

JIM MACNAMARA

Organizational Listening II

Expanding the Concept, Theory, and Practice

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The Author

Jim Macnamara is a Distinguished Professor in the School of Communication at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS). He is also a Visiting Professor to the London School of Economic and Political Science, Media and Communications Department, and the London College of Communication.

He is an internationally recognised authority on evaluation of public communication and a pioneer in the study of organizational listening in and by government, corporations, and non-government and non-profit organizations and institutions.

In addition to leading The Organizational Listening Project over the past decade, his research has included evaluation of the World Health Organization's COVID-19 and World Health Days communication globally from early 2020 to 2023.

He also has advised the UK Government Communication Service (GCS) and the European Commission Directorate-General for Communication (DG COMM) on evaluation of public communication and conducted studies of community engagement and consultation by government departments and agencies in Australia.

Jim has received numerous awards in recognition of his work including The Don Bartholomew Award¹³ in 2017 for “outstanding service to the communications industry” presented by the International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC) in London and The Pathfinder Award,¹⁴ “the highest academic honour” awarded by the Institute for Public Relations (IPR) in the USA for scholarly research.

Before taking up an academic post in 2007, he was the founder and CEO of a leading computer-aided research company specializing in media content analysis.

He is the author of more than 100 academic journal articles, book chapters, and conference papers, and 16 books including the first edition of *Organizational Listening: The Missing Essential in Public Communication* (Peter Lang, 2016); *Evaluating Public Communication: New Models, Standards, and Best Practice* (Routledge, 2018), and *Beyond Post-Communication: Challenging Disinformation, Deception, and Manipulation* (Peter Lang, 2020).

Introduction – Why Organizational Listening II?

The first edition of this book titled *Organizational Listening: The Missing Essential in Public Communication* broke new ground when it was published in 2016. It reported the first stage of The Organizational Listening Project, a research study undertaken between 2013 and 2015 that examined how, and how well, corporate, government, and non-government organizations (NGOs) in Australia, the UK, and the USA listen to their stakeholders,¹⁵ such as their employees, shareholders, and customers, and constituents such as members, patients, students, and local communities. The findings collected from 36 organizations identified an overwhelming focus in organization-public communication on distributing information and persuasive messages (i.e., speaking) and concluded that “most organizations listen sporadically at best, often poorly, and sometimes not at all”.¹⁶

Eminent Professor of Media, Communications, and Social Theory at the London School of Economics and Political Science, Nick Couldry, described the research as “of international significance”.¹⁷

Until then, despite a large body of literature related to *interpersonal* listening – i.e., in dyads and small groups – there was very little published research and guidance on how organizations can and should listen as part of public communication. While many of the sociological, psychological, and ethical principles related to interpersonal listening apply in an organization-public context, there are substantial differences. As explained in detail in Chapter 3, organizations are commonly expected to listen at *scale* (e.g., to thousands, hundreds of thousands, or even millions of people in the case of governments). Because of scale, they are required to listen through *delegated* channels such as customer relations units or research departments. Furthermore, organizational listening needs to be applied to *mediated* voice such as written complaints, correspondence, reports of calls to call centres, submissions, and comments on social media platforms. The techniques of listening in oral-aural communication do not apply to asynchronous, delegated, mediated, listening at scale.

Since the first edition was published, The Organizational Listening Project continued to Stage 2, which examined listening in and by UK government departments and agencies leading up to and in the wake of the shock *Brexit* vote (2016–2017). It then progressed to a third stage

that focussed on listening in and by three operating companies of a multinational group in 2018–2019.

Also, half a dozen cognate studies were conducted concurrently and subsequently, as well as an increasing number of studies by other researchers specifically examining listening to employees, consumers, young people, ethnic minorities, and other marginalized groups. Some examined listening as part of public relations, health communication, and what is increasingly referred to as *strategic communication*. All have continued to find a predominant focus on information distribution (speaking) and minimal attention and resources for listening by organizations.

Why does this matter? ‘So what’ is a question that researchers are trained to ask.

Nick Couldry discussed why “voice matters” in his important 2010 book.¹⁸ In democracies, *vox populi*, the voice of the people, is the basis of legitimacy for government and an equitable society. However, unless voices are listened to, they have no effect and expression of voice has no value.

Couldry’s writing on voice was among several sources of inspiration that triggered The Organizational Listening Project. The other major trigger was my three-decades of evaluating public communication of governments, corporations, NGOs, and non-profit organizations (NPOs). This consistently found that even multimillion-dollar public communication campaigns often fail to achieve their objectives. The reasons found in evaluation studies included:

- Lack of understanding of target audiences’ interests, concerns, and needs;
- Lack of knowledge of target audiences’ most used and trusted channels of communication;
- As a result of the above, setting objectives that are not SMART,¹⁹ such as objectives that are not achievable, or not relevant to target audiences.

Each of these shortcomings results from a lack of listening to those who some refer to as *publics*, or as *audiences*, or specifically as *target audiences*, as noted above. These terms and their positioning of those with whom organizations seek to communicate are examined in Chapter 1. Meanwhile, for brevity, the term *stakeholders* is used to include all such individuals and groups.

It is now 10 years since the original pilot study in three organizations that began The Organizational Listening Project. The 10th anniversary of the beginning of this project is another reason for a new edition. But more than symbolism, or a minor update, this text traverses new

ground and expands the field of organizational listening studies. My primary research into how organizations listen, or don't, has now taken place in 60 organizations on three continents and involved more than 300 interviews; analysis of more than 600 documents; more than 80 meetings and forums; analysis of hundreds of websites and thousands of social media posts; and more than a year of direct first-hand observation (ethnography) inside organizations.

In addition, more than a dozen studies by other researchers are drawn on in reaching conclusions and making recommendations. Collectively, this research makes a significant contribution to theory and guidelines for best practice. Beyond building theory of organizational listening, this volume contains substantial practical advice on methods, tools, systems, and processes for effective ethical listening by organizations.

At the same time, this analysis recognizes that some forms of organizational listening are problematic. For instance, while national security is an important issue in all countries, there is considerable concern that listening to gain intelligence – military, political, or commercial – can infringe privacy and human rights. Also, companies have been found to be engaging in surveillance and capturing personal data from social media sites and other sources and using it to manipulate voting or consumer behaviour. The 2016 Cambridge Analytica scandal involving misuse of the Facebook data of 87 million users was a 'wake up' moment,²⁰ but far from the last of such scandals.

Espionage and unethical listening practices are not what is proposed in this book. The organizational listening that is described and advocated is ethical listening as part of engagement and dialogue between organizations and their stakeholders. Such listening is essential for communication to occur.

Without listening we are left with monologue that creates silence by others – and even silences others.

Without listening, organizations operate in ignorance of the views, interests, concerns, and useful feedback and suggestions of their allegedly valued employees, customers, business partners, and other stakeholders.

A lack of listening eventually leads to disengagement and disjuncture in relationships.

Disengagement and breakdowns in relationships between citizens and organizations that are central to organized societies are potentially made permanent through a loss of trust. The "crisis of trust"²¹ that currently pervades many societies and afflicts governments, corporations, and media is yet another reason for this updated volume.²²

Conversely, active listening by the organizations that play central roles in society can yield significant benefits. Organizational listening can lead to increased employee engagement and satisfaction, resulting in increased employee retention and reduced recruitment and training costs. As one of the studies reported in this book shows, organizational listening can result in customer loyalty and retention, leading to increased profits, as well as inform the development of improved products and services. Increased listening by government can stimulate increased engagement and democratic participation to address a concerning *democratic deficit*,²³ and contribute to better policy. These and other benefits of effective organizational listening are discussed with evidence in the following chapters.

Ultimately, given the central role of government, corporate, non-government, and non-profit organizations in industrialized and post-industrial societies, effective organizational listening can contribute to social equity and enriched democracy and civil society.

Notes

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15 The term ‘stakeholders’ was coined by R. Edward Freeman in his book *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach* referring to “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives”. Freeman advocated engagement beyond stockholders to include employees, customers, suppliers, distributors, retailers, and local communities. See Freeman, R. (1984). *Strategic management: A stakeholder approach*. Pitman, p. 46.

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