

Listening in a Time of Pandemic: New Mediations and Intimacies between Solitude and Solidarity

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Abstract

During the pandemic, listening habits around the world have been undergoing significant transformation in response to various public health measures imposing physical distancing and stay-at-home-isolation. This situation has prompted new experiments with digital mediations, transformations in modalities of protest and autonomy, and impulses towards anecdotal accounts in a bid to share experiences of isolation. The essays in this special feature range across a variety of socio-political and disciplinary concerns and point towards a crucial issue facing societies today: how to design new forms and practices of listening to foster the forms of sociality and collectivity urgently needed in a changed world.

Keywords: Listening; protest; sociality; digital mediation; solitude.

With the introduction of various public health measures imposing physical distancing and stay-at-home-isolation, listening habits around the world have been undergoing significant transformation. From changing patterns in the consumption of music, radio, and podcasts through the relocation of deliberative democracy onto digital platforms to the reattunement to quieter public spaces and soundscapes of revived biodiversity, listening practices have been undergoing change no less significant than and deeply entangled with the broader social and economic impacts of the pandemic. One striking effect of the pandemic has been a translation of listening's affective dimensions into new spheres of mediation. As the experience of being

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together “face-to-face” has been significantly disrupted and displaced, the ears have come to take on new and adaptive possibilities and affordances. New forms and practices of listening, now more intensely mediated by technological prostheses and digital platforms, are caught up in the production of new modalities of collective care and social intimacies. The challenges and possibilities for listening are being felt across multiple sectors: politics, civil society, education, cultural production, psychoanalysis, urban design, ecology, and so forth.

This special feature gathers together a series of short essays and meditations from scholars, all of whom also have a creative sound or writing practice. The pieces assess and critically reflect on the ways in which listening is adapting to and evolving in light of the unprecedented conditions imposed in response to COVID-19. These contributions highlight a wide range of issues across a spectrum from aesthetic to socio-political concerns, embracing diverse disciplinary concerns from psychoanalysis to critical pedagogy, but a series of recurring motifs and common themes emerge notwithstanding the variety of issues and disciplines represented. Each of the essays in some way foregrounds the possibility of protest, noisy or silent, or of otherwise marking some degree of resistance or autonomy from prevailing modes of governance. Listening, far from being a panacea, is revealed to be pharmacological — poison and cure. It provides the basis for uncontrolled forms of sociality, undictated conversations, unregulated intimacies, and unscripted solidarities, but it can also tune out and conspire with existing regimes of exclusion and marginalization, silencing the voices of black, brown, and indigenous peoples or any voice not deemed to have been sufficiently disciplined by reason. Echoes of the Black Lives Matter protests in the US and France that ruptured the sudden vacation of politics from the streets are never far out of earshot. Educational institutions also form important sites for the politics of listening as they are radically transformed through an abrupt evacuation to virtual spaces.

One thing that is striking is how anecdotal the contributions are, often straddling the boundaries between realism, autobiography, and autofiction, even though this was never an express intention when the idea for the special feature was conceived. As such, these are invitations to listen, for the anecdote has a confessional quality, as if announcing a secret in plain sight (etymologically, the anecdote is something unedited so both as yet unpublished and also the surplus of what might have been left unsaid). The anecdotal quality that comes to the surface in these essays, as in other writing prompted by the isolation and solitude of the pandemic, attests to a need to be heard that has come to be perhaps more acutely experienced in these times. It moreover points to the aporetic impossibility of sharing isolation which is broken the moment that the experience is made public.

From their different perspectives, each of these essays highlights that the social is inextricable from the question of power, and that our practices and tools of listening are contested terrains on which social forces form and congeal. While a piece on the topic of “listening in a time of pandemic” could just as well invite a focus on non-human sounds or digital tools alone, all these contributors write urgently about political, interpersonal, and communal struggles brought up by the quarantine and pandemic, and how they are articulated through listening and its challenges. It is noisy protest in the streets rather than quiet quarantine that frames this special issue, opening with Jessica Feldman’s narrative of a collective silence in the presence of the police and closing with Julie Beth Napolin’s moving account of a public speech at a Black Lives Matter rally, calling to collectivize our breath and life forces. Feldman moves from the street to the digital network, pointing out the ways in which the isolation of confinement has been politically dangerous and that online listening tools must be redesigned to accommodate a form of politics that prioritizes the communal rather than the atomized neoliberal subject for which corporate tools are imagined.

That the pandemic became an occasion to intensify the already existing forms of exclusion remains an acute theme under examination. Erin Soros brings this problem painfully close to the heart in her autobiographical essay, laying bare the absence of empathetic understanding in the academy, exacerbated by the reduction of spaces of communication to “Zoom rooms.” For Soros, the confinement meant a turn to an experience of solitude “which can never be shared,” by definition, much as one cannot be accompanied on the journey into psychosis and must therefore invent one’s own witness. The move to the Zoom-room triggered the ensuing failure or perhaps *refusal* of her community to understand and honour intentions and communications from a voice which represented madness, a logic outside of academic puzzles, the exterior to a rationality upon which knowledge reifies itself. Naomi Waltham-Smith echoes these concerns about “Zoom atomization” and exhaustion but argues that listening is always already mediated and therefore spaced out. Following Derrida’s reflections on a line from Celan — “The world is gone, I must carry you” — she argues that a politically powerful “listening alone together” requires a “militant carrying of the other by ear.” This kind of militant listening entails holding the other in our and their solitude, shared and disjoined, in order to cultivate and radicalize practices of mutual aid — an exhausting task when the tools are against us, but absolutely politically necessary.

Like Soros, Emile Bojensen takes up the question of the university as a space for listening, reversing the indictment of students’ listening capacity to remind us that some of the most important listening occurs between students, often informally in the cracks of the institution and outside of the classroom and other formalized spaces. Bojensen asks if and how these spaces could be allowed to emerge in an online environment where unplanned conversation and semi-anonymity is lost to priorities of efficiency and tracking. This finds its echo in Napolin’s question: “How can we record what we cannot fully register?” The question points to the necessarily partial and unequal nature of digital capture by surveillance technologies, such as the New York City street microphones which registered only the absence of public noise during the quarantine, as well as police body cams which serve less to reveal nuanced truths than to support dominant ruling-class narratives. The absence of human listening with and to others means an absence of witnessing death and struggle, both individually and as collective politics. Napolin ties together pandemic and the protest at a physiological level, connecting the human breath as a source and index of life to the act of sounding together in protests and the speaking of the names of those killed by the police. To fully register this history requires a kind of listening and witnessing that is only achievable through collective action.

We are, though, only beginning to reckon with the necessity of this demand in the throes of a health and economic crisis in which listening has been affected. In multifarious ways, listening — its practices, mediations, and capacities — will continue to be affected in a world where such uncertainty remains about the forms that sociality and social relations will take as economic aftershock ripples across the global South as well as the global North. This collection of essays points to questions that remain to be addressed when it comes to assessing the impact of the pandemic on the conditions, practices, techniques, and mediations of listening in social and political environments. What does it mean in this climate to listen well and in what new ways will misunderstanding arise, on the one hand, and empathy be nurtured, on the other? Are there tools, tactics, and technologies that can be designed to promote more effective, more attuned, more compassionate listening on digital platforms and to what extent are these bound up with broader struggles against an intensified turn towards state monopoly capitalism that puts increasing power in the hands of big tech? How can new forms and practices of listening be designed to foster the forms of sociality and collectivity urgently needed in a changed world?

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