Towards a theory and practice of organizational listening

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Abstract

While there is an important and growing body of research literature on listening, this is predominantly focussed on interpersonal listening. Meanwhile, in contemporary industrial and post-industrial societies, organizations play a central role in society and the lives of citizens. People need to interact on a daily basis with government departments and agencies, corporations, and a plethora of non-government and non-profit organizations. Despite theorization of the disciplinary practices of public relations and corporate, organizational, government, and political communication as *two-way* communication involving dialogue and engagement with stakeholders and publics, a transdisciplinary literature review of these fields reveals that little attention is paid to listening. In addition to identifying this gap in the literature, this article reports empirical research that shows organizations listen sporadically, often poorly, and sometimes not at all. To address this socially and politically significant gap, this analysis makes recommendations as a contribution to a theory and practice of organizational listening.

Keywords: Organizational listening, two-way communication, dialogue, engagement

Introduction

> Our democracy should work for everyone, but if you've been trying to say things need to change for years and your complaints fall on deaf ears, it doesn't feel like it's working for you. (Theresa May, 2016a, para. 45)

> [Brexit] was a revolution in which millions of our fellow citizens stood up and said they were not prepared to be ignored anymore. (Theresa May, 2016a, para. 19)

Acknowledgement by the Prime Minister of a major democratic country that the voices of citizens "fall on deaf ears" and have been "ignored" by politicians and governments draws long overdue attention to an aspect of communication, sociology, and politics that is understudied by academics and overlooked by practitioners and which demands urgent attention. Such concerns in relation to politics are not new, unfortunately. In 2009, a citizen known as 'Joe the Plumber', who gained popular support when he appeared on US national television challenging Barack Obama, said "both parties routinely take American citizens for granted" and went on to declare that "people are mad at their government for not listening" (Wurzelbacher, 2009, paras 4–5). The 2016 US presidential election showed that Joe's warning has gone unheeded among major political parties and leaders, as does research showing declining public trust in government in many countries as well as in corporations, and even non-government organizations (NGOs) and non-profit organizations (Edelman, 2017; Harvard University, 2014).

It is not only in politics where people are feeling ignored. Business consultant and author Ram Charan reported in *Harvard Business Review* that, based on his experience in conducting 360-degree reviews[1] of corporate leaders, "one out of four of them has a listening deficit" (Charan, 2012, para. 2). Management trainer Bob Bobinski said, "millions of dollars are lost every day in organizations simply because of poor listening" (2016, para. 1). For example, business case studies show that a lack of listening is a major cause of lost customers, such as a 2011 decision by Netflix to change its pricing of DVDs and streaming video that led to the loss of 800,000 subscribers in one quarter (Pepitone, 2011). Lack of or poor listening by management in organizations also results in reduced staff motivation, productivity, and loyalty, and increased staff turnover. A 2016 study of 1,000 industry professionals in a sector with rising staff turnover confirmed previous findings that salary is usually not the prime motivator for 'job hopping.' Instead, salary was the sixth most important consideration in employees' job satisfaction, with 'feeling valued' and 'feeling respected' being higher priorities (Calibre, 2016). Fundamental to feeling valued and respected is being listened to (Brownell, 2016; Lloyd, Boer, Keller, & Voelpel, 2014). At its extreme, lack of listening by organizations has been shown to lead to suffering and deaths, as tragically illustrated in 2013 when the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust Public Inquiry into deaths in hospitals chaired by Robert Francis QC, drew the following conclusion in its report:

> Building on the report of the first inquiry, the story it tells is first and foremost of appalling suffering of many patients. This was primarily caused by a serious failure on the part of a provider Trust Board. It did not listen sufficiently to its patients. (HMSO, 2013, p. 3)

It is both significant and paradoxical that these and many other examples of communication breakdowns between organizations and their stakeholders[2] and publics[3] have occurred during a time of record spending by organizations on public communication. For instance, worldwide expenditure on media advertising in 2015 was in excess of US$500 billion and is forecast to exceed U$600 billion a year by 2018 (E-marketer, 2016). Spending on public relations grew by 34 percent between 2013 and 2016 to almost £13 billion in the UK alone (PRCA, 2017) and is reported to be growing by more than 20 per cent a year in fast-developing markets such as Brazil (ICCO, 2013). Private and public sector organizations continue to make major investments in social and market research, customer relations, stakeholder engagement, social media communication, and government departments, and agencies extensively conduct public consultation – activities that ostensibly involve listening as well as speaking. However, intriguingly, research shows a major gap in theory and practice in relation to how well organizations listen to their stakeholders and publics, the implications of not listening, and methods for achieving effective listening in organizations such as corporations, government departments and agencies, NGOs and non-profit organizations.

This article reviews relevant literature and reports findings of a study of how and the extent to which organizations listen to their stakeholders and publics. The study examined listening practices and methods in corporations, governments, and a number of NGOs and presents findings and recommendations that offer a contribution to a theory and practice of organizational listening, which it argues is much needed in contemporary complex societies.

The Study of Listening

Listening has been extensively studied and theorized in the context of interpersonal communication such as applied in human resource management (HR), leadership, education, counselling, and therapeutic fields of practice. This body of knowledge, to which valuable contributions have been made by members of the International Listening Association and this journal, is extremely important. As John Dewey observed, "society exists in communication" (1916, p. 5), a fundamental tenet of sociology and cultural studies echoed by James Carey (1989), Raymond Williams (1976, p. 10) and other eminent scholars. Despite recognition of the centrality of organizations in contemporary industrialized and post-industrial societies (Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2012), however, a review of literature in the public communication fields of organizational, corporate, marketing, government, and political communication, as well as public relations and even the growing body of work in relation to interactive social media shows that listening receives scant attention. Furthermore, empirical evidence indicates that, notwithstanding the daily practices and interdependencies of organization-public relations (OPR) in contemporary societies, *organizational listening* is under-theorized – even untheorized – and poorly practiced.

The purpose of using the term 'organizational listening' is not a misguided attempt to anthropomorphize organisations such as government department and agencies, institutions such as the Church and the military, corporations, or the plethora of NGOs and non-profit organizations that, along with individuals, comprise our societies. While recognizing that it is humans in organizations who listen – or don't listen – organizations face particular challenges as well as responsibilities in relation to listening. First, listening in organizations is largely *delegated* through organizational functions such as social and market research, customer relations, public consultation, stakeholder engagement, complaints handling, correspondence processing and, increasingly in the digital age, social media monitoring and analysis. Second, this in turn means that organizational listening is mostly *mediated*. Third, this delegation and mediation means that organizational listening is most often *asynchronous*. Except in personal meetings involving organization staff, organizational listening does not happen dynamically in real time between the interactants; rather, if it occurs, it does so across time and space. Fourth, and very significantly, there is the issue of *scale* – what Andrew Dobson called the problem of "scaling up" listening techniques and practices from one or a few to many (2014, pp. 75, 124). Organizations often need to communicate with, and therefore need to listen to, thousands, hundreds of thousands in the case of large corporations, or even millions of people in the case governments.

Unlike interpersonal listening which is paradigmatically direct, face-to-face, and synchronous, organizational listening requires and depends on policies, systems, structures, resources, and a range of processes, technologies, and specialist skills that can enable and facilitate delegated, mediated, large-scale listening. The challenges of organizational listening outlined in the previous paragraphs and the findings of a literature review that revealed little attention to listening in organizational, corporate, government, and political communication and related fields of practice such as public relations led to The Organizational Listening Project, a three continent study of organizational listening. The following discussion summarizes relevant literature and overviews the key findings of research conducted between 2014 and 2016, which identify the need for a theory of organizational listening as well as principles for practice, and concludes by offering a contribution to such a theory and proposals to address this significant missing link in public communication practice.

A History of Human Communication Dominated by Voice and Speaking

Historically, voice and speaking have been a major focus of study since the early Western 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; Kennedy, 1994). Rhetoric was also studied and developed as early as 500 BCE in Islamic societies of North Africa (Bernal, 1987) and in China (Lu, 1998). Rhetoric remains one of the major traditions of human communication scholarship and practice identified by Robert Craig (1999) and expounded in a number of communication theory texts (e.g., Craig & Muller, 2007; Littlejohn & Foss, 2008).

Vox populi – the voice of the people (the *demos*) – and its potential to influence and shape the policies and decisions of government and the exercise of power and authority (the *krátos*) are fundamental principles of democracy, which is now the dominant form of government practiced in one form or another in almost 200 countries worldwide (Marsh & Miller, 2012, p. 3).

When citizens experience a lack or loss of voice, researchers point to significant social, cultural and political problems. For instance, Charles Husband (2000) and others (e.g., Dreher, 2009) have drawn attention to the lack of voice in any meaningful sense afforded to ethnic minorities and argued that this constitutes oppression and injustice. Feminist studies has similarly identified lack of voice available to women as a social inequity negatively impacting the status and identity of women in many societies (e.g., Butler, 1999; Weatherall, 2002). Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of *symbolic power*, it can be argued that a failure or refusal to listen is a form of *symbolic violence* (Bourdieu, 1984).

In his seminal writing on the public sphere and his theory of *communicative action*, Habermas (1991) argued that "reaching understanding is the inherent telos of human *speech*" (p. 287) [emphasis added]. Habermas used 'speech' and 'communication' as if they are synonyms, and he built the theory of communicative action based on what he described as an "ideal speech situation" (pp. 196–203). Habermas and his protagonists neither identify nor see a need to describe an *ideal listening situation*.

It is symbolic that, until relatively recently, human communication scholarship was described as *speech communication*, particularly in North America – and in some places is still conceived this way (Gunn & Dance, 2014). Human communication theories have increasingly rejected one-way transmissional notions of communication and emphasize two-way *transactional* approaches involving dialogue (Bakhtin, 1984, 1986; Buber, 1958, 2002; Craig & Muller, 2007; Littlejohn & Foss, 2008). Communication theorist Robert Craig specifically posited that communication involves "talking and listening" (2006, p. 39). Author of *Why Voice Matters*, Nick Couldry described voice as "the implicitly linked practices of speaking and listening" (2009, p. 580). The term 'implicitly' hints at a problem and a gap in the literature and practice.

At the 2004 International Listening Association (ILA) conference, Michael Purdy (2004) noted that there has been only a small amount of qualitative research in relation to listening and that this is primarily grounded in cognitive psychology, mostly with a therapeutic focus. Lisbeth Lipari (2010) acknowledged that listening is studied in "humanities-based communication scholarship" as well as in "social science and cognitive science literature" but that this is predominantly in the context of interpersonal listening (p. 351). In their 2014 review of literature related to listening, Bodie and Crick issued a call "to lift listening from its slumber in Western scholastic thinking and in the communication studies discipline more specifically" (2014, p. 118). Such a project is well underway in terms of interpersonal listening through this journal and as evidenced in the 648-page edited volume, *The Sourcebook of Listening Research: Methodology and Measures* (Worthington & Bodie, 2017). However, listening by and within organizations that play a central role in contemporary developed societies has remained little studied and, as shown in the research reported here, is poorly practiced.

Susan Bickford (1996) was one of the first to point out this gap in relation to democratic politics in her landmark text *The Dissonance of Democracy*: *Listening, Conflict and Citizenship* – a cause taken up recently by Andrew Dobson in his book *Listening for Democracy*. Even as recently as 2014, Dobson said "honourable exceptions aside, virtually no attention has been paid to listening in mainstream political science" (p. 36). He concluded that "the listening cupboard is very bare indeed" (p. 110). Similarly, Couldry observed that "surprisingly, little attention has been given to what listening involves" (2010, p. 146). Dobson pointed out that efforts to improve democracy have mainly focussed on "getting more people to speak" (2014, p. 36). But, as Gideon Calder (2011) pointed out, the real problem in democratic politics is not being denied a voice; it is being denied an audience. Tanja Dreher made a similar point in her analysis of marginalized communities. For instance, in discussing Muslims living in Australia, she reported that there is no shortage of articulate spokespersons and commentators within the Muslim community. The challenge faced by Muslims in this predominantly Christian country is "being heard" (2008, p. 7). In a following analysis, Dreher concluded that "in much research and advocacy, there is a strong emphasis on the democratic potential of *voice, representation*, *speaking* up and *talking*" (2009, p. 446) [emphasis added].

Lacey (2013) noted that "listening has long been overlooked in studies of the media as well as in conceptualizations of the public sphere" (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).

A disciplinary field in which one could reasonably expect to find discussion of organizational listening is public relations (PR) and the largely synonymous fields of corporate, government, and organizational communication, which are theorized as enablers of dialogue, engagement, and relationships between organizations and their stakeholders and publics (L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; Kent, 2013; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Taylor & Kent, 2014). However, these fields also largely ignore listening. A search of PR journals and books revealed scant attention paid to listening. For example, a keyword search of the two leading PR journals, *Public Relations Review* from 1976 to 2015 and *Journal of Public Relations Research* since its launch found only three articles focused specifically or substantially on listening. Only one article discussed organizational listening in any depth, saying that "building a culture of listening and engagement" is one of three roles of public relations professionals and listing eight requirements to build a culture of listening in an organization (Gregory, 2015, p. 598).

Listening also receives little attention in PR research monographs and textbooks. For instance, is not listed in the index of 12 of the most widely used PR textbooks including the main text on PR Excellence theory (Grunig et al., 2002), described as 'the dominant paradigm' of PR (L'Etang, 2008; Pieczka, 1996, 2006). On the few occasions that listening is discussed in PR literature, it is with an organization-centric focus. For example, in *Today's Public Relations: An Introduction*, Heath and Coombs (2006) wrote that "today's public relations practitioner gives voice to organizations" and add that "this process requires the ability to listen" (2006, p. 346). They go on, however, to narrowly and instrumentally 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" (2006, p. 346).

Bimber et al. discussed the use of new open, interactive media and communication technologies as potential enablers of engagement between organizations and their various stakeholders and publics such as customers, members, employees, and citizens/voters. However, even in the age of Web 2.0 and interactive social media which, hypothetically, increase two-way communicative interaction, Kate Crawford has noted that "speaking up has become the dominant metaphor for participation in online spaces" and "listening is not a common metaphor for online activity" (2009: 526). Studies of online election campaigns and *e-democracy* in Australia, the UK, and the US (e.g., Gibson, Williamson, & Ward, 2010; Macnamara, 2011; Macnamara & Kenning, 2014; McChesney, 2013; Vergeer, 2013) and analyses of youth engagement by Bennett, Wells and Freelon (2011) have found that social media are mainly used for the transmission of information and messages (i.e., speaking), rather than listening and engaging in dialogue.

In seeking to collect empirical evidence on organizational listening, the Organizational Listening Project recognized the importance of having a realistic as well as a reasonably clear definition of what this process might entail. If we set unrealistically high expectations, listening is bound to fall short. On the other hand, it is important to recognize that, as well as non-listening, there are many forms of fake listening such as *pretend* listening (Bussie, 2011, p. 31) and *pseudolistening* (Adler & Rodman, 2011, p. 136). An important distinction is made by listening scholars between listening and hearing (Lipari, 2010). Hearing involves only the physical reception of signals or voice, whether they are sounds vibrating on a human eardrum, or correspondence of some kind received by an organization. Despite considerable diversity in definitions of listening (see Glenn, 1989), literature in relation to interpersonal listening, psychology, democratic political theory, and ethics identifies what are referred to here as 'seven canons' of listening, as follows:

- Giving *recognition* to others as having the right to speak rather than selective listening (Bickford, 1996; Honneth, 2007; Husband, 2009);
- *Acknowledgement* of others' views and expressions of voice, ideally in a timely way, the importance has been demonstrated in the Deliberatorium online consultation experiment conducted by MIT (Klein, 2007) and by the Obama presidential election campaigns (Macnamara, 2014);
- Paying *attention* to others (Bickford, 1996; Honneth, 2007; Husband, 2009: 441);
- *Interpreting* what others say as fairly and receptively as possible (Husband, 1996, 2000; ILA, 1995, p. 4);
- Trying as far as possible to achieve *understanding* of others' views, perspectives, and feelings (Bodie & Crick, 2014; Habermas, 1984, 1987; Husband, 1996, 2000);
- Giving *consideration* to what others say such as in requests or proposals (Honneth, 2007; Husband, 2009); and
- *Responding* in an appropriate way (Lundsteen, 1979; Purdy & Borisoff, 1997). Scholars agree that 'appropriate' does not necessarily mean agreement or acceptance of what is said or requested, but research shows that some response is required.

The Organizational Listening Project Stage 1

To address the major gap in research in relation to how listening is undertaken in an organizational context identified in the preceding literature review, a two-stage research project was undertaken between 2014 and 2016 to examine organizational listening. This applied the above definition of listening in examining a range of interactions between various types of organizations and their stakeholders and publics.

Research questions

The overarching research question explored in Stage 1 of this research was 'how, and how well, do organizations listen to their stakeholders and publics?' These questions were informed by the literature, which shows listening is a fundamental corollary of speaking to achieve two-way communication, dialogue, engagement, and create and maintain relationships. In operationalizing the study, a number of specific research questions were investigated including:

RQ1: To what extent is organization-public communication two-way transactional and dialogic versus one-way information transmission?

RQ2: What are the main media, methods, systems, and mechanisms used by organizations for listening?

RQ4: What barriers, obstacles, and challenges inhibit two-way communication involving listening by organizations?

RQ5: Conversely, what tools, technologies, systems, methods, and other factors best facilitate scalable two-way communication involving listening within organizations?

Research method

A naturalistic approach was taken in this research into organizational listening on the basis that studying organizations at work going about their typical public interactions is likely to yield more authentic and accurate findings that relying on self-reporting survey questionnaires. Also, while a large amount of empirical data were collected, the research was interpretative as it required analysis of claims, observed behaviours, activities such as research and consultations, and documents such as plans and reports. 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 based on the literature. Hence, the study was conducted using qualitative case study methodology (Stake, 2008; Yin, 2009) within a naturalistic interpretive approach.

Stage 1 of the study was interested in how organizations with a large number of stakeholders and publics in both the public and private sectors listen. The research was designed to focus on developed democratic countries with advanced communication systems and resources and to reflect international perspectives as far as possible. With the resources available, the first stage of the study was conducted in Australia, the UK, and the USA. As Bryman (1988) and others have noted, well-selected defined cases in qualitative research produce findings that have a broad generalizability to particular contexts, or what Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Shenton (2004) prefer to call transferability. Therefore, a purposive sampling method was used in which selection of cases is “based on a specific purpose rather than randomly” (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003, p. 713). As Miles and Huberman noted, defined case (purposive) sampling for qualitative studies is informed by the conceptual question, not a concern for “representativeness” (1994, p. 29).

The sampling frame for Stage 1 employed Miles and Huberman’s three-part approach for qualitative research sampling by selecting (1) some “exceptional” or exemplary cases; (2) some “discrepant”, “negative” or “disconfirming” examples; and (3) some apparently “typical” examples (1994, p. 34). In simple terms, this can be described as selecting some cases at each end of the spectrum and some in the middle. 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 (MasterCard, 2014; 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 (HMSO, 2013). Typical examples were chosen from large well-known organizations willing to participate.

De-identification was provided as part of human research ethics approval to encourage frankness in discussions and also to aid recruitment. The sample of 36 case studies examined in Stage 1 is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample of organizations studied in Stage 1 of The Organizational Listening Project.

Organization Type	Australia	UK	USA	Total
Government	2	14	2	18
Corporate	3	3	8	14
NGO/non-profit	2	1	1	4
Totals	**7**	**18**	**11**	**36**

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 indicated a lack of listening, Stage 1 of the research conducted in 2014–15 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 and listening related functions including social and market research; public relations; strategic, corporate, government, and/or organizational communication; customer relations; public consultation; community relations; stakeholder engagement; social media monitoring and analysis; correspondence; and complaints. Up to seven interviews were conducted in some organizations, while in others the head of communication preferred to provide all comment, soliciting information from colleagues as required. A total of 104 interviews were conducted, an average of almost three interviews per organization. All interviews were conducted face-to-face and ranged from 1.25 hours to 2.5 hours.
2. *Document analysis* – To help validate data gained in interviews, the study also collected a range of documents that contained evidence of organization-public communication activities. These included public relations and ‘strategic communication’ plans, reports of communication programs and activities, records of public consultations, and evaluation reports. More than 400 relevant documents were obtained and analysed for evidence of organizational listening.
3. *Field tests* – Third, a number of field tests were conducted involving contact with a sample of organizations to test their response (e.g., inquiries, requests for information, feedback, and complaints).

Data capture and analysis

All formal interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Almost 1,000 pages of transcripts were analysed using NVivo 10 to produce lists and ‘word clouds’ showing the most frequently occurring terms, concepts and themes in line with qualitative textual and content analysis procedures (Neuman, 2006; Punch, 1998; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). 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, 210–21). These were derived from a mixture of inductive and deductive analysis. For instance, terms were categorized as ‘listening-oriented’ and ‘speaking-oriented’ 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 research, social media, customer relations, public consultation, and so on.

While bringing a systematic approach to data analysis, this somewhat mechanistic analysis told only part of the story. 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.

Findings – The ‘crisis of listening’

Almost all of the organizations studied claimed to be committed to engagement with their stakeholders and publics and to be listening. Table 2, which summarizes the findings of interviews based on categorization of comments by listening-orientated terms and speaking-orientated terms, suggests a near even balance of speaking and listening in corporate, government, and organizational communication.

Table 2. A comparison of listening orientated and speaking orientated terms used by interviewees.

Listening-orientated terms	**Mentions**	**Speaking-orientated terms**	**Mentions**
Engagement	365	Informed	398
Listening	312	Talk	291
Consultation	230	Content	87
Audience	64	Message	73
Interactive	40	Speak	64
Hear	35	Broadcast	47
Collaboration	29	Voice	28
		Advocacy	17
		Distribution	10
		Disseminate	2
TOTALS	1,075		1,017
%	**51%**		**49%**

Figure 1 further illustrates the rhetoric of corporate, government, and organizational communication, with the 'word cloud' generated from content analysis of interview transcripts showing focus on media, particularly social media and a major interest in Facebook 'likes', as well as engagement, communications, consultations, conversations, and stakeholders.'

Figure 1. The main communication-related terms discussed by interviewees.

However, closer analysis presented a different picture. Overall, the most frequently used words by interviewees in describing their role were 'informing', 'disseminating', 'educating', 'showing', 'telling', and 'distributing'.

Also, despite frequent claims of listening, even the most upbeat listening claimants were often unable to provide examples and were circumspect in giving an overall rating to their organization's listening. The final question posed to all interviewees asked them to make an overall estimate, in approximate terms, of the proportion of their budget, time, and resources that were spent on speaking-related activities and the proportion of their budget, time, and resources that were spent on listening-related activities. The highest claims for listening were made by practitioners involved in customer relations and public consultation, who rated their work as primarily listening, suggesting ratios of 60:40 and 70:30 listening versus speaking respectively. However, beyond these specialized public communication fields, the majority of interviewees were reflexive and self-critical. Overall, around one-third of interviewees characterized their public communication activities as between 80:20 and 90:10 speaking versus listening. One rated his organization's speaking to listening ratio as 95:5. Even among those who claimed high levels of listening in functions such as research or public consultation, most acknowledged that these listening-oriented activities occur only occasionally – sometimes only once a year or even once every few years. While these are not statistically reliable quantitative ratings, averaging responses from interviewees indicates that, overall, the public communication of most organizations is around 80:20 speaking versus listening. 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.

Furthermore, when organizations do listen, it is mostly instrumental, designed to help the organization achieve its objectives. For example, customer relations staff are trained to listen to identify opportunities for 'up-selling' of additional products or services, as well as resolve customer complaints. Also, complaints handling is often focussed on pacification rather than operationally responding to complaints such as reporting problems to product development teams for product improvement. Social and market research is primarily undertaken to gain 'intelligence' and 'insights' to help organizations 'target' audiences and *consumers* – a neoliberal and hypermodernist term that is increasingly used in government as well as commercial organizations (Couldry, 2010, Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Lipovetsky, 2005).

Stage 1 of The Organizational Listening Project concluded that "most organizations listen sporadically at best, often poorly, and sometimes not at all" (Macnamara, 2016, p. 236). It summarized that, in the name of public communication, organizations have created an 'architecture of speaking' operationalized through advertising, media publicity, Web sites, publications, events, presentations and speeches, and even social media, and argued that to achieve two-way communication and engagement, this needs to be counter-balanced by creating an *architecture of listening*. The study theorized eight elements of an architecture of listening as:

1. An organizational *culture* that is open to listening as defined by Gadamer (1989), Honneth (2007) and Husband (1996, 2009) – that is, one that inclusively *recognizes* others' right to speak, pays *attention* to them, tries to *understand* their views – even when they are divergent or oppositional – and *responds* with acknowledgement and respect;
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 on issues, 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, analysing, 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.

The Organizational Listening Project Stage 2

Following Stage 1 of The Organizational Listening Project, a second stage of research was conducted in 2016 to explore the findings of Stage 1 in greater detail. The aim of Stage 2 was to closely examine organization-public communication activities in one or more organizations over an extended period of time and to test the theory of an *architecture of listening* in an operational environment in order to identify challenges, potential barriers, requirements, costs and benefits of effective organizational listening.

Research questions
The research questions explored in Stage 2 were:

1. How do democratic governments listen to key stakeholders such as industry and community groups and citizens at large?
2. Specifically, what are the methods, systems, channels, processes, and mechanisms used for listening by democratic governments?
3. How effectively do these work in the context of definitions of listening?
4. What barriers and challenges, if any, need to be overcome to improve listening by government in democratic societies?

Research methods
To gain deep insights and due to the need to work collaboratively with the participating organizations in deploying and testing methods and ideas for improved organizational listening, Stage 2 of The Organizational Listening Project used ethnography and participatory action research (PAR). As Geertz (1973) described, ethnography involves direct observation and sometimes participation in the activities being studied over an extended period of time to gain what he called 'thick description.' Barbara Tedlock noted that ethnographers "live in a community or group for a considerable period of time" (2008, p. 151), which affords "very detailed description of a ... culture from the viewpoint of an *insider*" (Neuman, 2006, p. 381). In PAR, the group being studied are co-researchers (Hearn, Tacchi, Foth, & Lennie, 2009). As Dick (2000) noted, members of the participating group are encouraged to not only carry out the activities being studied, but to critically reflect on their actions and participate in testing alternatives or seeking solutions to problems encountered. As part of critical reflection, PAR asks what worked well; what did not work well; what could be improved; and how could the action or actions be done another way with better results?

The research methods used in Stage 2 within the framework of ethnography and participatory action research were as follows:

- *Observation* of and participation in relevant organization-public communication activities during a six-month full-time attachment inside the UK Government Communication Service working with the departments and agencies participating in the study (see Table 3);
- *In-depth interviews* with senior management and senior professional staff involved in government communication, policy development and advice, engagement, and specialized

fields of communication-related practice such as social research, public consultation, complaints processing, customer service, and correspondence;
- *Content analysis* of documents related to the above functions such as plans and reports;
- *Journaling* by the researcher and recording of participant discussions in minutes of meetings and internal reports.

While Stage 1 of the research informing this analysis was conducted in Australia, the UK, and the USA, the second stage of intensive research was conducted within the UK national government for two reasons. First, the UK Government Communication Service (GCS) responded positively to Stage 1 of this research by inviting a presentation of the findings in the Cabinet Office, Whitehall, and offering support for Stage 2 of the research. The GCS agreed to support the research in partnership with the UK Department of Health as a primary site for investigation, in addition to facilitating access to other UK government departments and agencies. The organizations studied in Stage 2 of the project are listed in Table 3. Second, the political environment in the UK in the period 2014 to 2016 was characterized by increasing and unprecedented signs of citizen discontent with the national government and major political institutions, as evidenced in the Scotland Referendum in 2014, which narrowly maintained UK unity, and particularly in the 2016 EU Referendum referred to as *Brexit* in which citizens made an historic decision to leave the European Union after 40 years of membership against the policies and recommendations of the government. The surprise and shock that greeted the *Brexit* decision was a clear indication that the UK government was out of touch with the views and wishes of citizens – a concerning and dangerous situation acknowledged by the incoming Prime Minister Theresa May in a speech to launch her campaign for the leadership in July 2016 in which she said "there is a gaping chasm between wealthy London and the rest of the country" (May, 2016b, p. 19).

Table 3. The UK Government departments and agencies studied in Stage 2 of The Organizational Listening Project.

Organization	**Location**
UK Government Communication Service (GCS)	Number 10, Downing Street and the Cabinet Office, 70 Whitehall, London
UK Department of Health	79 Whitehall, London
Department for Exiting the EU (DExEU)	9 Downing Street, London
Her Majesty's Revenue & Customs (HMRC)	100 Parliament Street, London
Foreign and Commonwealth Office	King Charles Street, London
Department of Work & Pensions (DWP)	Tothill Street, London
Department of Transport	33 Horseferry Road, London
Department of Energy, Business and Industrial Strategy (BEIS)	3 Whitehall Place, London
NHS England (National Health Service)	80 London Road and 133 Waterloo Road, London
Public Health England (PHE)	80 London Road and 133 Waterloo Road, London
Scotland Office	Edinburgh, Scotland
Scottish Government	Edinburgh, Scotland

Data analysis
In addition to content analysis of relevant documents such as communication plans and internal reports related to functions such as customer relations, correspondence, complaints, and stakeholder engagement, informal content analysis of the minutes of meetings related to public communication was conducted. Analysis also included critical reflection and discussion among participants.

Findings
In the space available here, four key areas of UK government communication that are ostensibly focussed on listening to stakeholders and citizens are discussed, starting with what can be called the 'three Cs' of organizational listening.

Consultation. Under open government and open policy making strategies, the UK Government like many democratically elected governments has made a major commitment to consultation. Indeed, it could be said that consultation is one of the central platforms for citizen engagement and participation, occurring much more frequently than elections and affording opportunities for detailed comments and feedback.

The UK Government has established a single official Web site for announcing and reporting consultations (Gov.UK). However, Gov.UK does not provide a full service consultation function. It serves as a central location only to (a) announce consultations; (b) provide a description and details of consultations (e.g., background information, terms of reference, and sometimes questions for response); and (c) post reports of consultations. Typically, consultations announced and described on Gov.UK link to specialist online consultation applications such as Citizen Space, which is widely used by UK government departments and agencies. Even these specialized tools need additional applications and plug-ins to be effective. For example, Citizen Space is best used in conjunction with Dialogue, a complementary application that allows participants in Citizen Space consultations to rate suggestions and ideas using a peer rating system. Furthermore, experienced consultation staff in the UK Government noted that public consultations need to be actively promoted and explained beyond what is possible on the Gov.UK Web site to make stakeholders and citizens aware of them and encourage participation. One approach used is to publish a blog specifically devoted to publicising and discussing issues relevant to the consultation. E-mail is also used when addresses are available.

These learnings draw attention to the fact that considerable skills are required among government policy and communication staff to conduct effective consultations, as well as a number of specialized tools. Such skills and use of tools such as those noted above are patchy across the government. For example, in planning a consultation in relation to disability, some policy and communication staff involved confessed to being unfamiliar with consultation methods and tools. Based on observation, interviews, examination of consultation reports, and analysis of consultation submissions during the period of this study, the following 10 failings in consultation were identified:

- Many consultations are *framed narrowly with specific questions* written by government department or agency staff that limit discussion to the government's agenda;
- A number use technical and *official language*, even when addressing the 'general public';
- In most cases, submissions to consultations are *not acknowledged*;
- Many have *short time frames* for comments that may be practical for major industry and professional organizations that have expert resources to prepare submissions, but which disadvantage or preclude many citizens and small groups from participation;

- The preceding limitations are created largely because of *a one size fits all approach* to consultation. Some consultations are aimed at experts and industry and some legitimately have a very specific and limited scope. However, others seek (or should seek) views from a wide cross-section of the public. But there is no clear distinction between the different types and levels of consultation in terms of language, accessibility, time frame, etc.;
- Most consultations *attract and are dominated by the 'usual suspects'* – i.e., major organizations and even professional lobbyists. The following point exacerbates this bias, but points to solutions;
- Consultation *lacks outreach*. All consultations studied involved a passive approach in which the government calls for and then waits for submissions to be made. This ignores the reality that some groups and individuals affected by a policy or issue under consultation are unlikely to initiate a submission. This particularly applies to those with low socioeconomic status and/or low education levels, and those who are not easily able to articulate their views. Consultation can be productively enhanced through (a) outreach to affected groups including a wider range of community groups, social movements, and activist organizations; (b) visiting affected areas to talk to local organizations, leaders, and individuals; (c) interviewing in local communities, such as 'button hole' interviews in shopping malls or community centres in relevant areas; and (d) even door knocking in key affected areas;
- There is a *lack of analysis of consultation submissions*. Focus is predominantly on collecting *inputs* and often little planning and scant resources are devoted to how submissions will be analysed to produce *outputs* and *outcomes*. Also, many departments and agencies lack the tools to analyse large volumes of unstructured data (i.e., text);
- There is *no sharing of the findings of consultations* when there is content relevant to other government departments and agencies, as discussed further in the following;
- There is also a *lack of reporting back following consultations*. Reports of consultations are posted on Gov.UK. However, while major stakeholder organizations which 'understand the system' might readily access these reports, citizens are unlikely to search for the results of a consultation. It was concluded that proactive reporting to relevant stakeholders and citizens should be undertaken. This can be easily managed today with technology such as auto-generated e-mails when e-mail addresses are provided, or simply publishing reports and summaries in relevant media such as local newspapers, trade journals, and specialist publications (e.g., organization newsletters).

An overall conclusion was that many consultations are more about meeting legal requirements than listening. With consultation a legislated requirement in many circumstances, focus is often on meeting the specified criteria, which results in formulaic and minimalist approaches. Given the importance of consultation, it is worth illustrating the failures in listening in this form of potential engagement with an example. The *NHS Mandate* is published annually by NHS England to outline the objectives and priorities of the UK National Health Service based on stakeholder and public consultation. The NHS Mandate public consultation conducted in October 2015 to develop the *NHS Mandate 2016–2017* attracted an unprecedented 127,400 submissions, many of which were 10 or more pages. Neither NHS England nor the Department of Health had the tools or resources to analyse more than one million pages of text, even though it was in digital form collected through Citizen Space, e-mail, or PDF documents that could be 'text scraped'.

Civil service staff are to be commended for the manual analysis they did without any specialized text or data analysis tools. However, in July and early August 2016 as part of this participatory action research, the NHS Mandate consultation submissions were re-analysed using a textual analysis application, Method52, developed by the University of Sussex in partnership with DEMOS, capable of natural language processing (NLP) and incorporating *active machine learning* which enabled detailed analysis of the very large corpus of unstructured data. The developers provided training for Department of Health staff as well as consulting throughout the analysis. This analysis revealed a number of major findings that were not discovered or reported in the initial consultation report including that:

- Many citizens *do not trust government consultation*. A significant number commented that the NHS Mandate consultation was a 'smokescreen' for privatization of health and indicated a broader problem with government consultation in general;
- There was *confusion over who the consultation was for* – health experts or the general public;
- *Personal experiences were reported by health professionals* including doctors and consultants – some with 20 plus years of experience – providing considerable 'expert' feedback that was not initially recognized or taken in to account in NHS planning;
- Also, a substantial number of *patient experiences* were reported; and
- *Postcodes* were given in many submissions, allowing geo-location analysis to show regional trends and patterns.

*Complaints***.** Along with consultation submissions, complaints are another direct and important form of voice received by organizations. This study found that complaints to UK government departments such as the Department of Health are individually processed and responded to in what seems to be an effective manner. However, three weakness were observed in complaints processing as follows.

- *Rating systems are orientated to volume* – A high volume of complaints is commonly assumed to indicate problems and poor quality. For instance, an NHS Trust or a hospital with a high volume of complaints is assumed to pose greater risks to patients than one with a low volume of complaints. However, many complaints are often in relation to quite minor matters such as car parking. Qualitative analysis of complaints is important – e.g., one complaint about a life-threatening issue is more serious than 100 about minor matters. Also, organizations that actively seek customer feedback are often also active in addressing issues raised, but this is not reflected in quantitative complaints reporting and analysis.
- *Lack of pattern or trend analysis over time* – Even more importantly, no evidence was found of complaints data being analysed over time to identify patterns, trends, prominent issues, and 'hot spots', even though academic studies have shown that deep and valuable insights can be gained from such analysis (Reader, Gillespie, & Mannell, 2014; Reader, Gillespie, & Roberts, 2014). This is a process that could be undertaken annually or even more frequently using the same textual analysis applications used for consultation submissions and correspondence, as complaints are in textual form.
- *Complaints via social media* – Some government organizations do not accept or even monitor complaints via social media. While processing of serious complaints requires a formal complaint and supporting data, social media are increasingly used by people to voice complaints. Often the first signs of dissatisfaction or concern can be identified in social media. Broader monitoring (i.e., listening) via social media can provide early detection of dissatisfaction and identification of issues.

The importance of listening effectively to complaints including through ongoing data analysis was starkly illustrated in the report of the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust Public Inquiry into deaths in hospitals cited previously. Even more recently, the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire in London, which claimed at least 80 lives and injured 70 others, has been directly attributed to a "failure to listen" (Ghelani, 2017, para. 1). Warnings of inadequate fire safety standards were posted on the Web site of the Grenfell Action Group four years before the disaster (Ghelani, 2017, para. 5) and reports identifying the dangers of combustible cladding on buildings were submitted to the UK Parliament as early as 1999 (House of Commons, 1999). These examples, while extreme, illustrate that listening by organizations is a socially significant issue.

Correspondence. Many UK government departments and agencies receive between 40,000 and 70,000 pieces of correspondence a year. These come in the form of Ministerials[4] and letters and e-mails direct from stakeholders and citizens. E-mail is increasingly used, which means the text of correspondence is mostly received and stored in digital form. As with complaints, departments and agencies appear to have reliable systems for receiving, recording, and processing correspondence, including referral and escalation procedures when information needs to be sought from particular branches, units, or senior management. Most use databases to hold correspondence records. However, none of the departments and agencies studied conducted qualitative analysis of the content of correspondence over time (e.g., annually or even over several years). Such analysis can reveal the most frequent topics and issues raised, themes, and patterns in what is a large body of information received by the government. While some correspondence is quite issue-specific, letters and e-mails often range over a number of issues and include general comments – positive as well as negative.

Research
The UK Government extensively uses social research as a basis for evidence-based policy and decision-making. This includes major national studies such as the *British Social Attitudes* survey, annual RepTrak™ reputation studies, academic studies, internally conducted online surveys, and traditional and social media analysis. Research should provide reliable insights into public opinion, attitudes, concerns, needs, and interests. However, two key issues became evident in relation to social research during this study as follows.

- *Focus on polls and quantitative data* – First, social research conducted by the UK Government is predominantly quantitative (e.g., polls, surveys, quantitative media monitoring, economic analysis, etc.). A much smaller investment is made in qualitative research. This is compounded by the lack of analysis of large qualitative (unstructured) data sets collected from public consultations, correspondence, and complaints, as discussed in the preceding sections. While generalizable quantitative research is important, research that probes beyond simple scores and ratings, explores ranges and diversity beyond *means* (i.e., averages), and accesses *affective* (i.e., emotional) as well rational responses are necessary for understanding stakeholders and publics. This was particularly highlighted in the EU Referendum, after which qualitative research revealed emotional factors such as fears and confusion in relation to immigration and pent-up frustration with the government led to the unexpected vote.
- *Lack of data centralization/pooling and sharing* – A major overarching finding of this study that emerged from analysis of social research as well as consultations, correspondence, and complaints is that the UK government had no central database or knowledge management system for collecting and holding the 'voice' of citizens and which, in turn, would enable integration of multiple data sets, triangulation, and meta-analysis. This lack of a central repository of data also means that there are limited opportunities for sharing of data between departments and agencies. Public feedback resides in 'data siloes' within various department and agencies. This represents a lost opportunity to gain insights and understanding of stakeholders and publics; a risk when important information is overlooked (which conveys non-listening to publics); and a cost through undertaking new research or duplicated research in some cases.

Further details of these and other findings of this study are available in Macnamara (2016, 2017).

Conclusions

This study draws attention to the importance as well as the challenges of organizational listening, which involves scale and various forms of *delegated listening* through functions such as social research, consultation, correspondence processing, complaints handing, and social media monitoring. It also illustrates that, even though listening ultimately is a human undertaking, organizational listening requires a culture that is open to listening as well as policies, structures, systems, processes, technologies, resources, and skills for collecting, analysing, and making sense of large bodies of unstructured as well as structured data. Affording voice to citizens and increasing the voice of marginalized groups will not improve their access to decision making and policy making or representation and will not address the much-cited and concerning 'democratic deficit' (Couldry, 2010, p. 49; Curran, 2011, p. 86; Norris, 2011) unless there is effective listening by government as well as non-government, and non-profit organizations. Also, declining trust in corporations is unlikely to be addressed by increasing expenditure on advertising and PR that are almost exclusively focussed on persuasion and often propaganda. This research brings focus to this important priority and indicates that major benefits could accrue from public communication based on an *architecture of listenin*g, not only an architecture of speaking, which is the dominant paradigm in public communication.

Demonstrating the potential benefits of improved organizational listening requires further research, but in the public sphere these arguably include more equitable representation; increased participation in politics and civil society; increased trust; and increased social equity. In the commercial sector, there are indications that improved organizational listening can lead to improved employee morale, loyalty, retention and productivity; increased customer retention; reduced criticism and crises; and improved reputation. In contemporary democratic societies plagued by collapsing trust in government, business and even long-trusted institutions; declining participation and engagement in politics civil society; increasing radicalization and extremism; and in which public frustration is boiling over in landmark events such as *Brexit*, the election of Donald Trump, 'hung' parliaments in the UK, and rising unrest and public dissatisfaction in the European Union, there is an urgent need for fundamental changes in organization-public communication.

The 'seven canons' of listening and the creation of an *architecture of listening* to guide the design of public communication activities and projects offer contributions to a theory and practice of organizational listening to counterbalance the brutalist architecture of speaking that has shaped public communication, particularly since the era of broadcasting and *mass communication* theory. An interdisciplinary approach to organizational listening theory building and practice is highly recommended. As well as drawing on communication studies, psychology, sociology, democratic political theory, and ethics literature, the fields of organizational, corporate, government, and political communication and related practices such as public relations could do well to look to the growing body of specific literature on listening. And organizations such as the ILA and listening scholars can extend their remit and further contribute to society by reaching out to these disciplines that face the challenge of large-scale public communication.

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1 360 degree refers to a comprehensive staff evaluation method that collects feedback from an employee's manager, peers and supervisees.

2 'Stakeholders' is a term proposed by R. Edward Freeman (1984) in his book *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach* to draw attention to those affected by or affecting organizations beyond stockholders. Stakeholders can include employees, suppliers, distributors, retailers, and local communities.

3 The term 'publics' (plural) is used by public relations scholars (e.g., Grunig and Hunt, 1984) and sociologists and political scientists such as Nina Eliasoph (2004) to refer to the range of groups and individuals with which organizations need to interact.

4 Ministerials are letters sent to a government Minister, department, or agency by a Member of Parliament or Congress on behalf of citizens.