



# Listening in polarised controversies: a study of listening practices in the public sphere

Carolyn M. Hendriks<sup>1</sup> · Selen A. Ercan<sup>2</sup> · Sonya Duus<sup>2</sup>

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## Abstract

Listening is an important feature of policy making and democratic politics. Yet in an era of increased polarisation the willingness and capacity of citizens to listen to each other, especially those they disagree with, is under strain. Drawing insights from a divisive community conflict over proposed coal seam gas development in regional Australia, this article examines how citizens listen to each other in a polarised controversy. The analysis identifies four different listening practices that citizens enact in a polarised public sphere, including (1) enclave listening between like-minded citizens; (2) alliance listening across different enclaves; (3) adversarial listening between citizens on opposing sides of the debate to monitor opponents; and (4) transformative listening where citizens listen selectively to other community members with the intention of changing their views. The article argues that all four listening practices fulfil important democratic functions in polarised debates such as enhancing the connective, reflective and communicative capacity of the public sphere. Notwithstanding these democratic contributions, under polarised conditions participatory interventions may be required to enhance the prospects of listening across difference.

**Keywords** Listening · Polarisation · Democratic politics · Community conflict · Citizen engagement · Unconventional gas · Democracy · Energy · Public communication · Political communication

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✉ Carolyn M. Hendriks  
carolyn.hendriks@anu.edu.au

Selen A. Ercan  
selen.ercan@canberra.edu.au

Sonya Duus  
sonya.duus@canberra.edu.au

<sup>1</sup> Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia

<sup>2</sup> Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance, University of Canberra, Canberra, Australia

## Introduction

In a time of increased political polarisation, opportunities for open and meaningful communication between citizens with opposing views can be in short supply. Polarisation delineates complex political issues in binary terms and pushes people to hold one of two opposing views (Becker et al. 2003: 183). It shrinks the middle ground and thereby reduces opportunities for citizens to talk and listen across difference or hear more moderate policy arguments (Strickler 2017). Democratic theorists worry that under polarised conditions it becomes more difficult to generate plural and inclusive public debate, where citizens with diverse views can meet, talk and listen to each other (Ercan 2017; Mansbridge and Latura 2016; Pfetsch 2018).

To date, much of empirical research on the democratic effects of political polarisation is centred on studies of small group communication (e.g. Grönlund et al. 2015; Lindell et al. 2017). One well-known finding from this research is that when citizens discuss polarised issues in small group settings they tend to gravitate towards opposing poles of like-minded people where their views become even more extreme (Sunstein 2009). It remains unclear, however, whether the insights gained from actual or experimental small group participatory forums hold true in the broader, messier context of the public sphere, where there are numerous sites for communication and listening.<sup>1</sup>

On the one hand, the public sphere potentially offers a suitable context for listening across difference. After all, in contemporary public spheres citizens have numerous diverse spaces to meet, talk and listen to each other—both face-to-face and online (Ercan et al. 2018; Vromen et al. 2015). Yet on the other hand contemporary public spheres might not be well suited to facilitating communicative listening in polarised contexts because modern media can exacerbate the effects of ‘selective exposure’—a phenomenon where citizens prefer to listen to arguments that support their own opinions (Stroud 2010). Under polarised conditions, citizens ‘have relatively few opportunities to learn about perspectives, opinions and facts that challenge their own’ (Mansbridge and Latura 2016: 39). Emerging experimental research on the effects of mass polarisation also finds that people’s views become more extreme not only because of exposure to partisan information but also because of their interpersonal discussions with other like-minded citizens (Druckman et al. 2018).

In this article, we inject further empirical insights into these debates by examining how citizens listen to each other in a polarised policy controversy. Our analysis centres on horizontal forms of listening, that is, listening *between* citizens. Here, we depart from much of the existing scholarship on political listening which emphasises vertical receptivity, for example, how decision-makers listen to citizens (e.g. Dobson 2014; Macnamara 2017), how public service providers listen to users (e.g. Simmons 2011) and how stakeholder representatives listen to their constituencies (e.g. Schultz and McGinn 2013).

Horizontal listening is crucial for democracies. When citizens listen actively and openly to each other in the public sphere, they are better placed to develop informed opinions, learn about different perspectives, understand and engage in conflict (Bickford 1996), address the issues of power and privilege (Bassel 2017) and contribute to public deliberation (Dryzek 2000). Listening in the public sphere also serves an important democratic

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, the public sphere is understood in Habermasian terms as “public conversation” composed of “mutually interlocking networks and associations of deliberation, contestation and argumentation” (Benhabib 1996 emphasis in original).

function by facilitating the flow of diverse information and ideas between citizens, their associations, the media and policy makers (Mansbridge and Latura 2016).

To examine how polarisation affects the form and function of horizontal listening in the public sphere, we study the listening practices of citizens contesting a divisive coal seam gas development proposal, the Narrabri Gas Project (NGP), in regional Australia. Our in-depth case study of horizontal listening in this controversy draws on 48 interviews conducted by the authors between 2015 and 2017 with actors involved in the debate. Informed by an interpretive approach and inductive research design (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012), our research explores how individual citizens and community groups experience, interpret, and enact listening in the public sphere surrounding the NGP controversy. Our analysis identifies four different modes of horizontal listening and considers their democratic function in polarised debates. We argue that normatively undesirable forms of listening such as adversarial listening can fulfil important (and hitherto unrecognised) democratic functions in polarised public spheres. We conclude by arguing that in contexts of deep division, mechanisms may be needed to break down listening barriers and enhance the prospects of communication across difference.

## Listening in public sphere

Listening between citizens represents a vital yet mostly neglected theme in studies of democracy. Scholars of democratic theory and practice have tended to focus on providing citizens access to, and voice in, the democratic conversation (Calder 2011; Ercan et al. 2018). Those scholars that have taken a specific interest in the role of listening in democracy have focussed mainly on the norm of receptivity, whereby decision-makers are considered to be listening to citizens when they are receptive and responsive to messages they receive from them (Dobson 2014). Even theories of democracy centred on communication in the public sphere, such as Habermas' (1996) and Dryzek's (2000, 2010) account of deliberative democracy, emphasise the vertical process of communication between the public sphere and formal decision-making spaces. Neither scholar elaborates on how listening proceeds *within* the public sphere.

There are some notable scholars who have signalled the democratic importance of listening between citizens, although the public sphere is not their explicit reference point (see for example Barber 1984; Bickford 1996; Coles 2004). In developing his arguments for a participatory 'strong democracy', Benjamin Barber (1984: 183) discusses how informal and spontaneous forms of talk and listening, such as 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. Similarly, Bickford (1996) draws attention to the importance of listening between citizens, especially for facilitating better understanding of a conflict at stake. She argues that the purpose of listening is not to do away with disagreement, but it is about connecting conflicting parties with each other and expanding the possibilities of future interaction (Bickford 1996: 165–171).

Regardless of whether scholars of democracy emphasise vertical or horizontal listening, most hold high normative expectations about how listening ought to be enacted. 'Good' listening is typically associated with the characteristics of openness, attentiveness, empathy, and sincerity. For example, for Barber (1984) a good listener is the capacity to empathise and take another's perspective: 'I will put myself in his place, I will try to understand, I will strain to hear what makes us alike, I will listen for a common rhetoric evocative of

a common purpose or a common good'.<sup>2</sup> Others associate 'good' listening with mutual respect (Goodin 2008), openness (Bickford 1996), or recognition of what others have to say (Honneth 1996). The normative standards for democratically desirable forms of listening are often contrasted with the characteristics of 'poor' listening in a democracy. Listening is considered to be ineffective when it is selective or passive (Barber 1984; Forester 1988: 110), therapeutic (Dobson 2014) or strategic (Dobson 2012).

Ideas on listening in the public sphere can also be found in the scholarly literature on media and political communication. Lacey (2013), for example, argues that listening to what others say or write is a critical condition in the emergence of a public sphere. She argues that the public sphere is not passive when it comes to listening. The successive media forms since the late nineteenth century (beginning with simple sound technologies such as telephone, phonograph and radio) have enabled publics to listen out in the public sphere in attentive and anticipatory ways. The recent development of online technologies has expanded the way citizens talk and listen to each other in the public sphere (Crawford 2009; Vromen et al. 2015), though some say towards greater dissonance and disconnection (Pfetsch 2018).

The capacity of citizens to actively and openly listen to each other in the public sphere depends not just on the openness of individuals but also on the nature of the issues under debate. As noted above, polarised debates pose particular challenges to open-minded listening and research has shown that people are likely to gravitate towards opposing enclaves of like-minded people where their views become more extreme (Sunstein 2009). Emerging research, however, finds that the effects of group polarisation (even in homogenous groups) are mitigated when group discussions are guided by deliberative norms such as providing participants with access to balanced information, having clear discussion rules, and moderating the discussion (Grönlund et al. 2015).

What remains unclear is how polarisation affects listening in the public sphere, particularly its democratic capacity. Existing research to date suggests that the public sphere is an unlikely place for tempering the negative communicative effects of polarisation. Reflecting on the prospects for listening in the context of increasing polarisation in US politics, Mansbridge and Latura (2016) argue that in polarised contexts citizens may need to engage in multiple, decentralised and informal modes of listening in order to facilitate political communication across difference. But what might such listening look in practice? When does listening help establish, if any, 'connections that enable shared action despite deep inequalities and unavoidable conflict' as suggested by Dreher (2009: 450)? These questions require close-up contextual empirical investigation of actual listening practices in a context of deep division.

## The polarised debate over Narrabri Gas Project (NGP)

In this section, we offer empirical insights into how horizontal listening is enacted in a polarised controversy. Our empirical study examines listening practices in the public debate surrounding a divisive proposal to extract coal seam gas (CSG) from a region near Narrabri

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<sup>2</sup> Some scholars take issue with Barber's emphasis on listening for commonality (e.g. Sanders 1997; 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.

in eastern Australia.<sup>3</sup> The proponent of the Narrabri Gas Project (NGP), the energy corporation Santos, proposes to develop 850 gas wells across a project area of approximately 1000 square kilometres. The controversy surrounding the NGP is widespread, but our interest here is the local debate that is playing out in various small communities dispersed across nearly 100,000 square kilometres that make up the North West New England region of NSW—an area similar to that of Iceland or the US state of Kentucky. Numerous actors have participated actively in the local public debate since it emerged in 2010 including: the gas industry, local, state and federal agencies, politicians, farmers and farmer groups, environmental groups, local business people, Indigenous peoples and many local residents.

The public sphere surrounding the NGP within the region is highly polarised between those who oppose the gas project, and others who support it (e.g. Chan 2017; Potter 2014). Those opposed to the NGP include individuals and citizen groups concerned about diverse issues such as land and water impacts, the safety of extraction technologies, effects on human health, consequences for the social fabric of communities and implications for global climate change (Ransan-Cooper et al. 2018). These echo the concerns expressed by opponents of unconventional gas projects worldwide (e.g. Ladd 2013; Metze 2014). Citizens against the NGP formed various community groups as early as 2010 in order to have a stronger voice and coordinate opposition activities. These local opposition groups have also been assisted by regional, state and national environmental groups.

Some citizens in the region support the NGP because it promises positive impacts on local business and employment. In the early years, those supportive of the NGP were far less vocal in the public sphere than those opposing it. In response to this lack of voice in the community, a group of citizens decided to form a group ‘Yes2Gas From the Pilliga’ in 2014 (some 4 years after oppositional groups had formed). Yes2Gas is described by its founder as ‘an umbrella for [like-minded] people to stand under’.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to these two polarised publics, there are many citizens in the region who do not hold strong views on the NGP. Many in the debate refer to these people as the ‘silent majority’. Although exact figures on these ‘middle ground’ citizens do not exist, survey research of local attitudes towards the project undertaken in 2017 by a consortium representing the government and gas industry (GISERA) sheds some light on the distribution of views in the public sphere. It found that amongst 400 Narrabri residents, 30% of respondents were opposed to CSG development (‘reject it’), 42% lukewarm (‘tolerate’ or ‘be ok with it’) and 28% support it (‘approve’ or ‘embrace’) (Walton and McCrea 2017).

## Practices of horizontal listening in a polarised debate

The polarised nature of the NGP controversy creates difficult conditions for open listening, particularly across those holding different views. Many we interviewed described a strong reluctance within the local community to engage across points of difference due to the divisive and sensitive nature of the debate, and due to a widespread belief that it is impossible to reach an agreement. Our interviewees describe how people are either ‘violently’ pro

<sup>3</sup> The controversy surrounding the NGP remains unresolved. In early 2017, Santos lodged its Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to the state government of New South Wales (NSW) 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).

<sup>4</sup> Interviewee #4, 22.11.15.

or anti the NGP,<sup>5</sup> and that ‘fors and againsts don’t mix’<sup>6</sup>—with one interviewee stating that listening to opposite views was ‘a waste of time’.<sup>7</sup> Another described how conversations about the NGP especially on social media are ‘poisonous’.<sup>8</sup>

What kind of listening between citizens, if any, might occur in such a polarised context? Below, we characterise four particularly prevalent listening practices in the NGP.

### **Enclave listening: building solidarity**

Enclave listening occurs within groups of like-minded people who share the same or similar values or beliefs on an issue of concern. In the NGP, two broad enclaves can be identified as those in support of the development (pro-NGP) and those against it (anti-NGP). Within these two enclaves, listening occurs in various spaces including online via emails and social media sites, as well as in face-to-face meetings, group activities (such as protests), community events, market stalls and chance encounters in the street. In all these spaces, citizen listens to share stories, to build common narratives and to learn more about the views and arguments of those who share common concerns.

Based on our analysis of the NGP controversy, enclave listening serves several inter-related democratic functions in the public sphere. First and foremost, enclave listening can build solidarity amongst like-minded people by enabling them to share their common experiences and circulate knowledge amongst those they trust as thinking and feeling ‘like them’. In this sense, enclave listening affirms people’s political experiences and viewpoints. This can be especially empowering 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 the NGP case, there were many geographically isolated women who were empowered by listening to the stories of others who were ‘just like them’. Here, we see how enclave listening is central to formation of ‘counterpublics’ (Fraser 1997).

Second, enclave listening can help to mobilise and empower like-minded citizens into action. In the NGP case, several interviewees emphasised the crucial role of enclave listening in inspiring people to take action. For example, 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.<sup>9</sup> Enclave listening can also empower citizens through its therapeutic function. For example, in the NGP enclave listening offered avenues through which actors could express frustrations about burnout,<sup>10</sup> or deal with the emotional side of the issue by channelling their anger into political action (Ransan-Cooper et al. 2018).

Third, enclave listening helps active publics understand the issues at hand, and the personal stories of affected people. In the NGP case, this kind of listening occurred on both sides of the debate between local community members, but it also extended to other geographical areas. This was especially prominent amongst opponents to the NGP, who regularly listened into people’s experiences in other parts of Australia. Activists listened to

<sup>5</sup> Interviewee #44, 8.6.17.

<sup>6</sup> Interviewee #41, 7.6.17.

<sup>7</sup> Interviewee #16, 24.11.15.

<sup>8</sup> Interviewee #25, 1.12.15.

<sup>9</sup> Interviewee #37, 1.3.17.

<sup>10</sup> Interviewee #37, 1.3.17.

gather evidence and fortify arguments in the local debate. Here, we see that while enclave listening might be enacted in a communicative form (with empathy and openness) it can also serve highly strategic ends such as strategising and coordinating actions. In other words, as scholars of listening in social movements put it, horizontal listening can be an internal good in the public sphere, but it also offers a means to other ends (Coles 2004).

### **Alliance listening: forging connections and relationships**

A second prominent form of listening that emerged from the analysis of our case is what we label alliance listening. Here, listening helps build connections *across* specific enclaves by encouraging relationships with those who share common causes or ‘enemies’. Alliance listening is a more open and diverse form of listening than enclave listening because listeners are actively seeking to connect and build relationships (and projects) with those outside their specific group. It involves reaching out, connecting and listening to those who have potentially different socio-economic backgrounds, life experiences, ideologies, narratives and even political motivations.

In the NGP case, alliance listening was evident across both sides of the controversy, but it was especially prevalent between the diverse groups opposing the NGP. Enclaves made up predominantly of farmers, Indigenous people,<sup>11</sup> environmentalists and people from specific towns or localities are joined through alliances that share common concerns about the proposed gas development. For example, there is a formal alliance in the region—the North West Alliance—which is an umbrella organisation of local and supporting groups that oppose coal and CSG in north-west NSW (The Wilderness Society 2013). In addition, many of our interviewees also relate to the broader more informal anti-CSG movement across NSW and Australia, which is commonly characterised as a loose network of different groups.

To be clear, these alliances do not always necessarily start from commonalities. Sometimes, they emerged through the politics of engagement and for the strategic reason of uniting against the enemy. For example, against the common enemy of CSG production the above-mentioned North West Alliance represents a mix of ‘strange bedfellows’ of farmers, environmentalists and Aboriginal people who have historically been divided over resource extraction, environmental management and land tenure (Colvin et al. 2015; Vincent and Neale 2016). The common threat of CSG motivated these groups to listen across difference and to explore ways to work together, despite their historic differences.

In the public sphere, alliance listening enables diverse actors to build relationships and a means to reach agreement 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 ‘relationships are all we have’.<sup>12</sup> 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 interviewee described how they listened carefully to within-group dynamics in the interests of cohesion and solidarity, helping them decide when to speak

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<sup>11</sup> The NGP covers land of Gomeroi people. Various spellings including Gamilaroi, Gamilaraay, Gamilaroi and Kamilaroi (see AIATSIS, n.d.).

<sup>12</sup> Interviewee #38, 17.3.17.



and what to say, and when to hold their tongue.<sup>13</sup> The same interviewee also explained that listening across groups in the community was not only crucial for the development and success of the anti-NGP campaign, but that the alliance also offers an important social legacy in and of itself:

... I want there to be a legacy of this [anti-NGP] movement... I want there to be a positive social legacy that we've built alliances across groups of people that don't often talk to each other, and especially, well that would be greenies, farmers and black fellas, you know, that historically haven't got on very well...<sup>14</sup>

For supporters of CSG, alliance listening in our case was far less public, although interviewees 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 amongst groups and individuals supportive of the NGP.

### **Adversarial listening: monitoring opponents**

The third listening practice in the NGP we identified was a kind of adversarial listening where actors tune into the activities and statements of their opponents. In this mode of listening, the intent is not to listen for mutual respect or dialogue, but to gain information and refine strategy. Adversarial listening occurs when citizens tune into 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. When citizens listen to monitor each other, they are participating in the broader project of public surveillance (cf. Dreher 2009: 448).<sup>15</sup>

In the NGP case, adversarial listening was a prominent feature of the public communication on the controversy both online and offline. Though largely strategic in nature, adversarial listening serves a number of important democratic functions in the public sphere. First, it can update, inform and sharpen the arguments and points of disagreement in a debate. Second, and relatedly, adversarial listening both motivates action and counteraction, and informs the strategies of active publics. In the NGP, both democratic features of adversarial listening were on display: actors on both sides of the controversy actively monitor what their opponents are saying, planning and doing in order to prepare counter arguments, media releases and organise protest actions (Hendriks et al. 2016). For example, one supporter of the NGP explained how they keep 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'.<sup>16</sup> Another 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 are listening quite carefully to the language that's used and to the messages that are being

<sup>13</sup> Interviewee #22, 6.6.17.

<sup>14</sup> Interviewee #22, 6.6.17.

<sup>15</sup> Here, our focus is on surveillance between citizens, rather than that undertaken by corporations or governments, for example who use webwatchers and social media to follow and pre-empt the activities of problematic activists and social movements (e.g. Lubbers 2015). We also recognise citizens engage in vertical surveillance listening, for example listening to what relevant decision-makers are saying/not saying about a particular issue. Our interest though here is on horizontal surveillance between citizens.

<sup>16</sup> Interviewee # 4, 8.6.17.



provided so that they can counter those'.<sup>17</sup> For some interviewees, this kind of monitoring activity was more about surveillance than listening, as one interviewee explained, 'I'm certainly not listening to them, the other side', but then went on to explain:

But we certainly look at the financial papers and see if [Santos'] share prices are falling or not.... We find out when their annual general meetings are on, and I still get stuff through Facebook feed on that... so people who are involved in the movement have their tabs on what Santos is doing.<sup>18</sup>

Offline, adversarial listening occurred 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 in the CSG work sites, and when company security vehicles trail anti-CSG tours of the area.<sup>19</sup>

### **Transformative listening: changing the views of the broader public**

The fourth horizontal listening practice we identified in the NGP was where actors listen to the broader public with the aim of informing, persuading and transforming their views on a particular political issue. This is a particularly selective kind of listening where initially transformative listeners may appear to listen openly and attentively to others to build rapport and respect. However, in the course of the conversation the listener selectively 'hears' perspectives that she deems can be informed and converted. Transformative listening is premised on two assumptions: i) that the broader public 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 NGP opponents and proponents taking opportunities to 'listen' in order to transform the views of everyday people. This form of listening took place in everyday settings, for example at the farm gate, at food market, at the showground. Interviewees describe these exchanges as casual non-threatening conversations with 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. Herein lies a core democratic function of transformative listening in the public sphere: to insert views into the public consciousness.

Another democratic function of transformative listening is to broaden public debate and potentially empower citizens. Consider, for example, how opponents of the NGP enacted transformative listening by undertaking 'gasfield free' surveys in the local region. Volunteers conduct these surveys by going from house to house (or farm to farm) and asking local residents a binary question about whether they would prefer their neighbourhood to remain gasfield free (yes/no). Resident's answers are 'listened to' and noted and then collectively reported throughout the region, for example '97% of district X voted to remain gasfield free'. This is a kind of mass, organised, transformative listening with a very particular (partisan) purpose. In some instances, the surveys lead to more substantial

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<sup>17</sup> Interviewee #9, 7.6.17.

<sup>18</sup> Interviewee #21, 6.6.17.

<sup>19</sup> Interviewee #45, 9.6.17.

conversations, such as the example given by one interviewee who engaged a neighbour in conversation for 2 h on the property boundary about the potential local impacts of CSG development.<sup>20</sup>

## The democratic functions of horizontal listening in polarised public spheres

Against the normative ideals of ‘good’ democratic listening, the most empathic and perspective taking form of listening in the NGP occurs in enclaves between like-minded citizens seeking solidarity and support. Enclave listening plays an important supportive role in the public sphere by enabling people involved in a controversy to not only share their stories, knowledge and experiences but to channel their emotions into political action.

Other prevalent forms of horizontal listening in the NGP were less about openness and perspective taking and far more strategic. For example, many citizens listen 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. For the most part, these strategic forms of horizontal listening are more about one-way strategic ‘hearing’. Scholars interested in good political listening tend to denigrate the democratic value of listening as hearing, in favour of more dialogical forms of listening (e.g. Forester 1988: 110). However, our analysis finds that strategic forms of horizontal listening serve at least two significant democratic functions in the public sphere. First, strategic forms of listening can perform a *connective function* in the public sphere by facilitating linkages *across* different sets of publics. In the NGP case, we saw how alliance listening in particular served to bridge historically divided groups, such as environmentalists, farmers and Indigenous people, as well as connect diverse citizens from different backgrounds and geographical locations. The connections facilitated by horizontal listening serve to boost the collective action potential of publics. It enables them to pool knowledge and resources, and strengthen their capacity for voice when articulating their positions to the public, to the media and to the decision-makers. In other words, horizontal listening between citizens from different groups enables organised publics to be more efficient and effective advocates in the public sphere, and thereby potentially aids the prospects of vertical listening between citizens and decision-makers.

Second, strategic forms of horizontal listening can also perform a *reflective function* in public sphere. In the NGP case, we see this function especially in adversarial and transformative listening where citizens ‘listen out’ to opponents and the broader public, respectively. These forms of listening are certainly not oriented towards reaching mutual understanding (as normative democratic theorists hope), but they nevertheless potentially induce reflection and make listeners consider their own viewpoints in the light of the views of others. In the case of NGP, for instance, local citizens on both sides of the debate pay particular attention to (listen out for) what the other side uses as evidence to support their either pro- or anti-CSG view point. They scrutinise the credibility of sources their opponents use and constantly look for other sources of reliable information and assessment (especially with regards to the risks posed by CSG mining). As such, strategic listening can assist key participants in a public debate to refine their own position vis-à-vis others. This, of course,

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<sup>20</sup> Interviewee #40, 7.6.17.

**Table 1** Modes and democratic functions of horizontal listening in the public sphere

Listening mode	Description	Democratic functions
Enclave listening	Citizens listen to those with like-minded views to build solidarity	<p><i>Communicative</i></p> <p>Sharing knowledge and experiences</p> <p>Mobilising and empowering citizens with common interests/concerns</p> <p>Seeking to understand, affirm and represent affected publics</p>
Alliance listening	Citizens listen to those with overlapping interests to form new alliances	<p><i>Connective</i></p> <p>Building networks and forming alliance across groups committed to common causes</p> <p>Consolidating positions and arguments, and thereby facilitating more effective communication to the public, media and decision-makers</p>
Adversarial listening	Citizens listen to monitor the claims and activities of their opponents	<p><i>Reflective</i></p> <p>Building an awareness of what is going on</p> <p>Helping to develop counter-arguments and strategies</p>
Transformative listening	Citizens listen to the broader public to change people's views	<p><i>Communicative and reflective</i></p> <p>Inserting issues into the public consciousness</p> <p>Informing and mobilising the broader public</p>

does not necessarily lead to dialogue or even building bridges across difference, but it can enhance the discursive quality of the debate.

An overview of how these democratic functions relate to each listening mode we identified in the NGP case is provided in Table 1.

Notwithstanding these democratic functions, in our case study the combined effect of communicative listening amongst like-minded and strategic listening across difference appears to have taken a particular toll on local citizens. The NGP conflict is playing 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. These social dynamics require citizens to adopt various ‘coping mechanisms’ in the public to navigate their way around the polarised topic. For example, one widespread coping mechanism used by local residents of Narabri has been to withdraw from the public sphere. Some citizens in the NGP intentionally exclude themselves from listening in the public sphere because they do not want to be associated with the two extreme positions. Another widespread coping mechanism has been to ‘agree to disagree’. Citizens adopt this approach as a pragmatic response to polarisation—a way to preserve social ties and norms. However, this coping mechanism engenders a particularly shallow form of social listening that does not help the community reach common ground, or move the debate forward.

## Conclusion

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 and sites of political engagement, such as parties and voting, and engaging in more informal modes of political communication and participation (Norris 2011). The informal modes of horizontal listening between citizens play an important yet under-recognised role in the public sphere, especially in polarised contexts. Our empirical study demonstrates that in contemporary public spheres, citizens enact listening through a diverse range of listening practices and their motivations to listen to each other are mixed and nuanced. Some modes of listening such as enclave and alliance listening emulate many of the communicative norms celebrated by scholars of democratic listening, while other modes of listening, such as adversarial and transformative listening, are far more strategic and selective in nature.

Overall, our findings challenge the normative picture that democratic listening comes in two forms: strategic (bad) listening versus communicative (good) listening. We found that strategic forms of listening (across difference) are not necessarily all negative for the public sphere. Although they are not oriented towards a reaching common understanding or dialogue, they can nevertheless fulfil important (and hitherto unrecognised) democratic functions in polarised public spheres. In particular, we find that some strategic or selective forms of horizontal listening can play valuable connective and reflective functions in public debates.

Moving beyond our case study, these findings have important implications for identifying and improving the prospects for listening across difference in polarised controversies. We suggest that when strategic listening serves to fuel polarisation, formal and informal participatory mechanisms may be required to break down listening barriers and to foster more diverse and open-minded listening between multiple publics. This might involve convening specific participatory designs that bring together diverse voices, for example, by

selecting participants through stratified random sampling (e.g. Smith 2009; Suiter 2018). Similarly, less structured, more informal forms of citizen gatherings, for example, Kitchen Table Conversations (Victorian Women's Trust 2007), or even less structured everyday encounters such as those at sporting venues, show days, or local markets can also serve as promising spaces of listening across difference in the public sphere. Listening across difference might also be encouraged through performance, art and other visual media that encourage people to talk and discuss issues outside and beyond their enclaves (e.g. Denman-Cleaver 2013). These spaces can potentially offer citizens valuable resources to shift from 'coping with division' to 'learning across division'.

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