Meeting the challenge of being a listening organization

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Introduction

Communication is a term that rolls easily off the tongue, which is symbolic in light of the following discussion. Eminent sociologists, psychologists, democratic political theorists, and others have described communication as "the organizing element of human life"[1] and the basis of human society.[2] American philosopher and psychologist John Dewey said succinctly: "Society exists … in communication."[3] Communication provides the 'glue' that holds groups, teams, communities, societies, and organizations together, even when they face challenges and conflict.[4]

However, starting with the oratory and the 'art of rhetoric' proselytised by Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian,[5] communication has been widely conceptualized as voice and speaking. In Book 1 of *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.[6] Renaissance political philosopher Thomas Hobbes echoed Aristotle's trope in saying "the most noble and profitable invention of all others was that of speech".[7]

In comparison, listening has languished in scholarship and practice, particularly in relation to organizations. Recent research has reported that "most organizations listen sporadically at best, often poorly, and sometimes not at all".[8] There is growing evidence that this is causally related to the "crisis of trust"[9] that plagues many of our institutions as well as many inequities, crises, and catastrophes. There is an urgent need to turn attention to listening in our organized society.

The post-discipline of communication

When we come to discuss listening, we step into the very broad field of communication. Here I am talking about human communication, leaving *communications* (plural) that refers to technologies such as broadcasting and the internet to the side for a moment, although I will return to those as aids to human communication a little later. Understanding of human communication is grounded in semiotics and language, psychology, social psychology, sociology, phenomenology, cultural studies, rhetoric, systems theory, and in fields such as media studies because humans are users of tools.

Eminent professor of media and public affairs, Silvio Waisbord, describes communication studies as a *post-discipline*. "Born at the crossroads of various disciplines,"[10] he says it has become "polyphonic[11] and a "porous, multi-faceted" field.[12]

To narrow this expansive field down a little to focus on core principles, we can broadly identify two main types of human communication that are practiced and important in contemporary societies.

Interpersonal communication
First, there is *interpersonal* communication that occurs in dyads (between two people) and in small groups. This is mostly verbal applying people's oral and aural senses, although it also includes gestures and other non-verbal language applying our visual senses.

Public communication
The second important type of human communication is *public communication*. This comes under various labels in different professional and industry sectors including corporate, organizational, government, and political communication, and specialist practices such as advertising and public relations. Interpersonal communication is very important to relationships and the functioning of communities and societies, but here I wish to focus on public communication, and particularly the public communication that occurs – or is meant to occur – between organizations and sectors of the public such as their members, customers, patients, students, parishioners, or other groups that are commonly referred to as *stakeholders*.

Organization-public communication is important because organizations are central features of the economic, political, social, and cultural landscape of modern societies. People have to deal with organizations every day. Organizations of various types – government, non-government (NGOs), corporate, and non-profit organizations (NPOs) – have a major impact on people's lives, and in democracies people influence the operations, success, and future of organizations.

We can break the broad concept of communication down further to identify three main purposes of communicating.

Informing
Informing people through *one-way transmission* of messages is important in society in many situations. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic people needed to be informed of the symptoms to look for as well what to do. People depend on information about services, products, health risks, actions to take in an emergency, and so on.

Persuading
In some situations, it is also necessary to use *one-way transmission* of messages for persuading people to change their behaviour or take certain actions such as become vaccinated, lose weight, or drive safely. Persuasive marketing and political campaigns are legitimate provided they are ethically conducted.

Interacting
However, a major role of communication is interacting, which is fundamental to relationships, engagement, cooperating and collaborating, learning, and for democracy to function. Interaction requires *two-way transactional* communication. And that needs to be more than two or more parties speaking.

The root of the term – and the problem

Being in the city of Rome, the home of the language of Latin, I take you back and pay tribute to the root of our English term communication. *Comunicazione* in Italian. *Communicacion* in old French – but often now spelled the same as the English word, with *communiquer* as the

verb. On the other side of the world, Indonesians and Malaysians say *kommunikasi* in their Bahasa.

These terms and the English word communication are derived from the Latin root *communis* meaning "common" or "public" and, more specifically, the Latin noun *communicatio*, which denotes "sharing" as well as "imparting"[13] and the Latin verb *communicare* meaning to "share or make common".[14] For those who prefer more contemporary references, current dictionaries define communication as "the imparting or interchange of thoughts, opinions, or information by speech, writing, or signs"[15] and, even more transactionally as "a process by which information is exchanged between individuals".[16] Sharing and exchange of information require listening.

However, rhetoric with its focus on speaking remains one of the major traditions of human communication scholarship and practice[17] expounded in numerous communication studies texts.[18] In fact, for much of the 20th century and even into the 21st century, human communication has been widely studied as *speech* communication, particularly in North America.[19]

In his classic text, *Communication as Culture*, James Carey said "the transmission view of communication is the commonest in our culture".[20] Contemporary texts on communication note that "theorists have criticized the current dominance of a transmission (sender-receiver) model of communication" that exists in everyday thinking.[21]

Democracy is founded on the principle of *vox populi* – the voice of the people.[22] However, in his 2014 book *Listening for Democracy*, Andrew Dobson said "honourable exceptions aside, virtually no attention has been paid to listening in mainstream political science". He added that efforts to improve democracy have mainly focussed on "getting more people to speak".[23] But, as Gideon Calder points out, the real problem in democratic politics is not being denied a voice; it is being denied an audience.[24]

While welcoming the proliferation of media in contemporary societies including social media from early in the 21st century, John Downing says poignantly that there is no point in a right to free speech if no one is listening.[25] In the same vein, Kate Lacey observes that "without a listener, speech is nothing but noise in the ether".[26]

Research shows that this problem is continuing largely unchecked. In a 2020 paper discussing how organizations need to consider the 'voice of consumers", David Brandt reported that "while there is a rich literature on listening in interpersonal settings, studies of organizational listening have been comparatively scarce."[27]

Popular culture reveals a similar focus on voice and speaking. A Google search of the term 'have your say' early this year when I was writing *Organizational Listening II: Expanding the Concept, Theory, and Practice* yielded 13.2 billion weblinks. A search of the term 'speak up' produced 4.7 billion weblinks. Nick Couldry wrote an important book titled *Why Voice Matters*.[28] But what value is voice if no one is listening?

Today, organizations make major investments allegedly in communication. For example, spending on media advertising reached almost US$800 billion a year globally in 2022.[29] Public relations is reported to be a $100 billion a year industry and growing.[30] Organizations also spend hundreds of millions of dollars, euros, pounds, and other currencies on websites, marketing communication such as direct mail, publications, social media, and sponsorship of

public events. The design and construction of organizations today is based on an *architecture of speaking*.

While acknowledging that listening is a focus in interpersonal communication and in therapeutic fields of practice, Lisbeth Lipari issued a timely call for a "rethink" of communication "through the lens of listening".[31]

This was a call that I took up in my research in relation to communication in, with, and by organizations. Before discussing some key findings from that research, there are some concepts and principles in relation to listening that need to be recognized.

Listening as humans

Despite frequent conflation of the concepts, listening is distinctly different to hearing. In the case of interpersonal communication, hearing is a physiological process in which signals in the form of sound waves cause vibrations that strike the human eardrum (the *tympanic membrane*) and then travel through the cochlea to be interpreted by the auditory cortex located in the temporal lobe the brain. In addition to aural reception, humans process light signals received from texts or images such as photographs and video through the sensors of their eyes.

Listening occurs when the brain translates electromagnetic or electrochemical signals (sound or light) into meaning, which in turn can trigger a cognitive, affective, or behavioural response.[32]

In an organizational context, hearing is the receipt of signals that typically arrive in text or visual form such as emails, letters, submissions, proposals, petitions, research reports, and articles and posts in traditional or social media, as well as oral messages in meetings and forums. *Organizational listening* occurs when these signals are processed by the organization.

Seven canons of listening

Rather than reduce the process of listening to a simple definition, I scoured a wide range of psychology, sociology, therapeutic, democratic political science, and ethics literature to identify what I have referred to as "seven canons of listening" because they highlight key principles and elements.[33] These are:

1. Giving *recognition* to others as people or groups with legitimate rights to speak and be treated with respect. This requires openness to avoid selective listening in which the voices and views of some groups are given preference while others are ignored;[34]
2. *Acknowledgement* of others' views and expressions of voice, ideally in a timely way;
3. Paying *attention* to others;[35]
4. *Interpreting* and constructing meaning from what others say receptively and with empathy;[36]
5. Trying as far as possible to achieve *understanding* of others' views, perspectives, and feelings through engagement with them at a cognitive, affective, and participatory level involving interactivity such as dialogue;[37]
6. *Considering* what others say,[38] particularly giving "fair consideration";[39] and
7. *Responding* in an appropriate way after consideration has been given.[40] Appropriate does not necessarily mean agreement or acceptance, but research shows that an explanation is expected if agreement is not achievable.

Many people and organizations fail to apply these important principles and steps in communication. In this forum, it might be appropriate to briefly note some sins of listening as

well as virtues of listening. Unfortunately, many commit sins of listening such as *pretend* listening; *inactive* listening, *pseudolistening*, and *tokenistic*, *selective*, *forgetful*, *interruptive*, *defensive* and *cataphatic* listening. Cataphatic listening refers to categorizing others and what they say into pre-existing and often pejorative pigeonholes such as identifying a speaker as 'misinformed', 'a perpetual complainer', or a 'trouble maker'.

Conversely, virtuous forms of listening including *active*, *attentive*, *empathetic*, *compassionate*, *reflective*, *mindful*, *reciprocal*, *courageous*, and *apophatic* listening – apophatic being open listening that does not pre-judge speakers and what they say.[41]

Listening as organizations

It is often assumed that the principles and the practices of interpersonal listening directly translate to an organisational context. The principles, as reflected in the 'seven canons of listening' and the virtuous approaches do. But the practices of listening in and by an organization are fundamentally different for three key reasons.

Scale
Unlike interpersonal communication in which people are expected to listen to one or a few, or a few hundred at most in large face-to-face meetings, organizations are commonly expected to listen to thousands or hundreds of thousands of people such as employees, customers, members, students, or other groups that need to interact with an organization. Governments commonly need to listen to millions of people

Delegated
Because of scale, listening in organizations is mostly delegated to functions such as social and market research; customer relations; complaints departments; stakeholder engagement teams; social media monitoring staff or agencies, public consultation; and government, corporate, marketing, and internal employee communication teams or units.

Mediated
A third key characteristic of organizational listening is that it is mostly mediated. People have limited opportunities to speak personally to someone in an organization. Most often, people speak to organizations through letters, emails, written complaints, website forms, responses in surveys, social media posts, and submissions to consultations.

Listening to mediated communication through multiple channels at scale is not something that can be done inclusively or effectively via human ears, and often listening to achieve understanding and appropriate response is beyond the capacity of manual reading of documents. Listening in an organizational context usually requires data retrieval from a range of sources and systematic analysis.

The Organizational Listening Project – Lessons in organizational listening

In 2014, I began The Organizational Listening Project in which I closely examined how, and how well, organizations listen. In an initial pilot study followed by three stages of the project and several cognate studies, I have examined listening in 60 organizations – a mixture of government, non-government, corporate, and non-profit organizations – in Australia, Europe, the UK, and the USA.

The findings have been widely reported in a 2016 book titled *Organizational Listening: The Missing Essential in Public Communication* and in academic and professional journal articles.[42] So here, I will only briefly summarize key findings.

Overall, what was revealing and alarming was that the organizations studied acknowledged that, on average, 80 per cent of their total resources applied to public communication was focussed on distributing the organization's messages – in short, organizational speaking. In some organizations, up to 95 per cent of their communication resources was focussed on speaking. Furthermore, when organizational listening was undertaken, it was primarily for gaining intelligence and insights to serve the organization's interests.

A noteworthy example of a failure in organizational listening was in the area of public consultation – a communication activity that is allegedly undertaken specifically for listening. The UK National Health Service (NHS) Mandate consultation of 2015 attracted 127,400 submissions – a record. So much so, that it was beyond the capacity of the staff in the NHS and Department of Health to analyze the contents or even read them all. A summary of a small sample was presented to the relevant Minister of Government. As part of my research project, a machine learning natural language processing (NLP) application was used to undertake detailed textual analysis of the almost one million pages of people's views and concerns. This produced a number of important findings including revelation of unfounded but strongly held beliefs that EU migrants and visitors were responsible for over-burdening the UK's public health system and other anti-EU views. Such views had a major influence in the 2016 EU Referendum. But until the shock result that led to *Brexit*, those voices had not been listened to.

There are many other examples of the serious and even catastrophic results of organizations not listening. These include:

- The death of more than 300 people in Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust hospitals in the UK of which a Public Inquiry report said: "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 and staff or ensure the correction of deficiencies brought to the Trust's attention";[43]
- The Deep Horizon Oil Rig disaster. The following inquiry found that rig workers had reported concerns about the safety of the deep water undersea well, but BP ignored them;
- The 2017 Grenfell Tower fire in London that claimed more than 70 lives and injured many more was directly attributed to a "failure to listen".[44] Warnings of inadequate fire safety standards were posted on the website of the Grenfell Action Group four years before the disaster[45] and reports identifying the dangers of combustible building cladding were submitted to the UK Parliament as early as 1999;[46]
- The Boeing 737MAX airliner that was grounded worldwide for more than a year following two crashes in which 346 people died. A Quality Manager who worked at Boeing for more than 30 years said in an online report that "Boeing stopped listening to its employees."[47]

Research also shows that a lack of organizational listening leads to a loss of employee loyalty and productivity; lost customers; lost members; increased crises because early warnings and signals are not received; damaged reputations; social inequities; and ultimately a loss of trust.

When organizations identify a need to listen, or listen better, a common strategy is to reach for a technology as a 'silver bullet' or make a grand gesture such as a 'listening tour'. However, an interesting finding of The Organizational Listening Project was that organizations with the most advanced communication technologies were often among the worst listeners and organizations with less communication technologies were often among the better listeners. This

raised a question of what leads to open inclusive attentive and effective organizational listening?

An architecture of listening
Analysis showed that the foundation of organizational listening is the *culture* of the organization. An organization's leadership and management must want to listen. The organization needs to recognize that relationships, engagement, and trust necessitate listening as well as speaking. Furthermore, stakeholders very often have something of value to say.

Organizational culture also needs to address the *politics of listening* in which some people are listened to while others are ignored. Many organizations are prone to selective listening, which leads to skewed understanding of stakeholder and public opinion and denies organizations potentially valuable input and feedback.

Once an organization has a culture of listening that is open and inclusive, organizational listening at scale through delegated departments and units monitoring mediated forms of stakeholder voice requires *policies* and *systems* for listening. These can be enabled and enhanced by assistive *technologies* which, in turn, require allocation of *resources* such as staff with the necessary *skills* to use the tools available. Assistive technologies and tools for large-scale organizational listening to mediated voice include:

- Content analysis of social media, often referred to as *social listening*. It needs to be noted, however, that social media content is not a representative sample of viewpoints;
- *Surveys* and *interviews* with key stakeholders, which can be conducted online;
- Machine learning *textual analysis* applications, which are particularly important given that people express themselves in words, not numbers, such as in emails, letters, complaints, open-ended comments in surveys and interviews, and submissions to consultations;
- *Voice to text* (VTT) software that can translate recorded voice calls to call centres into text for analysis using textual analysis applications. Some organizations studied receive millions of phone calls a year – a rich source of data for analysis;
- Advanced in-depth research methods such as *participatory action research* that involves collaboration and co-design, *behavioural insights*, and *customer journey mapping* that can also be applied to other stakeholders.

These methods do not replace face-to-face meetings; public forums; tours and visits; and techniques such as citizen juries, panels, assemblies, and dialogues, which are also important methods for organizational listening. They extend interpersonal listening to cope with scale, delegation, and mediation.

Whichever methods of organizational listening are used, the final important stage is *articulation* of what is learned to decision makers and policy makers. Unless this occurs through reports and presentations, many individuals and groups in society remain the 'unlistened to' and the 'insufficiently listened to'.

These eight elements – culture, politics, policies, systems, technologies, resources, skills, and articulation – are collectively referred to as an *architecture of listening* because they need to be reflected in the design of an organization and deployed in a coherent complementary way. They cannot be simply 'tacked on' to an organization like fake facades on a building. Ad hoc application of one or a few elements will not achieve effective ethical organizational listening. On the other hand, proposing an *architecture of listening* to facilitate large-scale organization-public communication is not intended to be prescriptive or suggest a single solution. The overall framework of an *architecture of listening* not only leaves room for, but encourages

innovation, customization, and creativity. Like built architecture, there can be many forms and styles and infinitely varying scales. Furthermore, it is not only about creating structures, but about creating spaces in which people can interact with organizations in mutually beneficial ways and an environment that is welcoming and inclusive.

An *architecture of listening* counterbalances the brutalist architecture of speaking that has shaped public communication by organizations, particularly since the era of broadcasting, mass media advertising and publicity campaigns informed by *mass communication* theory, and early Web 1.0 applications.

An *architecture of listening* in organizations can create employee loyalty, retention, and high productivity;[48] customer loyalty and retention;[49] an increase in innovation; reduced crises;[50] and increased reputation and trust.[51] Organizational listening also can contribute to invigorated democracy and ultimately to a more equitable society.

We must remind ourselves that listening is not a period of non-communication; a passive period of waiting while others speak. Listening is a communicative act. An active, positive part of communication at an interpersonal and an organizational level.

And not listening is also a communicative act. It says a lot.

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