Chapter 2.2

Organizational listening and the non-profit sector

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Abstract

Listening in an interpersonal context, such as in dyads and within small groups, has received considerable attention in a number of disciplines including psychology, leadership studies, human resources management, and in therapeutic fields. However, until recently, there has been little attention paid to how organizations with large numbers of stakeholders listen, compared with the vast body of literature on how organizations 'speak' through methods such as media advertising, publications, websites, and various other channels used in marketing, public relations, and promotion. Recent research presents evidence that *organizational listening* is undertaken in a rather poor way. Non-profit organizations (NPOs) have particular responsibilities in representing and engaging with their stakeholders. This chapter reviews contemporary research on organizational listening, including listening to those beyond the limited sphere of real-time aural listening, and how organizational listening processes and systems can enhance the effectiveness of NPOs.

Introduction

In Book 1 of his *Politics*, Aristotle wrote that "Nature … has endowed man[1] alone among the animals with the power of speech" and identified speaking as a key attribute that defines humans (as cited in Haworth, 2004, p. 43). Voice and speaking have been studied and celebrated since the early Western civilisations of ancient Greece and Rome where rhetoric – the art of speaking persuasively – was recognized as one of the foundational liberal arts based on the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian (Atwill, 1998; Kennedy, 1994). Rhetoric also was developed as an 'art' as early as 500 BCE in Islamic societies of north Africa (Bernal, 1987), and in China (Lu, 1998).

Renaissance philosopher Thomas Hobbes echoed Aristotle's trope in *Leviathan*, saying "the most noble and profitable invention of all others was that of speech" (Hobbes, 1946, p. 18).

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[1] Gendered term in original text.

John Durham Peters refers to communication as "the natural history of our talkative species" (1999, p. 9).

However, as contemporary communication studies scholar Robert Craig (2006) succinctly reminds us, communication requires "talking and listening" (p. 39). In writing about the importance of voice, sociologist Nick Couldry (2009) describes voice as "the implicitly linked practices of speaking and listening" (p. 580). It is significant that Couldry notes that listening is implicit, not explicit. Despite attempts by some such as Back (2007) to highlight the importance of listening, Fiumara noted that listening has often been "a secondary issue" (1995, p. 6).

These are highly pertinent comments, particularly for those living and working in democracies. Democracy is founded on the principle of *vox populi* – the voice of the people (the *demos*) being able to influence decisions and policy exercised by those with power and authority (the *krátos*). However, voice has no effect or value without listening.

Notwithstanding, throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, organizations of all types – government, corporate, non-government, and many non-profits – have been misled by theories and models that conceptualize communication as one-way transmission of information, and seduced by the growing global industries of advertising, marketing, public relations, and promotion that focus on rhetoric and persuasion. So-called theories of communication such as the *mathematical theory of communication* of Shannon and Weaver (1949) and the similar *source, message, channel, receiver* (SMCR) model of Berlo (1960) that are still widely used represent information transmission, not human communication.

Rediscovering communication and dialogue

While the term 'communication' and its common abbreviation 'comms' are used widely to denote the creation and distribution of information such as through publications, website content, videos, and social media posts, the English term communication is derived from the Latin root *communis* meaning common or public, and the related noun *commūnicātiō*, which denotes "sharing or imparting", and the verb *communicare*, which means to "share or make common" (Peters, 2015, p. 78).

Thus, while imparting information is one element in the process of human communication, it is not complete without sharing and achieving some common position or view with others. Contemporary scholars therefore associate communication with meaning making and sharing meaning. Dictionaries define communication as "exchange" (Merriam-Webster, 2021) and refer to "discussing, debating", and "conferring" (Etymonline, 2021).

Communication is therefore a *two-way* process and is closely linked with dialogue. However, even dialogue is commonly misunderstood, with many assuming that the Greek term *dia* means two. In fact, *dia* means 'through', with *logos* meaning speech, logic, and reasoning or argument. In reality, dialogue can be no more than two or more parties speaking, with each paying little attention or giving little consideration to others. Based on extensive research, this chapter argues that, instead of attempting to communicate primarily *dia logos* (through speech, logic and argument), society needs more engagement *dia akouó* – through hearing and listening. It suggests that this is particularly relevant for non-profit organizations (NPOs) that perform important representative and agency roles in society.

Hearing, listening, consensus, agreement

This leads to an important juncture of identifying what constitutes listening? In particular, a question asked by many is whether listening necessarily results in 'common ground' such as consensus or agreement?

First, a clear distinction must be understood between hearing and listening. Hearing in humans involves sound waves striking the eardrum. The organizational equivalent is the receipt of correspondence, telephone calls, research data, and so on. It is well known that much of what people hear is ignored or quickly forgotten – and the same occurs in the case of information, requests, and reports received by organizations (see Macnamara, 2017 pp. 26–27).
Glenn (1989) identified 50 definitions of listening in a literature review in the *International Journal of Listening*, which focus on interpersonal listening. Drawing on this literature, as well as political science, psychology, psychotherapy, and ethics, "seven canons" of listening were identified in Macnamara (2016, pp. 41–43) that apply to both individuals and organizations. These are (1) *recognition* of others as having rights to speak and be treated with respect (Honneth, 2007; Husband, 2009); (2) *acknowledgement* (Schmid, 2001); (3) giving *attention* to what is said (Bickford, 1996; Honneth, 2007; Husband, 2009); (4) *interpreting* what others

say fairly and receptively, such as avoiding stereotyping and overcoming reactance and cognitive dissonance; (5) trying as far as possible to achieve *understanding* of others' views and context (Bodie & Crick, 2014; Husband, 1996, 2000); (6) giving *consideration* to what others say (Honneth, 2007; Husband, 2009); and (7) *responding* in an appropriate way (Lundsteen, 1979; Purdy & Borisoff, 1997).

At no point does the literature identify agreement or compliance with all requests, suggestions, or recommendations as a requirement of listening. Studies in relation to human communication, democratic politics, and ethics note that listening requires an active and authentic attempt to reach a shared or common position. But sociology, cultural studies, and democratic political science also advocate acceptance of difference and even dissent. In many cases, there are good reasons that people and organizations cannot agree or comply with requests or recommendations. In such cases, an explanation should be provided. Response is essential to close the 'communication cycle'. William James (1952), the founder of American pragmatism, stated that ignoring someone is the most "fiendish" way to deal with another.

The Emerging Theory of Organizational Listening

Beyond the important and extensive literature on interpersonal listening, of which a summary is provided in *The Sourcebook of Listening Research* (Worthington & Bodie, 2017), Burnside-Lawry (2011) is one of the few who have attempted a definition of *organizational listening*. In her study of listening competency of employees, she drew on the research of Flynn, Valikoski, and Grau (2008) in relation to listening in business to say:

> Organizational listening is defined as a combination of an employee's listening skills and the environment in which listening occurs, which is shaped by the organization and is then one of the characteristics of the organizational image (Burnside-Lawry, 2011, p. 149).

This definition is useful in several respects. First, it notes that skills are required for listening and suggests that these are different to the skills of speaking and presentation of information. Second, it draws attention to the organizational environment, which includes culture, policies, structure, and other elements. Third, by focusing on employees, it identifies that ultimately it is people in organizations who listen – or don't listen. While communication is the basis of human organization and *communication constitutes organizations* (CCO theory), as identified

by Vásquez and Schoeneborn (2018) and Schoeneborn, Kuhn, and Kärreman (2019, p. 475), organizations themselves are inanimate entities.

However, three key characteristics distinguish organizations in terms of the capability and capacity for listening to occur in them. First, there is the issue of *scale* – what Dobson (2014) refers to as the problem of "scaling up" from interpersonal and small group communication (pp. 75, 124). Organizations typically need to be able to listen to hundreds and often thousands, or even hundreds of thousands of people who are stakeholders (Freeman, 1984),[2] as well as those who some refer to as *stakeseekers* (Heath, 2002; Spicer, 2007).

The issue of scale leads to the second key characteristic of organizational listening – *delegation*. To engage with a large number and range of stakeholders, organizations typically delegate listening to functional units such as customer or member relations; research departments, social media monitoring teams, public relations; and human resources (HR) for listening to employees.

Scale, in addition to distanciation in space and time that occurs in the case of organizations operating in multiple locations and even internationally, leads to the third key factor to be addressed in organizational listening – *mediation*. The 'voice' of stakeholders is commonly expressed to organizations through correspondence such as letters and e-mails, written complaints, online comments, submissions to consultations, phone calls to call centres, and other mediated means.

Delegation and mediation mean that, in order to influence decisions and policies, the voice of stakeholders needs to be interpreted and articulated by various functional units and teams in order to reach and be considered by decision makers and policy makers. These factors, along with Burnside-Lawry's observations, led to the concept of an *architecture of listening* (Macnamara, 2013, 2015, 2016) as an essential prerequisite for effective listening in organizations. Five years of research in The Organizational Listening Project (Macnamara, 2013, 2015, 2016) involving more than 100 organizations on three continents concluded that recognition of an architecture of listening enables organizations to design effective listening

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[2]   Stakeholders is a term proposed by R. Edward Freeman (1984) in his book *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach* to denote "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's purpose and objectives" (Freeman, 1984, p. 6).

into their operations, rather than ineffective add-on attempts such as conducting periodic 'listening tours' or 'listening posts', or relying on a software application.

The architecture of listening proposed for organizations is based on eight key principles and elements as follows:

1. An organizational *culture* that is open to listening as defined by Honneth (2007), Husband (1996, 2009) and others – that is, one that *recognizes* others' right to speak, pays *attention* to them, and tries to *understand* their views.
2. Addressing the *politics of listening*, such as selective listening to certain individuals or groups, while others are ignored and marginalized, as discussed by Dreher (2009, 2010) and Bassel (2017).
3. *Policies* that specify and require listening in an organization.
4. *Systems* that are open and interactive, such as websites that allow visitors to post comments and questions.
5. *Technologies* that aid listening, such as monitoring tools or services for tracking media and online comment, automated acknowledgement systems, and analysis tools for sense-making. Such technologies are further discussed in the following section.
6. *Resources* including staff to operate listening systems and do the *work of listening* (Macnamara, 2013, 2015), such as establishing forums and consultations, inviting comment, and monitoring, analyzing, and responding to comments and questions.
7. *Skills/competencies* for large-scale organizational listening such as textual analysis and social media analysis.
8. *Articulation* of what is said to an organization to policy-making and decision-making. Unless there is a link to policy-making and decision-making for consideration of what is said to an organization, voice has no value, as Couldry (2010) notes.

A 2016 definition of listening emphasized the eight elements of an architecture of listening and the 'seven canons' of listening stating:

> Organizational listening is comprised of the culture, policies, structure, processes, resources, skills, technologies, and practices applied by an organization to give recognition, acknowledgement, attention, interpretation, understanding, consideration, and response to its stakeholders and publics. (Macnamara, 2016, p. 52)

Listening systems

In addition to arguing that listening has to be designed into an organization – not simply 'bolted on' to an existing structure – because effectiveness is dependent on organizational culture, politics, policies, and skills, the third stage of The Organizational Listening Project identified that large-scale listening by organizations is substantially aided by a range of specialist practices and technologies. While organizations typically have sophisticated systems for speaking, such as website development teams, media production departments, and advertising and public relations units or agencies, they often lack specific methods and tools for listening.

Listening systems do not replace face-to-face and other forms of interpersonal communication such as meetings, telephone calls, and video conferencing, which are emphasized by many researchers (e.g., Bassel, 2017; Bodie & Crick, 2014). But they are essential for delegated, mediated listening by organizations at scale. Table 1.1 identifies some common formal and informal methods and tools for organizational listening.

Table 1.1.

Formal and informal methods and tools for organizational listening

Research-related methods of listening	Other methods of organization listening
Quantitative analysis of responses to surveys (including open-ended comments)	Analysis of the minutes of meetings of advisory boards and committees
Qualitative analysis of transcripts of interviews (e.g., coding and textual analysis)	Recording and analyzing public dialogues
Qualitative analysis of transcripts of focus groups	Capturing and analyzing feedback such as website comments and 'suggestion boxes' (digital and physical)
Content analysis of media reporting, opinion columns, and letters to the editor	Recording notes or minutes of all key stakeholder engagements and meetings
Content analysis of social media comments by relevant stakeholders	Journal notes during field visits and tours
Textual analysis of recordings of forums and discussion groups	Crowdsourcing initiatives in developing policies and plans

Textual analysis of written submissions to consultations	Systematically reviewing petitions
Textual analysis of written correspondence including complaints (e.g., over the period of several months or a year to identify consistent topics, messages, and patterns)	Citizen juries
Textual analysis of digitally recorded phone calls to call centres enabled by voice to text (VTT) software	Study circles
Use of research methods such as participatory action research (PAR), deliberative polling, and appreciative inquiry that involve high levels of participation and input from stakeholders	
Behavioral insights analysis	
Sense making methodology	

As shown in Table 1.1, organizational listening requires and depends on systematic *analysis* of data, not simply collection of data such as research reports, submissions, and feedback. Too often vast quantities of information from stakeholders such as submissions to consultations, online feedback, and call centre recordings remain unread and unused. For example, the second stage of The Organizational Listening Project focussed on listening by government organizations found 127,400 public submissions on health topics had not been analyzed because the department had no natural language processing (NLP) textual analysis software or staff with the necessary training to undertake such a task (Macnamara, 2017, pp. 26–27).

Table 1.1 also shows that organizational listening needs to extend beyond quantitative methodologies that focus on statistics. People speak and write in words, not numbers. Therefore, textual analysis and related analysis methods such as content analysis are essential skills for a listening organization. Specialist software applications are available and often needed as part of listening systems.

In addition, Table 1.1 identifies that, as well as employing traditional quantitative and particularly qualitative research methods such interviews and focus groups, organizational listening can be implemented through a number of advanced research and engagement methods including *deliberative polling* (Fishkin, 2011); *participatory action research* (PAR); *sense*

making methodology (Dervin & Foreman-Wernet, 2013) *appreciative inquiry* (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008); *behavioral insights* (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008); and *customer journey mapping* (Court, Elzinga, Mulder, & Vetvik, 2009), which can be adapted to studying the 'touchpoints' of stakeholders interacting with NPOs.

The rapidly growing field of *data analytics* is another systematic way that the voices of stakeholders can be accessed and considered, and digital technologies such as voice to text (VTT) software enables recorded phone calls to be transferred to text for textual analysis that can identify common messages, themes, and patterns.

Organizations are also adopting artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as *chat bots* to 'listen' to users of web pages and respond with relevant information, as well as learning algorithms based on NLP and machine learning code that responds to users' data entry and selections (Macnamara, 2019).

Some object to such technologies being described as listening systems, and it is acknowledged that these bring with them limitations as well as some serious concerns and questions. Critical technosocial and technocultural scholars such as Gillespie (2018), Landau (2017), and Napoli (2014) express concern about *digital surveillance* and the effects of algorithms such as *algorithmic filtering* (Caplan, 2018). As Caplan says, in many if not most online platforms, algorithms decide "the inclusion or exclusion of information" (Caplan, 2018, p. 564). Algorithms can lead to *filter bubbles*, a term that refers to recipients of information receiving only what they are disposed to receive from those who they are disposed to receive it from – also referred to as *echo chambers*.

Based on recent research trialling and evaluating a range of advanced systems and methods of listening in organizations, the following expanded definition of organizational listening was published in a leading international communication journal.

> Organizational listening comprises the creation and implementation of scaled processes and systems that enable decision makers and policy makers in organizations to actively and effectively access, acknowledge, understand, consider and appropriately respond to all those who wish to communicate with the organization or with whom the organization wishes to communicate interpersonally or through delegated, mediated means. (Macnamara, 2019, 5191)

The Costs of Not Listening

Political scientist Susan Bickford (1996) was one of the first to observe serious negative consequences in society caused by a lack of effective listening by organizations on which citizens depend or place expectations. More recently, a number of researchers have warned that many countries are facing a "democratic deficit" (Norris, 2011) and even a "crisis of democracy" (Przeworski, 2019; Van der Meer, 2017).

At an individual level, research shows that when people are not listened to, they disengage from politics and civic life (Bennett, Wells, & Freelon, 2011; Coleman, 2013); they become unrepresented and marginalized (Dreher, 2009, 2010), and many plummet into a "spiral of silence" (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Dobson calls for "*listening out for*" as well as "listening to" people (2014, p. 34) [original emphasis], particularly in relation to "otherwise unheard voices" (p. 22), which draws attention to the need for *active* listening, not simply passive processing of what is received. Such calls are particularly relevant to NPOs.

Two recent case studies demonstrate that a failure of organizations to effectively listen can even be a matter of life and death. The 2013 report of the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust Public Inquiry into deaths in UK hospitals concluded:

> Building on the report of the first inquiry, the story it tells is first and foremost of appalling suffering of many patients. This was primarily caused by a serious failure on the part of a provider Trust Board. It did not listen sufficiently to its patients. (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 2013)

Even more recently, the tragic 2017 Grenfell Tower fire in London, which claimed more than 70 lives and injured many more, has been directly attributed to a "failure to listen" (Ghelani, 2017, para. 1). Warnings of inadequate fire safety standards were reportedly posted on the Web site of the Grenfell Action Group four years before the disaster (Ghelani, 2017, para. 5) and reports identifying the dangers of combustible cladding on buildings were submitted to the UK Parliament as early as 1999 (House of Commons, 1999).

Listening by NPOs

Some NPOs have established quite sophisticated listening methods and systems. For example, after originally focussing on interpersonal communication, the Public Dialogue Consortium in

the USA (https://publicdialogue.org) has expanded its activities to include training and facilitation of dialogue, particularly in relation to government-community consultation. The PDC employs some advanced communication techniques to support public leaders in assessing organizational and community readiness to co-design and deliver engagement processes, and provides training for organization staff, officials, and community members in communication with a focus on dialogue. Despite limited funds, many other NPOs make substantial efforts to engage in two-way communication with their stakeholders.

However, many NPOs, as well as communication and social marketing guides for NPOs, ignore or place little focus on listening. For instance, under the heading 'Best non-profit communication strategies', one online guide places priority on identifying "target audiences" – audiences being receivers of information – and the main sections focus on "Tell the organization's story" and "Lead the conversation" (Queens University of Charlotte, 2021). Similarly, on the *Non-profit PRO* website, a guide titled 'Effective marketing communication strategies for non-profits' says that non-profits can "build connection through storytelling" (Alameda, 2020, para. 3) – 'telling' being the focus that this chapter challenges.

The Benefits of Listening

Active listening by organizations offers many benefits to individuals, organizations, and society. While commercial organizations gain benefits such as increased customer loyalty; increased employee morale, motivation, and productivity; and increased insights into market needs (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013; Leite, 2015), NPOs can achieve increased and more equitable representation of interests; better understanding of diversity; increased social and political engagement by citizens; and even improved mental and physical health and well-being through increased understanding and reflection of community concerns, fears, anxieties, and needs. Research also shows that all organizations can gain increased trust and reputation through listening (Leite, 2015; Tomlinson & Mayer, 2009).

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