

Why Are Organizations Criticized for Not Listening?

Findings from Practitioners and Stakeholders

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Abstract

Many organizations are criticized for *not listening*; those that listen are still criticized for *not listening genuinely*. While *listen more* or *listen better* could be the simple solutions to this criticism, there are different perspectives on how to achieve *more* and *better* listening.

Listening becomes challenging when an organization faces a variety of different viewpoints among stakeholders and especially when many of those viewpoints are conflicting. In this book chapter, we posit that the criticisms for the practice of organizational listening are caused by the different expectations and experiences of practitioners and stakeholders.

Findings from a survey conducted in Australia ($n=400$) showed that there are positive associations among their trust for the Australian government, their attribution of responsibility to the Australian government for the issue of high-rise overdevelopment and their evaluations of the Australian government's listening efforts. Findings from interviews ($n=26$) with Australian practitioners showed that their design of an organization's listening activities could be limited by the organization's goals, the discrepancy between organizations' and stakeholders' interests and their stakeholder mapping. Recommendations are made for the practice to acknowledge the boundaries of organizational listening (184 words)

Keywords: feedback, government listening, organizational listening, stakeholder engagement, trust

Introduction

Organizational listening is widely acknowledged as an essential component of public relations practice. It facilitates the co-adaptation of cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes in *both* organizations and the multiple stakeholder groups involved ("strategic-behavioral paradigm," J.-N. Kim & Ni, 2010). This co-adaptation ensures shared decision-making and mutually beneficial outcomes (Brunner, 2008). It also highlights the roles of public relations professionals as *boundary spanners* who facilitate the listening process to generate intersubjective meanings between organizations and stakeholders and as the *organization's conscience* who advocate for *both* organizations and their stakeholders (Bowen, 2008; J. E. Grunig, 2006). Ideally, through the listening process, organizations "negotiate, balance, and satisfy the demands and interests of various internal and external stakeholders" (Saffer, Yang, & Taylor, 2018, p.122). This allows organizations to learn from and adapt to the environments in which they operate (Fieseler et al., 2015; Jacobs & Coghlan, 2005). Moreover, the process provides stakeholders with some power to advocate for and balance their own interests with those of the organization and other stakeholders (Fitzpatrick, 2006).

Despite this premise, organizations have been criticized for their emphasis on building "an architecture of speaking" (Macnamara, 2016, p. 162) that focuses on organizations' efforts of communicating their perspectives to stakeholders to influence how stakeholders interpret organizations' actions and decisions (J. E. Grunig, 2009b; S. Kim & Kim, 2016). The listening that organizations undertake is "mostly instrumental, undertaken to serve the organization's interest such as gaining insights into consumer psychology to sell more products and services" (Macnamara, 2016, p. 157). Moreover, stakeholders criticize organizations for "hearing but not listening" and engaging in listening as "a mere gesture of taking note of public comments" (Conrad et al., 2011, p. 771). Organizational listening

practices have been criticized for seeking to manage stakeholders' expectations and for privileging well-organized groups over marginalized groups (Meesters et al., 2021). The public relations practice also has a tendency to pursue consensus, making it difficult to achieve the disagreements and differences embraced in the organizational listening process (Ciszek, 2016).

Despite the *ideal* outcomes of organizational listening in empowering stakeholders in getting their voices heard and incorporated into decision making, the listening process is bounded by challenges. Macnamara (2016) notes: "listening is easier said than done because of the challenges of scale and diversity of views among stakeholders and publics that can lead to a cacophony rather than a consensus." (p. 163). Not only do different stakeholders have different viewpoints (and thus, expectations for the listening process), the organization itself may also be bounded by factors such as the resources (e.g., time and workforce) needed for listening and having to accommodate feedback which may or may not be feasible to implement.

To explore the perspectives from both stakeholders and practitioners on how they evaluate the process of organizational listening and the factors that affect such evaluations, this book chapter reports the findings from a survey conducted with a nationally representative sample of Australian citizens ($n=400$) and from interviews conducted with public relations practitioners in Australia ($n=26$). The findings will shed light on the factors that affect both the process and the outcomes of listening.

Literature Review

Organizational listening from the perspectives of stakeholders

The strategic management of public relations begins with the identification of *stakeholders* which refer to individuals and groups whose behaviors will influence the organization and who will be influenced by the organization's decisions and actions (J. E.

Grunig & Repper, 1992). Due to constraint of limited resources, organizations are advised to prioritize their resources to managing relationships with *publics* who affect or are affected by organizational decisions and create issues by engaging in communicative behaviors in order to resolve the issues (J.-N. Kim et al., 2008). In the process of working with publics, public relations managers carry out *relational activities* by facilitating two-way communication with publics, both before and after organizational decisions are made (J. E. Grunig, 2018). By giving publics a voice in organizational decisions, they help organizations establish mutually beneficial relationships with publics, meet organizational objectives and develop a favorable reputation (J. E. Grunig, 2018; J.-N. Kim & Ni, 2010; S. Kim & Kim, 2016). Organizational listening is an essential part of these relational activities.

Macnamara (2015) defines organizational listening as being “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” (p. 52). He later added that the processes should enable decision makers to “actively 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, p. 5191). This conceptualization highlights the two-way, relational activities between an organization and its stakeholders that ultimately benefit all parties involved (Macnamara, 2019). This concept of listening is also aligned with Taylor and Kent's (2014) dialogic engagement principles that “enables organizations and stakeholders to interact, fostering understanding, good will, and a shared view of reality” (p. 391). By improving understanding among organization-stakeholder interactions via organizational listening, decisions should be made to benefit all parties

involved. Organization-stakeholder interactions are necessary for stakeholder counsel/advice on issues that affect both organization and stakeholders (Taylor & Kent, 2014).

Even though the ideal goal of listening is to create a more balanced partnership between an organization and its stakeholders by empowering the latter, listening activities could be criticized for being a “tokenistic, tick-box activity” (Tam et al., 2021, p. 116). Stakeholders’ negative experiences with organizations can cause perceptions of inauthentic listening. For example, organizations might have predetermined decisions prior to the listening process, limiting the types and scope of changes allowed after considering stakeholders’ feedback (Sahay, 2021). In addition, organizations’ “product-focused and speaking-centered” approach to listening have been criticized for ignoring stakeholders’ relational needs (Place, 2022, p. 4). There are many instances when publics are engaged in communicative behaviors in an attempt to resolve an issue but organizational behaviors do not reciprocate (J.-N. Kim, 2012). On the other hand, individuals may also have close-mindedness and reject any information that contradicts their pre-existing beliefs (J.-N. Kim & Grunig, 2021). Therefore, it is inevitable that there is a discrepancy between what an organization seeks to achieve and what its stakeholders wish to advocate for their interests (often arising from their different motivations and expectations for engaging in the listening process) (Tam et al., 2021). Individuals with pre-determined issue motivations and preferred solutions to the issues could be advocating for their own stances while rejecting any counter-information from the organization or other publics (J.-N. Kim & Grunig, 2021). These individuals find evidence to support their pre-determined conclusions as opposed to finding evidence to make conclusions (J.-N. Kim & Grunig, 2021). This is especially prominent when they do not trust the organization (Macnamara, 2018). Their issue involvement and perceptions towards an organization could also lead to motivated reasoning in responsibility attribution, that is, making attributions which are consistent with their prior beliefs (Zhao et

al., 2022). Zhao et al. (2022) found in a U.S. sample that individuals' issue involvement and perceived severity of the COVID-19 pandemic are positively related to their attribution of responsibility to China. Hence, this study makes the following propositions based on the above literature review:

Proposition 1: Individuals' situational perception about an issue (i.e., problem recognition) is positively associated with their attribution of responsibility to an organization for causing the issue.

Proposition 2: Individuals' trust in an organization is negatively associated with their attribution of responsibility to an organization for causing the issue.

Proposition 3: Individuals' attribution of responsibility to an organization for causing an issue affects their evaluations of the organization's listening efforts.

Organizational listening from the perspectives of practitioners

The practice of listening is a critical condition to the pursuit of organizational learning (Jacobs & Coghlan, 2005). It involves scanning, interpreting and understanding the environment in which an organization operates through which relationships are formed and intersubjective meanings are generated (Jacobs & Coghlan, 2005). It relates to the practice of environmental scanning in public relations (e.g., Dyer, 1996) and emphasizes the importance of acknowledging organizational stakeholders and their viewpoints in generating shared understanding (Jacobs & Coghlan, 2005). Instead of simply advocating for *listen more, listen better*, Jacobs and Coghlan (2005) stated: "future studies should investigate in more detail enabling and disabling aspects of the symbolic value of listening." (p. 134)

Listening is related to the practice of environmental scanning in public relations. Defined as "a method of gathering information from the external environment for use in issues management and the strategic decision-making process", environmental scanning is

also known as “an early warning system” which helps management detect emerging issues to guide actions (Larsen, 2005, p. 341). Environmental scanning is an important diagnostic task for strategy formation; public relations practitioners’ expertise in environmental scanning differentiates them from the marketing function and enhances the value of public relations to strategic management (Tam et al., 2022). Despite this, listening activities are lacking in organizations not only because of senior management, but also public relations practitioners’ focus on information transmission (Macnamara, 2016). In addition to having an architecture of listening within organizations, it is also important to note that listening “ultimately is a human undertaking” (Macnamara, 2018, p. 18).

In the practice of organizational listening, Place (2022) conducted interviews with 38 nonprofit and government public relations professionals in the United States and found that the participants develop listening activities with the consideration of intersectionality, defined as the interplay of social categories which shape human lives. Because multiple factors can come into play in shaping an individual’s lived experience, the consideration of intersectionality will guide public relations practitioners in identifying alternative voices among marginalized publics (Place, 2022). Practitioners could be restricted by organizational constructs including the organizational culture for listening (Macnamara, 2016) and the organizational motivations for listening (Meesters et al., 2021) as well as professional constraints such as their positions’ focus on speaking rather than listening (Macnamara, 2016).

In the context of engaging employees during organizational change, Sahay (2021) found that the lack of systems, processes, structures, resources and skill sets had caused confusion, stress and resistance among input providers. Brandt (2021) also found that organizational hierarchy could hinder information flow and knowledge transfer; even though frontline employees had more in-depth first-hand knowledge of customer problems and

complaints, their insights were often ignored. Therefore, perceptions of the effectiveness of organizational listening could vary because of the roles that different parties play in the listening process (Brandt & Donohue, 2022). Organizational listening can be perceived as “a manifestation of hypocrisy” when stakeholders are invited to participate in a listening process that is framed as “an open dialogue” but did not have the “negotiation currency” to change organizational actions (Andersen & Høvring, 2020, p. 421). Oftentimes, organizations are perceived to be “better at capturing customer feedback than they are at analyzing, disseminating, or utilizing it to improve products, services and customer experiences” (Brandt, 2020, p. 156).

Therefore, this study makes the proposition that these factors, which enable and constrain how practitioners develop and implement an organization’s listening efforts, can affect the outcomes of an organization’s listening efforts.

Methodology

Survey

To test the extent to which individuals’ issue motivations and their association of an organization with the issue affects their evaluations of the organization’s listening efforts, a survey was conducted with a nationally representative sample (by age and gender) of 400 Australian citizens in December 2020 to January 2021. Upon receiving approval from the University’s Ethics Committee, which is equivalent to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) in the United States, data was collected from research participants recruited through Qualtrics; they were compensated for their time based on their agreements with Qualtrics. Table 1 below provides a summary of the key demographic characteristics of the sample.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the respondents in the sample

Individual-level variables	<i>N</i>	Percent	Mean	Standard Deviation
Age	400		45.34	17.90

Gender			
	<i>Male</i>	192	48%
	<i>Female</i>	206	51.5%
	<i>Non-binary</i>	1	0.3%
	<i>Prefer not to answer</i>	1	0.3%
Education			
	<i>Less than high school</i>	29	7.2%
	<i>High school graduate</i>	92	23%
	<i>TAFE certificates</i>	104	26%
	<i>Bachelor's</i>	118	29.5%
	<i>Master's</i>	46	11.5%
	<i>Doctorate</i>	6	1.5%
	<i>Other</i>	5	1.3%
Annual pre-tax income			
	<i>Less than AUD\$30,000</i>	96	24%
	<i>AUD\$30,001-\$60,000</i>	100	25%
	<i>AUD\$60,001-\$90,000</i>	63	15.8%
	<i>AUD\$90,001-\$120,000</i>	48	12%
	<i>More than AUD\$120,000</i>	60	15%
	<i>Prefer not to disclose</i>	33	8.3%

Five variables were tested in the survey. To test individuals' motivation in an issue involving an organization, high-rise overdevelopment in Australia was used as an issue and the Australian government was used as an organization in the survey items. Respondents evaluated the statements on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). First, to test an individual's issue motivation, problem recognition was conceptualized and tested as the extent to which an individual finds the issue of high-rise overdevelopment was problematic in Australia (J.-N. Kim & Grunig, 2011). Five items were adapted from Kim and Grunig (2011), resulting in a reliability score of $\alpha=.948$. Second, to test the extent to which an individual's pre-existing views about the organization influences evaluations of listening efforts, trust was tested with four survey items adapted from Moon and Yang (2015), resulting in a reliability score of $\alpha=.897$. Third, because a combination of issue motivation and trust in the organization can affect how the organization is perceived in the issue, attribution of responsibility to the Australian government for the issue of high-rise overdevelopment was tested with five survey items adapted from Brown and Ki (2013),

resulting in a reliability score of $\alpha=.904$. Lastly, to test individuals' evaluations of the Australian government's listening efforts, two constructs were derived: selective listening and diverse listening. Selective listening was defined as the extent to which an organization is evaluated to be listening to only a selected group of stakeholders and was measured using seven items ($\alpha=.963$). On the other hand, diverse listening was defined as the extent to which an organization is evaluated to be listening to its diverse stakeholders and was measured using seven items ($\alpha=.961$). Table 1 shows the survey items used and the mean, standard deviation (SD) and standard error (SE) for each item.

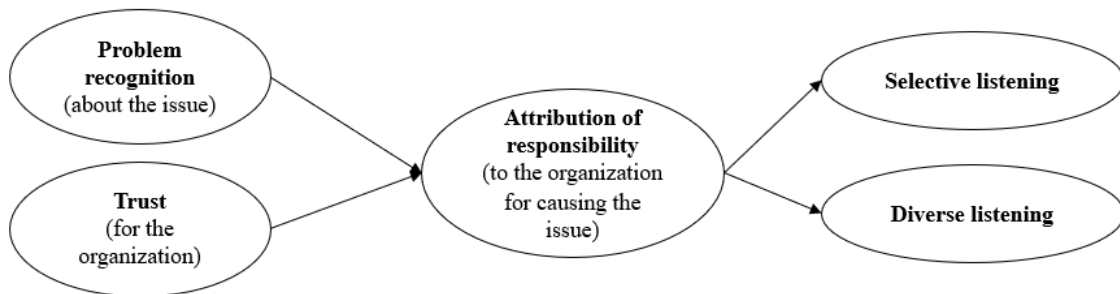
Table 1. The survey items used and the mean (M), standard deviation (SD) and standard error (SE) for each item and for the weighted composite of each construct

Construct	Item	M	SD	SE
Problem recognition $\alpha=.948$ M=3.51 SD=1.06 SE=.053	I consider the overdevelopment of high-rise apartment buildings in Australia to be a serious issue.	3.46	1.184	.059
	I am worried about the overdevelopment of high-rise apartment buildings in Australia.	3.48	1.17	.058
	Something needs to be done immediately to address the overdevelopment of high-rise apartment buildings in Australia.	3.54	1.196	.059
	People should pay more attention to the overdevelopment of high-rise apartment buildings in Australia because it is affecting us.	3.56	1.122	.056
	The government should take immediate action on the overdevelopment of high-rise apartment buildings in Australia.	3.55	1.147	.057
Trust $\alpha=.897$ M=2.95 SD=1.07 SE=.053	Whenever the government makes important decisions, I know it will be concerned about its citizens like me.	3.23	1.161	.058
	The government can be relied on to keep its promises.	2.79	1.199	.06
	I believe the government takes opinions of people like me into account when making decisions.	2.85	1.216	.061
Attribution of responsibility $\alpha=.904$ M=3.48 SD=.951 SE=.048	I feel very confident about the government's policies and procedures.	3.03	1.204	.06
	The overdevelopment of high-rise apartment buildings in Australia is an issue caused by the government.	3.39	1.141	.057
	The government has knowingly contributed to the overdevelopment of high-rise apartment buildings in Australia.	3.55	1.08	.054
	The government should be held responsible for the overdevelopment of high-rise apartment buildings in Australia.	3.59	1.102	.055
	The government should be blamed for the overdevelopment of high-rise apartment buildings in Australia.	3.46	1.158	.058
Diverse listening $\alpha=.961$ M=3.10 SD=1.07 SE=.054	Problems within the government caused the overdevelopment of high-rise apartments buildings in Australia.	3.35	1.1	.055
	The government recognizes its diverse citizens as having legitimate rights to speak about its policies.	3.25	1.177	.059
	The government treats the voices of its diverse citizens with respect.	3.15	1.195	.06
	The government acknowledges and listens to what its diverse citizens say.	3.12	1.207	.06
	The government pays attention to the voices of its diverse citizens.	3.03	1.19	.059
	The government interprets what its diverse citizens say fairly and receptively.	3.08	1.186	.059
	The government considers suggestions from its diverse citizens.	3.12	1.171	.059
Selective listening $\alpha=.963$ M=3.52 SD=1.05 SE=.052	The government responds to suggestions from its diverse citizens promptly and properly.	2.93	1.193	.06
	The government recognizes only some of its citizens as having legitimate rights to speak about its policies but ignores others.	3.41	1.162	.058
	The government treats the voices of only some citizens with respect but ignores others.	3.53	1.159	.058
	The government acknowledges and listens to only some of its citizens but ignores others.	3.53	1.176	.059
	The government pays attention to the voices of only some citizens but ignores others.	3.51	1.144	.057
	The government interpret the voices of only some citizens fairly and receptively and ignores others.	3.5	1.144	.057
	The government considers suggestions from only some citizens but ignores others.	3.59	1.134	.057
The government responds to suggestions from only some citizens promptly and properly but ignores others.	3.53	1.126	.056	

A conceptualization of the hypothesized model to be tested is shown in Figure 1.

Weighted composites were created on SPSS version 28 for the data analysis. The relationships among the variables were tested using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) on AMOS version 28.

Figure 1. Hypothesized model to be tested



Interview

To test the factors that affected how public relations practitioners develop and implement organizational listening activities, 28 Australian public relations practitioners were recruited through snowball sampling and were interviewed on the phone in November 2020-February 2021. They were compensated a gift card for their time. Of the 28 practitioners, 11 were male and 17 were female. Fourteen of them self-identified as engagement specialists. They had an average of 13.5 years of experiences in the industry.

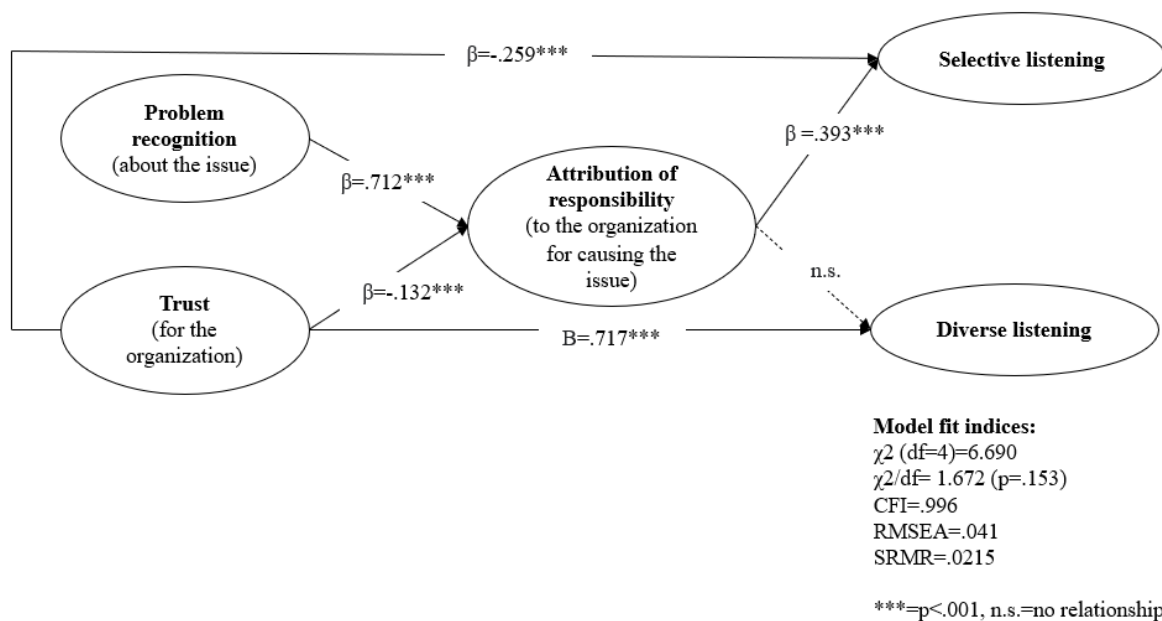
The interview guide included questions related to their views of organizations' motivations to invest in listening and their views of their roles in organizational listening (including how they ensure diverse voices are heard). Upon completion of the data collection, they were transcribed manually and were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings

Survey

The result from the testing of the hypothesized model is shown in Figure 2. As hypothesized, there is a positive relationship between problem recognition about the issue of high-rise over-development and attribution of responsibility to the Australian government for causing the issue ($\beta=.712^{***}$). A negative association between trust and attribution of responsibility was also found ($\beta=-.132^{***}$). Also as hypothesized, a positive relationship between attribution of responsibility and selective listening was identified ($\beta=.393^{***}$). However, there was no association between attribution of responsibility and diverse listening. In addition to the paths in the hypothesized model, a positive relationship was also found between trust and diverse listening ($\beta=.717^{***}$). A negative relationship was found between trust and selective listening ($\beta=-.259^{***}$). The model achieved a satisfactory model fit indices ($\chi^2/df=1.672$, CFI =.996, RMSEA=.041, SRMR=.0215) based on Hu and Bentler's (1999) cut-off criteria ($\chi^2/df < 3$, CFI $> .95$, RMSEA $< .06$, SRMR $< .08$).

Figure 2. Results from the hypothesized model tested



The findings from the survey show that individuals' evaluations of an organization's listening efforts could be affected by their trust for an organization. Individuals' problem

recognition of an issue and their attribution of responsibility to an organization for causing the issue also affected their evaluations of whether the organization listens selectively.

Interviews

To understand factors that influence how practitioners develop and implement an organization's listening efforts, the following findings highlighted the specific results that could influence how the listening efforts are evaluated.

Identifying organizations' goals and motivations for organizational listening

Organizational listening is to serve some purposes. There are organizations which emphasize more stakeholder-centric goals and there are organizations which emphasize more organization-centric goals. Table 2 shows the organization- and stakeholder-centric goals identified from the interviews.

Table 2. Stakeholder- and organization-centric goals identified from the interviews.

Stakeholder-centric goals	Organization-centric goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ to gather stakeholders' needs and expectations ▪ to gain an understanding of the issues experienced by publics ▪ to adjust organizational actions ▪ to generate shared understanding to deliver outcomes desirable for both organizations and publics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ to inform communication strategy including the choice of messaging and channels ▪ to obtain social license to operate ▪ to ensure ongoing business through improvements ▪ to reduce complaints and staff turnover

Specifically, Participant #9 noted that organizations invest resources in organizational listening either because of statutory requirements or because they see the genuine value in doing it. For those who do it for statutory requirements such as in the government context, they may have a 20-day period for consultation. For those who see genuine value in the practice, they think about the needs of the community and are dedicated to work collaboratively with a wide range of different stakeholders to achieve better outcomes for both the organization and its stakeholders. The latter does so to "build up the trust bank, which is critical to a social license to operate." (Participant #9). It is especially prevalent

today because the advent of social media means that “stakeholders themselves have the power to influence and direct the content and the storyline of an organization” (Participant #13). Despite this, there are also organizations which listen primarily to influence. Participant #15 notes that from her experiences, listening is conducted “to ensure that communication strategies and the way that they are speaking to their stakeholders is effective.”

Stakeholder mapping and choice of channels

The practice of stakeholder mapping and prioritization of publics may cause organizational listening to be criticized. In the stakeholder mapping stage, practitioners identify stakeholders who are influenced or have a stake to influence a project or an issue. Participant #19 notes that stakeholder mapping would identify stakeholders including other organizations, shareholding ministers, government departments, regional organizations, community groups and customers who are connected to the organization in some way and/or are impacted by it. But when it comes to the analysis process, she would prioritize based on (a) their influence on the project/issue, (b) their needs, (c) their motivations for engaging in the listening process, and (d) their mutual trust with the organization. She notes:

“Some people have a louder voice than others, and it doesn't mean that they should be spoken to first. You really have to work out if there are groups or individuals that are less well represented and make a concerted effort to include them. So, yeah, mapping everybody that you could think of or every organization that that has some sort of touch point that you need to consider. And then that's the reason why you need to talk to them or listen to them and what it's about.” (Participant #19)

Participant #26 further notes that the choice of channels for listening is dependent upon the target stakeholder groups and the general sentiments within each group. Ultimately, the choice of channels will determine the stakeholders represented (and thus, the voices heard). Participant #17 highlights that the role of the communicator is:

“to synthesize those different point of views and then present it to management. And particularly that process of synthesis to me is really bringing about meaning and understanding of what the various pieces of Insight's and data that are coming back from those tools mean to the executive to stick to the decision makers who they are presenting to, you know, a tweet which is posted by a person who could start a consumer backlash to the brand is very different to a tweet posted by someone with five followers who's never going to see the light of day.”

Co-orientating with stakeholders

While different stakeholder groups have different expectations, it was noted that listening needs to serve a purpose and that information should be provided to stakeholders before channels are set up to collect their feedback. Participant #6 pointed out the importance of providing information to stakeholders and thinking about what questions should be anticipated beforehand:

“When you're seeking people's feedback, it has to have a purpose because if you don't give them parameters, then you're going to have every man and their dog giving their opinion and then it might not be relevant. And you're wasting your time. You know, I've had experience on projects where things get blown out of proportion and the wrong information gets put out there, if you can control that in a way where your message is the one that's the source of truth and you're very clear about how to address people's concerns.”

Likewise, Participant #9 notes that stakeholders may mistakenly believe that through participating in listening activities, they can change organizational decisions in the direction they desire. Considering that two-way communication is practiced during organizational

listening, organizations also need to provide information and explanations. He notes that it is important to explain why certain feedback is not taken into consideration:

“If I say I want black, but the organization wants to deliver Y. It doesn't mean that they need to change from black to Y. That's not what. But they do need to know is that I've said that I want black and the reasons why I want black and is there are things that we can do to meet my needs as well as their needs.”

Participant #23 highlights the differences between listening and hearing. During the listening process, organizations might reiterate their positions so that stakeholders would understand their positions and would provide feedback with consideration to those positions.

“Stakeholders might not like hearing the organization's position, but that is our position versus what they keep saying. Why don't you change a particular position on it? So I am listening, but I'm reiterating organization's position. If the stakeholder doesn't like what they're listening, that doesn't mean that I didn't listen. It is important to distinguish between listening and decision making. What I'm saying and communicating after I listen to stakeholder needs and what the positions organizations are. If they don't match, often the comment received is that organization didn't listen. They actually just didn't like it. They didn't like what they're hearing back from the organization.”

Implications

The purpose of this study is to highlight enabling and disabling factors which lead to criticisms of the organizational listening process. The results from the survey indicated that individuals' pre-existing perceptions about an issue and the organization involved affect whether they consider the organization to be responsible for causing the issue and whether the organization is listening selectively. This reflects that rather than *listen more*, *listen better*,

there is a need to acknowledge individuals' motivations for engaging in the listening process. Extant research on cognitive dissonance has identified that individuals are more willing to accept information which is consistent with their pre-existing beliefs and are more prone to reject information which is inconsistent with their pre-existing beliefs (Tsang, 2019). This also dictates their choice of information and their communicative behaviors as they seek to reinforce their pre-existing beliefs over time (J.-N. Kim & Grunig, 2021). The findings from our study confirm the proposition that if an individual disagrees with an issue and associates an organization for causing the issue, it is likely that he/she will evaluate the organization as not listening or listening selectively. Moreover, if he/she does not trust the organization to begin with, he/she will also evaluate the organization as not listening or listening selectively. These findings point to the need of identifying organizational listening practices to effectively "bridge" with stakeholders who do not trust an organization and/or have high problem recognition about an issue such as following the mutual gains approach to dealing with angry publics (Susskind & Field, 1996).

The results from the interviews showed that there are practices inherent in the process which could cause an organization to be criticized for not listening or listening selectively. For example, organizations also have their motivations for investing in organizational listening. According to Macnamara (2016) and Meesters et al. (2021), these motivations are often organization-centric such as selling more products and services (Macnamara, 2016) and managing stakeholder expectations (Meesters et al., 2021). There could also be a tendency to favor agreements over disagreements (Ciszek, 2016). These organization-centric motivations could lead to tokenistic listening practices which do not translate into changes in decisions or behaviors (Tam et al., 2021). However, considering the different (and possibly conflicting) stakeholders' interests, it is also important to ensure that (a) organizations also convey their positions in the listening process and that (b) stakeholders are given some information about

the issue or the project so that they are on the same page. After all, it is essential to generate inputs which are feasible and actionable. And lastly, the practice of stakeholder mapping and/or public segmentation has been a long-standing practice within public relations.

Organizations have been criticized for prioritizing local, organized groups over non-local marginalized groups (Meesters et al., 2021). If practitioners only focus on one criterion such as influence, they will have a tendency of only listening to “the loud minority” and neglecting “the silent majority.” Because this segmentation also affects the choice of channels used for listening, when reporting the feedback received during the listening process, practitioners should also report the limitations. This can include reporting the demographic data of the stakeholders who have been listened to and the channels used to collect their feedback. They should also consider reporting why some concerns have been incorporated into decision making and some have not.

Theoretical Implications

The findings from this study highlight a major problem: organizational listening seeks to serve the purpose of co-adaptation to ensure shared decision-making and mutually benefits (Brunner, 2008), but it can result in perceptions of inauthentic listening (Sahay, 2021). These perceptions could be caused by factors beyond the control of organizations, such as individuals’ pre-existing problem perceptions and preferred outcomes about an issue and the discrepancies between individuals’ and organizations’ expectations of the process. From the perspectives of organizations, the listening process is not just about gathering feedback but also articulating their positions. From the perspectives of stakeholders, when they are invited to give feedback, they expect their concerns to be addressed and incorporated into organizations’ decisions.

Organizational listening is aligned with the behavioral, strategic paradigm of public relations (J. E. Grunig, 2009a; S. Kim & Krishna, 2018) such that its purpose is to understand

stakeholders and publics' concerns properly and to reflect them in organizational decision making. To bridge the gap between an organization and its stakeholders, adaptation is needed, which refers to "the willingness and ability of the organization to make changes necessary to create harmony between itself and its key publics" (Smith, 2013, p. 114).. By employing principles of symmetrical communication and adapting themselves to the changes and concerns of stakeholders, organizations ensure their actions to be responsive to the stakeholders as well as responsible and ethical in their relationships with stakeholders (S. Kim & Krishna, 2018).

However, even though current research on public relations has consistently found the positive outcomes of symmetrical communication in various contexts such as employee communication (e.g., Men & Sung, 2022) and crisis communication (e.g., Chon et al., 2022), its operations (in the form of organizational listening) may not be perceived as positively. Ideally, symmetrical communication contributes to mutual understanding and mutually beneficial relationships (L. A. Grunig et al., 2002). But when both parties' expectations and experiences of organizational listening differ, the listening activities could be evaluated as inauthentic. Organizations' practice of symmetrical communication is only perceived as "symmetrical" if there are positive outcomes for stakeholders (e.g., organizations' addressing and incorporating their concerns into decisions). But when stakeholders have diverse views, some of which can be conflicting, the listening activities will not result in positive outcomes for *all* stakeholders.

While current research on symmetrical communication has operationalized the variable with measurement items testing perceptions of two-way communication in surveys (e.g., Chon et al., 2022; Men & Sung, 2022), future research should consider breaking down the construct into sub-dimensions such as the pursuit of mutual expectations, mutual understanding and mutual benefits and should test the construct in relation to issues with

which they may agree or disagree with an organization's positions. Furthermore, stakeholders' perceptions of organizations' efforts to pursue symmetrical communication with stakeholders who may agree or disagree with their positions on issues could also be tested using experiments in future research. On the one hand, organizations should pursue dissensus (rather than consensus) (Ciszek, 2016). On the other hand, if organizational listening results in the revelation of differences and disagreements that organizations cannot possibly address in their decisions they make, then it can be perceived as "inauthentic" (Sahay, 2021, p. 13) or "a manifestation of hypocrisy" (Andersen & Høvring, 2020, p. 421). Future research could examine the aims, processes and outcomes of organizational listening separately and assess how alignment and misalignment could affect stakeholders' perceptions.

Recommendations for Practice

Like all organizational practices, organizational listening is subject to scrutiny and thus, compliments and criticisms. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made for practice:

1. Prior to starting the process of organizational listening, practitioners should understand the organization's positions on the issue and their motivations for investing in organizational listening.
2. Rather than designing a listening process during which stakeholders can leave any feedback, practitioners should be cognizant of what the organization can and cannot do and ensure that the listening process does not give stakeholders the false expectations that all their feedback can be actioned.

3. Practitioners should provide stakeholders with some information about the issue before seeking feedback from them in order to ensure that the feedback collected has valuable information which can be incorporated into decision making.
4. When doing stakeholder mapping, practitioners should clearly identify and justify their criteria for prioritizing some groups over others and their choice of channels for these groups.
5. Practitioners should seek to understand the stakeholders' motivations for engaging and *not* engaging in the listening process including their issue motivation, their trust for the organization and their attribution of responsibility to the organization for causing the issue.
6. When synthesizing the listening report to management, practitioners should also report the limitations including the demographic data of the stakeholders who have been listened to and the groups that they might not have been able to reach.
7. At the conclusion of the listening process and/or decision-making process, practitioners should consider publishing a report that reports and explains the feedback that has been received and taken into consideration and the feedback that has been received but not taken into consideration.

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