

## **Explicating Listening in Organization–Public Communication: Theory, Practices, Technologies**

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There is a concerning lacuna in communication studies and particularly in specialist subdisciplines including political, government, corporate, and organizational communication, and public relations. Despite Craig’s succinct but cogent description of communication as “talking and listening”; theorization of communication as a two-way transactional interaction rather than a one-way transmission of messages; and focus on voice, dialogue, and engagement, listening is implicit or described in sketchy terms in these disciplines. This critical analysis, based on a transdisciplinary literature review and empirical research findings, proposes that organizational listening must be made explicit and explicated in practical theory. This analysis builds on existing theory and empirical studies to examine methods and technologies that can facilitate organizational listening in a digital age to create an effective public sphere and meaningful organization–public engagement. Ethical as well as technological issues are explored, and directions for further research are proposed to inform effective two-way organization–public communication and potentially create transformative communication.

*Keywords: public communication, listening, speaking, voice, dialogue, engagement*

Listening has long been recognized as an essential part of communication, along with speaking (Back, 2007; Fiumara, 1995). But as Fiumara (1995) noted, listening has often been “a secondary issue” (p. 6) in logocentric Western societies, overshadowed by attention to speaking in studies of language, voice, dialogue, discourse, and communication. This bias continues in many communication-related disciplines and fields of practice today, as will be shown.

When listening is examined, it is predominantly in relation to interpersonal communication in dyads or small groups. For example, in a summary of listening provided in *The Concise Encyclopedia of Communication*, King (2015) notes that scholarly attention to listening “is most often seen in clinical and instructional materials in areas such as counselling, interviewing, mentoring, mediation and interpersonal communication” (p. 331). Lipari (2010) has pointed out that listening is studied in “humanities-based communication scholarship” as well as in “social science and cognitive science literature” (p. 351), but she also has acknowledged that this is predominantly in the context of interpersonal communication. Examination of interpersonal interactions in dyads and small groups is the focus in many monographs, textbooks, and

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handbooks focused on listening (e.g., Purdy & Borisoff, 1997; Wolvin & Coakley, 1996) and is the primary focus of specialist journals such as the *International Journal of Listening*.

A second, more broadly focused area of scholarship in relation to listening has examined spectatorship and audiences in the context of the arts and entertainment, such as studies of theater and TV audiences (Bennett, 1997; Morley, 1992; Napoli, 2011).

Though all of the above types and contexts of listening are important, it is significant—and arguably informative in relation to problems in contemporary societies—that the following analysis shows that listening is understudied and often lacking in the context of communication within and by organizations in society.

This sphere of listening is important for three reasons. First, since the 1980s it has been recognized that organizations are constituted by communication, referred to as the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) and also as “communication as constitutive of organization” (Vásquez & Schoeneborn, 2018, p. 1) and as “communication constitutes organizations” (Schoeneborn, Kuhn, & Kärreman, 2019, p. 475).

Second, organizations play a central and influential role in contemporary industrialized and postindustrial societies (Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2012), or what Couldry (2010) refers to as “complex societies” (p. 100). People need to interact with and depend on organizations of various kinds on a daily basis. These include government departments and agencies, corporations, NGOs, and nonprofit organizations and institutions such as the police, hospitals, schools, universities, and churches. In democracies, in particular, many organizations have a responsibility to represent and act in accordance with public opinion and the “will of the people.” To do so requires active, attentive listening. Also, in competitive free enterprise economies, the success and sustainability of commercial organizations depend significantly on their understanding of and alignment with the needs and interests of customers as well as the society in which they operate, as discussed in research literature on “license to operate” (Nielsen, 2013) and corporate social responsibility (Crane, Matten, & Spence, 2014).

Many terms are used to denote the others with whom organizations need or seek to interact. People inside organizations include “employees,” “staff,” or “members,” whereas people external to organizations may be “customers” or be broadly referred to as “the public” (Dewey, 1927), “publics” (Eliasoph, 2004), “target publics” (Heath & Merkl, 2013; Hutchins, 2018), “target audiences” (Dozier & Repper, 1992), or “consumers” (Scammell, 2003), which mostly imply a one-way flow of information as well as services. In this analysis, the more neutral term “stakeholders” is used to collectively refer to these others, except in references to specific groups. “Stakeholders” is used here to denote “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s purpose and objectives” (Freeman, 1984, p. 6). This reflects Deetz’s (1995) open approach to “stakeholder democracy” (p. 50), rather than a narrow view in which organizations selectively identify stakeholders.

The third, and often overlooked, reason that listening within and by organizations warrants critical analysis and further research is that while interpersonal communication occurs between representatives of organizations and stakeholders, such as in meetings and public forums, organizations need to communicate

with thousands, hundreds of thousands, or even millions of people in the case of governments and multinational corporations. Speaking and listening in and by organizations has to be scaled up, as Dobson (2014, pp. 75, 124) notes, which requires the use of various mediated techniques and technologies for listening. Though media technologies are extensively studied as platforms for speaking by organizations, such as in advertising, public relations, and other related disciplines, research shows that limited attention has been paid to how various mediated communication processes and technologies can aid active listening by organizations.

This analysis begins from the principle that organizations need to listen to their stakeholders as well as speak to them, which is a consensus in democratic political theory (Bickford, 1996; Dobson, 2014), in corporate, marketing, government, and organizational communication literature (Barbour, 2017; Borner & Zerfass, 2018), and in related fields such as public relations (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). Even in persuasion-oriented communication, listening is increasingly seen as essential, as identified in the shift to customer-centric marketing (Galbraith, 2005), health communication based on a culture-centered approach and social ecology model (Dutta, Anaele, & Jones, 2013; Dutta & de Souza, 2008), and management practices that apply design thinking, which begins with empathizing and includes collecting and responding to feedback (Martin, 2009).

After framing this analysis within relevant communication theory, this article identifies the special characteristics and challenges of what is referred to as organizational listening. It then discusses methods, processes, and systems that can facilitate organizational listening to explicate the practices of listening in an organizational context. It argues that such explication is necessary to move beyond broad conceptual discussions and normative theory to provide practical theory, which Craig (2018) proposes is important in fields such as communication. This article concludes by identifying directions for further research into ways that organizational listening can create an effective public sphere, meaningful organization–public communication, and increased social equity through effective two-way communication and potentially transformative communication.

### **Listening as Part of Communication**

The diverse field of communication studies has long since evolved from one-way transmissional notions to recognize communication as a two-way process focused on meaning making and meaning sharing, drawing on adaptive and networked systems theory, rhetorical theory, sociopsychology, sociology, semiotics, phenomenology, and cultural studies (Craig & Muller, 2007; Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017). In addition, communication scholarship has embraced theories on dialogue grounded in the work of Buber (1923/1958, 1947/2002), Bakhtin (1981, 1979/1986), and, more recently, Bohm (1996); the dialogical–dialectic (Baxter, 2011); and concepts such as openness to the other (Gadamer, 1960/1989). Also, recent literature on engagement and participation informs communication studies in important ways (Arnstein, 1969; International Association for Public Participation, 2016).

Craig (2006) parsimoniously, but cogently, defined communication as “talking and listening” (p. 39). In discussing voice, Couldry (2009) described it as “the implicitly linked practices of speaking and listening” (p. 580). In arguing that “voice matters,” Couldry (2010) noted that voice has no value if speaking is not

accompanied by effective listening. However, the implicitness of listening referred to by Couldry points to the problem addressed in this discussion.

This critical analysis particularly focusses on organization–public communication, which is conducted through the practices of political, government, corporate, and organizational communication, and public relations. Specifically, in relation to these fields, Barbour (2017) affirmed Couldry’s observation, stating in the *International Encyclopedia of Organizational Communication* that “listening is implicit in theory and research” (p. 1). Such conclusions reveal taken-for-grantedness to listening, which the following analysis will show to be problematic and in need of address in both theory and practice.

In a 2014 review of literature related to listening, Bodie and Crick (2014) issued a call “to lift listening from its slumber in Western scholastic thinking and in the communication studies discipline more specifically” (p. 118). That project is underway in relation to interpersonal communication in volumes such as Worthington and Bodie (2017) as well as in specialist journals such as the *International Journal of Listening*. The following summary of relevant literature in the fields of political, government, corporate, business, and organizational communication, and the related practice of public relations—collectively referred to here as organization–public communication—reveals a gap and a need for specific focus on organizational listening.

### **The Listening “Blind Spot” in Disciplinary Literature**

A review of political, government, corporate, business, and organizational communication, and public relations literature shows that listening receives relatively little attention. When it is discussed, it is mostly conceived in terms of stakeholders and citizens listening to organizations as “target audiences.” This has occurred despite these disciplines adopting and adapting communication theories and emphasizing two-way interaction, engagement and mutuality—even to the point of advocating symmetry in organization–public communication in some cases (Grünig et al., 2002). Listening by organizations is often conceived in narrow and potentially dysfunctional ways, such as in the practices of surveillance and intelligence. These are identified in this analysis as areas for scrutiny and critical research, but the purpose and focus of this analysis is identifying methods for ethical organizational listening as part of meaningful two-way communication between organizations and their stakeholders.

Bickford (1996) was one of the first to identify a lack of attention to listening in political communication in her landmark text *The Dissonance of Democracy: Listening, Conflict and Citizenship*. More recently, Blumler and Coleman (2010) concluded that an “inexorable impoverishment of political communication has taken place” (p. 140). They attributed this at least in part to a lack of listening, which they said is creating a “crisis of public communication that is sapping the vitality of democratic political culture” (p. 140). In his discussion of voice, Couldry (2010) concluded that “little attention has been given to what listening involves” (p. 146). Even more recently in *Listening for Democracy*, Dobson (2014) lamented that “honorable exceptions aside, virtually no attention has been paid to listening in mainstream political science” (p. 36). He added that efforts to improve democracy have mainly focused on “getting more people to speak” (p. 36).

However, Couldry (2010) argued that any attempt to create what he terms a “postneoliberal politics” will “fail at first base if it reduces to simply calling for more voices” (p. 137). As Calder (2011) has pointed out,

the real problem in democratic politics is not being denied a voice; for many it is being denied an audience who listens. This point has been particularly emphasized by Dreher (2009, 2010) in relation to marginalized communities.

Lacey (2013) notes that "listening has long been overlooked in studies of the media as well as in conceptualizations of the public sphere" (p. 3). Even in the age of Web 2.0 and interactive social media that offer increased potential for two-way communicative interaction, Crawford (2009) concluded that "'speaking up' has become the dominant metaphor for participation in online spaces" and "listening is not a common metaphor for online activity" (p. 526).

Public relations is a field in which one could expect to find listening to stakeholders elucidated and expounded, given its two-way conceptualization and theorization as dialogue, engagement, and the building and maintenance of relationships between organizations and their stakeholders (Grunig et al., 2002; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Taylor & Kent, 2014). However, a search of two leading public relations journals<sup>1</sup> over four decades between 1976 and 2014 found only a handful of articles that even mentioned listening, and only two that specifically discussed listening in an organization–public context (Macnamara, 2016).

When listening is discussed in public relations literature, it is frequently in an instrumental context. For example, one leading text says, "listening gives a foundation for knowing what to say and thinking strategically of the best ways to frame and present appealing messages" (Heath & Coombs, 2006, p. 346). In this context, listening is an activity undertaken only insofar as it provides insights and "intelligence" (Arcos, 2016) to serve the interests of the organization.

Some argue that listening is integral to dialogue. This was stated by Johannesen (2008) in writing about ethical communication. He said that participants in dialogue "should show desire and capacity to listen without anticipating, interfering, competing, refuting, or warping meanings into preconceived interpretations" (p. 56). In their extensive writing on dialogic public relations, Taylor and Kent (2014) noted that "over time, organizations realized their dependency on the public" (p. 395). In an earlier landmark article, these authors outlined five "tenets" or "features" (p. 24) of what they call dialogic public relations (Kent & Taylor, 2002) and identified listening as a "skill" (p. 31) necessary for building relationships. Recently, Lane and Kent (2018) expanded Taylor and Kent's dialogic orientation to include "take time to listen, to reflect, and to respond" (p. 65). However, apart from the above brief references and a discussion of organization–stakeholder listening competency by Burnside-Lawry (2011, 2012), which is examined later, discussion of listening is minimal in public relations literature.

Furthermore, invoking dialogue leaves listening implicit because, at its roots, the English word "dialogue" is derived from the Greek terms *dia* (διά), meaning "through"—not "two," as noted by Bohm (1996)—and *logos* (λόγος), which means "speech" or "words." Literally and in practice, dialogue can be no more than two sides speaking (speech acts) unless listening is explicit and designed into communication activities.

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<sup>1</sup> This search was conducted on articles published in *Public Relations Review* and *Journal of Public Relations Research*.

In management literature, listening is identified as an important element of leadership and human resources management, but this is almost entirely focused on interpersonal listening (Flynn, Valikoski, & Grau, 2008). Listening to external stakeholders is also addressed in business, particularly in marketing literature, in which a number of sophisticated methods of large-scale listening are advocated, including research, customer call centers, and social media monitoring. But the focus of business and marketing is also predominantly instrumental, with objectives such as increasing sales. For example, a recent article in the *Journal of Business Research* says that “an organization’s listening environment facilitates both organizational and employee outcomes” (Reed, Goolsby, & Johnston 2016, p. 3591). However, the authors go on to define employee outcomes as “employee commitment to organizations” and “employee loyalty” (p. 3593).

Barbour (2017) made the important observation in relation to organizational communication that listening is a topic that “merits attention,” but added “most also agree that, despite its importance, it has been the focus of relatively little empirical research” (p. 1).

### **What the Limited Empirical Research Tells Us**

Organizations invest large amounts of money and time ostensibly in communication. Industry research reports that organizations—including government departments and agencies, corporations, and NGOs—spent more than US\$630 billion on advertising in 2018, and global advertising expenditure by organizations is forecast to increase to more than US\$750 billion by 2021 (Statista, 2019). An annual study by the University of Southern California, Annenberg (2018) reported that 86% of public relations firms predicted revenue growth in 2018, with half forecasting growth of 15% or more. Many millions of dollars, euros, pounds, and other currencies are also spent on public consultation, customer relations, and other organization–public communication practices. It is therefore fair to say that, in many if not most cases, organizations have the resources to engage with their stakeholders. It is also fair to say that organizations expect that their stakeholders listen to them via their media advertising, publicity, websites, speeches, brochures, reports, social media posts, and other channels of communication.

However, empirical research that has been conducted to specifically examine how and how well organizations listen to their stakeholders confirms that the blind spot in theory translates to major failings in organization–public communication practice. A study of 36 corporate, government, and NGOs in Australia, the UK, and the United States involving 104 interviews and content analysis of more than 400 relevant documents found that, on average, 80% of the communication-related resources of organizations is devoted to disseminating their messages (i.e., speaking). In some cases, up to 95% of their substantial investment in public communication is devoted to speaking (Macnamara, 2016). This research concluded that, in the name of public communication, organizations have created an architecture of speaking operationalized through advertising, media publicity, publications, events, websites, presentations, speeches, and other rhetorical strategies (Macnamara, 2016, p. 235).

An in-depth study of UK government communication post the Brexit referendum confirmed a focus on organizational speaking and a lack of listening to stakeholder groups and citizens (Macnamara, 2017). This research also revealed some of the reasons for a lack of listening by major organizations. Though not ruling out intentionality as a cause of failure to listen, in-depth research based on ethnography, interviews, and

content analysis of documents found the primary causes of a lack of open active listening to stakeholders included the following:

1. Dominant use of quantitative research such as surveys and polls, which do not provide in-depth information or feedback and are often based on small unrepresentative samples.
2. Consultations conducted online via official websites limited to specific questions, which means that stakeholders on the wrong side of the "digital divide" are left voiceless, and stakeholders' views on many issues remain unsaid.
3. A lack of textual analysis tools and skills to analyze the large volumes of the voice of stakeholders received through letters, e-mails, written complaints, submissions to consultations, and surveys that allow open-ended comments.
4. Social media used primarily for posting messages and a lack of monitoring and analysis tools.
5. A lack of data integration and analysis, which can identify previously unseen patterns and trends in relation to issues of public concern or interest (Macnamara, 2017).

Further empirical research related to potential methods of organizational listening, including "listening systems," is examined in the following discussion.

### **Making Listening Explicit—Toward a Theory of Organizational Listening**

Making listening by organizations explicit and explicating how it should and can be undertaken requires the development of organizational listening theory. Noting that Littlejohn and colleagues (2017) and others describe theory as a body of concepts, explanations, and principles, the following discussion seeks to contribute to such a theory by expanding on pioneering research and exploring the "technical aspects of practical conduct" (Craig, 2018, p. 289). Craig (2018) describes communication as a practical discipline and calls for practical theory as well as empirical social science—that is, theory that is not "merely practical in the colloquial sense of technical or occupational training" but that involves "communicative praxis . . . to improve communication and disseminate better communication practices" (pp. 289–290).

### ***The Concept of Organizational Listening***

The concept of organizational listening has already been introduced, but is explicated further here in the project of building organizational listening theory. Though people working in or representing organizations can engage with stakeholders to some extent through interpersonal communication, which is extensively discussed and researched, three key characteristics of organizational listening that differentiate it from interpersonal listening need to be addressed. As discussed previously, the first is the issue of scale. Large organizations in particular potentially need to listen to many people and, therefore, potentially to large volumes

of voice, which can be diverse. Many of these stakeholders are distant to the organization's offices and facilities. This leads to the second key characteristic of organizational listening—that it is largely mediated. Some of the forms of mediation have been mentioned already, and more will be examined in the following. Third, mediated listening in organizations is typically delegated by organizational policy makers and decision makers to functional departments and units responsible for research, customer relations, complaints, correspondence, public consultation, social media, and so on.

Therefore, unlike interpersonal listening, which is direct, organizational listening requires and depends on policies, processes, structures, resources, systems, technologies, and specialist skills in organizations that can enable and facilitate delegated, mediated, large-scale listening.

### ***Defining Organizational Listening***

Researchers have noted that there are many forms of fake listening, such as pretend listening (Bussie, 2011, p. 31) and pseudolistening (Adler & Rodman, 2011, p. 136) that are not open, active, or effective. Though organizational listening has some unique characteristics, as identified, the body of literature on interpersonal listening is a useful starting point. Organizational listening is further informed by psychology, ethics literature, and democratic political theory.

Glenn (1989) identified 50 different definitions of listening in a literature review in the *International Journal of Listening*, all of which predominantly address interpersonal listening. For example, Bodie and Crick (2014) define listening as follows:

Listening . . . 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. (p. 106)

Drawing on a range of interpersonal communication, psychology, and ethics literature, Macnamara (2016) identified the "seven canons of listening" as recognition, acknowledgement, attention, interpretation, understanding, consideration, and response and applied these to organizational listening (pp. 41–43). Other factors identified as important characteristics of listening include being open, active or even proactive, reciprocal, and ideally mindful and empathetic.

In addition to the key features of scale, delegation, and mediation, there are some other key differences between organizational and interpersonal listening. For example, in most dyadic and small-group communication, all parties are interlocutors in that they are both speakers and listeners, or at least potentially both speakers and listeners. In organizational communication, those who listen may not be the ones who speak in response, and those who speak may not be the ones primarily responsible for listening because of the issues of scale and delegation. Though lack of a direct connection between speakers and listeners is important in interpersonal communication, including in telephone calls to organizations, this is not an expectation in most organization–stakeholder communication, which is distanced in time and space by being conducted via text such as letters, e-mails, written complaints, submissions to consultations, and online comments.

Some also argue that concepts and principles of interpersonal listening cannot be applied to organizational listening because the psychophysiological constitution of individual humans is fundamentally different to the constitution of an organization. However, this misses the point that in organizations it is individuals who listen, or fail to listen, not some inanimate structure. The key differences exist in the channels and processes that are used to bridge the distance referred to above and through which listening occurs. It is these differences that are inadequately studied and which are the focus of this analysis.

Burnside-Lawry (2011) is one of the few who have attempted a definition of organizational listening. In her study of the listening competency of employees, she drew on Flynn and colleagues (2008) to say the following:

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. (p. 149)

This definition is somewhat useful by drawing attention to the organizational environment as well as the role of individuals in organizations, who are required to operationalize listening. The organizational environment can include its culture, policies, structure, and other elements, which are closely examined in this analysis. A definition in Macnamara (2016) emphasized the eight elements or requirements of organizational listening and the "seven canons" stating the following:

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. (Macnamara, 2016, p. 52)

However, while recognizing that listening is more than hearing, this definition still fails to fully identify the central concepts and principles of organizational listening. Drawing from a wide range of literature and empirical research referred to in the following discussion, this analysis offers the following definition of organizational listening:

Organizational listening comprises the creation and implementation of scaled processes and systems that enable decision makers and policy makers in organizations to actively and effectively access, acknowledge, understand, consider and appropriately respond to all those who wish to communicate with the organization or with whom the organization wishes to communicate interpersonally or through delegated, mediated means.

This definition builds on previous analyses in several important ways, including identification that organizational listening

- must occur at, or be articulated to, the decision-maker and policy-maker level to lead to an appropriate response;

- incorporates interpersonal listening, but must also extend to delegated mediated listening;
- needs to be scaled appropriately in accordance with the number of people who seek to communicate with the organization, or with whom the organization seeks to communicate;
- requires processes and systems to enable delegated and mediated listening;
- should be active, not merely passive; and
- should be inclusive, by stipulating that an organization should listen to all who wish to communicate with it, or vice versa, rather than selective listening or confining listening to “key stakeholders” and “publics” that are commonly identified by an organization based on its interests.

This conceptual framework is likely to be still incomplete, and further contributions are invited to this undertheorized and underpracticed element of public communication. As stated in the conclusions of this article, in addition to laying the foundations of a theory of organizational listening, this analysis opens up an important direction for further research. However, this explication of the concept of organizational listening, together with the following key principles of organizational listening and identification of systems necessary for operationalization based on empirical research, move us toward a practical theory of organizational listening.

#### ***Principles of Organizational Listening—An “Architecture of Listening”***

Some organizations have recognized that they have a “listening problem” and sought a quick fix, such as hastily organized stakeholder forums and reactive listening tours or listening posts, which usually fail (Lee, 2012). Another common approach is to believe that technology alone can provide a solution. Coleman and Freelon (2015, p. 1) argue that “digital communication fundamentally reshapes politics” and recently Stewart and Arnold (2018, p. 98) state that “social listening” is increasingly mediated through electronic channels. . However, , while technology including digital listening tools can play a part in hearing and listening within an organization as discussed later, research shows that no amount of communications technology can facilitate organizational listening if some other key elements and principles are not in place. Drawing on communication, psychology, political science, and ethics literature, as well as empirical research, Bassel (2017), Burnside-Lawry (2011, 2012), Dreher (2009, 2010), Macnamara (2016), and others collectively identify the following eight principles of active organizational listening:

1. Create an organizational culture that is open to listening as defined by Honneth (2007), Husband (1996, 2009), and, most recently, Gregory (2015)—that is, one that recognizes others’ right to speak, pays attention to them, and tries to understand their views

2. Address the politics of listening, which can lead to selective listening and some groups being ignored and marginalized, as discussed by Dreher (2009, 2010) and Bassel (2017).
3. Establish policies that specify and require listening in an organization.
4. Design systems that are open and interactive, such as websites that allow visitors to post comments and questions and vote on others' comments.
5. Implement technologies that aid listening, such as monitoring tools or services for tracking media and online comment, automated acknowledgement systems, and analysis tools for sense making. Such technologies are further discussed in the next section.
6. Allocate resources including staff to operate listening systems and do the work of listening, such as establishing forums and consultations, inviting comment, and monitoring, analyzing, and responding to comments and questions.
7. Develop skills/competencies for large-scale organizational listening such as textual analysis and social media analysis.
8. Have channels for articulation of what is said to an organization to policy making and decision making. Though listening does not necessarily lead to or require agreement or acceptance (Macnamara, 2016, p. 43), unless there is a link to policy making and decision making for consideration of what is said to an organization, voice has no value.

These principles have been referred to as comprising an architecture of listening because they establish a framework that informs the design of specific listening activities to suit varying circumstances and counterbalance the "architecture of speaking" that dominates the design of political, government, corporate, and organizational communication, and public relations (Macnamara, 2016). The notion of an architecture of listening provides a broad framework to facilitate organization-public communication, but it does not provide a practical theory of organizational listening. Such a theory needs further explication in relation to the "technical aspects of practical conduct" (Craig, 2018, p. 289). In this regard, this analysis seeks to further advance discussion of organizational listening and contribute additional theory building as well as questions for further research.

### ***Listening Systems***

Listening at an organizational level as defined can involve a wide range of methods that were explored in recent empirical research as part of this study of organizational listening (Macnamara, 2017, 2019). These can include formal and informal methods. For example, social and market research is an obvious formal method through which organizations can listen to stakeholders. Customer call centers and

help lines are ostensibly another site of organizational listening. However, there are many other activities, processes, and technologies that can be applied to facilitate organizational listening.

To a significant extent, organizational listening involves listening systems. This is not to dismiss or downplay the role of humans, noting the point made earlier that, ultimately, listening in the sense of paying attention, giving consideration and responding has to be undertaken by people. Artificial intelligence is far from the level of sophistication required to achieve human understanding and respond with decisions or policy proposals. Some, such as Bassel (2017), emphasize face-to-face communication in what she refers to as micropolitics, and the argument advanced here in no way undermines or replaces such approaches. However, the issue of scale results in the voice of stakeholders and citizens often comprising large volumes of data in various forms (textual, visual, and sonic, such as voice recordings, as well as statistical), and even big data in some situations.

Based on political, corporate, marketing, government, and organizational communication literature and empirical research (Macnamara, 2016, 2017, 2019), a number of formal and informal methods that can facilitate organizational listening are tabulated in Table 1 in the interest of brevity.

**Table 1. Formal and Informal Methods to Facilitate Organizational Listening.**

| Research-Related Methods of Listening  | Other Methods of Organization Listening   |
|--|---|
| Quantitative analysis of responses to surveys (including open-ended comments)                                    | Textual analysis of submissions to public consultations                                     |
| Qualitative analysis of transcripts of interviews  | Textual analysis of reports, minutes, and/or notes from stakeholder engagement meetings     |
| Qualitative analysis of transcripts of focus groups  | Textual analysis of recordings of public meetings/forums                                    |
| Quantitative and qualitative analysis of data from pretesting (e.g., products, services, messages)               | Qualitative analysis of journals and notes from field visits, outreach, tours, and so on    |
| Quantitative and qualitative content analysis of media reporting, opinion columns, and letters to the editor     | Textual analysis of correspondence (letters, e-mails)                                       |
| Quantitative and qualitative content analysis of social media discussion and conversations                       | Textual analysis of voice-to-text conversions from call center recordings                   |
| Quantitative analysis of trending topics and "hubs" in online conversations through social network analysis      | Voice of the Customer (VOC) applications that integrate surveys and other customer feedback |
| Textual analysis of notes, video, or audio recordings of ethnography (direct observation)                        | Textual analysis of written complaints  |
| Content/textual analysis of screen captures or "data scrapes" from netnography (online observation) <sup>4</sup> | Quantitative analysis of petitions  |
| Quantitative and qualitative analysis of responses to deliberative polls   | Textual analysis of discussion at listening posts   |

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|---|---|
| Textual and reflective analysis of participatory action research discussions (e.g., meeting minutes, journals, notes, proposals, plans) | Textual analysis of dialogues and policy crowdsourcing initiatives                          |
| Textual analysis of Net Promoter Score (NPS) surveys (open-ended questions)   | Textual analysis of notes or transcripts from customer/user groups and summits              |
| Analysis of feedback from customer decision journey/customer journey mapping (evaluating "touchpoints")                                 | Textual analysis of discussion by citizen juries  |
| Textual analysis of deliberative forum transcripts  | Textual analysis of discussion by trust networks  |
| Textual analysis of appreciative inquiry forums and discussions   | Textual analysis of discussion by study circles   |
| Behavioral insights analysis  | Textual analysis of discussion at captive audience meetings (CAMs)                          |
| Sense-making methodology (SMM)  | Textual analysis of discussion by advisory boards and committee meetings (e.g., minutes)    |
| Triangulation and meta-analysis of multiple data sets to identify/confirm patterns or trends  | Textual analysis of feedback (e.g., "Contact Us" submissions on websites, suggestion boxes) |

Listening systems in organizations need to progress beyond polling, which is commonly used in political and government communication, and structured surveys, which are the most widely used research method overall. Polling provides little more than a faint whisper of voice by limiting participants to a few "tick a box" questions and ratings. Surveys are also limited in enabling voice, with most predominantly made up of closed-end questions. Also, organizational listening needs to be much more than tokenistic feedback forms on websites and net promoter score (NPS) ratings—a widely overused method that asks people to rate the likelihood that they would recommend an organization, product, or service to friends or colleagues on a 0–10 scale.

A key finding of ongoing research is that textual analysis is a key tool for organizational listening, given that the voice of citizens and organization stakeholders such as customers is often expressed in correspondence such as letters and e-mails, written complaints, submissions to inquiries and public consultations, and in posts on social media (Macnamara, 2019). However, many organizations do not have a capability to analyze textual data. Also, this research shows that phone calls to call centers are digitally recorded in many organizations, allowing voice-to-text (VTT) software to convert the voice of callers to text, which can be analyzed using content or textual analysis methods to identify and understand common issues of concern. For large volumes of text, semiautomated text analysis applications that incorporate machine learning are necessary listening tools in organizations.

As well as employing qualitative research methods such interviews and focus groups, organizational listening also can be implemented through a number of advanced research and engagement methods including deliberative polling (Fishkin, 2011); participatory action research (PAR); sense making methodology (Dervin & Foreman-Wernet, 2013) appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008); behavioral insights (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008); and customer journey mapping in the case of

commercial organizations (Court, Elzinga, Mulder, & Vetvik, 2009). (See Table 1.) A number of these methods involve open active listening that can be widely applied, while others are tailored to particular contexts and stakeholders.

Organizations such as large banks and insurance, telecommunications, transportation, and health service providers are increasingly adopting bots, such as chat bots, to "listen" to users of Web pages and respond with relevant information, as well as learning algorithms based on natural language processing and machine learning code that responds to users' data entry and selections (Macnamara, 2019). The rapidly growing field of data analytics is another systematic way that the voices of stakeholders can be accessed and considered.

Some object to such technologies being described as listening systems, and it is acknowledged that these bring with them limitations as well as some serious concerns and questions. Critical technosocial and technocultural scholars such as Gillespie (2018), Landau (2017), Napoli (2014), and others express concern about digital surveillance and the effects of algorithms such as algorithmic filtering (Caplan, 2018). As Caplan (2018) says, in many if not most online platforms, algorithms decide "the inclusion or exclusion of information" (p. 564). Algorithms can lead to filter bubbles, a term that refers to recipients of information receiving only what they are disposed to receive from those who they are disposed to receive it from, also referred to as echo chambers.

Operationalizing an architecture of listening and listening systems to cope with scale is far from a simple or neutral task. Organizational listening theory requires an appreciation of the concerns and considerations debated in studies of dialogue, engagement, deliberation, and participation, such as power relations and the politics of listening, as well as myriad challenges and concerns related to digital communication, big data, and data analytics. Therefore, further research to examine the effectiveness of such engagements from the perspective of stakeholders as well as organizations and related ethical issues is needed.

Ignoring the potential of these methods, systems, and technologies to facilitate active ethical organizational listening leaves them underresearched and open to misuse. For example, the way in which Cambridge Analytica accessed and "listened" to personal information from 50 million Facebook accounts during the Brexit referendum and the 2016 U.S. presidential election is not what is proposed (*Graham-Harrison & Cadwalladr, 2018*). The data that are proposed for analysis are public expressions of voice, such as customer feedback, calls to call centers, letters to organizations, submissions to public consultations, and posts in open social media.

Development of organizational listening theory and practice has the potential to redress the "democratic deficit" (Norris, 2011) and the major decline in public trust and confidence in government, corporations, and NGOs (Edelman, 2019) by articulating the voices of stakeholders to organizations, with an obligation to respond. A recent report by Demos of research among citizens in the European Union documented how "responsive listening" (Bartlett, Miller, Reffin, Weir, & Wibberley, 2014, pp. 9–11) can be conducted via social platforms and other technologies across large numbers of people to gain insights and understanding. Such listening systems, supported by in-depth analysis that facilitates sense making, can complement and expand interpersonal listening that is limited in organization–public communication.

### Conclusions

This analysis identifies a substantial theoretical and practice gap in political, government, corporate, marketing, and organizational communication, and public relations. Theoretically, listening is mostly implicit in research literature informing these fields, and therefore it is assumed. In practice, research indicates that listening is frequently lacking. Therefore, this analysis has sought to make two contributions: (1) to propose and advance explicit theory in relation to organizational listening, and (2) to expand understanding of organizational listening and the range of methods, systems, and technologies that can operationalize listening in and by organizations, thereby contributing to practice as well as a practical theory of organizational listening.

In doing so, this analysis raises questions for further research. Such research and debate are warranted because an architecture of listening as defined and further development of organizational listening theory would enable meaningful engagement and dialogue—two concepts that are central to communication, but often superficially described and enacted. While the term engagement is often applied in marketing communication to simple interactions such as clicks on Web pages and follows in social media, Taylor and Kent (2014) say “engagement represents a two-way, relational, give-and-take between organizations and stakeholders—publics” to improve understanding and “benefit all parties involved” (p. 391). Understanding and mutual benefit are impossible to achieve without effective listening by organizations as well as others.

Bohm noted that careful, attentive, and empathetic listening is part of dialogue. But, further, he identified another form and result of listening that can potentially create transformative communication. In addition to contributing to understanding, Bohm proposed that listening inevitably involves misunderstanding of speakers’ intended meanings, which when expressed in responses, leads to a “to and fro” exchange of interpretations that can result in a new emergent interpretation. Bohm referred to this as the “flow of meaning” (Bohm, 1996, p. 7). In this sense, dialogue is distinctly different to negotiation, which involves accommodation or “trade-offs” (Bohm, 1996, p. 8) in which participants agree on one of an existing repertoire of meanings or actions. Listening as part of an expanded and reconstituted concept of dialogue can create transformative communication in which participants surpass existing perceptions and fixed positions to arrive at new levels of consciousness and new possibilities. Transformative communication, enabled by listening, takes communication closer to its normative origins in the Latin terms *communis* and *communicare*, meaning to create community or commonness through two-way interaction and exchange focused on mutuality.

In summary, this analysis argues that instead of relying primarily on communication *dia* (διὰ) *logos* (λόγος)—through speech, logic, and reasoning or argument—society needs more communication *dia* (διὰ) *akouó* (ἀκούω)—through hearing and listening—including by and within the organizations that play a central role in contemporary societies. Listening is an ensemble of activities essential to achieve understanding of others and shared meanings, and, in an organizational context, an expanding range of methods and technologies are available and warrant further investigation. Though a number of the methods and technologies discussed and listed in Table 1 are used by organizations, they are mostly applied in an instrumental and sometimes tokenistic way without an explicit theoretical framework of organizational listening. This analysis offers a contribution to such a theory and maps the terrain of organizational listening practices and technologies for further exploration.

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