

# Organisational listening: A vital missing element in public communication and the public sphere

*A study of the work and 'architecture of listening' in organisations*

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Voice and communication are seen as largely synonymous in social theory, democratic political theory, media studies and in more than 600 human communication theories that have been identified. That is to say, voice is normatively conceptualised as dialogic and communicative, not simply seen as speaking. However, in the context of organisations and organisation-public relationships (OPR), which are extensive in industrialised and institutionalised societies, research indicates that voice and communication are predominantly enacted as speaking. A pilot study reported in this article indicates that allegedly communicative functions including public relations, involve considerable and often massive resources devoted to creating an *architecture of speaking* and doing the *work of speaking* on behalf of organisations including government departments and agencies, corporations, and institutions. Conversely, this research raises serious questions about the extent to which organisations listen to those who seek to engage with them. Further, it suggests that organisations cannot effectively listen unless they have an *architecture of listening* or do the *work of listening*, and identifies cultural, structural, political and technological components to create this vital missing element in public communication and the public sphere.

**Keywords:** Voice, listening, speaking, public relations, engagement, work of listening, architecture of listening

## Introduction

Voice and speaking have been studied since the early Western civilisations of ancient Greece and Rome where rhetoric – the art of speaking persuasively – became recognised as one of the foundational liberal arts based on the writings and oratory of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian (Atwill, 1998; Kennedy, 1994). Rhetoric was also studied and developed as early as 500 BCE in Islamic societies of North Africa (Bernal, 1987) and in China (Lu, 1998). In contemporary societies, rhetoric with its focus on speaking remains one of the major traditions of human communication scholarship and practice identified by Robert Craig (1999) and elaborated in a number of communication theory texts (e.g., Craig & Muller, 2008; Griffin, 2009; Littlejohn & Foss, 2008).

## The valorisation of voice

Citizens and 'stakeholders' are regularly urged to find their voice, 'speak up' and 'have their say'. For instance, a Google search of the term 'have your say' in April 2014 yielded 3.28 million Web links ranging from local, state and national government sites in Australia, New Zealand, the UK and US, to airport authorities, universities, the BBC program called 'Have your say' and the *TuneIn* 'World have your say' site. Similarly, a search of the term 'speak up' yielded 1.17 million Web links to sites such as 'speak up to stop bullying' to the 'Speak up' initiative of Project Tomorrow, a non-profit education organisation in the US.

When citizens experience a lack or loss of voice, a number of scholars point to significant social, cultural and political problems. For instance, Charles Husband (2000) and others have

drawn attention to the lack of voice in any meaningful sense afforded to ethnic minorities and argued that this constitutes oppression and injustice. Feminism similarly has identified lack of voice available to women as a social inequity negatively impacting the status and identity of women in many societies, and fostered a tradition of debate focussed on speaking, voice and representation (e.g., Butler, 1999; Tuchman, 1978; Weatherall, 2002).

In introducing a Social Inclusion Agenda designed to enhance multiculturalism, equal opportunity and social equity, the previous federal Labor government in Australia stated on its Social Inclusion Web site that “all Australians should have the resources, opportunities and capability to ... have a voice so that they can influence the decisions that affect them” (<http://www.socialinclusion.gov.au>)<sup>1</sup>.

‘Listening Project’<sup>2</sup> researcher Tanja Dreher has noted that “in much research and advocacy, there is a strong emphasis on the democratic potential of *voice*, *representation*, *speaking* up and *talking*” (2009, p. 446) [italics added]. On the face of it, it seems that many people and organisations are waiting eagerly to engage with citizens with the promise that their voice matters, as Nick Couldry (2010) says it should.

Rhetoric in its original Platonic and Aristotelean conceptualisation, as well as its subsequent use in classical Greece and Rome, paid some attention to the audience. Donald Bryant (1953) has emphasised that rhetoric is not simply oratory expressing the views of the speaker, but is adapted and tailored to the audience (1953, p. 123), although this could be described as *audiencing* as discussed by John Fiske (1994) and Yvonna Lincoln (1997, 2001), which is principally a technique to increase the resonance and persuasiveness of speaking.

More recently voice has been conceptualised as largely synonymous with communication in social theory, democratic political theory, media studies, and in most of more than 600 human communication theories that have been identified by Jennings Bryant and Dorina Miron (2004). That is to say, theoretically at least, voice and communication are conceptualised as dialogic and, in this sense, are posited as fundamental for the functioning of human society, for democracy, for social equity, for individual and collective identity and in relationships (Baxter, 2011). John Dewey (1916) said human society *is* communication and, by communication, he meant *dialogue* as described by Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1984) and Martin Buber (1958, 2002) comprised of people being able to speak to express their views as well as listening to others – although not naïvely ignoring the *dialectics* of dialogue and assuming they will always agree. In his classic works including *Communication as Culture*, James Carey (1989) extensively quoted Dewey, Kenneth Burke and Martin Heidegger on the importance of *conversation* in human society (see also Adam, 2009 and Clark, 2006, paras 19–21). Democracy is founded on the principle of *vox populi* – the voice of the people – not only in the sense of speaking, but even more particularly in terms of being listened to. Nick Couldry refers to voice as “the implicitly linked practices of speaking and listening” (2009, p. 580).

## **The missing corollary of speaking**

However, closer examination of a wide range of scholarly and professional literature reveals that voice is predominantly associated with speaking. Susan Bickford (1996) pointed this out in the context of politics and the public sphere in her landmark text, *The Dissonance of Democracy: Listening, Conflict and Citizenship*, in which she criticised the lack of attention to listening. Recent analyses, such as those by Nick Couldry (2012), Stephen Coleman (2013a) and Bruce Bimber, Andrew Flanagin and Cynthia Stohl (2012), while not specifically addressing listening, identify a lack of recognition felt by citizens today.

Bimber et al. specifically identify and examine the role of organisations in civil society and the use of new media and communication technologies for engagement between organisations and citizens. However, even in the age of Web 2.0 and interactive ‘social media’ which, hypothetically, increase two-way communicative interaction, Kate Crawford has noted that “‘speaking up’ has become the dominant metaphor for participation in online spaces” and “listening is not a common metaphor for online activity” (2009, p. 526). Studies of online election campaigns and *e-democracy* in the US, UK and Australia by the Pew Research Center (e.g., Rosenstiel & Mitchell, 2012; Gibson, Williamson & Ward, 2010; Macnamara & Kenning, 2011 and Macnamara, 2014) and analyses of youth engagement by Bennett, Wells and Freelon (2011) also have found that social media are mainly used for the transmission of information and messages (i.e., speaking), rather than listening and engaging in dialogue.

As Couldry (2010) has cogently argued, voice matters. But to matter, speakers and texts need to have listeners. Further, and importantly, listening is more than tokenistic attention or cursory consideration. Glenn (1989) has identified 50 different definitions of listening in a literature review in the *International Journal of Listening*. However, key elements of listening that are consistently described in the literature are giving *attention* and *recognition* to others (Bickford, 1996; Husband, 2009, p. 441; Honneth, 2007), engaging in *interpretation* to try to *understand* what others have to say (Husband, 1996, 2000), “*receiving and constructing meaning from spoken and/or non-verbal messages*” and, very importantly, *responding* in some way (International Listening Association, as cited in Purdy & Borisoff, 1997, p. 6; Lundsteen, 1979) [italics added]. Bickford (1996) noted that such processes involve work.

Listening is also informed by Gadamer’s (1989) concept of openness. He noted that, as a prerequisite to listening, “one must want to know” what others have to say. He added that openness requires not only passive listening, but asking questions and allowing – even facilitating – others to “say something to us”, even when what they have to say may be against us (as cited in Craig & Muller, 2007, pp. 219–220). Bakhtin’s *dialogism* and Buber’s elegant description of dialogue, monologue and “monologue disguised as dialogue” further inform the processes of listening.

## **The gap in PR and corporate and organisation communication**

While studies of interpersonal communication and citizen participation in democracy such as those of Coleman (2013a; 2013b), Couldry (2009, 2010, 2012), Crawford (2009), Dreher (2009, 2012) and Penman and Turnbull (2012) have recognised listening as an essential part of communication and affording voice that matters, examinations of listening have rarely turned their attention to organisations, other than specialist disciplinary studies of internal organisational communication between management and employees conducted in the HR and management fields, analyses of entities that function specifically as representative organisations, and some nascent attention paid to listening in PR and corporate communication research. This is a significant gap because, in ‘institutionalised’ spheres and societies (Chadwick, 2006), or what Couldry calls “complex societies” (2010, p. 100), citizens not only work in and are represented through organisations, but they need to interact on a daily basis with a plethora of government, corporate, institutional and non-government organisations (NGOs) – and vice versa. These interactions range from dealing with government departments and agencies in relation to services and multinational corporations as customers (e.g., banks, airlines and car companies) to negotiating with local businesses and organisations such as councils, phone companies, electricity providers and transport authorities.

In their 2012 book, *Collective Action in Organisations: Interaction and Engagement in an Era of Technological Change*, Bimber et al. identify the traditional and continuing central role of organisations in contemporary civil societies and usefully explore how individuals today engage with organisations using an increasing array of media and communication technologies. However, as the title indicates, they focus on specialist ‘collective action’ organisations and their acts of representation. Similarly, Couldry discusses organisations in the sense that they serve as “mechanisms of representation” providing “distributed forms of voice” for individuals they represent (2010, p. 101). Stephen Coleman has specifically explored the “challenge of digital hearing” and “listening in to the public sphere” in the context of digital democracy or what some call *e-democracy* ((2013b, p. 3). While providing valuable contributions to the discussion of voice and listening, particularly in relation to democratic politics, these texts do not examine how the policies, cultures, structures and systems of organisations broadly, across various sectors of government, business, industry, the professions and society, facilitate or hinder engagement and dialogue with stakeholders (Freeman, 1984).

In her analysis of voice in multicultural communities and marginalised groups, Tanya Dreher (2009) pointed to the need to shift focus and responsibility from individuals and communities speaking up to “the institutions and conventions which enable and constrain receptivity and response” (p. 456). But her call for innovative research into this broader context of organisational listening has so far not been taken up, other than in her own and Jo Taachi’s ongoing work on digital storytelling in a social theory context (e.g., Dreher, 2012; Taachi, 2009).

Within the disciplinary fields that focus specifically on organisational communication in both its internal and external contexts, including public relations and corporate communication as well as specialist sub-fields such as employee relations and community relations, it is particularly troubling that organisational listening is little studied or discussed in detail. This is despite claims that *two-way* interaction, *dialogue*, *engagement*, *relationships* and even *symmetrical* communication are core concepts in these fields of practice (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; J. Grunig, L. Grunig & Dozier, 2002; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000).

A search of articles published in *Public Relations Review* and the *Journal of Public Relations Research*, identified as the two most representative PR journals globally (Kim, Choi, Reber & Kim, 2014), found that listening is mostly mentioned within discussion of dialogue (e.g., Kent & Taylor, 2002; Sommerfelt, Kent & Taylor, 2012) and relationships (e.g., Waymer, 2013), along with a few mentions in relation to values in PR (e.g., Spicer, 2000; Gregory, 2014) and leadership (e.g., Grunig, 1993).

A keyword search of *Public Relations Review* articles published between 1976 and 2014 found only 217 that mention listening anywhere in their text. However, only two articles published in this journal focus on listening to the extent of mentioning it in their title – an analysis of President Nixon’s ‘Listening Posts’, which began in 1969 but were quietly closed down in 1971 after being deemed a failure (Lee, 2012), and an analysis of audience research by arts institutions (Foreman-Wernet & Dervin, 2006). Listening is mostly referred to in passing with no examination of what listening entails at an organisation-public relations level. For instance, in ‘revisiting the concept of dialogue’, Theunissen and Noordin (2012, p. 10) cite Heath who suggests that “listening and speaking” are key elements of dialogue, but provide no further discussion of listening. In an analysis of Twitter use by US presidential candidates, Adams and McCorkindale said “retweeting, when done appropriately, can show that candidates are listening to their constituents” (2013, p. 359). While retweeting involves

some level of attention, recognition and response, it does not meet the definitions of listening advanced in the specialised literature cited. On the few occasions that methods of listening are discussed in PR literature, listening is mostly equated with monitoring and environmental scanning (e.g., Sonnenfeld, 1982, p. 6).

A search of *Journal of Public Relations Research* identified 123 articles that mention the word ‘listening’, but even fewer articles in this journal examine how listening is operationalised in organisation-public relations and none focus specifically on listening. The most detailed discussion of listening in public relations to date emerged in the ‘Melbourne Mandate’, an advocacy paper developed in 2012 by the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management, which identified “the ability of the organisation to listen” as one of three spheres of PR value adding (Global Alliance, 2014, para. 1). In an article in press at the time of writing, Gregory (2014) lists seven requirements outlined in the Melbourne Mandate to build a culture of listening in an organisation, as follows:

- Develop research methodologies to measure an organisation’s capacity to listen, and apply these metrics before and after the pursuit of strategy and during any major action;
- Identify and activate channels to enable organisational listening. Identify all stakeholder groups affected by the pursuit of an organisation’s strategy, both now and in the future;
- Identify all stakeholder groups that affect the pursuit of the organisation’s strategy, both now and in the future;
- Identify these stakeholder groups’ expectations and consider them both in the organisation’s strategy and before taking any action;
- Ensure sound reasons are communicated to stakeholders in cases where their expectations cannot be met;
- Prove that the organisation is genuinely listening as it takes actions in pursuit of its strategy;
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the organisation’s listening (Gregory, 2014, n.p.).

However, even in this valuable addition to discussion, specific methods and mechanisms for organisational listening are not identified and the considerable challenges remain unaddressed.

Listening also receives little focus in PR research books and textbooks that inform practice. For instance, ‘listening’ is not listed in the index of the main ‘Excellence theory’ text, which is widely recognised as representing the dominant model of public relations practice (Grunig, et al., 2002), or in the index of the more recent *Public Relations Theory II* (Botan & Hazelton, 2006). It is mentioned only in one chapter on internal communication in the major volume on *The Future of Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management* edited by Elizabeth Toth (2007). Nor is listening mentioned in the contents or index of leading PR textbooks such as the 9<sup>th</sup> edition of Wilcox and Cameron’s (2010) US-published text, Tench and Yeomans’ (2009) leading UK PR text, or the latest edition of Joep Cornelissen’s (2011) text on corporate communication. The 10<sup>th</sup> edition of the widely-used PR textbook *Cutlip & Center’s Effective Public Relations* (Broom, 2009) says “effective public relations starts with listening”, but it discusses this only as part of “systematic” and “scientific research” (pp. 271–272), which it mostly associates with achieving organisation goals. While mentioning listening several times in the context of rhetorical theory, *Today’s Public Relations: An Introduction* by Heath and Coombs (2006) similarly positions it as part of research to help practitioners strategically target publics. Heath and Coombs say: “Today’s public relations practitioner gives voice to organisations” and add “this process requires the ability to listen”. But they go on to narrowly configure listening by saying “listening gives a foundation for knowing what to say and thinking strategically of the best ways to frame and present appealing messages” (p. 346). This approach constitutes *audiencing* as discussed by Fiske (1994) and Lincoln (1997, 2001), and is a far cry from listening as defined in the

literature. In Habermas's (1984) theory of communicative action, such approaches are clearly *strategic* action focussed on achieving the organisation's objectives, not authentic *communicative* action.

Illustrative of this gap in the literature is that it is hard to find a definition and description of organisational listening beyond those in human resources and training literature which focus on intra-organisation listening and learning, as observed by Judy Burnside-Lawry (2011) and also noted in business and management literature by Flynn, Valikoski and Grau (2008). Drawing on the concept of 'listening competency' developed by Andrew Wolvin and Carolyn Coakley (1994) and expounded by Lynn Cooper (1997) and Cooper and Charles Husband (1993), Burnside-Lawry (2012) examined *organisation-stakeholder listening competency*. However, the focus on competency, while important, does not address other factors such as recognition that others have something worthwhile to say and willingness to listen, which are prerequisites of listening, as well as cultural, structural and political dimensions of listening.

It seems incongruous and an oversight that in the now sizeable body of literature about public relations and corporate communication, which discusses dialogue, relationships, two-way interaction and symmetry at length, there is little by way of definitions, models or even discussion of organisational listening.

Furthermore, there is evidence that communication is still often understood and operationalised in business, management, politics and many areas of media and communication practice within a basic *systems theory* perspective which focusses on one-way transmission of information *a la* Shannon and Weaver (1949). As Couldry (2010) argues, contemporary neoliberalism offers proliferating opportunities for voice, but not necessarily listening. Jo Taachi similarly notes, voice "may be encouraged" among citizens and stakeholders, "but nevertheless not be heard" (2009, p. 170). Coleman observes that contemporary societies are "noisier and more talkative than they used to be, with billions of messages ... buzzing around the internet every day", but he says "there is a problem". His research indicates that "the chances of them being heard by the people they hope to address are slim" (2013b, p. 3).

Despite its importance in industrialised and institutionalised societies, organisational listening is little researched and largely untheorised in management and business, marketing, politics, and organisational and corporate communication.

## **Pilot study**

Based on this critical analysis, a pilot study was undertaken in 2012–2013 to explore organisational listening in a number of medium to large organisations that purport to engage with stakeholders. The project is ongoing and the aim is to expand this to an international study of organisational listening in a number of key contexts including public relations as well as community engagement and consultation, and democratic political participation. The project is classified as a pilot because of its small scale initially and because it was conducted to explore methods that would be most effective and limitations that need to be overcome, as discussed in the following.

### ***Theoretical framing***

This research is transdisciplinary informed by several areas of theory. As well as being framed broadly within social theory and democratic political theory, analysis is particularly informed by dialogic theory, relationship theory, and sociocultural and phenomenological human communication theories which challenge systems and cybernetic approaches focussed

on information transmission with occasional and often feeble feedback loops and, instead, focus on interaction and the mutual construction of meaning.

In addition, organisational listening is usefully examined within the framework of Habermas' (1984, 1987) theory of communicative action, which affords identification of genuine 'communicative' action in contrast with 'strategic' action that, either openly or in a concealed way, uses communication for persuasion and even manipulation to serve organisational interests. Habermas said ethical communication must include willingness among participants to try to understand others, consideration of others' as well as one's own interests, equal opportunity to express those interests, opportunity to argue against suggestions that may harm one's interest, and protection against 'closure' – i.e., shutting down discussion (Habermas, 1990). Thus, this theoretical framework supports the definitions of listening outlined in the previous sections.

### ***Methodology***

The aim of this project is to explore, as forensically as possible, the strategies, resources, methods, technologies and time committed by organisations to speaking through their corporate advertising, public relations, corporate communication, customer communication, employee communication, etc. and compare that with the strategies, resources, methods, technologies and time committed by the same organisations to listening to their various publics and stakeholders. These elements are being examined in a series of case studies of corporate, government, NGO and non-profit organisations.

This pilot study examined three organisations: a large information technology company; a medium size service provider enterprise; and a large public sector institution with an active communication program with its stakeholders. The study was undertaken over a three-month period in late 2012 and early 2013. Anonymity was requested and a condition of agreement to participate in the study. Several organisations declined to participate in the study.

Noting that self-reporting by organisation staff has the potential to overstate listening and that some organisations may be reluctant to make admissions that indicate a lack of listening, the project used a triangulation approach to draw data from several sources. A primary research method deployed was in-depth interviews with the senior communication managers, who were considered best-placed to report on communication in the two-way interactive form identified by Bakhtin (1981), Buber (1958), Gadamer (1989), Habermas (1984, 1987) and contemporary dialogic communication scholars such as Baxter (2011) and Kent & Taylor (2002). However, a limitation of interviews is that PR and corporate communication practitioners can make inflated and unsubstantiated claims about organisational listening.

To overcome these limitations and construct a reliable data pool, the study is also collecting data from the job descriptions of staff employed in communication related roles such as public relations, employee communication, customers relations, etc. to identify key responsibilities, accountabilities and tasks; as well as communication, engagement and consultation plans; reports of communication/engagement activities; budgets when available; and even time sheets and work schedules of public communication staff, which identified actual activities undertaken. Also, when possible, key stakeholder representatives are interviewed. Each case study is, therefore, a time-consuming and complex process and so far just three case studies have been undertaken. However, it is argued that the findings to date are informative for further research and practice.

## Findings

The pilot study of organisational listening has indicated that, other than for strategic planning and targeting purposes, organisations listen to stakeholders sporadically, often in tokenistic ways and sometimes not at all. For example, despite all organisations studied making explicit claims for listening to their key stakeholders, the following were noted.

1. The job descriptions of heads of communication and public relations in organisations, and senior positions in those roles, contained no reference to functions related to listening such as systematically collecting and evaluating feedback, doing formative research, or responding to stakeholder opinion or concerns. While job descriptions do not necessarily reflect actual work done, they indicate organisation priorities and are often linked to performance management;
2. Two out of three organisations studied undertake market or reputation research, but this was clearly described in terms of how it informed the development of strategy to achieve organisational goals and objectives. In other words, it was instrumental and functionalist. This confirms the finding by Foreman-Wernet and Dervin in one of the few studies of organisational listening in PR literature, who concluded that “audience research in the arts is dominated by marketing-oriented surveys ... this work is primarily administrative in nature, geared toward mapping audiences as consumers so that audience size can be maintained or increased (2006, p. 288);
3. There was no mention of changing organisation behaviour to meet stakeholders’ or publics’ concerns, interests or objectives in any plans or reports reviewed, only reference to achieving organisational concerns, interests and objectives;
4. Social media were used by all three organisations studied, comprised of one corporate blog and three Twitter accounts, but these primarily involved one-way transmission of organisation messages, with the blog and one Twitter account managed by marketing to promote products and the Twitter accounts containing 98 per cent broadcast tweets compared with two per cent direct messages or responses to others;
5. The only other function consistent to all three organisations examined was traditional and social media monitoring, but this was focussed in all cases on tracking the organisations’ messages as part of evaluating its PR and brand, not as a listening mechanism;
6. The only organisational function which seems to make any sustained effort to listen and respond directly to publics or stakeholders is customer relations. This function was not studied specifically and is a field of specialised research, but this analysis indicated customer relations is focussed largely on pacification and resolving particular problems to preserve revenue/customers/enrolments and protect the reputation of the organisation, rather than open listening.

It can be summarised that *attention* and *recognition* are given to publics only insofar as they are ‘targets’ for information and organisational persuasion<sup>3</sup>; *interpretation* and *understanding* are undertaken or attempted only in instrumental ways to aid organisational strategic planning; and *responding* is mostly comprised of attempts at appeasement, which is common in customer relations, or continued attempts at persuasion and orientation to the views of the organisation. No substantial evidence of dialogue, co-orientation or symmetry in relation to stakeholders was observed in any organisation.

While being drawn from a small sample, these findings are supported by studies of political campaigns, online public consultation by government agencies, and organisational use of social media allegedly for ‘engagement’ (e.g., Macnamara, 2010a, 2013, 2014), which show that Couldry’s claimed “crisis of voice” in contemporary societies (2008, p. 389; 2009, p. 581) is better described as a crisis of listening.

## **Discussion – the work and architecture of organisational listening**

In looking beyond the ‘what’ is happening – or, in this case, what is not happening – to the ‘why’ and ‘how’, analysis indicates that the lack of listening in organisations is partly cultural. Some do not want to, or see the need for listening, because of functionalist approaches to management and elitist modernist notions of top-down expert knowledge. It is also a result of power relations, with large organisations in particular deploying considerable resources to achieve their strategic objectives. However, analysis also suggests structural, institutional and operational barriers to listening – what Couldry points to as “organisational challenges” (2010, p. 101), although he does not elaborate or explore what these are in any detail. There are also indications that political and technological factors have a part to play.

This research reveals that the so-called ‘communication’ functions of organisations (i.e., public relations and organisational and corporate communication) are primarily devoted to doing the work of speaking on behalf of organisations. Furthermore, organisations create a substantial *architecture for speaking*, comprised of systems such as Web sites (i.e., Web 1.0), databases and mailing lists; technology such as Web programming, videoconferencing, data mining, and presentation software; resources such as event management; and information production and distribution systems for speeches, reports, newsletters, brochures, and other publications – not to mention multi-million advertising campaigns in many cases.. Many organisations – government, corporate and institutional – spend seven-figure sums of money a year on resources and systems for speaking. Conversely, most do not have an *architecture of listening* or do the *work of listening*.

It is proposed that an architecture of listening designed into an organisation with appropriate structures and systems and the work of listening are necessary and important in organisations because listening, which is often challenging even at an individual or small group level, becomes a much more complex undertaking at an organisational level where it usually needs to be large-scale and increasingly multimodal. Organisations are often expected to listen to hundreds, thousands, or even millions of people, whether they are conceptualised as citizens, publics, audiences, communities, stakeholders, customers, or ‘consumers’ in neoliberal capitalist terms. They also need to listen to voice expressed in multiple mediated forms including via e-mail, texting, Web comments and social media. Public comments are no longer confined to letters or formal submissions. Therefore, organisational listening cannot be achieved aurally or through traditional speech acts or rhetorical techniques. While organisational listening requires cognitive, affective (e.g., empathic) and behavioural responses by relevant organisation staff at an individual level, as discussed by Cooper (1997) and Wolvin and Coakley (1994), it also requires specifically designed structures, management systems, human resources and operational processes as well as what Coleman (2013b) calls the “technologies of hearing” (p. 3).

The 2008 and 2012 Obama presidential campaigns gave some insights into how large-scale voice can be mobilised and made to feel valued and ‘matter’ through the creation of an architecture of listening and doing the work of listening – e.g., the Obama Online Operation referred to as ‘Triple O’ (Macnamara, 2010b, 2014). The MIT Deliberatorium, an online consultation experiment that has been running for a number of years, also has provided useful

insights into the tools, aids, structures and systems required for large-scale listening (Klein, 2007; Iandoli, Klein & Zolla, 2009). Sense Making Methodology (Dervin, Foreman-Wernet, & Lauterbach, 2003) has been extensively used in audience/user research in the library and information science and technology fields, but only one article was found in the literature search applying this methodology to PR or corporate communication (Foreman-Wernet & Dervin, 2006). Such approaches remain exceptions rather than the rule or academic experiments. Furthermore, even the much-praised 2008 Obama campaign “did not reply to followers, or indicate that direct messages were being heard” during the times of heaviest use of digital technologies (Crawford, 2009, p. 530). Communication systems designed and resourced primarily for speaking, collapse under the weight of large-scale speaking by others with an expectation of organisational listening.

While technologies can provide tools to aid listening, such as media and internet monitoring and text analysis software, the concept of an architecture of listening is not an argument for *technological determinism*. The term ‘architecture of listening’ is used in preference to Coleman’s “technologies of hearing” because organisational listening has cultural, institutional, structural and political as well as technological components. Preliminary findings in this project suggest that an architecture of listening in organisations requires the following elements which are being explored in detail in the ongoing study:

1. *Culture* which needs to be open to listening as defined by Honneth (2007), Husband (1996, 2009) and, most recently, Gregory (2014) – that is, one that *recognises* others’ right to speak, pays *attention* to them, tries to *understand* their views and *responds* with at least acknowledgement, although not necessarily agreement. This is similar to Coleman’s identification of “ideology” as a second barrier to organisational listening along with a lack of the “technologies of hearing” (2013b, p. 3);
2. *Policies* that invite comment and discussion and allocate resources to listening as well as speaking;
3. *Systems* that are open and interactive, such as Web sites that allow visitors to post comments and questions, vote, and so on;
4. *Technological tools* to aid listening, such as monitoring tools or services for tracking media and online comment; automated acknowledgement systems; text analysis software for sense-making when large volumes of discussion occurs, and even argumentation software to facilitate meaningful dialogue, consultation and debate;
5. *Human resources* (staff) assigned to operate listening systems and do the work of listening (e.g., establishing spaces such as forums, inviting comment, monitoring, analysing, and responding to comments and questions); and
6. *Articulation* of what the organisation ‘hears’ to policy-making and decision-making. While listening does not imply or require that every comment and suggestion should be acted on, unless there is a link to policy-making and decision-making for potential adoption the voice of those who speak to or about an organisation and its activities has no value – or, in Couldry’s terms, it does not matter.

Burnside-Lawry (2011) reported that stakeholders evaluated the level of financial and human resources allocated by organisations to stakeholder engagement, as well as corporate culture and other factors such as lack of response, in assessing organisations’ sincerity, commitment to and competency in listening (p. 167). Add to this the finding of the 2013 Edelman Trust

Barometer that listening is the highest rated attribute for establishing trust in organisations (Edelman, 2013, p. 9), and the importance of organisational listening becomes clearly apparent.

This research complements and extends the social and political science work of Couldry, Coleman, Bimber et al., Crawford and others and it addresses an under-researched area in public relations and corporate communication. As well as contributing to theoretical understanding of the role of organisational listening, this research also has the potential to provide an important practical contribution to understanding how organisational listening can be operationalised.

If preliminary findings are found to be consistent and widespread, they will signal the need for substantial reform of democratic political participation processes and the operation of the public sphere, as well as major structural change in the practices of public relations and organisational, corporate and marketing communication in both private and public sector organisations. Such reform will contribute to addressing the “democratic deficit” identified in many countries (Couldry, 2010, p. 49; Curran, 2011, p. 86), creating social capital and establishing social equity. Sheila Bentley (2010) has contended that listening effectiveness in an organisational environment can have positive outcomes for customer satisfaction and profitability of businesses. A genuine commitment to and resourcing of listening will also give meaning to the normative theories of public relations that espouse two-way interaction, dialogue and relationships and thus make a significant contribution to public relations and communication management.

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<sup>1</sup> The Liberal/National Coalition government elected in September 2013 closed down the site on 14 October 2013.

<sup>2</sup> The Listening Project is a research collaboration between Australian cultural and media scholars, practitioners and activists interested in the theme of listening (see <http://www.thelisteningproject.net>).

<sup>3</sup> Terms such as 'target publics' and 'target audiences' frequent the language of public relations and, while democratic politics theorises people as citizens or voters, they are often described using terms such as 'punters', a somewhat derisory 'othering' description (Hirst & Harrison , 2007, p. 255).