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Chapter 10

Dialogue of the Deaf: Listening on Twitter and Democratic Responsiveness during the 2015 South African State of the Nation Address

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Introduction

The 2015 South African State of the Nation Address (SONA) was widely hailed as South Africa's first social media event (du Plessis 2015). In response to accusations of corruption and a lack of responsiveness, the South African Presidency embarked on a social media listening exercise in the weeks leading up to the SONA. They invited contributions from the public on Twitter, asking users to make suggestions for what President Jacob Zuma should address in his speech. The public responded in a wave of over a thousand messages directed at the Presidency. Some asked the president to address specific issues that they were concerned about; yet many others dismissed the listening exercise as a sham, instead asking Zuma to resign and accusing him of corruption. But the SONA developed as a social media event in respects even less desirable to the Presidency. As the president's speech in the National Assembly came underway, it was disrupted by members of the opposition party the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and overtaken by tumultuous events. The Presidency responded with silence, and by silencing others through the blocking of the mobile telephone signal inside Parliament, thereby obstructing journalists from reporting on events, and censoring the public broadcaster SABC's coverage. The public's commentary on Twitter exploded, removing itself further from the Presidency's tightly controlled listening exercise and attempts to curb the media's account of events, thereby constructing its own forum for public debate and commentary. Meanwhile, the president remained silent, giving no sign of having heard the public outcries.

With the rise of networked technology and social media in particular, we have witnessed a revolution in the ability to speak. Through the integration of aspects of interpersonal communication, such as two-way dialogue, with the affordances associated with mass communication, social media tools enable many to gain access to a worldwide audience and to add their voice to collective conversations and campaigns. Collective speech on Twitter is enabled by the affordances of the platform such as 'favouriting', retweeting, @-mentioning and organising public conversation around hashtags. This ability to converge around, and add resonance to, a message has given Twitter an image in the public imagination as a tool for ordinary people to gain an influential voice, as a tool of bottom-up democratization. Academic Twitter studies have so far addressed questions of who is able to speak and their political participation in the networked public sphere (for example Dahlgren 2006, Hermida 2010, Ausserhofer & Maireder 2012). Yet, with the proliferation of hate speech and an increasingly polarised and fragmented citizenry, affording voice online also has its dark side (see, for example, Conover et al. 2011). We therefore find that more voices, and voice alone, do not necessarily produce better democracy. Moreover, while the availability of such new

affordances for communication by citizens raises both normative and practical questions, we must also address the question of whether anybody is listening. A concurrent renewed interest in listening in democratic theory therefore begs investigation of the implications of using Twitter as a political tool for improving listening by governments. Can it improve governmental responsiveness and government-citizen conversation in the face of public disaffection in representative democracies around the world, and how?

Listening is often employed by governments as a rhetorical exercise undertaken for instrumental reasons to boost popularity when it is at low ebb. Such disingenuous claims to listening risk dismissal and derision by increasingly cynical publics that are repeatedly subjected to governments' misleading gestures. In addition to asking whether anybody is listening, we must therefore also consider *how* they are listening. In this chapter we investigate the tension between growing voter disaffection at elections, the rising cacophony of political voices on social media, and governments' claims to listen – sincerely or instrumentally – on social media. To do so we analyse the run-up to the SONA 2015 as a case of an online listening exercise conducted by the South African Presidency in response to increased public tension in the country's democratic politics.

While South Africa experienced a relatively robust transition to democracy, the continued electoral dominance of the ruling African National Congress (ANC), the former anti-Apartheid liberation movement, presents long-term challenges to democratic health (Friedman 2005). Then-president Jacob Zuma's controversial use of public funds for upgrades to his personal Nkandla homestead caused an outcry in the press and on social media, with the hashtag #paybackthemoney rising to prominence in August 2014. The ANC government has further been facing rising accusations of a lack of responsiveness, with public service delivery protests bellowing in frustration across the country over recent years. While South Africa has experienced subsequent successful elections, the debate is not so much about whether democracy in South Africa will survive, but rather about the quality of that democracy (Southall 2001). Despite a vocal opposition, the ANC faces no credible threat at the polls. The danger is that it becomes an 'illiberal' democracy, performing the rituals of a procedural democracy without their substance (Giliomee et al. 2001). We therefore ask whether the Presidency's online listening exercise in the run-up to and during the SONA in 2015 is just such an empty performance of the rituals of procedural democracy, or whether it constitutes a deliberative engagement in listening. We further consider what role Twitter plays in this exercise, and whether it has the potential to realise good listening practice.

We start by reviewing the emerging body of literature on democratic listening and on listening and social media. We argue that good listening goes beyond a procedural approach to democracy in which listening is restricted to a set of formal procedures. Rather, good listening involves 'listening to' as well as 'listening out for' (Waks, 2010) new and unexpected voices and issues on an ongoing basis and valuing the listening exercise as part of the democratic process in and of itself (Dobson 2014). We go on to outline a mixed-methods approach to Twitter analysis that integrates hashtag analysis with the qualitative following of key actors and interpretive analysis of their posts. We consider Twitter posts not in isolation but as part of the wider media ecology and as responses to, and part of a conversation with, offline events. We then move on to our analysis of the Presidency's listening exercise on Twitter and the public's engagement in, and responses to, it. We finally conclude by reflecting on Twitter's potential as a tool for good government-citizen listening.

A communication perspective on the quality of democracy: the role of listening

Social media are changing the ways in which governments and citizens can engage in dialogue. While the majority of research in the field of political communication has focused on the ways in which Twitter has enabled ordinary citizens to achieve a stronger voice in democratic politics, a new focus on listening in democratic theory (see, for example, Coleman 2013, Couldry 2010, Crawford 2009b, Dobson 2014, Lacey 2013, Macnamara 2015, Waller et al. 2015) offers an alternative perspective with which to gauge conversations on social media and their potential to influence and improve the quality of democracy. As an established dimension of the measure of the quality of democracy (Diamond & Morlino 2005), responsiveness can be judged by citizens' ability to give voice to their concerns and opinions and by governments' responses to those concerns. Yet most of the normative perspectives in the emerging literature on democratic listening see a procedural perspective that concentrates on the formal rules that enable such responsiveness – aggregating citizens' preferences and transforming them into policy outputs – as insufficient.

What is missing is the importance of the quality of communication and deliberation for understanding the quality of democracy. Blumler and Coleman (2015), for instance, aim for more balance between top-down and bottom-up inputs in an ongoing process of public dialogue that goes beyond regular elections. In this sense, a focus on listening normatively points to a process-oriented approach to democracy that considers the way in which democratic decisions are taken – rather than the formal requirements and outcomes of listening – as the basis of democratic legitimacy (Dobson 2014: 172-3). As an ongoing process of representative democracy, listening then has the potential to improve responsiveness from being confined to electoral procedures and instead become an integral part of governance (Dobson 2014).

Such good listening requires three things. First, it must be sincere in its aim of dialogue. Listening that conceives of the audience as consumers and followers is 'a misleading gesture: more a cultivated appearance of listening than an experience of sharing ideas' (Coleman 2004: 118). False claims to listen are often made by governments when their legitimacy is at low ebb, a last-ditch resort to regain legitimacy in the face of accusations of a lack of responsiveness. Rather than improving the quality of democracy, such instrumentalism may only cause public cynicism to spiral (Macnamara 2015).

Second, good listening resists the inclination to preconceive the nature, values and opinions of those being listened to. Dobson (2014) thus argues that good listening is characterised by 'apophatic' listening rather than 'cataphatic' listening. Apophatic listening resists the temptation 'to hear what is said through pre-existing interpretive frames, and especially those which are the result of the exercise and reproduction of power' (*ibid*.: 108). In contrast, it is as much about 'listening out for' previously unheard voices and issues as it is about 'listening to'. It is, according to Dobson, the key to solving the mistrust and apathy that characterises democracy today.

Third, as a means of approaching the conflicts inherent in politics, good listening does not necessarily require agreement with the speaker's point of view. Rather, it allows for the conflicts and differences inherent in politics to result in joint action (Bickford 1996), and this is what makes it so important to democratic practice. However, while good listening does not demand agreement, it is an active process (Crawford 2009a): it requires interpersonal performance (Goffman 1959) in the

form of responses such as confirmatory gestures, eye contact, clarifying questioning, and so on. For the public to appreciate and evaluate apophatic listening by their representatives, the representatives must *be seen* to listen, not just to agree (Crawford 2009a). In this study we therefore understand listening as 'the process of receiving and constructing meaning from spoken and/or non-verbal messages and responding in some way' (Purdy & Borisoff 1996: 6).

As a form of interpersonal communication, such apophatic listening has been challenging to perform at scale in modern representative democracies. According to some scholars, however, innovations in networked technologies and social media are now giving cause for hope. Crawford (2009b), for instance, has developed the concept of listening as a way to describe the act of paying attention online, a dynamic process of networked engagement. The affordances of social media can thus provide the tools for listening, and for being seen to listen, for example through 'favouriting'/'liking' or retweeting as a confirmatory gesture, through replying to seek clarification and develop dialogue, and through engaging in hashtagged polylogue that involves multiple and multi-directional conversations between groups of networked citizens.

Other scholars, however, temper the excitement incited by the democratising potential of social media as a tool for good listening at scale. Indeed, Dobson dismisses social media as a tool for listening entirely, arguing that, despite their promises to the contrary, they usually function as 'stages from which to declaim, rather than to listen' (2014: 185) (which, incidentally, is consistent with an emerging body of literature on self-(re)presentation on social media; see, for example, Thumim 2012). According to Dobson, social media messages are rarely truly understood or contributing to meaningful dialogue. Moreover, while networked technologies lead us to question the quality of listening they afford, they also offer increased potential for instrumental listening. Social media's affordances enable listeners to, for instance, hide behind avatars (their online incarnations) and perform what Crawford terms 'delegated listening' where politicians 'outsource their online presence to staff [who] are not really listening, nor are they fully engaging with that community of users' (2009b: 531). We should thus also be suspicious of the use of those 'easy' social media affordances that stand in for confirmatory interpersonal gestures, such as 'favouriting' or retweeting, as they may merely be signs of superficial engagement that is unlikely to further apophatic listening, understanding or deliberation.

The potential of technology for improving listening practice comes down to not only its affordances and norms of use, which indeed offer mixed promises, but also to the intentions that lie behind its deployment. These may be instrumental, or they may be genuinely democratising. In the words of Coleman, 'communication technologies can transmit signals, but cannot automatically or deterministically reconfigure relationships' (2004: 113). A renewal of the relationship between representatives and the represented requires a genuine commitment to apophatic listening, as well as the tools to carry it out. We now turn to the case of the South African State of the Nation Address 2015. We consider not only how the affordances of social media were employed by the Presidency for their listening exercise, but also how the Presidency's level of commitment revealed itself through their practices and resulted in very particular reactions from users.

Methods

In order to answer these questions, we engaged in systematic analysis of the conversations initiated by the South African Presidency in the run-up to and performance of the 2015 State of the Nation

Address[1]. We employed a bespoke Twitter analysis tool, Mecodify[2], to retrospectively capture two interconnected data sets. The first dataset was compiled by 'follow(ing) the actors' (Marcus 1995) in order to capture conversations between the South African Presidency and Twitter users before and during the president's speech. We did this by capturing all tweets sent by the official Presidency Twitter account @PresidencyZA and Jacob Zuma's personal Twitter account @SApresident from 1 to 12 February 2015, as well as responses sent to those tweets during the same period.

The time period was chosen based on the Presidency's[3] listening exercise, from their first invitation on 1 February to submit suggestions of topics to be addressed in the president's speech until and including the actual speech on February 12 when the Presidency tweeted feedback to individual contributors as a means of closing the exercise. In the case of responses to the two Presidency accounts, it is to be noted that our data set is limited to replies to the tweets themselves, rather than, for instance, @mentions of the accounts, and to replies made within the period of our search parameters, that is 1 February at 00:00 hours to 12 February at 23:59 hours.

Second, we studied the wider public conversation around the event of the SONA in the same period by collecting all tweets using the hashtag #SONA2015, capturing over 145,000 tweets (over 345,000 including retweets). This allowed us to set the Presidency's activity within the context of wider public debate and to gauge the Presidency's relative influence and activity level within this conversation. We used the same tool to visualise influential actors, hashtags, relationships between the Presidency accounts and members of the public, and peaks in activity over time in this dataset in order to understand how these peaks corresponded to offline events.

We analysed the conversation dynamics between citizens and the Presidency Twitter accounts in order to evaluate the latter's claim to listen and Twitter users' reactions to that claim through their replies to the Presidency's tweets. For this purpose we applied a qualitative coding scheme to the actor-based data set, based on the theory of democratic listening discussed above, which we developed through iterative data analysis (see appendix). We then analysed the content of the messages sent in response to the Presidency's request, the Presidency's response to those suggestions and subsequent follow-ups during the actual speech, as well as citizens' responses to, and evaluations of, this listening exercise. We followed links to press releases and news stories

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[1] Although the campaign was conducted on Twitter and Facebook, our analysis concentrates on Twitter as a platform more geared towards public communication and that best enables decentralised public polylogue through hashtagged conversations.

[2] See official web page http://mecodem.eu/mecodify and documentation in the GitHub repository at https://github.com/wsaqaf/mecodify/blob/master/manual.md. The tool is freely available. Using Mecodify's web search method for data collection produces results that mirror those that emerge using a web search through Twitter's Advanced Search page (https://twitter.com/search-advanced). According to Twitter's own documentation, this method behaves similarly to, but not exactly like, Twitter's Search API. Hence, there is no guarantee that all tweets will be returned. However, it has been demonstrated through extensive testing that the search results obtained through Mecodify do match those returned through Twitter's search form.

[3] We use 'the Presidency' to refer to the office of the president and hence as a catch-all term for both the Presidency's and the president's Twitter accounts, @PresidencyZA and @SAPresident respectively. We refer to either individual account by using the account name.

contained in the sampled tweets and responses in order to capture the broader conversation. We also retraced activity by users mentioned by these accounts and analysed conversations that evolved between respondents to the tweets. We further zoomed in on selected conversations initiated by the two Presidency accounts on Twitter that were key to promoting and engaging in their listening exercise. These were: @PresidencyZA's call for suggestions on 1 February, @PresidencyZA's list of suggested topics on 5 February, @SAPresident's thank you for suggestions on 12 February, and @PresidencyZA's five tweets on 12 February during Zuma's speech, which @-mentioned citizens who contributed suggestions on the topics of jobs, energy, education, crime and corruption (see *Figure 10.1*).

[FIGURE 10.1 ABOUT HERE]

We evaluated the extent to which the ensuing dialogue between the Presidency and citizens could be deemed to constitute apophatic listening. For this purpose, we considered the extent to which the Presidency 'listened to' and 'listened out for' citizens' suggestions and reactions. To evaluate whether they 'listened to' citizens on Twitter, we adopted Dobson's (2014: 87) criteria of 'the length of the listening exercise… and the way in which views are taken into account', that is, the length and depth of the listening exercise. To evaluate whether they 'listened out for' previously unheard members of the public, we considered 'the effort expended on drawing in and reaching out to participants' (*ibid*.), that is, the breadth of the listening exercise.

The South African Presidency's claim to listen through Twitter

In this section we analyse the Presidency's claim to listen and the execution of their exercise on Twitter. We argue that the listening exercise was a failure in apophatic listening as it did not demonstrate any features of listening to or listening out for citizen voices. In making this assessment we consider whether the Presidency were seen to listen and we take into account the extent and nature of the public engagement that their listening exercise inspired.

Listening to

'What would you like President Zuma to say in the State of the Nation Address? Tweet your suggestions to @PresidencyZA #SONA2015' (PresidencyZA 2015a).

The Presidency's initial call for input from citizens on 1 February (above) represented President Zuma as a conduit for citizens' voices. The Presidency received significant attention on Twitter following this call for input. We can measure the extent to which the public sought to get the attention of the Presidency through the number of 'mentions', that is, the number of times citizens included the Presidency's account name in their tweets to ensure the Presidency received notification of what they said. Indeed, when we look at the most mentioned accounts on Twitter in the period (*Figure 10.2*), the Presidency tops the list by a huge margin. The second and fifth most mentioned accounts are Mmusi Maimane, leader of the opposition party Democratic Alliance, and Parliament's official account; the third and fourth accounts on the list are a celebrity (comedian Chester Missing) and a commercial outlet (fast food restaurant Nando's).

[FIGURE 10.2 ABOUT HERE]

Despite public efforts to get the Presidency's attention, it is not clear that the Presidency actually listened to the many suggestions sent by the public on Twitter. During the length of the listening

exercise, from 1 February to the end of the SONA on 12 February, both the Presidency and the President himself did little to demonstrate that they heard or understood what was being said by citizens: they gave practically no sign of listening. A network visualisation of responses to and from @PresidencyZA demonstrates this almost entirely unidirectional mode of communication. The red edges in the diagram in *Figure 10.3* constitute tweets directed to @PresidencyZA while any blue lines would have indicated tweets directed by @PresidencyZA to others: there is virtually no response from @PresidencyZA to any of the tweets they received.

[FIGURE 10.3 ABOUT HERE]

Neither did the Presidency use any of Twitter's more superficially dialogic affordances for demonstrating listening, such as 'favouriting' or retweeting. This lack of visible listening was reflected in the content of replies by the public to the Presidency's tweets. In response to @PresidencyZA's call for suggestions, one citizen, for instance, demonstrated acute awareness of the dangers of delegated listening afforded by Twitter: 'What's the point? Its not like #Zuma reads any of these tweets!' (Twitter user 1 2015).

Over the course of the listening exercise, the level of public engagement dropped, with replies to Presidency tweets dropping from 623 to 19. Further, of those who did participate in dialogue, the rate of dismissive, as opposed to engaged, responses rose steadily. In response to the initial call for suggestions on 1 February, 55 per cent of the replies constructively engaged with the listening exercise. Such replies suggested issues for Zuma to address or provided targeted critique of specific policies or situations, suggesting for instance to lower the cost of education, concentrate on the electricity crisis and address homophobia. In contrast, 43 per cent of replies to @PresidencyZA's call for suggestions were dismissive of the exercise[4], attacking Zuma personally by asking him to resign (17 per cent of replies) or to 'pay back the money' (14 per cent of replies), or dismissing the Presidency's claim to listen as a sham. In the response to Zuma's follow up 'thank you' tweet on 12 February, dismissive engagement had risen to 46 per cent, with some responses being outright aggressive, for example 'the best thing you can do is resign. U r a cancer' (Twitter user 2 2015). Finally, in response to the Presidency's final tweet during Zuma's live speech mentioning members of the public that had contributed suggestions, public engagement dropped to a mere 19 replies, which were all dismissive of the president (*Figure 10.4*).

[FIGURE 10.4 ABOUT HERE]

Meanwhile, the conversation on #SONA2015 elsewhere on Twitter rose to unprecedented levels for a South African media event (*Figure 10.5*), giving rise to or reengaging such hashtags as #zumamustgo and #paybackthemoney.

[FIGURE 10.5 ABOUT HERE]

What started out as a considerable and, for the most part, constructive engagement in the Presidency's listening exercise thus gradually deteriorated in response to what the public perceived as an inauthentic or insufficient performance of listening. Towards the end, the public response was

[4] We categorised 2 per cent of replies as unrelated.

split between superficial support and a decline in dialogic engagement. Indeed, many of those who did engage qualitatively designated the Presidency's exercise as instrumental. For instance, in response to @PresidencyZA's final tweet of 'President Zuma now addresses corruption' (PresidencyZA 2015b), one citizen commented, 'Excellent! Will he now address resigning as suggested by @EveryoneWhoLovesSA?' (Twitter user 3).

There was also little evidence of the Presidency's *depth* of listening. We looked for evidence in the Presidency's engagement in dialogue with citizens making suggestions, for instance through asking clarifying questions, or in detailed distinctions between opposing viewpoints. In this respect the Presidency's follow-up communications had very little depth. First, a 5 February tweet (PresidencyZA 2015c) (linking to a press release) presented a summary list of one- or two-word 'dominant issues' which did not attempt to resolve or even recognise differences in citizens' policy suggestions or points of view. The topic summarised by the Presidency as 'land ownership', for example, did not truly acknowledge or resolve contrasting perspectives among citizens. Some suggested that 'land expropriation…become a reality' (Twitter user 4) in contrast to those who saw 'land expropriation without compensation' (Twitter user 5) as the real problem. By ignoring the nuances – and outright opposing viewpoints – of these different approaches using the summary 'land ownership' even in the linked-to press release, the conversation lost any deliberative value. The lack of listening evident from this is summed up by one citizen on the jobs issue, correcting @PresidencyZA's tweet to the effect that Zuma had 'mentioned, not addressed' (Twitter user 6) the issue.

Second, the Presidency sent a sequence of five tweets during Zuma's live speech. Each tweet acknowledged a few selected Twitter users who had made suggestions of topics that Zuma was covering in his address, for example, 'President Zuma addresses jobs as suggested by @siphiwe965, @Nkomati, @BavuyileM' (PresidencyZA 2015d). Whereas these five tweets served to establish direct contact with some of the citizens who had made suggestions, they engaged with a tiny fraction of those members of the public who participated in the listening exercise. Moreover, like the topics in the press release, the tweets did not describe Zuma's position on, or solution to, these issues. This may be partly due to the affordances of Twitter where the 140 character limit does not allow this level of detail. Yet the tweets were also shorter than need be, some using less than half the characters available. In contrast, many of the suggestions by citizens managed to effectively use the affordances of Twitter to convey a relatively high level of specificity and detail and to express a clear personal stance.

The Presidency's brief, vague tweets can thus be seen as a deliberate choice to not engage in more deliberative dialogue. Instead they used the posting of the five tweets as a claim in and of itself that the listening process was successful by demonstrating the outcome in the form of topics mentioned in Zuma's speech. In doing so, the Presidency adopted a procedural approach to listening by following the formal requirements of listening without substantive engagement with citizens; and they did so to a very limited, even token, extent. In their dialogue with citizens, the Presidency proved that the listening exercise had taken place without engaging in apophatic listening that would improve deliberation and dialogue at a deeper level.

Indeed, few of the citizens mentioned by @PresidencyZA in their five live tweets during Zuma's speech felt encouraged to use the opportunity for further dialogue provided by Twitter's affordances. Neither did the Presidency encourage this in their single-word summaries of issues

when mentioning selected citizens. Two of the citizens mentioned expressed general gratitude and were clearly deeply affected by the personal contact, for example, '@PresidencyZA feeling so humble. If what I've said makes sense to Mr President' (Twitter user 7). Another citizen (Twitter user 8) did not reply directly but rather retweeted the Presidency's tweet with their name mentioned and also tweeted an Instagram picture of the Presidency's mention. In doing so, this user conformed to the social norms of Twitter usage in the form of self-promotion and -declamation, avoiding further direct contact with the Presidency. In this case, it is thus clear that even where the listening exercise was appreciated by those few citizens who had been mentioned, these citizens did not expect or attempt further deliberative dialogue with the Presidency. Rather, the affordances of Twitter here only contributed to the democratising potential of listening in the very narrow sense that it allowed self-promotion by ordinary members of the public as well as by the Presidency.

While the Presidency's listening demonstrated very limited depth and resulted in declining participation, it did on occasion inspire instances of dialogic engagement between citizens themselves. In one case, for example, one of the accounts (Twitter user 9) mentioned in the Presidency's tweet about the topic of crime engaged in a rather extensive exchange with another tweeter (Twitter user 10):

> Twitter user 10: what about 1000 asking him to resign. Deaf to the truth
>
> Twitter user 9: @TwitterUser10 mxm[5] seemingly u don't understand how politics works ne.
>
> Twitter user 10: @TwitterUser9 politics I know thugs & thieves not do much. Zuma & his puppets bring the latter.
>
> Twitter user 9: @TwitterUser10 regardless of that people voted for him. He is going no where. U better start accepting it
>
> Twitter user 10: @TwitterUser9 maybe u ok with the dictator, police state, corrupt thieving gov, but trust me the honest ppl of SA or not
>
> Twitter user 10: @TwitterUser9 clinging to power the same as NP [National Party governing during Apartheid]. Look what happens to them.

Although brief, contentious and conducted within the affordances of Twitter, this dialogue engaged with some core democratic issues concerning the meaning of democratic representation and the validity and authenticity of the president's claim to listen. Twitter user 9 clearly has a procedural view of representative democracy. According to this perspective, the participatory role of citizens is limited to elections, and representatives ought to be left to get on with their jobs in between these key events. Twitter user 10, however, adopts a more process-oriented perspective, expecting representatives to be accountable at all times and citizens to have a stronger and continuous voice. As a result, she evaluates Zuma's government as autocratic and his listening exercise as a sham. Such examples of dialogue demonstrate the potential that listening and deliberation on Twitter could have had, in a more sincerely undertaken listening exercise.

[5] 'Mxm' means 'The clicking of one's tongue to show attitude' as used in texts or online (Urban Dictionary n.d.).

Listening out for

In our analysis of whether the Presidency *listened out for* the unexpected and previously unheard, such as new voices or suggestions that did not fit pre-existing categories, we consider the breadth of their listening exercise. For instance, we analyse whether they chose to ignore certain voices or issues and how they responded to suggestions from the public.

The limited signs of listening offered by the Presidency suggest an attempt to control and narrow the terms of the listening exercise. On 5 February the Presidency summarised what they defined as the 'dominant' issues by producing a list of some of the suggested topic areas in a press release and tweeting it. The list contained the standard topics of any state of the nation address, such as jobs, energy and crime, and excluded more controversial, marginal and critical suggestions. However useful or constructive, such suggestions were ignored. For instance, one user tweeted 'why do we remain among the most expensive countries in the world for Internet access[?] - slowing economic growth' (Twitter user 11). Although the tweet was retweeted by others to indicate support and agreement, its topic was not acknowledged by the Presidency.

The Presidency's next response to public input only came on the morning of the SONA from Zuma's personal account: 'thanks to all those who sent *constructive* suggestions on issues to address for #SONA2015' (SAPresident 2015; our emphasis). The hundreds of Twitter users calling for the president to resign and/or to 'pay back the money' associated with Zuma's corruption scandal in response to the request for suggestions were ignored and dismissed as irrelevant to the listening exercise. These replies were so plentiful that they developed some of the most prominent hashtags in our sample, such as #paybackthemoney and #zumamustgo and amounted to 43 per cent of initial suggestions. In dismissing these calls for his resignation and for ending corruption as illegitimate and as not taking his listening exercise seriously, the Presidency did not demonstrate apophatic listening or an attempt to engage in dialogue. Instead, they actively confined the listening exercise to those suggestions that they deemed 'constructive' (that is, favourable to them), allowing the Presidency to set the terms of the debate. In doing so, they also put the onus of process-oriented democratic listening onto the public rather than themselves.

Significantly, this was the only tweet sent by Zuma's personal account in the period. The shift in sender is indicative of a personalization strategy designed to give the appearance of Zuma having listened personally to the public's suggestions, in response to accusations of delegated and inauthentic listening. Yet this attempt at upholding the Presidency's listening claim had limited success; replies from members of the public were mostly dismissive, adopting a cynical or sarcastic tone: 'Not 1 suggestion will be used' (Twitter user 12) and 'like you really care' (Twitter user 13) were typical responses. The Presidency's attempts to be seen to listen were thus very feeble indeed, and the public responded accordingly.

In addition to failing to listen out for unexpected or non-dominant issues, the Presidency also failed to listen out for previously unheard or non-dominant voices. Although we cannot in this study conclude on any activities the Presidency may have undertaken outside the sphere of Twitter, it is important to note here that, generally speaking, the voices of the poorest and most marginalised in

South African society would not be able to participate in these conversations on Twitter[6]. Further, a remarkable omission by the Presidency indicates wilful disregard of non-dominant voices. In all mainstream media accounts of the SONA, and in the #SONA2015 conversation on Twitter on 12 February and in the days that followed, a spectacular disruption of the SONA by the small opposition party Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and subsequent tumult when security was called in was by far the dominant topic and angle. Police forcibly removed EFF members from the National Assembly, raising concerns that police had acted illegally and unconstitutionally and leading to the main opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (DA), staging a walkout in protest of the use of police. Cellphone blocking devices were used by Parliament preventing journalists from posting information from their cellphones; and broadcasters were not allowed to show what was happening during the live television broadcast of the event. At no point, however, did the Presidency acknowledge or mention these significant and tumultuous events on the ground, choosing simply to pretend they had not happened. Instead, @PresidencyZA resurfaced the morning after the conflict with a picture of President Zuma playing golf.

The Presidency's listening exercise was in many ways the perfect example of a cataphatic approach. The Presidency used pre-existing analytical frames to fit in what they wanted to hear from the citizenry and either tried to ignore or bury the rest. There seemed to be no potential for surprise from new voices or topics. Truly deliberative procedures, in contrast, are unpredictable in terms of outcomes because the listener exposes him- or herself to the possibility of a decision they might not initially favour, and their process of engagement in apophatic listening is active and visible. In this case, however, members of the elite decided the terms of debate and interpreted contributions to it on those terms. As Dobson (2014: 8) argues, where apophatic listening involves conferring power on those being listened to, refusing to listen to unwanted categories and suggestions is in and of itself an expression of power. The Presidency's listening exercise was in this respect instrumental, intending to give the appearance of attributing power to the people in the face of accusations of lacking responsiveness, yet through doing so instead serving its own hold on power.

Conclusion

It is in the context of the threat of empty democratic rituals that we locate the conversation about the SONA in the run-up to the event in February 2015. We asked whether the exercise in listening by the South African Presidency constituted good listening as defined by Dobson's term of 'apophatic' listening. We found that the listening exercise constituted a token performance for two key reasons: firstly, because the Presidency failed to truly hear what was being said by citizens due to the lack of length and depth of the exercise; secondly, because they failed to listen out for previously unheard voices and issues due to the lack of breadth of the exercise. Engagement was limited to a 12-day period in which the Presidency took suggestions. The Presidency gave very little sign of listening during this period. They engaged in no deliberative dialogue, only addressing members of the public in empty gestures; and they narrowly set the terms of debate to predefined frames of reference. Following the Presidency's tweets as a conversation between the South African government and its citizens, we are provided with a stark image of the inauthentic performance in which the government was engaging. The lack of meaningful engagement with citizens was then mirrored in

[6] There are 7.4 million Twitter users in South Africa, representing only 14 per cent of the South African population; there are 13 million Facebook users (World Wide Worx, 2016).

the parliamentary chambers where journalists were prevented from reporting events and security personnel were directed to violently eject members who vocally opposed the president during his speech.

This exercise was clearly a failure in apophatic listening, but it was also a failure in instrumental listening. With a steady decline in both quantitative and qualitative engagement by the public, citizens on Twitter exposed the inauthenticity of the Presidency's claim to listen. Instead, the conversation among members of the public evolved and climaxed outside the terms of the Presidency's exercise, in direct response to the government's authoritarian attempts to control events on the ground. For instance, in response to the government's use of cell phone signal jamming, the South African Twittersphere was set alight in a roar of outrage, with citizens demanding that they be listened to in their call to #bringbackthesignal. And while the Presidency failed to engage in meaningful dialogue with Twitter users, they deliberated amongst themselves.

The question remains as to whether Twitter can ever be used as a tool for meaningful dialogue by governments. Even with the best intentions, could listening ever occur on social media platforms like Twitter where messages are limited to a mere 140 characters[7] and where the focus of activity is on broadcasting announcements and identities rather than engaging in dialogue? It is important to note here that it is essentially impossible to separate voice from listening. Wherever there is an articulation or expression, there will be the potential for listening, however limited. The question then becomes one of how the tool can be used to enable listening in any meaningful way, given the essential commitment to the learning exercise.

We see three key opportunities for using Twitter – as part of a broader set of tools – to engage in apophatic listening: by providing feedback on the fate of responses and being seen to listen, by using Twitter to listen out for voices on the edge of society (with the important limitation of these voices being limited to those on Twitter), and by ensuring that government leaders engage directly with a segment of the citizenry.

First, one feature of active listening that is essential in order to be recognised as a genuine attempt at engagement is feedback on the fate of unsuccessful requests or suggestions. In this case, the Presidency only provided feedback to signal that they had been listening through the press release that contained a short list of 25 issues highlighted by the social media conversation and in the five tweets highlighting particular users whose identification of issues matched those the president covered in his speech. Of the handful of citizens that @PresidencyZA responded to, there was one in particular who replied in a way that demonstrated that she actually did feel heard and was grateful for it, actively defending President Zuma against attack by other citizens. Those who expected more from the Presidency, those who identified issues, problems and priorities that did not make it to the final speech, and those who dismissed the exercise entirely were simply ignored. The Presidency may not have been able to reply to every user (although the numbers in this case did not make it impossible to do so), but they could have done a better job of reflecting all responses in more depth and in acknowledging and following up dismissive and negative responses.

[7] During September 2017 Twitter experimentally allowed a small group of users the ability to tweet with 280 instead of 140 characters.

Second, deeper engagement with users who represented non-dominant groups in South African society could have contributed to apophatic listening. Twitter can here be seen as a 'listening post' for democracy (Coleman 2005) but with a particular focus on those at the edges of society. Listening out for alternative, oppositional or even supportive messages and then engaging with selected individuals from non-dominant groups could be a powerful way of modelling democratic dialogue using the affordances of Twitter for conversation at scale. By engaging with those at the edges, democratic dialogue would be modelled for other Twitter users (and the media) to witness and follow. Such engagement could involve replying to users with particular sets of questions or inviting them to further face-to-face focus group discussions. Importantly, however, and especially in a society with a digital divide as deep as South Africa's, listening can never be contained in social media alone and must be supplemented by face-to-face engagement with citizens on the other side of the digital divide. Twitter can be seen as a platform for starting conversations that are then extended in, and supplemented by, arenas more conducive to deeper dialogue and collaborative problem solving; but Twitter is still a platform for the elite and must never stand in for dialogue representing the needs of the entire population.

Thirdly, in the case of the SONA, many citizens indicated that they did not believe that the president was actually reading/listening to their tweets and that their effort was pointless because the exercise constituted delegated listening. In order to succeed as an exercise in active listening, at least some of the messages sent and received on official Twitter accounts need to be sent by the officials themselves. In the United States, President Obama, for example, signed those of the tweets that he personally sent from his official account with 'BO' so that the authorship of the account was clear.

Our analysis of the SONA case demonstrates that a large proportion of tweets adopted a humorous and cynical tone in response to the Presidency's exercise. This is indicative of the norms of use of Twitter, which is perceived by its users as a democratising platform in the sense that it provides a non-hierarchical space in which to criticise the elite. However, it is less recognised as a platform for constructive, dialogic engagement with elites. This very particular culture of democracy on Twitter requires an even more clearly demonstrated commitment to listening from the elite where they visibly engage with citizens at their own level. In the case of the SONA, President Zuma would have done well to respond similarly to at least some of the individual tweets, rather than limiting his response to a single tweet of general 'thank you' and further confining himself to what he deemed 'constructive' suggestions. Engagement with at least some individual users is akin to stopping to talk to one or two people in a crowd of citizens in the street and would demonstrate commitment to the process of listening.

In conclusion, governments' listening exercises on Twitter represent both opportunities and threats to democratic dialogue. On the one hand, social media listening represents a potential for governments to listen to previously unheard voices and represent those voices in decision-making that affects citizens. Recognised as one forum among many in which listening exercises can take place, Twitter can be used by governments as one of a range of venues for apophatic listening, given the transparency by which claims are made and responded to on the platform. Unlike other forums for democratic dialogue and exchange, dialogue on Twitter is available for witnessing by many others and over time. Rather than dismissing social media as an inherent problem for democracy, we argue that it may provide fertile ground for governments to practice listening in a manner that

serves a more positive relationship with citizens in democratic societies. On the other hand, poorly performed listening campaigns can result in spiralling frustration among citizens that they are not being heard and further entrenchment of the position of elite groups in society. Which future this takes will be decided by whether social media dialogues are seen as instrumental and an end in themselves or as the beginning of a larger conversation.

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Appendix: Qualitative Coding Scheme

All replies to Presidency tweets were categorised according to their function. Based on Macnamara's notion of instrumental listening and Dobson's argument of the risk of listening 'too late' in the case of cynical publics, we also summarised the function of the tweets according to whether they dismissed or engaged with the listening process attempted by Zuma:

[TABLE 10.1 HERE]

The categories were derived inductively and then distilled. Self-promotions were classified as dismissal of Zuma's listening exercise. Calls for Zuma to resign or 'pay back the money' were consistently categorised as a dismissal of Zuma as illegitimate, rather than as constructive critique of a specific situation. The summary categories of dismissal and engagement in the second column refer to the public's reactions to the Presidency's performance of listening: do they take it seriously as an attempt to engage in dialogue as part of the democratic process, or do they dismiss it as a rhetorical exercise or as too late?

In addition, we categorised each tweet according to its tone, using the following categories: humorous, polite, serious, cynical, hopeful, aggressive, pleading. We allowed the allocation of more than one of these categories per tweet.