

Speaking (and listening) to empower voices rarely heard

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Abstract

The theme of the PRIA Research Symposium 2021 brought into focus an essential, but often lacking, contributor to a civil and equitable society – the need for the voice of marginalised, silent, and silenced groups to be expressed. However, ‘speaking up and speaking out’ is only half of the equation for social justice and equity. Recent research has shown that listening is “a missing half” of communication (Macnamara, 2018) in many instances. In particular, research has drawn attention to the need for *organisational listening* (Macnamara, 2016a), noting that in contemporary industrialised societies, organisations play a central role in people’s lives, including, corporate, government, and non-government organisations (NGOs) (Bimber et al., 2012). Sociologists and political scientists warn that if such organisations are not listening inclusively and effectively, voice has no value (Couldry, 2010). This paper synthesises seven years of empirical research to propose concepts and recommendations that address a gap in public relations, stakeholder and community engagement, and public communication literature generally that give meaning and impact to speaking up and speaking out.

Keywords: Speaking, voice, listening, public relations, communication, engagement

Introduction

This paper draws on seven years of empirical research focussed on how and how well government, corporate, non-government, and non-profit organisations listen to their various stakeholders and ‘stakeseekers’,¹ progressing from a *metasynthesis* (Sandelowski et al., 1997) of findings to a conceptual discussion of how identified gaps and shortcomings can be addressed to give meaning and impact to speaking up and speaking out.

Metasynthesis refers to “the “synthesis of findings across multiple qualitative reports ... to produce a new and integrative interpretation of findings that is more substantive than those resulting from individual investigations” (Fingeld, 2003, pp. 894–895). It is less formal than *meta-analysis* as applied to quantitative data, but identifies key themes and consistent findings that collectively offer expanded insights that contribute to theory and practice.

The conceptual section of this paper presents conclusions and recommendations derived from a nascent but growing body of literature on organisational, corporate, and digital listening.

The valorisation of speaking and voice

When we look at the history of communication studies, we cannot escape a predominant focus on speaking and voice from the rhetoric of Ancient Greece to well into the twentieth century. In ancient Greece and Rome, rhetoric – the art of speaking persuasively – was recognised as one of the foundational liberal arts, based on the writings and oratory of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian (Atwill, 1998; Kennedy, 1994). In Book 1 of his *Politics*, Aristotle wrote that “nature ... has endowed man 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).

Rhetoric was also studied and developed as early as 500 BCE in Islamic societies of North Africa (Bernal, 1987) and in China (Lu, 1998), and remains one of the major traditions of human communication scholarship identified by Robert Craig (1999) expounded in a number of communication theory texts (e.g., Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017).

Vox populi – the voice of the people (the *demos*) – and its potential to influence and shape the policies and decisions of government and the exercise of power and authority (the *krátos*)

are fundamental principles of democracy, which is now the dominant form of government practiced in one form or another in almost 200 countries worldwide (Marsh & Miller, 2012, p. 3).

However, it is telling that, until relatively recently, human communication scholarship was described as *speech communication*, particularly in North America – and in some places is still conceived this way (Gunn & Dance, 2014). The research and conceptual analysis presented in this paper turn attention to what is logically and ethically the corollary of speaking – listening. In particular, this research examines listening by organisations for the reasons outlined in the following sections and shows that organisational listening is an area of significant deficiency, but also significant opportunity.

The theoretical neglect of listening

Despite the observation by John Dewey that “society exists in communication” (1916, p. 5), echoed by James Carey (1989), Raymond Williams (1976, p. 10) and other eminent sociologists and cultural studies scholars, and the widely accepted concept of communication as a *two-way* process, listening is little studied as an essential corollary of speaking beyond interpersonal and therapeutic contexts.

In a 2014 review of literature related to listening, Bodie and Crick (2014) issued a call “to lift listening from its slumber in Western scholastic thinking and in the communication studies discipline more specifically” (p. 118). Such a project is well advanced in terms of interpersonal listening, as evidenced in the 648-page edited volume, *The Sourcebook of Listening Research: Methodology and Measures* (Worthington & Bodie, 2017). However, listening by and within organisations, which play a central role in developed societies (Bimber et al., 2012), and in the broad field of public communication, has remained little studied and, as shown in research, is poorly practiced.

The term ‘organizational listening’ is not used as a misguided attempt to anthropomorphize organisations such as government department and agencies, institutions such as the Church and the military, corporations, or the plethora of NGOs and non-profit organisations that proliferate in developed societies. While recognising that it is humans in organisations who listen, or don’t listen, organisations face particular challenges as well as responsibilities in relation to listening. First, and very significantly, organisational listening is commonly characterised by *scale*. Organisations need to communicate with, and therefore need to listen to, hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands in the case of large corporations, or even millions of people in the case governments. This results in what Andrew Dobson calls the difficulty of “scaling up” listening techniques from one or a few to many (2014, pp. 75, 124). As a result of scale, listening in organisations is largely *delegated* through functions such as social and market research; customer relations; complaints processing; stakeholder engagement; public consultation; and government, corporate, and organisation communication. Furthermore, organisational listening is mostly *mediated* through research reports, submissions, letters, e-mails, and increasingly through online platforms and applications.

Unlike interpersonal listening which is direct, face-to-face, and synchronous, organisational listening requires and depends on policies, systems, structures, resources, and a range of processes, technologies, and specialist skills that can enable and facilitate delegated, mediated, mostly asynchronous large-scale listening.

One might expect to find those policies, systems, structures, resources, processes, technologies, and skills in the disciplines of public relations, corporate communication, organisational communication, and related fields such as stakeholder, customer, and community engagement. However, several studies have found that listening is lacking and sometimes absent in theory and practice in these fields (Macnamara, 2016a, 2016b, 2020),

despite claims of two-way communication (Grunig et al., 2006), dialogue, and engagement (Taylor & Kent, 2014).

On the few occasions that listening is discussed in public relations literature, it is in an instrumental context. For example, *Today's Public Relations: An Introduction*, Heath and Coombs (2006) say “listening gives a foundation for knowing what to say and thinking strategically of the best ways to frame and present appealing messages” (p. 346). Listening is also either ignored, or conceived as an activity undertaken only insofar as it provides insights and “intelligence” (Arcos, 2016) to serve the interests of the organisation in politics and political science (Bickford, 1996; Dobson, 2014), in business and management literature (Flynn et al., 2008), and in media studies (Lacey, 2013). Listening has thus suffered from theoretical neglect.

Defining listening and organisational listening

Before summarising recent research that shows practical neglect of listening by and within organisations, it is necessary to have some clear and reasonable definitions. If we expect too much of listening, such as universal consensus and agreement, it is bound to fail. On the other hand, much purported listening is *pretend* listening (Bussie (2011, p. 31), *pseudolistening* (Adler & Rodman, 2011, p. 136), and *cataphatic* listening that assigns what others say into categories, often prejudicially based on pre-conceptions or stereotypes (Waks, 2010, p. 2749).

In a literature review in the *International Journal of Listening*, Glenn (1989) identified 50 different definitions of listening. Diversity results from the fact that human listening is informed by psychology, sociology, communication studies, political science, ethics, and therapeutic fields of research and practice. Drawing from a number of disciplines, my early research identified *seven canons of listening* as follows.

1. Giving *recognition* to others as people or groups with legitimate rights to speak and be treated with respect (Bickford, 1996; Honneth, 2007; Husband, 2009);
2. *Acknowledgement* of others' views and expressions of voice, ideally in a timely way;
3. Paying *attention* to others (Bickford, 1996; Honneth, 2007; Husband, 2009, p. 441);
4. *Interpreting* and constructing meaning from what others say as fairly and receptively as possible (Husband, 1996, 2000);
5. Trying as far as possible to achieve *understanding* of others' views, perspectives, and feelings (Bodie & Crick, 2014; Husband, 1996, 2000);
6. Giving *consideration* to what others say such as in requests or proposals (Honneth, 2007; Husband, 2009); and
7. *Responding* in an appropriate way after consideration has been given (Lundsteen, 1979; Purdy & Borisoff, 1997). Scholars agree that ‘appropriate’ does not necessarily mean agreement or acceptance, but research shows that an explanation is expected if agreement is not achievable.

These elements of listening are also informed and supported by human communication theories, such as Gadamer's (1989) concept of openness, and the dialogism and dialogue espoused by Bakhtin (1981, 1984) and Buber (1958, 2002), as well as theories of receptivity (Kompridis, 2011), reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), hospitality (Silverstone, 2007), and interactivity (Pelias & VanOosting, 1987). Also, literature on the ethics of listening (Beard, 2009; Bodie, 2010; Bodie & Crick, 2014; Conquergood, 1985; Gehrke, 2009) informs theory building and practice.

Burnside-Lawry is one of the few who have attempted a definition of *organisational listening*. In her study of listening competency of employees, she drew on Flynn et al. (2008) to say:

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

This definition is somewhat useful by drawing attention to the organisational environment as well as the role of individuals in organisations, who are required to operationalise listening. A definition provided in the book reporting Stage 1 of the Organisational Listening Project summarised the eight elements of a proposed *architecture of listening* and the 'seven canons' of listening stating:

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

However, while recognising that listening is more than hearing, this definition still failed to fully identify the central concepts and principles of organisational listening. Drawing from Stages 2 and 3 of the Organisational Listening Project, organisational listening is more comprehensively defined as follows.

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

This definition builds on previous analyses in several important ways including identification that organisational listening:

- Must occur at, or be articulated to, *decision maker and policy maker level* in order to lead to an appropriate response;
- Incorporates *interpersonal* listening but must extend to *delegated mediated* listening;
- Needs to be *scaled* appropriately in accordance with the number of stakeholders;
- Requires *processes and systems* to enable delegated and mediated listening;
- Should be *active*, not merely passive;
- Should be *inclusive*, by stipulating that an organisation should listen to all who wish to communicate with it, or vice versa, rather than *selective listening* or confining listening to 'key stakeholders' and 'publics' that are commonly identified by an organisation based on its interests.

Practical neglect of listening – Empirical findings

A critical research question

The overarching research question explored in three stages of the Organisational Listening Project was 'how, and how well, do organisations listen to their stakeholders', whether they be customers, employees, members, students, patients, local communities, or citizens generally.

A tale of five studies

The empirical research exploring this overarching question and a number of specific related research questions included, firstly, a study of 36 government, corporate, non-government, and non-profit organisations in Australia, the USA, and UK in 2014–2015; secondly, a six-month full-time study of government communication working inside the UK Government in 2016–

2017; thirdly, a study of corporate, organisational, and marketing communication in three subsidiaries of a European multinational corporation in 2018 and 2019; and fourthly, a cognate study to evaluate public consultation and engagement by the Greater Sydney Commission during development of the Greater Sydney Development Plan in 2018. As shown in Table 1, these projects have involved study of 60 organisations worldwide.

Table 1. Organisations studied in the Organisational Listening Project and cognate studies.

Organization type	Australia	Europe	UK	USA	Total
Government	4	2	30	3	39
Corporate	4		3	8	15
NGO/non-profit	2	2	1	1	6
Totals	10	4	34	12	60

Most recently, this has been complemented by ongoing global research since early 2020 for the World Health Organization (WHO) that involves evaluation of its public communication and engagement including its listening capabilities to understand and engage with stakeholders.

Methodology

The methodology of all stages of research was qualitative, conducted within an interpretivist and naturalistic approach (i.e., in the natural setting of the practices and phenomena studied). The first stage of the Organisational Listening Project involved (1) depth interviews with a range of senior organisation leaders responsible for potential listening functions including market research, stakeholder engagement, public consultation, customer call centres, public relations and corporate communication, and internal employee communication; (2) content analysis of relevant documents such as strategic communication plans and reports of research, evaluations, and consultations; and (3) field tests in which inquiries were submitted to organisations and their response recorded.

The second and third stages of the Organisational Listening Project used participatory action research (PAR) employing (1) close up observation *in situ* in the studied organisations; (2) depth interviews with a senior organisation leaders responsible for functions with the potential to listen to various stakeholders; and (3) content analysis of relevant documents such as strategic communication plans and reports of research, consultations, and evaluations.

The study of stakeholder and community engagement by the Greater Sydney Commission involved (1) depth interviews with a sample of organisation and community leaders and (2) content analysis of relevant documents such as draft plans and revisions to plans in response to engagement and consultation.

As shown in Table 2, research into organisational listening informing this analysis has involved 327 interviews; content analysis of more than 600 documents; participation in 77 meetings and forums as part of PAR; analysis of 200 web pages and 1,200 social media posts; and 25 field tests to monitor response to inquiries submitted to organisations.

Table 2. Summary of research activities in The Organisational Listening Project and cognate studies 2014–2019.

Research	Interviews	Documents	Meetings & forums	Web pages	Social media posts	Field tests
Listening Pilot – Aust	3	-	-	-	-	-
Stage 1 – Listening Corporate, Government & NGOs – Aust, UK, USA	104	412	12	40	-	25
Stage 2 – Listening Government – UK	76	92	54	65	-	-
Stage 3 – Listening Achmea Int. – Aust, Europe ²	96	64	6	75	-	-
Achmea Int. – Europe ³	33	24	2	10	200	-
Greater Sydney Commission – Aust	15	25	3	10	1,000	-
TOTALS	327	617	77	200	1,200	25

Key findings

Key findings from three stages of the Organisational Listening Project and the study of Greater Sydney Commission (GSC) engagement and consultation included the following.

1. In the name of public communication, most organisations predominantly disseminate their messages – i.e., they engage in speaking to stakeholders and publics who they perceive primarily as ‘target audiences’ (Dozier & Repper, 1992), ‘target publics’ (Heath & Merkl, 2013; Hutchins, 2018), and ‘consumers’ (Scammell, 2003). These terms reflect the focus on *organisational speaking*, such as through advertising, media publicity, publications, websites, social media, and events. The ratio of resources and time devoted to speaking versus listening by organisations is as high as 95:5, with 80:20 being an average acknowledged by participants in the research (Macnamara, 2016a, p. 235).
2. Even social media, which are designed for two-way interactive communication and *sociality* are used primarily by many organisations for speaking to promote their brands, products, services, and policies.
3. Specialist functions established ostensibly to foster engagement, dialogue and participation, such as stakeholder engagement and public consultation are also often used primarily for speaking by organisations.
4. When listening is conducted by organisations, it is mostly instrumental and organization-centric, undertaken to gain insights and intelligence to aid targeting of people for marketing products and services or other forms of persuasion such as seeking to influence voting in elections.
5. Organisational listening, when undertaken, is also often selective – what Bassel (2017) refers to as the “politics of listening”. For example, governments listen mostly to major business, industrial and other power elites; corporations often listen only to major customers and partners; and even public consultations and stakeholder engagement often hear only from the ‘usual suspects’ – large established organisations, lobbyists, and highly organised and professionalised groups.
6. Selective listening is exacerbated by a lack of ‘outreach’ to individuals and groups who are socially and political isolated, and/or disengaged, and/or insufficiently articulate and media literate. As well as *listening to* people, responsible and responsive organisations need to *listen out for* those who lack access or opportunity to effectively speak up and speak out.

7. In cases in which the voice of stakeholders is received, most organisations lack the resources, skills, and specialist tools to analyse the data. For example, Stage 2 of the Organisational Listening Project identified a public consultation in which the UK Government received 127,400 submissions. The department involved did not have textual analysis software or the skills to analyse the almost one million words from people speaking up and speaking out (Macnamara, 2017). This, and other examples, identify that collection and receipt of the voice of stakeholders and stakeseekers do not constitute listening; listening requires analysis of often large bodies of text and sometimes audio or video content to pay attention to, achieve understanding, and give consideration to what is said.

When citizens experience a lack or loss of effective voice, researchers point to significant social, cultural and political problems. For instance, Charles Husband (1996, 2000) and others such as Tanja Dreher (2009, 2010) have drawn attention to the lack of voice in any meaningful sense afforded to ethnic minorities and argued that this constitutes oppression and injustice. Feminist studies has similarly identified lack of voice available to women as a social inequity negatively impacting the status and identity of women in many societies (e.g., Butler, 1999; Weatherall, 2002). Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of *symbolic power* exercised through language and discourse, it can be argued that a failure or refusal to listen is a form of *symbolic violence* (Bourdieu, 1984).

Key findings from ongoing research to evaluate WHO public communication during the COVID-19 pandemic and annual World Health Days have contributed further relevant learnings. Almost two years of evaluation of WHO communication globally have confirmed that communication is conceptualised most commonly as disseminating information and conducting campaigns aimed at persuasion of others – i.e., speaking. The first stage of research for the WHO found that almost all evaluation undertaken was *process evaluation* focussed on measuring and assessing *outputs*, such as media publicity in terms of reach, impressions, share of voice, and media 'sentiment', and website visits and views.

Planning of WHO strategic communication was subsequently recast to recognise that audience research and stakeholder engagement are required as part of *ex-ante* formative evaluation to understand stakeholder and community attitudes, concerns, beliefs, interests, and needs, and to identify baseline metrics such as existing awareness levels. Similarly, audience research and stakeholder engagement are required as part of *ex-post* summative evaluation to assess progress, gain feedback, and identify change in awareness, attitudes and/or behaviour that can be connected to communication. Monitoring (process evaluation) also is essentially listening. Evaluation and listening research overlap in the domains of audience research and stakeholder engagement, as well as in various forms of monitoring such as social media monitoring and analysis.

A related finding gained early in the WHO research was that capability development is required among communication practitioners. Communication processes and practices studied revealed medium to very high levels of expertise in production-oriented tasks, such as writing, overseeing graphic design, posting on social media, and presenting. However, the vast majority of communication practitioners had low levels of experience and training in research methods, consulting techniques, or data analysis, particularly for qualitative data that are most commonly in the form of text. Thus, a major part of the WHO project became capability development of communication staff to expand their skills in research including basic methods of gaining feedback, doing or commissioning audience research, and analysing audience response data. This included preparing a WHO Manual on audience as well as media research methods and the conduct of training workshops. The manual included a number of feedback forms and questionnaires for WHO policy, technical, and communication staff to use when engaging with stakeholders such as national health authorities, senior health workers, and community groups. In short, WHO communication professionals were trained in how to listen as well as how to

speak on behalf of the organisation – a focus that is missing in professional development and in many university courses in communication.

Most recently, the WHO is expanding its listening to behavioural insights (BI), establishing a BI unit in its Geneva headquarters, and collaborating with external specialists to gain understandings of stakeholders views, perceptions, and concerns. For example, the WHO was included in a 2020 Pew Research Center survey of public perceptions of organisations' performance (Bell et al., 2020, pp. 26–27) and in the 2021 and 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer studies (Edelman, 2021, p. 42; Edelman, 2022, p. 48).

The important issue of how, and how well, organisations listen has been taken up by a number of scholars since the pioneering organisational listening studies of 2014–2016 including Place (2019, 2020), Reinikainen, Kari, and Luoma-aho (2020), and others who have examined listening in various fields of practice including public relations and in the growing world of digital communication. The work of Bassel (2017) on the politics of listening is an important contribution. Furthermore, studies by technosocial and technocultural scholars such as Caplan (2018), Gillespie (2018, and Napoli (2014), who critique the use of 'big data' and *dataveillance* that can *listen in* in ways that invade privacy and manipulate people, are also important contributions.

Drawing on this large body of research, a number of recommendations are offered for conceptualising, or reconceptualising, communication as speaking and listening, and for operationalising organisational listening that is inclusive, effective, and ethical.

Conceptualising and operationalising open, effective, ethical listening

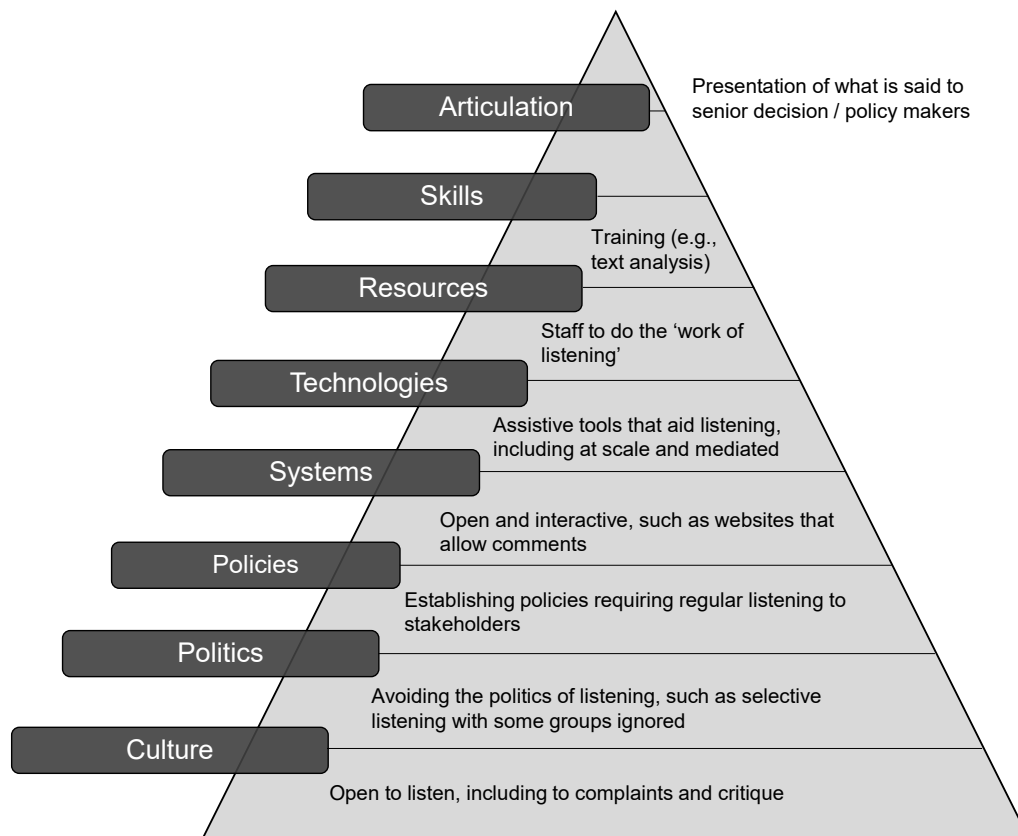
Designing listening into an organisation

Seven years of empirical research has identified that effective listening cannot be simply added on to an organisation's traditional operations, such as periodic 'listening posts', 'listening tours', or a 'Have your say' online portal. Also, data capture technologies on their own do not provide effective listening. Rather, as noted previously, research has identified that an 'architecture of listening' is required to design listening in to an organisation. Specifically, this requires a *culture* of listening as the foundation – in short, an organisation's management needs to want to listen. Also, organisations need to avoid the *politics of listening* – instead, being open and inclusive. Then, *policies* for listening, *systems* and *technologies* for listening, *resources* for listening, and *skills* for listening need to be applied. Finally, in order to be effective, what is learned through organisational listening needs *articulation* to senior decision makers and policy makers in order to have influence (see Figure 1).

Listening systems and technologies

Because many organisations face the challenge of listening at scale through various delegated and mediated forms, and often across time zones and substantial geographic distance, assistive technologies and systems are commonly required. However, in the first instance, in order to soothe the naysayers who hide behind discursive barriers such as lack of budget and lack of tools, it is important to point out that organisational listening can be enabled by low-cost and low-tech methods as well as 'ComTech' and advanced research methods. The simple feedback forms developed for and used by WHO staff who regularly engage with stakeholders are examples. Furthermore, omnibus survey questions included in studies conducted by research institutes and companies offer low-cost ways of gaining insights into stakeholder and public attitudes, perceptions, and concerns. Also, as shown in Table 3, there are a number of informal methods for listening, such as establishing advisory boards and committees; attending meetings with key stakeholders and representatives of constituents; hosting or attending forums; visiting areas and facilities; and engaging in crowdsourcing. Many tools that enable listening are also free such as basic versions of Google Analytics and numerous open source content and textual analysis applications that can analyse transcripts and media content.

Figure 1. Eight elements of an ‘architecture of listening’ for organisations.



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Given that people speak up and speak out in words, verbally or in text, textual analysis capabilities are essential for organisational listening, but often lacking, or deprioritised in favour of statistical analysis. Open-ended questions in surveys; transcripts of focus groups and interviews; recordings of calls to call centres; correspondence and complaints; and submissions to consultations cannot be understood and given adequate consideration simply by reading, particularly when there are large volumes of text. Natural language processing (NLP) applications, particularly those with automated machine coding and machine learning capabilities, enable analysis of large volumes of text such as submissions to consultations. Calls to call centres and complaints departments that are usually digitally recorded can be transferred to text via voice to text (VTT) software for systematic analysis.

Organisations are also increasingly adopting artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as *chat bots* to ‘listen’ to users of web pages and respond with relevant information, as well as sophisticated learning algorithms that respond to voice as well as users’ data entry and menu selections (Macnamara, 2019). Continuing developments in AI and the rapidly growing field of *data analytics* are advanced ways that the voices of stakeholders can be accessed, given attention, understood, and considered.

Some object to such technologies being described as listening systems, and it is acknowledged that such technologies have limitations and some raise serious questions for users and society. A number of researchers such as Caplan (2018), Gillespie (2018), Landau (2017), and Napoli (2014) express concern about digital surveillance and the effects of algorithms such as *algorithmic filtering*. 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 whom they are disposed towards.

Operationalising an architecture of listening and listening systems that are inclusive and can cope with scale is far from a simple or neutral task. Organisational listening theory requires an appreciation of the concerns and considerations debated in studies of dialogue, engagement,

deliberation, and participation such as power relations, as well as myriad challenges and concerns related to online communication, ‘big data’, and data analytics. Therefore, continuing research to examine the effectiveness of such engagements from the perspective of stakeholders as well as organisations, and related ethical issues, is needed. However, to ignore the listening potential of such technologies leaves them under-researched and communication under-equipped.

Organisational listening also can be expanded and enhanced by utilising a broader range of research methods. Compared with the limited and often stilted opportunities for stakeholders to speak up and speak out in surveys and focus groups – the most common research methods used by organisations – much more can be said and richer and deeper insights can be gained through more advanced qualitative as well as quantitative methods. These include *deliberative polling* (Fishkin, 2011); *participatory action research* (PAR) (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019); *interpretative phenomenological analysis* (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2003); *appreciative inquiry* (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2008); *sense making methodology* (Dervin & Foreman-Wernet, 2013); *behavioural insights* (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008); and *customer journey mapping* (Court, Elzinga, Mulder, & Vetvik, 2009).

A summary of formal research methods, informal methods, and systems and technologies that can enable organisational listening is shown in Table 3, based on the research cited in this paper.

Table 3. Formal and informal methods of organisational listening and listening systems / technologies.

Formal research methods	Informal Methods	Listening Systems
Structured surveys	Advisory boards / committees	Data analytics
Deliberative polling	Field / facility visits	Google Analytics
Behavioural insights	Forums (physical)	Online forums
Customer journey mapping	Meetings	Chatbots
Focus groups	Minutes of meetings	Web page feedback applets
Depth interviews	Call centre reports / recordings	Voice to text (VTT) software
Content analysis (quantitative) – e.g., of reports, open end survey responses	Crowdsourcing initiatives	Machine learning natural language processing (NLP) content analysis applications
Textual analysis (qualitative) – e.g., of transcripts, consultation submissions, correspondence)	Independent research reports	Online consultation sites and applications (e.g., Citizen Space, Gov.UK)
Media monitoring and analysis	Reading media	Media analysis software or service providers
Social media monitoring	Reading social media	Social media analysis software (e.g., Brandwatch, Hootsuite) or service providers
Ethnography (observation)	Citizen juries	Artificial intelligence (AI) applications (evolving)
Netnography	Study circles	
Participatory action research		
Appreciative inquiry		
Interpretative phenomenological analysis		
Sense making methodology		

Resources and skills for listening

Resources in terms of human resources, time, and budget clearly need to be applied to organisational listening, not only disseminating information which is the traditional focus of public relations and corporate and organisational communication. Of note is that the skills required for organisational listening as described are significantly different to core skills for organisational speaking such as writing, presenting, media relations, and event management. Organisational listening requires knowledge of and skills to conduct research and use, or at least access, tools such as machine learning textual analysis applications and online engagement and consultation applications and platforms such as Citizen Space (https://www.delib.net/citizen_space) or EngagementHQ marketed by Bang the Table (<https://www.bangthetable.com>). Professional development and industry training programs need review in light of these research findings and conceptualisations (reconceptualisations) of communication.

Conclusions

Increased and improved listening by organisations that play central roles in contemporary developed societies can lead to major benefits at a micro, meso, and macro level. At a micro level, open, effective, ethical listening – what could be called OEE listening – by government, non-government, corporate, and non-profit organisations can afford equity to marginalised, silent, and silenced individuals and groups. At a meso level in the operations of organisations, OEE listening can result in increased employee and customer satisfaction and loyalty, reduced customer acquisition costs, reduced staff turnover, and reduced training costs for new employees, as well as insights and understanding that can positively contribute to organisation strategy (Macnamara, 2020). At a macro-social level, development of organisational listening theory and practice has the potential to redress the concerning decline in public trust and confidence in government, corporations, NGOs, and many institutions (Edelman, 2021; Garland, 2021) and the “democratic deficit” (Norris, 2011) that plagues many democratic societies today. A recent report by Demos of research among citizens in the European Union documented how “responsive listening” (Bartlett et al., 2014, pp. 9–11) can be conducted via social platforms and other technologies across large numbers of people to gain insights and understanding and improve public trust. Ultimately, listening by the both the organisations entrusted with key roles in society and their stakeholders can increase social cohesion by making communication meaningful.

This research and discussion throw a ball at the feet of public relations researchers and practitioners and those in the related fields of corporate, government, and organizational communication in terms of future directions in research and practice. Normative theories of building and maintaining relationships through two-way communication can be realised, and a positive role can be played in society, by contributing to an architecture of listening in organisations. Picking up this ball will require focus on creating cultures, policies, and systems for listening and acquiring skills to manage such systems and technologies in effective ethical ways to counterbalance the speaking and shouting that characterises traditional corporate, government, and marketing communication.

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¹ In addition to *stakeholders* who affect an organisation's operations or are affected by an organisation (Freeman, 1984), stakeholder and issues management researchers also recognise *stakeseekers*, defined as individuals and groups without a direct relationship with an organisation but who seek to have a say or influence (Heath, 2002; Spicer, 2007).

² Conducted in 2018.

³ Conducted in 2019.