The Work and ‘Architecture of Listening’: Addressing Gaps in Organization-Public Communication

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Abstract

Listening is extensively discussed in relation to interpersonal communication, in therapeutic contexts such as counselling and, to some extent, in the context of intra-organizational communication conducted as part of human resources management. However, listening is surprisingly and problematically overlooked in the large body of literature on organization-public communication including government, political, corporate, and marketing communication and related practices such as public relations. Based on critical analysis of relevant literature and primary research among 36 organizations in three countries, this analysis identifies a ‘crisis of listening’ in organization-public communication and proposes strategies to address gaps in theory and practice including attention to the *work of listening* and the creation of an *architecture of listening* in organizations, which can offer significant stakeholder, societal, and organizational benefits.

Keywords: Listening, organizational listening, two-way communication, dialogue, engagement

Introduction

As widely discussed in a large body of extant literature, communication is identified as the basis of human society (Carey, 1989/2009; Dewey, 1916) and “the organizing element of human life” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, p. 4). Dewey said “society exists … in communication” (1916, p. 5). Raymond Williams also wrote effusively about the importance of communication in creating and sustaining communities and societies, echoing Dewey in saying “society is a form of communication” (1976, p. 10). Other scholars note that humans “cannot not communicate” (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967, p. 48). Even silence communicates – an important principle informing this analysis.

However, as the following analysis shows, there is valorization of voice and a conflation of voice with speaking in much discussion of communication, particularly in relation to public communication and the public sphere. Noting that organizations such as government departments and agencies, corporations, and non-government organizations (NGOs) play a central role in contemporary industrialized societies (Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl (2012), this article reports the findings of a study that explored how and how well organizations listen to their stakeholders and publics. The study closely examined a range of organization-public communication practices and channels that are potential sites of listening including research, customer relations, public consultation, social media, and public relations. In addition to identifying gaps in relevant strategic communication and public relations literature, this article presents empirical evidence from case studies that confirms a lack of attention to listening in much organization-public communication. The analysis informs a contribution to theory and practice that addresses this ‘crisis of listening’ and offers significant stakeholder, societal, and organizational benefits.

Voice and Speaking

Voice and speech, including public speaking, have been studied in Western societies since the early civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome where rhetoric – the art of speaking persuasively – became recognized as one of the foundational liberal arts based on the writings and oratory of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian (Atwill, 1998). Rhetoric with its focus on speaking remains one of the major traditions of human communication scholarship and practice identified by Craig (1999) and expounded in a number of communication theory texts (e.g., Craig & Muller, 2007; Littlejohn & Foss, 2008). In fact, for much of the twentieth century and even into the twenty-first century, human communication has been widely studied as *speech* communication (Cohen, 1994; Rogers & Chafee, 2006).

Democracy is founded on the principle of *vox populi* – the voice of the people – being freely expressed (Fishkin, 1995). A number of scholars point to significant social, cultural, and political problems associated with lack or loss of voice. For instance, Husband (2000) and others have drawn attention to the lack of voice in any meaningful sense afforded to ethnic minorities and argue that this constitutes inequity and injustice. Feminist scholarship has identified lack of voice available to many women as a social inequity negatively impacting the status and identity of women in many societies. Such concerns have added to the tradition of debate focused on speaking, voice and representation (e.g., Weatherall, 2002). Dreher, who has focused on the plight of marginalized groups, has noted that "in much research and advocacy, there is a strong emphasis on *voice*, *representation*, *speaking* up and *talking*" as enablers of democracy and social equity (2009, p. 446) [emphasis added].

In contemporary scholarship, communication and the affordance of voice are conceptualized as *dialogic* practices, informed by the seminal work of Bakhtin (1963/1984, 1981), Buber (1923/1958, 1947/2002), and Gadamer's (1960/1989) concept of openness to the other and his critique of monologue. Carey (1989/2009) discussed the importance of *conversation* in human society. Most recently, communication theorists such as Craig and Muller (2007) and Littlejohn and Foss (2008) emphasize two-way transactional understandings of communication over one-way transmissional views, with a focus on meaning rather than messages. Baxter (2011) describes relationships as necessarily dialogical encounters, and fields of applied public communication such as public relations lay claim to a two-way dialogic approach and even *symmetry* between organizations and their publics (Grunig et al., 2006; Taylor & Kent, 2014).

Craig says that communication involves "talking and listening" (2006, p. 39). While presenting a strong argument for why voice matters in his text of that title, Couldry (2010) similarly describes voice as "the implicitly linked practices of speaking and listening" (2009, p. 580) and has called for "new intensities of listening" (2010, p. 140). However, examination of a wide range of literature and practice reveals that communication and voice are predominantly associated with speaking and that little attention is paid to the vital corollary – listening. The research reported and analyzed here explored this gap in the context or organization-public communication.

The Missing Corollary of Speaking

While 'feedback loops' are now included in most models of communication (e.g., Barnlund, 2008; Schramm, 1954; Steinberg, 2007) in place of earlier linear, transmissional models (e.g., Shannon & Weaver, 1949), a number of communication scholars note that little attention is often paid to reciprocity in communication. For example, Carey noted that "the transmission view of communication is the commonest in our culture (1989/2009, p. 12). More recently, Craig and Muller reported that "contemporary theorists have criticized the current dominance of a transmission (sender-receiver) model of communication in everyday thinking" (2007, p. 1). Furthermore, it must be noted that even if feedback is facilitated and provided, feedback loops and mechanisms do not guarantee listening unless *active listening* is practiced (Mukherjee & Basu, 2005, p. 14; Steinberg, 2007, pp. 76–85). Similarly, while *invitational* rhetoric allows others to speak, in contrast with *manipulative* rhetoric that seeks only to persuade (Foss & Griffin, 1995; Heath, 2006), it does not ensure listening. These concepts and mechanisms only afford a right to speak.

A search of communication literature reveals that discussion of listening is strikingly absent from most articles and texts. Within communication textbooks, for instance, despite dialogic conceptualizations of communication and voice, only a few have chapters or sections devoted to listening (e.g., Adler & Rodman, 2012; McCrae, 2015; Trenholm, 2008). Listening is either little discussed or not mentioned in many major communication texts such as Craig and Muller (2007) and Littlejohn and Foss (2008). Those that do discuss listening exclusively focus on interpersonal listening at an individual and small group level.

Disciplinary literature also pays little attention to listening. Bickford (1996) pointed out this lack of attention to listening in the context of politics and the public sphere in her landmark text *The Dissonance of Democracy*: *Listening, Conflict and Citizenship*. This concern was recently taken up by Dobson (2014) in *Listening for Democracy*, which explicitly critiques a lack of listening in contemporary democratic politics. In his sociocultural analysis, Couldry refers to the paradox "that voice can apparently be offered, without any attention to whether it is matched by processes for listening" (2009, p. 581). Couldry (2010) further observes that "surprisingly, little attention has been given to what listening involves" (p. 146). Dreher (2009) highlights this in her analysis of marginalized communities. Lacey notes that "listening has long been overlooked in studies of the media as well as in conceptualizations of the public sphere" (2013, p. 3). Furthermore, analysis shows that there is scant attention paid to listening in business and management literature other than discussion of interpersonal listening in an intra-organizational context (e.g., in human resources management), as noted by Flynn, Valikoski, and Grau (2008).

Within disciplinary fields that focus specifically on public communication by organizations such as public relations and corporate communication as well as specialist sub-fields such as community relations, it is particularly troubling that listening is little studied or discussed. This is despite claims that *two-way* interaction, *dialogue*, *engagement*, *relationships* and even *symmetrical* communication are core concepts in these fields of applied organization-public communication (Grunig et al., 2006; Taylor & Kent, 2014). For example, a search of articles published in *Public Relations Review* and *Journal of Public Relations Research*, identified as the two most representative PR journals globally (Kim, Choi, Reber, & Kim, 2014), found a distinct lack of research and critical analysis of listening. A keyword search of *Public Relations Review* articles published between 1976 and 2014 found only 217 that mention listening anywhere in their text, with only two focused specifically on listening (Foreman-Wernet, & Dervin, 2006; Lee, 2012). A search of *Journal of Public Relations Research* identified 123 articles that mention the word 'listening', but none focus specifically on listening.

Listening also receives little focus in PR and corporate communication research books and textbooks that inform practice. For instance, 'listening' does not appear in the index or contents of the main PR Excellence theory text, which is widely recognized as representing the dominant model of public relations practice (Grunig, et al., 2006), or in a dozen other international texts examined (e.g., Botan & Hazelton, 2006; Cornelissen, 2011; Wilcox & Cameron, 2010).

PR and corporate communication texts that do discuss listening exhibit an organization-centric, instrumental approach such as *Cutlip & Center's Effective Public Relations*, which says "effective public relations starts with listening", but discusses this only as part of "systematic" and "scientific research" to understand 'target audiences' so messages can be tailored to achieve the organization's goals (Broom, 2009, pp. 271–272). Similarly, Heath and Coombs (2006) say "today's public relations practitioner gives voice to organizations" and add that "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).

It seems incongruous that in the sizeable body of literature on various forms of public communication, which discusses two-way interaction, dialogue, engagement, and relationships between organizations and publics at length, there is scant research and little by way of descriptions or models of organizational listening, making this an important subject for further research.

Bimber et al. (2012) argue that new media and communication technologies provide opportunities for increased engagement between organizations and citizens. But even in the age of Web 2.0 and interactive 'social media' that, hypothetically, increase two-way communicative interaction, 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).

While studies of interpersonal communication and citizen participation in democracy such as those of Coleman (2013), Couldry (2010), Crawford (2009), and Dreher (2009) have recognized listening as an essential part of communication and affording voice that "matters" (Couldry, 2010), examinations of listening have rarely turned their attention to organizations, other than specialist disciplinary studies of intra-organizational communication between management and employees and analyses of entities that function specifically as representative organizations (Bimber et al., 2012). This is a significant gap because in industrialized societies with 'institutionalized' politics and social systems (Chadwick, 2006), or what Couldry calls "complex societies" (2010, p. 100), citizens not only work in and are represented through organizations, but they need to interact with an array of organizations on a daily basis. These include government departments and agencies, corporations, various NGOs, institutions such as police, hospitals, libraries, schools, universities, museums, associations, clubs, foundations, local businesses, councils, and so on. Thus, organizations are an important site for an examination of listening in the context of organization-public communication and organization-public relations (OPR).

Defining and Theorizing Listening

Before proceeding to examine findings of new research on organization-public communication focused on listening, it is important to identify what is meant by listening. Glenn (1989) 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 *recognition* and *attention* to others (Bickford, 1996; Husband, 2009, p. 441; Honneth 2007), engaging in *interpretation* to try to gain *understanding* what others have to say (Husband, 1996, 2000), giving *consideration* by "receiving and constructing meaning from spoken and/or non-verbal messages", and *responding* in some way (Lundsteen, 1979; Purdy & Borisoff, 1997, p. 6) [emphasis added]. These elements, in addition to *acknowledgement* that was shown to be important in the Obama presidential campaigns, could be termed the seven canons of listening.

A transdisciplinary approach is necessary to understand listening. Listening is crucially informed by Gadamer's (1960/1989) 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 others to "say something to us" even when what they have to say may be against us (as cited in Craig & Muller, 2007, p. 219–220). In addition, Bakhtin's *dialogism* and Buber's description of dialogue, monologue and "monologue disguised as dialogue' specifically inform the processes of listening. McCrae (2015) advocates *dialogic listening* drawing on the foundational work of Bakhtin and Buber, and Conquergood (1985), who sees dialogue including the 'performance of listening' as a "path to genuine understanding of others" and essential for ethical engagement with others (p. 9) – a point also made by Bodie (2010), Bodie and Crick (2014), Conquergood (1985), Gehrke (2009), and others. In addition, theories of receptivity (Kompridis, 2011); reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960); hospitality (Silverstone, 2007); and interactivity (Pelias & VanOosting, 1987) inform understanding of listening.

Researchers warn of many pitfalls in listening and *faux* listening strategies including *pseudolistening*, *selective* listening, and *defensive* listening (Adler & Rodman, 2012, p. 136). Waks' concepts of *cataphatic* listening (a selective and only partially attentive approach that assigns what others say to prefigured categories) and *apophatic* listening (in which a listener sets aside prefigured categories and presumptions and is temporarily silent and open to what others say) also contribute to a theoretical framework in which to examine listening (Waks, 2010).

Methodology

Research questions

The overarching research question explored in this research was 'how, and how well, do organizations listen to their stakeholders and publics', noting that listening is a fundamental corollary of speaking to achieve two-way communication, dialogue, engagement, and create and maintain relationships as identified in communication literature. In operationalizing the study, a number of specific research questions were investigated including:

1. To what extent is organization-public communication two-way transactional and dialogic?
2. What are the main media and methods used by organizations for speaking, and the scale, frequency, and intensity of their use?
3. What are the main media and methods used by organizations for listening, and the scale, frequency, and intensity of their use?
4. What barriers, obstacles, and challenges inhibit two-way communication including listening between organizations and their publics?
5. Conversely, what tools, technologies, systems, methods, and other factors facilitate scalable two-way communication including listening between organizations and their publics?

Approach

While stakeholders and publics can provide external perspectives on how well organizations listen, an in-depth exploration of the research questions, which relate to how organizations listen, the practices, methods, systems and other resources used (or not used), and the barriers, obstacles, and challenges encountered, requires an examination of organizations at work going about their typical public interactions. Therefore, case studies examined qualitatively using a naturalistic approach – i.e., in their 'natural setting' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) – within the interpretivist/post-positivist tradition (Neuman, 2006) was deemed to be the most appropriate methodology for this study. While a large amount of empirical data was collected, the research was interpretative as it required analysis of claims, observed behaviors, activities such as research and consultations, and documents such as plans and reports, and it was qualitative as the purpose was to explore how, and how well, organizations listen. This was not simply a study of how many inquiries organizations respond to or how many consultations they conduct, but how they listen in terms of giving recognition, acknowledgement, attention, interpretation, consideration, understanding, and response to others as defined in the literature. In accordance with sound qualitative research methodology, the research was designed to achieve and optimize *credibility*, *dependability*, *confirmability*, and *transferability*, which contribute to the overall *trustworthiness* of the research, as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985), Shenton (2004), and others. This was achieved by paying careful attention to sampling, methods, and data analysis as outlined in the following.

Sample

The study was particularly interested in how organizations with substantial numbers of stakeholders and publics listen (i.e., large-scale listening). Also, the study was conducted with the intention of identifying common practices in different types of organizations in a range of industries and sectors and in a number of geographic regions to ensure the maximum relevance and transferability of findings. Therefore, a purposive sampling method was used in which selection of units or cases is “based on a specific purpose rather than randomly” (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003, p. 713). As Miles and Huberman (1994) note, defined case (purposive) sampling for qualitative studies is informed by the conceptual question, not a concern for “representativeness” (p. 29). Bryman (1988) and others note that well-selected defined cases produce findings that have a broad generalizability to particular contexts, or what Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Shenton (2004) prefer to call transferability.

The sampling frame employed Miles and Huberman’s three-stage approach for qualitative research sampling by (1) selecting some “exceptional” or exemplary cases; (2) selecting some “discrepant”, “negative” or “disconfirming” examples; and (3) selecting some apparently typical examples (1994, p. 34). Exceptional and exemplary examples were identified from academic articles, media reports, and announcements of specific initiatives in organizational listening, such as the MasterCard’s Conversation Suite (Weiner, 2012). Discrepant negative examples were identified from media and public criticisms of organizations for lack of listening and engagement with stakeholders and citizens, such as criticism of the UK Government and its Department of Health in relation to complaints that led to the Mid Staffordshire hospitals crisis (Stationery Office, 2013) and reports of customer complaints about energy, finance, telecommunications, and other companies (e.g., FTC, 2015). Typical examples were chosen randomly from large well-known organizations. This sampling approach also reflected purposive sampling strategies summarized by Teddlie and Yu (2007), Patton (2002), and others including *typical case* sampling, *extreme* or *deviant case* sampling, *maximum variation* sampling, *revelatory case* sampling, and *critical case* sampling. The sample of 36 cases in total was made up of:

1. A mix of government (n = 18), corporate (n = 14), and NGO and non-profit organizations (n = 4);
2. Organizations in each of the above categories in three countries – the UK (n = 18), the USA (n = 11), and Australia (n = 7);
3. Organizations that are leaders or ‘top three’ in their sector, as these are likely to be representative of practices in the sector.

To aid recruitment of the sample and frankness in discussions, de-identification of all participating organizations and individuals was provided. Ethics approval for the study was gained through the author’s university, which included written consent from all participants.

Research Methods

Noting that self-reporting by organization staff had the potential to overstate listening and that some organizations were likely to be reluctant to make admissions that indicate a lack of listening, the project used a triangulation approach to draw data from three sources as follows.

1. *In-depth interviews* – A primary research method deployed was in-depth semi-structured interviews with senior staff in communication-related roles. The study recognized that organizational speaking and listening can occur at multiple levels in multiple functions and organizational units, including on a day-to-day basis via operations, field, and sales staff. However, because the study was focused on large-scale listening and conducted in the context of strategic corporate, marketing, government, and organizational communication and related fields such as public relations, interviews were conducted with senior staff in eight professionalized strategic communication-related functions. These were research (including market research, social research, reputation studies, etc.); customer relations/customer relationship management (CRM); public consultation; digital/social media; corporate communication; public relations including related roles such as community relations; internal organizational communication; and correspondence units (particularly relevant to government). Up to seven interviews were conducted in some organizations. Furthermore, during the study it became apparent that some organizations outsource organization-public communication that potentially or explicitly involves listening, such as social media analysis, to specialist research firms and agencies. On the recommendation of the organizations studied, a number of these specialist research firms were added to the sample as they have first-hand knowledge of these practices. A total of 104 interviews were conducted during 2014–2015, an average of almost three interviews per organization. All interviews were conducted face-to-face and ranged from 1.25 hours hour to three hours.

2. *Document analysis* – To help validate data gained in interviews, the study also collected a range of documents including 'strategic communication' plans, reports of communication programs and activities, records of public consultations, and evaluation reports. More than 400 relevant documents were obtained and analyzed for evidence of organizational listening.

3. *Field tests (experiments)* – Thirdly, field tests were conducted as mini-experiments in which the author and research associates submitted 'real life' inquiries, questions, complaints, and comments warranting a response via e-mail or to the Web sites and social media sites of organizations studied. During the period of research 25 such communications were submitted to organizations and responses were monitored and recorded.

Data capture and analysis

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts of interviews were analyzed inductively in the first stage of data processing using NVivo 10 to identify key issues, topics, and concepts discussed by participants in line with qualitative textual and content analysis procedures (Neuman, 2006; Punch, 1998; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Almost 1,000 pages of transcripts were analyzed in NVivo to produce lists and 'word clouds' showing the most frequently occurring terms, concepts and phrases. After initial *open* coding focused on identifying key terms and topics in the texts, NVivo was used to undertake some second-level *axial* and *pattern* coding to group terms and concepts into categories (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Punch, 1998, pp. 205, 210–221). These were derived from a mixture of inductive and deductive analysis. For instance, terms were categorized as 'listening-oriented' and 'speaking-orientated' where possible based on grouping synonyms and derivative words in the texts (inductive), while *a priori* categories were used to deductively categorize terms into specific fields of practice such as customer relations, public consultation, social media, and so on.

While bringing a systematic approach to data analysis, this somewhat mechanistic analysis told only part of the story, however. An important part of interpretative analysis was comparing transcripts of interviewees' statements with key documents accessed. For instance, if an interviewee claimed public consultation was undertaken, a report of the consultation was requested and examined to confirm or disconfirm claims made. Concurrently, results of field tests were tabulated to identify the rate and types of responses received.

Results – The 'Crisis of Listening'

The first and final questions posed to the organizations studied best summarize the findings of this research. From the outset, one-fifth (20 per cent) of all organizations contacted for an interview did not respond despite introductions provided by leaders in their field known to them and the offer of de-identification.[1] Also, almost half of the organizations contacted with a genuine request for information or complaint (the third research method deployed) failed to respond.

After discussing a range of public communication practices that could involve speaking and/or listening on behalf of the organization such as customer relations, public consultation, public relations, and social media use, the final question posed to interviewees asked them to make an overall estimate, in approximate terms, of the proportion of their budget, time, and resources that are spent on speaking-related activities and the proportion of their budget, time, and resources that are spent on speaking-related activities. The average speaking to listening ratio was 80:20, with some organizations openly acknowledging that as much as 90 per cent of their so called public communication comprised speaking on behalf of the organization. One head of communication rated his organization's speaking to listening ratio as 95:5.

The highest claims of listening were made by customer relations, public consultation, and research practitioners who, perhaps not surprisingly, rated their work as primarily listening, claiming ratios ranging from 60:40 to 70:30 listening versus speaking. However, two of these activities – research and public consultation – are conducted only periodically by most organizations, sometimes as seldom as once a year in the case of research and usually not more than a few times a year in the case of public consultation. Furthermore, given that these are self-assessments, claims in relation to time and resources spent on listening are more likely to be generous rather than minimalist.

Moreover, when listening is conducted, such as through research, customer relations, public consultation, social media use, and other practices, it was found to be predominantly instrumental – that is, undertaken to serve an organization's interests, as shown in the following examples. This form of listening fails to meet the transactional 'win-win' view of 'strategic' communication advocated by Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, and Sriramesh (2007) in their seminal article in this journal, or the requirements of "participatory" or "network" (Murphy, 2011) approaches advocated by Falkheimer and Heide (2011), Murphy (2011) , and others. Rather, it reflects "the dark side of strategic communication" identified by Dulek and Campbell (2015, p. 123). To summarize other key findings of this extensive research project within the space limitations of an article, three areas of strategic public communication practice are the primary focus for the reasons given in the following sections.

Public consultation

Public consultation is a specialist field of practice in which one would expect to find substantial listening, as it is purposively conducted to gain public feedback and comment with a view to informing policy or decisions on major issues. Many public sector organizations have made a committed effort to public consultation, both physical and increasingly online. In the US, the Regulations.gov Web site (http://www.regulations.gov) provides a central portal for public consultations and offers a choice of direct comment online as well as an 'alternate ways to comment' button that allows citizens to e-mail or even send written comments through the postal system. In the UK, the Gov.UK Web site (https://www.gov.uk) provides a single online portal for all government information and services including public consultations.

A major public consultation examined in this study related to a very large national infrastructure project approved by the British Parliament in 2010 – although it did not have Royal Assent (final approval) at the time of this study. Therefore, there was still an opportunity for interested parties to make their views known. As the project involves compulsory acquisition of private property, industrial construction in urban and rural landscapes, and operations that will create noise, there are many issues of concern for residents living near the project, environmentalists, local communities, and farmers. Such a situation presents a test for consultation and an interesting case study to examine, as it is involves multiple diverse interests with varying levels of influence and power and some conflicts of interest (e.g., environmentalists and residents negatively impacted by the project versus businesses that will be the primary beneficiaries).

The corporate plan of the company established by the UK government to develop and manage the project says in its statement of values: "We listen to people without pre-judgement" (De-identified company, 2014a, pp. 13–14).[2] In line with these principles and to comply with the Aarhus Convention and the European Commission's Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) processes to which the UK is committed, the company conducted extensive public consultation during the first phase of the project. One of the early public consultations in 2011 received 55,000 responses, some of which were 100 pages long. The project team used an independent research company, Ipsos-MORI, to analyze response when it reaches such levels.

As well as a number of formal consultations conducted via the Gov.UK Web site on issues such as compensation packages for compulsory land acquisition, which was active at the time of this research, the head of community and stakeholder engagement, the community stakeholder manager, and the head of consultations emphasized that engagement was ongoing. The head of community and stakeholder engagement said: "I mean, you're on the ground out there talking to people. That's part of the job" (personal communication September 29, 2014). Furthermore, the company uses events such as public meetings, Web sites, occasional surveys and focus groups with key stakeholders and members of the "general public", and, increasingly, social media to canvass public views. Tweetdeck and Hootsuite are used to monitor comments in social media and staff reported that they were "looking at using Google Analytics" at the time of interview. A spokesperson said:

> We listen on social media much more than we actually promote or publish information. We study. We have a full-time social media officer who is monitoring the main channels every day. We have a daily report on what people are talking about. (personal communication, September 29, 2014)

In addition, the consultation team has experimented with Citizen Space as an online consultation tool, saying it offers "greater flexibility". The head of communication for the project company said "Gov.UK is a very vanilla approach. You're not always able to put the context around a consultation that will help guide people through it" (personal communication, September 29, 2014). While contextualizing issues can be helpful, putting context around a consultation could also be interpreted as framing it in such a way that certain issues are highlighted, while others are downplayed, which can be problematic. For instance, attention can be deviated from issues that an organization does not want to subject to scrutiny. Framing is one of a number of limitations identified in public consultation practices. Others were openly acknowledged by practitioners, albeit their interpretation revealed an organization-centric focus. For example, the head of community and stakeholder engagement for the UK infrastructure project acknowledged limitations of traditional town hall meetings, saying:

> I think town hall meetings are rarely the best way of getting information across … actually the people who are turning up don't always get the best level of service out of that or the best information because actually it's quite difficult to get information across in that kind of format. (personal communication, September 29, 2014)

Analysis of this statement reveals symbolic markers in relation to speaking and listening. The company's head of community and stakeholder engagement referred to "getting information across" twice in the one statement. It was clear from the context of the discussion that the organization is not so much concerned about participants in the consultation getting their information across, but rather the organization getting its information and messages across.

A further limitation revealed in this case study is that staff referred frequently to meetings and discussions with local councils, local politicians, regional airport operators, local chambers of commerce, industry groups, various action groups, supply chain partners and, by the admission of one staff member, "the captains of industry" (personal communication, January 27, 2015). While such meetings are a necessary part of consultation, there are two problems in relation to the selection of who to consult illustrated in this case study. First, it shows a tendency for consultations to gravitate to the 'usual suspects'. Representative organizations, which are assumed to speak for their constituencies, are usually the prime participants in consultations. But who is left out? Who are not represented? Often there are many who are not represented by the groups selected or self-selecting for consultation.

One of the consultation and engagement team of the UK infrastructure project also noted that:

> Most places … have some kind of action group associated with them who have been set up in response to ourselves. These tend to be not necessarily very representative of the community and it may actually be pushing a particular single issue. If they become the focus of engagement, actually we get a very narrow view of what locals want. (personal communication, September 29, 2014)

In the case of the 'usual suspects' and lobby groups, power relations further skew communication and representation in a way that can deny voice in the sense of both speaking and listening. Business groups, industry, organized action groups, councils, and so on are invariably better resourced and more skilled in making representations than most individual citizens and small communities. What may appear to be simple matters for professional staff in organizations, such as writing a submission, standing up to speak in public, and doing research to mount a strong argument, are not within the skill set or experience of many residents in suburban and rural communities. Even if they do seek to participate in consultations, their voice is often dismissed because they do not speak the formalized and institutionalized language of policy making and politics.

Another government department involved in closing almost 300 regional offices undertook public consultation on its plans to replace local inquiry centres with online information and telephone information lines. Its description of the consultation was intriguing in two respects: who was consulted and how they were consulted? A spokesperson said:

> There has been negative feedback from the unions and from a small number of politicians … But we *told* them we were doing it; we *told* them why we were doing it; we *gave* them *facts*. We *wrote* to every single politician and *explained* why we were doing what we were doing and when. We *wrote* to the local governments as well to *tell* them what we were doing and why and when and how. We had the minister *write* to members of parliament and significant members of government whose constituencies were affected by this, as well as voluntary organizations … We are seeking to *inform* them about things that are happening. (personal communication, September 24, 2014) [emphasis added]

Italics have been added to these verbatim quotes to highlight actions that were involved in the so-called consultation. The statements are rife with the terms 'told', 'tell', 'wrote', 'write', 'explained', 'gave', and 'inform'. Furthermore, the description makes it clear that the department was 'doing it' (closing the centres) and that it had already decided when. What the department's spokespersons described was not consultation. It was simply another public information campaign. These statements reveal the loquaciousness of some organizations and their overwhelming compulsion to tell and inform, even when supposedly consulting. A further limitation of this approach to consultation is that the focus was primarily on local politicians. The department was questioned on whether it had consulted directly with members of the public. The response was: "No, not to the public. We did that via the media, so our press office would do that" (personal communication, September 24, 2014). Illustrating that the above statements were not isolated examples selectively quoted, the discussion of public consultation with this department ended with this summary:

> If there's a new policy that is controversial, that people misunderstand, we will *write* and *explain* what's going on. It could be things that are not new, but we just feel there needs to be more *information*… we're trying to *persuade* and *influence* people with *information*, as well as simply provide *information*. (personal communication, September 24, 2014) [emphasis added]

The ultimate test of public consultation is to ask whether anything changed as a result of the consultation. As in a number of interviews with practitioners involved in public consultation, the consultation team for the major UK infrastructure project was asked "has the project been changed from the form in which it was originally proposed?" The answer: "No, not really" (personal communication, January 27, 2015).

Social Media

It has been well documented that Web 2.0-based social media offer increased affordances of interactivity and two-way communication compared with mass media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), as well as democratization of media (Macnamara, 2014a; Siapera, 2012). It could be expected that the popularity of social media by organizations as well as individuals would increase listening. However, this research confirmed the findings of a number of other studies by showing an overwhelming focus on using these new channels for speaking.

Some organizations have made substantial investments in social media with the objective of listening as well as speaking, such as MasterCard's Conversation Suite, which was examined in this study. Senior vice president for corporate and external communication at MasterCard, Andrew Bowins, has publicly declared that the company's "global corporate communication function is evolving from a broadcast model reliant on intermediaries to a direct, real-time communication ecosystem" (as cited in Weiner, 2012, p. 8). In a 2012 interview Bowins said that the company's social media activity "begins with real-time social media listening and analysis" (as cited in Weiner, 2012, p. 8). The MasterCard Conversation Suite comprises a custom-built online monitoring system that tracks 6,000 key words in 26 languages across traditional and social media as well as traditional media globally 24/7. In early 2015 the system was annually identifying 36,000 traditional media articles and more than three million social media posts that refer to MasterCard or issues of interest to the company, according to one of the digital specialists operating the system (personal communication, January 15, 2015).

However, despite considerable innovation in monitoring online comment and a stated commitment to conversations, the overriding purpose of the MasterCard Conversation Suite is to gain insights and intelligence that serve its interests, with collected data reported to the company's marketing department. Also, the social media director of the agency managing the MasterCard Conversation Suite said "marketing staff cannot help giving in to the urge to sell" (personal communication, January 15, 2015).

Another multinational corporation studied operates a Global Listening Tool with similar capabilities. However, close analysis shows that it facilitates listening only insofar as it informs organization strategy such as providing competitive intelligence and identifying opportunities to promote its products. Some examples of this *selective listening* approach are reported in the next section.

Government is also increasingly a major user of social media. One of the largest UK government departments with annual spending of around £160 billion, the Department of Work and Pension (DWP), says in its published 'Communications Strategy 2014/15':

> Social media has [*sic*] led to a major shift in the relationship between organizations and audiences. Our strategy recognizes that citizens now expect a two-way dialogue where people create and share their own content, and mistrust the old 'push' information approach. 2014/15 will see a further decisive shift away from traditional 'broadcast' digital communications towards an engagement approach, with continuing conversations and activity. (DWP, 2014)

The head of another UK government agency stated emphatically: "Absolutely we do more listening on social media at the moment than broadcast". However, he went on immediately to say:

> Our policy at the moment externally, for Twitter in particular, is to publish stuff that is of operational use. It's often public education … so we'll be tweeting about seminars and workshops and reminding people about key deadlines and things like that … It's very focussed on the specific purpose of what we're doing. (personal communication, September 24, 2015)

Terms and phrases such as 'publish', 'education', 'we'll be tweeting', 'reminding', 'focussed on the specific purpose of what *we're* doing' [emphasis added] clearly indicate an orientation to speaking and distributing messages about what the organization is interested in and what it wants to achieve. Further examples of social media use are reported in the following section on public relations, as this function in organizations is often responsible for media, including social media communication.

Public Relations

As noted in the literature review, public relations makes explicit claims for two-way communication, dialogue, and fostering organization-public relationships – even to the extent of symmetry (Grunig et al., 2006). Therefore, PR practices should involve substantial listening as well as speaking on behalf of organizations. However, a number of case studies showed that PR 'talks the talk' but does not 'walk the walk'. The global PR manager of a major automotive manufacturer was frank saying: "The culture here is mostly a command and control one. The senior management mostly have engineering backgrounds. That means we are very process driven and very focussed on numbers and data" (personal communication, January 30, 2015). The auto manufacturer uses research including surveys as well as focus groups to gain customer and potential customer feedback, but this is mostly undertaken for testing new designs and features for its products. The PR manager said "I would like to be measuring engagement" and added "we would like to use listening tools such as more sophisticated social media monitoring tools to track comments and public opinion on issues. But it is a trade off on how much we can spend and priorities" (personal communication, January 30, 2015). This case illustrated how the culture of an organization and its structure define how communication is conceived and practiced.

This is further borne out in examination of the PR function in another industry in another country. The general manager (GM) of corporate affairs for a national wholesaler that supplies a large network of franchised stores provided a frank description of how some organizations do not listen. The GM of corporate affairs said "the only communication we have with our key stakeholders, our retailers, is our annual general meeting, and the CEO insists on a quarterly update newsletter which I don't think anyone reads". The company uses social media, but the GM of corporate affairs said: "We use Twitter and LinkedIn to put out announcements. There's a constant flow of little bits of information. We receive very little feedback or comment (personal communication, March 6, 2015).

The senior vice president and vice president of the digital and social media team in the New York office of one of the world's leading PR firms reported that they use social media to "track issues" to identify those that clients can "jump on". They referred to their practices as "news jacking" and "meme jacking" and gave an example.

> For instance, if there is as story of someone famous or important taking a 'selfie' and we have a cell phone client, they can jump online and say 'hey, our cell phone can take wide angle pics' or whatever to position their products. (personal communication, January 22, 2015)

Most of the PR practitioners interviewed, as well as other organization staff with job titles that included the term 'communication' such as corporate communication described their work in terms of "informing", "disseminating", "educating", "showing", "telling", "distributing", and "broadcasting", and spoke frequently of "content", "messages" (the organization's), and "storytelling" (the organization's). Analysis of a range of organization-public communication practices revealed an overwhelming focus on what the executive director of the UK Government Communication Service, Alex Aiken, calls "SOS – sending out stuff" (personal communication, September 29, 2014).

Other Practices

While this article has focused by necessity on just three of eight areas of strategic communication studied, analysis of other often over-lapping but recognized disciplinary fields related to communication including market, stakeholder, reputation, social, and evaluation research; customer relations (commonly referred to as *customer relationship management*); and government communication found similar levels of organization-centricity and focus on organizational speaking (Macnamara, 2016).

Discussion and Conclusions – The Work and Architecture of Listening

It is reported that more than US$500 billion a year is spent on advertising (PWC, 2014) and the PR industry is estimated to be worth more than $10 billion a year and growing rapidly (Macnamara, 2014b, p. 73). This study shows that these and other organization-public communication practices are primarily focused on speaking on behalf of organizations and that comparatively little attention is paid to listening by governments, corporations, NGOs, and many institutions. The lack of organizational listening is almost certainly contributing to the "democratic deficit", disengagement from politics identified in a number of countries (Coleman, 2013; Couldry, 2010, p. 49; Dobson, 2014), and declining levels of public trust in government, corporations, and institutions (Edelman, 2015; Harvard University, 2015). Conversely, there is evidence that increased listening could generate significant benefits for democracy, government policy making, business, and society (e.g., Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013: Tilley, 2005).

Bickford (1996) pointed out that listening requires work. As well as doing the work of speaking on behalf of organizations such as advertising, producing informational Web sites, giving speeches, distributing media releases, and hosting events dominated by organization presentations, organizations need to do the *work of listening* to create healthy democracy and social equity. This can include open-ended research, public consultation including outreach beyond the 'usual suspects', broad-based social media monitoring (not only tracking the organization's coverage), and collecting, analyzing, and responding to feedback, comments, and complaints.

In addition, listening at organizational level, which typically involves large-scale listening, requires what can be described as an *architecture of listening*. This recognizes that large-scale listening requires tools and technologies, as it cannot be undertaken aurally or even face-to-face in many cases. However, 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*. Findings of this research suggest that effective ethical organizational listening requires a number of elements, features, and characteristics including:

1. An organizational *culture* that is open to listening as defined by Honneth (2007) and Husband (1996, 2009) – that is, one that *recognizes* others' right to speak, pays *attention* to them, tries to *understand* their views and *responds* with at least acknowledgement;

2. *Policies* that specify and require listening, including processes to address issues of power differentials and the 'politics of listening' as discussed by Dreher (2009);

3. *Systems* that are open and interactive, such as Web sites that allow visitors to post comments and questions, vote, and so on;

4. *Technologies* to aid listening, such as monitoring tools or services for tracking media and online comment; automated acknowledgement systems; text analysis software for sense-making, and even specialist argumentation software to facilitate meaningful consultation and debate;

5. *Resources* including staff to operate listening systems and do the work of listening, such as establishing forums and consultations, inviting comment, and monitoring, analyzing, and responding to comments and questions;

6. *Skills* for listening; and

7. *Articulation* of the voices of stakeholders and publics to policy-making and decision-making. While listening does not imply or require agreement in all cases, unless there is a link to policy-making and decision-making for consideration of what is said to an organization, voice has no value – in Couldry's terms, it does not matter.

Limitations and Further Research

As this study used qualitative methods of inquiry, the proportions of listening versus speaking are reported estimates and indicators, not generalizable statistics. However, the sample used in this study was substantial and the extensive literature review and in-depth analysis conducted provide considerable evidence that there are significant gaps in theory and practice in relation to organization-public communication. A proposed further stage of research is to construct a model of organization-public communication informed by the 'architecture of listening' using a method such as participatory action research and monitor and evaluate the costs and benefits from the perspective of the organization and stakeholders. Such research is necessary to lift strategic communication out of the organization-centricity that continues to skew and limit the field.

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[1] To facilitate access to senior communication executives, the researcher gained introductions and endorsements of the study from leaders in the disciplinary fields examined and professional organizations such as the UK Government Communication Service (GCS), Whitehall, and the Institute for Public Relations ((IPR) in the US.

[2] This corporate plan published by the UK government department responsible for the project on behalf of the company is de-identified as part of ethics approval commitment. It is not listed in the reference list because of this requirement.

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