

CREATING AN 'ARCHITECTURE OF LISTENING' IN ORGANIZATIONS

The basis of engagement, trust,
healthy democracy, social equity,
and business sustainability.

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Contents

Introduction	5
Executive Summary	6
■ Key findings	6
■ Operational findings	11
Methodology	12
■ Research question	12
■ Sample	12
■ Pilot study	13
■ The Organizational Listening Project	13
■ Research methods	13
■ Ethics	14
How organizations communicate with stakeholders and publics	15
■ Major forms of organization-public communication	15
■ What the textbooks and research literature say – the theory of listening	16
■ The dominance of speaking and voice	17
How organizations listen to stakeholders and publics – or not!	19
■ What comprises listening?	19
■ Seven canons of listening	19
■ Multiple sites of listening	21
■ Overall patterns, themes, and narratives	21
■ Listening in customer relations	24
■ Listening in research	25
■ Listening in social media	28
■ Listening in public consultation	34
■ Listening in government communication	37
■ Listening in political communication	38
■ Listening in organizational communication	39
■ Listening in marketing communication	42
■ Listening in corporation communication	43
■ Listening in public relations	45
■ Listening in management	46
Creating an 'architecture of listening' and doing the work of listening	47
■ Culture of listening	47
■ Policies for listening	47
■ Politics of listening	48
■ Structures and processes for listening	49
■ Technologies for listening	50

■ Resources for listening	51
■ Skills for listening	51
■ Articulation of listening to decision-making	52
■ The work of listening	52
■ Models for organizational listening	53
The benefits of the work and 'architecture of listening'	58
■ Reinvigorating democracy and democratic government	58
■ Business sustainability – the 'bottom line of listening'	60
■ Transforming public communication practice	62
■ Listening for social equity	62
Appendix 1 – List of software applications used or mentioned by participants	64
The author	67
References and notes	68

Introduction

This report presents findings of an international study of organization-public communication that examined how, and how well, government, corporate, non-government, and non-profit organizations implement *two-way* communication, *engagement*, and *dialogue*, which are theorized as Best Practice and are buzzwords in contemporary organizational, corporate, and marketing communication, customer relations, and public relations practice.

Worldwide, governments are launching *open government*, government-to-citizen (G2C), and online digital strategies such as Gov.UK to enhance services and democratic participation that underpin their legitimacy. Similarly, corporations are recognizing the importance of engagement with their stakeholders¹ and publics² to gain trust, loyalty, and sustainability.

This study specifically focussed on organizational listening because of the central role that organizations play in industrialized and post-industrial information societies. Citizens are required to interact with organizations every day ranging from national government departments and agencies and large corporations to local councils, hospitals, schools, and other institutions.

While listening receives extensive attention in relation to interpersonal communication, there is little focus on organizational listening in academic and professional literature, with books and articles focussed predominantly on disseminating organizations' messages (i.e. speaking) – a *transmissional* or broadcast approach to public communication.

Organizational listening is long overdue for close study because of (1) this lack of focus; (2) because of its importance in addressing the widely-discussed 'democratic deficit' in politics, the lack of trust in government, corporations and institutions, and social inequities; and (3) because organizational listening involves particular challenges and requirements.

Organizations such as government departments and agencies, corporations, NGOs, and non-profit organizations have thousands, hundreds of thousands, or even millions of stakeholders – whether these are citizens, customers, shareholders, employees, members, patients, or 'consumers' generally. Therefore, organizations need to be capable of *large-scale* listening.

Unlike dyadic (one-to-one) and small group listening, which can be achieved face-to-face and aurally, large-scale listening has policy, cultural, structural, human resource, systems, and technological dimensions.

This study involved **36 case studies** of major government, corporate, NGO, and non-profit organizations in the UK, US and Australia operating in a range of sectors including health, transport, finance, IT and telecommunications, retail, automotive, food, environmental protection, and education, as well as specialist communication service providers. In examining these, **104 interviews** were conducted. In addition, more than **400 key documents** were analyzed including communication, engagement and consultation plans and reports. Furthermore, organizational response was tested by submitting inquiries, questions, and comments warranting a response to a selection of organizations ($n = 25$).

The findings have significant implications for government, corporations, NGOs, and non-profit organizations, for professional communication practice, as well as for democratic participation, trust in organizations, reputation, organizational legitimacy, and social equity.

This report presents a summary of findings. A comprehensive analysis is available in *Organizational Listening: The Missing Corollary of Speaking in Public Communication* (Peter Lang, New York, 2016, available December 2015).³

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Executive summary – key findings



- **Organizations including government department and agencies, corporations, and some NGOs and major institutions spend millions and even hundreds of millions of dollars, pounds, and Euros a year on communication**, both internally and particularly for public communication. This is done through media advertising, direct marketing, customer relations, political communication, public consultation, corporate and organizational communication, and public relations (PR).
- **Organizations extensively ‘talk the talk’** of two-way communication, engagement, dialogue, conversation, consultation, collaboration, and relationships with their stakeholders and publics. Terms such as ‘engagement’ are buzzwords in professional marketing and communication literature, and a number of professional communication practices such as public relations are specifically theorized as two-way engagement and dialogue.
- **However, research shows that organization-public communication is overwhelmingly comprised of organizational *speaking*** to disseminate organizations’ messages using a *transmissional* or broadcast model. Analysis shows that, **on average, around 80 per cent of organizational resources devoted to public communication are focussed on *speaking*** (i.e., distributing the organization’s information and messages). Even social media, which were developed specifically for two-way interaction, are used by organizations primarily to disseminate their messages. Some organizations acknowledge that **up to 95 per cent of their so-called ‘communication’ is speaking**, while best cases have a 60/40 speaking/listening ratio. It can be said that **organizations construct and deploy an ‘architecture of speaking’** comprised of internal professional communication staff as well as specialist agencies and consultants using increasingly sophisticated information systems, tools, and technologies.

- **Voice** is widely identified as fundamental to democracy and social equity, constitutionalized and legislated in many countries as a right to 'freedom of speech' and advocated in calls to 'speak up', 'have your say' and 'tell us what you think'. Despite assumptions and expectations that expression of voice is reciprocated with listening, **voice is widely misunderstood and practiced as speaking, with little or no attention to who is listening and how listening can be effectively accomplished.**
- This is particularly the case in relation to organizations, which play a central role in industrialized and post-industrial societies.⁴ **Organizational listening is essential in developed contemporary societies, particularly in democratic societies** in which citizens, customers, employees, members, shareholders, and other stakeholders and *stakeseekers*⁵ have to deal with public and private sector organizations every day.
- **Most organizations listen sporadically at best, often poorly, and sometimes not at all.** Few 'walk the talk' of two-way communication, dialogue, conversation, engagement, consultation, collaboration, and relationships. Listening, which requires (1) *recognition* of others' rights and views; (2) *acknowledgement*; (3) paying *attention*; (4) *interpreting* what is said to gain (5) *understanding* of others' views; (6) giving *consideration* to what is said; and (7) an appropriate *response*⁶ is so rare that it can be said **there is a 'crisis of listening'** in contemporary societies.
- When organizational listening does occur it is **mostly undertaken through (1) customer relations, (2) research, (3) social media monitoring and analysis, and (4) public consultation,** as well as through representatives and field staff who directly interface with citizens, stakeholders, and members of organizations' publics.
- However, **even in these practices, listening is mostly undertaken for instrumental organization-centric purposes** – that is, to solve particular practical problems and serve the interests of the organization. For example:
 - **Research in public communication practices is administrative, conducted to achieve organization goals** such as identifying populist opinion to help win elections and understanding consumer psychology in order to sell more products and services;
 - Customer relations involves considerable listening, but in traditional approaches this has been predominantly designed to resolve complaints, mostly through placation rather than substantive change. **Contemporary approaches to customer interaction have shifted increasingly to customer relationship management (CRM) designed primarily to gain repeat sales and 'upsell' customers to higher level products and services.** Customer relations and CRM involve listening, but this comprises what could be called *strategic listening*;
 - **Social media monitoring and analysis are conducted primarily for identifying and targeting influencers** who can help organizations achieve their goals and for gaining 'intelligence' and insights to help organizations "jump on to" issues to **promote their brands, products, services, and messages.** Several organizations spoke openly about "news jacking" and "meme jacking", with much less attention paid to learning and gaining feedback to inform organizational change and adaptation;
 - Despite being one of the public communication practices most explicitly orientated to listening, **public consultation primarily listens to the 'usual suspects'**

comprised of elites and the loud voices of organized groups, with many individuals and groups ignored, or disengaged and silent. Also, many consultations result in no change to plans, policies, and projects.

- Fields of practice that explicitly claim to facilitate *two-way* communication, *engagement*, *dialogue*, and create and maintain *relationships* such as **public relations, corporate communication, and relationship marketing** are **overwhelmingly one-way information transmission representing the voice of the organization**. This substantial theory-practice gap demands transformative change in specialist public communication fields such as political communication, corporate communication, and public relations to become more ethical and socially responsible.
- Organizational listening cannot be achieved simply by adding a listening tool or *solution*, such as automated software applications, listening posts, or a tokenistic 'have your say' page on a Web site. Organizational listening has cultural, procedural, political, structural, resource, skill, and technological dimensions. **Effective organizational listening requires what can be described as an *architecture of listening* comprised of eight key elements:**
 - i. A **culture** of listening;
 - ii. **Policies** for listening;
 - iii. Addressing the **politics** of listening;
 - iv. **Structures and processes** for listening;
 - v. **Technologies** for listening;
 - vi. **Resources** for listening;
 - vii. **Skills** for listening; and
 - viii. **Articulation** of listening to decision-making and policy making.

These eight elements are described as an 'architecture of listening' because they need to be designed into an organization and be deployed in a coherent complementary way.
- Furthermore, **listening is work**. Once an architecture of listening is in place, organizational staff need to undertake the work of listening as well as the work of speaking – particularly staff involved in communication roles such as organizational communication, corporate communication, and public relations.
- Technologies can enable and support organizational listening. There are **a number of tools, systems, and applications that aid organizational listening** ranging from simple do it yourself (DIY) social media tracking to sophisticated e-consultation applications, 'big data' analysis, and sense-making technologies. Some of these are noted in this report and many more are reviewed in *Organizational Listening: The Missing Corollary of Speaking in Public Communication* (Macnamara, 2016).
- Implementation of an architecture of listening and doing the work of listening within organizations has major potential benefits for governments, business, professional practices, and society including:
 - **Reinvigoration of the public sphere and civil society** through increased citizen participation and increased trust in government and institutions;
 - **Increased trust in business and improved reputation and customer satisfaction**, leading to more sustainable businesses;
 - **Increased business productivity and efficiency** through motivated engaged employees;
 - **Increased social equity** including attention to the voices of ignored and marginalized groups;
 - **More ethical and more effective approaches in political communication, marketing communication, public relations, corporate communication, organizational communication**, and other public communication practices.

- **Transparency and open government, which collectively have become a zeitgeist of contemporary Western democracies, are largely interpreted and implemented as providing more and more information to citizens. This can simply result in information overload and hinder rather than help citizens.** Open government needs to be interpreted as, first and foremost, being open to listen to citizens and shaping policies and decisions after taking account of the range of views, needs, and interests in society. Second, open government needs to involve ongoing two-way communication and engagement.
- **Engagement is mostly interpreted as engagement by stakeholders and publics with an organization, rather than a two-way street.** Most organizations fail to see a need for them to genuinely engage with their stakeholders and publics. Engagement needs to be rethought in most organizations and recognized as a two-way process.
- **Government departments and agencies and even some NGOs are adopting the term 'customers' for citizens who they serve and with whom they interact.** While well-intentioned in most cases, whether this leads to improved 'civil service' and social equity is questionable, as it brings with it the principles and values of neoliberalism and capitalism including focus on financial issues, efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and competition.
- **Institutionalization of organizational listening, such as through compulsory public consultation mechanisms (e.g., the French National Commission for Public Debate), while having some benefits, is largely counterproductive, as it is shown to slow down processes, increase costs of projects, "mobilize and radicalize opposition" by providing a platform for vocal minorities, and even lead to "participation fatigue".**
- **Nevertheless, public consultation needs to be wider than current formal consultation processes to be inclusive and equitable. It needs to include outreach to affected groups and individuals – not simply inviting and passively collecting and collating comments, feedback, and submissions, which are mostly provided by the 'usual suspects' (e.g., organized industry and professional groups such as business associations, unions, and lobbyists).**
- **Institutionalized political communication, through political parties and organized political events similarly needs to be broadened to engage with the wider electorate.** Current practices such as tours, visits, and rallies that are typically attended by "the party faithful", who are organized as "cheer squads", and selectively arranged meetings with voters mean that politicians are often not listening to 'real people'. Through highly staged events and meetings with 'representatives' they are mostly hearing the loud voices of power elites and the platitudes of sycophants, shallowly supplemented by small sample (and often misleading) polls. Thus, many political representatives and leaders gain a narrow and sterilized version of citizens' views.

Operational findings

- **Organizational culture is a starting point for effective organizational listening – and the most important single factor in creating an open listening culture is a progressive CEO who is supportive of two-way communication.** The second most important influence is highly skilled research-orientated professional communicators who act as advocates and evangelists.
- **Contrary to some claims and concerns, a commitment to organizational listening does not 'open the floodgates' and deluge an organization with comments, requests, and**

expectations that it cannot process, nor create expectations that it will agree with all comments and comply with all requests.

Organizations report that the greatest challenge in public communication and consultation is the *disengaged* rather than the engaged and that most people have quite modest expectations. In cases analyzed “the vast majority of people are happy just to be heard and have their opinion noted” and some “just want to get something off their chest” (interview, January 19, 2015). Even in cases of serious complaints, research shows that most people simply want to ensure that “the same thing won’t happen again”.⁷

- As well as undertaking effective ethical listening as defined in this study, organizations need to **close ‘the listening loop’** by communicating (1) what was done as a result of listening, and/or (2) why some things that are requested cannot be done. When organizations do not report back to stakeholders and publics they risk “the damage that silence can create” (interview, September 24, 2014).
- Closing the listening loop requires organizations and professional staff involved in public communication to recognize that two-way communication is more than two-step communication (i.e., a binary exchange). Dialogue and conversation, which lead to engagement and relationships, require **three-step or multistep, two-way communication** (i.e., party A speaks; party B responds; party A acknowledges and accepts, or raises further points; party B responds further, etc.).
- No organization in this study reported imminent or likely increases in budget or resources for communication. To the contrary, most reported recent budget cuts and reductions in communication staff, and most expected budget restraint to continue into the foreseeable future. This indicates

that any change to how public communication is enacted, including creation of an *architecture of listening*, must be achieved with current or even reduced resources. However, a number of organizations are demonstrating that **increased communication effectiveness including listening can be gained through reallocation of resources and prioritization.**

- **Measurement and evaluation aid the processes** of prioritizing and allocating resources to the most effective and impactful activities. Without research-based measurement and evaluation, organizations are likely to spend time and resources on ineffective and unnecessary activities.
- The interrelated processes of **measurement and evaluation – a major focus in public communication practice and widely seen as lacking in scale and rigour – are themselves exercises in listening.** Measurement and evaluation of the effectiveness of communication involve listening to feedback and response and then, contingent on what is learned, responding in a way that takes account of the views of others. However, measurement and evaluation, along with research generally, are often under-used or used in narrow, instrumental ways to gain only answers to self-serving questions that organizations want to ask.
- Implementation and formalization of **evaluation in an organization creates what this study calls the ‘evaluation factor’.** This is a significant influence that affects all planning and implementation of communication activities when evaluation is built into work processes. It exerts its effects quite simply: when practitioners know that their work and activities will be rigorously evaluated, they pay much more attention to formative research to understand audiences and identify what is likely to be most effective, as

well as to careful planning. They are much less likely to undertake activities with low likelihood of success, so wastage and failures are reduced even before evaluation is undertaken.

- Measurement and evaluation should incorporate **measurement and evaluation of an organization's responses to the requests, needs, interests, and concerns of its stakeholders and publics** – not only the response of stakeholders and publics to the organization's communication and actions. However, this rarely occurs. Measurement and evaluation are mostly conceptualized narrowly as instrumental exercises to assess an organization's impact on others.
- Communication staff who have been successful in implementing interactive social media practices in conservative companies and government departments and agencies **use a 'start small and roll out' approach**. Several government departments and agencies reported training a team of 10–30 staff who then act as 'champions', 'advocates', and trainers for others. Also, several reported that providing private coaching for senior management in social media substantially changes the culture of an organization and its social media engagement.
- Another strategy being adopted is using peer support and crowdsourcing to resource some functions such as customer relations – i.e., engaging other customers in answering basic customer questions and sharing information online. While closely monitoring peer-to-peer communication to avoid distribution of misinformation, some organizations are finding that **crowdsourcing can answer many customer questions and resolve some problems, thereby reducing the work and resources required** of the organization.
- **Flexible working hours** including weekend shifts are being increasingly adopted and becoming necessary in communication and customer relations departments of organizations and their agencies, such as social media monitoring and analysis firms, in response to the 24/7 nature of online communication.

Methodology

The most appropriate way to study organizational listening is by examining **case studies** of organizations at work going about their typical activities.

As far as possible, a *naturalistic* approach is preferable and was taken in this study.⁸ While some quantitative information is relevant and was collected – such as the number of staff devoted to listening activities, the number of inquiries and requests responded to, and so on – the research was *interpretative* in that it required critical analysis of claims, observed behaviours, activities, events, and other phenomena. A scientific instrument is not readily available to test organizational listening in the way an audiometer can test human hearing.

Case studies were examined using predominantly *qualitative* methodology⁹, as the aim was to identify how well organizations listen in terms of giving recognition, acknowledgement, attention, consideration, interpretation, understanding, and response to others as defined in the literature – not simply how many inquiries an organization responds to or processes.

Research question

The overarching research question explored in this research was '**how, and how well, do organizations listen to their stakeholders and publics**', noting that listening is a fundamental corollary of speaking to achieve two-way communication, engagement, dialogue, and create and maintain relationships as identified in communication literature.

Sample

A purposive sample was used, as the study was particularly interested in how organizations with substantial numbers of stakeholders and publics listen (i.e., **large-scale listening** rather than interpersonal, dyadic or small group listening).

Also, while it was not a quantitative study designed to be statistically representative or generalizable, the study was conducted with the intention of reflecting practices in a range of industries and sectors and a number of geographic regions to ensure the maximum relevance of findings and transferability. Therefore, the study examined:

1. A mix of **government** (n = 18), **corporate** (n = 14), and **NGO and non-profit organizations** (n = 4) at national, state and local level;
2. Organizations in each of the above categories **in three countries – the UK** (n = 18), **the USA** (n = 11), and **Australia** (n = 7);¹⁰
3. Organizations **with a substantial number of stakeholders, stakeseekers, and publics** (i.e., primarily large organizations).

A number of organizations declined to participate. Thus, the study also involved an element of *convenience* sampling because it accessed only organizations that we were willing to take part. Notwithstanding, the study is based on a substantial sample of major organizations in the UK, US and Australia, including a number of Fortune 500 companies and some of the world's leading brands. For example, MasterCard was one corporation that agreed to be named.

Examination of government-public communication was boosted by a decision of the Executive Director, Government Communication in the UK to grant largely unfettered access to senior communication staff in the UK Cabinet Office, Whitehall and a range of UK government departments and agencies. Also, a senior US government official with more than 30 years of experience in the US civil service working in the White House and a number of US government departments and agencies agreed to provide an overview of US government to citizen (G2C) and OpenGov initiatives, as well as provide specific case study examples.

Pilot study

A pilot study examined three organizations in Australia: a large information technology company; a medium size service provider enterprise; and a large public sector institution with an active communication program with its stakeholders. The pilot study was undertaken over a three-month period in early 2013 to test the approach, methodology, and research methods and instruments.

The Organizational Listening Project

The major portion of the Organizational Listening Project involved in-depth analysis of the public communication activities of a further 33 organizations during 2014 and early 2015, yielding a total sample of **36 case studies**.

Research methods

The study was conducted through:

1. *In-depth interviews* – A primary research method deployed was in-depth interviews with senior staff in communication-related roles. The starting point for interviews was the senior communication managers in organizations, who were considered best-placed to report on communication. These typically have titles such as director, executive director, or head of communication, *communications*¹¹ or corporate communication; communication manager; corporate communication manager; or public relations manager. Some multinational organizations have positions such as head of global communication or chief communication officer (CCO) – a relatively new title that reflects a rise of communication to the 'C suite' of executive management along with the CEO, chief financial officer (CFO), chief marketing officer (CMO), chief information officer (CIO), and so on.

Some marketing managers were also interviewed in cases where their focus was on marketing communication and/or *relationship marketing*. In addition, interviews were also conducted with senior staff in specialist functions such as customer relations/customer relationship management (CRM), research (often referred to as insights), public consultation, social media monitoring and analysis, and internal/employee communication. Up to seven interviews were conducted in some organizations. Furthermore, during the study it became apparent that a number of organizations outsource some organization-public communication that potentially or explicitly involves listening, such as social media analysis, to specialist research firms and agencies. On the recommendation of the organizations studied, a number of these specialist research firms were added to the sample as they have first-hand knowledge of these practices. A total of **104 interviews** were conducted, an average of 2.89 (almost three) interviews per organization. All interviews were face-to-face and all except two were conducted by the author.

2. *Document analysis* – To help validate data collected in interviews, the study also collected a range of documents that contain evidence of organization-public communication activities. These included 'strategic communication' plans; reports of communication programs and activities; evaluation reports including tracking of key performance indicators (KPIs) on the basis that organizations usually evaluate what is most important to them; research reports; records of public consultations; and even job descriptions. While some organizations declined to supply such documents, most did on the condition that the specific contents were not revealed. In addition, a range of documents relating to public consultation, engagement, and open government were

downloaded from government Web sites such as www.gov.uk and corporate sites to access information about relevant initiatives such as the MasterCard Conversation Suite (<http://newsroom.mastercard.com>). While job/position descriptions do not comprehensively describe what activities are done in practice, and roles can change over time, these do identify key responsibilities, priorities, and tasks. These were sourced from an executive recruitment firm specializing in the corporate and marketing communication field, which provided 95 typical job/position descriptions of senior communication-related roles. In total, more than **400 relevant documents** were obtained and analyzed for evidence of organizational listening

3. *Field tests (experiment)* – Thirdly, a field experiment was conducted concurrently with the interviews and document gathering stages involving a group of research associates submitting ‘real life’ inquiries, questions, comments, and complaints on the Web sites and social media sites of the organizations studied. This method provided independent empirical evidence of how organizations listen and respond to stakeholders and publics. During the period of the research **25 inquiries, requests for information, complaints, or comments** warranting a response were submitted to the online sites of organizations, and responses were monitored and recorded.

Ethics

The research received Human Research Ethics Committee approval via the University of Technology Sydney (HREC Ref. No. 2013000359). This required:

- Protection of any **confidential** information received;
- **De-identification**¹² of all organizations and individuals participating to allow them to speak openly and freely, except where specific written approval for identification was given;
- **Consent forms** signed by all interviewees and the chief researcher.

How organizations communicate with stakeholders and publics

Public communication today is a multi-billion dollar field of practice involving advertising and other forms of marketing communication, political communication, government communication, organizational communication (also called internal communication), corporate communication, public relations, and a number of specialist sub-fields such as customer relations, public consultation, public affairs, and community relations. ▶

Major forms of organization-public communication

Many organizations spend millions of dollars a year on public communication. The largest field of public communication is advertising in which organizations invest more than US\$500 billion a year worldwide. Significantly, advertising is almost entirely one-way transmission of information involving little or no listening.¹³ ▼

Advertising	Worldwide spend in 2014
Global TV advertising	\$174 billion
Global Internet advertising	\$117 billion
Global newspaper advertising	\$100 billion
Global magazine advertising	\$50 billion
Global outdoor advertising (billboards, bus sides, etc.)	\$36 billion
Global radio advertising	\$35 billion
Miscellaneous (e.g., merchandise)	\$10 billion
Total global advertising (US dollars)	\$520 billion

Table 1. Global spending on advertising in 2014 (Sources: PWC, 2014; Statista, 2014).¹⁴

Beyond advertising, the major forms of public communication and public engagement that can potentially involve listening as well as speaking, which were examined in this study, include:

- **Research** such as surveys, focus groups, interviews, media content analysis, social media analysis, and communication, reputation, and public relations (PR) evaluation;
- **Marketing communication** practices such as direct marketing and particularly *relationship marketing*;
- **Customer relations**, which was examined separately to marketing communication because of its specific focus;
- **Political communication**;
- **Government communication**;
- **Organizational communication**, which mostly refers to internal/employee communication and inter-organization communication;
- **Corporate communication**;
- **Public relations**;
- **Social media** communication;
- **Public consultation**;
- **Correspondence**, 'info lines' and help lines.

What the textbooks and research literature say – the theory of listening

Listening is extensively researched and theorized in the field of interpersonal communication, which occurs between two individuals (dyads) and within small groups. But there is very little research of organizational listening.

However, we can borrow well-established concepts, principles, and theories from the broad field of human communication studies informed by psychology, rhetoric, semiotics, phenomenology, and other social sciences, as well as some aspects of listening theory in the interpersonal communication field.

Listening is crucially informed by philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer's concept of **openness to others**.¹⁵ US communication academic Lisbeth Lipari notes that listening is "focus on the other".¹⁶ Gadamer argued that a prerequisite for listening is that, first and foremost, "**one must want to know**" what others have to say. Gadamer added that openness requires not only passive listening, but **asking questions and allowing others to "say something to us"**. This could be interpreted as giving others the space to speak to us. Furthermore, and importantly, Gadamer said openness must include "**recognizing that I must accept some things that are against me**".¹⁷

Influential Austrian-born philosopher Martin Buber fundamentally informed understanding of human communication and the inter-related roles of speaking and listening in his argument for dialogue.¹⁸ Buber argued that communication must be a **transaction** involving **dialogue**, not monologue or "monologue disguised as dialogue".¹⁹

Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986), who was heavily influenced by Buber²⁰, proposed **dialogism**, which he saw as not only two-way dialogic discussion, but a way of

thinking that involved consideration of others' views, interests, and concerns.²¹

More recently, communication scholars and leading communication text book authors such as Robert Craig and Heidi Muller²², Stephen Littlejohn and Karen Foss²³, and Em Griffin²⁴ emphasize that communication between humans is a **two-way transactional process**, not one-way transmission of information.

Early twentieth century Modernist literature, particularly that emanating from North America in the era of *mass society* thinking and the rapid growth of *mass media*, proposed 'sender, channel, receiver' models of communication. These portrayed communication as one-way transmission of information and assumed communication effects (e.g., Shannon and Weaver's *mathematical theory of communication*²⁵ and Berlo's 'sender, message, channel, receiver' [SMCR] model²⁶). However, these have been shown to be misleading on both accounts – transmission of information does *not* constitute communication, as messages may not arrive or be ignored, meaning may be distorted, and no effects may result. However, misguided transmissional views of communication remain.

*"The transmission view of communication is the commonest in our culture."*²⁷

*"Our basic orientation to communication remains grounded, at the deepest roots of our thinking, in the idea of transmission."*²⁸

*"Until late in the 20th century, the transmission model served as the basis for conceptualizing communication activities by organizations."*²⁹

“Contemporary theorists have criticized the current dominance of a transmission (sender-receiver) model of communication in everyday thinking.”³⁰

Eminent sociologist John Dewey says that “society exists in ... communication”³¹ – that is, society is not possible without communication – and, drawing on Dewey and others, James Carey highlights the importance of **conversation** as a method of ‘working things out’ and creating consensus and community.³²

Disciplines such as marketing and public relations have drawn on these foundational theories of human communication in advocating practices such as **relationship marketing** and **two-way symmetrical public relations** that emphasize dialogue and relationships.³³

The popularity of **social media** demonstrates human expectations and demands for interactivity and for others to have a voice – not only elites in government and business, journalists, and other privileged political actors.

The dominance of speaking and voice

Voice and speaking, including public speaking, have been studied 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. In Book 1 of his *Politics*, Aristotle wrote that “nature ... has endowed man alone among the animals with the power of speech” and identified speaking as a key attribute that defines humans.³⁴

Renaissance political philosopher Thomas Hobbes echoed Aristotle’s trope saying “the most noble and profitable invention of all others, was that of speech”³⁵

Democracy is founded on the principle of *vox populi* – the voice of the people.³⁶ In democratic societies, citizens and ‘stakeholders’ are regularly urged to find their voice, ‘speak up’ and ‘have their say’. For instance, a Google search of the term ‘have your say’ in early 2015 yielded 620 million Web links.

Many, including eminent scholars, assume listening as part of voice. For example, leading communication scholar Robert Craig says that communication involves “talking and listening”³⁷. Media and communication professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science, Nick Couldry, sees voice as “the implicitly linked practices of speaking and listening”³⁸. However, research shows that voice is predominantly associated with speaking, and listening lacks any significant focus or attention.

In his book *Listening for Democracy*, UK political scientist Andrew Dobson says that “honourable exceptions aside, virtually no attention has been paid to listening in mainstream political science”³⁹. From his analysis of listening in democratic politics, Dobson concludes that “the listening cupboard is very bare indeed”⁴⁰.

In her 2013 book *Listening Publics*, Kate Lacey notes that “listening has long been overlooked in studies of the media as well as in conceptualizations of the public sphere”⁴¹.

Even in social media that are based on the principles of Web 2.0 (interactivity, dialogue, participation, and collaboration)⁴², 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”⁴³.

Analysis also shows that, beyond interpersonal and small group listening discussed in HR texts, there is scant attention paid to listening in business and management literature, as noted by Jan Flynn and her co-researchers.⁴⁴

An analysis of leading text books and academic journals in fields such as corporate communication and public relations conducted as part of this study found only a handful of articles that examine listening by and in organizations, compared with vast tracts of literature that focus on:

- **Targeting audiences;**
- Crafting **messages** that capture attention and are persuasive;
- Producing **content** – even to the extent of claiming ‘content is king’;
- Achieving **the organization’s goals and objectives.**

In his landmark book *Why Voice Matters*, Nick Couldry gave many reasons why voice matters in a democracy, for civil society, and for individual equity and identity, and warned that there is a ‘crisis of voice’ in contemporary societies. However, this research shows that the real problem is a crisis of listening.

*Giving people voice is not enough.
It’s listening to them that counts.*

The following anecdotal and scholarly comments reflect this blind spot in contemporary societies in relation to listening.

- Public speaking has flourished as a major field of professional practice, but there is no field of practice devoted to **public listening.**
- Keynote speakers are widely sought and prized in business and industry and on the conference circuit, but interestingly there is no such thing as **keynote listeners.**
- We regularly hear counsellors, consultants, teachers, negotiators, and others say ‘we need to talk’, but we rarely if ever hear ‘**we need to listen**’.

- Democratic societies write constitutions and legislation guaranteeing *free speech* as a right, but there is no corresponding **free listening** and there is **no right to listening.**

*There is no point in a ‘right to communicate’ if no one is listening.*⁴⁵

*“Without a listener, speech is nothing but noise in the ether.”*⁴⁶

*“The most effective and insidious way to silence others in politics is a refusal to listen.”*⁴⁷

*The problem is not one of speaking truth to power, but of getting the powerful to listen.*⁴⁸

How organizations listen to stakeholders and publics – or not!

What comprises listening?

To examine organizational listening, it is necessary to have a clear and reasonable definition of what comprises listening in a large-scale organizational context. As noted in the previous section, the literature is very light on in relation to organizational listening. The primary focus of listening is in relation to interpersonal communication. In this field, Graham Bodie and Nathan Crick say:

Listening, in short, is the capacity to discern the underlying habitual character and attitudes of people with whom we communicate, including ourselves, in such a way that, at its best, brings about a sense of shared experience and mutual understanding.⁴⁹

Writing in the *International Journal of Listening*, Jan Flynn and colleagues noted the absence of a widely accepted definition of organizational listening, which they attributed to a lack of empirical research on the subject.⁵⁰ Judy Burnside-Lawry attempted a definition in her study of listening competency drawing on Flynn et al. in which she said:

Organizational listening is defined as a combination of an employee's listening skills and the environment in which listening occurs, which "is shaped by the organization and is then one of the characteristics of the organizational image".⁵¹

This definition incorporating Flynn et al.'s observation is useful as it draws attention to the organizational environment as well as the role of individuals in organizations, who are required to operationalize listening – although the plural 'employees' is clearly preferable to reference to a singular "employee's listening skills". The organizational environment can include its

culture, policies, structure and other elements, which were examined in this study.

However, to facilitate a detailed study of organizational listening, a more precise and expansive definition is required. Drawing on a range of research literature, organizational listening is defined in this study as follows.

Organizational listening is comprised of the culture, policies, structure, processes, resources, skills, technologies and practices applied by an organization to give recognition, acknowledgement, attention, interpretation, understanding, consideration, and response to its stakeholders and publics.

Seven canons of listening

The above definition is drawn from an extensive review of research literature undertaken as part of this study. This revealed at least six key elements of listening discussed in interpersonal and organizational communication, phenomenological, psychological, and democratic political literature. Along with these, one further essential element is advocated in contemporary public communication practice, allowing identification of seven 'canons of listening' for organizations as follows:

1. **Recognition** of others as people or groups with legitimate rights to speak and be treated with respect.⁵² William James, the founder of American pragmatism, stated that the most "fiendish" way to deal with another person is to ignore that person⁵³;

2. **Acknowledgement**, which is sometimes assumed to be part of recognition of others or seen as part of response, but quick and specific acknowledgement is an important signal to those who speak that what they say has been heard and is receiving attention (the next step or canon). Acknowledgement often requires an initial communication to advise the speaker that their inquiry, question or comment is being looked into – particularly when a response requires referral to a specialist department or unit, which may take some time. The 2008 Obama presidential campaign demonstrated the power of quick acknowledgement, as all online and e-mail inquiries received an automated electronic acknowledgement within hours and sometimes minutes. While auto-generated using technology, the limitations as well as advantages of which will be discussed later, this at least advised citizens that their message had been received and indicated that it would receive attention;
3. Giving **attention** to others. Beyond an initial acknowledgement, listening to others requires cognitive focus as well as some level of empathy (affective engagement or emotional intelligence).⁵⁴ Both require an investment of time. Hence we often refer to attention giving as 'paying' attention. In organizations, giving or paying attention may involve referring public communication to a particular department or unit that has the specialist knowledge required to undertake the following stages;
4. **Interpreting** what others say as fairly and receptively as possible⁵⁵ – not glossing over, misinterpreting, rejecting because of prejudices or information processing barriers, or automatically resorting to persuasion to try to 'talk the speaker out of' their viewpoint, position or concern – all of which happen all too often;
5. Trying as far as possible to achieve **understanding** of others' views, perspectives, and feelings.⁵⁶ While it is impossible to fully understand others, Charles Husband suggests that the right to speak should be replaced by or at least incorporate a right to be understood.⁵⁷ Stephen Covey says that to feel understood is the deepest psychological need. However, in his popular book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Covey says 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"⁵⁸ – what Jacqueline Bussie calls "re-loading our verbal gun"⁵⁹;
6. Giving **consideration** to what others say. Considering the views, opinions, comments, and concerns of others is specifically listed as the sixth stage within the seven canons of organizational listening, as consideration should follow giving attention, interpreting, and gaining understanding. Considering what others say without first giving it adequate attention, interpreting what is meant, and trying to understand their position and perspective is inevitably likely to lead to miscommunication. It should be noted, however, that giving consideration does not require agreement (see next point);
7. **Responding** in an appropriate way. Beyond initial acknowledgement, a more substantial response is usually required after consideration of another's expression of voice.⁶⁰ As noted above, 'appropriate' does not necessarily mean acceptance or agreement of what is said or requested. There may be good reasons why a request or suggestion cannot be agreed to. In such cases, an appropriate response should contain explanation of these details – although positive responses should be made when views and opinions, requests, comments, and complaints are justified.

These definitions and the 'seven canons of listening' form the basis for analyzing how and how well organizations listen.

Multiple sites of listening

From an early stage in this study it became clear that organizations potentially listen to their various stakeholders and publics through a number of practices and media or channels. Therefore, any analysis of organizational listening needs to look broadly at the multiple sites of listening. As noted under 'Methodology', this study examined each of the fields of practice listed in the previous section – namely, research, customer relations, public consultation, social media, organizational communication, political communication, government communication, corporate communication, public relations, and so on.

Overall patterns, themes, and narratives

Comments by interviewees included very frequent mentions of terms such as *media*, *communication*, *digital*, *social media*, *likes* and *liking*, *campaign*, and *story*, which is unsurprising given that the research was focussed on public communication. Also, unsurprisingly given that it is a buzzword in marketing and public communication, *engagement* was mentioned frequently. Furthermore, because specific questions were asked about *listening*, this term appeared near the top of the list of issues discussed, as shown in the 'word cloud' derived from NVivo transcript analysis presented in Figure 1. Interviews also frequently discussed *talk*, *call*, *response*, *conversation*, *being informed*, *consultation*, and *stakeholders*.



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

Figure 2 shows the main ways through which interviewees say they undertake listening. Reportedly, **organizational listening mainly occurs through engagement activities and consultations**, with frequent mentions of direct listening and some discussion of *audiences* (e.g., their interests and needs) as well as *interactivity*.

In comparison, Figure 3 shows the main concepts discussed by interviewees in relation to speaking on behalf of their organization. This indicates a **focus in public communication on making stakeholders and publics informed**.

Information is seen to a large extent as a panacea for addressing communication problems. If stakeholders and publics do not support, or are in conflict with an organization and its policies and actions, public communication practitioners see this most often as a result of those groups and individuals not being adequately informed. A common assumption is 'if they are informed they will think as we do'. Figure 3 also shows a focus on talking, producing *content*, *messages*, *speaking*, *broadcasting*, and *voice*.



Figure 2. The main terms and topics discussed by interviewees in relation to listening.



Figure 3. The main terms and topics discussed by interviewees in relation to speaking.

Table 2 compares the most frequently used 'listening orientated' and 'speaking orientated' terms. Based on the volume of what interviewees talked about, this suggests that organizations engage in a near even balance of listening and speaking. In fact, this indicates that they do slightly more listening than speaking. However, closer analysis presents a different picture.

Despite frequent claims of listening, even the most upbeat listening claimants 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 spent on *speaking-related* activities and the proportion of their budget, time, and resources spent on *listening-related* activities. The customer relations departments of two organizations rated their work as primarily listening, claiming ratios of 60:40 and 70:30 listening versus speaking. One public consultation team also rated its work as 70 per cent listening. However, **beyond customer**

relations, consultation, and research staff, the majority of interviewees were reflexive and self-critical, with many claiming a 70:30 speaking versus listening ratio. Around one-third of interviewees characterize 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 when high claims are made for organizational listening, interviewees suggest that there is "a split" between listening intensive specialist functions such as public consultation, and other broader public communication functions such as corporate communication and public relations. Furthermore, they acknowledge that some of the key listening activities such as research and consultation occur only occasionally – sometimes only once a year or even once every few years – whereas marketing, corporate communication, and PR are perennial. 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.**

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%

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

Listening in customer relations

The most direct and explicit site of listening in most of the organizations studied is their customer relations function. Organizations have a vested interest in maintaining the support of their customers, who are described as the lifeblood of commercial organizations, and in many cases they have legal obligations to listen and respond to customers.

However, the practice of customer relations has increasingly evolved from customer service to *customer relationship management* (CRM). Despite the rhetoric of relationships, CRM is primarily undertaken to:

- Gain repeat sales;
- 'Upsell' customers to other products or services offered by the organization;
- Motivate satisfied customers to become advocates for a brand or organization; and
- Resolve problems and complaints in order to avoid lost revenue and criticism, more through placation than substantive change to organization processes or products.

Three out of the above four objectives of customer relations are about selling. Banks now routinely appoint so-called 'relationship managers' for 'high net worth' individuals and business accounts. But the roles have little to do with building relationships, which require focus on mutual interests and genuine understanding that necessitates listening. In reality, the role of relationship managers in financial institutions, for example, is to turn single product and ad hoc customers into buyers of insurance, superannuation, share trading schemes, and other products to maximize 'customer value'. Genuine customer concerns and feedback are very often glossed over or swept away in a frenzied focus of telemarketing – increasingly conducted by someone in a call centre on the far side of the world.

For example, on receipt of a complaint about slow internet speed, one of two telecommunications companies studied responded by offering a free internet router and a new higher value connection package. Discussion of why the existing package and equipment were slow was assiduously avoided. Listening is not part of the equation other than to identify opportunities for selling.

Even when organizations explicitly say they are listening to customers, this study found some very disappointing – and at times infuriating – practices. For instance, after taking three weeks and numerous phone calls to approve a claim, an insurance company that widely advertises that it is listening sent a request for customer feedback. However, the feedback was restricted to one question with a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'awesome' to 'very bad', but with three of the five ratings indicating the company had met expectations – i.e., a skewed scale. Furthermore, the insurance company's customer feedback request allowed only one employee and one contact to be rated, despite most calls being referred to multiple staff members and multiple calls being required. Three attempts to contact the insurance company to comment in more detail on its service via (1) e-mail, (2) a special section on its Web site headlined "Have your say – we're listening", and (3) the general 'contact us' section of its Web site all produced error messages. The company heard what it wanted to hear, and no more.

Notwithstanding a number of concerning cases and approaches, some innovative and responsive practices in customer relations were found. In one of the largest government call centres in the UK with more than 1,000 customer advisers handling 20 million customer contacts a year, several hours spent sitting with headphones on listening to calls and observing staff processing customer inquiries and complaints via e-mail and even on Twitter were insightful.

Historically the government agency call centre accepted telephone calls only, but it now accepts and responds to e-mails from customers and the agency's e-mail address for customer contact is publicly listed on the central Gov.UK Web site (<https://www.gov.uk>). The agency received 600,000 e-mails from customers in 2014. Furthermore, the agency started responding to tweets on Twitter in 2014 and has a small but growing team delivering customer service via social media and cross-training other call centre staff in social media interaction with customers. The manager of the centre says the agency's aim is to have an integrated team of customer advisers all able to respond via telephone, e-mail, or on social media (interview, February 5, 2015).

This approach in itself indicates listening by the organization, as it is responding to a customer trend to express complaints in social media rather than wait in telephone switchboard queues. In addition, observation of customer advisers at work revealed a surprisingly personalized approach. For instance, one young customer adviser demonstrated the suite of e-mail templates prepared by the agency for responding to common customer inquiries and requests. However, he commented that he rarely used the standard templates without some modification. He explained:

I stick to the basic information. I don't change the facts or the policy statements. But you put a few personal phrases in, such as 'thanks for your inquiry' and you add things like 'I hope you find this helpful'. You also try to make the language simple and friendly (interview, February 5, 2015).

Monitoring of some responses to the young customer adviser's e-mails showed that customers appreciated his quick and friendly communication.

Listening in research

All organizations studied undertake some form of research and most do research on a regular basis.

The most common types of research conducted in relation to public communication are:

- Customer satisfaction studies;
- Employee surveys;
- Stakeholder surveys (e.g., among business partners, shareholders, etc.);
- Reputation studies; and
- Measurement and evaluation.

Market research is also conducted by many organizations, particularly sales-orientated corporations. Some organizations subscribe to social research studies (e.g., the British Social Attitudes Study that has been conducted annually since 1983). Political organizations subscribe to opinion polls and pay particular attention to these during election cycles.

Research is a key site of listening. However, market research, which involves listening in a broad sense to identify customer needs and preferences to inform the development of new products and services, is rarely open-ended. Despite claims of meeting consumers' needs, it is primarily focussed on serving the organization's interests (i.e., maximizing sales and profits).

Also, most research conducted by organizations is quantitative, comprised predominantly of closed-end questions. In many such studies, participants can do little more than tick boxes under multiple choice questions. When qualitative research is conducted, such as focus groups, the discussion is usually concentrated on specific issues that the organization wants to know about. The views, opinions and concerns of people that are outside the research brief are considered 'off topic' and usually ignored. Thus, administrative applied research tends to involve selective listening.

The corporate communication and public relations fields have mostly pursued a basic and largely automated approach to measurement and evaluation, particularly focussed on

evaluation of media coverage using online search tools and content analysis software programs. Most are quantitative, reporting the volume of mentions, audience reach, and counts of key messages, while some use algorithms to calculate what is referred to as tone, sentiment, or favourability.

Mark Weiner, CEO (North America) of Prime Research, says the PR metrics market is emerging from an era of automated solutions that often use 'black box' methodologies and secret algorithms to an approach that "combines technology and talent" (interview, January 12, 2015). The Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC) in Europe and the Institute for Public Relations (IPR) in the US are spearheading a project to develop international standards for measurement and evaluation of PR and corporate communication that was launched in 2011 following the Barcelona declaration of measurement principles (IPR, 2010). Weiner strongly advocates standards as well as a combined human and machine approach. He says automated data collection and classification can go so far, and machine learning systems are extending that capability. But Weiner argues:

Automated coding is fast, but really stupid. Data on its own is dumb. Real time data processing gives information, not insights. Humans are needed to interpret data and write reports that summarize what it means. Humans make decisions and judgements. And only humans can give advice and make recommendations (interview, January 12, 2015).

The executive director of communication for one of the two telecommunications companies studied agrees with this approach and also argues for the need to look beyond simple metrics. His organization is increasingly accessing 'big data', producing analytics, reporting via 'dashboards'⁶¹, and uses the **Net Promoter Score (NPS)**. This is a measurement method that asks customers to score an organization on a 0–10

scale for one question: 'How likely is it that you would recommend [organization name] to a friend or colleague?' Scores of 9–10 are rated 'loyal enthusiasts' or advocates; scores of 7–8 are classified as 'unenthusiastic customers' who are seen as vulnerable to competitive offerings; and scores of 0–6 are considered to be 'unhappy customers' who can damage a brand through negative word-of-mouth or 'word-of-mouse' online.⁶² However, while supporting ongoing data collection and analysis, the head of communication for the 'telco' said:

There is a need to step back occasionally from the data and reflect to see the trends. You can't just watch the 'worm' going up and down on dashboards and charts. You can get too close to metrics and not see the wood for the trees (interview, November 11, 2014).

While evaluation is traditionally focussed on identifying effectiveness, and this is most typically done from an organizational perspective, evaluation potentially facilitates listening in two respects. First, it utilizes a range of research methods such as surveys, focus groups, and interviews to collect and analyze the views and perceptions of stakeholders and publics. Second, it can and should incorporate evaluation of organizational responses to the requests, needs, interests, and concerns of stakeholders and publics. In this sense, evaluation is important to 'close the listening loop' by identifying how well an organization relates to and adapts to its stakeholders and publics. However, evaluation rarely includes this perspective.

Analysis of evaluation reports and dashboards of 14 UK government departments and agencies and interviews revealed a new-found commitment to evaluation in government communication. Focus as of early 2015 remained predominantly on quantitative measurements, but a number of qualitative methods are being introduced, and a noteworthy observation that emerged from this analysis is the presence of

what this study calls the **evaluation factor**. This is a significant influence that affects all planning and implementation of communication activities when evaluation is built into work processes. It exerts its effects quite simply: when practitioners know that their work and activities will be rigorously evaluated, they pay close attention to formative research to understand audiences and identify what is likely to be most effective, as well as careful planning. They are much less likely to undertake activities with low likelihood of success, so wastage and failures are reduced even before evaluation is undertaken. The evaluation factor may create reluctance to take risks, but overall it is a positive influence.

Some particularly insightful case studies involved the application of **behavioural insights**. Drawing on the research of Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein in their book *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness*⁶³, the UK Government has been an innovator in this area, setting up a Behavioural Insights Team, also known as the Nudge Unit, in 2010. Number 10 Downing Street subsequently divested the unit in 2014 as a 'social purpose company' jointly owned by the Cabinet Office, employees, and the "innovation charity" Nesta. Behavioural Insights Limited, as it is now called, (<http://www.behaviouralinsights.co.uk>) is headed by British psychologist David Halpern.

Other countries are also turning to behavioural insights to inform policy making and influence citizens' behaviour. In the US, Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government has established the Behavioural Insights Group (BIG) and the White House set up a Nudge Unit in 2014.⁶⁴ In Australia the state government of New South Wales has established a Behavioural Insights Community of Practice to share knowledge (<http://bi.dpc.nsw.gov.au>).

Behavioural insights techniques, also referred to **nudge marketing**, focus on understanding the social, cognitive and emotional triggers of

human behaviour and identify subtle changes to the way messages are presented and decisions are framed that can have a significant impact on behaviour. From one perspective, behavioural insights are gained to assist in persuasion of stakeholders and publics. But behavioural insights can also inform changes in an organization. Two examples were examined in this study. In the first⁶⁵, researchers identified that **5.5 million hospital outpatient appointments were missed in 2012–2013**, a 'did not attend' (DNA) rate of 9.3 per cent of total health and medical appointments in the year.⁶⁶ That may sound unimportant and understandable in a busy world. But missed appointments cause inefficient use of staff (e.g., doctors and other health professionals being paid to attend facilities unnecessarily) and **cost British taxpayers £225 million a year**.⁶⁷

Two randomized controlled trials (RCTs) were conducted in 2013–2014 to test various forms of reminders. These found that SMS (short message service) text messages performed better than other reminder methods such as telephone calls or e-mail. Four different SMS text messages were tested with 10,000 patients in the 'nudge' trial to identify the most effective wording. The trials found that adding a conformity message (most others keep their appointments) increased attendance. In addition, the research identified three characteristics for the most effective communication: (1) **personalized language** including directly addressing recipients as 'you'; (2) **identifying the cost** of missed appointments; and (3) **listing a phone number** to call for cancellations. Use of this format reduced missed appointments from 11.7 per cent to 8.3 per cent, saving millions of pounds a year.

In the second 'nudge' project examined, also in the health area, one million people were exposed to eight variants of messages designed to prompt organ donation (more than 135,000 exposures of each) – one of the largest randomized controlled trials ever conducted in

the UK. Adoption of the best performing message was reported to generate 96,000 additional registrations of organ donors a year.⁶⁸

A few UK government departments and agencies use some other advanced research methods. For example, one presented reports based on **longitudinal studies, structural equation modelling, and CHi-squared Automatic Interaction Detection (CHAID)** analysis, which is used for prediction in a similar fashion to regression analysis. However, most rely on quantitative output metrics such as **reach, impressions, sentiment or tone** of messages, **click through rates (CTR), cost per thousand (CPM) and cost per click (CTC)**. No corporation studied used any of the advanced research methods discussed.

Listening in social media

Social media are viewed with great enthusiasm in most communication orientated functions within organizations and appear to be rapidly closing in on customer relations as the primary form of organization-public interaction, and also challenging formal research as the primary means of gaining feedback, insights, and intelligence. Indeed, some interviewees described social media as “free real time research”.

This study examined several major social media initiatives that are allegedly focussed on listening including the **MasterCard Conversation Suite** and a **‘global listening tool’** created by another multinational corporation. The MasterCard Conversation Suite has received considerable attention and publicity – hence the company was prepared to be identified in this research. Senior vice president for corporate and external communication at MasterCard, Andrew Bowins, has publicly declared that the company’s “global corporate communication function is evolving from a broadcast model reliant on intermediaries to a direct, real-time

communications ecosystem”. He said in a 2012 interview in *Kommunikations Manager*: “We have established platforms and a global framework to listen to and engage consumers, merchants and influencers across online, social and traditional media”. Bowins added that the company’s social media activity “begins with real-time social media listening and analysis”.⁶⁹ It does this through a custom-built online monitoring system that tracks 6,000 key words in 26 languages across traditional and social media globally 24/7 – what the company refers to as an ‘integrated’ media analysis system. The system includes content from Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest, Tumblr, and Sina Weibo, as well as major traditional media online news sites. As at early 2015, the system was annually identifying 36,000 traditional media articles and more than three million social media items such as blog posts, tweets, and videos that refer to MasterCard or issues of interest to the company, according to one of the digital specialists operating the system (interview, January 15, 2015).

The MasterCard Conversation Suite is outsourced to Prime Research, a specialist research company charged with building the system and overseeing all monitoring and analysis. This relationship has been publicly reported by Bowins.⁷⁰ An important feature of this system is that, unlike some other media monitoring services, responses to comments or inquiries are not written by social media specialists or PR staff. An authorized Prime Research spokesperson for MasterCard said “MasterCard management in various regions and business units makes the decisions on whether to respond or not, and how to respond” (interview, January 15, 2015). The contracted operators of the MasterCard Conversation Suite sometimes identify posts that they assess as warranting a response and refer these to a relevant MasterCard executive or unit. But an important part of the process in terms of authenticity is that all responses and comments

made on behalf of the company are made by MasterCard staff. Some other systems involve a 'PR-izing' of organizational responses.

Physically, the MasterCard Conversation Suite is comprised of massive LED displays at the company's Purchase NY headquarters and in its offices in Miami, Mexico and Brazil, as well as interfaces on the PCs of key staff worldwide. These present graphical dashboards showing the volume of articles and mentions of relevant issues; the audience reach of those items; the volume of reposts such as retweets; and the percentage that are favourable, unfavourable and neutral; as well as real-time content feeds of the most relevant articles and social media posts. The system "sucks in" data to an IBM-based 'back end' from a number of data suppliers and services and then analyzes the content using proprietary applications to produce the dashboard showing charts and content such as tweets ranked by topic and relevance, according to the senior digital specialist responsible. For instance, MasterCard tracks safety and security, travel, innovation, small business, and a range of financial issues, as well as mentions of its name and related products such as its PayPass Wallet.

An impressive feature of the MasterCard Conversation Suite is that the company's staff can respond to comments and messages on various platforms from within the Conversation Suite. For example, they can select a tweet, type a response, and their response is sent as a direct message or broadcast tweet over the Twitter network. "MasterCard executives don't have to leave the Conversation Suite and go to Twitter or Facebook to interact – they just click and type," the spokesperson said. Also, the MasterCard Conversation Suite can translate into English and from English into other languages using Google Translate that it integrated into the system (interview, January 15, 2015).

In addition to the automated dashboards presented on screens, the MasterCard Conversation Suite has two further levels of analysis. Advanced analytics are available via menus that allow Boolean searches of all data in the system – for example, to examine conversations about certain issues in particular regions in particular time frames. The processing of advanced analytics is fully automated, but this function requires entry of search terms by the user. Prime Research provides training for MasterCard executives on an ongoing basis. For instance, the spokesperson said that in July 2014 after some significant upgrades were made to the system, 250 MasterCard staff were trained either face-to-face or via WebEx (interview, January 15, 2015).

The third level of analysis is really an add-on to the Conversation Suite. This involves bespoke reports produced by applying human interpretation to the data collected. Specialist data analysts at Prime Research produce monthly or quarterly written reports by region, quarterly corporate reports overviewing issues globally, and what they call "insights reports" based on "deep dive" analysis. These are produced using a combination of automated machine analysis and human analysis. For example, all coding of the 36,000 traditional media articles a year is done by humans (interview, January 15, 2015).

There can be little argument that the MasterCard Conversation Suite involves listening by the company. It is one of the most sophisticated listening systems identified in this research. However, two qualifications need to be made in the context of this study of how organizations listen. First, the MasterCard Conversation Suite is a substantial investment. Neither MasterCard nor Prime Research would reveal the cost of building and operating the system, but it is clearly many hundreds of thousands of dollars annually, and possibly several million dollars in total including data

feeds, proprietary software design, hardware, and staffing by specialist researchers, social media analysts and data analysts. While providing an exemplar of how scale can be achieved in organizational listening, such a system is beyond the means of many if not most organizations. Second, and perhaps not surprisingly, a commercial strategy underlies the company's commitment to listening, which oscillates between authentic engagement for mutual customer-corporation benefit and exploitation of customers through the harvesting and clever analysis of data. A senior social media manager involved in supporting the Conversation Suite explained that there are "two types of social media listening". She described these as (1) **engagement** to hear what people are saying and what they are concerned about to respond to and interact with them, which often leads to multiple exchanges (conversation); and (2) **intelligence** based on using what people are saying to inform strategy and tactics, often not acknowledging or responding to them (interview, January 12, 2015).

Several senior US practitioners argued that listening for intelligence is authentic ethical listening and posited intelligence as the primary form of organizational listening (interview, April 27, 2015). While it may be legal, and even ethical in some cases, intelligence cannot be considered open active listening as defined in listening and communication literature. Listening for intelligence is selective, indirect, monologic, *cataphatic*, and self-serving. It is not active, mindful, dialogic, transactional, or *apophatic*.⁷¹

Another major investment in social media listening that was examined is the **global listening** tool of a US-headquartered multinational corporation. The company is demonstrably innovative in terms of communication, having brought in an anthropologist to help management better understand what motivates employees and engage with them. As with the MasterCard

Conversation Suite, the development and operation of the global listening tool have been outsourced to a specialist research firm. The system features a custom-designed portal for the organization to view statistical and graphical data such as charts and 'word clouds' as well as the text of relevant traditional media articles and social media posts. High quality dashboards present summaries of key data such as the volume, reach (audience size), tone, and share of voice of articles and posts relevant to the company and competitors tracked. According to a spokesperson, the underlying technology is a Cognos database with automated feeds from media content suppliers, from which query tools import selected data into proprietary applications for analysis and reporting.

The project manager in charge of the tool at the research firm says the proprietary global listening tool of the corporation tracks content relevant to the organization and five of its key competitors in 650 priority media worldwide as well as across a wide range of social media. The system is largely automated, using **neuro-linguistic programming (NLP)** with learning capabilities to filter relevant content. At the time of viewing the global listening tool, there were 6,300 traditional media articles in the system as well as a large volume of social media content.

As with the MasterCard Conversation Suite, decisions in relation to responding to posts and comments are made by the corporation's executives, not the research firm's media or data analysts, although this is often based on the advice of the project manager responsible for the system. The project manager agrees that tracking and analysis cannot be fully automated. He said "the system depends on entering key words to track" and "humans are needed to make decisions on whether to respond". He also explained that the research firm went beyond providing automated dashboards. **SPSS** (statistical package for the social sciences) is used to conduct additional statistical analysis,

and bespoke reports are produced by the research firm to provide insights and recommendations to the client (interview, January 12, 2015).

One of the world's leading airlines and the largest government customer service centre in the UK use social media for monitoring and responding to customer inquiries and comments about their products and services. As at early 2015 the airline was receiving 200–300 customer contacts a day via Twitter and reported that this is growing rapidly, as many customers seek to avoid often lengthy periods on hold when contacting telephone-based CRM systems. The airline also accepts and responds to customers via Facebook, e-mail, and its Web site as well as telephone. In addition to using social media for customer communication, the airline has adopted a policy of **using social media as its first response channel in a crisis**. A spokesperson explained that the airline has three social media strategies, which she described as:

- Customer service;
- Crisis communication first response; and
- Promotional campaigns.

The airline has used Salesforce's **Radian6** social media monitoring and analysis software for a number of years, but changed in 2014 to **Lexer**, a small start-up specializing in "behavioural forensics" and online CRM. In 2014 the company also incorporated **Local Measure** into its social media monitoring and analysis strategy, which provides geo-location information. This allows the airline to track social media posts to a particular airport and even to specific airline lounges. The airline's manager of digital communication told the story of a frequent flyer who received 'happy birthday' tweets from family and friends while in one of the airline's lounges. The airline's social media team quickly sent a message to the lounge manager who arranged a small cake and a greeting for the passenger.

However, the same company has run into major criticism for some of its promotional efforts in social media and the manager of digital communication admitted that "none of the airline's senior management engage professionally in social media" (interview, March 3, 2015). So it is reasonable to conclude that many of these initiatives are pioneering efforts and it will be some time before interactive social media engagement is embedded in corporate culture.

A different approach is taken by some other corporations. One of the world's largest telecommunications companies with a quarter of a million employees (see further discussion under 'Listening in organizational communication') has moved in the past few years to 24/7 monitoring of social media and all monitoring is done internally. The VP of corporate communication said that communication staff members are rostered on shifts including over weekends to monitor key social media platforms. These staff members send alerts to relevant managers and departments in the company when they identify posts requiring a response. The VP explained:

If you see somebody tweet or post on Facebook about a service problem they're having, you immediately flag the customer care team who are also standing by on the weekend so they can jump in right there and then (interview, January 14, 2015).

Furthermore, the telecommunications company authorizes a large number of its staff to post stories, comment, and respond on social media, and allocates responsibility for monitoring related responses to the authors. "It's the author's responsibility to monitor for 24 hours after they post a story or comment. If it looks like something is really hot, then they have to keep monitoring until it's over," the VP of corporate communication said (interview, January 14, 2015).

Another large telecommunications company has appointed a '**chief social officer**' to head one of five units in its communication division along with corporate communication, product communication, employee communication, and executive support such as writing speeches. The company uses **Yammer** internally among its 43,500 staff, around 40 per cent of whom (around 18,000 staff) are active on the platform, making it one of the largest Yammer sites in the world. Internal communication and collaboration on Yammer are coordinated by three Yammer community managers, according to the head of "employee engagement communication" (interview, October 21, 2014). The CEO also publishes a regular blog and the company uses proprietary social media sites to engage with retailers, investors, and customers, as well as public platforms including Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Google+, Google Hangouts, Instagram, Tumblr, Vine, LinkedIn, Pinterest and Snapshot. The company also uses **Lithium** for customer relationship management and was experimenting with **Evernote** as a collaboration tool at the time of this research. This rather heavy commitment to social media is managed by "12 to 15 communication staff including six social media managers responsible for supporting regions". The executive director of communication said "collaboration is where it is at". He pointed to two types of collaboration online: (1) **document sharing** at a basic level of collaboration and (2) **conversations**. He said collaboration could help with problem solving, such as customers "chipping in with ideas to help other customers" (i.e., crowdsourcing customer support), as well as idea generation in general. Furthermore, he said practical benefits of online collaboration included a reduction in meeting time and reduced e-mail (interview, November 11, 2014).

"Fail fast and move on. Learn from testing. Be agile."

(interview, November 11, 2014)

The range of social media used by this company was interesting and the executive director of communication was probed on this issue. He reported that the company did not believe that there is a single 'killer app' for collaboration and social media engagement. He said "our policy is to experiment. We believe in fail fast and move on. Learn from testing. Be agile". However, he was frank about the challenges. He said "it's really, really hard" referring to the demands of 24/7 operation that is increasingly expected online. His advice on how to cope with the demands of social media was common to a number of case studies. He said:

We have to be structured for that. The changes brought on by social media are transformational in terms of the shift from 'one to many' to 'many to one' and 'many to many'. That means working weekend shifts. Working Monday to Friday is going out the window. Staff now need to work flexible hours. That doesn't suit everybody, but increasingly workers welcome the flexibility to work from home sometimes, to work remotely, to have flexible hours. In [company name] we are adopting a policy of all roles flex (interview, November 11, 2014).

Many of the government departments and agencies studied are also using social media increasingly. In the UK this is aligned with the national government's 'digital by default' strategy.⁷² However, despite *open government* and government to citizen (G2C) engagement policies in the UK, US and Australia, use of social media by government varies widely from attentive listening to pseudo listening and, in some cases, to monologue.

The director of communication for a large UK government department with a stated commitment to and flexible policies in relation to social media found on his arrival in the role that the department's regional and local offices had 600 Twitter accounts. A more recent follow up interview with the department's newly appointed head of new media updated this to

700 Twitter accounts that had “sprung up organically” (interview, February 6, 2015). While supporting a distributed model of communication (e.g., the director encourages local offices to issue releases to local media), he was concerned about the department’s approach to social media. He reported:

So I did an audit of what they were doing, what was actually being put out, was anyone actually talking to people and engaging through social media. No, they’re not. I found they’re using it as a broadcasting tool largely ... it is important to me that we open it up as a two-way conversation and it’s got to be a productive two-way conversation (interview, September 30, 2014).

The same director of communication sees social media as only part of the ‘communication mix’ currently, but as increasingly important channels in the future, accessed from desktops and mobile devices. He said:

We’re not picking up two-way conversations with hundreds of thousands of people. It’s not happening. However, in the future in the transformation of the department between now and 2020 in which the department will have more of a digital presence, my feeling is that most people will want to transact through a Smartphone (interview, September 30, 2014).

Accordingly, some government departments and agencies are employing highly skilled specialists to lead their social media activities and have implemented online engagement strategies.

Social media have resulted in changing expectations in relation to response time, which is creating additional pressures on resources and systems in many organizations. Prior to social media, most of the government departments and agencies studied operated on the basis of 20-day turnaround for correspondence such as letters and e-mails. All agreed that this policy is no longer acceptable to most people. A number of government organizations as well as companies are moving to 24-hour response

times via social media. The director of communication for a UK government agency involved in regulation and standards said “we respond to phone calls within 24 hours”. He added: “We don’t have a KPI for tweets, but I think same day response is acceptable” (interview, September 26, 2014). The assistant director of communication of a government agency involved in health services said:

When someone can tweet and get the same questions answered within an hour, we can’t continue to take three weeks to provide a response by letter. We need to be bringing our response rate targets for customer letters in line with social media. We’re not resourced to do it. But I think we’ll start to see this happening. We’ve had to flex our teams to develop the capability for quicker response – our staff work flexible hours (interview, September 25, 2014).

A controversial issue in relation to social media is who manages the function in organizations. According to several studies, most commercial organizations manage social media through their marketing department.⁷³ The social media director of the agency managing the MasterCard Conversation Suite sees problems in this approach saying “marketing staff cannot help giving in to the urge to sell”. She said social media should be a broad corporate or government communication responsibility where the focus is two-way communication rather than promotion and selling (interview, January 15, 2015).

“Social media should be a broad corporate or government communication responsibility ... marketing staff cannot help giving in to the urge to sell.”
(interview, January 15, 2015)

The head of corporate communication for a leading automotive manufacturer expressed similar concern saying “part of the problem is that social media is owned by marketing. They

use it primarily for promoting brands and products” (interview, January 30, 2015). While most interviewees agreed that social media communication needs special focus in the short-term because of its relative newness, most felt that, ultimately, social media are simply tools that should be open to and used by all in an organization, working within a governance framework provided by guidelines and training.

“Having a head of social media is like having a head of faxes.”

(interview, September 25, 2014)

A wide range of social media monitoring and analysis tools and services were mentioned by interviewees or noted in reports of their organizations’ activities. The most used by the organizations studied for day-to-day social media monitoring and analysis are **Google Analytics**, **Hootsuite**, **Tweetdeck**, **Netvibes**, and **Brandwatch**. **Radian6** was praised, but described as expensive. The most used online consultation tool in the sample studied is **Citizen Space**. At the higher level of bespoke and customized media and communication research, **Prime Research** and **Social Bakers** are used by several exemplar case studies, while the most used CRM tools among the organizations studied are **Salesforce’s Marketing Cloud**, **Brandwatch**, and **Sysomos**, with one committed to **Lithium**. The most mentioned media analysis service provider was **Gorkana**, but this is most likely skewed by a slightly higher UK sample size.

Listening in public consultation

Public consultation is a legal requirement of government and sometimes corporations in many countries, particularly in the case of major policy initiatives and major infrastructure projects. All government departments and most government agencies studied undertake regular public consultation.

In the US, a substantial number of public consultations are underway at any one time on a range of issues. Information about most of these can be viewed online at Regulations.gov (<http://www.regulations.gov>), a Web portal that provides information on physical forums as well as the opportunity to enter comments directly online. For example, at the time of this research a national ‘public notice and comment’ was underway on the operation and certification of small unmanned aircraft systems (i.e., drones). The Regulation.gov Web site displays a list of all consultations underway and one click takes visitors to a dialogue box where they can comment (see Figure 4). An important feature of the site is that near the top of the comment box is a link to open a ‘docket folder’, which accesses useful background information such as reports and fact sheets – although a simpler name than ‘docket’ folder would be helpful. Also, at the top right of the comment box is a link to ‘alternate ways to comment’. This provides users with information on how to e-mail or even send written comments through the postal system. The provision for citizens’ input by post, e-mail, online, or face-to-face at meetings does afford quite open and flexible access.

US government agencies reported several large public consultations following disasters and crises. These consultations were convened to canvass views on what went wrong, what was done right, and how processes could be improved. A US government spokesperson reflected on one major public consultation that was convened following a natural disaster that claimed lives saying “we faced an angry mob in some of these discussions. But we had to have them” (interview, January 19, 2015). Given a number of changes in agency structure and even legislation that followed some of these consultations, it has to be concluded that, at least in some cases, organizations listen in public consultation and take action as a result.



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Figure 4. US government online public consultation site.

However, none of the corporations studied had undertaken public consultation other than informal consultation with stakeholders such as business partners and employees. The way these were discussed indicated that they were more exercises in gaining 'buy in' rather than genuine consultations to canvass the views of others.

A major national public consultation underway at the time of this research involves a very large transportation infrastructure project that will potentially affect several million people ranging from business owners to residents in towns and villages and farmers along the route. The head of community and stakeholder engagement, the community stakeholder manager, the head of

consultations, and a member of the 'public response team' emphasized that engagement was ongoing and had to extend beyond formal consultation processes. One said: "You simply would not be doing your job if you were just doing formal consultations. It would be a very narrow set of responses you'd be getting" (interview September 29, 2014).

The communication and stakeholder engagement team of the company set up to manage the project prefer the term 'engagement' to consultation and listed a range of methods employed by the company. These include face-to-face discussions. The head of community and stakeholder engagement said:

"I mean you're on the ground out there talking to people. That's part of the job" (interview, September 29, 2014). As well, the company uses information materials, events such as public meetings, Web site information and, increasingly, social media.

Some of the more innovative approaches to consultation in relation to the project include appointment of a residents' commissioner in 2015 and planning for '**pop-up**' information centres in towns and villages, as well as '**drop in**' events in addition to scheduled town hall meetings. The company's head of community and stakeholder engagement cited limitations to traditional town hall meetings, saying:

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

Hopefully the spokesperson means all participants getting their information across – not just the organization.

A further interesting point that the company's consultation staff made is that a large number of those in the vicinity of or potentially affected by the project don't turn up to meetings – they are *disengaged*. As this infrastructure project nears the beginning of construction, one of the leaders of engagement commented that "the group we are really concerned about is the disengaged" (interview, January 27, 2015).

This and another observation made by several policy and consultation staff – that **consultations tend to be dominated by the 'usual suspects'** such as organized industry, activist and lobby groups – point to a need for consultation to involve **outreach** to affected groups rather than passive receipt of submissions.

Another UK government department involved in public consultation on part-time employment regulations gave a revealing example. It found itself faced with 38,000 submissions. However, analysis found that more than 36,000 of them were closely related in terms of content and language. The staff concluded that the submissions were part of an organized campaign and identified the organization responsible. To look beyond this orchestrated voice, they reached out to existing groups such as Mumsnet (www.mumsnet.com), an online community of parents attracting 70 million page views and over 14 million visits per month, and Saga (www.saga.co.uk), an online site for the over 50s, as these represented people with an interest in flexible working hours. One of the senior executives interviewed reflected that:

The traditional way of government consultation and listening to people involved writing a consultation document, publishing it, and giving a two or three month time period for responses such as written submissions ... the next stage is to have seminars or workshops ... in which you try to get people to comment in person (interview, January 28, 2015).

This passive approach to public consultation is shown in research and practice to attract a narrow range of responses.

Public consultation needs to include outreach. The typical formats of issuing notices, calling for submissions and comments, and holding public meetings hear the voices of the 'usual suspects' – powerful elites and organized groups. Many others voices are not heard.

However, not all public consultation is as enlightened as the previous example in relation to employment regulation. Typical of many others who see public communication as transmission of information was this comment

from a senior government policy and consultation executive:

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

Listening in government communication

The UK's 2012–2013 *Government Digital Strategy* required that “corporate publishing activities of all 24 ministerial departments move onto Gov.UK by March 2013, with agency and arm’s length bodies’ online publishing to follow by March 2014” for projected savings of £1.7 to £1.8 billion a year.⁷⁴ In early 2015, it was reported that the UK government’s ‘digital by default’ strategy and establishment of a single government Web portal had saved £11 billion⁷⁵ – an increased efficiency gain on what was predicted. The decision by the UK government to integrate all major government department and agency information and services through one Web portal (<https://.gov.uk>) has put the UK ahead of most countries in terms of digital access and simplicity.

The Australian government followed suit with MyGov in 2013 (<https://mygov.au>) to replace its previous attempt with www.australia.gov.au.

While the US government has a central official Web site (<http://www.usa.gov>), a spokesperson for the US Administration in Washington DC said the US was “well behind at this stage” in providing a single portal for government information and services (interview, January 19, 2015). The Department of State lists more than a dozen US government Web sites in addition to www.usa.gov as sites of important information on matters such as benefits, disaster assistance, grants, and regulations.⁷⁶ Recent initiatives such as the US health care portal

(<https://www.healthcare.gov>) are separate Web sites and “cost a bomb” according to a US government spokesperson (interview, January 19, 2015). Looking ahead, the US government is seeking efficiencies as well as improved effectiveness in its public communication, as are other countries such as Australia.

It needs to be noted that the ‘digital by default’ and ‘digital first’ strategies of a number of governments are as much or more about cost savings as they are about engagement. A number of corporations also reported budget cuts and/or reduced communication staff. **No organization studied expects budget increases in the next few years and many forecast likely budget cuts.** This indicates that any change to how public communication is enacted must be achieved with current if not reduced resources. Adding new functions and increased staff for listening are not options for most organizations in both the private and public sectors.

Many government department and agency communication executives were reflexive and frank, admitting that their organizations are “on a journey” and that they have some way to go in terms of being open and interactive. For example, one senior government communication director said:

When I first started in this job ... we used to be completely in broadcast mode. We’d have a breakout session at forums with stakeholders, but that was just talking to people for 45 minutes, giving them loads of chapter and verse. We’ve tried to turn that on its head (interview, February 2, 2015).

The CEO of an Australian state environmental agency said: “We used to just focus on getting information out and telling our story. Now there is a focus on engagement – including listening to the community. We are becoming more community orientated” (interview, November 19, 2014).

The deputy director of media and communication for the national environmental agency of another country reported similarly, saying: “We’re a learning organization. We’ve moved from broadcasting information to two-way dialogic channels” (interview, September 24, 2014).

Some UK government communication staff expressed frustration at the policies of the Government Digital Service (GDS), which they said did not support many interactive social media platforms, as well as out-of-date internal IT systems. However, the *Social Media Playbook* produced by GDS, a practical guide outlining the benefits of using social media and the major types and their uses, does include a section titled ‘Listening’ which states:

Listening to online conversations is a good place to start and can also help you refine objectives, channels, the profile of your audience, and their needs. Although this seems like the most obvious statement in the world, it’s worth repeating as it’s often forgotten. *Listening should always be your step one.*⁷⁷ [original emphasis]

In focussing on government online strategies, it is important to not overlook traditional methods of public communication that remain popular. A number of US and UK government departments report receiving from 40,000 to 70,000 letters a year. Many departments maintain ‘correspondence units’, often with 30 up to 150 staff working full-time to reply to letters. However, even though most organizations studied see responding to letters as an important activity, only one of the organizations studied conducts systematic analysis of letters.

Despite hospitals and health services being a controversial sector in terms of ignoring complaints (e.g., see the 2007 Commission for Healthcare Audit and Inspection report)⁷⁸, a communication executive in a major government health organization that receives 50,000 letters a year on average said:

I’d say time for me would be one of the big barriers. So those 50,000 letters – I mean I would love us to be able to analyze them, actually work out what people are saying and crunch that into useful data. But I just can’t see how we are going to be able to do that (interview, September 25, 2014).

Listening in political communication

Much political communication is conducted by individual political representatives, as well as their apparatchiks and ‘spin doctors’, which is not the focus of this study that examines organization-public communication. Also, discussions were held with senior officials in only one political party, so political communication was not assessed in detail.

However, findings about organization-public communication generally have relevance for political organizations. In addition, several specific points made in discussions with senior political party representatives are noteworthy. There is considerable concern that political parties and governments are losing, or have lost, legitimacy and public support, although listening has not been identified as a key cause except by a few notable exceptions.

One party spokesperson said that many politicians and political parties are “going through the motions of listening” and believe they are listening. But he pointed to institutionalized practices such as tours and visits during which the “party faithful” are organized to attend as ‘cheer squads’, and meetings with voters that are ‘stacked’ with supporters, along with delegations from interest groups. He said politicians are often not listening to “real people”. Party ‘machines’ have turned politics into highly organized, professionalized processes focussed on highly staged set piece events on one hand and behind-closed-door meetings on the other.

The stage-managed visits to shopping malls, factories, and town hall meetings are supplemented by opinion polling, which is mostly based on small samples and a narrow range of closed end questions (see 'Listening in research'). As a result, the leaders of political parties hear only a scant and sterilized version of citizens' views.

Politicians are not listening to 'real people'. They are mostly hearing the loud voices of power elites, the platitudes of party sycophants, and small sample (often misleading) polls.

This illusion faced by politicians reminds one of the aphorism that the Queen of the UK and Commonwealth countries believes the whole world smells of paint because everywhere she goes has been freshly painted in preparation for her visit. She rarely if ever sees the 'real world' of people's everyday lives.

Beyond this analysis, political communication is informed by studies of politicians' and political parties' use of social media and studies of election campaigns. A number of studies of the 2010 UK national election, Australian federal elections in 2007, 2010, and 2013, and even the much-acclaimed Obama presidential election campaigns in the US have reported a predominance of one-way transmission of party messages and political slogans, with little two-way interaction with citizens.⁷⁹

While further research into public communication by political organizations such as political parties is needed to draw specific detailed conclusions, there are indications that **lack of listening is at least part of the cause of citizen disengagement from traditional politics and voter dissatisfaction that is being reflected in falling voter turnouts, 'hung' parliaments, and a rise in radical extreme right and extreme left political parties and organizations.**

Listening in organizational communication

The internal communication of one of the world's largest telecommunications companies with consolidated revenue of over US\$100 billion and a quarter of a million employees was examined in this study. The vice president (VP), corporate communication and the head of internal communication were interviewed and an extensive range of communication materials were reviewed.

A number of stand-out trends were observed in this organization. The most noteworthy was a fundamental **shift from printed information materials to video** – specifically digital video hosted internally on the company's intranet or externally on YouTube channels or other public Web sites. The company has established four video programs that are produced weekly or bi-weekly – one specifically focussed on staff matters, one covering international news, one for business partners, and one for employees to engage external audiences as advocates for the company. These programs are highly polished in terms of their presentation, with anchors introducing segments on a professional-looking set similar to TV news and talk shows. Interviews and reports from the field presented in the programs are quite often low resolution video with signs of being shot on a hand-held camera. Rather than being detrimental, this gives the reports authenticity, as they contain clear visual clues that they are not staged and that they are recorded by eye witnesses rather than professional camera crews. However, all the content is edited and curated to a high standard.

The company has a strong commitment to research and some of this was devoted to evaluating response to its shift from print to video communication. **Employee surveys** are conducted twice a year. For example, in 2014 an online survey was sent to 40,000 employees from among 138,000 who had watched at least one episode of the international news video

program. The survey received 5,570 responses (a 14 per cent response rate), of which 93 per cent said the program was interesting and worth watching. The survey also asks employees what types of information they prefer and this informs program planning. **Focus groups** are also conducted regularly to gain further qualitative insights. This testing and feedback has resulted in the video program segments being two to three minutes in length. "That's the attention span for an internal video," the VP corporate communication said (interview, January 14, 2015).

The CEO of the company appears regularly in videos produced for employees. While this is not unusual, a noteworthy feature of this CEO's approach is that he has an oft-expressed dislike for 'corporate speak' – that is, business buzzwords, technical terms, and managerial clichés. He advocates "simplifying how we talk", which the organizational communication team puts into practice (interview, January 14, 2015). This **shift away from traditional corporate news presented in formal business language dotted with buzzwords** is the second significant feature of this company's organizational communication.

An example of their shift away from traditional corporate presentations to interesting stories is that the video programs viewed included reports of one of the company's employees rescuing a starving dog that had been thrown into one of their compounds and abandoned. How is such a video report relevant to organizational communication in a large corporation? This question was put to the VP of corporate communication. She said:

It's about demonstrating the values of the company. We're showing that we are a company of caring people. We're not putting words into a corporate brochure; we're *doing* it. People want to work for that kind of organization. People want to do business with that kind of organization (interview, January 14, 2015).

The third significant and surprising discovery in this case study was that **the company's internal communication budget had been cut in the previous year and all its internal communication is coordinated by a small communication staff of just nine.**

The secret of doing new things at reduced cost is two-fold, according to this communication team. First, almost everything is done internally. The company does not use an external production house to produce its video programs or even external professional comperes. The internal communication staff explained production of its video programs thus:

We had quotes from \$30,000 up to \$100,000 per program. But we looked around internally and found we had people with experience in TV compering or stage work who were willing to give it a go. One of our staff had worked at a TV studio previously. The other anchor was a former beauty queen who we trained up.

We go up to a little studio on the 24th floor of headquarters. The backdrop looks like some big fancy thing, but it's just a screen that flips. We write the script – it's usually a team effort. We put these programs out on Tuesdays and Thursdays. It's usually shot in the studios at about 7 am. Then the file gets digitally sent back to the employee communication video team – that team is based in Connecticut. They add in all the B-roll stuff and come up with the final thing. Then they send it back and we post it online. It's typically posted around 2 pm or 3 pm (interview, January 14, 2015).

The second secret to this company's capability to do more with less, including transitioning its internal communication from print to video as well as taking on 24/7 social media monitoring and engagement (see 'Listening in social media'), is what the VP corporate communication calls "**pivoting**". She said: "You have to **change the structure and change the expectations**. You have to clearly state the expectations and then sit back and see who rises and who doesn't."

She explained that, to make the change, the company called on staff to take on new roles and develop new skills. “We provided a lot of training, including training in video recording and production,” she said. The VP was also keen to point out that age is not a determinant of adaptability, telling a story of one near retirement age employee who relished the chance to write in new ways for video scripts and social media after a lifetime writing formal business reports. “He became a role model and helped us change the culture,” she said. ‘Pivoting’ has also involved changing recruitment policies and practices. The VP of corporate communication explained:

We’ve put a very high premium on moving out people who do not have writing skills and bringing in people with writing skills and, beyond writing skills, we have started bringing in people with experience in TV and video. We’ve had to pivot in terms of internal structure and roles, training, and hiring (interview, January 14, 2015).

As part of this structural and cultural change, the company has had to stop doing some of the things that it previously did and reallocate resources in order to do new things within budgets and staff levels available. **Measurement and evaluation helps in identifying less effective activities.** But the VP corporate communication acknowledged that terminating some activities such as producing newsletters or writing media releases meets resistance. She said as one of her final messages: “The hard question is ‘what are you going to stop doing?’ That is a question we’re constantly asking ourselves. What represents the future? What are relics of the past that we need to stop doing?”

While a number of interesting things can be learned from this corporation, the key question relevant to this study is ‘to what extent does its organizational communication involve listening?’ Clearly the company listens through research and has responded to employees’ needs and interests identified in employee surveys and

focus groups. In ‘pivoting’ to change its communication structure, skill set, and outputs, it has demonstrated listening in a general sense – e.g., to shifting media consumption patterns and social and cultural changes. The company also conducts town hall meetings, both physically and via Webcasts, and the format of these one hour sessions is a maximum of 15 minutes for the CEO or other senior executives to speak, with 45 minutes reserved for questions. Hence, a significant level of engagement and listening is demonstrated in its organizational communication.

However, after several hours watching snippets of its video programs and viewing the large amounts of information on its corporate Web sites and various other sites such as YouTube, one is still left with an overwhelming sense of strategic corporate informing. The company is a behemoth, its voice is loud, and its information voluminous. It encourages employees to speak, but it provides a forum for their voices only when they echo the messages of the organization. It was, however, informative and refreshing to find a CEO and a small communication team working hard to engage with key stakeholders and going some way to listen as well as trumpet the voice of the organization.

Some government departments and agencies also demonstrated commendable innovation in their organizational communication, including a shift to video as well as social media. One major UK government department has 176 active groups on Yammer involved in peer-to-peer communication. It also noted that the UK’s Home Secretary, Theresa May, is active on departmental Yammer sites and publishes a blog. Theresa May, along with the former Minister of the Cabinet Office, Francis Maude, who retired as of the 2015 UK national election, have long been champions of digital communication and opening up government communication.

Nevertheless, an article published by the Organizational Communication Research Center of the Institute for Public Relations (IPR) in the US illustrates that one-way, top-down transmission of an organization's messages is still widely perceived as the function of organizational communication. The opening paragraph of the April 2015 article saw it necessary to instruct readers that:

Employee communications is more, must be more, than simply conveying the direction and directives of management throughout an organization. Employee communication professionals must take responsibility for assisting with all communication flow within the system. This means engaging in the management of bottom up and lateral communications as well.⁸⁰

Listening in marketing communication

Marketing communication involves listening through market research and some aspects of customer engagement, but in the bounded sense of understanding potential consumers and then using techniques of rhetoric, psychology, and semiotics to persuade them to think and behave in accordance with an organization's objectives.

As well as examining the marketing communication of a number of companies, the work of the marketing communication unit of a large university was studied as a useful vantage point to observe contemporary marketing communication practices away from an overtly commercial context. It can be argued that a university should be an optimal site of interactive and relationship marketing being a non-profit organization with a range of public accountabilities.

The university undertakes considerable research including an annual **RepTrak**[®] reputation study among key stakeholder groups such as employers, as well as regular student surveys and a biennial staff survey. Quantitative surveys are followed up by focus groups in some cases to

gain deeper insights into the views, needs, interests, and concerns of stakeholders including students, staff, employers, and industry and professional organizations. Engagement is a stated priority of the university evidenced in the appointment of a deputy vice chancellor (DVC) to head this role with equal status to the DVCs of teaching and research. Most faculties of the university also have appointed associate deans or directors of engagement – indeed engagement has become a buzzword of the university sector, as any search of university Web sites shows.

However, while the university has moved much of its information to its Web site, which was substantially upgraded in the year before this research, it maintains a relatively traditional approach to marketing communication, with its courses promoted through newspaper advertising and PR that is largely focussed on traditional media publicity and events. Furthermore, it publishes a supplement in a major newspaper in the city in which it operates, which was in printed form as recently as 2014, and still publishes a number of 'hard copy' magazines and newsletters.

The university has begun to use social media, but had just 1.5 FTE (full-time equivalent) staff managing its social media presence at the time of this research, despite a student population of almost 40,000 and more than 3,000 staff. To be fair, the university is seeking to implement a "distributed model" in which academic staff and students respond to issues, answer questions, and comment on relevant content online, rather than have a central team of social media communicators. However, it still has a way to go in this regard as the institution did not have clear policies and guidelines on social media use at the time of this study (guidelines were "in development"), there was no training provided to staff or students in social media use, and monitoring and analysis were basic. The university has a presence on Facebook, Twitter,

Instagram, LinkedIn and Pinterest, but social media monitoring and analysis are limited to **Buzznumbers**, a predominantly quantitative tool, and automated volume and 'positive, negative, neutral' charts provided by **Meltwater**. The university considered **Radian6**, but the director of the marketing communication unit commented: "It is a market leader, but we could not afford it" (interview, November 3, 2014).

The director said the university's social media communication has moved through three phases, which she described as (1) "a channel to distribute messages" (transmission only); (2) "a channel to distribute messages and track our own messages, reach, and so on" (transmission with measurement of effectiveness); and (3) "an insights tool to monitor issues of concern, viewpoints and opinion" (transactional, but with a strategic organizational planning focus). The university has not moved to a fourth phase in which the organization actively listens and responds and she confessed that "it is still a lot of one and two" (interview, November 3, 2014).

The colonization of social media by marketing departments and a resulting focus on one-way transmission of promotional messages designed to sell products and services was identified by several interviewees in this study, as reported under 'Listening in social media'. In addition, most other marketing communication remains one-way, and true engagement with customers or other stakeholders is minimal, despite widespread claims of 'customer engagement'.

Listening in corporate communication

The corporate communication of a leading US broadband and telecommunications company was noteworthy in several respects. First, it has '**banned**' media releases, which it refers to as *press releases*, other than formal announcements that it is legally obligated to issue, such as release of annual financial results. The VP, corporate communication stated:

We're not allowed to do press releases here – other than announcements required by the stock exchange. You must think first about the audience and then the story, and then determine what is the best vehicle? That vehicle or channel is rarely press releases (interview, January 16, 2010).

He explained that writing and distributing what this analysis calls media releases "was so habitual ... there's no thought that goes into it. There's no thought about the audience, there's no thought about the behaviour change that you're trying to drive". The company's decision to stop issuing media releases becomes understandable upon hearing his rationale.

I think at last count, we issued between 2,000 and 3,000 press releases a year. There's no way for that volume of activity to not cost a lot of money – all for something that you cannot prove the value of except that I can show the CEO the coverage that those X thousand press releases generated and hopefully he won't ask me to verify it in terms of impact (interview, January 16, 2015).

The need to restructure the corporate communication function of the company and redeploy resources was informed by a **commitment to measurement and evaluation** (a second key characteristic noted) that led to a realization (the third informative feature of this case study). The VP of corporate communication said "there's this **dirty little secret** that I talk to my team about". He explained this 'dirty little secret' as follows:

We have, for good or bad, convinced our clients, our business partners, if you will, that what we do – media clips, coverage, volume – matters. It's a dirty little secret because what we all really know is that we can't really prove that it has any meaningful impact on the business ... I think we have two choices. You can continue to close your eyes and hope that people continue to believe that clips – media coverage – mean something valuable to the business. But we know today it doesn't. We could shake a stick and get a tonne of coverage today and still turn around tomorrow and have our lunch handed to us by our

competitors. Or we can use data-informed insights to engage in a way that actually has meaningful impact on brand affinity, perceptions, and the way people think about us as an organization. That's meaningful value (interview, January 16, 2015).

He emphasized that the structural and cultural change to new ways of communicating is not easy, saying:

It requires very hard decisions because, if you think about adding resources and activities, that means financial costs, and that means you have to stop something. You've got to eliminate some things ... you can't just add this to what you're doing today. You've got to make a conscious decision, for instance, that 25 per cent of what you've been doing has got to cease to exist – and that impacts people, work processes, and the way we think (interview, January 16, 2015).

The company has shifted substantial communication resources into research to track its brand and measure and evaluate its communication effectiveness, as well as social media. The VP responsible for corporate communication said the company collects data from three sources – “the voices of customers, the voices of employees, and the voices of social” (consumers and citizens generally) and integrates data from these “listening posts”. In addition to surveys among its 125 million customers, the corporation somewhat bravely tabulates the results of exit interviews with departing employees and draws data from **Glass Door** (<http://www.glassdoor.com>), an independent Web site on which employees anonymously rate companies in terms of pay and conditions, culture, and behaviour. For tracking social media, the company's head of digital media said his “favourite” tool is **Brandwatch**, but also reported that he has used **Radian6** and **Buffer** for social media monitoring and analysis and for “refining stories” and strategies in social media. The company also uses **CrowdAround**, an emerging product at the time of this research reportedly designed to replace **Yammer** as an internal organizational collaboration tool.⁸¹ The

company's VP of corporate communication said “every place where our customers are allowed to engage with us we're capturing data, analyzing it [sic], and then producing insights to inform our business”.

Comments by the company's head of digital ‘rain on the listening parade’ to some extent. He described traditional corporate communication as “you're either putting out fires or you're lighting fires”. In relation to social media, he said “in our function, we're constantly kindling. We're always out there trying to spark something”. Also, in referring to research and listening, he said “when we're *speaking*, we're trying to be really informed and seeing if it worked ... we want to be *breaking news*” (interview, January 16, 2015) [emphasis added].

Such statements reveal a lingering focus on speaking. They show a focus on “kindling” and “igniting” discussions rather than observing and listening to existing discussions. They also indicate that listening through research and social media monitoring is largely or mostly undertaken so the organization can accurately target potential customers, employees, and others with its messages. Such criticism is not to reject this case study as lacking listening. Indeed, it is commendable in many respects. But it illustrates the subconscious and often unconscious penchant for speaking that permeates public communication practices. It reveals a gravitational pull that makes most corporate, government, and organizational communication top-down and stifles bottom-up communication other than brief encounters when powerful organizations reach down to ‘test the temperature’ or surveil the landscape over which they reign.

A number of corporations spoke incessantly about “getting our messages across” and “adding value to the business” even when using terms such as ‘engagement’ and two-way communication.

Listening in public relations

Public relations departments and units are where this researcher expected to find considerable listening, given the explicit focus on two-way communication, engagement, dialogue, and relationships in PR theory.⁸² This facet of the research was a great disappointment.

The headquarters PR function of a global automotive manufacturer was insightful both in terms of the commitment of the PR head and for what it revealed about the importance of culture and structure. The PR manager was frank saying:

The culture here is mostly a command and control one. The senior management mostly have engineering backgrounds. That means we are very process driven and very focussed on numbers and data. But there is an awareness of the 'new world' out there (interview, January 30, 2015).

Even though dialogue allegedly "has become ubiquitous in public relations writing and scholarship" according to one PR academic text⁸³, he rated the ratio of speaking to listening in his company as 90–95 per cent speaking compared with 5–10 per cent listening. He reported that the headquarters corporate PR team was comprised of 70 staff. In addition, its two major global brands each have their own PR teams and the corporation operates through 18 national sales companies around the world which each have their own marketing staff. But he explained that the brand marketing teams and national sales companies are almost exclusively focussed on marketing and promotion of products.

A long-time PR practitioner, who was general manager of corporate affairs at the time of this research with a national wholesaler that supplies a large network of franchised stores, provided a sad and sobering description of how some organizations listen hardly at all. While his title was 'corporate affairs', his role was highly media-orientated and his background includes

considerable experience in public relations as well as related practices such as public affairs.

The GM corporate affairs said "the only communication we have with our key stakeholders, our retailers, is our annual general meeting, and the CEO insists on a quarterly update newsletter which I don't think anyone reads". The company uses social media, but in a "a very fragmented and broadcast way", according to the GM of corporate affairs.

Social media are managed through three different units in the company – corporate affairs is responsible for its corporate Twitter and LinkedIn accounts, its marketing department uses a variety of social media for "online selling", and a digital team has been created separately to operate the company's Facebook site. Furthermore, the digital team has been put under the control of the IT department. The GM, who is purportedly responsible for the company's overall public communication, said:

They don't have a clue about communication. They are focussed on technology platforms and systems. We use Twitter and LinkedIn to put out announcements. There's a constant flow of little bits of information. We receive very little feedback or comment (interview, March 6, 2015).

The company does do an annual staff survey conducted by an independent research firm. However, the GM corporate affairs said there is little face-to-face communication between management and staff. "They don't go out and talk to people." He was even blunter in relation to listening, adding: "And they certainly don't listen to them" (interview, March 6, 2015).

How does such a situation exist when an experienced communication professional is appointed to a senior role in an organization? That question is addressed in the following final section reporting findings of this study – 'Listening in management'.

Elsewhere, the senior vice president and a vice president of the digital and social media team in the New York office of a leading global PR firm were blunt in discussing the use of social media and research in public relations, saying:

The majority of what we do for clients is monitoring their own stuff – 90 per cent of our clients use us for media relations. It's very media-centric. One major client issued 26 press releases in four days during a show. They considered it a success based on the volume of publicity ... a lot of PR is still measured in terms of press clippings. And measurement is still mostly historical – looking back at what was done (interview, January 22, 2015).

They also reported that they “track issues”, but they described this in terms of identifying issues that clients could “jump on” for promotional gain. They referred to social media monitoring in this context as facilitating “news jacking” and “meme jacking” and gave an example.

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

Little evidence was found of systematic or substantial two-way communication, dialogue, or engagement led by public relations departments, units, or consultancies in the 36 organizations studied.

Listening in management

A critical element of organizational listening is articulation to senior management of views, opinions, needs, expectations, and interests that are found to be valid through a genuine ethical process of listening and analysis. Articulation of findings from organizational listening processes to senior management is essential because, in large-scale organizational environments, listening

is largely delegated (e.g., to social media analysts, consultation teams, etc.). Unless there is articulation of what organizational sites of listening hear to senior management, the voices of many stakeholders and publics will not receive attention, consideration or appropriate response.

Disarticulation of the voices of stakeholders and publics occurs for a variety of reasons including:

- A **culture** in which some people are not recognized as having a voice that should be listened to;
- **Fear** of presenting criticism and negative views to senior management among organization staff;
- Senior management **ignoring** or **dismissing** what the organization is told (e.g., on the basis that it is seen to be uninformed, incorrect, impractical, etc.).

There needs to be clear lines of reporting to senior management, and the ‘C suite’ needs to be disposed to and set aside time to listen, unlike the lamented position of the GM, corporate affairs of the national wholesaler who said:

“Senior management doesn’t listen to advice. They tell me that I need to develop a PR strategy to stop criticism. I tell them to stop doing what they are doing to cause the criticism, but they don’t take any notice. I try to explain that they are asking me to put lipstick on a pig. In the end, it’s still a pig.”

(interview, March 6, 2015)

Creating an 'architecture of listening' and doing the work of listening

This study shows that organizations – government, corporate, NGOs, and many non-profits – create an **architecture of speaking** in their organization-centric approaches to public communication. It argues that the policies, systems, structures, resources, and technologies devoted to speaking need to be counter-balanced by policies, systems, structures, resources, and technologies for listening – what this study calls an **architecture of listening**.

Also, it argues that, in parallel with the considerable work devoted to speaking to disseminate an organization's messages, organizations need to do the **work of listening**. This can be considerable and requires human resources and time.

Research indicates that an effective architecture of listening is comprised of the following key elements.

Culture of listening

A fundamental underpinning finding of this study is that organizational culture pre-determines the extent and effectiveness of listening. An architecture of listening needs to begin with establishing an organizational culture that affords recognition to stakeholders and publics, including stakeholders in some cases, and is prepared to engage in the processes of listening as defined in this report (see 'Seven canons of listening').

A key factor in determining the culture of organizations and their level of listening to stakeholders and publics is the **attitude and approach of the CEO**. The corporations and government departments and agencies moving most from broadcast models of information

transmission to engagement including listening all identified a key role played by their CEO. The Fortune 500 'telco' that has radically shifted from traditional newsletters to videos, which are largely staff-generated, identified the active role of its CEO in supporting and participating in the change. The deputy director of media and communication for an environmental agency participating in the study described the role of its CEO in "bringing in a new culture" as "huge" (interview, September 24, 2014). The CEO of a state environmental agency in another country asked to personally participate in interviews conducted with his communication and public consultation staff, saying engagement was among his highest priorities (interview, November 19, 2014).

Cultural understandings of what comprises *communication* also substantially shape organization-public interactions and specifically influence propensity to listen. Conceptualization of communication as transmitting, sending, broadcasting, distributing, and disseminating information and as telling, informing, presenting, showing, convincing, persuading, and educating, which is endemic in late Modernity societies, create a culture of speaking.

Policies for listening

With a culture that is open to and disposed towards listening, organizations then need to develop and implement policies for listening. More than broad philosophical statements, these should include specific directives and guidelines to relevant departments, units, and agencies on who is to be listened to and how listening is to be conducted. Policies of listening can include:

- **Clear directions from the CEO and senior management** that the organization is open for feedback and input and that various expressions of stakeholders' and publics' voice are to be acknowledged, given attention, interpreted to gain an understanding, given consideration, and responded to in an appropriate way – even if agreement and adoption are not possible;
- **Policies on social media use** that are open and encouraging, while ensuring governance through guidelines, training and monitoring;
- **Mandated measurement and evaluation** that includes requirements for rigorous methods of analyzing stakeholder and public feedback and reporting to senior management;
- **Policies to demonstrate listening** such as ensuring organization response is communicated to stakeholders and publics. For example, airlines routinely ask passengers to complete passenger feedback surveys, but airline inflight magazines and even frequent flyer newsletters rarely if ever report what happens as a result of feedback received – if anything. An article thanking passengers for their input and reporting, even broadly, on what was learned and what is being done as a result would 'close the listening loop'.

Politics of listening

An architecture of listening needs to recognize the "politics of listening", as discussed by a number of researchers such as Charles Husband and Nancy Fraser⁸⁴. The politics of listening are played out externally and internally. They begin with the first canon of listening – recognition. Who is listened to? Most often organizations listen to a narrow group of key stakeholders and fail to recognize others. For instance, large companies often view protesters as "ratbags" and "ferals", irrespective of the merits of their case. Also, large organizations often ignore so-called 'lay people' such as local residents and communities because they believe that they cannot understand complex issues and have

nothing to contribute. In so doing, they often fail to access valuable local knowledge. Western societies have ignored Indigenous knowledge for generations, believing it is inferior to 'scientific' knowledge and irrelevant today.

Not listening to someone is itself an overtly political act.

The politics of listening may be explicit, such as senior management making it clear that they are not interested in certain views or the views of certain groups that they revile and with which they have no interest in rapprochement. In such cases, voices fall 'on deaf ears' despite the efforts of communication staff, as occurred in the case of the general manager, corporate affairs at a national wholesaler who expressed frustration. In other cases, the politics of listening may be subtle, such as pretending to listen but with no intention of deviating from one's predetermined path.

The politics of listening also serve to inhibit and block listening internally within organizational systems. An insidious form of the politics of listening cuts off listening even before it gets to senior management. Indonesians have a phrase *asal bapak senang* that means 'as long as the boss is happy', also translated as 'never give the boss bad news'. This refers to a culture inside organizations in which information that is likely to upset senior management and lead to recriminations is discarded or 'buried'. Employees simply elect not to tell senior management about negative or critical views for fear that they will reflect badly on them and their colleagues, or simply because management become irritated and "things get ugly", as one customer relations executive commented (interview, February 3, 2015).

Having specific policies for listening, as well as structures and processes for listening as discussed next, serve to minimize the politics of listening.

Structures and processes for listening

In organizations listening is mostly delegated. The heads of large organizations such as presidents, prime ministers, ministers, permanent secretaries, CEOs, directors, and so on cannot personally listen to every person who wants to express a view relevant to the organization, or read every document that provides feedback, comment, suggestions, requests, proposals, and so on. Other than a limited number of letters, e-mails and phone calls that go direct to senior management, listening is usually assigned to specialist organizational functions such as public consultation teams, customer contact units, and a range of other public communication staff and agencies as discussed in this analysis.

When listening is delegated, it means that the messages and meanings of those who speak to or about the organization and relevant issues need to be captured; analyzed to determine their validity and practicality; conveyed to decision makers; considered; and responded to.

At the most basic level, **job descriptions**, also referred to as position descriptions, should explicitly state that listening in various forms is a requirement of certain roles, particularly those related to communication, engagement, consultation, customer relations, research, and social media. More than simply dropping in the word 'listening', these documents that prescribe the focus, priorities, and key accountabilities of roles should specify the purpose of listening and some details of the types of listening to be undertaken. An examination of 95 job descriptions for high-level positions supplied by a leading executive recruitment agency specializing in the corporate and marketing communication sector revealed that not one used the word 'listening' in any context. A large number of the documents specified 'engagement', several mentioned 'relationships', and one listed 'collaboration'. However, none described how these interactions were to occur and most were

very light on in recognition of audiences, stakeholders, or publics other than in the context of these constituting targets for "strategic" engagement and communication.

A second key element of structure and processes for listening is that **criteria need to be developed as the basis for determining whether, and to what extent, attention and consideration will be paid to certain voices, and these need to be fair and reasonable**. Criteria applied by some organizations include the following.

- **Popularity** of views based on frequency of similar statements. Applying this criterion requires some form of systematic analysis of the content of submissions, proposals, petitions, letters, online comments, and other expressions of voice over time to identify common views, themes, and patterns.
- However, majority and common views should not be the only basis of selection of issues to address. Sometimes, minority views and even a lone voice can raise important matters. Attention should be paid to the **merits** of each expression of voice.
- Also **social equity** and **ethics** should be considered. Are some individuals or groups denied a voice and disadvantaged? Is it ethical to ignore some voices and what they say? These are questions that can inform the processing of information received through consultations, customer relations, research, and other channels. While one organization in the 36 studied employed an anthropologist to assist in employee engagement, no organizations in the sample employed or sought advice from a sociologist or ethicist in relation to their various engagements with stakeholders and publics, despite many claims of corporate social responsibility, a social conscience, and community engagement. These are examples of expertise that can contribute to effective interpretation and articulation of the voice of stakeholders and publics to organization decision makers.

- Also, **risk assessment** methodology, which is commonly used in business and government, can be applied. A risk assessment should evaluate the potential of an issue to escalate, and weigh up the likelihood and level of potential benefits and potential negative impacts of taking responsive action versus not taking responsive action.

Further specific examples of structures and processes for large-scale organizational listening are provided later in this section under 'Models for organizational listening'.

At a broad structural and process level, there is a danger in government focus on transparency and *open government*, which collectively have become a zeitgeist of contemporary Western democracies. These principles are being interpreted and implemented in some cases as the provision of more and more information to citizens. This can result in information overload and hinder rather than help citizens. In a 2002 lecture series, Onora O'Neill (Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve and emeritus professor of philosophy at the University of Cambridge) said that government focus on transparency and disclosure often demonstrates a continuing informational logic. She said:

There has never been more abundant information about the individuals and institutions whose claims we have to judge. Openness and transparency are now possible on a scale of which past ages could barely dream. We are flooded with information about government departments and government policies.⁸⁵

Open government needs to be interpreted, first and foremost, as being open to listen to citizens and shaping policies and decisions after taking account of the range of views, needs, and interests in society. Second, open government requires ongoing *two-way* communication and engagement – not simply distributing information.

Baroness O'Neill said "openness or transparency is now all too easy: if they can produce or restore trust, trust should surely be within our grasp". Elsewhere O'Neill declared: "Trust grows out of listening, not telling"⁸⁶.

Technologies for listening

Eminent professor of political communication Stephen Coleman drew attention to the role of technologies for listening in the public sphere in an article that explored the "challenge of digital hearing" and the use of what he called "technologies of hearing".⁸⁷ Also, a number of other authors have written with varying degrees of excitement and optimism about *e-democracy*, *e-government*, and the potential of Web 2.0-based social media to democratize media⁸⁸ and revolutionize public communication.⁸⁹

However, while technologies can play an important part in an architecture of listening, organizational listening cannot be achieved by simply 'bolting on' a technology 'solution'. Machines can collect and process information. Stephen Coleman is right – technologies can 'hear' through processing texts, sounds, and visual images. But humans need to make judgements about what is said. Only humans can apply empathy, social considerations, ethical reflections, and humans make decisions about whether to accept or reject, act on or ignore, what others say. Humans determine whether voice matters.

Having made these qualifications, it is important to note that a wide and growing range of technologies is available to aid organizational listening as well as organizational and individual speaking. These include:

- **Media monitoring applications and services;**
- **Social media monitoring applications and services;**
- **Text analysis and content analysis software programs.** These are widely used to analyze

media content, but their use can be extended to analyzing other texts such as complaints over a period, as demonstrated by Alex Gillespie, Tom Reader, and their colleagues in the UK⁹⁰;

- **Online consultation applications**, sometimes referred to as *e-democracy* and *e-consultation*, although the latter term is widely used for online medical consultation;
- **Automated acknowledgement systems** such as those effectively used by the Obama Online Operation during the 2008 US presidential election campaign;
- **Specialist sense making software**; and
- **Argumentation software** and systems.

Examples of a number of these methods and systems at work are provided at the end of this section under 'Models for organizational listening' and also a list of software applications and services discussed by participants in this study is provided in Appendix 1.

Social media are one of the most obvious and most accessible technologies for organizational listening. However, as reported by a number of researchers, organizations widely use social media primarily for distributing their messages and promoting their brands, services, products, and events. Even in 2014, a study of complaints processing by large US companies found that "companies are not fully embracing the opportunities of social media to demonstrate their willingness to interact with and assist their stakeholders". The researchers reported that "organizational responsiveness is only moderate".⁹¹

Resources for listening

If organizations have the first four elements for listening – that is, if they have a culture of openness and willingness to listen, policies to actively listen to key stakeholders and publics, address the politics of listening, and have structures and processes in place for large-scale

listening – then the issue of resources looms large. As interviewees unanimously said in this study, organizations are highly unlikely to allocate increased budgets to public communication in the near future.

While some systems and tools are automated or semi-automated, listening requires **human resources, time, and budgets** for functions such as research, social media monitoring and analysis, consultation, customer relations, and processing of correspondence. This raises a key question about how organizations can extend their activities to increase listening.

All interviewees advised that **reallocation of resources from ineffective activities allows two-way communication and engagement activities to be resourced**. In some cases, organizations reported doing more and getting better results with less. The key to identifying ineffective activities and prioritizing is measurement and evaluation undertaken using rigorous qualitative as well as quantitative methods.

Another strategy reported is using peer support and crowdsourcing to resource some functions. For example, several corporate and some government customer relations units that have transitioned some or all of their customer communication online are engaging other customers in answering basic questions and sharing information. While being wary of misinformation being distributed, which they manage by closely monitoring peer-to-peer communication, they are finding that crowdsourcing can answer many customer questions and resolve some problems, thereby reducing the work and resources required.

Skills for listening

The reallocation of resources, the shift to new processes, and adoption of new technologies noted in the previous sections have major implications for education, training, and

employment in fields such as marketing communication, corporate communication, organizational communication, and public relations. Traditional core skills and competencies such as writing, editing, producing strategic plans, arranging events, and so on will increasingly not be enough for organizations transitioning to two-way engagement, dialogue, and relationship building to create stakeholder satisfaction and trust. This study found that some of the most innovative and effective communication was created by behavioural psychologists, researchers, and policy specialists committed to consultation, as well as a few pioneering social media teams in customer relations. A traditional advertising, marketing, PR, or corporate communication executive was not to be seen at the forefront of genuine engagement, dialogue, and relationship building with stakeholders and publics.

This is an area requiring further study. What can be identified immediately, however, is that skills for organizational listening almost certainly need to include:

- Knowledge of **feedback mechanisms and a range of qualitative as well as quantitative research methods** such as surveys, focus groups, interviews, case studies, ethnography, and participatory action research;
- Operational skills to engage dialogically in **interactive digital environments such as social media** and online forums;
- **Text and content analysis**, not only for media analysis, but for analyzing transcripts of interviews, consultation meetings, complaints letters, etc.;
- Understanding of consultation techniques and the use of **e-consultation** software;
- High level **presentation skills such as using video** to directly present stakeholders' and publics' views to management;
- An understanding of **psychology** and **behavioural insights**; and increasingly
- **'Big data' analysis**.

Articulation of listening to decision making

Finally, an architecture of listening needs to incorporate lines of reporting and accountabilities to ensure that what an organization hears and has merit is acted upon in some appropriate way.

Not everything that an organization 'hears' needs to be or should be referred to senior management for a decision or consideration in policy making. Clearly, what is articulated to senior management for consideration in decision making and policy making needs to be critically analyzed using criteria, as recommended under 'Policies for listening'. Private companies cannot be expected to kowtow to the wishes of external publics, and even public companies have limited responsibilities beyond those in relation to their shareholders, employees, and the environment that are delineated in law. Too much responsiveness could prevent corporations implementing coherent strategies and making long-term plans. Also, too much government responsiveness is seen as undesirable as it would undermine the stability and functioning of policy making by subjecting processes to whims and emotions rather than evidence.

However, there are indications that the bar is set far too low in terms of the extent to which policy makers and decision makers respond affirmatively to stakeholders' and publics' concerns, views, and proposals. Much greater articulation of the voice of stakeholders and publics to decision makers and policy makers needs to be established.

The work of listening

With the eight elements of an architecture of listening in place, organizations are in a position to undertake the work of listening. Organizations should make no mistake, large-scale listening is work. Declaring a policy of listening and inviting feedback, comment, and input are only the

beginning. As a UK government deputy director of communication said:

Being open takes hard work. It's not just publishing things. It's working hard to think about and get into the spirit of the interaction ... openness and transparency are two very different things. Transparency is like we'll give you lots of information. Openness is the other way round. It's about you talk to us (interview, February 2, 2015).

The work of listening needs to be focused on reception, acknowledgement, interpretation to gain understanding through analysis and other processes, consideration, and articulating the views of stakeholders and publics that are assessed as being valid and reasonable based on established criteria to decision makers and policy makers.

The work of listening includes monitoring of traditional and social media to identify reported stakeholder and public concerns, views and interests (not just tracking the organization's publicity); analyzing social media to identify and try to understand others' views (not just counting the organization's 'hits'); conducting open-minded research and inclusive public consultations; and designing and implementing specialist listening strategies such as those discussed in the next section.

Public communication professionals mainly do the work of speaking on behalf of their organizations, or hold a megaphone to the lips of CEOs and politicians while they speak. They need to rethink their role and restructure their calendars, work plans, and job lists to do the work of listening.

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Models for organizational listening

A number of initiatives worldwide provide models for organizational listening, highlighting both positive features to emulate as well as negative features to avoid. These are discussed in some detail in the book emanating from this research study (Macnamara, 2016). In summary, these include the following.

- **The National Commission for Public Debate (NCPD)** [*Commission Nationale du Débat Public*] established in France in 1995 is an important model of formal public consultation to examine because it was created as an independent agency with legislated powers; it has been in operation for two decades; and as at early 2015 it had conducted 69 major public debates on national issues and 21 post-public. In the words of vice president of the NCPD, Professor Laurence Monnoyer-Smith, the commission has been successful in bringing big companies, citizens and local communities together to talk and in forcing big companies to consider the views of communities and 'lay' people, who were previously considered unable to contribute to highly technical and complex discussions and, therefore, ignored. However, she points out that the commission focusses on rational deliberative debate that limits input; the processes of formalizing public consultation create major delays in projects and even cancellations; and the commission leads to the "mobilization" and "radicalization of opposition" by providing a platform for activist groups to make headlines and build their profile. Also, she says that, after 20 years and many major public consultations, there are some signs that citizens suffer "participation fatigue".
- **The 2008 and 2012 Obama US presidential campaigns** have been cited already in this analysis. Independent studies found that, in peak periods, the much-vaunted Obama Online Operation (Triple O) "did not reply to

followers, or indicate that direct messages were being heard” during the times of heaviest use of digital technologies.⁹² Also, the campaigns had massive budgets to work with, had to be sustained only over a relatively short period, and their main objective was fundraising and mobilizing citizens to vote – not deep engagement in discussion of issues or policy. However, the Obama campaigns demonstrated the importance and benefit of issuing quick acknowledgements of all citizen contacts which contributed to unprecedented levels of basic online engagement

- The **Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Collaboratorium/ Deliberatorium** is a long-running online consultation on climate change that has experimented with a range of argument mapping and argumentation processes and software tools and has documented the challenges faced and how these have been addressed (<http://cci.mit.edu/klein/deliberatorium.html>). Researchers involved in the project, Luca Landolfi, Mark Klein and Giuseppe Zolla, note that “few attempts have been made to support large, diverse and geographically dispersed groups in systematically exploring and coming to decisions about complex and controversial issues”.⁹³ The project leader Mark Klein and his colleagues have identified a number of elements required for effective large-scale listening. These, combined with learnings from a study of online public consultation in Australia, suggest that large scale discussion online requires:
 - **Background reading** for those unfamiliar with topics to enable them to gain understanding in order to participate in an informed way;
 - A **moderation** function to intervene in unacceptable communication such as comments involving racism, sexism or vilification;
 - An **acknowledgement** function (possibly auto-generated) to respond to contributors promptly;
 - A **categorization** function to group information and comments into topics or headings so they are easy for participants to find and follow;
 - **Editors’ summaries** to update late-comers to the conversation and condense and clarify large volumes of comment; and
 - Collection of comments in a **database** as a secure and searchable record.⁹⁴
- The **MIT Dialogue Project** is another initiative of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. It takes a particular approach to promoting dialogue and public participation by drawing on the expertise of university professors in psychology, leadership, and business to lead discussions. The MIT Dialogue Project provides public consultation facilitation services to government, educational institutions, and business.⁹⁵
- The **National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD)** is a network of more than 2,200 innovators who join in discussion on major issues, plan actions, and provide advice and assistance to citizens and communities on civic and political participation. Headquartered in Pennsylvania, the organization describes itself as “a gathering place, a resource center, a news source, and a facilitative leader for this vital community of practice”. The NCDD Web site (<http://ncdd.org>) serves as a clearinghouse for research studies, papers, and other resources such as the NCDD’s ‘Resource Guide on Public Engagement’, and the coalition organizes conferences, forums, and seminar on issues related to engagement and public participation.⁹⁶
- The **Public Dialogue Consortium (PDC)** is a non-profit organization in the US, operating mainly in California. The group originally

focussed on interpersonal communication, but its activities have expanded to include training and facilitation of dialogue, particularly in practices such as government-community consultation. Its approach is different to the MIT Dialogue Project, which draws expertise from academics and industry experts, in that it provides its own trained coaches to create and facilitate dialogue within and between groups and offer consulting services to organizations (see <http://publicdialogue.org>).

- **The 2003 GMNation? 'foundation discussion' workshops in the UK** was a series of public consultations launched in the UK in 2003 as part of nationwide discussion and policy making in relation to genetically modified crops that has been widely reported. This initiative is interesting for the way it combined a series of nine "foundation discussion workshops", which were fully public and had an open agenda, with discussion among experts and analysis by the government's own civil service professionals. Andrew Dobson describes this initiative as an example of *apophatic* listening.⁹⁷
- **The Restorative Gentrification Listening Project, Portland, Oregon** is a product of the Portland Office of Neighborhood Involvement that uses restorative listening circles to address issues of racism and social injustice in order to build community and cultural understanding and to find ways to act together to include and value all members of a community. This particular listening and engagement exercise focuses on identifying the harm caused to poor communities by gentrification of neighbourhoods and developing solutions to redress that harm. However, the processes such as 'listening circles' can be applied in a range of situations.⁹⁸
- **The California Report Card** is a more recent example of organized online public listening. This is comprised of a mobile-optimized Web application designed to promote engagement by residents with the California state government. It was developed by Professor Ken Goldberg and the Center for Information Technology Research in the Interest of Society (CITRIS) at the University of California, Berkeley as part of its data and democracy initiative in conjunction with California Lieutenant Governor Gavin Newsom.⁹⁹ Version 1.0 was released in January 2014. The application is based on the World Bank's Citizen Report Card¹⁰⁰, as well as a Berkeley University online consultation application called Opinion Space, also known as The Collective Discovery Engine. On the CRC site participants are encouraged to grade the California government on a scale from A+ to F (fail) on six timely topics, and to offer their own suggestions of issues that they believe need attention.¹⁰¹ While being a simple online survey in many respects, it is the open-ended nature of the site that offers the most potential for listening, with citizens able to enter comments and suggestions.
- **Argument mapping and facilitation** – complex discussions and consultations can be assisted with the use of argument mapping, also referred to as *conversation mapping*¹⁰², *discourse architecture*¹⁰³, and *computer-supported argumentation visualization*¹⁰⁴. This approach draws on concepts such as:
 - The **argumentation support model** developed by Aldo de Moor and Mark Aakhus¹⁰⁵;
 - The **new rhetoric** of Chaïm Perelman¹⁰⁶;
 - The **informal logic** and **argument analysis structure** of Stephen Toulmin¹⁰⁷; and
 - A number of academic models such as **argument schemes** developed by Douglas Walton¹⁰⁸ and the **Issue Based Information System (IBIS)** of Jeff Conklin¹⁰⁹.

These processes produce 'maps' and 'trees' showing for and against arguments and linkages and connections, as well as summaries of key issues and points. These concepts are complex. Fortunately, a number of specialist software applications are available, such as **Argunet** (<http://www.argunet.org>). In addition, organizations usually employ specialists to assist in these more sophisticated approaches.

- **Sense making methodology** is another sophisticated approach relevant to listening, particularly to large-scale listening when huge volumes of information can be involved and diverse views expressed. Originating in human computer interaction and information science and technology fields¹¹⁰, sense making has been applied to organizational studies¹¹¹ and can be applied to communication. In a communication context, sense making methodology prescribes methods of question framing, data collection, and analysis that can be used in conducting research designed to understand how people experience and make sense of the phenomenon being studied in and on their own terms.¹¹² However, no organizations studied used or were even aware of sense making methodology and only one article could be found in research literature applying this methodology to corporate communication or public relations¹¹³.

Other less complex mechanisms that can be applied to aid organizational listening and form part of an architecture of listening include:

- **Turn taking**, which is a feature of public diplomacy used as a way to 'level the playing field' when there are disparities of power between negotiating parties¹¹⁴;
- **Listening posts**, which can be physical locations such as 'pop up' public consultation sites (e.g., booths, temporary offices, even

tents or marquees), although increasingly these are Web sites;

- **Captive Audience Meetings** (CAMS, which have attracted considerable criticism because of their use by employers "to compel employees to listen to anti-union and other types of proselytizing". Roger Hartley is one who has challenged such uses of captive audience meetings and argued for "a freedom not to listen".¹¹⁵ However, the concept of captive audience meetings can be used in a broader sense, such as using existing gatherings of citizens or members of associations and groups to discuss matters of common interest;
- **Customer engagement summits** or establishment of a permanent **customer engagement council**, which is recommended by McKinsey consultants as a way to give customers a high level voice to speak directly to management¹¹⁶;
- **Reconciliation committees**, which tend to be used mainly for major social issues such as ethnic tensions and Indigenous reconciliation;
- **Ombuds** (an abbreviation now widely used instead of *ombudsman*, which is a gendered term), who are commonly appointed by government, but also can be established by private sector organizations to provide an independent channel for inquiries and complaints and represent the interests of the public to an organization.¹¹⁷ If appointed in an organization, an ombud should adhere to the International Ombudsman Association Standards of Practice that are available online (<https://www.ombudsassociation.org>);
- **Citizens' juries**, which are panels of citizens who are presented with evidence and asked to decide on a number of options such as approving or opposing a project. Citizen juries have been used to gain citizen input in

relation to offshore wind farms in Scotland¹¹⁸ and to decide on the development of roads through the World Heritage listed Daintree Forest near Cairns in northern Australia¹¹⁹;

- **Trust networks**, which are derived from the work of Charles Tilley, who described them as groups of people connected by similar ties and interests whose “collective enterprise is at risk to the malfeasance, mistakes, and failures of individual members”¹²⁰. In simple terms, trust networks have mutual dependency, or what business analysts call having ‘skin in the deal’, which generates a commitment to achieving mutually acceptable outcomes;
- **Study circles**, which are small groups of people who meet multiple times to discuss an issue. There is no ‘teacher’ or chair, but one member usually acts as facilitator. Staffan Larsson and Henrik Nordvall provide an independent review and examples¹²¹;
- **Community liaison officer** appointments for groups affected by the activities of an organization;
- **Advisory boards and committees** with representation from all relevant stakeholders, public and stakeholders, not only leaders from major groups and elites.

While this analysis is not able to comprehensively review all aids available to facilitate organizational listening, it has identified a number of example of systems, tools, methods, structures, technologies, and models of practice that can enable and enhance organizational listening, including on a large scale. These serve to show that large-scale listening is possible and that a body of knowledge about organizational listening is emerging, albeit it is spread across many disciplines and fields of practice and requires synthesis and further development.

The benefits of the work and 'architecture of listening'

A fundamental question that arises from this study – the 'elephant in the room' in business-speak – is the ultimate question in any research project: so what? More specifically, there are a number of interrelated questions including: why do organizations have to listen – including to strangers in some cases? Even more importantly for many, what are the benefits of organizational listening? These are questions that have arisen during this research project, posed both as genuine inquiries as well as veiled objections or perceived obstacles. One more key question that must be added to these is: what happens if organizations don't listen to their stakeholders, publics, and concerned stakeholders?

These questions were carefully considered in this study and are briefly answered here. See *Organizational Listening: The Missing Corollary of Speaking in Public Communication*¹²² for a detailed discussion.

Reinvigorating democracy and democratic government

Numerous studies of what is termed the 'democratic deficit' have clearly established that citizens in democracies want their governments at national, state, and local levels to listen to them more. Stephen Coleman's research in the UK is particularly salutary – and worrying.¹²³ He found that many UK citizens are disillusioned and disengaged. Citizens do not trust their own elected political leaders very much in any of the countries studied. Barely half trust their civil service in Britain. Only 15–16 per cent trust business.¹²⁴

And it is much the same or worse in other countries – for example see Table 3 for a summary of the findings of a 2015 Harvard University study of trust in government, business, media, and institutions among US citizens.

Source	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
The President	44%	41%	41%	39%	32%
Congress	25%	23%	23%	18%	14%
The Supreme Court	45%	44%	45%	40%	36%
The Federal Government	29%	27%	27%	22%	20%
United Nations	40%	38%	38%	34%	34%
Your state government	–	28%	32%	30%	28%
Your local government	–	33%	37%	34%	33%
Wall Street	11%	–	13%	12%	12%
Mass media	17%	–	–	11%	11%

Table 3. The percentage of young Americans (18–29) who say they trust the above institutions to do the right thing all or most of the time. (Source: Harvard University, 2015)¹²⁵

Does trust in government matter? It most definitely does, according to Marc Hetherington (2005), author of *Why Trust Matters*¹²⁶, Charles Tilley¹²⁷, and a number of other researchers. Kate Lacey argues that the loss of trust in politicians and government is a serious concern “because of the role that trust plays in a representative political system”¹²⁸. If people do not trust a system, they defect from it, as noted by Charles Tilley and Andrew Dobson.¹²⁹ They either ignore it, which breaks down the foundational participatory basis of democracy, or they are open to, or actively seek, alternative systems. The radicalization of youth in the US, UK and Australia, mostly stable peaceful democracies, suggests that young citizens are disillusioned with institutionalized politics and government in these countries. The prevalence of ‘hung’ parliaments and political parties having to establish often uncomfortable coalitions with minority parties in a number of democratic countries including the UK and Australia are signs of an even broader general disillusionment among citizens with all shades of institutionalized politics.

There is evidence that this loss of trust is related to lack of listening. An Australia Institute study in 2013 found that the issues most talked about by politicians and reported in media do not align with citizens’ major concerns. The youth engagement officer of the Australia Institute, Bridget Daly, says that young people “don’t feel as though they are being represented by politicians – they don’t feel as though they are being listened to”. She adds: “Almost half the nation’s young voters aged under-25 believe no party represents their interests”.¹³⁰

As shown in Table 3, the 2015 ‘Trust in Institutions and the Political Process’ study conducted by Harvard University reported that trust in the president, congress, federal, state and local government, and even the courts has fallen among 18–29 year olds. Only 14 per cent of young Americans trust the US Congress to do the

right thing all or most of the time, and only 20 per cent trust the federal government in this context.

Political scientists, sociologists, and communication scholars unanimously see participation as fundamental to a healthy democracy, although not all agree on the level and type of participation that is desirable or achievable. For a start, it is well established that a sizeable proportion of citizens remain uninvolved and passive in terms of politics and civil society – referred to *lurkers* in social media, with studies showing that as many as 90 per cent of Internet users ‘lurk’ in sites without making a contribution to discussion.¹³¹

But there is evidence that citizens, particularly young citizens, are seeking new ways to participate in politics and new ways to engage in civil society. Democracy needs to accommodate those wishes and expectations.

To rebuild trust in government and to maintain stable democracies, politicians, government departments, and agencies at all levels need to be more open to more people – not just elites and the dominant political actors such as leaders of big business, lobby groups, trade unions, major churches, powerful NGOs, and journalists. There needs to be an understanding of listening – what it requires, and what it does not require or promise, such as total agreement, a panacea for solving all problems, or capitulation. But there needs to be real dialogue, real conversations, real engagement – not the PR puff and one-sided talkfest to which citizens are subjected on a daily basis.

The benefits of effective ethical listening can include increased trust in government, leading to political stability and increased participation in politics and civil society, which in turn lead to more equitable representation, better policy making, and reduced crises through the detection of early insights and warnings.

Business sustainability – the 'bottom line of listening'

Business also needs to listen to create and maintain trust and legitimacy. In a post on the 2015 World Economic Forum blog titled 'Why Trust Matters in Business', the chairman of Baker & McKenzie USA, Eduardo Leite, wrote:

... lack of public trust runs deep and it extends to both individual leaders and institutions. Perhaps more worrying, the trend looks set to continue, if the opinions of the next generation are anything to go by ... lack of trust is something we should all be worried about, because trust matters. For many companies, particularly professional services firms like the one where I work, trust is at the centre of the business model.¹³²

Leite went on to say that "in business, trust is the glue that binds employees to employers, customers to companies – and companies to their suppliers, regulators, government and partners". He also said:

Most companies appreciate that high trust levels lead to a stronger reputation, sustainable revenues, greater customer advocacy and increased employee retention. It is also likely that companies with higher levels of trust will bounce back from future crises far quicker than others.

Can listening contribute to and rebuild trust?

There is substantial empirical evidence to show that it can. For example, a detailed study of 20 companies – 10 selected from a *Fortune* list of 'most admired companies' and 10 from the list of 'most hated companies' in America – reported that "a significant positive association existed between the perceived quality of dialogic communication and the level of trust". The study further reported that openness to stakeholders and publics is "especially germane in engendering public trust"¹³³.

Henry Jenkins writing with Sam Ford and Joshua Green says that companies that "listen to ... their audiences" will thrive.¹³⁴

Better listening can contribute to business sustainability in a number of way including:

- **Successful strategy** through embracing 'emergent strategy' that results from interaction with stakeholders and an organization's environment, rather than top-down internally developed strategy;¹³⁵
- **Effective management** creating increased employee engagement, motivation and loyalty; and
- **Creating a 'social organization' or 'social business'** as recommended by Gartner and embraced by business leaders such as IBM.¹³⁶

A number of management studies and independent academic research show that two-way communication including listening leading to dialogue and engagement provide a number of bottom line outcomes for organizations. National Business Hall of Fame member Peter Nulty says that "of all the skills of leadership, listening is one of the most valuable" and, in turn, he points to leadership as a vital element of business success.¹³⁷ Sadly and instructively, he adds that listening is "one of the least understood" skills. Former McKinsey & Company senior executive and author of *The Will To Lead*, Marvin Bower, lends support to the findings of this research saying that, particularly in 'command and control' companies, "a high proportion of CEOs ... don't listen very well ... in fact, chief executives of command companies are generally ... poor listeners".¹³⁸

It is not possible in one short discussion to identify and substantiate all the potential benefits of organizational listening. However, some well-supported arguments are overviewed in the final pages of this report demonstrating that there are tangible 'bottom line' benefits of listening.

- Human resources management expert Avraham Kluger says that “truly listening to one’s workers is good for business”.¹³⁹
- Specifically, internal communication by managers with employees motivates their subordinates to provide **superior service to customers**.¹⁴⁰
- A 2010 study by Sheila Bentley reported that improving listening in an organization can have positive outcomes for **customer satisfaction** and even **profitability** of a business.¹⁴¹
- Employees’ knowledge about their jobs and the organization (i.e., engagement) contributes to the creation of organizational advocates, who can **enhance the organization’s reputation and increase sales** in sales and marketing environments.¹⁴²
- Research shows that **productivity and profitability increase** when employees are motivated and engaged.¹⁴³ However, a 2013 Gallup ‘State of the Global Workplace’ study found that only 13 per cent of employees are engaged at work and concluded that “increasing workplace engagement is vital to achieving sustainable growth for companies, communities, and countries”.¹⁴⁴
- The 2013 Edelman Trust Barometer survey reported that listening is the highest rated attribute for **establishing trust in organizations**. Successive annual Edelman Trust Barometer studies indicate that if there is one thing that increases satisfaction, trust, and reputation, listening is near the top of the list.¹⁴⁵

If there is one thing that increases satisfaction, trust, and reputation, listening is near the top of the list.

There is also a strong case that improved organizational listening can make a significant contribution to:

- **Customer retention;**
- **Reduced staff turnover;**
- **Improved morale** leading to **increased productivity;**
- **Reduced disputation** in the workplace;
- **Crisis avoidance** through early detection of critical issues.

Conversely, a number of studies have concluded **that ineffective or lack of organizational listening can lead to financial costs and damage** (such as dealing with problems and even crises), dysfunctional organizational communication (e.g., internal communication breakdowns), and organizations that dominate communities rather than work cooperatively with them, leading to resentment, loss of trust, reputational damage, and lost opportunities for collaboration.¹⁴⁶ Chicago-based communication consultant David Grossman says **disengagement of employees is costing business between US\$450 million and \$1 billion a year**.¹⁴⁷

Governments also can gain ‘bottom line’ results from better listening. The UK *Health and Social Care Bill* fiasco before a ‘Listening Exercise’ was ordered by the British PM illustrates clearly the cost of not listening. As a senior UK health communication executive summarized:

What happened with the *Health and Social Care Bill* was a classic. We’ll save time on engagement because we know what we want to do. That was the assumption. Of course, then having to do consultation and engagement with stakeholders retrospectively meant it took longer and if you look at the Bill itself, I think it has the world record for the most amount of amendments on a Bill ever. It’s had something in the region of 1,800 to 2,000 amendments. That is a huge cost in time for government and stakeholders (interview, February 2, 2015).

Such a process cost huge amounts of time and money – albeit not as much as the catastrophic failure to listen to UK hospital complaints that led to the death of around 300 people, several major inquiries, and millions of pounds in legal costs.¹⁴⁸

Transforming public communication practice

The public relations industry explicitly claims to conduct two-way communication and dialogue, even to the point of *symmetry*. However, a number of scholars have exposed huge holes in these claims.¹⁴⁹ Robert Brown argues that contemporary PR theory is ahistorical and proclaims “the myth of symmetry”.¹⁵⁰ This study indicates that the claims of PR theory for two-way communication, dialogue, and symmetry between organizations and their stakeholders and publics are farcical in many cases. Many of the same criticisms can be made of corporate communication and organizational communication.

Genuine commitment to, and resourcing of, listening would give meaning to the normative theories of public relations and provide a much more ethical form of practice. Alternatively, PR needs to be honest and recognize that the practice is one of representing the voice of organizations. Another view is that corporate communication, by virtue of its name and focus, is the function of speaking for an organization, while public relations should focus on relationships and interaction. There is much for public relations, corporate communication, and organizational communication scholars and practitioners to think about based on the findings of this study.

Listening for social equity

Improved listening by organizations also will make a substantial contribution to social equity and create a fairer, more just society. This will occur through:

- Listening to **marginalized voices** such as the poor, Indigenous people, LGBT communities, refugees, remote communities, as well as culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) and Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities, and people from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB), who are frequently drowned out or ignored in the noisy ‘wrangle of the marketplace’¹⁵¹ that occurs in neoliberal democracies;
- **Listening to the silent majority** – popular culture has long recognized the ‘silent majority’, and this group is joined by the *silenced majority* – those who are sidelined, ignored, and excluded from political debate and media discussion, which is a key site of the public sphere;
- **Listening across cultures** – increasingly in multicultural societies, and that means most societies today, organizations need to listen across cultures. Dame Freya Stark, a widely respected travel writer who died at age 100 in 1993, said in her book *Journey’s Echo* that the best advice when encountering new and different cultures is “hold your tongue and develop your listening skills”.¹⁵² Noted authority on sustainable economic development, Ernesto Sirotli, is even blunter about how so-called experts and organizations should operate when working across cultures. In describing his experiences in aid work, he said well-intentioned aid workers often hear of a problem and go to work to prescribe solutions because they are the ‘experts’. He says this is naïve and unproductive. He advises that the best way to help someone is “shut up and listen” to tap into local knowledge and the ideas of those directly involved and affected;¹⁵³
- **Listening across diversity** – differences between people such as culture, language skills, abilities, and religion, faith, or belief systems present particular listening

challenges, as Tanja Dreher has argued.¹⁵⁴ Beyond tolerance, openness to the other demands acceptance and understanding;

- **Listening across borders** – in today’s globalized world, organizational listening by governments, corporations, and NGOs also needs to occur across borders. Not only are borders geographic, but they exist as political and ideological borders. Communication is the primary mechanism for breaching borders without unwelcome incursion. But communication across borders must involve open, ethical listening, not simply intelligence

gathering or selective listening to serve one’s own interests. We hear often of ‘communication breakdowns’ and the tendency is to believe that these are caused by not making a case (i.e., speaking) well enough. But rarely are communication breakdowns caused by a lack of talking; they are usually the result of a lack of listening.

Today we have the skills and technologies to listen to the universe. But often we don’t listen to people around us.



Photo: Albert Barr, Phoenix, Arizona.

Appendix 1.

Category	Product/Service	Details
Media monitoring (basic tools):	Google Alerts	https://www.google.com/alerts
	Mention	https://en.mention.com
Media monitoring (services)	Cision	http://www.cision.com
	BurrellesLuce	http://www.burrellesluce.com
	Gorkana	http://gorkana.com/pr-products/media-monitoring (owned by Cision)
	Kantar Media	http://www.kantarmedia.com
	iSentia	http://www.isentia.com (formerly Media Monitors)
	Meltwater	http://www.meltwater.com
	CyberAlert	http://cyberalert.com
Media analytics (vendor supplied)	Google Analytics	http://www.google.com/analytics
	Tweetdeck	https://tweetdeck.twitter.com
	Twitter Analytics	https://analytics.twitter.com/about
	Twitter for Business	https://business.twitter.com
	Facebook Insights	https://www.facebook.com/insights
	Pinterest Analytics	https://analytics.pinterest.com
Media analysis tools (basic, free or low cost)	Hootsuite	https://hootsuite.com
	Netvibes	http://www.netvibes.com
	Sprout Social	http://sproutsocial.com
	Social Mention	http://socialmention.com
	Tableau	http://tableau.com
	Klout	https://klout.com
	Traackr	http://traackr.com
	Trackur	http://www.trackur.com
	Coosto	http://www.coosto.com
	Topsy	http://topsy.com
	Lexer	http://lexer.com.au
	Local Measure	http://www.getlocalmeasure.com
	Pulsar TRAC	http://www.pulsarplatform.com
	Simply Measured	http://simplymeasured.com
	Buffer	https://bufferapp.com
	Kiss Metrics	https://www.kissmetrics.com
BuzzNumbers	http://www.buzznumbershq.com (owned by iSentia)	
Twitalzyer	http://www.twitalzyer.com	

	Quintly	https://www.quintly.com
Media analysis <i>(proprietary, advanced tools, mostly automated)</i>	Radian6	http://www.exacttarget.com/au/products/social-media-marketing (now owned by Salesforce)
	Brandwatch	http://www.brandwatch.com
	Gorkana	http://www.gorkana.com (Gorkana Group incorporates Gorkana, Durrants and Metrica; owned by Cision)
	Visible Technologies	http://www.cision.com/us (now owned by Cision)
	SR7	http://www.sr7.com.au (now owned by KPMG)
	Cymfony	http://www.cymfony.com (purchased by Visible Technologies 2012, which is now owned by Cision)
	Buzzlogic	http://www.twelfefold.com (now owned by Twelfefold)
	Infegy Atlas	https://infegy.com
	SAS Analytics	http://www.sas.com/social
	SocialSignin	http://socialsignin.co.uk
	Vizie	http://www.csiro.au/en/Research/DPF/Areas/The-digital-economy/Digital-service-delivery/Vizie
Media analysis <i>(service providers)</i>	Gorkana	http://www.gorkana.com
	Prime Research	http://www.prime-research.com
	Saliency Insight	http://www.saliencyinsight.com
	Cision	http://www.cision.com (owns Delahaye, MediaMap, Vocus, Visible Technologies and Gorkana)
	Ketchum	https://www.ketchum.com/research-analytics
	CARMA International	http://www.carma.com (CARMA US owned by Saliency Insight; CARMA Asia Pacific owned by iSentia)
	Kantar Media	http://www.kantarmedia.com
	MediaTrack	http://www.mediatrack.com
	Precise	http://www.precise.co.uk (a Kantar Media company)
	We Are Social	http://wearesocial.com
	Meltwater	http://www.meltwater.com
E-consultation & collaboration:	Citizen Space	www.citizenspace.com
	Yammer	https://www.yammer.com
	CrowdAround	A planned replacement for Yammer (https://prezi.com/qujtz_n_zxqyj/crowdaround)
	SocialText	http://www.socialtext.com
	eNgageSpace	https://www.engagespace.co.uk
	Evernote	https://evernote.com
	Objective	http://www.objective.com
	Dialogue by Design	http://www.dialoguebydesign.co.uk
Reputation	IdeaScale	https://ideascale.com
	Alva	http://www.alva-group.com
	Brandseye	http://www.brandseye.com

CRM	Salesforce	http://www.salesforce.com/au/marketing-cloud
	Brandwatch	http://www.brandwatch.com
	Sysomos	https://www.sysomos.com
	Lithium	http://www.lithium.com
	Nielsen Buzzmetrics	http://www.nielsen-online.com/products_buzz.jsp?section=pro_buzz#1
	IBM Watson Analytics	http://www.ibm.com/analytics/watson-analytics
	Simplify 360	http://simplify360.com
	Alterian	http://www.sdl.com/cxc/digital-experience/alterian.html (now owned by SDL)
	Foresee	http://www.foresee.com
	Epicor Clientele	http://www.evron.com/crm/clientele.asp
	Marketo	http://au.marketo.com
	Eloqua	http://www.eloqua.com
	Hubspot	http://www.hubspot.com
Data suppliers/feeds	GNIP	https://gnip.com
	LexisNexis	http://www.lexisnexis.com
	Moreover Technologies	http://www.moreover.com (purchased by LexisNexis in 2014)
	Datasift	http://datasift.com
	Spredfast	https://www.spredfast.com
	Sprinklr	https://www.sprinklr.com
	Oracle Social Cloud	http://www.oracle.com/us/solutions/social/overview/index.html
	ListenLogic	http://www.listenlogic.com

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Professor Macnamara is internationally recognized for his research into evaluation of public communication campaigns and recently has undertaken extensive research into social media use by politicians and governments for election campaigns and citizen engagement, including youth engagement.

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- The Intergovernmental Consultation (IGC) on Migration, Asylum and Refugees in relation to migration discourses and debate;
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