Listening Publics
For Adam, Madeleine and Lance
Listening Publics
The Politics and Experience of Listening in the Media Age

KATE LACEY
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Preface

This book is about listening in the modern mediated public sphere. It traces how listening changes in relation to successive media forms and how the act of listening figures in modern public life. In so doing, it deals with an aspect of modern life that is ubiquitous and significant – but that has been strangely overlooked. Ever since the late nineteenth century, the recording, manipulation and transmission of sound has opened up the possibility of new industries, new prospects for the commodification of sound, new artistic practices, new cultures of listening, new subjectivities and, not least, new publics. And yet listening has been a curiously absent category in most treatments of media history and in most theorizations of the public sphere. It is a curious absence because listening is actually right at the heart of questions of communication and public life. 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.

The starting point for this book is the idea that the arrival of sound media gradually ‘re-sounded’ the modern public sphere that had been ‘de-aural-ized’ in the age of print, and that this has had profound consequences for the conduct and experience of public life, not least in the way in which the cultures and practices of listening have come to take on a renewed public significance alongside those of reading and looking. The central argument is that thinking about listening as an activity in public life opens up profound questions for the understanding of mediated experience, public participation and civic engagement. In short, Listening Publics aims to reveal listening as a critical category that can enhance our understanding of modern media, politics and experience.

Kate Lacey, Brighton, June 2012
Listening Overlooked
1 Listening In and Listening Out

Listening has long been overlooked in studies of the media as well as in conceptualizations of the public sphere. It is a curious oversight, given the centrality of listening to communicative, experiential and public life. The aim of these first two chapters is to offer an overview of just how critical is the role of listening in mediated public life.

The curious neglect of listening in relation to media and the public sphere has a long and complex history, but is crucially bound up with a cultural hierarchy of the senses that privileges the visual over the auditory (witness the trio of visual metaphors in the paragraph above!), and a logo-centric frame in which listening is encoded as passive in opposition to the acts of writing, reading and speech. This widespread association of listening with passivity has rightly been called ‘one of the worst ideas ever to infest cultural criticism’ (Peters 2006: 124), and this book will present ample historical and theoretical evidence to challenge that association. In so doing, it will also engage with the way in which the active/passive distinction is one of those critical and complex binaries that tends to be mapped all too easily onto other powerful (and often gendered) binaries, not least the public/private distinction. Indeed, it is the association of listening with passivity and with the private sphere that has surely hindered it being properly attended to either as a critical public disposition or as a political action.

Defining Terms

These central binary oppositions – active/passive, public/private – are conceptually problematic, often paradoxical, but remarkably persistent and powerful. Clearly there is little chance of arriving at a single definition of ‘public’ or ‘private’ to encompass all the contradictory uses; yet neither can the distinction simply be ignored, since it is clearly meaningful, for all its inconsistencies. They are not simply adjectives to describe the social world but rather ‘tools for arguments about and in that world’ (Gal 2002: 79). Such arguments include ideological and normative debates about the ‘proper’ separation of the spheres, with all the concomitant fears from either end of the political spectrum about the ‘colonization’ or ‘contamination’ of one sphere by the attributes and practices of the other. Though the terms
persist, their meaning is neither stable nor absolute, their referential content shifting according to context and perspective. Linguistic anthropologist Susan Gal (2002) has usefully suggested that the public/private divide – and, by extension, I would argue, the active/passive distinction – should be thought of less as a simple binary opposition than as a series of fractal distinctions, a recursive division that can be projected onto different social objects and in broader or narrower contexts, with often contradictory outcomes. For example, the dictionary definition recognizes listening as active in relation to hearing, yet listening at the same time is insistently described as passive in relation to other communicative actions. Similarly, the individual reception of impersonal public speech via public media in private spaces begins to illustrate the kind of complex and contradictory ways in which the terms are invoked against the backdrop of an ever-changing media landscape. The proliferation and variety of ways in which the terms have been invoked in different times and places have to be taken seriously while at the same time not mistaken for a single overarching distinction.

Of course the ‘activity’ of audiences has long since been acknowledged in terms of how people engage with the media and the variety of ‘readings’ they bring to bear on the texts they encounter. Audiences are understood to be ‘at work’ in accessing, decoding and mobilizing mediated communication. But contemporary reception studies have been fascinated by the television viewer, the film spectator, the reader of magazines, romances and newspapers and the user of web pages. There are astonishingly few studies of contemporary audiences as listeners, except perhaps as listeners to music – despite the fact that modern audience research began with the study of listeners to radio. So, while the notion of the active audience in principle extends to the listening audience, the absence of particular accounts of active listeners has served to perpetuate the commonsense understanding of listening as a passive mode of reception. And even if listening is recognized as an audience activity, the recognition has rarely been extended to thinking about the potential forms and consequences of that activity as a political phenomenon in the public sphere.

But if this project was initially born of a frustration with the neglect of listening in relation to the media and the public sphere, during the intervening years between conception and completion, it has been nurtured by a resurgent interest in the auditory – a veritable ‘sonic turn’ in cultural studies (Drobnik 2004: 10) – that is not unconnected to the increasingly prevalent place that the auditory plays in contemporary culture, in terms of wider access to the production, manipulation and consumption of sound in all its forms. Certainly this book is not unique in arguing that an acoustic
dimension be restored to the standard visualist histories of technological and social changes that have characterized the modern mediated public sphere. This book draws on and supplements some of those histories, but the focus is not on sound itself, nor sound technologies per se, but rather the way in which the new possibilities for recorded and transmitted sound shaped – and were shaped by – the idea of listening as a public act, and the consequences that had for what it means to be a member of the public. It is, then, the qualities, practices, experiences and interpretations of listening as a communicative activity in the public sphere that is the central concern.

Although the notion of the public sphere is no longer exclusively associated with the model that Habermas (1962/1991) set out, it is, nevertheless thanks to a creative translation of his term ‘Öffentlichkeit’ (literally, ‘openness’ or ‘publicness’) that the spatial metaphor of the ‘sphere’ is introduced into Anglophone discussions of politics and civil society (Peters 1993: 542–3). This accident of translation is perhaps particularly fortuitous for an analysis of listening as a public activity. Sound surrounds, and can be approached from any and every direction, whereas the visual field is fixed and has to be presented face-on. These different qualities of sound and vision are as much cultural constructs as they are descriptions of physical or physiological reality, but as such they have been enormously powerful as metaphors mobilized in competing models of subjectivity, communication and public life. The spherical character of acoustic space was particularly significant in the work of Marshall McLuhan who, since his early collaborations with the ‘communications group’ in Toronto, had contrasted it to the linearity of visual space in terms that will echo through the discussions that follow (Carpenter and McLuhan 1960; Schafer 2007: 83–4; Cavell 2010: 142–5). In Law of Media, written with his son Eric, he offered the following summary of what was at stake in the contrasting conceptualizations of space:

Visual space, created by intensifying and separating that sense from interplay with the others, is an infinite container, linear and continuous, homogenous and uniform. Acoustic space, always penetrated by tactility and other senses, is spherical, discontinuous, non-homogenous, resonant, and dynamic. Visual space is structured as static, abstract figure minus a ground; acoustic space is a flux in which figure and ground rub against and transform each other (McLuhan and McLuhan 1988: 33).

For McLuhan, visual space is an intellectual construct, a technological effect of alphabetic perception. Acoustic space, by contrast, is grounded in experience. Visual space is conceived as a unified field of perception; acoustic
space as a discontinuous field of relations. Visual space breaks up into categories and groups; acoustic space is a ‘resonant sphere’ with no centre and no margins. The relativity and dynamism of space was increasingly recognized in a series of profound revolutions in art, science and technology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (examples would include Picasso’s cubism, Schoenberg’s atonality, Le Corbusier’s architecture, Einstein’s theories of relativity, and the development of quantum physics) that for McLuhan are set against the ‘ground’ of electric technology and represent a technologically determined return to the ‘common sense’ of acoustic space (McLuhan 2004: 69).

If the visual space of print culture was associated with rationality, objectivity, abstraction, linearity, individualism and nationalism, then, McLuhan argued, electronic culture reverses those attributes to favour partiality, involvement, experience, simultaneity, collectivity and globalism. From this perspective, acoustic space sits somewhere between the physical and the virtual, just as the public sits somewhere between the real and the imaginary. By extension, listening becomes the defining mode of experience under these new conditions, not only metaphorically, but also literally, by virtue of the new media technologies of recording and transmission.

It is not coincidental, as Stephen Connor (1997: 208–9) has argued, that this destabilization and reconfiguration of the soundscape coincided with reconceptualizations of the modern self as unstable, malleable and fragmented. In fact, the qualities of the auditory resonate in a variety of ways with modernist, feminist and postmodern conceptualizations of subjectivity, not least because privileging an acoustic subjectivity throws into disarray conventional distinctions between interior and exterior worlds, public and private, active and passive, even subject and object (Bhabha 1992; Salvaggio 1999; Ihde 2007). The new sound media of the phonograph, the telephone and the radio radicalized these attributes of auditory experience, for the first time in history ripping sound away from its secure and organic location in time and space, and shattering the once stable connection between sound and vision, between sound and body.

So my intention in this book is to examine the listening relation in modern public life rather than focus on what was listened to. Of course, the distinction is only an analytical one and has its limitations – the sounds people listened to will still resonate through the pages that follow – but the distinction is a necessary step in moving beyond the conventional histories of media, or sound technologies or specific media audiences in order to connect the material history of listening to the idea of listening as a public act.
The distinction has its roots in the fact that ‘to listen’ is both an intransitive and a transitive verb. In other words, it is possible to listen without necessarily listening to anything. Listening can therefore be understood as being in a state of anticipation, of listening out for something. The listening public in this sense is an always latent public, attentive but undetermined. Any intervention in the public sphere is undertaken in the hope, faith or expectation that there is a public out there, ready to listen and to engage. One of the features of public discourse that distinguishes it from other forms of collective address is precisely that it is addressed to an indeterminate set of people defined only insofar as they participate in or find themselves interpellated in the discourse that addresses them.

This ‘listening out’ is in a sense the mirror image, or perhaps the necessary corollary, of the indiscriminacy of the public address. There is a faith in the moment of address that there is a public out there, and there is a faith in the act of listening that there will be some resonance with the address. We are familiar with the idea of the reading public, an idea that suggests a potential, the sum of people with the critical skill of literacy, rather than the readers of any one particular publication. Yet the idea of the listening public that emerged with the infant sound media at the turn of the last century – and that has dominated ideas of the audience ever since – has tended to be associated with particular texts or media, with no connotations of latent critical practice. Early radio, for example, was attended by the usual mix of utopian idealism and cultural pessimism that habitually surrounds the emergence of new media. For both sides it rapidly came to stand as the paradigmatic mass medium. With its rapid adoption by whole populations, the simultaneity of its centralized and monologic address to a vast atomized and domesticated audience together with its ‘immediate’ sensory appeal, it seemed to offer either the possibility of a newly inclusive democratic forum fit for the modern age, or a pernicious threat to a participatory democracy and an effective public sphere. When ‘screen radio’, as television was once called, arrived, it only intensified the debates. This is familiar territory. What is rarely considered, however, is the role that listening played in this history and in these debates. For some, the return to the spoken word breathed new life into public communication and opened it up to all, reinvigorating public participation. For others, the identification of the public as an audience of listeners as opposed to readers was the quintessential proof of the passification of the public, rendered mute and helpless in its position as listener in a culture that celebrates and privileges the freedom of expression. The relegation of listening (standing in for media consumption as a whole) as a public activity remains clearly
evident in contemporary celebrations of ‘interactivity’ and ‘produsing’ and so on, where the ‘progress’ is more often identified in the proliferation of voices and opportunities for expression than in the proliferation or quality of opportunities to listen.

In other words, most treatments of listening within media and cultural studies tend to privilege the action of listening in to something, to use the telling phrase adopted in the early years of radio. ‘Listening’ in such formulations tends to be relatively unproblematised, presented simply as the natural receptive mode of consuming media messages in sound. Even when listening is taken to be a sense formation, the apperception of sound tends to be examined at the level of intimate, individual experience. Despite the growth in ‘sound studies’, academic treatments of listening rarely attend to the connections between the act of ‘listening in’ to specific media texts, the sensory experience of listening and a political philosophy of listening. This book challenges such a restricted understanding of the listening public by identifying listening as a category that bridges both the realm of sensory, embodied experience and the political realm of debate and deliberation. Moreover, it will make the case that, unlike a reading public constituted of individuals in isolation, a listening public is made up of listeners inhabiting a condition of plurality and intersubjectivity. Its ambition is to think these different aspects of listening together, to address the public aspect of listening, an aspect which has at least as much to do with listening out, as listening in – listening as a form of radical openness, literally, Öffentlichkeit – the German term commonly translated as ‘the public sphere’.

**Listening In/As a Public**

The analytical separation of ‘listening out’ (an attentive and anticipatory communicative disposition) from ‘listening in’ (a receptive and mediatized communicative action) opens up a space to consider listening as an activity with political resonance. Indeed, it becomes possible to think of listening as a political action in its own right. Where political theory has concentrated on the rights and responsibilities of speech and expression, the intention here is to examine the rights and responsibilities of those listening in the act of listening (that is to say, the object of enquiry is not on the activities that follow on as a consequence of having listened, for example the production of more speech or other forms of political action). This apparently simple switch of focus opens up surprisingly far-reaching speculations about the guarantee of plurality in modern political society (the role of ‘auditing’ political discourse), and proposes listening as a powerful
conceptual corrective to nostalgic political models based on idealized notions of the face-to-face dialogic encounter.

This image of the ‘face-to-face’ indicates how our dominant communicative models tend to be conceptualized in terms of a visual logic and a dyadic exchange, rather than in terms of an embodied and pluralistic encounter. It is a construct that implicitly privileges interpersonal, private conversation over impersonal, public communication. ‘Face-to-face’ also implies a ‘live’ and ‘immediate’ exchange, but in the age of electronic mediation, liveness, of course, can also happen at a distance – a radical sensory reorganization of communicative experience that was first registered as a listening experience via the sound media of the telegraph, the telephone and the radio. If ‘face-to-face’ is coupled with ‘live’ as some sort of ideal of communicative exchange, then the communications media are always to be found wanting.

This is just one example of how beginning from a perspective that takes listening seriously can usefully recast some of the most fundamental tenets of communication theory. This has nowhere more profound consequences than in balancing the normative ideal of free speech with a normative freedom of listening that encompasses both a responsibility and a right to listen. In chapter 8, the concept of ‘freedom of listening’ will be proposed as a necessary corollary to the ‘freedom of speech’, and that listeners be understood not just as an ‘audience’ for public discourse, but as ‘auditors’ of public exchanges, performances and plurality. Where the freedom of speech is a right ascribed to the individual, I will argue there is a ‘freedom of listening’ that, by contrast, inheres in the space between individuals, and is concerned precisely with guaranteeing the context within which freedom of expression can operate not as speech, but as communication.

However, it is sensible to point out in these introductory remarks that while the central argument of Listening Publics is for listening to be considered as an activity in the public sphere, it will be taken as read that this listening is necessarily just one activity among others. Listening is neither autonomous nor primary either as a sensory or a communicative activity. The neglect of listening as a public action has, however, been so pervasive and so profound, that the case has to be put as strongly as possible, even if doing so runs the danger of appearing to make overblown claims for listening as the principal or most profound dimension of communicative activity in the public sphere. True, the acknowledgement of listening as public action can open up new ways of thinking about old questions, and is a necessary corrective, but it would be absurd to claim listening as a self-sufficient activity, let alone a sufficient political activity. On the other hand, the starting point of this book is that to have ignored listening as an activity in the public sphere for so long is equally absurd.
Listening in the Literature

Counter to this general trend of neglect, there are two aspects of the cultural work of listening that have been the subject of much attention, although they will play only a tangential role in this book. The first is the ‘skill’ of listening in therapeutic, interpersonal or pedagogic situations; the second is the ‘art’ of listening to music and other sonic forms. The former tends to concentrate on the psychology of the individual listener, and is rarely applied to public or mediated situations. For example, the International Listening Association was founded in 1979 to ‘identify, and institutionalize “listening” as a legitimate area of scholarly enquiry’ (Wolvin et al. 1999: 111). It subsequently launched a journal that in 1995 became *The International Journal of Listening*, where the focus is, with a few notable exceptions, very much on interpersonal communication from the perspective of cognitive psychology and is very often concerned with a kind of ‘strategic’ listening in business, education and the professions (Gehrke 2009: 2; Beard 2009: 15; Wolvin 2010). Where media are considered within this framework, it tends to be the interpersonal forms like telephony. Another related body of work considers the skill of listening as a research method in interview-based disciplines like journalism, anthropology and sociology (Wiley 1998; Merritt and McCombs 2004: 105; O’Donnell 2009; Erlmann 2004; Angel-Ajani 2006; Burghart 2008; Forsey 2010; Back 2007, 2009).

Meanwhile, the specialist musicological discourses on listening tend to treat music (and sonic arts generally) as an aesthetic more than a sociological or political phenomenon, and so these, too, lie broadly beyond the remit of this book. Yet the importance of music in the development and expansion of the listening public, and indeed the political role of music more broadly, cannot be denied. It is clear that the rapid and ubiquitous adoption of sound technologies in modern public life have been significantly driven by the desire for more music to be more accessible to more people in more and more different situations. Certainly music has brought people together in ‘listening publics’, and of course music can have its own political force, directly or indirectly. Moreover, musical and other aesthetic and cultural experiences are inescapably social, of course, however much they seem also to be individual, affective experiences (Bourdieu 1986). To this extent, music will feature in the story, albeit rather *sotto voce*, if only for the pragmatic reason of keeping the project within manageable limits, and in recognizing that listening to music in modern public life has already been the subject of many studies, from histories of recording technologies to genealogies of musical genres, from stories of fans and analyses of youth cultures.
to textual analyses of protest songs and biographies of musicians with a political edge. Still, in many considerations of music in public life, the idea of the listening public tends to be conflated with the notion of particular taste publics and identity politics, and the wider public dimension folds in again around the individual and around listening as a practice of individual consumption.

‘Sound’ and the excavation of ‘soundscapes’ tend to fare better than ‘listening’ per se. In 2005, Michele Hilmes commented sardonically that sound studies have been ‘hailed as an “emerging field” for the last hundred years’ and that it might well remain that way, ‘always emerging, never emerged’ (Hilmes 2005: 249), although the growing number of degree courses, research centres and anthologies in the field suggest that it is becoming more established (Bull and Back 2003; Morat 2011; Pinch and Bijsterveld 2011; Sterne 2012). Whatever its status, it has certainly been a dynamic one in recent years, albeit widely distributed across different disciplines that do not always speak (or listen) to each other, and where the production of sound tends to receive more critical attention than its reception. Much of the most important work in historical sound studies has concentrated on attempts to reconstruct historical soundscapes, for example the contested sounds of Shakespearean or Victorian England, nineteenth-century rural France, colonial America or the American Civil War (Corbin 1998; Smith 1999, 2001; Picker 2003; Cullen Rath 2003). Not coincidentally perhaps, most studies of this sort seem to deal with periods that predate the era of recordable sound, almost as if we could turn to a more direct ‘record’ of more recent soundscapes. The ambition of this book is not to reconstruct the modern media soundscape (which would be to try to recreate a sense of what was heard in particular times and places), but to try to think through how innovations in media technologies might have impacted on ways of listening in a reconfigured soundscape in which sounds were no longer in the same way bound to a specific time and place and to ask the question what impact that might have had on public life and listening as a political activity.

Finally, there are plenty of media histories on which this study draws. This book does not claim to offer sustained chronological or institutional histories of the media, for its historical span is too broad and its conceptual ambition lies elsewhere. The notion of the ‘listening public’ does not arise in relation to a single medium or at any single identifiable historical moment, but is, rather, a latent term that appears in different guises in various contexts throughout the modern media age. Instead, the focus is on moments of transition, be they moments of technological development or political change, inasmuch as they present ‘privileged moments of
genuine uncertainty and improvisation’ (Boddy 2004: 3), that can potentially destabilize preconceived notions of the public consequences of now familiar political and media ecologies. In the spirit of Miriam Hansen’s (1991) work on early cinema publics, the book begins with the contention that, in periods of transition with successive sound media, we might well expect to find the activity of listening as an explicitly contested terrain in the public sphere, which in turn raises the possibility of identifying alternative listening publics that lie behind the dominant historical narrative of a passified audience.

It is predominantly in these periods of innovation and instability that the debates, discourses and decisions that helped to shape the social application of these various technologies are at their most prolific and urgent. The phonograph and the radio will be taken as the archetypal technologies of this new era of sound, representing the key attributes of all subsequent sound media, recording and transmission. For that reason, the weight of the historical evidence presented in this book lies between the 1870s and the 1930s when there was a veritable ‘aural awakening’ (Biocca 1990) by virtue of there being more sound, (certainly more music), and also a greater variety of sounds being produced by the sound factories of recording studios and radio stations. The simple possibility of playback, of repeating, of listening again and again to the self-same sounds, be that for study or amusement, was nothing short of revolutionary. Sound for the first time could be captured, repeated, slowed down, speeded up, reversed, and could be transmitted to far-flung times and places – all literally unheard of possibilities just a few years before. The modern ear, then, was faced with a richer sonic environment to decipher than ever before, new businesses grew up as veritable ‘empires of sound’ (Millard 1995), and listening to mediated sound became established as a public phenomenon. Moreover, this period also saw the extension of the vote to women and the working class, the upheavals of war and economic depression, and the sharpening ideological divide between right and left. For all these various reasons, the debates about the proper role of the emergent media in a democratic culture were particularly urgent, and the foundations that were laid when these media were in their infancy resonated throughout the twentieth century and into our contemporary digital media culture.

Given the extensive public attention to the new horizons opened up by the auditory technologies of telegraphy, telephony, phonography and radio, there is a surprisingly impoverished vocabulary for writing about mediated listening. There are no easy auditory equivalents to the visual concepts of the ‘gaze’ or the ‘glance’, ‘surveillance’, ‘voyeurism’ or ‘spectatorship’. Despite increasing scholarly attention to the sound of cinema and of television, this
somehow has not widely translated into attending to the question of ‘listenership’. The very word rings oddly – in fact the OED offers it only as a noun to describe ‘the estimated number of listeners to a broadcast programme or to radio (specifically as opposed to television)’ [my italics], whereas the common definition of ‘spectatorship’ is ‘the state of being a spectator or beholder’. In short, ‘listenership’ is the quantitative product of a media event, while ‘spectatorship’ is an existential condition. One of the themes of this book is that the modern technologies of mediation have, in fact, contributed to the production of ‘listenership’ not only as a collective noun, but as a state of being and a civic disposition.

And yet studies of both media and politics are shot through with auditory terminology though on the whole we remain deaf to the implications of such language. Within political discourse, analyses of political relations are often framed in terms of ‘harmony’ or ‘discord’, where judgements can be ‘sound’, and ideas can ‘resonate’, where people can act in ‘concert’ or produce a ‘cacophony’, and where ‘having a voice’ is central to all kinds of politics. And of course, democratic theory places great weight on ‘the freedom of speech’, without quite recognizing that speech is sounded out, and therefore demands a listener. The most significant example of this auditory terminology is obviously the word ‘audience’, which etymologically clearly privileges the listening relation in the process of communication, and yet has all but lost that particular association. There is potentially much at stake in recovering an understanding of that listening dimension if only because modern citizens habitually spend a significant proportion of their lives as members of audiences in one form or another. For all the attention to ‘the spectacle’ in modern culture, there are in fact few spectacles that unfold in utter silence. But the shift to an acoustic rather than a visual register in understanding the mediated world also, I will argue, offers productive ways of thinking about even purely visual culture inasmuch as it shifts our attention from the subjectivity of the individual to the intersubjectivity of the public, plural world.

**Audiences as Listening Publics**

‘Audience’, according to the OED, refers to the action, state, condition or occasion of hearing, or ‘an assembly of listeners’. The modern idea of an audience certainly retains that notion of a collectivity. An ‘audience of one’ is a phrase that draws attention to the rarity of being a singular member of an audience. ‘Audience’ is a collective noun for the activity of listening that has been assimilated for other activities, precisely because no parallel nouns
existed that gave the same sense of collectivity. ‘Readership’, for example, still conjures up a vision of individual readers; ‘spectatorship’ remains primarily an abstraction associated with individual viewers, not the cinema public. And yet the inescapable collectivity suggested by the word ‘audience’ resides in its relation to sound and listening (Ong 1982: 74).

This sense of ‘the audience’, in the singular, this image of a unity created out of the diversity of a group of individuals, lies at the heart of much of the mistrust of ‘mass’ media, since the ‘mystery of the collective noun’ conjures up the idea of a singular body with ‘a collective consciousness that is analogous to a unified individual subject’, despite all evidence and experience to the contrary. Addressing this problem in relation to theatrical audiences, Alice Rayner (1993: 3–6) has argued that since ‘the audience’ is made up of diverse individuals and since the constitution of the audience changes over time (rather like the pronoun ‘we’), it makes less sense to talk about the ontology of the audience than to talk about it in terms of ‘the listening function that would constitute the action of audience’. Thought of in these terms, the audience ‘is an instance of intersubjective relations with specific reference to the act of listening’, and since listening involves a fundamental openness towards others,2 listening and the action of audience is an act that is both political and ‘fundamentally ethical’.

It is this sense of openness in relation to others in the act of listening that connects with definitions of the public, although ‘public’ is another of those apparently ordinary but extraordinarily complex words that defy easy definition. Already in these first few pages, it has appeared as a noun in the singular and in the plural, as an adjective that either stands alone or is conjoined with other nouns, like ‘sphere’ or ‘life’. And always tagging along is its equally difficult other half: ‘private’ (Weintraub and Kumar 1997). It would be impossible to give a definitive, or even concise definition, of ‘public’ – even the OED struggles, acknowledging as an opening gambit that, ‘the various senses pass into each other by many intermediate shades of meaning’. But for all its nuances, as an adjective it means something to do with being open so that all may see or hear; and as a noun, something that describes a community, nation or people as a whole. Yet ‘the public’ is not coterminous with these other collective nouns. Michael Warner (2002: 50) points to the essential circularity in the idea of ‘a public’, which is, at least in principle, simply ‘a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself’, a self-creating and self-organizing space that ‘exists by virtue of being addressed’. However, despite acknowledging that a public is constituted by being addressed, in the very next sentence Warner supposes the only way of being actively involved in a public is in ‘speaking, writing and thinking’. In short, there is no active part to play in being
addressed: ‘merely paying attention is enough to make you a member’ (Warner 2002: 62).

This innocuous phrase ‘merely paying attention’ is worth unpacking, for the ‘merely’ suggests that paying attention comes easily. And yet ‘to pay attention’ would suggest precisely an intentional effort to engage with the ‘speaking, writing and thinking’ of others, presumably by listening, reading and more thinking. Since it is hard to conceive of literacy as something that is not a skill, or of reading or thinking without intent, the ‘merely paying attention’ seems to be a reference to listening (looking would also fit here, but ‘appearing’ is not granted the status of a public activity in Warner’s trio of possibilities). So here, albeit implicitly, is an acknowledgement of the critical role of listening in becoming a member of a public – critical, that is, both in the sense of crucial, and in the sense of a rational disposition.

The media are doubly implicated in the modern constitution of things public: first, by virtue of their role in publicizing events, ideas and performances; and second, by virtue of their role in enabling the constitution of the public – or rather, publics – as an imagined community with an intersubjective horizon. The media also have various public functions according to liberal political theory: to hold the state to public account, to act as a forum for public information, debate and civic participation, and to channel the voice of the people as public opinion. There is, of course, a vast scholarly literature that engages with the term in very precise ways in a variety of political and sociological traditions, and some of those debates will reveal themselves in the chapters that follow, but the term is left deliberately open here, in order to explore the variety of ways in which listening plays out as a public activity. The idea of a singular, overarching public is a rhetorical fiction, albeit perhaps a necessary or inevitable one, and there are instances where the idea of a single ‘listening public’ maps on to such a fiction; but on the whole, the theoretical, historical and empirical evidence suggests the presence of multiple publics with distinct characteristics, functions and political capital, overlapping and interrelating in potentially significant ways. By focusing on an activity like listening that is central to so much public engagement and yet has been almost entirely ignored as a critical category in considerations of the public sphere, it is possible not only to delineate some specific incarnations of the public which have escaped attention, but also to indicate some of the ways in which those overlaps and interrelationships have played out.

Certainly there is a tendency and a temptation to set up publics and audiences as opposites, the one made up of (potentially) active citizens, the other made up of more or less passive consumers. The term ‘public’