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Digital Corporate Communication and Organisational Listening

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Abstract

Human communication theory and disciplinary theory in corporate communication and cognate fields such as organisational communication and public relations, emphasise two-way, dialogic interaction. As communication scholar Robert Craig, succinctly says, communication involves speaking and listening. But research reveals a dominant focus on speaking in corporate communication and related fields, and a lack of listening. Addressing this gap in corporate communication is a challenge due to *scale* (the large number of stakeholders with whom many organisations need to engage); *delegation* to various departments such as customer relations and HR; and *mediation* of the voice stakeholders in many forms such as submissions, reports, and written complaints, as well as online. However, digital corporate communication provides new opportunities not only to ‘speak’ to stakeholders, but to listen to them. This chapter examines how organisational listening can be enhanced as part of digital corporate communication to gain increased understanding, insights, and stakeholder engagement.

Keywords: Organisational listening, digital listening, two-way communication, engagement

Introduction

As sociologist John Dewey remarked, society *is* communication, arguing that human society cannot exist without communication. Communication is the ‘glue’ that binds groups of people, and organisations, together. CCO theory, variously expressed as *communication constitutes organisation* and the *communicative constitution of organisations* (Schoeneborn, Kuhn, & Kärreman, 2019; Vásquez & Schoeneborn, 2018) specifically recognises the fundamental role of communication in the establishment and operation of organisations, as well in as the general function of human organizing.

The centrality of communication in human society is not to say that communication is easy, or that it always works to the satisfaction of the parties involved. As John Durham Peters says poetically, drawing on William James: “That we can never communicate like the angels is a tragic fact, but also a blessed one” (Peters, 1999, p. 29). He says communication, in all its fractures and mediations, is what makes us human. Interestingly, Peters also says that, despite the potential for misunderstanding in human communication, “most of the time we understand each other quite well; we just do not agree” (p. 269). This is an important point in the context of this chapter that specifically discusses listening as part of digital corporate communication.

A number of communication scholars label humans as *Homo narrans* (story tellers), referring to humankind’s development of advanced languages and capacity for speaking, talking, and telling (Fisher, 1984). This reflects a broad philosophical focus on speech and rhetoric from the time of ancient civilisations in Greece, Egypt, and China. In Book 1 of his *Politics*, Aristotle wrote that “Nature ... has endowed man¹ alone among the animals with the power of speech” and he identified speaking as a key attribute that defines humans (as cited in Haworth, 2004, p. 43). Renaissance philosopher Thomas Hobbes echoed Aristotle’s trope in *Leviathan*, saying “the most noble and profitable invention of all others was that of speech” (Hobbes, 1946, p. 18).

However, contemporary communication studies scholar Robert Craig (2006) succinctly reminds us that communication requires “talking and listening” (p. 39). In writing about voice, sociologist Nick Couldry (2009) describes voice as “the implicitly linked practices of speaking and listening” (p. 580). It is significant that Couldry notes that listening is implicit, not explicit. Despite attempts by some such as Back (2007) to highlight the importance of listening, Fiumara noted that listening is often “a secondary issue” in discussion of communication (1995, p. 6).

Furthermore, a review of the literature on listening, summarised in the following sections, shows that most focuses on interpersonal communication in dyads and small groups in which listening is performed aurally. While aural listening is possible in organisational settings such as face-to-face meetings telephone calls, and teleconferencing applications, corporate communication commonly seeks to engage with stakeholders who are distanced in time and space and who may number in the thousands,

hundreds of thousands, or even millions in the case of large multinational corporations and other corporate bodies. In this chapter, the broad definition of corporate based on *corpus* meaning body and *corpora* (plural) is used to include government agencies, non-government organisations (NGOs), and non-profit organisations (NPOs), as well as the incorporated companies.

This chapter addresses a significant gap in the literature by examining (1) principles and approaches that need to be applied for effective listening in and by organisations; (2); methods for organisational listening, particularly how digital communication technologies can be applied; and (3) the substantial benefits, as well as potential risks, that can result for organisations as well as their stakeholders.

Definitions

Corporate communication is described as “a management function that offers a framework for the effective coordination of all internal and external communication with the overall purpose of establishing and maintaining favorable reputations with stakeholder groups upon which the organisation is dependent (Cornelissen, 2017, p. 5). Cornelissen adds that the function of corporate communication has developed to “incorporate a whole range of specialised disciplines, including corporate design, corporate advertising, internal communication to employees, issues and crisis management, media relations, investor relations, change communication and public affairs” (p. 4). This broad view is supported by other corporate communication scholars such as Argenti (2016), and indicates that corporate communication is closely aligned with, overlapping, or synonymous with the practices of public relations, organisational communication, some aspects of marketing communication, and evolving notions of strategic communication. This holistic view is taken in discussing how organisational listening can be applied as part of corporate communication.

Digital corporate communication

Since the development of computers, and particularly since the creation of the internet and the World Wide Web, digital forms of communication have permeated almost every corner of society. It is unsurprising, and eminently logical, that corporate communication has embraced digital communication for engaging both internal and external stakeholders. As outlined in this handbook, digital corporate communication includes media such as websites; social media platforms; online publications and videos; videoconferencing; and emerging communications technologies such as bots including chatbots; and other uses of algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI).

Before we look at how listening can be undertaken as part of digital corporate communication, we need to return for a moment to define the foundational concept being addressed – communication. The

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term communication is largely used as an ideograph – a concept that is invoked as if it has a precise, unambiguous, and shared meaning, but which in reality is often not understood, equivocal, and even antithetical. A lack of clarity in relation to what communication involves muddies understanding of the role, importance, and benefits of listening.

Communication vs. information

While the term ‘communication’ and its common abbreviation ‘comms’ are used widely to denote the creation and distribution of information such as through publications, website content, videos, and social media posts, the English term is derived from the Latin root *communis* meaning common or public, and the related noun *commūnicātiō*, which denotes “sharing or imparting”, and the verb *communicare*, which means to “share or make common” (Peters, 2015, p. 78). Thus, while imparting information is one element in the process of human communication, it is not complete without sharing information and achieving some common understanding with others. Contemporary scholars therefore associate communication with meaning making and sharing meaning. Dictionaries define communication as “exchange” (“Communication”, 2021a) and refer to “discussing, debating”, and “conferring” (“Communication”, 2021b).

Communication is therefore a *two-way* dialogic process. However, even dialogue is commonly misunderstood, with many assuming that the Greek term *dia* means two. In fact, *dia* means ‘through’ or ‘between’ (“Dia”, 2021), with *logos* meaning speech, logic, and reasoning or argument. In practice, dialogue can be no more than two or more parties speaking, with each paying little attention or giving little consideration to others.

Listening vs. hearing

Recent studies of communication and dialogue draw attention to the importance of listening while others speak, rather than what Jacqueline Bussie calls “re-loading our verbal gun” (2011, p. 31). Author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey similarly warns that, even when they do listen, “most people do not listen to understand; they listen with the intent to reply. They’re either speaking or preparing to speak” (1989, p. 251).

It is important to recognise that hearing is not the same thing as listening. Hearing in humans involves intelligible sound waves striking the ear drum. The organisational equivalent is the receipt of correspondence, telephone calls, research data, and so on. It is well known that much of what people hear receives little attention, or is even ignored – and the same occurs in the case of information, requests, and reports received by organisations (see Case study 1).

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Listening requires openness to others. While being ‘open-minded’ slips easily off the tongue, the concept is spelled out in quite specific terms by philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989) in his *magnum opus* in which he said that openness requires not only passive listening, but asking questions and allowing others to “say something to us”, even to the point of “recognizing that I myself must accept some things that are against me” (p. 361). Listening is also informed by the *dialogism* of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1986) and particularly Martin Buber’s description of dialogue contrasted with monologue and “monologue disguised as dialogue” (Buber, 2002, p. 22).

Glenn (1989) identified 50 definitions of listening in a literature review published in the *International Journal of Listening*. However, these focus predominantly on interpersonal listening as applied in human resource (HR) management, leadership, and therapeutic contexts. Drawing on this literature, as well as communication studies, political science, psychology, psychotherapy, and ethics, “seven canons” of listening were identified in an extensive study of organisational listening (Macnamara 2016, pp. 41–43). These are:

- *Recognition* of others as having a right to speak and be treated with respect (Honneth, 2007; Husband, 2009);
- *Acknowledgement* (Schmid, 2001);
- Giving *attention* to what is said (Bickford, 1996; Honneth, 2007; Husband, 2009);
- *Interpreting* what others say fairly and receptively, such as avoiding stereotyping and overcoming reactance and cognitive dissonance;
- Trying as far as possible to achieve *understanding* of others’ views and context (Bodie & Crick, 2014; Husband, 1996, 2000);
- Giving *consideration* to what others say (Honneth, 2007; Husband, 2009); and
- *Responding* in an appropriate way (Lundsteen, 1979; Purdy & Borisoff, 1997).

At no point does the literature identify agreement or compliance with all requests, suggestions, or recommendations as a requirement of listening. Studies in relation to human communication, democratic politics, and ethics note that listening requires an active and authentic attempt to reach a shared or common position. But sociology, cultural studies, and democratic political science also advocate acceptance of difference and even dissent. In many cases, there are good reasons that people and organisations cannot agree or comply with requests or recommendations. In such cases, an appropriate response is an explanation. Response is essential to close the ‘communication cycle’. William James (1952), the founder of American pragmatism, stated that ignoring someone is the most “fiendish” way to deal with another.

Organisational listening

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Judy Burnside-Lawry (2011) was one of the first to offer a definition of what is commonly referred to as *organisational listening*. In her study of listening competency of employees, she drew on the listening competency research of Cooper (1997) and Wolvin and Coakley (1994), and the research of Flynn, Valikoski, and Grau (2008) in relation to listening in business, to say:

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

The term 'organisational listening' is not a misguided attempt to anthropomorphise organisations. It recognises that, ultimately, it is people in organisations who listen, or don't listen. However, there are three key characteristics that distinguish organisations in terms of how listening to stakeholders can occur. First is the issue of *scale* – what Andrew Dobson (2014) refers to as the problem of “scaling up” from interpersonal and small group communication (pp. 75, 124). As noted previously, a corporation may have hundreds of thousands or even millions of customers with whom it seeks to engage, and vice versa. Many organisations have thousands of employees with whom communication is important, and government agencies, NGOs, and institutions often have very large and diverse groups of stakeholders whose views, concerns, complaints, suggestions, and requests need to be listened to in order to maintain relationships.

The challenge of scale leads to the second key characteristic of organisational listening – *delegation*. To engage with a large number and range of stakeholders, organisations typically delegate listening to functional units such as customer or member relations; call centres, research departments, social media monitoring teams, public relations; and HR for listening to employees.

Scale, in addition to distancing in space and time that occurs in the case of organisations operating in multiple locations and even internationally, leads to the third key factor to be addressed in organisational listening – *mediation*. The 'voice' of stakeholders is commonly expressed to organisations through correspondence such as letters and e-mails, written complaints, online comments, submissions to consultations, phone calls to call centres, and other mediated means.

These factors indicate that we need to go beyond Burnside-Lawry's identification of the listening skills of organisation employees, which were formulated based on study of face-to-face communication at stakeholder engagement events. Listening to potentially large volumes of delegated and mediated communication requires the application of technologies, as discussed in this chapter.

The characteristics of organisational listening, the 'seven canons' of listening drawn from the literature, and empirical research conducted as part of the Organisational Listening Project, which

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involved in-depth qualitative research into relations between a total of 60 organisations and their stakeholders over five years, led to the following definition of organisational listening.

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

This supports the definition of digital corporate communication (DCC) as *the strategic management of digital technologies to improve communication in organisations, in society, and with organisational stakeholders for the maintenance of organisational intangible and tangible assets*.

In order to operationalise this definition of organisational listening, The Organisational Listening Project and studies by a number of other researchers (see Table 1) proposed that organisations need to adopt what is conceptualised as an *architecture of listening* (Macnamara, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2019). Rather than ad hoc attempts at listening such as periodic ‘listening tours’ or ‘listening posts’, or relying on monitoring services, listening needs to be designed into an organisation to be effective. The architecture of listening proposed for organisations is based on eight key principles and elements as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Elements of an ‘architecture of listening’ in an organisation.

| Element | Description | References |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| Culture | Open to listening as defined – that is, one that <i>recognises</i> others as having something to say, <i>pays attention</i> to them, and tries to <i>understand</i> their views and context | Gadamer (1989); Honneth (2007); Husband (1996, 2009) |
| Politics of listening | Avoid or address organisational politics, such as selective listening to certain individuals or groups, while others are ignored or marginalised | Bassel (2017); Dreher (2009, 2010) |
| Policies | Developing and applying policies that require listening | Macnamara (2013, 2014, 2016) |
| Systems | Open and interactive, such as websites that allow visitors to post comments and questions (<i>see ‘What is changing’</i>) | Macnamara (2019) |

| | | |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| Technologies | Monitoring tools or services for tracking media and online comment; automated acknowledgement systems; and data analysis tools (<i>see 'What is changing'</i>) | Dreher (2012) Karpf (2016) Macnamara (2013, 2016, 2019) |
| 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 | Macnamara (2013, 2015, 2016) |
| Skills / competencies | E.g., ability to conduct textual analysis; social media analysis; as well as statistical data analytics | Burnside-Lawry (2011) Cooper (1987) Wolvin & Coakley (1994). |
| Articulation | Presenting what is said to an organisation to policy-makers and decision-makers honestly and clearly, without which voice has no value | Macnamara (2013, 2015, 2016) |

What is changing

Organisational listening which, as explained, is often required at large scale, delegated, and applied to mediated messages is substantially aided by a range of digital systems and technologies, as well as advanced research methods. While organisations typically have sophisticated systems for speaking, such as website development teams, media production departments, and advertising and public relations units or agencies, they often lack specific methods and tools for listening.

For organisational listening to be effectively applied at scale to large numbers of stakeholders such as customers, employees, and communities as part of digital corporate communication, advanced software applications and internal systems and processes for acknowledging, giving attention, interpreting, and responding are required. A number of examples are outlined in Table 2 and the following case studies.

Table 2. Methods for digital organisational listening.

| Listening methods | Digitalisation |
|--|---|
| Surveys (including open-ended as well as closed-ended questions) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of e-surveys (online) |

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Statistical analysis of quantitative data (e.g., SPSS, Excel) • Textual analysis of open-ended responses using natural language processing (NLP) software with machine learning capabilities |
| Interviews | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital recording • Automated transcripts using speech recognition software (e.g., Otter.ai; Temi; Microsoft Stream) • Textual analysis using NLP machine learning applications |
| Focus groups | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Textual analysis using NLP machine learning applications |
| Media content analysis | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Automated algorithmic-based content analysis applications (quantitative and qualitative) |
| Social media analysis | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Automated algorithmic-based content analysis applications (qualitative) • Google Analytics (quantitative) |
| Website content review | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Google Analytics to track views, duration, bounces, conversions/clickthroughs |
| Website feedback | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of web page plug-ins such as Usabilla that record user feedback |
| Public consultations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online public consultation sites (proprietary or using applications such as Citizen Space) • Textual analysis of submissions using NLP machine learning applications |
| Call centre telephone calls | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital recording • Automated transcripts using speech recognition software (e.g., Otter.ai; Temi; Microsoft Stream) • Textual analysis using NLP machine learning applications |
| Customer feedback | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer satisfaction e-surveys |

| | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NPS surveys |
| Customer experience (CX) study | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer journey mapping (a wide range of software applications is available) |
| Forums and public meetings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital recording • Automated transcripts using speech recognition software (e.g., Otter.ai; Temi; Microsoft Stream) • Textual analysis using NLP machine learning applications |
| Employee satisfaction / feedback | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E-surveys • Intranet feedback site • Internal social media (e.g., Workplace by Facebook; Yammer; Socialcast) |

As shown in Table 2, organisational listening requires and depends on systematic *analysis* of data, not simply collection of data such as research reports, submissions, and feedback. Too often vast quantities of information from stakeholders such as submissions to consultations, online feedback, and call centre recordings remain unread and unused, as evidenced in Case Study 1.

Table 2 also shows that organisational listening needs to extend beyond quantitative methodologies that focus on statistics. People speak and write in words, not numbers. Therefore, textual analysis and related analysis methods such as content analysis are essential skills for a listening organisation. Specialist software applications are available and often needed as part of listening systems.

In addition, organisational listening can be implemented through a number of in-depth research and engagement methods including *deliberative polling* (Fishkin, 2011); *participatory action research* (PAR); *sensemaking methodology* (Dervin & Foreman-Wernet, 2013); *behavioural insights* (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008); and *customer journey mapping* (Court, Elzinga, Mulder, & Vetvik, 2009).

Digital technologies such as voice to text (VTT) software enables recorded phone calls to be transferred to text for textual analysis that can identify common messages, themes, and patterns to inform decision-making and policy-making.

Organisations are also adopting artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as *chat bots* to ‘listen’ to users of web pages and respond with relevant information, as well as learning algorithms based on NLP and machine learning code that responds to users’ data entry and selections (Macnamara, 2019).

Case studies

The following case studies illustrate how digital technologies can be applied as part of digital corporate communication, leading to significant insights. The first involved a large government agency, noting that in some countries the term ‘corporate communication’ refers to communication by all types of organisations based on the Latin *corpus* meaning body, while the second case study reports on the application of listening using digital tools in a multinational corporation.

Case Study 1.

The second stage of The Organisational Listening Project, which focussed on listening by government organisations, reviewed the 2015 National Health Service (NHS) Mandate consultation in the UK which invites submissions from health professionals, patients, and the general public. This discovered that 127,400 submissions had been received, some involving 10 or more pages. Neither the NHS nor the UK Department of Health and Social Care had natural language processing (NLP) textual analysis software, or staff with the necessary training to undertake such a task, so their response was based on manual reading of a sample. Thus, many thousands of people were not listened to on important health issues and concerns in which they had lived experience (Macnamara, 2017, pp. 26–27). Such situations occur despite research that shows listening can improve health policy and services (Matthews & Sunderland, 2017) and policy generally in cases of deliberative engagement (Collingwood & Reedy, 2012, pp. 233–259).

As part of the Organisational Listening Project, a specialised machine learning textual analysis application was licensed (Method52), two analysts were trained in coding using the system, and the submissions were analyzed, resulting in discovery of seven major findings that were highly relevant to government policy making (Macnamara, 2017, pp. 27–28).

Case Study 2.

Achmea is a multinational insurance and financial services corporation headquartered in the Netherlands, with operating companies in a number of European countries as well as Australia. In total, the group has more than 10 million customers and almost 14,000 staff. In 2018–19, Achmea committed to a participatory action research (PAR) project to improve listening to its key stakeholders (customers and employees) and evaluate the results. The project involved Achmea International in the Netherlands and two of its major operating companies – Interamerican in Greece and Union poisťovňa in Slovakia.

The project tested a wide range of listening activities. One is reported here as an example of the benefits that can accrue from effective organisational listening as part of corporate communication.

Achmea International and its operating companies conduct regular Net Promoter Score (NPS) surveys of their customers, which primarily focus on identifying a 0–10 score in which ratings of 9–10 are regarded as ‘promoters’, ratings of 7–8 are considered ‘passive’, and ratings of 0–6 are described as ‘detractors’. Marketing research shows that ‘promoters’ are highly likely to remain customers, while ‘detractors’ are highly likely to be lost customers.

As part of improving its listening to customers, Achmea added open-ended questions to its NPS surveys to gain insights into why customers gave the ratings they did. Then, to pay attention to, understand, and give consideration to NPS customer feedback, operating companies such as Interamerican employed text analysts and textual analysis software (SAS Text Analytics in this case) to identify key concerns of ‘detractors’ as well the views of ‘passives’ and ‘promoters’ stated in response to open-ended questions.

Following this, the group introduced what it calls a ‘closed loop’ methodology in which well-trained staff in its call centres proactively called ‘detractors’ to discuss and try to resolve their concerns.

The group expected that the call-backs might change ‘detractors’ to be at least ‘passive’. However, follow-up NPS surveys found that 21.5% converted to ‘passives’; 29.9% remained ‘detractors’; and, surprisingly, 48.6% converted directly to being ‘promoters’.

If this trend is maintained across the group, which in 2018 had 17,000 ‘detractors’ – just 0.17% of its customer base, but a substantial number nevertheless – the group calculated that, based on a conservative average customer lifetime value (CLV) of €5,000 (euros), this listening activity would generate more than €20 million in revenue that otherwise was likely to be lost (Macnamara, 2020).

What remains the same

Listening systems do not replace face-to-face and other forms of interpersonal communication such as meetings, telephone calls, and video conferencing, which are emphasised by many researchers (e.g., Bassel, 2017; Bodie & Crick, 2014). As Hargie (2021) says in the latest edition of his text on interpersonal communication, people have a deep-seated and universal need to interact with others on a personal level. This is particularly the case in communication with employees, major customers, and business partners who can be engaged one-on-one (dyads) or in small groups. As noted previously, organisational listening using digital methods is applicable and becomes essential when engagement is required at scale and through delegated and mediated methods.

Also, research shows that respect (similar to what Honneth calls recognition) and empathy remain essential elements in digital corporate communication, just as they are in interpersonal communication. For example, in a study of how corporations respond to complaints on social networks, Einwiller and

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Steilen (2015) found that “respect, empathy, and a willingness to listen and learn about the complainant’s concern” positively contribute to complainants’ satisfaction (p. 197).

Furthermore, as noted in the definition of organisational listening, it is ultimately humans in organisations who listen, or don’t listen, particularly CEOs and senior managers. Digital media and applications simply aid the process.

Critical examination

The field of organisational listening research is continuing to expand. Reinikainen et al. (2020) have noted that, as young people have turned to social media to interact, build relationships, and discuss issues of concern, organisations have similarly turned to social media as platforms to address and engage young people. However, they note that many reports show that these attempts fail and that young people's trust in institutions, brands, and organisations continues to decline. Nevertheless, they found in a study of more than 1,500 young people aged 15–24 that listening by organisations is connected to higher levels of trust. They concluded: “The results highlight the role of competent listening on social media” (p. 185).

Brandt (2020) has studied how organisations listen to the “voice of the consumer (VOC)” (p. 156) and found that, while a majority of organisations capture consumer feedback, they are not effectively analysing, disseminating, or utilising findings to improve products, services, and consumer experiences. This validates the focus on analysis in Table 2. Brandt concludes by pointing to the benefits, but challenges, of processing both structured and unstructured data and the need to consider both “inbound” voice and outbound calls for feedback (p. 174).

A study in the USA by Neill and Bowen (2021) found that employees, particularly non-managers and women, continue to be dissatisfied with their organisation's listening efforts. So much remains to be done.

In studying organisational listening during organisational change, Sahay (2021) has confirmed that organisations struggle to incorporate effective listening due to lack of systems, processes, structures, resources, and skill sets. He noted a prevalence of “inauthentic listening” (p. 2), which has negative consequences for organisations and input providers. He also calls for organisations to develop comprehensive analysis, as well as empathetic skills among those soliciting or receiving input (p. 10), and using culturally sensitive and relevant technologies” (p. 11). This last point links to a related area of critique.

It needs to be recognised that advanced digital listening systems bring with them risks and concerns about privacy and ethics. For example, critical scholars warn of dangers in *digital surveillance* (e.g., Gillespie, 2018; Landau, 2017; Napoli, 2014) and *algorithmic filtering* (Caplan, 2018). As Caplan says, in many if not most online platforms, algorithms decide “the inclusion or exclusion of information” (Caplan, 2018, p. 564). In a recent book Lewis (2020) devotes a chapter to what she calls the “dark side of organisational listening”. Exploitive and manipulative applications or espionage are not what is proposed in organisational listening as part of digital corporate communication. An architecture of listening should be guided by ethics as well as regulations in relation privacy and data security.

Nevertheless, active, open, ethical listening by organisations offers many benefits to individuals, organisations, and society. Commercial organisations are shown to gain benefits such as increased

customer loyalty; increased employee morale, motivation, productivity; and increased insights into market needs (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013; Leite, 2015). Ultimately, Sheila Bentley (2010) and others contend that effective listening by commercial organisations can increase profitability. Research also shows that all types of organisations can gain increased trust and reputation through listening to their stakeholders (Leite, 2015; Tomlinson & Mayer, 2009). Increased and effective listening by government and political parties is cited as a key step to address the concerning “democratic deficit” identified in a number of countries (Coleman, 2013; Couldry, 2010, p. 49; Dobson, 2014; Norris, 2011) and what some even refer to as a “crisis of democracy” (Przeworski, 2019; Van der Meer, 2017).

Conclusion and future directions

This chapter has drawn attention to a major gap in corporate communication in which organisations deploy substantial resources, time, systems, and processes to disseminating information and their messages (i.e., speaking), but apply comparatively little resources, time, systems, and processes to listening to their stakeholders.

To address this gap, key principles and definitions of organisational listening have been advanced based on recent research and an ‘architecture of listening’ is described and advocated to embed two-way communication in an organisation. The elements identified are referred to as an *architecture* because they establish a framework that informs the design of specific listening activities to suit different types of organisations and varying circumstances. These concepts contribute to both the theory and practice of corporate communication.

Looking to the future, digital corporate communication will continue to apply an ever-expanding array of digital technologies. Future research is needed to maintain currency, particularly with developments in data analytics, the use of so-called ‘big data’, and AI that can afford insights through digital listening and two-way communication. Also, further research is required to understand and develop strategies for ensuring organisational listening is conducted ethically and, ideally, for mutual benefits. This must include keeping a critical eye on digital surveillance techniques that compromise privacy and listening tools for collecting ‘intelligence’ that is used for manipulative targeting of people for commercial or political objectives. However, the benefits identified show that balancing the ‘architecture of speaking’ that shapes most digital and traditional corporate communication with a digitally enhanced architecture of listening offers productive directions for digital corporate communication.

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¹ Gendered term in original text.