

What Are The Problems Inherent In The Idea Of Listening To A Community?

The word 'Community' initially evokes something very tangible. The image we have is of a group of people, usually a small group of people, living in the same place, where everybody knows everybody's name and everybody's business. The sense of involvement of people with others and the protective nature of belonging to a community are true, but the rest of this image is something of a stereotype (and maybe rather sentimental). Community can happen on a large or a small scale, is something active rather than passive and is not limited to geographical groupings.

People cannot just be lumped together under the umbrella of Community because they live in the same street. Community is something that happens 'because of' people, and not 'to' people who share a common interest. Whether this be a love of boats or a concern for the local park, a community is made through its members' active participation and is not sustainable otherwise.

The traditional view that a community is a geographical entity is a falsehood. Although communities of place do exist, virtual communities of interest are everywhere. In a huge city like London, where it can easily feel like there is no sense of community whatsoever, people find various communities they can belong to through identification. Among the urban sprawl, communities not based on place construct their own spaces.

Of course London is a community of interest and place in its own right, but sometimes this is hard to see, especially with the generally received notion that community is necessarily small. As a city we are part of the community which is Britain, and as a country we are part of the community which is Europe. In terms of interest, we are also part of the community of rich, Western nations which share the same unsustainable lifestyle.

So if Community is something we do, then listening to a community is inherently problematic. Especially when the way that Community is understood becomes static and centred on the geographical. This carries the implication that a community has one voice, when really it is a living and breathing system of relationships constructed by the people who identify as a part of that community. Attempting to listen to the voice of a community might effectively lump a group of people together in the traditional shape of Community for ease of the listener.

yes!

Not only does a community have multiple voices, but the act of listening to a community assumes certain things about the needs of that community and the position of the listener. Does the community want to be listened to, or more specifically, does that community want to be listened to by that particular listener? If in everyday conversation we listen to others through a filter of our own preconceived notions, then listening to the voices of an entire community is challenging to say the least, especially when the listener might not identify with that group in any way.

In practical terms, the idea of working in a community can be contentious. An artist working with a group they are not a part of, offering to listen to it and respond to its needs, is presuming that they are in a position to do that and to be of benefit to that group. This work is often stereotyped as 'doing good', and implies a certain hierarchy between the listeners and those being listened to. If Community is understood to be a moving changing thing, and not a static entity, then whoever is working with, or listening to, a community, would be able to engage and interact with the relationships which form that community.

“Community” is a term heavily loaded with stereotypical and outdated images. Although it is widely thought of as something positive and protective, the way that the idea of ‘Community’ is effectively pigeonholed has a negative effect on the growth of community and the growth of other people’s involvement in, and understanding of, other communities. Communities do not just exist unchanged. They are created by those involved in them, and evolve with that involvement. As Kobena Mercer puts it: “Community should be understood as a verb, not a noun.”