Everyday listening:
how citizens listen to each other in polarised debates

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines the everyday modes of listening that occur between citizens in the public sphere when polarised policy issues are at stake. It considers the various roles that these more informal and sometimes even accidental modes of listening play in a democracy understood in deliberative terms. For empirical insights the paper analyses a case study of a polarised debate playing out in several small communities in regional Australia on a proposed coal seam gas project. The in-depth case analysis reveals that in polarised contexts citizens do listen to each other, yet the form and function of listening differ from conventional understandings of listening. The research identifies five types of everyday listening that occur within and across polarised groups: enclave, monitory, transformative, social and accidental listening. The research finds that in a polarised context, everyday listening involves like-minded citizens connecting with each other, and being strategic towards opponents and the public. Other more nuanced forms of everyday listening between those who disagree with each other are also uncovered. We discuss the role of each type of listening for democracy and conclude that in polarised settings, both formal and informal mechanisms may be required to break down listening barriers, and foster more diverse and open-minded listening between diverse publics.
INTRODUCTION
Listening is an important yet neglected aspect of democratic communication. Conventionally listening in democratic systems is equated with the norm of vertical receptivity; ideally decision makers are receptive and responsive to messages they receive from affected publics (Dobson, 2014). Vertical listening is predicated on the idea that citizens are well-bonded to their elected representatives. Yet this is a democratic ideal under increasing strain in modern politics as popular distrust and cynicism towards political elites grows (Dalton, 2007; Stoker, 2006). The increasing polarisation of contemporary politics has also created conditions where decision makers are listening less to citizens and each other (Barber and McCarty, 2016; Mansbridge and Latura, 2016). While elites may be struggling to listen, the proliferation of informal modes of political participation (Li and Marsh, 2008; Rollo, 2016; Verloo, 2017) invites us to pay more attention to horizontal modes of listening between citizens. For example, citizens listen to each other variously when they participate in protest movements, sign online petitions, connect and share on social media, engage in urban interventions or crowd-fund political issues (Marsh and Akram, 2015; Theocharis and Deth, 2016).

In this paper we explore everyday forms of horizontal listening that occur between citizens in the public sphere, and consider their implications for public deliberation. Listening is an important yet typically implied aspect of deliberative democracy (Dobson, 2014 chapter 4). At its heart, deliberative democracy is a normative theory of collective decision-making; decisions are legitimate to the extent that the views of those potentially affected have been considered through a process of open public reasoning (Dryzek, 2010a; Thompson, 2008). From a normative perspective, listening serves many functions in deliberative democracy: it is crucial to demonstrating mutual respect (Chambers, 2004) and trying to put oneself in another’s position (Goodin, 2008; Mansbridge and Latura, 2016); to the communicative process between citizens and decision makers (Habermas, 1996), and to the articulation of conflict in the public sphere (Bickford, 1996).

We argue that public deliberation is also shaped by the various forms of everyday listening that occurs between citizens as they seek to make sense of, and take action on issues that affect them. Here we use the term ‘everyday’ to refer to non-elite individuals in the community that lack formal political power. Everyday citizens can vary considerably in their willingness and capacity to engage in public debate and politics. For example, some everyday citizens are highly active ‘expert citizens’ affiliated to community groups and political causes.
(Bang, 2005), others might be ‘everyday activists’ who have been called into action (Mansbridge, 1999, pp. 217–21), and then there are many who are politically unaffiliated non-activists who prefer to participate in politics as individual citizens. The contributions of everyday people to public deliberation is gaining recognition, for example, the value of their informal conversations (Mansbridge, 1999) as well as civic deeds and agency (Boyte, 2005; Rollo, 2016). Yet the role of everyday people in facilitating (or hindering) political listening has been a largely neglected theme in democratic theory.

Our paper offers a conceptualisation of everyday listening, and an empirical study of its form and function in public deliberation. More specifically we research how everyday listening is enacted in the complex and messy world of a contemporary public sphere. Our study speaks directly to Dobson’s (2014, p. 11) call for “independent attention to the listening aspect of real-life deliberation”. We seek both to boost the practical utility of normative theory, and to engage democratic theory in the inherent tensions and possibilities of democracy as experienced in everyday politics.

In studying everyday listening we adopt a systems view of deliberative democracy, which recognises the democratic significance of everyday political communication between citizens (Mansbridge, 1999). A ‘deliberative system’ consists of differentiated yet linked components, ranging from highly structured assemblies and forums (such as legislatures) to loose informal social gatherings and everyday public interactions (Hendriks, 2006; Parkinson and Mansbridge, 2012). These sites can vary in their intrinsic deliberative quality; some may be truth seeking, inclusive and egalitarian, while other may be exclusive and closed to competing discourses. Normatively, what matters is that the system as a whole engenders public reasoning for collective judgments (Mansbridge et al., 2012). In terms of listening, we contend that a healthy deliberative system ought to foster multiple forms of listening that promote mutual recognition and openness across diverse publics.

Building on the notion of ‘everyday talk’ (Mansbridge, 1999), we conceptualise everyday listening as the informal, unstructured horizontal forms of listening that occur between everyday citizens. In contrast to Mansbridge’s everyday talk, we understand everyday listening as something that extends well beyond “formally private spaces” (p. 211), which are described as “homes, workplaces, and places where a few friends meet” (p. 212). As we understand it, everyday political listening occurs not only in homes and cafes, but also out in
the street, landscape and increasingly online. Indeed the digital and visual age of politics has opened up a multitude of opportunities for citizens to engage in everyday politics (Allen and Light, 2015; Rowe, 2017; Vromen, Xenos, and Loader, 2015). And this in turn has opened up new forms of everyday listening: for example, citizens might read a blog post, down-load a Ted talk, form a local protest movement on Facebook, ‘listen out for’ particular perspectives on their Twitter feed, view a political video, or ‘listen in’ to political conversations on virtual chat rooms. Offline everyday people are also listening extensively to each other; they engage in spontaneous sometimes even accidental conversations in the street, they listen to relevant physical and environmental cues such as posters, signs, construction work, protests or even climatic change. Everyday listening might be unidirectional where citizens listen to someone speaking or acting in the public sphere, or it might be more interactive where multiple actors (speakers and listeners) connect and ultimately move together (Bickford, 1996, p. 145). While the various forms of political listening may deviate from the ideal of deliberative or critical listening (Dobson, 2014; Forester, 1988), they may offer important democratic goods for deliberative systems.

To better understand the nature and democratic implications of everyday listening, we turn to practice and empirically study its enactment in a context typically associated with a lack of listening — polarisation. Polarised debates delineate controversial issues in a bi-polar way by drawing a line between two simple answers and asking citizens to take a stand on one side of the line or the other (Becker, Chasin, Chasin, Herzig, and Roth, 2003, p. 183). Polarisation has deliberative consequences, most notably that people can be unwilling to talk and listen to those holding opposing views (Strickler, 2017). Concerned about the increasing polarisation in US politics, Mansbridge and Latura (2016) suggest that multiple, decentralised and informal modes of listening among citizens may be an important resource for facilitating political communication across difference. Our paper explores this proposition by examining the form and extent of everyday listening in the context of a polarised debate.

Our empirical study also sheds light on how everyday listening is influenced by relational and social forces at the local democratic scale. We examine a single case study of everyday listening in the context of polarised publics in battle over a proposed coal seam gas (CSG) project in Australia — the Narrabri Gas Project (NGP), located south of the town of Narrabri, 500km north-west of Sydney. The NGP controversy is being played out in several small local communities, where ordinarily there are fruitful conditions for social capital and community
cohesion (Alexander, 2015; Putnam, 2001), and potential for everyday listening. According to Barber (2013) the prospects of political listening and public deliberation are greater when citizens act as neighbours. He claims that (Barber, 2013, p. 282) “individuals living in proximity must listen intently to one another and envision what they may share”. Our analysis of the NGP case illuminates how everyday people in local communities listen to each other when confronted by a polarised controversy.

Our methodological approach to studying everyday listening in the NGP is interpretive (Ercan, Hendriks and Boswell 2017; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012); we draw heavily on the perspectives of citizens living in the potentially affected area, which we have visited on three separate occasions (in November 2015, June 2016 and June 2017). Extensive qualitative data was collected in over 45 in-depth interviews conducted by the authors with relevant activists, industry staff and everyday citizens. Some citizens we interviewed were actively involved in the controversy (either in support or against the NGP) while others were not especially active in the debate. Our analysis also draws on direct observations of some local protest events, including a highway protest and large community gathering; and content from relevant websites and social media platforms, particularly Facebook (see Hendriks, Duus, and Ercan, 2016).

EVERYDAY LISTENING IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Until quite recently listening has been a neglected aspect of political communication in democratic thought. Far more attention has been given to the speaking capacity of democratic systems, which is reinforced by the predominance of representative systems of government wherein “…it is far easier for representatives to speak for us than to listen for us” (Barber, 1984, p. 174).

For our purposes here important contributions on listening in democratic thought have been made by Benjamin Barber (1984), and Susan Bickford (1996) who both identified the significance of listening for their respective understanding of democracy. For Barber (1984), listening is central to his notion of ‘strong democracy’, particularly in generating agreement across difference. Good listening for Barber (1984) requires the capacity to consider the perspectives of others in a democracy: “I will put myself in his place, I will try to understand, I will strain to hear what makes us alike, I will listening for a common rhetoric evocative of a
common purpose or a common good”. Some scholars take issue with Barber’s emphasis on listening for commonality (Sanders, 1997; e.g. Young, 1996). However, Mansbridge and Latura (2016) contend that many democratic theorists have not fully appreciated Barber’s ideas on listening, particularly his emphasis on the need to continue to talk and to continue to listen in adversarial contexts. For our purposes what is particularly insightful about Barber’s account of political talk and listening is that he considers not only their role in bargaining, negotiating and making political decisions but also in the “complex, open-ended art of conversation” (p. 183). For Barber (1984, p. 186) forms of talking and listening that proceed without an agenda, for example an interaction over a neighbour’s fence or a conversation in a local street, represent important communicative moments for communities as they try to form bridges across differing world views.

A more conflictual appreciation of listening is offered by Bickford (1996, p. 19) who emphasises the importance of listening in adversarial contexts where citizens do not share common goals. Listening, according to Bickford (1996, p. 2) “enables political actors to decide democratically how to act in the face of conflict and to clarify the nature of conflict at hand.” She draws attention to the structures that inhibit listening, and calls for a more active and creative form of listening in the public sphere where “people can undermine hierarchies of language and voice” (p. 129).

More recent contributions have been made by Andrew Dobson (2012, 2014), who among other things connects ideas on political listening with the literature on deliberative democracy. Drawing on Habermas, Dobson (2012) distinguishes between deliberative listening which is aimed at mutual respect and more “strategized listening” where people are listening only to persuade, or for self-interest. While substantially broadening the discussion on political listening, Dobson’s (2014) conception of listening is predominantly understood in vertical terms; he emphasises listening between decision makers and citizens, and argues for increased attentiveness and responsiveness to public voices. To improve democratic listening, Dobson (2014) argues that decision makers need to better plan and organise how they listen to citizens, and to this end he makes a case for institutionalising specifically designed structures for listening.

Notwithstanding these contributions, there has been very limited explicit attention on what listening entails for public deliberation, especially when understood in systemic terms.
Theories of deliberative democracy have evolved over the past thirty years (Ercan and Dryzek, 2015) and so too have implicit ideas on the form and function of listening. When deliberation is understood narrowly as an ideal form of face-to-face communication (e.g. Cohen, 1997), then political listening involves equals — be they legislators, or everyday citizens — engaging in open-minded discussion. In a deliberative forum, all participants are speakers and listeners who are willing to take the perspective of others and mutually respect each other’s arguments and viewpoints. This kind of attentive listening is, as Goodin (2008, p. 110) puts it “part and parcel of what it is to deliberate.” Similar implied notions of ‘listening as mutual respect’ can be found in many empirical studies of deliberative democracy (e.g. Burkhalter, Gastil, and Kelshaw, 2002; Janssen and Kies, 2005; Mendelberg, 2002). For example, for Conover and Searing (2005) deliberation entails “listening very carefully to the views of others, explaining to them one’s own views, and taking time together to think over a matter thoroughly.”

Yet when deliberation is conceptualised as a broader social process of political legitimation, then deliberative democrats have tended to emphasise a more vertical kind of political listening between ‘the people’ and decision makers. For example, in Habermas’ (1996) dual-track notion of deliberative democracy, he describes how publics ‘make claims’ that are then ideally listened to, and taken into account by decision makers. Similarly, in Dryzek’s (2000, 2010a) more discursive view deliberative democracy, a consequential and legitimate system of public deliberation is one in which decision makers actively listen to, and act upon ideas and discourses from the public sphere. While Dryzek does not theorise listening, his discursive understanding of public deliberation is particularly attentive to enablers and constraints in the public sphere that shape who is heard and who is not (Calder, 2011).

Although we agree with these conceptions of listening and their importance for public deliberation, we contend that from a systemic view of public deliberation everyday listening deserves particular attention because it sheds light on the form and extent of communication that occurs between citizens. This is a particularly neglected aspect of current thinking in deliberative systems; a gap that has led some critics to argue that systemic accounts of deliberative democracy provide little or no room for ordinary citizens in public deliberation (e.g. Owen and Smith, 2015).
We argue that everyday listening represents an important component of any healthy deliberative system where there is ideally a multiplicity of forms of communication taking place horizontally within the public sphere, and between publics and decision makers (after Dryzek, 2010a; Hendriks, 2006). In a well-functioning deliberative system everyday listening ought to provide opportunities for citizens to not only bond politically with like-minded people, but also to promote discursive bridges across publics that hold different views (after Dryzek, 2010b). When this occurs, everyday listening in the public sphere provides important translation and transmission functions by facilitating the movement of diverse perspectives and arguments across the deliberative system. In real deliberative systems listening may vary from context to context depending, for example, on the nature of the issue under contestation, the actors involved and the diversity of viewpoints. Thus some forms of everyday listening might be highly deliberative aimed at mutual recognition, while other forms of listening might be more conflictual or even strategic.

We turn now to practice to study what everyday listening looks like in real contemporary deliberative systems. To be clear, our intention here is not to measure practice against the above-mentioned norms on ‘good’ listening, but rather to inject empirical insights into theoretical debates on the form and function of listening in public deliberation.

**A CASE ANALYSIS OF EVERYDAY LISTENING**

Our empirical study centres on the localised polarised debate surrounding a proposed project by the energy corporation, Santos, to develop 850 gas wells across a project area of approximately 1,000 square kilometres near Narrabri in eastern Australia (Santos, 2017).

The local controversy emerged around 2009. Though our analysis centres on the local debate, it is worth noting that the NGP has attracted significant political attention at various times across the state of NSW, as well as nationally and internationally. In early 2017 Santos lodged its Environmental Impact Statement for the project, attracting over 23,000 public submissions — many of which were from outside the region, including 200 from overseas (NSW Department of Planning and Environment, 2017). To date, the battle surrounding the NGP continues, with final government approval yet to be granted.

There are four key characteristics of this case study that make it particularly appealing for studying everyday listening. These aspects can be observed in other similar contexts, and they
also have important bearings on how we understand and might improve everyday listening in contemporary democracies more broadly.

\( i) \) **Polarised nature of the debate**

First, there are unfavourable conditions for political listening because of the debate over the NGP is divided between two polarised publics (e.g. Chan, 2017; Potter, 2014). Those opposing the NGP include diverse range of everyday citizens, many who have formed various community groups as early as 2009 in order to have a stronger voice and coordinate opposition activities. With the region’s agricultural industries highly dependent on groundwater for irrigation, the most prominent concern has been the potential for negative impacts on groundwater resources. The proximity of the project to prime agricultural land, and the project’s location in the nationally iconic Pilliga Forest have also generated concerns amongst farmers, environmentalists and Indigenous people. In addition local opposition, regional, state and national environmental groups have also become involved. Around 30 groups comprise the North West Alliance — an umbrella organisation of local and supporting groups that oppose coal and coal seam gas in north-west NSW (The Wilderness Society, 2013). These groups have dominated the public discursive space in both face-to-face and online spaces.

Everyday citizens in support of the NGP are also politically active, though less vocal in the public sphere. Their organised support for the project did not occur until 2014 when they formed the group ‘Yes2Gas From the Pilliga’ (Brown, 2014). Rather than a formal group with membership and meetings, the group’s founder has described it as “an umbrella for people to stand under”. Through colour posters and advertisements, the faces and stories of local identities in the region’s farming and business communities highlight the employment and economic opportunities that coal seam gas (CSG) development presents. The group also distributes information-rich graphics that attempt to answer the common complaints made against CSG. The group regularly has information stalls at monthly local markets and has an online presence through a Facebook page, Twitter account, and webpage.

The polarised nature of the NGP debate has taken its toll on political communication in the region. According to many citizens we spoke with, there is reluctance within the local community to talk and listen across points of difference, due to the divisive and sensitive nature of the debate, and also due to the general belief that it is impossible to reach an
agreement. While there is some level of communication between people who hold different views on the NGP in the local region (as we discuss below), people describe that in many instances people refuse to listen to each other, or how conversations become heated and emotional. During interviews we heard that there are people either “violently” pro or anti the NGP,1 and that “fors and againsts don’t mix”2 — with one informant stating that listening to opposite views was “a waste of time”.3 Another described how discussions on social media about the NGP are “poisonous”.4

ii) Small community norms shaping acceptable forms of talk and listening
Second, the controversy is playing out in several small communities geographically dispersed across nearly 100,000 square kilometres that make up the North West New England region of NSW – an area roughly equivalent to that of Iceland or the US state of Kentucky.5

Figure 1: A map of the Narrabri Gas Project (NGP) within the state of NSW, Australia6

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1 Interviewee #44, 8.6.17
2 Interviewee #41, 7.6.17
3 Interviewee #16, 24.11.15
4 Interviewee #25, 1.12.15
Each community has its own distinct characteristics while at the same time as sharing a broader regional identity, especially when it comes to issues of state or national significance, such as coal seam gas. Thus, the case provides important insights into how polarised debates play out in small communities where it can be difficult for community members to avoid each other in everyday contexts, such as the local markets, school drop-offs, sporting events and various other local and regional recreational activities. It is a context where the collective project of getting along with each other is primary, and people are constantly negotiating ways of polite disagreement when exposed to differing views (the emotional labour involved with this is explored in Ransan-Cooper, Duus, and Ercan, 2017).

iii) A diverse and abundant deliberative system

Third, the deliberative system that has formed around the NGP includes a multiplicity of communicative spaces. It encompasses many traditional spaces such as print and electronic news media, parliamentary debates, council meetings, legislative inquiries and planning procedures (both with public submission processes), elections and political party rooms discussions, scientific inquiries and expert commissions, stakeholder forums, community meetings, and protests. It has also involved numerous online spaces, including websites, Facebook pages, blogs, Twitter accounts, e-petitions, YouTube and other films. Interviews and fieldwork in the region has also revealed that considerable public discussion on the NGP occurs in everyday spaces such as in the bakeries, cafes, pubs, shops, sporting fields, and schools in the towns and localities potentially affected by the proposal.

iv) Insufficient/ineffective mechanisms and initiatives of vertical listening

Fourth, despite an abundance of spaces for political communication and debate, many opponents of the NGP perceive a vertical listening void between decision makers, institutions and potentially affected citizens and groups. In some respects, decision makers have heard and been very responsive to concerns expressed by the community about coal seam gas: they have commissioned technical studies and other inquiries that attempt to address some of the main stated issues. Public hearings and calls for written submissions have provided institutional and formal opportunities for vertical listening. There are monthly meetings of the Narrabri Community Consultative Committee, designed to provide a communication channel between community members, the proponent and the state government. Specific concerns have also been heard in courts of law (Robinson, 2016). Nonetheless, for those opposing the

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NGP, there is a persistent perception that relevant levels of government are not really listening, that there is a lack of transparency and substance to public engagement exercises, and those that do occur are often merely perfunctory (Askew and Askland, 2016; Walton, McCrea, Taylor, and Jeanneret, 2017). They feel that relevant decision makers have been unreceptive and unresponsive to their concerns about possible environmental degradation and economic hardship. One informant commented that they had a “lack of faith in the democratic process… we just feel that we're not listened to, we're not heard, and there's a failure in our local, state and federal mechanisms”.

For another, genuine listening would require tangible outcomes: "[government] can listen and they can write a report, but genuine engagement, genuine change means that they will follow through with recommendations that are hard". In contrast, those in support of the project are generally satisfied with the opportunities to be heard.

**FORMS OF EVERYDAY LISTENING IN PRACTICE**

Our analysis of the NGP controversy finds significant political listening being enacted in everyday interactions between citizens in the public sphere. Some of this everyday listening is small scale and private, while others occur in the coordinated activities and venues of various community groups that have formed on both sides of the debate. Everyday listening is particularly active in the anti-NGP side of the debate where citizens are distrustful of the gas corporation, and governments’ capacity to regulate coal seam gas (CSG). Rather than listen to government and industry, many citizens discuss the issues with each other, using social media and offline social networks to learn from each other’s experiences and/or to build alliances as we discuss further below.

In this section we focus on what we assess to be the five most prevalent forms of everyday listening in the NGP deliberative system (see Table 1). Our categories have been inductively generated from our data with the aid of qualitative content analysis on Nvivo. While our categories have been developed from the specific context of our single case study, they offer useful analytic constructs for future empirical studies of everyday listening in the public sphere especially when polarised issues are at stake.

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7 Interviewee #16, 24.11.15
Table 1: Forms of everyday listening in the NGP controversy

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Form of everyday listening</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Function in deliberative system (+positive or −negative)</th>
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| **Enclave listening**     | Listening to like-minded citizens | +To share knowledge and experience (affirmation)  
+To build solidarity and form alliances  
+To understand and represent affected publics  
−To limit interaction across difference and diversity |
| **Monitory listening**    | Listening to arguments and activities of opponents | +To develop counter-arguments and strategies  
+ To scan the debate and be aware of what’s going on  
−To fuel adversarial debate, polarisation and division |
| **Transformative listening** | Listening to local community and broader public through everyday interactions | +To meet with everyday citizens and raise topics for public conversations  
+To inform public views  
+To mobilise the public  
+To insert issues into the public consciousness  
−To hear public views/concerns rather than to listen |
| **Social listening**      | Listening politely to family, friends and members of local community | +To develop and maintain community cohesion and social capital  
+To demonstrate respect and recognition  
−To foster shallow forms of listening |
| **Accidental listening**  | Listening involuntarily to those with different views | +To encourage diversity and cross pollination of views  
+To inject new/marginalised/unpopular views  
−To fuel misunderstanding, stereotypes, and even polarisation when listening is shallow and non-dialogical |

Consistent with the polarised nature of the debate, we find ample evidence of a) **enclave listening**, where citizens listen actively to those with similar values and beliefs about CSG. We also find two particular forms of strategic listening: b) **monitory listening**, where citizens strategically listen to their opponents for tactical purposes, and; c) **transformative listening**, where citizens listen to the local community and broader public to transform their views. In addition our study finds evidence of some more nuanced forms of everyday listening that occur between those who disagree with each other. These forms of listening are not driven by communicative or strategic purposes, but by the social and geographic context of the case.
We find: d) *social listening*, where people listen in familial and social contexts to those they disagree with in order to maintain social relationships and community cohesion, and e) *accidental listening*, where people listen to alternative perspectives through the accidental encounters they have in everyday life, for example, in conversations they hear on the street or in the supermarket, or protests or signs they see on the street or in the landscape.

a. **Enclave listening (to those with shared beliefs/values)**

Enclave listening occurs within groups of like-minded people with the same or similar interests or views on an issue of concern. This kind of in-group listening is largely about ‘horizontal receptivity’. It serves to formulate oppositional interpretations, interests and needs. Enclave listening enables individuals to feel part of a larger group, and to share and build common narratives. It performs an important cohesive role, by facilitating good relationships and resolving conflicts. There can be significant strategic elements in enclave listening, with members listening to each other in order to effectively represent the group’s concerns, and to organise and co-ordinate action. Our finding that listening can be both an internal good but also a means to other ends — is consistent with other studies of political listening in social movements (Coles, 2004).

In our case study two broad enclaves can be identified as pro-CSG and anti-CSG. Within these two enclaves, listening occurs in various spaces: in formal face-to-face meetings, chance encounters in the street, community events, market stalls, and group activities (such as protests), but also online via emails, and social media sites. In these spaces people listen to understand and learn more about the views and arguments of those who share common concerns. In other words, enclave listening helps to affirm individual and group positions on a given issue.

Of note in our case study are the diverse groups that comprise the anti-CSG enclave. Here we see people looking beyond their specific interests and identities in order to build broader alliances. In particular, farmers, Indigenous people, environmentalists, and people from specific towns and localities have formed connections in order to build a stronger anti-CSG opposition. In addition to the North West Alliance, many of our informants relate directly to the wider Australian and international movement against fossil fuels, which provides support, and through which experiences and “horror stories” (of CSG development elsewhere) are regularly shared.
Listening is especially important in these diverse alliances in order to build relationships, deal with historical tensions, and to agree on common aims and strategies — often with individuals and groups that have very different life experiences, emphases and political motivations. One activist stressed the importance of relationships in the anti-CSG movement, stating that “relationships are all we have”.

Listening is a critical part of building and maintaining these relationships, such as listening to differences in order to avoid and/or resolve conflict within the group. Another informant described how they listened carefully to within-group dynamics in the interests of cohesion and solidarity, helping them decide when to speak and what to say, and when to hold their tongue. This points to a kind of strategic listening occurring for the benefit of the development and maintenance of the alliance.

Enclave listening can inspire people to take action. One activist explained how he closely followed social media related to the local NGP opposition over several months. Through this online enclave listening he became motivated to travel to the area and play an active role in organising protest activities. Enclave listening can also have an important therapeutic role within the group by helping members be receptive to the well-being of others, such as listening out for signs of burnout.

For proponents and supporters of CSG, enclave listening was far less public, although informants did refer to open lines of communication between Santos, the founders of Yes2Gas and their supporters, and the local Chamber of Commerce. This suggests that there was also some alliance listening occurring among groups and individuals supportive of the NGP.

b. Monitory listening (to opponents)

Monitory listening occurs when political actors tune in to the actions and statements of others in order to understand and ultimately counter their logic, arguments, strategies, tactics, as well as identify any weaknesses that can then be targeted/exploited. Monitory listening is mostly horizontal in that is focussed on opponent groups, although it can also be vertical, such as in the case of listening to what relevant decision makers are saying/not saying about a particular issue.

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8 Interviewee #38, 17.3.17
9 Interviewee #22, 6.6.17
10 Interviewee #37, 1.3.17
11 Interviewee #37, 1.3.17
Monitory listening can be understood as a form of ‘agonistic’ listening, in keeping with political theories that argue that agonism is part of human relations (Mouffe, 2000). Monitory listening is central to surveillance (Dreher, 2009, p. 448), but it is more complicated and sophisticated in a digital era. For example, corporations use webwatchers and social media monitors to follow and pre-empt the movements of problematic activists and social movements (Andrejevic, 2014; Lubbers, 2015; Uldam, 2016).

In our case study monitory listening was abundant and active, with people on both sides of the controversy ‘listening in’ to what their opponents were saying, doing and planning. Some actors described this as a particularly significant aspect of the controversy, and explained that it happened both online and offline. One informant commented that they did not think people from different sides of the debate were listening to each other in the usual sense but that “both sides listening quite carefully to the language that's used and to the messages that are being provided so that they can counter those”.12 Another anti-NGP informant confirmed this view when they claimed "I'm certainly not listening to them, the other side", but then went on to reveal how they would follow Santos’ share prices and the timing of its Annual General Meetings, and social media pages of NGP supporters. One supporter of the NGP explained that they kept an eye on the numerous anti-NGP Facebook pages “mostly just for opportunities to counteract debate… not so much to have my say on their sites”.13

Offline, monitory listening occurs in public spaces such as the main street and Narrabri monthly market. It also happens in the Pilliga Forest when activists keep watch for company activities and physical changes, and when company security vehicles trail anti-CSG tours of the area.

c. Transformative listening (to the local community and broader public)

Many citizens listen purposefully with the intent of informing and transforming community views on a particular political issue. This is a particularly selective kind of listening that is partisan and strategic. In the first instance transformative listeners may appear to listen openly and attentively to others to build rapport and respect. However, in course of the conversation the listener selectively ‘hears’ perspectives that she deems can be informed and converted.

12 Interviewee #9, 7.6.17
13 Interviewee # 4, 8.6.17
This form of listening is more than clever marketing or public relations. Instead, it is premised on a minimalist form of dialogic pedagogy (e.g. McLaren, 1995) where a transformative educator (for our purposes, a listener) engages in a dialogue with their student to raise their consciousness about the conditions of his or her life. Rather than encouraging critical thinking (Freire, 1972), transformative listening takes a minimalist pedagogical approach by assuming i) that people are largely uninformed or unaware of their own situation, and ii) that through non-threatening constructive conversations they can learn ‘the facts’ and be enlightened about issues, and change their views.

In our case study transformative listening was active on both sides of the controversy with CSG opponents and proponents taking opportunities to listen to everyday people with the aim of informing and ultimately shifting their views. It took place in everyday contexts, such as at the farm gate, at market stalls, at the showground, in the form of casual non-threatening conversations where individuals took time to engage and listen to everyday citizens about CSG in their local area. The conscious and stated purpose of these casual discussions was primarily to inform people about the ‘facts’ and issues. However a likely, though often-unacknowledged, secondary purpose was to encourage them to support a particular viewpoint.

One particularly systematic example of transformative listening is the ‘gasfield free’ surveys undertaken by opponents of the NGP. In conducting these surveys Volunteers go from house to house (or farm to farm) and ask residents a binary question about whether they would prefer their neighbourhood to remain gasfield free. Resident’s answers are ‘listened’ to/noted and then collectively advertised as, e.g. “97% of x district voted to remain gasfield free”. This is a kind of mass, organised, strategic listening with a very particular (partisan) purpose. Importantly, it can lead to more substantial conversations, such as the example given by one informant who engaged a neighbour in conversation for several hours on the property boundary about the potential local impacts of CSG development.14

d. Social listening (to friends, family and members of the local community)

Our study also finds evidence of more nuanced forms of everyday listening that occur between those who disagree with each other. One of these is social listening where people listen respectfully to views they do not agree with in order to develop or maintain community cohesion, cordial relationships and social capital. This kind of listening might be interpreted

14 Interviewee #40, 7.6.17
as a shallow form of therapeutic listening, practiced for the purposes of demonstrating good manners, and contrary to more critical forms of listening (such as that advocated by Bickford (1996), Forester (1988), Dreher (2009, 2010)) that can involve uncomfortable discussions, and even conflict. However, we contend that listening practices in small communities need to be appreciated in more complex terms.

In our case study, it was common for regional-based informants to describe civil interactions with other local residents who hold opposing views on CSG, whether it was at social gatherings, school drop-offs or at sporting events. One informant described how there were people within their social circle with different views on CSG, but that “local people are definitely respectful of different opinions”. One of the explanations for this in our particular case study is the need for strong social capital in rural and regional areas, where there is a higher level of dependence on one another, and a long-term view in which families have relationships with each other across multiple generations. It was succinctly explained by one of our informants:

… an important way of operating in the country is you don't upset people, because it's part of a survival mentality. You might actually want that person that you've completely annoyed at some point, it's how you live. It's part of living in a civil way.

**e. Accidental listening (to the other)**

The other more nuanced form of everyday listening we uncovered in this research is the listening that occurs when people accidentally hear views that they may not necessarily share. This accidental or involuntary listening can play a role in breaking down enclaves of like-minded because it exposes people to views that they might not otherwise encounter. Accidental listening also helps to sensitise people not actively involved in a debate to the issues being discussed.

The rural context of our case study strongly influenced the degree to which accidental listening occurred. Despite the vastness of the north-west region of NSW (>100km²), many of its residents tune in to the relatively small number of local and regional media outlets. It is not surprising then that accidental listening regularly occurred through exposure to local media – including local and regional radio stations that would broadcast interviews with people on

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15 Interviewee #4, 8.6.17
16 Interviewee #12, 24.11.15
different sides of the debate; and local and regional newspapers that published stories, editorials and letters related to the local CSG debate.

A particular kind of accidental listening is where people cannot help but to ‘visually listen’ to different positions in the debate, through exposure to the prolific use of car stickers, signs, symbols and other paraphernalia that appeared in the streets, at events, stuck in trees, on gates and along roadsides. One interviewee relayed how her husband just the previous night had remarked on the presence of yellow triangle anti-CSG signs along the road all the way between Dubbo and Narrabri — a distance of more than 250 kilometres.17 Annual highway protests by CSG opponents, where protest stations are set up at regular intervals along long stretches of road, make use of the geography to portray the abundance and activity of opposition sentiment. Supporters of the NGP have consciously sought to balance these messages by distributing Yes2Gas signs, caps and stickers.18 Unlike the more reasoned arguments offered through radio and print, some informants felt that this battle of symbols in the streets and wider landscape was polarising, forcing people to identify with one side of the debate or the other (further discussed in Hendriks, Ercan, and Duus, 2017).

DISCUSSION: THE DEMOCRATIC IMPLICATOINS OF EVERDAY LISTENING

Overall our case study provides significant empirical insights into what everyday listening looks like in practice. It is almost always informal but can take many forms, ranging from highly public to relatively private forms, as is the case for citizens who formed the pro-NGP group, Yes2Gas. Everyday listening is also not always about verbal or audio receptivity. We find ample evidence of citizens listening visually to cues on the street and in the landscape. Here there is an important difference between the role of everyday listening and ‘everyday talk’ (Mansbridge, 1999) in deliberative systems. Our study suggests that everyday listening is not just something undertaken between friends and family in informal conversations around the kitchen table or at the pub. Nor is it confined to enclaves; it is also enacted between adversaries and opponents, and sometimes by complete strangers. We find everyday listening occurs in multiple venues: out on the street, at the football, in the landscape, and online. In our case study Facebook has been a particularly important site of everyday listening enabling

17 Interviewee #9, 7.6.17
18 Interviewee #4, 8.6.17
citizens to learn, connect and form groups, but also to monitor what opponents are saying and doing (see Hendriks et al., 2016).

Despite the perceived lack of vertical listening in the case, we see that citizens are listening to each other in various ways. Indeed the perception among those opposed to the NGP that government is not listening seems to have paradoxically facilitated an abundance of everyday listening. Here we see as how a so-called ‘listening failure’ might actually result in positive democratic outcome (Lloyd, 2009, p. 485) — at least here in terms of building solidarity amongst likeminded citizens and empowering them into action.

Our case analysis finds that in a polarised contexts citizens enact forms of everyday listening that vary considerably in democratic quality. For example, some forms of everyday listening are more inclusive and open to diverse views than others; some are motivated by communicative norms, while others have a more strategic orientation. The various forms of everyday listening uncovered in this study can be compared in terms of their capacity to foster communicative/open listening and diversity of viewpoints (see Figure 2).

![Figure 2: Everyday listening in a polarised context](image-url)
Figure 2 reveals some noteworthy features about the nature of listening and public deliberation in polarised public spheres. First, we see in the case study that the dominant forms of everyday listening were strategic/selective in nature, rather than aimed at mutual respect and perspective taking. While citizens may be listening to those they disagree with, it is mostly for strategic purposes; listening selectively to opposing groups to monitor their arguments and activities or they listen to the broader public in an attempt to transform their views on particular issues. These forms of everyday listening are more about one-way ‘hearing’. Scholars interested in good political listening tend to denigrate the democratic value of hearing, in favour of more communicative forms of listening. For example, Forester (1988, p. 110) argues: “Hearing passively records; listening helps us to learn”. However, we find that listening as hearing can offer some democratic virtues. For example, monitory listening and transformative listening enable actors to ‘listen out’ to each other, to the public and to opponents. In doing so citizens learn about issues and understand and refine their arguments. Most significantly strategic listening facilitates action; in our case much of the political activity from publics opposing the proposal has been stimulated by their capacity to hear what opponents are saying and doing or not.

These findings speak to the broader question of what is the link between listening and action, or “what comes after listening?” (Bickford, 1996; O’Donnell, Lloyd, and Dreher, 2009, p. 437). Our research suggests that everyday listening can generate strong impetus for action. In this context, contrary to what many deliberative democrats might argue, we contend that strategic forms of everyday listening may not be all bad for public deliberation. Strategic forms of everyday listening can help actors find solidarity, build alliances, and facilitate political action. However, if strategic forms of listening represent the only form of everyday listening between polarised groups, then they can fuel antagonism, polarisation and misunderstanding in the public sphere. Indeed in our case we saw little evidence of the possible transmission function of everyday listening, largely because listening was not about reaching out for mutual understanding, but about improving communicative tactics and converting views.

Secondly, Figure 2 shows that the only communicative mode of listening in the case occurred within enclaves of like-minded people, or those with common interests. In the case study many citizens engaged in attentive and open listening in order to forge alliances across
historically divided groups in the community such as farmers, Indigenous citizens and environmentalists. An important aspect of this more communicative or deliberative mode of listening is that it was oriented towards generating agreement and possibly collective action. Here we see how enclave listening can help to build solidarity among like-minded people and can facilitate the formation of counter publics (Fraser, 1997). This can be especially empowering when it when it involves those who themselves are not used to being heard (Calder, 2011), or whose views are subordinated by dominant paradigms (Mansbridge and Latura, 2016). In our case, some enclave listening also served an important therapeutic role, for example it provided citizens with affirmation, and enabled them to deal with the emotional side of the issue by channelling their anger into political action (Ransan-Cooper, Duus, and Ercan, forthcoming).

The deliberative costs of enclave listening are that it risks creating more extreme views (Sunstein, 2009) and thereby hinders communication across difference. The dynamics of extreme polar views were evident in the NGP case. We also learnt that some citizens intentionally exclude themselves from everyday listening because they did not wish to be in one or other of the two enclaves. Some interviewees referred to such citizens as the ‘silent majority’; they are conceptualised as the voiceless public who have more moderate opinions on the controversy, but they feel excluded by the debate because there is only room for polarised positions. We met a few of these citizens and they appear very reluctant to engage in everyday listening, preferring instead to listen to independent sources from the media or government.

Thirdly, from Figure 2 we see that more conflictual forms of everyday listening (Bickford, 1996) are largely absent in the case. This is, as discussed above, mainly due to the small community context of the case where social norms shape what is considered appropriate communication, particularly with those holding different views. Our analysis shows in the context of a small community, when citizens meet face-to-face in casual interactions they tend to avoid confrontational or conflictual modes of talk and listening. As in the case of social listening, citizens listen to others politely (even with those they disagree with) to maintain relationships, and refrain from saying all they could say on the NGP controversy. While this type of listening is likely to close up the prospects of more robust conversations on the issue at stake, it promotes other democratic virtues. Similar to the observations made by Kingwell (1995, p. 219) in a different context, this type of civility via “not-saying... contributes to
smooth social interaction, makes for tolerance of diversity and conditions a regard for the claims and interests of others”.

Fourthly, what is notably absent from Figure 2 are those forms of everyday listening that we uncovered, which are motivated by other logics. The presence of these ‘other’ (social and accidental) forms of listening in our case reveals some potential opportunities for bridging across difference in polarised deliberative systems where the public debate pushes people to belong to one of the two extremes. So, for example, we see in the NGP how social listening provides a means, albeit a shallow one, for citizens to be exposed to different views and respect the arguments of others. Accidental listening also brings potential strengths to deliberative systems to the extent that it can expose citizens to views that might not ordinarily choose to hear or consider. These more mild mannered forms of everyday listening are crucial in a context where citizens are expected to stand and defend their particular side of the controversy.

CONCLUSION

Everyday listening between citizens is an important part of democratic life. This is particularly so in an era when citizens are turning away from formal mechanisms for vertical listening, such as parties and voting, and engaging in more informal modes of political participation (Mair, 2013; Norris, 2011). When there is a perceived absence of genuine vertical listening, many citizens turn to the public sphere where they can engage and listen horizontally to other citizens. They listen to the political arguments and views of their friends, colleagues and family; they might have brief political conversations with strangers, or accidentally hear political views on the street or online. These everyday informal modes of listening between citizens play an important yet under recognised role in how the public make sense of, and deliberate on issues that affect them.

To better understand the implications of everyday listening for public deliberation, in this paper we have empirically examined how citizens listen in the context of a polarised debate. Polarisation creates challenging conditions for everyday listening because citizens are typically reluctant to listen across divides. Our study finds that in a polarised context there is considerable listening between citizens, though how they listen differs from normative ideals about ‘good’ political listening. In our in-depth case study we find that everyday citizens
contesting polarised issues tend to listen to like-minded people who are in their social and political groups, and through these groups they listen out for issues that they are collectively interested in, and take note of what others are saying. Citizens also enact listening strategically; they ‘listen out for’ and monitor the views and actions of their opponents, and they listen to the broader public to inform and transform views.

The implications of these findings for public deliberation are mixed. On the one hand, the observed forms of everyday listening offer democratic strengths, for example, enclave deliberation can help citizens build solidarity and form alliances, and more strategic forms of everyday listening, such as monitory listening and transformative listening, can assist citizens to mobilise the public and take political action. Yet on the other hand our study finds that in polarised contexts, citizens in their everyday interactions rarely enact communicative forms of listening across difference or diverse views. The social or accidental listening we observe in our case might help to maintain social relations in a small community context, but they do not encourage citizens to create spaces where different views can be contested and negotiated. So the public sphere in polarised debates effectively becomes a venue of discrete discursive silos, rather than a space of mixing viewpoints and diverse contestation. In our case, everyday listening seems to provide mainly opportunities for citizens to bond politically with like-minded people, but less so across publics holding different views.

These findings have important implications for the functioning of deliberative systems and for the generation of democratically legitimate outcomes. We suggest that in highly polarised public spheres, formal and informal mechanisms may be required to break down listening barriers across different sites, and foster more diverse and open-minded listening between diverse publics. This might involve applying specific participatory designs that bring together diverse voices, for example, by selecting participants through stratified random sampling (e.g. Smith, 2009). More informally, diverse listening might be generated in more unstructured spaces of public interaction, for example at sporting venues, show days, or local markets. Listening across difference might also be encouraged through the use of performance, art and other visual media to get people talking and discussing issues outside and beyond their enclaves. Useful applications for this purpose can be found in the health and care sectors where live performances have been used to facilitate empathy and dialogue, for example among individuals associated with mental health service delivery in UK (Denman-Cleaver, 2013).
While the emphasis in this paper has been on the horizontal forms of listening between everyday citizens, we wish to conclude by underscoring the importance of vertical listening for effective and legitimate democratic decision-making. Indeed, an outstanding question in our empirical case study remains: why has everyday listening had such limited influence on formal listening in the NGP deliberative system? It is crucial for decision makers to not just hear their claims but to take them seriously through political action. Everyday listening can generate solidarity and action among citizens, but it cannot substitute for democratic functions of formal paths of listening.
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