

ARTICLE

Methodological reflections on radio and podcast listenership in political geography

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Abstract

This paper makes a novel intervention in political geography by offering methodological reflections on contemporary radio and podcast listenership. It begins from the starting point that radio and podcasts are important and popular sites of geographical knowledge production with the power to shape how audiences understand, imagine and engage in the world. The paper heeds calls in critical and popular geopolitics to move away from the site of representation towards audience reception and presents the 'playlist-diary' method as an innovative way of exploring listener responses to BBC radio journalism on migration. This method is then used as a springboard to think more broadly about everyday encounters with radio and podcasts. It argues that situating audience engagements within specific spatialities and temporalities, and considering the digital technologies and platforms through which audio is discovered, consumed and circulated, is critical to developing a nuanced understanding of radio and podcast geopolitics. This discussion reflects growing interest in materialities, networks and assemblages of popular geopolitics and points to a blurring of visual and aural media. Overall, the paper makes the case for amplifying methodologies of listening in political geography and aims to be a catalyst to future scholarship on radio and podcasts.

KEYWORDS

everyday geographies, geopolitics, listening, playlist-diary method, podcasts, radio

1 | INTRODUCTION

Despite fears that radio would simply fade away in a digital age, listenership remains significant and buoyant. BBC Radio 2 is the UK's most popular station with 13.5 million listeners, followed by Radio 4 with 9.3 million and 5 Live with 5.6 million (Maher, 2023). These figures speak to the enduring popularity of music, speech and sports broadcasting, with radio forming a key source of news and entertainment for large segments of the population. It mirrors global trends, too, as radio 'remains the most widely consumed medium' worldwide (United Nations, n.d.). Accessibility and affordability mean that radio has low barriers to entry and reaches well connected and remote communities alike (Maniewicz, 2022).

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At the turn of the twenty-first century, Shingler and Wieringa (1998, p. ix) identified radio as ‘one of the world’s most pervasive mass media ... heard by millions of people every minute of every day’, and their observation still rings true today.

Radio plays a role in many people’s lives at times of mundanity, celebration and crisis. Pinkerton (2014, p. 58) argues it has the ability to ‘accompany and narrate every moment of modern life’, while Hendy (2000, p. 3) notes that radio is ‘simply there in the background, almost all the time’. These observations capture radio’s ubiquitous status, reinforcing why many have characterised it as a vehicle for soft power (Pinkerton & Dodds, 2009). Reflecting on the early days of broadcasting, Scannell (1988, p. 20) suggests ‘in moments of national crisis, mourning, or celebration [radio] became compulsive listening for the whole population’. But even today, radio continues to attract mass audiences on national and banal occasions. Closs Stephens (2016) discusses the role of the media in constructing affective atmospheres of nationalism during the 2012 London Olympics. Although she singles out television and social media, the Games was widely consumed via the radio which played an important part in transmitting sporting events and circulating ‘the “happy atmospheres” of being together’ (Closs Stephens, 2016, p. 181). The COVID-19 pandemic is a more recent event which witnessed substantial radio listenership. The BBC’s director of Radio and Education, James Purnell, explained that ‘people turn to us during significant events for our news and analysis but also for music, entertainment and companionship’ (BBC News, 2020). The latter has historical precedent as Fox (2004, p. 95) remarks that ‘in wartime, as at other moments of crisis, there is a need to create unity ... to make the individual feel part of something greater’, concluding that radio played ‘an essential role in community building’. Coffey (2022) points to the pandemic as a contemporary example of the sociality of listenership, arguing ‘local radio performed a vital public service’, offering ‘news, analysis, entertainment and, most importantly, companionship to nearly 6 million listeners’. This popularity was primarily among older, often isolated, listeners but speaks to the affective impacts of radio and its ability to construct imagined communities of identity, citizenship and belonging (Anderson, 1983).

Like all media, as well as establishing connection, radio can also spark division. Waterson (2020) discusses the rising popularity of commercial speech radio in the UK and its role in bringing ‘culture wars to the airwaves’. This opinion-led journalism shares many similarities with the US media landscape by focusing ‘on a small number of hot issues, while encouraging hosts to become personalities, wear their biases on their sleeves, and confront guests head-on’ (Waterson, 2020). Not shy of airing their views, presenters such as James O’Brien on LBC and Julia Hartley-Brewer on talkRADIO are strident and outspoken, tackling social, cultural and political topics with little attempt to disguise their personal persuasions. Broadcasts are also interactive and participatory, encouraging listeners to phone in and engage in provocative debates with hosts. This style of broadcasting contrasts with the sound and tone of much BBC radio journalism, particularly the carefully orchestrated Radio 4, given its editorial commitments to impartiality. Although reaching smaller audiences, commercial stations like LBC and talkSport still attract around 3 million listeners (Maher, 2023). But as Pinkerton and Dodds (2009, p. 23) perceptively observe, ‘audience share does not provide sufficient nuance in terms of judging listening habits and emotional investment’.

While established media, such as radio, remain popular, new media like podcasts are shaping how news, current affairs and popular culture are communicated and consumed. Dodds (2007, p. 171) predicted that ‘the internet and associated practices such as blogging and podcasting ... will command increasing attention from those interested in popular geopolitics’. Yet despite his early forecast, there has been no research to date in political geography on podcast geopolitics. This is surprising given the exponential growth in podcast production and listenership since the medium’s advent 20 years ago (Aroesti, 2023). Low-cost production coupled with on-demand listening and a flexibility to explore topics and formats excluded from radio schedules has led to the proliferation of podcasts, which are no longer simply downloadable, repackaged versions of radio programmes (Berry, 2016). Currently, there are an estimated 3 million podcasts worldwide commanding a staggering audience of 460 million listeners (Howarth, 2023).

As an international story breaks, broadcasters are now quick to launch podcasts exploring its history, development and wider significance. This is illustrated by the BBC’s launch of ‘Ukrainecast’ on the same day Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, and ‘The Conflict: Israel-Gaza’ after Hamas’ attack on Israel in 2023. Both highlight how global affairs are increasingly mediated through podcast discourses, which offer a more informal and conversational style of representation and storytelling. Such is their popularity that podcasts have arguably joined radio as an ‘everywhere medium’ (Pinkerton, 2014, p. 58). It is increasingly rare to see passersby without earphones, plugged into intimate worlds of listening whilst simultaneously absorbed in smartphone screens. The growing propensity to film podcasters and broadcasters recording, coupled with the use of digital devices by audiences to discover, access, listen to and watch podcast and radio content unfold, begins to blur neat divisions between audio and visual media (Berry, 2016), and poses methodological challenges for political geographers interested in exploring ‘the everyday experience of the geopolitical’ (Dittmer & Gray, 2010, p. 1664).

This paper makes a significant intervention in political geography by offering methodological reflections on studying audience engagements with radio and podcasts. It contributes to critical and popular geopolitics as subdisciplines of political geography interested in the power of media to frame people and places, reinforce and contest geopolitical visions, and shape audiences' geographical imaginations (Dodds, 2004). Exploring geographies and practices of audience engagement answers calls to better understand how geopolitics operates in everyday life (Dittmer & Bos, 2019). Much scholarship to date has been critiqued for 'its failure to account for the complexities of the everyday and its tendency to occlude the lived experiences, practices, and encounters in which the varied mediations of geopolitics become meaningful' (Bos, 2018, p. 55). A traditional focus on geopolitical texts has meant sites of production and audiencing have attracted limited attention. This is not to 'abandon discourse, but, instead, to see it in a broader way that is less dominated by representation and more attuned to actual practices' (Dowler & Sharp, 2001, p. 169). This paper addresses these criticisms and expands political geography's traditional focus on visual media and culture to include sonic media and the power and effects of listening. This is timely given that Pinkerton and Dodds (2009, p. 23) consider 'a focus on listening ... essential to developing a critical appreciation of radio', whilst Jorgensen (2023, p. 148) remarks, 'there are scant in-depth analyses of podcast listening'. This paper, then, aims to be a catalyst to future popular geopolitical scholarship, outlining a number of avenues for further research.

It begins by presenting the 'playlist-diary' method as an innovative way of examining listener responses to radio journalism on migration. This is positioned as a creative tool for studying audience reception of radio with considerable potential for political geographers interested in capturing the impacts of geopolitical narratives, imaginaries and soundscapes within and beyond the story of displacement and migration. This discussion then acts as a springboard to think more broadly about spatialities and temporalities of listening, and how radio and podcasts are encountered, accessed and circulated through digital technologies and platforms. Throughout, the paper will discuss the similarities and differences between radio and podcasts, and consider the opportunities and challenges of studying everyday listener reception.

2 | THE 'PLAYLIST-DIARY' METHOD: LISTENER RESPONSES TO RADIO BROADCASTS

To study audience responses to BBC Radio 4 journalism on 'Europe's migration crisis', I designed the innovative 'playlist-diary method' (Watson, 2024). This was part of a wider research project examining the role of radio in shaping listeners' geographical imaginations (see Watson, 2023). The method was inspired by studies in environmental geography which ask participants to keep a diary documenting their behaviour patterns and energy consumption (Reid et al., 2011). I sought to apply diary-keeping to research on radio, asking 51 UK-based participants to record their reactions to a curated playlist of 12 Radio 4 broadcasts over a 2-week period. The diary was created on Microsoft Word and the broadcasts, which spanned Radio 4's range of programming, were hosted on the audio streaming platform, SoundCloud.

Critical context is that this method was designed and implemented at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. In theory, SoundCloud enabled the playlist to be listened to 'on the move', but in practice participants were grounded at home, completing the study during a national lockdown. Prior to the pandemic, my plan had been to include a photograph and interview element. Inspired by Latham (2003), I intended to give participants a disposable camera to photograph the spaces in which they tuned in to capture everyday geographies of listening. I then envisioned conducting follow-up interviews with audio and photo elicitation to probe ideas in the diaries and discuss the situated listening experience. This followed Gibson et al. (2013, p. 12) who suggest interviews can facilitate co-analysis 'where the interviewer learns from the participant how the image was created, the motivation for including it, and what it represents'.

This expansive method holds promise for future studies, however the pared back 'playlist-diary' version also produced fascinating, nuanced and unexpected data. Without detailing my findings (see Watson, 2024), the diaries provided a rich insight into how listeners hear, interpret, imagine and experience radio broadcasts in discursive and affective registers. The latter was a welcome surprise, given the emphasis on articulating responses through the written word, as listeners documented their embodied and emotional reactions to voices, stories and soundscapes. Whilst the pandemic perhaps explains participants' willingness to write detailed diary entries, the exercise proved a successful way of capturing the effects of radio. The ability to conduct the method remotely creates opportunities to gather international, as well as domestic, listener responses, and to scale up the study to include larger audiences with different demographics and characteristics. Finally, there is scope to apply the method to other themes of broadcasting, such as climate change or war reporting, to better understand the role of radio in shaping audiences' geographical imaginations around the urgent geopolitical stories of our times.

3 | SITUATED IN PLACE AND TIME: EVERYDAY GEOGRAPHIES OF LISTENING

A limitation of the 'playlist-diary' method is its simulation of radio listenership. It recreates focused listening and reflection which is likely to diverge from everyday radio consumption habits. After all, radio is 'in our bedrooms and bathrooms and at our breakfast tables, in our cars, on buses and trains, at our desks and on the factory floor, in our gyms and waiting rooms and supermarkets' (Pinkerton, 2014, p. 58). It forms a background soundscape across many of these spaces, shifting between listeners' full or partial attention as they engage in other activities. Completing a diary may not always be possible or convenient and may undermine a 'natural' instinct to switch off altogether. However, the model of intentionally seeking out audio and keeping a diary holds significant promise for exploring everyday geographies of *podcast* listenership. This is because podcasts are a "pull" medium, one where the listener is more active in the process of selection and scheduling' (Berry, 2016, p. 10). Audiences 'make a premeditated decision as to what exactly to listen to' (Sharon & John, 2019, p. 334), which contrasts with the spontaneity and unpredictability of live, linear radio broadcasting. Asking participants to record when, where, how and to what effect they tune into podcasts will reveal everyday spatialities, temporalities and impacts of listening. Although apps have given radio audiences more control over the listening experience—enabling them to pause, rewind or skip forward—podcasts award listeners total agency to choose what to listen to and when. Crucially, Schlütz and Hedder (2022, p. 460) suggest that 'podcast users usually listen closely and often with undivided attention', which highlights the applicability of focused listening and diary-keeping in a research context.

The 'opt-in' factor of podcasts raises particularly thought-provoking questions for a popular geopolitical study. Rae et al. (2019, p. 1043) argue that podcasts risk becoming 'a form of narrow-casting than broad-casting' by creating echo chambers of interested and sympathetic listeners. They examine the production and reception of 'The Messenger', a podcast in which a Sudanese refugee shares his experience of being detained on Australia's Manus Island. Voice messages sent by Muhamat are pieced together by a journalist to create a 16-part podcast about his embodied experience of off-shore detention. Rae et al. (2019, p. 1038) use this example to propose the concept of 'earwitnessing', defined as 'responsible listening to injustice' with political potential. They cite compelling evidence from listener reviews which highlight the podcast's ability to raise awareness, evoke empathy and collapse otherness. Yet the intentional nature of podcasts, whereby listeners must seek out, download and play 'The Messenger' limits opportunities to expose wider audiences to the politics of migration. Investigating how and why audiences discover and listen to podcasts is therefore a crucial part of understanding how podcast geopolitics is entangled in everyday life.

Radio and podcasts ultimately demand new methodologies to capture everyday geographies of listening. Radio is no longer confined to the wireless in the living room, but consumed 'everywhere' and 'on the go'. Its 'speeches and rhythms drift out from open car windows and shop doors' (Pinkerton, 2014, p. 58), providing a sonic backdrop to everyday life. Apart from attending a live podcast recording, radio diverges from podcasts in being broadcast aloud in private and public spaces, whereas podcasts are usually listened to alone and through earphones, turning public spaces into an 'intimate soundscape of their own choosing' (Lacey, 2013, p. 120). Regardless, the entanglement of both mediums with everyday spatialities and practices poses challenges for geographers interested in investigating where, how and to what effect radio and podcasts are consumed. Non-representational theory and audience studies emphasise 'the improvisational quality of everyday geopolitics, the contingency which environment and materiality inject into the everyday mediation of power and ideas' (Dittmer & Gray, 2010, p. 1673). In parallel, 'methodological approaches in sonic geographies have tended to embrace experimentation and improvisation', meaning that 'sonic methods are often (though not always) also mobile methods' (Doughty & Drozdowski, 2022, p. 3).

Mobilities approaches from sonic geographies therefore have significant potential to capture spatialities and temporalities of listening. Gallagher and Prior (2014, p. 274) discuss 'soundwalks', first proposed by Schafer (1994), as 'live listening exercises'. Although some involve participants listening to the environmental soundscape around them, others include 'technologically mediated walks' in which participants 'are given personal stereos, radios, or MP3 players to play back prerecorded audio' (Gallagher & Prior, 2014, p. 274). There is scope to accompany participants during their daily routines of tuning into radio and podcasts. Widespread smartphone ownership means it is unlikely participants would need to be given a device; rather, political geographers can adopt an ethnographic approach, engaging in participant observation and noting what participants listen to, how, where and when. Methodologies of listening in situ might also include 'drive alongs', sitting beside participants as they commute to work and listen to audio. Despite obvious safety considerations, drive alongs offer a way of capturing listening in real time, recording spontaneous reactions (and expletives!) and engaging participants in conversation about what they have heard. Questions arise about whether audiences

are aware of linear radio schedules and tailor their listening patterns accordingly? Do they listen in snatches or concertedly over long periods of time? How are contrasting tones and styles of broadcasting received and how do they influence listener moods and identities? And how do audiences react to the juxtaposition of content as news bulletins are followed by music, phone-ins and serialised radio plays?

Being on the move, however, is not a requirement given that ‘the home is often the central material context in which ... popular geopolitical texts are encountered’ (Bos, 2018, p. 59). Exploring how audio is consumed in the home—whilst cooking a meal or washing the dishes—and at what times of day is critical to understand ‘the domestication of geopolitics’ (Sharp, 2020, p. 1164): that is, how geopolitics enters private spaces in ways that reveal there is ‘no clear division of public-private, international-domestic, but instead ... these are always already entangled’ (Sharp, 2020, p. 1166). Exploring spatial practices and temporal rhythms of listenership is therefore a crucial next step in understanding how geopolitical discourses and affects mediate everyday life. For as Bos (2018, p. 54) reflects, ‘a focus on the everyday spaces of consuming popular culture broadens understandings into the ways the domestic setting shapes, and is shaped by, popular geopolitical consumption’.

4 | TECHNOLOGIES OF ENGAGEMENT: CONSUMPTION AND THE BLURRING OF THE VISUAL AND AURAL

Part of the effort to understand everyday geographies of listening involves exploring the technologies and platforms through which radio and podcasts are discovered, consumed, reviewed and circulated. Whilst geopolitical discourses broadcast over the airwaves may be ephemeral, they emerge from physical objects which point to an intertwining of ‘meaning and materiality, texts and things’ (Müller, 2013, p. 61). This is reinforced by Weir (2014, p. 856) who calls attention to ‘a wider scope of objects when we consider “radio geopolitics”, such as drones, cables and wireless devices. Actor-network theory and assemblage approaches have proven attractive for conceptualising ‘the everyday intersection of the human body with places, environments, objects, and discourses linked to geopolitics’ (Dittmer & Gray, 2010, p. 1673). Woodyer and Carter (2020, p. 1050) thus propose a ‘reformulation of popular geopolitics as an encounter between texts, objects, bodies, and practices’, which offers a conceptual framework for thinking through audience engagements with radio and podcasts, and the technologies and platforms which facilitate and constitute these encounters.

Smart speakers or voice-activated devices are increasingly popular technologies through which audiences play audio, accounting for over 10% of overall radio listenership (RadioCentre, 2022). Newman (2018, pp. 4–5) notes that smart speakers are ‘replacing radios in the home’ and ‘for heavy users, voice is now the first and final contact point with technology’. Engagement is therefore being shaped by devices which are removing the need to stare at screens or fiddle with controls. Preliminary research suggests smart speakers are less frequently used for podcasts because they are disproportionately owned by older people; podcast choices are often personal and work less well within shared spaces; and the majority of podcast listening takes place among younger listeners outside of the home (Newman, 2018). Berry (2016, p. 13) agrees that podcast consumption takes place principally through headphones which block out ambient sound and create ‘a deeply personal and highly privatised (and intimate) space in which content is consumed’. Participant observation and interviews are two methods for capturing listener encounters with these technologies in and outside of the home. Thinking through the politics of these encounters—in terms of whose voices are heard and silenced, and how spatialities and temporalities shape audience responses to geopolitical narratives and imaginaries—is critical to developing a nuanced understanding of radio and podcast listenership.

Applications on smartphones and tablets are central platforms through which digital podcasts and radio are discovered and consumed. These apps are sites of encounter that enable audiences to find, seek out and listen to audio content. Consumption is fragmented across platforms but the two most popular podcast apps are Spotify and Apple Podcasts (Podnews, 2023). The BBC launched its app, BBC Sounds, with the ambition of integrating radio, podcasts and music, facilitating live listening and catch-up, and be ‘a single point of interaction for audio content’ (Berry, 2020, p. 65). The BBC’s James Purnell described it as an attempt to better serve younger audiences and ‘lean into the podcast revolution’ (BBC News, 2018). It competes with apps like LBC and Times Radio, both of which are part of larger media stables enabling users to shift seamlessly between different stations, such as Virgin and Classic FM. The Times app also has a news button which directs users to their online newspaper, while LBC has a playlist button for listening to music. They are multi-media platforms which are eliding the visual and aural, and creating opportunities for mixed media engagement.

This blurring of visual and audio media is exacerbated by the encroachment of cameras into studios which is enabling audiences to watch radio and podcasts unfold. Broadcasters are ‘using new technology and storytelling

techniques to drive brand awareness and offer audiences new experiences by adding a visual dimension to radio' (Berry, 2013, p. 170). This digitisation has led to increased portability and synergies between media. Video clips are routinely published on social media, encouraging audiences to engage with radio and podcast content in different ways. Waterson (2020) argues that 'creating clippable moments that punch through a crowded social media world is now a core objective for any new [radio] station'. This raises questions about whether clips are supplementing, replacing or acting as a catalyst to conventional radio and podcast listenership, and for which audiences. Newman (2023) points to 'the growing importance of video podcasts', particularly on YouTube, which is the most dominant platform in the US. Contrary to claims of shortening attention spans, 'deep dive podcasts, inspired by The Daily from the New York Times, along with extended chat shows, such as The Joe Rogan Experience, are the most widely consumed' (Newman, 2023), with the latter approaching 16 million subscribers. The expansion of the BBC's Newscast, formerly Brexitcast, into television further complicates the definition of podcasts. Its first transmission drew over a million viewers, which signals the appeal of podcasts-turned-television shows (Walker, 2019). Interesting assemblages of visual and aural technologies are therefore emerging, demonstrating that radio and podcasts are not listened to in a silo or vacuum, but embedded within a media landscape with the potential to shape multisensory geopolitical imaginations.

Political geographers should be attentive to how social media is changing practices of engagement. Twitter and TikTok are platforms on which radio and podcasts can be shared and circulated, and they facilitate interaction between producers and audiences, reinforcing that 'cultural interpretation has gone viral' (Rose, 2016, p. 764). 'Listeners' can comment on clips, sharing their reactions to its geopolitical scripts, and journalists can reply, clarifying their meaning and contesting audience interpretations. Dodds (2006) uses the message boards of the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) to gauge audience reception of the Bond films and a similar approach could be applied to the comment and review sections of YouTube and Apple Podcasts. Bos (2022, p. 14) cautions that 'within media and cultural geography, toolkits for the critical interpretation of visual communication and meaning are arguably ill-equipped', largely due to the scale of data being uploaded and speeds at which it is distributed. As a result, Rose (2016, p. 765) wonders whether 'we just need to speed up a bit. Go a bit more casual' given that 'slow and careful analysis of individual cultural texts simply cannot address the contemporary cultural landscape'. However, there arguably remains room for deliberate analyses of radio and podcast series, and their multi-media production, consumption and circulation given their potential to reflect and illuminate wider trends and social practices. Asking participants to screenshot their digital encounters with radio and podcasts for photo-elicitation in follow-up interviews offers a creative way of exploring the variegated geographies, practices and meanings of audience engagement. This is critical to understand 'what social media does to feelings, experiences, and performances' of radio and podcast geopolitics 'within and beyond digital cultures and spaces' (Bos, 2022, p. 16).

5 | CONCLUSION

This paper makes a novel intervention in political geography by offering methodological reflections on audience engagements with radio and podcast geopolitics. Such research matters because both media are popular sites of geographical knowledge production with the power to shape how listeners think about, imagine and engage in the world. I have discussed why radio and podcasts should be of interest to critical and popular geopolitics, and outlined numerous avenues for future research. These lines of enquiry are underpinned by a theoretical and methodological shift from questions of representation to practice and an awareness of the importance of situating listenership within specific spatialities and temporalities, technologies and platforms. This chimes with recent interest in media geography in 'encounters between various human and non-human agents' and 'what such encounters do to participants' (Adams, 2017, p. 365). Turning attention to everyday life is likely to reveal how geographical imaginations are shaped not by media consumed in isolation, but a digital, multi-media, multi-sensory world 'surging with affects and teeming with practices' (Dittmer, 2021). Audience reception can no longer be theorised as 'the endpoint of a media artefact' but rather 'a lily pad on which processes of cultural production alight for a moment before moving on' (Dittmer, 2021). This raises daunting methodological challenges, but it is the responsibility of political geographers to dive deeper into this world and uncover the power, potential and effects of radio and podcasts within it.

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