express common interests, elements that distinguish individuals from the common interests are inevitably silenced.

iii. Non-citizens

We must also consider those who are harder to hear because they tend to be invisible under the category of “citizen.” For want of a better term, I have labelled these people non-citizens. These are the people who the law chooses not to recognize or protect (illegal immigrants, gays and lesbians, trans people, disabled, elderly, children, first nations people, the homeless, or those who fall outside state boundaries), or who are rarely able to represent themselves as individuals or collectively in the democratic context. Whether these actors

function as individuals or collectives, they can often lack the means or capacity to express their voice in the democratic arena.

iv. Politicians and Political Parties

Politicians and political parties often vie, whether sincerely or not, for the reputation of “listening to citizens.” We can also see examples of politicians or parties listening to special interests or populist trends. We seldom perceive parties or politicians, however, as listening to each other, which may explain, in part, why some citizens refuse to listen to politicians.

v. Government

Government is a distinct entity from parties and politicians. I use the term in the sense of the government of the day. Each government has a capacity to listen or not to citizen concerns. We speak of certain interests having the “ear” of government and hence the capacity to shape government policy, perhaps mistaking the act of listening with the act of developing policy or not. Governments also communicate with citizens by explaining policy and publicizing government programs.

vi. Bureaucracy

The bureaucracy is a distinct actor in the democratic arena. Bureaucracy is what continues when governments fall. It communicates in its own right (to obscure or clarify of regulations, freedom of information) and it listens in its own right. Who takes credit or blame when the bureaucracy acts is a highly charged political question that cuts to the heart of accountability and responsible government in a democracy.

Table 1: Who are the main actors in democratic listening?

Speakers		Listeners
Individual citizens		Individual citizens
Non-citizens		Non-citizens
Organized interests		Organized interests
Politicians and Parties		Politicians and Parties
Government		Government
Bureaucracy		Bureaucracy

* The arrows represent possible targets of different speakers. Parties, for example, may be well equipped to target citizens with their message, but less equipped to listen to citizens. (See Part 2 ii) below)

To understand listening in democratic contexts, we must appreciate that there is not only a range of different voices, but it is a choir of voices, each voice with vastly different ranges of pitch, volume and projection – usually not singing in harmony or with each

other. Further, some are singing, some are talking, some are shouting and some are whispering. Given this complex of voices that one could hear in a democracy, what shapes the context that gives these different speakers voice?

b) Voice in the Democratic Context:

Below are some key questions we must consider when thinking through the conditions that create voice in a democratic context.

vii. Does the speaker want to be understood?

Listening theory tells us that conditions must be ripe for listening to occur, and one fundamental condition is that one must want to be understood.² Perhaps we assume that ideally all actors in a democracy want to be understood. We see this in a positive light when we assume, for example, that political parties want us to understand their platforms, or that citizens want government to understand our demands, etc. In many cases, however, democratic actors may not want to be understood. Professional handlers often manage public officials to shape a message or use political spin to obscure an issue. Government can gag its own members, creating a false image of consensus to the public, or hiding important aspects of their strategies or policies.³ Yet government and politicians are not the only ones who may not want to be understood. In Toronto, we frequently hear the police urging citizens of poor communities to come forward to report crimes, pleas often met with deafening silence from crime-ridden communities.

viii. Who speaks to whom?

Like a good radio programmer, democratic actors must consider the question: Who is my intended audience? The intended audience complicates our understanding of democratic listening context in a myriad of ways. As in Table 1 above, each actor can target different audiences for their message. Not all political parties, for example, speak to all citizens; they often tailor their messages to different constituencies. In Canada this takes the form of parties focusing on the ridings they think they can win and ignoring the others, thus in some cases exacerbating regional divides across the country. Our Liberal Party, for example, does not invest in speaking to the west – where there is little hope of gaining seats. However, they will spend a lot of time campaigning in Ontario and Quebec where they hope to gain seats. Language barriers can also exacerbate this problem, with parties communicating different messages for a Francophone or an Anglophone audience. Not all citizens speak to their politicians, or to other citizens outside their narrow circle of acquaintances. Some organized groups target bureaucrats to voice their concerns about pending policy; others lacking access to the bureaucracy target the media by taking to the streets in protest.

² Dick Halley, *Listening Models and Procedures*, Kaia Publishing, 2008: 57.

³ The Harper government in Canada just fell because it lost the confidence of the House by failing to release budget information about new fighter jets and the building of new prisons..

ix. *Who speaks for whom?*

Not everyone speaks for themselves in the democratic context. We are all familiar with the ghostwriters who make otherwise tongue-tied politicians seem eloquent. Politicians are also supposed to “speak” for their constituents – yet in my case, I have never voted for the representative who ostensibly “speaks” for me in Parliament. Is it meaningful to say that my Member of Parliament speaks for me? We are also familiar with the citizen organizations that speak for collective interests. Do we ever stop to consider how that representation may silence differences among those represented? For example, First Nations representatives had a significant presence in Canadian constitutional negotiations, but they did not represent well the interests of First Nations women who lost status because of those negotiations. The women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s readily assumed they “represented” women, until black women, lesbian women and third world women began to challenge the movement’s representation of them. Who speaks for those who may not be able to voice their interests: children, the very elderly, the poor, the homeless, or the disabled? If someone else speaks for them, is this the same as speaking for themselves? If someone else speaks for you or appropriates your voice, does that distort the democratic process? To use the radio metaphor, does it matter whether you hear people speak in their own right on the evening news, or whether you hear someone else represent their views?

x. *Which voices are loudest or quietest?*

Which of the speakers in the democratic arena are able to shout the loudest is often a question of different kinds of resources. How this plays out in a democracy is unclear. Different actors may speak louder to particular audiences. Do those with financial resources to formally lobby government and the bureaucracy buy a radio commercial, a TV spot, or a table at an expensive political fundraiser necessarily have the loudest voice? Can organizations with diffuse public support and a handful of prominent supporters create a loud public voice? (think Bridget Bardot, Paul McCartney and baby seals). The attack on the Canadian seal hunt obscured the role that seal hunting played in many Arctic communities that relied on the hunt for their livelihood and that practiced this tradition for thousands of years as a sustainable part of the traditional Inuit culture. With the decline in the sales of seal pelts, many of these communities quickly shifted from being healthy, self-reliant communities to becoming welfare-dependent communities rife with social problems. Their voice on the international scene was a whisper compared to the international echo of the bleating baby seals clubbed to death on the ice flows off Newfoundland.

xi. *By what means do they speak?*

Just as radio uses different kinds of programming mediums (music, news, advertisement, documentaries) we also have multiple mediums for communicating in the democratic arena. Some promote listening more successfully than others. In Canada, CBC (our public radio) is a crucial medium that allows Canadians to listen

to the stories of other Canadians. In contrast, we would hesitate to claim talk radio promotes listening. Other means, such as parliamentary committees, town hall meetings, call-in shows, direct lobbying of bureaucrats & politicians, protests, media campaigns, and the emerging use of social media are avenues for actors to communicate in a democracy. Each of these means of listening carries with it its own advantages and constraints. Radio, for example, lends itself to a one-way exchange, unless it explicitly solicits and uses public feedback. Protests may be dramatic and garner media attention, but they are not necessarily an effective way to get others to listen to your message. Governments may use advertising campaigns to get the public to listen to their message. Governments also supplement the formal mechanisms of representation (elections, voting) with mechanisms like polling so that they can listen to public views on key issues.

xii. *By what means are voices amplified, fragmented, filtered or silenced in the democratic arena?*

By what mechanisms is communication distorted for both speaker and listener in the democratic context?

- For example, an electoral system itself can be a mechanism for amplifying certain voices while ignoring others. In the Canadian electoral system, often a party can win the election without winning the majority of the popular vote. Yet, the winners claim the “people” have spoken. Depending on the nature of the democratic system, political leaders can silence dissent within party ranks. Prime Minister Harper, wielding the threat of expulsion from cabinet and caucus has distinguished himself by silencing cabinet and caucus on an unprecedented scale in Canadian politics. No cabinet minister speaks without prior approval of the PMO.
- On the one hand, development of new social media creates new opportunities for democratic participation for both those who speak and those who listen. It also has the potential of shifting access to the democratic arena in favour of youth and those who use new social media. On the other hand, modern communication technology also fragments public voices, making it more challenging to think deeply about issues.⁴

xiii. *Who amplifies or filters voices?*

Even if a democratic actor has the means and resources to articulate a public stand, often someone else chooses whether to amplify or filter that voice. This is most apparent with respect to public media. Someone decides what is newsworthy.

- In the mass media, advertising interests influence what we hear on the six-o’clock news. The political bent of private networks (Fox news versus CNN) influences which views air and which voices are amplified or filtered. The media also decides which stories are newsworthy.
- In the recent G20 meetings in Toronto, whose voices among the protesters dominated? The media amplified the relatively incoherent voices and actions of

⁴ See Maggie Jackson, *Distracted*, New York: Prometheus Books, 2009.

a small handful of violent protesters. The media failed to cover the well-articulated voices of the thousands of peaceful protesters representing labour unions, women, and environmental groups.

- Despite a long history of women disappearing from Vancouver's impoverished east side (mostly poor, aboriginal or marginal women like drug addicts and prostitutes), it took decades before the pleas of the victim's families and friends were taken seriously. The Vancouver police repeatedly ignored or dismissed their voices. By the time he was caught, the pig farmer, Robert Pickton had admitted to killing 49 women. He wanted to make it an even 50.

I find it difficult to think about what it means to teach democratic listening without pondering the complexities of the democratic context. How do different voices become audible on the political broadband? Although listening theory suggests that we can think of hearing, interpreting, and evaluating as distinct but interrelated processes, in the democratic context these distinctions are substantially blurred.⁵ Both what we can and cannot hear shapes our understanding of issues. Whether we hear a voice or not in the democratic choir depends on much more than whether it is audible. Listening for the silences, that which we cannot hear, may be as useful as listening to that which we can hear. If all these questions shape our understanding of voice in the democratic context, how do we understand the listener's role in this democratic context? If this broad array of channels exists on the political broadband, how does one tune in or not to listen?

c) Listening in the Democratic Context:

We turn now from the context of who speaks to who listens. We could argue that all six democratic actors must not only speak but also listen for democracy to flourish. For example, we assume the capacity of government to "listen" to the people distinguishes democratic governments from dictatorships or absolute monarchies. Therefore, we must consider not only who addresses whom, but also who is listening to whom, and what mechanism facilitates democratic listening appropriate to each of these relationships. Table 2 captures some of the listening relationships among these six actors, some of the mechanism for listening, and hints at some of the challenges we face in promoting democratic listening in each relationship.

When we unpack the speaker/listener relationship in democracy in this way, several things become apparent. First, the kind of listening skills needed for each specific context may vary. For example, for citizens to listen to non-citizens, we must first consider how non-citizen voices become audible on the political broadband. Focusing on the skills of evaluation or understanding may amplify privileged voices that are already audible. A democratic culture needs to attend to the silences in political discourse. Perhaps this means that we should not conceive of listening as a linear process in the democratic context.

⁵ Judi Brownell, *Listening: Attitudes, Principles and Skills*. Toronto: Pearson, 2010.

Further, the rapid development of new communication technologies create exciting possibilities for expanded democratic listening while at the same time multiplying the cacophony of voices. It is uncertain how this will enhance our capacity for the deep understanding needed to tackle the immense challenges facing our democracies. We also need to ponder what it means to “listen well” in these different democratic contexts. How can we address some of the social and cultural forces that direct us to listen to some and not to others in undemocratic ways? Does poverty among the working poor, for example, deny them the leisure time needed to organize their voice, lobby for their interests or participate in public forums? Do strong political views hinder our ability to listen to the other side? What would it mean to teach democratic listening for these different contexts?

3. MODELS OF DEMOCRACY – HOW DO DIFFERENT CONCEPTS OF DEMOCRACY INFLUENCE HOW WE UNDERSTAND DEMOCRATIC LISTENING?

To complicate the issue further, some of these concerns come into sharper focus when we step back and consider our assumptions about the nature of democracy and how they might shape our understanding of democratic listening. Table #3 (page 14) drawn from the work of David Held,⁶ sets out different models of democracy and the implications of each for democratic listening. Each model makes differing assumptions about the necessary conditions for citizens to express their views and for democratic listening to occur among the key actors. A brief discussion of one of the models demonstrates how one’s assumptions about the nature of democracy can subtly and sometimes not so subtly shape our expectations for democratic listening.

a) Deliberative Democracy

The work of Amy Gutmann, while it draws on earlier models, ultimately falls within the deliberative model of democracy. In *Democratic Education*⁷, Gutmann sets out a civic minimum that we should teach for democracy to work. Students need to learn the following five basic skills or abilities so they can deliberate and participate effectively in democracy.

1. the 3Rs, religious toleration and non-discrimination, racial and gender non-discrimination,
2. respect for individual rights and legitimate laws,
3. the ability to articulate and the courage to stand up for one’s publicly defensible convictions,
4. the ability to deliberate with others and therefore be open-minded about politically relevant issues,
5. the ability to evaluate the performance of officeholders.(298)

Though Gutmann does not specifically address listening skills, we can discern them in each of these five points. The first of these, the 3Rs, if framed narrowly in terms of

⁶ David Held, *Models of Democracy*, 3rd ed. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006.

⁷ Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987.

toleration and non-discrimination, does not require great listening skills. It lends itself to the earlier liberal models like protective democracy, where leaving others alone and respecting laws are sufficient for democracy. However, knowing what constitutes non-discrimination necessarily draws us into listening to the communities that see themselves as discriminated against. To accomplish this, the public must listen to less powerful voices to determine what constitutes non-discrimination. However, by privileging religion, race and gender over other sites of discrimination, such as sexual orientation, suggests that some groups should be listened to more than others should. This framework of non-discrimination suggests one need listen only enough to know the legitimate limits of one's behaviour with respect to others, framed in a narrow sense of the second ability: to respect individual rights and legitimate laws. Perhaps this civic minimum is too low a standard for what we hope students learn in university. Should democratic listening, with respect to religion, race and gender, and beyond, not extend farther than mere toleration or anti-discrimination? Should we not aim higher: to teach listening so we might better understand others and learn from others?⁸ Protective democracy might dismiss these concerns as unimportant. Deliberative democracy requires a higher level of engagement from its citizens, moving us beyond toleration of others to understanding others in our community. This requires citizens listening to each other.

The third ability, to articulate and defend one's convictions, demands greater listening skills. To articulate a conviction is not enough, one must be able to defend it publicly. To do this effectively, one must listen to understand and respond to opposing views, drawing on more than perfunctory listening skills and suggesting a greater mastery of listening than implied in the first two points. The fourth ability, to "deliberate with others and therefore be open-minded about politically relevant issues" is more active than re-active listening: one must actively seek out and listen to different views on relevant political issues. To be open-minded suggests that one can suspend for the moment one's own views and reactions to hear opposing perspectives. Gutmann's final point draws on an even greater mastery of listening skills. The "ability to evaluate the performance of officeholders" implies perhaps the most active form of listening because it requires ongoing listening initiative: to seek out in an on-going way the information needed to make political judgements. To make such judgements one must have the requisite social conditions for listening, the skills to listen and the focus to attend to relevant political debates.

Listening skills are implicit in each of Gutmann's points about a civic minimum. She also shows us that democratic listening is not a relatively passive act. It has profoundly active dimensions, such as listening to seek out and hear silenced voices, or the listening that seeks out competing views, or the listening that probes for further information to better understand. While Gutmann's book seems primarily addressed to the issue of education at the primary and secondary level, I doubt that many university

⁸ Curiously, Gutmann uses the word "toleration" only with respect to religion. Why does religion, but not race or gender, require toleration? In contrast to race or gender, should religion, which is based on beliefs, not be subject to the same standards of inquiry as other beliefs in a democracy? Does toleration mean we should not question the premises of religious beliefs? If so, why?

faculty would agree that the students entering from high school have mastered these skills and abilities. Do we even know whether our university graduates have mastered these skills and abilities upon graduation? Would we be satisfied teaching to her civic minimum or should we aspire to take it up a notch? If the kind listening practices required for deliberative democracy are important for our students to learn, how might we think about pedagogical practices for teaching those skills?

4. WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING DEMOCRATIC LISTENING?

In one sense, this paper is merely a preamble to the question I consider most central. How can we teach democratic listening? I have prepared another workshop for this conference that provides examples of how these reflections might usefully inform how we teach democratic listening. I have posted a number of the examples on my website⁹ if you are unable to attend that workshop. I hope, at minimum that I have stimulated your interest in this subject and encouraged you to teaching listening skills with democracy in mind.

⁹ www.yorku.ca/jnewton/DemocraticListening.html