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Listening in times of crisis: The value and limits of radio phone-in shows

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Abstract

The article explores the democratic value of listening by examining what listening to radio phone-in programmes and listening more broadly mean to people in times of crisis. Drawing on focus groups with London residents severely affected by the cost-of-living, health and social care crises, the article discusses how participants engaged in listening and discussed its significance. Against what we call a 'crisis of listening', namely, a rapid shrinking of the spaces and possibilities for listening and a profound sense among people of not being listened to by the political system, the health system and other authorities, participants appreciated listening to phone-in shows and to fellow focus group participants. Listening unifies listeners around common experiences, facilitates building commonalities and enables the public expression of vulnerability in a period of increased isolation and intensifying individualism. At the same time, commercial and exploitative logics shaping phone-in shows foster polarised debate and delegitimise differing opinions, thus reinforcing a deepening crisis of listening. The article concludes by calling for a reorientation of public life around listening and a reorganisation of our commitment as researchers to contribute to listening as an ethical project.

Keywords

cost-of-living crisis, democratic life, focus groups, listening, phone-in, public, radio

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Introduction

Amid intensifying neoliberal market-driven politics in many democracies, critics have warned against a growing gap between citizens' actions, desires and needs and their recognition by the state: what Couldry (2008) calls 'a crisis of voice'. Several studies highlight the role of the media – particularly digital platforms – in alleviating this crisis by facilitating and amplifying citizens' voices and, especially, those of the marginalised, oppressed and vulnerable in society. However, the 'corollary of speaking' (Macnamara, 2014), that is, *listening*, has received less attention in media and communications studies and conceptualisations of the public sphere (Dobson, 2014; Lacey, 2013; Macnamara, 2014; O'Donnell et al., 2009). The proliferation of voices, opportunities for expression and the capacity to 'speak up' are central to enabling democratic public life, yet the democratic and civic value of listening has been relatively overlooked (Crawford, 2009; Lacey, 2013).

Addressing this gap, this article examines what listening to radio phone-in programmes and listening more broadly mean to people in times of crisis. Specifically, it focuses on listening in the context of the contemporary 'polycrisis' (Allouche et al., 2023) in Britain, a democracy characterised by intensifying neoliberalism. While the 'polycrisis' is international, in this article it is situated in the UK, referring to the convergence of the cost-of-living crisis, the National Health System (NHS) and social care crises, particularly following the Covid-19 pandemic and over a decade of austerity politics and low wage growth (Harari et al., 2024). In particular, the cost-of-living crisis in Britain, which accelerated in 2021, has faced many with extreme challenges and imposed dire conditions people never experienced before (Haggart et al., 2023). These crises are bound within a neoliberal doctrine embodied in Britain's politics (Couldry, 2008), and a profound feeling among the public of lack of recognition and representation by the political system (Haggart et al., 2023).

We focus on radio phone-in programmes since this radio genre continues to proliferate and enjoy significant popularity, despite the numerous means offered by digital media for ordinary people to express their grievances, experiences and opinions (Karpf, 2018). Indeed, the UK radio phone-in data we examined for this study suggest that one in five in the 15+ population listens to these shows.¹ And yet despite its popularity, the genre has been largely overlooked in recent research.

Drawing on theorisations of listening as a critical activity with political resonance in democratic mediated life (Ananny, 2018; Lacey, 2013), we ask: what might be the role of listening in the current moment of polycrisis and how might it play out? To address this question, we focus on the paradigmatic listening medium – the radio, and its archetypal popular listener participatory genre, phone-in programmes, within the national context of the UK. Not only are there very few studies of contemporary audiences as listeners but also, and crucially, as Lacey (2013) notes, recognition of listening to radio as an audience activity has rarely been extended to thinking about the critical role of this activity in mediated public life.

We start by situating the discussion within scholarship on the democratic value of listening, radio listening and phone-in programmes. We then describe the study methodology, designed to centre listening as both an activity and a topic on which focus group

participants were encouraged to reflect. Following this, we present the analysis of the focus group discussions to highlight how participants engage in listening and account for the role of listening to radio phone-in shows and listening more broadly in their lives. We conclude by discussing the main findings and issuing a fundamental call for a reorientation of public life around listening and a reorganisation of our commitment as researchers to advancing this wider project.

Listening: Democratic public life and radio phone-ins

Dominant accounts of media, democratic theory and the public sphere privilege the concept of voice and the individual's right to speak (Ananny, 2018; Crawford, 2009; Dobson, 2014; Lacey, 2013), while listening has been treated often as passive compared to other communicative actions and, particularly, in relation to speaking (Lacey, 2013). However, the 'qualities, practices, experiences and interpretations of listening' (Lacey, 2013: 5) constitute a vital communicative activity that media in democratic societies have a duty to facilitate (Ananny, 2018; Bassel, 2017; Lacey, 2013). Radio listening is a key site of this examination. It brings individual listeners together, constituting them as a public through their listening to the same perspectives, on the same topic, through the same medium, at the same time (Dobson, 2014; Lacey, 2013). Historical accounts underline the role played by radio listening in convening publics, particularly at the national level (Douglas, 1999; Kuffert, 2016; Scannell, 1989). In turn, radio reception studies have examined audiences' decoding of the content and details of sound, highlighting the meanings that radio and particular programmes assume as social objects that foster human connection in the contexts of private and shared listening (Bonini and Perrotta, 2007; Glevarec, 2005; Watson, 2024).

The focus on the value of listening in democratic public life reorients our understanding of it from a passive communicative activity to 'participation in its own right' (Ananny, 2018: 41; Dobson, 2014). The archetypal radio genre that centres participation is phone-in programmes or 'talk radio' shows. As part of the wider genre of audience participation programming (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994), phone-in shows have been positioned as offering opportunities for the public to hear; a space of civic participation allowing callers and listeners to share stories of their lived experience and conditions, and where they can respond to, challenge, discover and debate discourses on sociopolitical issues (Douglas, 1999; Hutchby, 2001; Karpf, 2018; Thornborrow and Fitzgerald, 2013). Within mainstream broadcast media, talk radio 'offers one of the very few regular environments in which ordinary members of the public are given the opportunity' to be listened to and 'to speak on issues and events in their own voices' (Hutchby, 2001: 481). In her account of the growing popularity of radio talk shows in the US in the 1970s and 1980s, Douglas (1999: 286) highlights their participatory and inclusive ethos and how they opened up the airwaves 'to a range of voices, some of them quite unwelcome elsewhere', including, crucially, the underclass. The value of these shows lies partly in the way that, at the time, they spoke (and, we would argue, continue to speak) to a profound sense of public exclusion from and increasing distrust in political and business institutions, including mainstream media and a deep anxiety about the collapse of community and civility.

At the same time, echoing critiques of talk television programmes (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994), radio phone-ins are frequently dismissed as cheap entertainment and accused of degrading public discourse and contributing to a decline of civility by displacing serious political debate, focusing instead on individuals' miseries and inflaming polarised prejudiced views (Douglas, 1999; Hutchby, 1996; Karpf, 2018). 'Today's "shock jocks"', Kuffert (2022: 82) notes, 'have foreclosed on the possibility of giving listeners a fair hearing or entering what seems to be an equitable dialogue'. Many phone-in shows, especially on commercial radio, are shaped by exploitative logics that threaten the democratic value of listening; they encourage confrontation, polarised debate and shouting down and delegitimising opinions and voices that differ from their hosts' (Karpf, 2018). Indeed, in the current highly commercialised and datafied mediated environment, the opportunities to be heard are profoundly uneven and are increasingly controlled by media platforms.

Building on this scholarship, in what follows we explore the value of listening in democratic public life by examining the significance of listening to radio phone-ins and listening more broadly for people in times of crisis. Drawing closely on Lacey's (2013) theorisation of listening, we do not focus on how listeners decode specific content and sound. Rather, our interest is in how people engage in listening to radio phone-ins and listening more broadly, and how they account for the role of listening in their lives. We are interested in understanding the public value of listening in times of crisis and inequality since it is particularly in those times that institutional politics and formal political spaces tend to ignore or marginalise ordinary people's voices, and yet those are precisely times when listening to those voices can provide fuller and more complex accounts of social problems and their possible solutions (Bassel, 2017). As Bassel (2017: 5) observes, listening can constitute an 'act in the face of conflict and inequality' that helps redistribute opportunities for narrating, allowing those who often do not have the privilege of speaking to be heard.

Listening to listeners: Introducing our study

The focus on listening informs the research design and study methodology. Grounded in an ethico-political commitment to listening (Back, 2007), the study involved two phases.

Phase 1: Listening to phone-in shows

We focus on radio phone-in shows since they are a popular mediated genre that foregrounds listeners as both participants in the programme and as its audience. Crucially, listening to radio phone-in programmes does not require digital access – an important factor for many of the individuals whose experiences we focus on, namely people with a lower socioeconomic background who are affected particularly harshly by the current polycrisis and lack digital access and/or digital literacy. To understand the role that listening to these shows plays in participants' lives (explored in Phase 2), we first listened to a sample of UK radio phone-in shows on the various crises on which the study focuses, namely the cost-of-living, NHS care and social care. Our initial radio sample included 63 episodes from 15 unique UK radio shows, broadcast between October 2022 and June

2023. The sample was selected based on episode titles and information gleaned from radio station websites indicating whether the episode covered themes related to those crises in the UK. These episodes were spread across shows produced by three broadcasting corporations: the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the London Broadcasting Company (LBC) and TalkRadio. The BBC is a public service broadcasting corporation whose conception rests on four principles: ‘non-profit aim, universality of service, unified control and the maintenance of high standards in programming’ (Lewis and Booth, 1989: 6). By contrast, both LBC and TalkRadio are commercial stations, which are financed by advertising and sponsorship and thus aim to maximise their profits ‘by giving advertisers and sponsors access to as large a number of potential consumers as possible’ (Lewis and Booth, 1989: 5), although public service motives may very likely inspire the work of people making programmes in the commercial system (Lewis and Booth, 1989: 6). Recordings of 45 of the 63 episodes were available from the Radio Monitor service and were spread across 9 unique radio shows.² Eight episodes were excluded due to their limited relevance to our topic of crises (this became apparent on listening to them). This resulted in a total of 37 episodes, and just slightly less than 68 hours of recordings.

To map the overall themes and issues voiced by these programmes, we coded each episode, based on the key themes raised by callers, caller identifying information, callers’ framings of the problems/crisis and their solutions, the main affects expressed by callers and the show’s host’s and guest experts’ framings and interventions. However, we should stress that our focus in this article is not on the phone-in shows’ *content*, but rather on their potential for facilitating experience of listening and listening relations in public life. Therefore, while the process of listening to and coding the radio programme sample was vital for the preparation of the focus groups in Phase 2, we do not discuss the findings derived from the coding in this article.

Phase 2: Listening to focus group participants

According to Ananny (2018: 4), understanding the democratic value of listening requires studying how individuals encounter other individuals through public spaces and how they come ‘to hear what they need to hear in order to sustain themselves as publics’. Thus, to explore how people listen and make sense of the current crises in their lived social contexts, and how this listening might help them sustain themselves as a public, we employed focus groups as our primary method. Focus groups were deemed suitable due to the conceptual focus on listening as a public act; they constitute a space where participants listen to each other and allow for the collective construction of meaning and knowledge in participants’ local contexts (Ackerly et al., 2006). Being interested in listening in the specific context of the polycrisis, we deliberately invited those most severely affected by the crises, that is, individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Between December 2023 and January 2024, we held six focus groups, in community centres and public libraries in six deprived boroughs across London: Barking and Dagenham (East London), Brent (Northwest London), Greenwich (Southeast London), Hackney (East London), Lambeth (South London) and Newham (East London). These boroughs were identified based on 19 poverty and inequality indicators; among London’s

32 boroughs, they scored ‘worse than average’ for several indicators (Trust for London, 2023).³

We advertised the focus groups by posting messages at local venues and on local community social media forums. We recruited a total of 49 participants, with between eight and nine participants in five of the groups and (due to unexpected no-shows), four participants in one group. Women aged over 45 accounted for three-quarters of our participants, reflecting the population that frequents community centres in these areas, the fact that more women in this demographic are unemployed, the gendered character of sharing personal vulnerabilities and the fact that the cost-of-living crisis has disproportionately affected women. Across the six groups, more than half of the participants had incomes of less than £20,000, well below the UK’s annual average wage of £34,963 (ONS, 2023), more than half were unemployed or retired, were living with family and were from Black, Asian or Mixed backgrounds. We deliberately included migrants without UK citizenship who are highly disadvantaged in terms of accessing and qualifying for state support and profoundly affected by the need to listen and be listened to, yet are often overlooked by theories of democratic value of listening, which refer almost exclusively to citizens.

Prior to the focus group meetings, participants were sent information packs that included a description of the study, a demographic information form and a consent form, which they were asked to complete and sign. To encourage the participation of individuals from underrepresented groups and in line with National Institute for Health Care Research UK Standards for Public Involvement guidelines,⁴ each participant was offered an incentive of £35 in recognition of their willingness to share their experience and to compensate for the time involved. Since many of the focus group participants were living in boroughs with lower socioeconomic population, a financial reward for participation seemed appropriate and was appreciated. The research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).

The aim of the focus groups was to explore listening as both an activity and a topic on which the participants were encouraged to reflect. The focus group activity began with the participants being asked to listen to one of two 5-minute recorded excerpts, compiled by us from the radio phone-in programmes we had listened to in the first stage. Each excerpt included a collection of callers’ accounts of the cost-of-living, NHS and social care crises. We observed how participants listened to the recording and included our reflections on this in our analysis. Following this introductory listening experience, participants were invited to comment on the radio stories they had heard, their own experience in relation to these stories and whether they had noted excluded voices or experiences. Participants were also asked whether they generally listen to phone-in programmes and their views of these shows. These questions were inspired by Ananny’s (2018: 41) emphasis on the need to study how individuals understand the ‘conventions, institutions and privileges which shape who and what can be heard in the media’, in order to examine the democratic value of listening.

Participants’ immediate reactions to the recordings provided a springboard for a broader discussion, in which participants shared their experiences of coping in the current times. They spoke about the unaffordability of food, energy and water, lack of affordable housing, the huge gaps in and shortages of basic health care provision, severe

mental health issues, lack of affordable childcare, erosion of community facilities and the difficulties involved in finding employment. At the end of the focus group meetings, many participants thanked the research team for listening to their stories and said that they had found the focus group session a supportive space to listen to the experiences of other participants.

All focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed, with transcripts analysed using NVivo (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and coded inductively, under three meta-themes and 22 sub-nodes. The three overarching meta-themes were informed by the research questions: (1) crisis; (2) value of listening; (3) limitations and critiques of listening (or its absence). Using the NVivo coding, we selected specific quotes or instances from the transcripts that illustrated the broader themes identified. We then returned to the recordings to listen to how a particular quote or example from the transcript had been articulated and how it sounded during the discussion. Where appropriate, we conducted further discourse analysis on the selected extracts, focusing particularly on aspects such as metaphors, repetition, comparison, silences, hesitations and laughter.

Listening in times of crisis

In this section, we draw on the focus group discussions to examine how participants engaged in listening and talked about the role of listening to radio phone-in shows and listening more broadly. We examine listening both as an *activity* participants performed during the focus groups – when they listened to the recording we played at the start and when listening to each other – and as a *topic* they discussed in relation to their everyday lives in the context of the polycrisis. We draw links between participants' listening to radio shows and listening in other contexts, underscoring how these listening experiences are interrelated.

Soothing companion, a caring space

The focus group discussions revealed the important emotional role played by listening to phone-in programmes, especially in providing companionship and comfort in the current crises. Several participants described the sound of radio as the background to their daily lives, as a source of comfort that helped alleviate loneliness. 'Radio is my best friend in the daytime', said Radhika, a pensioner from Newham. Richard, a pensioner from Lambeth, said the phone-in shows he listened to and the radio more generally were 'just on as a companion more than anything else'. Several female participants also described how phone-in and other radio shows kept them company while doing housework. While the role of radio as a companion has been documented in previous research (Bonini and Perrotta, 2007; Perse and Butler, 2005; Tramer and Jeffres, 1983), it appears to gain particular significance at times when loneliness affects millions in the UK: around 1 in 13 UK adults report feeling lonely often or always and evidence is growing of loneliness among children and young people too (ONS, 2024). Indeed, many of our focus group participants discussed the value of listening to phone-in programmes in relation to loneliness and in a climate where they feel profoundly neglected.

The account of Ruth, a non-binary migrant from Lambeth, is a powerful example. Ruth described the soothing effect of listening to radio phone-in shows when trying to go to sleep:

It helps me sleep. . . talking, keep on talking, and it's so, kind of, like, naah, aah, aah. . .and they're [phone-in callers] grounding my brain and I'm drifting to sleep, and it's wonderful. . .I hear what they say, but they're mostly talking, talking, talking. . .and I'm drifting away. It's wonderful. My lullaby, I suppose.

This calming kind of effect of radio is often associated with listening to music (Krause, 2020; Tacchi, 2003). However, here Ruth associates it with listening to phone-in programmes, where it is *not* the content (i.e. what the callers or host say), but rather the continuous stream of talking that offers calm and comfort. Situated within Ruth's broader account, which was recounted in detail in the focus group meeting, the calmative effect of listening appears particularly significant. Ruth describes an intense and painful sense of isolation and lack of care and not being listened to by the government, the local authority and the NHS health professionals treating Ruth. Amid this systematic neglect by a 'careless state' (Care Collective, 2020), expressed repeatedly by participants, radio phone-in programmes are a source of care; a lullaby, in Ruth's words, a metaphor evoking the comfort and reassurance of parental care.

Several participants referred specifically to the LBC (a commercial phone-in and talk radio station) show hosted by James O'Brien, named after its host. O'Brien, who has hosted this weekday morning phone-in show for LBC since 2004, and is one of the station's most popular presenters, is known for centring listening in his broadcasting. As Lynskey (2017) writes, while

the radio phone-in has always favoured voices from the right [. . .] When O'Brien took over LBC's mid-morning show [. . .] he wanted to see if another approach was possible [. . .] He has spent over half his adult life going head-to-head with the paranoid, bigoted and ill-informed without losing faith in people's capacity to listen, reason and change their minds.

Tellingly, while participants did not mention specific programmes or hosts frequently, O'Brien and his show were the only ones that enjoyed repeated mentions. Specifically, participants felt O'Brien expressed a particular quality of listening and care.⁵ 'He's the only one that shows a lot of empathy when he's talking to people in [difficult] situations', explained Olamide from Hackney. Rebecca from Greenwich recalled an episode when an old man phoned in from his bed, telling of his anxiety in being unable to contact a doctor and how the show's host, James O'Brien, 'got him help and kept him on the line'. 'It was so powerful', Rebecca reflected, adding that:

You can't just let them go. . .Because lots of people are slipping through the net. Lots of people try to phone their GPs [general practitioners] and city councils and ask for your help. Half the time when you try and phone these organisations you can't get through. Or you get wrong information, or conflicting information. You know, they don't seem to recognise that you might be at your wits' end, and you're caller number 20, because you've exhausted all the possibilities.

Rebecca contrasts ‘caller number 20’, an ordinary individual desperate to move up in the queue and be listened to by a GP – an experience shared by almost all the focus group participants – with a radio caller, who is being listened to, empathetically and effectively, by the radio show’s host. It is in this void – in the absence of everyday listening processes and structures and the frustration and pain caused by not being cared for or listened to – that listening to phone-in shows acquires both personal and political significance. ‘LBC did recognise a duty’, Rebecca noted further, referring to O’Brien’s act of listening and attending to his caller’s needs. Indeed, participants appreciated radio programmes and hosts whom they felt genuinely listened and attended to their listeners.

Building commonalities

Many participants talked of the sense of reassurance provided by hearing that other callers who were strangers to them, experienced difficulties similar to theirs: ‘it’s good to know you are not the only one struggling’, said Mike from Brent; ‘it makes me feel like I’m not so alone with my problems’, confessed Alison from Hackney. While previous research has documented similar feelings experienced by audiences from listening to or watching participatory programmes (Illouz, 2003; Livingstone and Lunt, 1994), in our study, the emphasis on the sense of not being alone that participants derive from listening reveals a very distinct value of listening in the context of the current polycrisis.

First, the novelty of the hardship and vulnerability brought about by the cost-of-living crisis, which was compounded by increased isolation during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, has meant that people have fewer opportunities to talk about their experiences and compare them to others’. The opportunity to listen to callers on radio phone-in programmes sharing similar experiences helps listeners to recognise that what they might be experiencing as individual problems, unique to them, are, in fact, shared by others. At a psychological level, this realisation provides reassurance and confirmation by turning a negative experience, perceived as unique and ‘abnormal’, into a common and, thus, ‘normal’ experience. This sense of validation was vividly evident in participants’ reactions as they listened to the radio recordings played at the start of the focus groups. Some nodded vigorously, some enthusiastically exclaimed ‘yes!’ ‘exactly’, or ‘true!’ in response to specific stories from callers that resonated with their experience. Thus, much like the focus groups, listening to some radio shows facilitates a sense of commonality, unifying listeners around a common experience in a period of increased isolation and intensifying individualism.

Second, the reassurance of not being alone in the struggle and the pain, is even more important in a context of a dominant neoliberal rationality that casts people as market actors who must constantly enhance their value through self-governance (Brown, 2015) and renders dependence, vulnerability and insecurity shameful and abhorrent (Orgad and Gill, 2022). Many participants admitted to feeling ashamed and inadequate in the face of what they experienced as failure to meet the neoliberal demand to self-manage in the current crises. For example, Ashraf, an immigrant father from Brent, who previously enjoyed going shopping with his children, now harbours anxiety about family outings when requests for toys or treats can no longer be satisfied: ‘I don’t want to show [my children] that I am weak’, he admitted painfully. Similarly, participants spoke of their

shame in asking for donations of food from neighbours via their WhatsApp residents' community groups. Against the neoliberal imperative that Ashraf and many others internalise – to suppress and hide any sense of weakness and vulnerability in the face of the current cost-of-living crises – listening to phone-in shows plays an important role: it makes audible the weakness and vulnerability and the feelings of shame and inadequacy they produce, thus, rendering them speakable. (The sample of phone-in shows we listened to in Phase 1 included numerous callers expressing their vulnerabilities, crying and confessing to feeling ashamed). 'Everyone's struggling. . . me, us', admitted Simon, a charity worker from Hackney, but it is 'those who've been brave enough' that 'go on national radio and talk about their situation'. Thus, unlike for those other than the idealised resilient neoliberal subjects who self-manage with grit and passion, phone-in programmes encourage listeners to expose their struggles, vulnerability and failure to self-manage, depicting *them*, as Simon put it, as the 'brave' ones. In this sense, listening to radio phone-in shows helps to normalise experiences and feelings that neoliberalism incessantly exhorts people to hide.

Validation, encouragement and turning inwards

Alongside the reassurance derived from recognising the *similarities* with the radio callers' stories, participants also reflected on the sense of validation and encouragement derived from comparing their situations with those of the callers and recognising that their experience was *dissimilar* and, specifically, better. For example, Richard, who took copious notes while listening to the recording at the start of the meeting and during the focus group discussion, observed that:

All the things in the radio programmes rang a bell, and what other people [in the group] have been saying. I'm lucky because I'm on my own, so I just do it for myself, which, as far as the price of food goes, it just means don't buy it. Don't turn on the heating, don't do any cooking, except in the microwave, and don't turn the water on. Get into bed and stay there.

The auditory metaphor of ringing a bell, which Richard repeated (and which was used by other participants), captures the feeling of a resonance generated from listening to the radio callers and, also, to the focus group participants. It led Richard to compare and evaluate his own experience against that of those he listened to: 'I'm lucky because I'm on my own', he concluded, comparing his lived experience to others' stories of caring responsibilities. Imara, an unemployed immigrant woman living in Brent, admitted that she *especially* likes to listen to radio callers describing experiences worse than hers: 'so you will say to yourself, that's good. I'm better than him, so I can manage. I can carry on! I will, I will continue. So, I will take the positive side from the listening'.

The consequences of the validation and encouragement derived from listening by listeners such as Imara and Richard are complex. Recognising that others are worse off than oneself, can have, as Imara put it, a 'positive side'. It encouraged Imara to self-manage and 'carry on!', while Richard's feeling of being 'lucky' made him resolve to finding individualised strategies for coping with the cost-of-living crisis. Zygmunt Bauman (2016: 14) notes that this process helps render 'one's own lot a little bit less than

absolutely demeaning, and so a little bit less bitter, unendurable and intolerable'. But this temporary relief from 'the humiliation of our helplessness' (Bauman, 2016: 17), Bauman warns, can obscure our vulnerability and helplessness and steer us away from trying to tackle their causes. Indeed, in the cases of both Imara and Richard, rather than questioning the structural forces contributing to their struggle, listening to the callers made them appreciate their advantages and turn inwards. Notwithstanding their clear accounts of extreme hardship and little or no support from the state, the sense of doing better than others caused Imara to conclude that she 'can manage' while Richard's feeling that he was 'lucky' made him focus on 'doing it for himself' (and staying in bed). In this sense, listening may have constituted Richard and Imara as part of a public, but it concurrently drew them apart, encouraging them to turn inwards and self-manage their problems, thus, failing to create 'the possibility of shared consequences' (Ananny, 2018: 40).

De-privatising personal troubles

Although listening encourages some participants to turn inwards and take individualised action, for others it evokes a strong sense of collective belonging to a public and participation in a political activity. This is exemplified by a comment from Alison, a pensioner living in Hackney, who listens to the radio 'pretty much all day long'. She said:

I like to listen to them [phone-in shows]. Not. . . "like" maybe is the wrong word, but people *need* to know. And you can sense that people are angry and frustrated and have reached the end of their tether. And it's a good thing, and it's a good thing that people can feel that they're not the only person who's going through it, just not today.

. . .

It's important that other people can feel that they're not alone. . . And I'm sure those vile politicians, they must listen. It must filter through, whether they care or not. In and out through the other one.

For Alison, listening to phone-in shows is valuable not because it yields comfort or pleasure – note how she retracts her initial description of listening to phone-in shows as something she 'likes' doing – but rather because it presents an opportunity to hear people voice their anger and frustration about their conditions. Alison focuses not on her suffering similar hardships to those described by radio callers, but rather on the similar *reactions* their conditions produce: anger and frustration – affects central to animating and mobilising political response. Hence, listening is not something Alison necessarily likes, but is something whose necessity she values: 'people *need* to know', she emphasises. Listening to phone-in shows enables listeners such as Alison to move from mere recognition that others, too, have 'reached the end of their tether' – a metaphor used frequently by participants – to recognition that others, too, are feeling angry and frustrated about the conditions of their existence. Crucially, Alison notes that the anger expressed by callers, and which she shares, 'filters through' to politicians, whom she imagines or hopes are also listening to these programmes, though there is concurrently a profound uncertainty

about whether these ‘vile politicians’, as she describes them, are really listening. Alison feels as though her own anger, frustration and critique of the government are mediated through the voices of radio callers. In this sense, echoing the historical participatory and inclusive ethos of talk radio, listening to phone-in callers constitutes an activity of representation (Douglas, 1999; Kuffert, 2022): listeners feel that callers’ angry and exasperated voices make audible not just their individual situation, but those of the listening public.

Related to the political resonance of listening revealed by Alison and other participants is the view, discussed earlier, that through listening people can feel they are not alone. However, rather than alleviating loneliness, here the importance of listening is focused more on the way it enables participants to connect their personal, intimate and often very painful experience of struggle and hardships to the wider conditions and structures that furnish and shape these experiences.

Take Jennifer, a 19-year-old woman from Hackney. In response to the recording played at the start of the meeting, Jennifer linked her experience of living with her mother and sister, who struggle to pay for food and electricity, to the stories offered by radio callers of similar hardships. She recounted how since finishing school she had been unemployed and, although she wanted to help her mother and sister, she was unable to do so. She had tried to find work but had been told repeatedly that she lacked experience and qualifications. Describing her current living arrangement as a financial burden on her mother and sister, Jennifer is keen to move out of the family home but cannot afford to do this. She blames herself, confessing tearfully, that it makes her feel ‘useless’.

Then Jennifer listened to the responses of the focus group participants to her story. Comments were supportive, and crucially, linked Jennifer’s struggles to the unjust social structures: the poor availability of low-paid jobs for young people with no work experience, the lack of appropriate support for young people seeking employment and the unaffordable housing rents. This act of connecting people’s personal struggles to the wider forces shaping and conditioning them emerged in all the focus group discussions. Listening to phone-in shows, and to each other, enabled the participants to locate some of their most personal, intimate and painful experiences in relation to wider social, economic and political structures. Mills (1959) famously described the task of connecting ‘personal troubles’ to ‘public issues of social structure’ as the crux of the ‘sociological imagination’. Making this connection plays both a crucial diagnostic role, allowing identification of the larger social forces shaping our most intimate personal troubles, and a transformative role, by showing the social change needed so we can be more than what we are already (Gane and Back, 2012). However, neoliberal rationality turns ‘social uncertainty into a personal failure that is divorced from any collective cause or remedy’ (Gane and Back, 2012: 7): Jennifer blames herself for being useless and being unable to find a job; Ashraf feels inadequate and weak, for his inability to afford treats for his children.

Listening, thus, has the potential to nourish a ‘sociological imagination’, that is, to open up a space for de-privatising ‘personal troubles’ and considering what might help address them – a political project ever more critical in current times (Orgad, 2020). Indeed, the listening experience and exchanges during the focus group discussions generated a process akin to Ananny’s (2018) description of the public’s right to

hear: a collective recognition and articulation of participants' and phone-in callers' shared conditions and consequences, recognition of the resources that hold them together and a generative debate about solutions to their predicaments and designs for alternative ways of living when people are being exhorted to self-manage and be self-sufficient (Srivastava et al., 2024).

A crisis of listening

The study is situated in the polycrisis, by which we refer to the intertwining of the cost-of-living crisis, the health crisis and social care crisis in Britain. However, the focus groups underscored how both the causes and consequences of these crises, and the way they are being experienced by focus group participants, are intertwined with another crisis: a crisis of listening. Sarah, an unemployed woman living in Brent, described the paradox underpinning this crisis. The poorer and more dependent people become, the more they need to be listened to and the more they need to engage in listening to those they interact with, and yet, the social systems, structures and processes shaping their lives offer no place for listening. People need GPs to listen to their needs and concerns but are often unable to get appointments (recall Rebecca's 'caller number 20'); on the rare occasions that they are given an appointment, timeslots are too short to provide sufficient time and space for listening. People need their councils and their energy suppliers, housing associations and insurance companies to listen to their needs. Yet, increasingly, they are faced with automated services which, by definition, are incapable of listening capaciously, with sufficient nuance and care, and with systems where people cannot get through to a person that can listen and help solve their problems. People need and want to listen to the experiences of and advice from other people and experts, but the accessibility of spaces for listening and getting advice is shrinking, in particular, since more and more services are available only digitally and many of our focus group participants have neither digital connections nor digital skills. 'People even don't ring anymore, they just text', lamented Sylvia from Lambeth, describing her frustrated attempts to speak to a representative of her housing association.

Amid this crisis of listening, radio phone-in programmes furnish some people with an accessible and hospitable space, which hosts the voices of listeners and invites others to listen in. Participants appreciated the value of this space, especially in the context of the huge hardships they were experiencing and the acute sense that 'nothing works' (Calafati et al., 2023) and 'nobody listens'. However, participants also criticised the embeddedness of radio phone-in shows in the crisis of listening. They explained that these shows foreground and amplify people's miseries and struggles in order to maintain legitimacy with their audiences while claiming to present 'ordinary' people's realities in 'authentic' ways (echoing Couldry, 2008). This, they noted, often has the opposite effect of being alienating and off-putting: 'I find [listening to these shows] demoralising, I find it depressing, and I have to choose. Because if I listened to them every day, I would be just about slitting wrists', said Jude from Hackney. Expressing similar reticence, Lola, also from Hackney, said: 'I've been prescribed antidepressants, so I could not be listening to that kind of negativity'. So while the audibility of vulnerability, struggle and weakness can have important political value (as discussed earlier), some listeners experience it as

damaging and counterproductive, which, consequently, can lead to avoidance and withdrawal – responses consistent with the broader pattern of news avoidance in crisis times (Aharoni et al., 2021; de Bruin et al., 2021; Lee, 2024).

Furthermore, some participants said they avoided phone-in programmes because of the exploitative dimension of commodifying people's miseries, and listeners' complicity in this commodification. Louise, a young mother from Brent, expressed this eloquently when she said:

I feel like sometimes some people are exploited on these kinds of shows. Even though they ring up willingly, but just to hear that, other people tune in to hear it and that's how money is generated, through them listening. So, I don't really want to be a part of exploiting someone else like that, so I tend to not listen anymore. But I did use to.

Indeed, while participants appreciate the critical value of listening offered by some phone-in shows, such as James O'Brien's, especially when so many struggle to survive and feel they are cruelly unheard, they also recognise that some of these shows are linked inextricably to and conditioned by exploitative market forces – 'money generated through listening', as Louise perceptively described it. Thus, listening to phone-in shows both helps to alleviate while also contributing to the crisis of listening.

Conclusion: A listening ear

In the current polycrisis, listening to radio phone-in shows and listening more generally can be significant acts. At the individual psychological level, listening can help alleviate loneliness and offer comfort, reassurance, encouragement and validation. Listening also constitutes a communal activity which enables building meaningful commonalities and collectivities. Against the structural carelessness of the neoliberal state (Care Collective, 2020), phone-in programmes, such as LBC's James O'Brien's, offer a collective space of listening and care, in part, challenging the claim that commercial logic inevitably forecloses the democratic value of listening. In a cultural and political climate that renders weakness, pain and vulnerability shameful and abhorrent, radio phone-in shows expose, legitimise and help to normalise these dispositions. Listening to phone-in shows and to each other, can enable people to realise the fundamental connection, which neoliberal doctrine persistently disguises and suppresses, between their 'personal troubles' and 'public issues of social structure' (Mills, 1959) – a connection that could form the basis for devising shared, collective, structural solutions to their predicaments.

However, as our study's participants clearly recognised, the spaces for listening and their capacity to nourish a 'sociological imagination' (Mills, 1959), are under threat and are shrinking fast in the wake of years of austerity, the Covid-19 pandemic and neoliberal policies. Tellingly, O'Brien's show, which many participants mentioned appreciatively, is an antidote to many other commercial, often right-wing phone-ins, which are characterised by their hosts' abrasive stance, and by encouraging confrontational and polarised debate (Karpf, 2018). Thus, while some phone-in programmes offer valuable spaces for listening as a public act, many are themselves shaped through commercial and

exploitative logics, and as such are integral to a deepening crisis of listening, which they reflect and reinforce.

‘We need an organisation called a listening ear’, Ruth concluded at the end of our focus group discussion in Lambeth. ‘People need somebody to talk to them, to hear them’. Turning to the person sitting next to them, Ruth performed the act of listening, asking: ‘What is your problem? What is your problem, Sandra? Sandra, can you tell me, what is your needs?’ Ruth referred to the need for ‘an organisation’, but what they seem to be emphasising here and throughout the group discussion, as articulated also by other focus group participants, is the urgency for a *reorganisation* of public life, guided by the principle of a ‘listening ear’. To be clear, the task of reorganising public life through extending a ‘listening ear’ is not one that people such as our focus group participants should be burdened with. They have, as we have heard from their accounts, been doing a lot of listening in their lives – to their families, neighbours, community members and radio phone-in shows. Thus, for some of them avoiding listening to radio phone-in programmes is arguably a vital strategy, given the heavy burden of listening and caring they are forced to carry in their daily lives. Rather, their plight is for structural and institutional listening, the responsibility for which should primarily lie with political leaders and institutions, public authorities as well as the media.

Specifically, our study shows that if both public and commercial radio phone-in shows regarded listening as their duty and committed to fulfilling this duty, then they could play an important part in this reorganisation. In this context, perhaps more attention needs to be paid to the responsibility of broadcasters for ensuring that the stories they air are transmitted in a way that is as least likely as possible to risk listeners and as most likely as possible to benefit them. For instance, the BBC (2021) editorial guidance on live broadcasting mentions risks such as ‘issues of portrayal including racism and national stereotyping’ and ‘unexpected and potentially inappropriate coverage of injuries and loss of life’, but not risks related to airing other trauma stories or narratives of suffering – stories which have populated many phone-in radio programmes about the current polycrisis. Such risks could be addressed through guidance and training aimed at broadcasters, especially given the challenges of controlling what callers will say in a live programme, as well as in centring the role of hosts as listeners – as exemplified by our focus group participants’ appreciation of LBC’s radio presenter, James O’Brien. Furthermore, radio stations can play a significant role in promoting deliberative democracy by hosting programmes where politicians are invited to engage in dialogue with members of the public who call in, examples of which we came across in the radio programme data we coded (e.g. Radio 5 Live’s *Nicky Campbell* ‘Food prices: can you cope?’, 19 April 2023).

More broadly, restructuring public life according to the principle of a ‘listening ear’ means positioning care and attending to people’s needs and desires, at the heart of democratic societies, and embedding listening into public structures and processes (Care Collective, 2020; Dobson, 2014). Deliberative practices can include, for example, holding regular town hall meetings, increasing the frequency of drop-in Member of Parliament (MP) surgeries and forming resident councils in different constituencies, with residents invited by random to join monthly meetings with relevant MPs or local government representatives to address the constituency’s needs (see Srivastava et al., 2024).

Finally, as media and communication researchers, we, too, can and should, contribute to the project of a ‘listening ear’ by centring listening in our research – conceptually, methodologically and analytically. This is an urgent commitment in times of rife inequalities and reduced audibility of the voices of the most marginalised and vulnerable in society, and in an age of digitisation and datafication, in which audiences’ concerns, motivations, commitments and desires are alarmingly muted (Livingstone, 2019).


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Notes

1. Data supplied by Hallett Arendt from Radio Joint Audience Research (RAJAR) for the first quarter of 2023.
2. Among the nine unique radio shows we listened to, four programmes were produced by the BBC, while five programmes were commercially produced by LBC and TalkRadio. These nine radio programmes are: (1) BBC Radio 4: *Any Answers?*, (2) BBC Radio 4: *You and Yours*, (3) BBC Radio 5 Live: *Dotun Adebayo*, (4) BBC Radio 5 Live: *Nicky Campbell*, (5) LBC: *James O'Brien*, (6) LBC: *Nick Ferrari*, (7) LBC: *Shelagh Fogarty*, (8) LBC: *Tom Swarbrick* and (9) TalkRadio: *Petrie Hosken*.
3. For example, four out of the six boroughs rated worse than average for homelessness acceptances and repossession and three out of the six were rated worse than average for child poverty rate and premature mortality.
4. <https://www.nihr.ac.uk/documents/payment-guidance-for-researchers-and-professionals/27392>
5. Some phone-in shows (e.g. BBC Radio 5 Dotun Adebayo show) frame themselves explicitly as communities of friends, even families, whose role is to support and comfort listeners.

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