

Organizational Listening in Public Communication

Emerging Theory and Practice



Jim Macnamara

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Cover

The author attending and speaking at a meeting of European Commission communication executives in *The Berlaymont*, the headquarters of the European Commission in Brussels (far side in a dark blue shirt and black coat below the central door exit sign – see page 44 for a close-up).

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FOREWORD

The research studies reported here, including a number of case studies, were conducted over a period of 10 years from a pilot study in 2013 to contemporary research working with the World Health Organization, government agencies, and multinational corporations between 2019 and 2022.

In all, the research reported took place in 60 organizations on three continents and involved more than 300 interviews; analysis of more than 600 documents; more than 80 meetings and forums; analysis of hundreds of websites and thousands of social media posts; more than a year of direct first-hand observation (ethnography); and a number of evaluations of the public communication of organizations.

Each of the studies explored one of two inter-related topics – *evaluation* of public communication by organizations or *organizational listening*. The cognate and complementary nature of the studies should be obvious (although they proceeded separately in parallel at first). Public communication involves – or at least should involve – (a) speaking, such as through media, videos, websites, etc., and (b) listening. If evaluation of an organization’s public communication focusses only on what it says (e.g., in media articles, reports, websites, etc.), without accessing the responses of intended audiences¹ and what they say about the organization, it is a partial evaluation in every sense of the term. A truism emerged and forged an alliance between these fields of research, namely: *An organization that does not listen, or listens poorly, to its stakeholders² and publics³ will fail in its public communication. A second truism is that both the organization and its stakeholders suffer as a result.*

While specific project reports and academic journal articles have published the key findings of individual studies, bringing together the findings and recommendations of multiple cognate studies undertaken over a decade provides a body of knowledge beyond that documented from any one study. Synthesis of the findings from this series of research studies identifies consistent patterns, conclusions, and recommendations based on a large body of evidence.

The following sections begin with an introduction that explains why organizational listening is an imperative in urgent need of address in contemporary societies.

This is followed by an Executive Summary of the main findings of the three stages of The Organizational Listening Project along with related findings from several evaluation studies.

After setting the context and rationale for this research (Section 3), Sections 4–9 report the methodology and detailed findings of a series of studies by the author that examined the public communication effectiveness of organizations, focussing on the need for both organizational listening as well as organizational speaking. This section also draws attention to recent research by a number of other authors that is creating an emerging body of theory and practical tools and methods for organizational listening in today digitalized and mediatized world.

The connection between the fields of organizational listening and evaluation is further drawn together in Section 10, which returns to where this research journey began – evaluation research in a number of organizations, including contemporary case studies, that reveal some recurring pitfalls, but also offers new approaches and models that contribute to both theory and practice for effective public communication.

¹ The author recognizes that the term ‘audience’ is problematic in many contexts, as it denotes mostly passive receivers of information and entertainment. Many researchers recognize audiences as active through interpretation of content and sometimes response. While the terms participant or interlocutor more equitably denote those engaged in two-way dialogic communication, audience is widely used in discussion of public communication.

² The term ‘stakeholders’ is used throughout this text to refer to “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives”. See Freeman, R. (1984). *Strategic management: a stakeholder approach*. Pitman, p. 46. Key stakeholders or organizations include employees, customers, shareholders, and local communities in which organizations operate.

³ The term ‘publics’ (plural) is used in public relations literature and some media studies to refer to specific individuals and groups with whom organizations seek to interact, eschewing the singular term ‘the public’ as too broad. Nina Eliasoph called for broad-based replacement of the singular term ‘public’ with the plural ‘publics’ to recognize social plurality and diversity. See Eliasoph, N. (2004). Can we theorize the press without theorizing the public? *Political Communication*, 21(3), 297–303. In her book, *Listening publics: The politics and experience of listening in the media age*, Kate Lacey says “the idea of a singular, overarching public is a rhetorical fiction” (Polity, 2013, p. 15).

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The Organizational Listening Project and cognate research reported here were supported by a number of organizations in various ways – financially, administratively, intellectually, and through access to information, staff to interview, and practices to observe. All funders as well as providers of in-kind support are declared in the following list and related footnotes. Individual participants in the research were de-identified in accordance with their wishes and ethics approval of the studies. The author gratefully acknowledges the following organizations that supported this research in various ways.

- Achmea International, the Netherlands⁴
- Achmea operating companies and subsidiaries Achmea Australia; Interamerican, Greece; Union poisťovňa, Slovakia; and Zilveren Kruis in the Netherlands
- Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, Washington, DC⁵
- Department of Health and Social Care,⁶ Her Majesty's Government, London⁷
- Department of Premier and Cabinet, New South Wales Government, Sydney⁸
- European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication (DG COMM), Brussels⁹
- European Central Bank (ECB), Frankfurt¹⁰
- Government Communication Service (GCS), The Cabinet Office, Whitehall, London¹¹
- Greater Sydney Commission, New South Wales Government, Sydney¹²
- The London School of Economics and Political Science, London¹³
- University of Technology Sydney.¹⁴

In addition to the three stages of The Organizational Listening Project, related studies of evaluation of public communication and engagement were funded by the following organizations.

- New South Wales Department of Premier and Cabinet, Sydney¹⁵
- New South Wales Department of Customer Service, Sydney¹⁶
- New South Wales Multicultural Health Communication Service, NSW Health, Sydney¹⁷
- Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD), Open Government Unit, Paris¹⁸
- World Health Organization (WHO), Geneva.¹⁹

In naming the above organizations for transparency, the author makes no claim to represent these organizations. This is an independent report. However, the author thanks these organizations, as well as the 60 government departments and agencies, corporations, and non-government organizations in Australia, Europe, the UK, and the USA that participated in the research and more than 300 executives in those organizations who agreed to be interviewed and provide information.

⁴ Funded Stage 3 of The Organizational Listening Project in 2017–2019, which investigated corporate listening. Achmea is the largest insurance group in the Netherlands, the largest health insurer in Europe, and the fifth largest insurance group overall in Europe. The group, founded in 1811, has operating companies in six countries and has around 13 million customers and 14,500 staff worldwide.

⁵ Agreed to meetings and discussions in 2017 to examine how the bureau listens to 25,000 complaints per month.

⁶ Called the Department of Health at the time of this research.

⁷ Co-funded Stage 2 with the UK Government Communication Service and hosted the author for field work in 2016.

⁸ Funded several related research projects including evaluation of communication and engagement 2015–2019.

⁹ Funded workshops to review European Commission (EC) communication and evaluation. Also, in 2018–2019 the author was funded as the academic partner in a project to review EC 'corporate communication' (pan-European communication campaigns to promote the European Union and the EC) led by Deloitte and Tetra Tech (formerly Coffey International).

¹⁰ Funded a visit to the ECB headquarters in Frankfurt for workshops and discussions about listening and evaluation.

¹¹ Co-funded Stage 2 with the Department of Health and supported the project with access to UK government departments and agencies and central UK Government communication strategies and activities in 2016.

¹² Funded a study of stakeholder and community engagement by the Greater Sydney Commission in 2018.

¹³ Provided office facilities and support during Stage 2 and ongoing support for the author as a Visiting Professor.

¹⁴ Provided funding for Stage 1 and supported Stage 2 with the award of 6 months sabbatical for full-time research.

¹⁵ Funded several contract research projects including a review of the NSW Government Evaluation Framework for Advertising and Communications.

¹⁶ Funded research to evaluate COVID-19 communication and update the NSW Government Evaluation Framework for Advertising and Communications (transferred from Department of Premier and Cabinet in 2019).

¹⁷ Funded formative and summative evaluation research in the design and implementation of multi-award winning 'Pink Sari' campaign to increase breast screening among Indian and Sri Lankan women.

¹⁸ The author was appointed an adviser to the OECD Open Government Unit on public communication by governments in 2022.

¹⁹ Funded research to evaluate its public communication globally in relation to COVID-19 and global health days from 2020 to 2022.

1. INTRODUCTION: ADDRESSING KEY CHALLENGES OF OUR TIME: Distrust, disengagement, democratic decline

There is widespread concern among political scientists, journalists, and social commentators that democracy is in decline – even in serious trouble – in a number of developed countries. They point to falling public trust in government, disengagement, and marginalization of many citizens, which many refer to as the “democratic deficit”.²⁰ Some even warn of a “crisis of democracy”.²¹

A collapse of public trust has been reported in numerous studies and warnings have been sounded for some time. For example, a 2015 Harvard University study reported that only 14% of 18–29-year-old Americans trust the US Congress and only 20% trust the federal government.²²

Landmark outpourings of public sentiment including *Brexit* in the UK and the election and presidency of Donald Trump have shocked the world and prompted politicians, political parties, and media advisers, campaign managers, and pollsters to look for answers.

But the malaise in contemporary societies is not confined to politics. Trust in business and corporations is also in decline – and has been for a number of years. Even NGOs, which include major charities, institutions such as churches, and aid organizations, have seen public trust and support plummet. The *Edelman Trust Barometer*, an annual survey of more than 35,000 people in close to 30 countries, reported in 2020 that less than half of the general population²³ (47%) trust government. Trust in media had fallen to the same low level and only 55% of the general population trusted business and NGOs.²⁴ While trust in government recovered during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2022 *Edelman Trust Barometer* reported that trust in government declined again with only slightly more than half of all people trusting government (52%) and only 50% trusting mainstream media.²⁵

The European Union, one of the most historic and important multinational initiatives to foster peace and social cohesion as well as economic progress, faces falling public support across its 27 member countries.²⁶ The spring 2018 Eurobarometer study found that only 42% of European citizens trust the EU and little more than one-third (34%) trust their national government.²⁷

There are undoubtedly a number of causes. To some extent, falling public trust, disengagement, public frustration, and negative public sentiment are likely due to political factors and economic conditions. Generational change also causes a shift in public attitudes. However, research identifies another avoidable cause of a potential crisis facing democracy, business, and contemporary civil society.

The organizations that provide the core infrastructure of industrial and post-industrial democratic societies are not effectively listening to their stakeholders and publics.

Listening is an essential part of human communication. Those who do not listen to us in interpersonal communication rarely become our friends, or even colleagues with whom we seek to engage. By not listening to us, they do not understand us, they demonstrate that they do not care about us, and they cannot represent us. In fact, they are likely to misunderstand and misrepresent us – if not intentionally, through ignorance.

“The most effective and insidious way to silence others ... is a refusal to listen.”²⁸

²⁰ Couldry, N. (2010). *Why voice matters: Culture and politics after neoliberalism*. Sage, p. 49; Curran, J. (2011). *Media and democracy*. Routledge, p. 86; Norris, P. (2011). *Democratic deficit: Critical citizens revisited*. Cambridge University Press.

²¹ Przeworski, A. (2019). *Crisis of democracy*. Cambridge University Press; Van der Meer, T. (2017). Political trust and the crisis of democracy. *Oxford research encyclopedia of politics*. Oxford University Press.

²² Harvard University. (2015). Trust in institutions and the political process. Institute of Politics. <http://www.iop.harvard.edu/trust-institutions-and-political-process>

²³ In many of its surveys, Edelman separates trust levels among ‘informed public’ (i.e., educated professionals) and the general population.

²⁴ Edelman. (2020). *2020 Edelman trust barometer*, p. 9. <https://www.edelman.com/trustbarometer>

²⁵ Edelman. (2022). *2022 Edelman trust barometer*, p. 5. <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2022-trust-barometer>

²⁶ Membership at January 2021 after withdrawal of the UK as decided in the 2016 EU referendum.

²⁷ European Commission. (2018). *Standard Eurobarometer 89: Public opinion in the European Union*. <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/WhatsNew/index>

²⁸ Dryzek, J. (2000). *Deliberative democracy and beyond: Liberals, critics, and contestations*. Oxford University Press.

Public communication – The essence of civil society

Listening is also essential in public communication, which is the context of this research and analysis.

Public communication forms and shapes society. While interpersonal communication is the basis of social interaction and relationships between individuals and small groups, historically it has been the public communication of the likes of Aristotle, Socrates, Mahatma Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., Winston Churchill, Nelson Mandela, Betty Friedan, the Dalai Lama and many other inspirational advocates that has shaped human society around the world. Public communication continues today – for better and for worse – through political and industrial representatives, diplomats, social and environmental advocates, writers, musicians, and artists, media reporters and commentators, rumourmongers, and those who deal in misinformation and disinformation.

When psychologist and philosopher John Dewey remarked that “society ... exists in communication”,²⁹ he was referring to public communication – although he later wrote despondently about the “eclipse of the public”³⁰ caused by the institutionalization of politics and the growing influence of big business. His prescient observation is supported by the substantial research reported in the following pages.

Contemporary industrialized societies are characterized by a proliferation of organizations of various types, shapes, and sizes. A multitude of government ministries, departments, bureaux, and agencies; corporations; non-government organizations (NGOs); and non-profit organizations (NPOs) play central roles in governing people’s lives. People have to deal with organizations every day such as their local phone and internet company (if they can get through to them), medical centres and hospitals, banks, insurance companies, electricity suppliers, schools, retail chains, and a whole host of local, state, and national governments departments, agencies, commissions, and committees. Every transaction from booking accommodation at a hotel to paying tax requires citizens to deal with organizations. Much, if not the vast majority, of public communication in contemporary societies flows between organizations and citizens, as well as between organizations and other organizations.

Sociologist Nick Couldry notes that organizations play a positive role in society in the sense that they serve as “mechanisms of representation” providing “distributed forms of voice” for individuals who they represent.³¹ In their book, *Collective Action in Organizations: Interaction and Engagement in an Era of Technological Change*, Bruce Bimber and colleagues similarly identify the central role of organizations in contemporary societies and explore how individuals today engage with organizations through an increasing array of media and communication technologies.³²

However, the decade of research reported in this book raises serious questions about the receptiveness of organizations to such representations and their understanding of communication.

That is not to say that organizations do not pay attention to public communication. They do to the tune of hundreds of billions of dollars a year. Paid media advertising was estimated to reach almost US\$800 billion a year globally in 2022.³³ Advertising is now only part of the marketing communication ‘mix’, with substantial growth also reported in public relations,³⁴ and massive growth in social media use and digital communication such as and websites, e-mail, and SMS text messaging. In the case of governments, billions of dollars of taxpayers’ money is spent every year ostensibly for public communication.

A significant part of the public communication of organizations is undertaken for the distribution of **information**, such as advising people of policies, laws, and the availability of services. Also, organizations legitimately engage in **promotion and persuasion** through commercial marketing of products and through social marketing campaigns for public health, road safety, and other public interest objectives.

²⁹ Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education*. Macmillan, p. 5.

³⁰ Dewey, J. (1927). *The public and its problems*. Henry Molt & Co. Title of Chapter 4.

³¹ Couldry, N. (2010). *Why voice matters: Culture and politics after neoliberalism*. Sage, p. 202.

³² Bimber, B., Flanagan, A., & Stohl, C. (2012). *Collective action in organizations: Interaction and engagement in an era of technological change*. Cambridge University Press.

³³ Guttman, A. (2019). Global advertising spending from 2014 to 2022. Statista.
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/273288/advertising-spending-worldwide>

³⁴ The US Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in 2021 that “employment of public relations specialists is projected to grow 11 percent from 2020 to 2030, faster than the average for all occupations”. See US Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2019). *Occupational outlook handbook: Public relations specialists*. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/media-and-communication/public-relations-specialists.htm>

Information, persuasion, and promotion are by nature predominantly *one-way* communication – albeit, even in these practices, pre- and post- audience research as well as feedback are important to design appropriate messages, monitor response, and understand if communication objectives are being achieved.

While one-way deployments of communication for information and ethical persuasion and promotion are legitimate and often necessary, **communication in its full and holistic sense is a two-way process involving exchange and sharing of information, ideas, and opinions.**

The English word communication is derived from the Latin noun *communicatio*, which denotes “sharing” as well as “imparting”,³⁵ and the Latin verb *communicare* meaning to “share or make common” and “be in relation with”.³⁶ Both originate from the Latin root *communis* meaning “common” or “public”.³⁷

Despite common reductive uses of the term ‘communication’ to denote distribution or *transmission* of information, the etymology of the term draws our attention to the duality and mutuality inherent in this key social concept, which refers to “sharing” and “to make common” or “public” as in public opinion. For those who prefer more contemporary references, authoritative definitions such as those from the Oxford Dictionaries define communication as “the imparting or *exchanging* of information by speaking, writing, or using some other medium” [emphasis added].³⁸ This recognizes the need to impart information to others, but it equally recognizes that communication involves exchange of information – i.e., **listening** to others and considering what they have to say.

In democratic societies in particular, *vox populi* – the voice of the people – is a right of all and the basis of legitimate political power, although this text will argue that it is *listening* to the voices of people that affords legitimacy and equity, not simply allowing people to have a voice, which can be ignored.

Even, dialogue, which is derived from the Greek *dia* (διά) meaning “through” and *logos* (λόγος), which means ‘speech’ logic, and argument, fails to fully capture the essence of communication because it can amount to no more than two or more parties speaking.

Further elaboration of fundamental concepts and principles related to communication, voice, speaking, and listening is provided in Section 3, ‘The Context – What We Need to Know About Communication and Listening’, which is highly recommended reading.

Lack of organizational listening costs money, reputations, social stability—and lives

Lack of effective listening needs to be addressed because it is causing serious problems in government, business, and society.

Business consultant and author Ram Charan reported in *Harvard Business Review* that, based on his experience in conducting 360-degree reviews³⁹ of corporate leaders, “one out of four of them has a listening deficit”.⁴⁰ Management trainer Bob Bobinski says that “millions of dollars are lost every day in organizations simply because of poor listening”.⁴¹ For example, business case studies show that **a lack of listening is a major cause of lost customers**, such as a 2011 decision by Netflix to change its pricing of DVDs and streaming video that led to the loss of 800,000 subscribers in one quarter.⁴²

³⁵ Peters, J. (2008). Communication: History of the idea. In W. Donsbach (Ed.), *International Encyclopedia of Communication* (pp. 689-693), p. 689. Wiley Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405186407.wbiecc075>

³⁶ Cobby, P. (2008). Communication: Definitions and concepts. In W. Donsbach (Ed.), *International encyclopedia of communication* (pp. 660–666), p. 660. Wiley Blackwell.

³⁷ Peters, p. 689.

³⁸ “Communication”. *Lexico English Dictionary* (powered by Oxford). <https://www.lexico.com/definition/communication>

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

⁴⁰ Charan, R. (2012, June 21). The discipline of listening. *Harvard Business Review*, para. 2. <https://hbr.org/2012/06/the-discipline-of-listening>

⁴¹ Bobinski, B. (2016, February 3). The price of poor listening. *Management Issues*. <http://www.management-issues.com/opinion/6564/the-price-of-poor-listening>

⁴² Pepitone, J. (2011, October 24). Netflix loses 800,000 subscribers. *CNN Money*. http://money.cnn.com/2011/10/24/technology/netflix_earnings/index.htm

Lack of and poor listening by management also results in reduced staff motivation, productivity, and loyalty, and increased staff turnover. A 2016 study of 1,000 professionals confirmed findings that salary is usually not the prime motivator for 'job hopping'. Instead, salary was the sixth most important consideration in employees' job satisfaction, with "feeling valued" and "feeling respected" being higher priorities.⁴³ Being listened to is a fundamental contributor to feeling valued and respected.⁴⁴

The importance of listening effectively to complaints was starkly illustrated in the 2013 report of the **Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust Public Inquiry** into deaths in UK hospitals which concluded:

“... the story it tells is first and foremost of appalling suffering of many patients. This was primarily caused by a serious failure on the part of a provider Trust Board. It did not listen sufficiently to its patients.”⁴⁵

The tragic **2017 Grenfell Tower fire in London**, which claimed more than 70 lives and injured many more, has been directly attributed to a “failure to listen”.⁴⁶ Warnings of inadequate fire safety standards were posted on the website of the Grenfell Action Group four years before the disaster⁴⁷ and reports identifying the dangers of combustible building cladding were submitted to the UK Parliament in 1999.⁴⁸

In 2019, the **Boeing 737 MAX airliner**, a new version of the biggest selling commercial aircraft produced by what was then the world's largest and most trusted aircraft manufacturer, was grounded worldwide for more than a year following two crashes in which 346 people died. Subsequent investigations resulted in US\$20 billion in fines, compensation, and legal fees, as well as indirect losses by Boeing of more than US\$60 billion from 1,200 cancelled orders.⁴⁹

The crashes were found to have been caused by a new Manoeuvring Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS) introduced in the 737 MAX to counter a tendency of the aircraft to pitch up and climb too steeply, potentially leading to a stall. This tendency resulted from more powerful engines fitted further forward than the engines on the previous 737 model. The MCAS system automatically pushed the nose of the aircraft down when it detected a high 'angle of attack'. However, Boeing provided no information to pilots about the new system and it could not be deactivated by pilots. Investigations also revealed other design faults in the 737 MAX that could send false information on climb rates to the MCAS system, resulting in it sending the aircraft into a series of unrecoverable nose dives, which were found to have caused the two fatal crashes.

How could what one reporter called “the most expensive corporate blunder ever” occur?⁵⁰ A number of Boeing employees reported that, after the 1997 merger of Boeing and McDonnell Douglas, manufacturing quality declined and staff complaints and warnings were ignored.⁵¹ In a documentary analyzing Boeing's fall from grace and the sky, John Barnett, a Quality Manager who worked at Boeing for more than 30 years said:

“Boeing stopped listening to its employees.”⁵²

⁴³ Calibre. (2017). 2016/2017 workplace sentiment survey. <http://calibresearch.com.au/please-mind-the-gap-the-costly-lesson-of-not-listening-to-your-employees>

⁴⁴ Brownell, J. (2016). *Listening: Attitudes, principles, and skills* (5th ed.). Routledge.

⁴⁵ Her Majesty's Stationery Office. (2013). Report of the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust public inquiry, p. 3. Retrieved from <http://www.midstaffpublicinquiry.com/sites/default/files/report/Executive%20summary.pdf>

⁴⁶ Ghelani, D. (2017, June 22). Grenfell Tower: “there are only the deliberately silent, or the preferably unheard”. *Media Diversified*, para. 1. <https://mediadiversified.org/2017/06/22/grenfell-tower-there-are-only-the-deliberately-silent-or-the-preferably-unheard>

⁴⁷ Ghelani, 2017, para. 5.

⁴⁸ House of Commons. (1999). Potential risk of fire spread in building via external cladding systems. Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs First Report, London, UK. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/199900/cmselect/cmenvtra/109/10907.htm>

⁴⁹ Isidore, C. (2020, November 17). Boeing's 737 Max debacle could be the most expensive corporate blunder ever. *CNN Business*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/11/17/business/boeing-737-max-grounding-cost/index.html>

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Vanapalli, V. (2022, February 18). Where is John Barnett Now? *The Cinemaholic*. <https://thecinemaholic.com/where-is-john-barnett-now>

⁵² Ibid. Interestingly, this statement has since been removed online. However, the statement “basically Boeing stopped listening to its engineers” is reported in Berkowitz, J. (2022, February 18). Netflix's Boeing documentary, 'Downfall,' is a righteous screed against corporate greed. *Fast Company*, para. 9. <https://www.fastcompany.com/90723236/netflixs-boeing-documentary-downfall-is-a-righteous-screed-against-corporate-greed>

Boeing subsequently rectified the problems including changes to the software and giving pilots the ability to override the system.⁵³ But, as well as costing lives, the reputation of the company and many of its management including the CEO at the time never fully recovered, opening the door for French rival, Airbus, to take market leadership.

At a macro-social level, the 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer issued its strongest warning yet about the loss of trust in organizations and risks to social stability and free enterprise capitalism, theming its survey report 'The Cycle of Distrust'. Edelman concluded that **distrust of government and media “threatens social stability”** and reported that 52% of people believe that **“capitalism as it exists today does more harm than good in the world”**.⁵⁴

On the other side of the equation, effective listening can yield many benefits, as indicated throughout this report, including:

- **Increased trust;**
- **Enhanced relationships;**
- **Improved reputation;**
- **Better policy;**
- **Well-informed evidence-based decisions** (based on qualitative data as well as statistics);
- **Increased employee morale, retention, and productivity;**
- **Customer satisfaction and retention;** and
- **Insights to inform future strategy and product and service development and delivery.**

This report summarizes the findings and recommendations of seven years of research conducted inside 60 organizations on three continents between 2013 and 2019 to examine how and how well organizations listen to their stakeholders and publics, together with evaluation of the public communication of a range of organizations conducted between 2019 and 2022 – in all, a decade of research involving 60 organizations. The organizations studied included national and state government departments and agencies; major corporations; a UN organization; and a number of non-government organizations (NGOs) and non-profit organizations (NPOs) in Australia, Europe, the UK, and the USA. It also includes citations of more than 200 other academic and professional studies and references that support the conclusions and recommendations presented in these pages.

An Executive Summary of key findings from 10 years of research follows in Section 2 for those who want quick access to the main findings and recommendations of this body of research. Detailed findings and recommendations of studies follow in Sections 4–10.

⁵³ Boeing. (2021). 737 MAX software update. <https://www.boeing.com/commercial/737max/737-max-software-updates.page>

⁵⁴ Edelman. (2022). *2022 Edelman trust barometer*, p. 12. <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2022-trust-barometer>

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – MAIN FINDINGS OF THIS RESEARCH

The Organizational Listening Project was conducted in three stages over a period of seven years between 2013 and 2019 and involved examination of the internal and external communication of 52 organizations including government departments and agencies, corporations, NGOs, and non-profit organizations in Australia, Europe, the UK, and the USA. In addition, cognate studies were conducted in a further eight organizations during this period and between 2019 and 2022. (See Table 2.1.)

Table 2.1. Organizations studied in the Organizational Listening Project and cognate studies (2013–2022).

Organization type	Australia	Europe	UK	USA	Total
Government	7	2	21	2	32
Corporate	3	5	2	9	19
NGO/non-profit	1	4	2	2	9
Totals	11	11	25	13	60

The Organizational Listening Project and cognate studies involved more than 300 interviews; analysis of more than 600 documents; more than 80 meetings and forums; analysis of more than 200 web pages and a sample of 1,200 social media posts; and 25 field tests of organizational listening. (See Table 2.2.)

Table 2.2. Summary of research activities in The Organizational Listening Project and cognate studies 2013–2022.

Research	Interviews	Documents	Meetings & forums	Web pages	Social media posts	Field tests
Pilot (2013–14) Australia (AU)	3	-	-	-	-	-
Stage 1 (2014–15) Corporate, Government, & NGOs – AU, UK, USA	104	412	12	40	-	25
Stage 2 (2016) Government – UK	76	92	54	65	-	-
Stage 3 (2017–19) Achmea Int. – AU, Europe Achmea Int. – Europe	96 33	64 24	6 2	75 10	- 200	- -
Greater Sydney Commission (2018) – AU	15	25	3	10	1,000	-
European Commission (2018) – Europe	-	18	5	16	-	-
TOTALS	327	635	82	216	1,200	25

Synthesis of the findings from The Organizational Listening Project and cognate studies revealed the following findings.

- In the name of public communication, organizations including government departments and agencies, corporations, NGOs and non-profit institutions, predominantly disseminate their messages** – i.e., they engage in speaking to stakeholders and publics who they perceive primarily as *audiences*, *consumers*, and sometimes even as *targets*. **The ratio of speaking to listening by organizations is as high as 95:5, with 80:20 being an acknowledged average.** In other words, between 80% and 95% of the communication resources of organizations is devoted to speaking, with **just 5–15% of technological, financial, and human resources devoted to listening.**
- Organizational speaking is conducted through major investments in and sophisticated systems of media advertising; public relations such as media publicity and promotional events; publications such as brochures, newsletters, and reports; websites; social media; speeches and presentations; and other channels.**
- Even social media, which are designed for two-way interactive communication and *sociality* are used primarily by most organizations for speaking** to promote their brands, products, services, and policies.

4. Specialist functions established ostensibly to foster engagement, dialogue, and participation, such as stakeholder engagement and public consultation are also often used primarily for speaking by organizations.
5. When listening is conducted by organizations, it is mostly instrumental and organization-centric, undertaken to gain intelligence and insights to aid targeting of people for marketing products and services or other forms of persuasion such as seeking to influence voting in elections.
6. Organizational listening is also often selective. For example, governments listen mostly to major business, industrial and community organizations which may or may not fully represent their constituencies; corporations often listen only to major customers and partners; and even public consultations and stakeholder engagement often hear only from the 'usual suspects' – large established organizations, lobbyists, and highly organized and professionalized groups.
7. The studies identified a number of challenges in organizational listening, particularly the issue of scale. Organizations often need to listen to thousands, hundreds of thousands or even millions of people in the case of large corporations and democratic governments. As a result of scale, organizational listening is mostly delegated and mediated through functions such as research, customer relations and call centres, stakeholder engagement, and public consultation.
8. Listening is more than hearing. Based on communication, psychology, political science, and ethics literature, the studies noted that listening does not necessarily require agreement or acceptance, as this may not be feasible in some circumstances, but that listening is not simply collecting feedback and input. The research proposed that organizational listening requires (1) recognition of others who have a right to be listened to, which requires openness; (2) acknowledgement; (3) paying attention to what others say (4) interpreting what others say fairly and in good faith; (5) trying to gain understanding of others' perspectives; (6) giving consideration to what others say; and (7) responding in some appropriate way. These are referred to as the *Seven Canons of Listening*. (See Section 3.)
9. The studies concluded that public communication functions of organizations, such as advertising, marketing communication, corporate communication, public relations, stakeholder engagement, specialist practices such as investor relations and community relations, and what is often broadly called *strategic communication* have created a sophisticated 'architecture of speaking'. This architecture of speaking is reflected in both theory and practice. For example, analysis of text books, research monographs, and academic as well as professional journal articles in the above fields reveals a focus on voice, rhetoric, *speech communication*, *mass communication*, and storytelling for the purposes of informing, promotion and persuasion, with little attention paid to listening.
10. The studies recommend that, in order to create public trust, engagement, a positive reputation, and sustainability, organizations need to create and operationalize an *architecture of listening*. Eight essential elements of an architecture of listening in organizations were identified in this research. (See Section 5, 'Listening by Corporations and Governments'.)

A definition of Organizational Listening

From the extensive review of literature conducted, as well as empirical research conducted as part of The Organizational Listening Project, the following definition was developed. See the 'Seven Canons of Listening' also in Section 3, as well as further discussion in Section 5.

“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.”⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Macnamara, J. (2019). Explicating listening in organization-public communication: Theory, practices, technologies. *International Journal of Communication*, 13, 5183–5204, p. 5191. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/11996/2839>

Key causes of lack of listening or poor listening by organizations

1. **A culture of arrogance and elitism within management.** While there is evidence of change in progressive organizations, senior management of many organizations believe that they personally possess, or have access to, all necessary knowledge and expertise, and members of 'the public' are perceived as 'consumers', 'targets', 'punters' and other dismissive and often patronizing terms.
2. **A focus on communication campaigns,** which are about what the organization wants to say when it wants to say it. While one-way communication for information, promotion, and persuasion is legitimate and important in some cases (e.g., for marketing to drive the economy, for social marketing campaigns to reduce smoking and obesity, etc.), balance is required between one-way and two-way and outbound and inbound communication.
3. **Market and social research conducted by organizations are predominantly quantitative.** While quantitative data are important for producing generalized findings and identifying averages and majorities, in-depth qualitative research is required to gain deep understanding of people, issues, and problems in particular contexts and to identify emotional factors that drive behaviour as much or more than rational cognition.
4. **Stakeholder engagement is often conducted to inform and persuade stakeholders to an organization's point of view,** rather than for two-way exchange of information and perspectives and shared meaning making.
5. **Public consultation, a primary communication activity for listening, is often conducted only to meet regulatory requirements** (i.e., a 'tick the box' exercise) rather than gain deep insights into public attitudes, concerns, and needs. For example, calls for submissions are often posted on official websites that are not widely accessed and reports are often lengthy, formal documents.
6. **Furthermore, public consultations mostly attract the 'usual suspects'** – organized professional groups, lobbyists and power elites who are articulate, motivated, and have the resources and time to make submissions and dominate discussion of issues.
7. The above is exacerbated by **a lack of outreach in public consultation and stakeholder engagement** to engage with marginalized groups whose members are insufficiently articulate or disengaged and, therefore, disinclined to proactively engage with an organization.
8. While statistical data is analyzed extensively, **unstructured data such as texts are often not analyzed systematically** (e.g., using text analysis software), resulting in the voice of citizens, customers, and others contained in text such as submissions to consultations and correspondence not being understood. This is important because the voice of citizens, customers, and others is expressed in words. Numbers only describe, rank, or categorize people in highly reductionist ways.
9. Many organizations have **multiple databases and information management systems that do not 'talk to each other', which means that information exists in 'data silos'**. Despite much hype over data analytics and 'big data', **most organizations do not have knowledge management systems to integrate and make sense of data from multiple sources and platforms.** This results in lost insights and duplicated activities. When conducted ethically, data integration and triangulation can provide deep insights not available from single data sets.
10. **Social media are mainly used for posting messages** and under-utilized as sites for listening.

The most effective methods, systems and processes for organizational listening

From the 60 organizations participating in The Organizational Listening Project and cognate studies, the following were identified as the 'top 10' most effective methods, systems, and processes for gaining understanding of stakeholders and publics, insights to inform future strategy, and build relationships.

1. **In-depth qualitative social and market research** such as focus groups, stakeholder interviews, ethnography (observation), and participatory action research to gain deep insights into the attitudes, perceptions, interests, and concerns of relevant groups;
2. **Public consultation** through written submissions as well as face-to-face presentations and discussions at hearings and forums – but see point 3 below which is a co-requirement;
3. **Textual analysis of open-ended comments, submissions, correspondence, and complaints** to identify major issues and concerns, which can then be responded to and addressed;
4. **Analysis of call centre recordings using voice to text (VTT) software** and then conducting textual analysis of transcripts to identify major issues and concerns, which can then be addressed;
5. **Social media analysis** that monitors conversations and comments by others (not only tracking the organization's posts). As well as social media content analysis, listening can include **social network analysis, social influencer mapping** and **netnography** (online observation over time);
6. **Deliberative forums** that involve distribution of advance information for participants to become informed and several rounds of discussion so that input evolves beyond initial positions and emotional responses to engage in an informed and thoughtful way;

7. **Customer journey mapping**, which can also be applied to members of organizations, patients, students and other stakeholders. Rather than relying on feedback at specific moments in time, this method identifies and evaluates multiple 'touchpoints' that stakeholders have of an organization and identifies those needing improvement (see Section 7, 'A Listening Corporation');
8. **Net Promoter Score (NPS) surveys with a 'closed loop'**. NPS is often limited to a single 0–10 rating of an organization. Adding qualitative questions to NPS surveys, such as 'Why did you give this rating?', and following up 'detractors' with outbound calls to learn more about and try to resolve their concerns delights and retains customers (see Section 7, 'A Listening Corporation');
9. **Behavioural insights**, which involves identification of the often hidden motivations of behaviour through testing various concepts and monitoring response (see Section 6, 'Listening by the UK Government Before and After *Brexit*');
10. **Sense making methodology (SMM)**,⁵⁶ a relatively new research and analysis methodology that involves ongoing open dialogue to achieve understanding through people 'talking things over'.

A range of other listening activities are used, such as advisory boards and committees; customer summits; review of petitions; listening posts; listening tours; citizen juries; trust networks; study circles; and various forms of face-to-face or digital *crowdsourcing*. A number of these are overdone, such as petitions, and some are no longer trusted (e.g., politicians doing a 'listening tour'). Some are also tokenistic. **Meaningful listening activities and methods need to be implemented, ideally those that lead to deliberative dialogue and discussion.**⁵⁷

As noted in the Table 2.3, **it is the analysis of feedback and information received from stakeholders and publics and follow-up consideration and response that constitutes listening** – not simply performing the activities.

Organizational management needs to recognize that listening is not merely a precursor to communication, or a non-speaking time to be used for preparing what to say. As well as a means to access valuable information (i.e., learning) and insights to inform strategy and planning, **listening is a communicative act** in itself. Equally, **not listening is a communicative act**. Failing to listen says much to the 'unlistened to' and the 'insufficiently listening to'.

Listening is a communicative act in itself.
Not listening is also a communicative act ... it says a lot.

Key learnings from evaluation of public communication

Evaluation of the public communication of a number of organizations conducted as part of The Organizational Listening Project and subsequently in several independent research projects in 2019–2022 confirmed a lack of effective listening and revealed key underlying reasons for failures in communication. Evaluation studies conducted as part of what has become a decade of intensive empirical research and analysis focussed on effective organization-public communication reveal:

1. Program logic models and frameworks⁵⁸ used by many government department and agencies, corporations, NGOs, and even many NPOs for planning and evaluation of public communication are **focussed primarily on distributing the organization's messages** (i.e., one-way outputs of information, promotion, and persuasion). While these approaches are legitimate in public communication to promote products and services, public health, road safety, etc., engagement and relationships with customers, employees, investors, local communities, and other stakeholders and publics require a commitment to authentic two-way communication;
2. Evaluation is restricted in most cases to **evaluating outputs, rather than outcomes and impact**, which are identified as the penultimate and ultimate stages in program theory and program logic models, further illustrating a focus on the organization's voice (*organizational speaking*) rather than mutual achievement of objectives.

⁵⁶ Dervin, B., & Foreman-Wernet, L. (2013). Sense-making methodology as an approach to understanding and designing for campaign audiences. In R. Rice & C. Atkin (Eds.), *Public communication campaigns* (4th ed.; pp. 147–162). Sage.

⁵⁷ Deliberative and deliberation refer to comments and discussion that are informed and rational, rather than ill-informed and irrational, although this does not negate emotional factors and responses.

⁵⁸ Program logic models and planning and evaluation frameworks recommended by researchers and used by many organizations are described in Chapter 9. 'Evaluating Public Communication – Finding Sources of the Problem, and Solutions'.

3. When it is discussed, **impact is often narrowly defined as “organizational impact”**, further reflecting an *organization-centric* approach. (See Section 10.)

Collectively, these findings identify a widespread organizational philosophy of viewing stakeholders and publics such as employees, customers, business partners, and members of local communities, who are vital to the success of the organization, as ‘audiences’, ‘targets’, and ‘consumers. Thus, they are perceived as receivers and recipients rather than agentic actors and voices to which organizations should listen as well as speak.

The benefits of being a better organizational listener

Evaluation of the public communication of a number of organizations conducted as part of The Organizational Listening Project and other independent evaluation studies of public communication show that there are substantial benefits from effective ethical organizational listening for organizations and for their stakeholders, publics, and society as a whole, including:

- **Feedback** to inform fine-tuning and adjustment of strategy and tactics;
- **Insights and intelligence** to inform future planning and strategy;
- **Improved policy;**
- **Increased acceptance of policies;**
- **Improved relationships** between organizations and their key stakeholders and publics;
- **Increased trust;**
- **Customer loyalty and retention;**
- **Employee engagement, motivation, and retention;**
- **Reduced conflict and disputation** (industrial, social, and political).

Figure 2.1. Listening is a powerful and enabling act for both those who are listening as well as those who are speaking.



Table 2.3. Examples of methods and tools that can create an *architecture of listening* in an organization.

RESEARCH-RELATED METHODS OF LISTENING	OTHER METHODS OF LISTENING
Quantitative analysis of responses to structured surveys	Textual analysis of submissions to public consultations ⁵⁹
Analysis of responses to open-ended questions in surveys (textual comments)	Textual analysis of reports, minutes, and/or notes from stakeholder engagement meetings
Qualitative analysis of transcripts of interviews	Textual analysis of recordings of public meetings and forums
Qualitative analysis of transcripts of focus groups	Qualitative analysis of journals and notes from field visits, outreach, tours, etc. ⁶⁰
Quantitative and qualitative analysis of data from pre-testing (e.g., products, services, messages)	Textual analysis of correspondence (letters, e-mails)
Quantitative and qualitative content analysis of media reporting and commentary	Textual analysis of voice-to-text conversions from call centre recordings
Quantitative and qualitative content analysis of social media discussion and comments	Voice of the Customer (VOC) applications that integrate surveys and other customer feedback ⁶¹
Quantitative analysis of topics and 'hubs' in online conversations through social network analysis (<i>indicates issues and topics of most interest or concern</i>)	Textual analysis of written complaints , including meta-analysis of complaints over a period of time to identify patterns, trends, and consistencies
Textual analysis of notes, video, or audio recordings of ethnography (direct observation)	Quantitative analysis of petitions
Content/textual analysis of screen captures from netnography (online observation)	Textual analysis of discussion at listening posts
Quantitative and qualitative analysis of responses to deliberative polls	Textual analysis of dialogues and crowdsourcing initiatives
Textual analysis of participatory action research discussions (e.g., minutes, journals, and notes)	Textual analysis of notes or transcripts from customer/user groups and summits
Textual analysis of Net Promoter Score (NPS) surveys qualitative questions	Textual analysis of discussion by citizen juries
Analysis of feedback from customer journey mapping / customer decision journey	Textual analysis of discussion by trust networks
Textual analysis of deliberative forum transcripts	Textual analysis of discussion by study circles
Textual analysis of appreciative inquiry interviews and/or summits ⁶²	Textual analysis of discussion at captive audience meetings (CAMs)
Behavioural insights analysis	Textual analysis of discussion by advisory boards and committee meetings (e.g., minutes)
Sense making methodology (SMM) ⁶³	Textual analysis of feedback (e.g., 'Contact Us' submissions on websites and suggestion boxes)
Triangulation and meta-analysis of multiple data sets to identify/confirm patterns or trends	Management by walking around (MBWA) – getting out of head office and regional offices to visit the 'shop floor' (ideally unannounced)

It is intentionally noted that in large-scale organizational listening, it is the analysis of what others say that constitutes listening, not simply conducting listening activities, and textual analysis is essential because people speak in words (orally or in writing).

⁵⁹ Some of these methods of analysis may require specialized computer software applications for text mining and textual analysis that use natural language processing (NLP) and machine learning (i.e., learning algorithms), particularly when large volumes of unstructured data (i.e., text) are involved.

⁶⁰ Basic data capture techniques such as keeping a journal or regularly writing notes can be important steps in systematic organizational listening.

⁶¹ Klie, L. (2012, July). Listening to the voice of the customer. *CRM Magazine*. <http://www.destinationcrm.com/Articles/Editorial/Magazine-Features/Listening-to-the-Voice-of-the-Customer-83180.aspx>

⁶² Cooperrider, D., Whitney, D., & Stavros, J. (2008). *Appreciative inquiry handbook* (2nd ed.). Crown Custom.

⁶³ Dervin & Foreman-Wernet, 2013.

3. THE CONTEXT – WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT COMMUNICATION AND LISTENING

Communication is widely agreed to be essential to human society, as well as to the practices of government, business and the professions. Sociologist John Dewey famously said that “society exists ... in communication”⁶⁴ and the philosopher and founder of American cultural studies James Carey identified communication as the basis of all culture and the process by which humans create a shared understanding of reality.⁶⁵ Even though John Durham Peters warned that we often expect too much of communication, describing it as a “registry of modern longings”,⁶⁶ Dewey, Carey, Raymond Williams and many other philosophers, political scientists, psychologists – not to mention communication scholars – strongly agree on the importance of human communication.

Some scholars note that humans “cannot not communicate”.⁶⁷ Even silence communicates – an important principle informing this analysis.

Voice and speaking have been a major focus in the study of human communication 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.⁶⁸ Rhetoric was also studied and developed as early as 500 BCE in Islamic societies of North Africa⁶⁹ and in China.⁷⁰ Rhetoric remains one of the major traditions of human communication scholarship and practice expounded in a number of communication texts.⁷¹

Figure 3.1. The *agora* of Ancient Greece, often held up as symbols of democratic participation, excluded women, slaves, former slaves, and men who were not native Athenians. Thus, listening has long been limited and selective.



⁶⁴ Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education*. Macmillan, p. 5.

⁶⁵ Carey, J. (1989). *Communication as culture: Essays on media and culture*. Unwin Hyman.

⁶⁶ Peters, J. (1999). *Speaking into the air: A history of the idea of communication*. University of Chicago Press, p. 2.

⁶⁷ Watzlawick, P., Beavin, J., & Jackson, D. (2008). Some general axioms of communication. In C. Mortensen (Ed.), *Communication theory* (2nd ed., pp. 74–85). Transaction Publishers, p. 48. (Original work published 1967)

⁶⁸ Atwill, J. (1998). *Rhetoric reclaimed: Aristotle and the liberal arts tradition*. Cornell University Press; Kennedy, G. (1994). *A new history of classical rhetoric*. Princeton University Press.

⁶⁹ Bernal, M. (1987). *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic roots of classical civilisation*. Rutgers University Press.

⁷⁰ Lu, X. (1998). *Rhetoric in ancient China fifth to third century BCE: A comparison with classical Greek rhetoric*. University of South Carolina Press.

⁷¹ Craig, R. (1999). Communication theory as a field. *Communication Theory*, 9, 119–161.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.1999.tb00355.x>; Littlejohn, S., Foss, K., & Oetzel, J. (2017). *Theories of human communication* (11th ed.). Waveland.

In democracies, in particular, *vox populi* – the voice of the people (the *demos*) – and its potential to influence and shape the policies and decisions of government and the exercise of power and authority (the *krátos*) are seen as a human right and fundamental to social stability.

When citizens experience a lack or loss of voice, researchers identify significant social, cultural and political problems. For instance, sociologists and social activists have drawn attention to the lack of voice in any meaningful sense afforded to ethnic minorities in some countries and argued that this constitutes oppression and injustice. Feminist studies has similarly identified lack of voice available to women as a social inequity negatively impacting the status and identity of women in many societies.

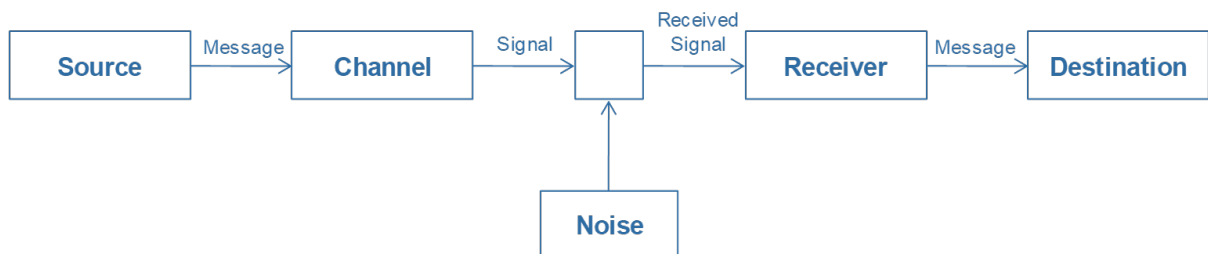
Voice matters, as Nick Couldry clearly showed in his important 2010 book titled *Why Voice Matters*.⁷²

However, there is a concerning lacuna in the heart of communication studies and in the related sub-disciplines and fields of practice variously referred to as *public communication* and, more specifically, as corporate, government, political, and organizational communication, and public relations.

In his theory of *communicative action*⁷³ and seminal writing on the public sphere, Jürgen Habermas argued that “reaching understanding is the inherent telos of human *speech*” [emphasis added].⁷⁴ This focus on speech, speaking and talking continued in 20th century communication scholarship, which for several decades went under the banner of *speech communication*,⁷⁵ particularly in North America.

Study of human communication also became enamoured with new technologies for communicating over time and distance, with the invention of the telegraph, radio, and then television. An early theory that became widely adopted as an explanation of human communication was that developed by Claude Shannon, a mathematician working at Bell Laboratories in the USA, and Warren Weaver, a consultant on scientific projects. Their backgrounds and naming of their theory as the *Mathematical Theory of Communication*⁷⁶ reveal that they were describing the process of electronic signal transmission from a source (typically a machine) that *encodes* a message sent via a channel to a receiver, which *decodes* the message at the destination point. Shannon and Weaver acknowledged that signals could be corrupted by ‘noise’, such as static or electronic interference, and suggested that this could be overcome by sending electronic messages multiple times (*redundancy*) for matching at the point of reception to establish signal fidelity – a practice that continues today in telecommunications networks. Shannon and Weaver never intended that their mathematical theory of signal transmission would explain how human communication works, but in the halcyon days of 20th century Modernism, it was applied in advertising and media practices, becoming nick-named ‘injection theory’ and ‘bullet theory’. This thinking contributed to unjustified but widespread belief in the power of top-down, one-way *mass communication*⁷⁷ that dominated media studies and politics in the 20th century and persists in the 21st century. Proponents of this model failed to realize that humans are agentic actors who interpret (and misinterpret) messages; and ignore; forget, argue, and have their own views to present. Human communication is inescapably *two-way transactional*⁷⁸ interaction – not one-way transmission.

Figure 3.2. The Mathematical Theory of Communication developed by Shannon and Weaver (1949).



⁷² Couldry, N. (2010). *Why voice matters: Culture and politics after neoliberalism*. Sage.

⁷³ Habermas, J. (1984). *Theory of communicative action volume 1: Reason and the rationalization of society* (T. McCarthy, Trans.). Beacon Press. (Original work published in German 1981); Habermas, J. (1987). *The theory of communicative action volume 2: Lifeworld and system: A critique of functionalist reason* (T. McCarthy, Trans.). Beacon Press. (Original published in German 1981)

⁷⁴ Habermas, J. (1991). *The structural transformation of the public sphere* (T. Burger, Trans.). MIT Press, p. 287. (Original work published 1962 in German)

⁷⁵ Gunn, J., & Dance, F. (2014). On the silencing of speech in the late twentieth century. In P. Gehrke & W. Keith (Eds.), *The unfinished conversation: 100 years of communication studies* (pp. 64–81). Routledge.

⁷⁶ Shannon, C., & Weaver, W. (1949). *The mathematical theory of communication*. University of Illinois Press.

⁷⁷ McQuail, D. (2010). *McQuail's mass communication theory* (6th ed.). Sage.

⁷⁸ Alberts, J., Nakayama, T., & Martin, J. (2007). *Human communication in society*. Prentice Hall.

The role of listening in communication

Eminent communication studies scholar, Robert Craig, provides a succinct but cogent definition of communication as “**talking and listening**”.⁷⁹

However, as James Carey observed: “The transmission view of communication is the commonest in our culture.”⁸⁰ Craig has similarly criticized the dominance of a transmission model of communication in everyday thinking.⁸¹ In *Listening for Democracy*, Andrew Dobson observed wryly that keynote speakers are widely sought for public forums, but it is rare to find *keynote listeners*.⁸²

Many communication researchers today advocate dialogue as part of effective and ethical communication, drawing on the philosophies of Mikhail Bakhtin,⁸³ Martin Buber,⁸⁴ and David Bohm,⁸⁵ and recent studies of relationships and public relations such as those of Leslie Baxter⁸⁶ and Maureen Taylor and Michael Kent.⁸⁷ Dialogue makes a useful contribution to understanding communication. However, even dialogue – which literally means “through speaking” requires attention to listening.

“There is no point in a right to free speech if no one is listening.”⁸⁸

“Without a listener, speech is nothing but noise in the ether.”⁸⁹

Listening – the missing link in research and practice

At the 2004 International Listening Association (ILA) conference, Michael Purdy noted that there has been only a small amount of research in relation to listening and that this is primarily grounded in cognitive psychology, mostly with a therapeutic focus.⁹⁰

Lisbeth Lipari acknowledged that listening is studied in “humanities-based communication scholarship” as well as in “social science and cognitive science literature”, but that this is predominantly in the context of *interpersonal* listening.⁹¹

In their 2014 review of literature related to listening, Graham Bodie and Nathan Crick issued a call “to lift listening from its slumber in Western scholastic thinking and in the communication studies discipline more specifically”.⁹² Such a project has seen the light of day in terms of interpersonal communication in the 664-page edited volume, *The Sourcebook of Listening Research: Methodology and Measures* edited by Debra Worthington and Graham Bodie.⁹³

However, listening by and within organizations that play a central role in contemporary developed societies has remained little studied and, as shown in the research reported here, is poorly practiced.

⁷⁹ Craig, R. (2006). Communication as a practice. In G. Shepherd, G. St John, & T. Striphas (Eds.), *Communication as ... Perspectives on Theory* (pp. 38–49). Sage, p. 39.

⁸⁰ Carey, J. (2009). Communication as culture: Essays on media and society. Routledge, p. 12. (Original work published 1989)

⁸¹ Craig, R., & Muller, H. (Eds.). (2007). *Theorizing communication: Readings across traditions*. Sage, p. 1.

⁸² Dobson, A. (2014). *Listening for democracy: Recognition, representation, reconciliation*. Oxford University Press, p. 182.

⁸³ Bakhtin, M. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics* (C. Emerson, Ed. & Trans.). University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published 1963); Bakhtin, M. (1986). *Speech genres and other late essays* (C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Eds., V. McGee, Trans.). University of Texas Press. (Original work published 1979)

⁸⁴ Buber, M. (1958). *I and thou* (R. Smith, Trans.). Scribners. (Original work published 1923); Buber, M. (2002). *Between man and man* (R. Smith, Trans.). Kegan Paul. (Original work published 1947)

⁸⁵ Bohm, D. (1996). *On dialogue* (L. Nichol, Ed.). Routledge.

⁸⁶ Baxter, L. (2011). *Voicing relationships: A dialogic perspective*. Sage.

⁸⁷ Taylor, M., & Kent, M. (2014). Dialogic engagement: Clarifying foundational concepts. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 26(5), 384–398. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2014.956106>

⁸⁸ Downing, J. (2007). Grassroots media: Establishing priorities for the years ahead. *Global Media Journal* (Australia Edition), 1(1), 1–16.

⁸⁹ Lacey, K. (2013). *Listening publics: The politics and experience of listening in the media age*. Polity, p. 166.

⁹⁰ Purdy, M. (2004, April). Qualitative research: Critical for understanding listening. Paper presented at the International Listening Association Conference, Fort Meyers, FL.

⁹¹ Lipari, L. (2010b). Listening, thinking, being. *Communication Theory*, 20(3), 348–362, p. 351. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2010.01366.x>

⁹² Bodie, G., & Crick, N. (2014). Listening, hearing sensing: Three modes of being and the phenomenology of Charles Sanders Peirce. *Communication Theory*, 24(2), 105–123, p. 118. <https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12032>

⁹³ Worthington, D., & Bodie, G. (2018). *Sourcebook of Listening Research: Methodology and Measures*. Wiley.

Susan Bickford was one of the first to point out this gap in relation to democratic politics in her landmark text *The Dissonance of Democracy: Listening, Conflict and Citizenship*⁹⁴ – a cause taken up recently by Andrew Dobson in his book *Listening for Democracy*.⁹⁵

Dobson has observed that “honourable exceptions aside, virtually no attention has been paid to listening in mainstream political science”.⁹⁶ Similarly, Couldry observed that “surprisingly, little attention has been given to what listening involves”.⁹⁷ Dobson pointed out that efforts to improve democracy have mainly focussed on “getting more people to speak”.⁹⁸ But, as Gideon Calder says, the real problem in democratic politics is not being denied a voice; it is being denied an audience.⁹⁹ Tanja Dreher made a similar point in her analysis of marginalized communities. For instance, in discussing Muslims living in Australia, she reported that there is no shortage of articulate spokespersons and commentators within the Muslim community. The challenge faced by Muslims in this predominantly Christian country is “being heard”.¹⁰⁰ In a following analysis, Dreher concluded that “in much research and advocacy, there is a strong emphasis on the democratic potential of *voice, representation, speaking up and talking*” [emphasis added].¹⁰¹

Kate Lacey notes that “listening has long been overlooked in studies of the media as well as in conceptualizations of the public sphere”.¹⁰²

Furthermore, analysis shows that there is scant attention paid to listening in business and management literature other than discussion of interpersonal listening in an intra-organizational context (e.g., in human resources management and leadership studies).¹⁰³

A disciplinary field in which one could reasonably expect to find discussion of organizational listening is public relations (PR) and the largely synonymous fields of corporate, government, and organizational communication, which are theorized as enablers of dialogue, engagement, and relationships between organizations and their stakeholders and publics.¹⁰⁴ However, these fields also largely ignore listening. For example, a keyword search of the two leading PR journals, *Public Relations Review* from 1976 to 2015 and *Journal of Public Relations Research* since its launch, found only three articles focussed specifically or substantially on listening. Only one article discussed organizational listening in any depth, saying that “building a culture of listening and engagement” is one of three roles of public relations professionals and listed eight requirements to build a culture of listening in an organization.¹⁰⁵

Listening also receives little attention in PR research monographs and textbooks. For instance, listening is not listed in the index of 12 of the most widely used PR textbooks including the main text on PR Excellence theory,¹⁰⁶ described as “the dominant paradigm” of PR.¹⁰⁷

On the few occasions that listening is discussed in PR literature, it is with an organization-centric focus. For example, in *Today's Public Relations: An Introduction*, Emeritus Professor Bob Heath and Tim Coombs wrote that “today’s public relations practitioner gives voice to organizations” and acknowledged

⁹⁴ Bickford, S. (1996). *The dissonance of democracy: Listening, conflict and citizenship*. Cornell University Press.

⁹⁵ Dobson, 2014.

⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 136.

⁹⁷ Couldry, 2010, p. 146.

⁹⁸ Dobson, p. 36.

⁹⁹ Calder, G. (2011). Democracy and listening. In M. Crumplin (Ed.), *Problems of democracy: Language and speaking* (pp. 125–135). Inter-Disciplinary Press.

¹⁰⁰ Dreher, T. (2008). Media, multiculturalism and the politics of listening. In E. Tilley (Ed.), *Power and place: Refereed proceedings of the Australian and New Zealand Communication Association Conference 2008* (pp. 1–14). Massey University, Palmerston, New Zealand, p. 7.

¹⁰¹ Dreher, T. (2009). Listening across difference: Media and multiculturalism beyond the politics of voice. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 23(4), 445–458, p. 446. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304310903015712>

¹⁰² Lacey, K. (2013). *Listening publics: The politics and experience of listening in the media age*. Polity, p. 3.

¹⁰³ Flynn, J., Valikoski, T., & Grau, J. (2008). Listening in the business context: Reviewing the state of research. *International Journal of Listening*, 22(2), 141–151. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10904010802174800>

¹⁰⁴ Grunig, L., Grunig J., & Dozier D. (2002). *Excellent organizations and effective organizations: A study of communication management in three countries*. Lawrence Erlbaum; Kent, M. (2013). Using social media dialogically: Public relations role in reviving democracy. *Public Relations Review*, 39, 337–345.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2013.07.024>; Kent, M., & Taylor, M. (2002). Toward a dialogic theory of public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 28(1), 21–37. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111\(02\)00108-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111(02)00108-X); Taylor & Kent, 2014.

¹⁰⁵ Gregory, A. (2015). Practitioner-leaders’ representation of roles: The Melbourne Mandate. *Public Relations Review*, 41(5), 598–606, p. 598. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2014.02.030>

¹⁰⁶ Grunig et al., 2002.

¹⁰⁷ L’Etang, J. (2008). *Public relations: Concepts, practice and critique*. Sage.

that “this process requires the ability to listen.” However, they go on to narrowly and instrumentally configure listening by saying “listening gives a foundation for knowing what to say and thinking strategically of the best ways to frame and present appealing messages”.¹⁰⁸

Even in the age of Web 2.0 and interactive social media which, hypothetically, increase two-way communicative interaction, Kate Crawford has noted that “speaking up has become the dominant metaphor for participation in online spaces” and “listening is not a common metaphor for online activity”.¹⁰⁹ Studies of online election campaigns and *e-democracy* in Australia, the UK, and the USA,¹¹⁰ and analyses of youth engagement,¹¹¹ have found that social media are largely used for the transmission of information and messages (i.e., speaking), rather than listening and engaging in dialogue.

As noted in Section 1, it is not that organizations cannot afford to listen to their stakeholders and publics – not when they spend more than a trillion US dollars on public communication worldwide, including an estimated US\$800 billion a year on media advertising¹¹² and hundreds of millions of dollars more on public relations, digital marketing, websites, events, and various other promotional activities.

It is ironic that during a period of increasing investment in public communication, trust in government, corporations, NGOs, and major institutions is falling. This is a clear sign that something is awry in public communication. Something important is missing.

Nick Couldry has described voice as “the implicitly linked practices of speaking and listening.”¹¹³ The term ‘implicitly’ hints at the problem that needs to be addressed. Listening needs to be made *explicit* in communication theory and practice. And it needs to be explicated in terms of how it can be operationalized, including in the major organizations that govern, regulate, and supposedly serve contemporary societies. The findings and recommendations in this report contribute to those important steps in theory building and practice.

Why examine organizational listening?

Use of the term ‘organizational listening’ is not a misguided attempt to anthropomorphize organizations. Ultimately, it is humans in organizations who listen – or don’t listen – to those who seek to interact with the organization. Even signals detected by so-called ‘listening’ devices and technologies are interpreted by humans, who then make decisions on actions to take and policies to implement.

However, there are a number of characteristics that make listening in and by organizations challenging and require specialized approaches. Unlike interpersonal listening in dyads and small groups, organizational listening is characterized by four key factors.

- **Scale** – Organizations commonly have thousands, hundreds of thousands, or even millions of stakeholders, such as customers, employees, members, ratepayers, patients, students, or citizens who may seek to communicate with them. Thus, the scope for personal aural listening, such as in face to face meetings, is limited and scaled up methods and systems are required.

¹⁰⁸ Heath, R., & Coombs, T. (2006). *Today’s public relations: An introduction*. Sage, p. 346.

¹⁰⁹ Crawford, K. (2009). Following you: Disciplines of listening in social media. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 23(4), 525–535, p. 526. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304310903003270>

¹¹⁰ Gibson, R., Williamson, A., & Ward, S. (2010). *The Internet and the 2010 election: Putting the small ‘p’ back in politics*. London, UK: Hansard Society; Macnamara, J. (2011). Pre and post-election 2010 online: What happened to the conversation? *Communication, Politics, Culture*, 44(2), 18–36.

<http://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary;dn=627292905802447;res=IELHSS>; Macnamara, J. (2014). *The 21st century media (r)evolution: Emergent communication practices*, Peter Lang; Macnamara, J., & Kenning, G.

(2014). E-electioneering 2007–2014: Trends in online political communication over three elections. *Media International Australia*, 152, 57–74. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X1415200107>; Vergeer, M. (2013). Politics, elections and online campaigning: Past, present . . . and a peek into the future. *New Media and Society*, 15(1), 9–17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444812457327>

¹¹¹ Bennett, W., Wells, C., & Freelon, D. (2011). Communicating civic engagement: Contrasting models of citizenship in the youth Web culture. *Journal of Communication*, 61(5), 835–856. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2011.01588.x>

¹¹² Guttman, A. (2019). Global advertising spending from 2014 to 2022. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/273288/advertising-spending-worldwide>

¹¹³ Couldry, N. (2009). Commentary: Rethinking the politics of voice. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 23(4), 579–582, p. 580. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304310903026594>

- **Delegated** – Because of scale, organizational listening is largely delegated through a range of organizational functions. These include social and market research, customer relations, call centres, public relations, stakeholder engagement, public consultations, complaints handling, correspondence processing and, increasingly in the digital age, social media monitoring and analysis.
- **Mediated** – As a result of scale and delegation, organizational listening is mostly mediated. Information, feedback, and requests are received by organizations predominantly in written form such as e-mails, letters, submissions, reports, responses to surveys; inquiries and comments posted on websites; and posts in social media; as well telephone calls to call centres, which are typically digitally recorded.
- **Asynchronous** – Unlike interpersonal communication that is synchronous (live and dynamic), organizational listening to comments and requests in letters, submissions, reports from inquiries, media articles, and other mediated forms requires time for receipt, consideration, and response.

Therefore, unlike interpersonal listening which is direct, face-to-face, and synchronous, **effective organizational listening requires and depends on systems, structures, resources, and a range of processes, technologies, and specialist skills that can enable and facilitate large-scale, delegated, mediated, asynchronous listening.**

What is listening? Realistic but reasonable expectations

This raises the question of what we mean by listening and what we expect of listening. If we expect too much of listening – e.g., always achieving consensus or agreement – listening is bound to fall short and many could be excused for being reluctant to try. On the other hand, it is important to recognize that, as well as non-listening, there are many forms of fake listening such as *pretend* listening¹¹⁴ and *pseudolistening*¹¹⁵ that are not authentic or effective. Jacqueline Bussie says that when others are speaking, most of us are “re-loading our verbal gun”.¹¹⁶ In his popular book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey says “most people do not listen to understand; they listen with the intent to reply. They’re either speaking or preparing to speak”.¹¹⁷ Many organizations announce that they are listening, but their policies are already formulated and decisions made.

The first important distinction to make is the difference between **listening and hearing**. Hearing simply involves the physical reception of signals or messages, whether they are sound waves travelling via the ear canal (*auditory meatus*) to vibrate on a human eardrum (*tympanic membrane*), or correspondence of some kind received by an organization. We know that such signals can be ignored – humans do not cognitively process all that they hear (listening occurs in the brain, not the ears), and this research shows that organizations similarly ignore, file away, or delete much of what arrives in their over-flowing inboxes, or leave it as zeros and ones on spinning or solid state hard drives where it is eventually lost in unscalable data mountains. Despite considerable diversity in definitions of listening – more than 50, according to Ethel Glenn writing in *The International Journal of Listening*¹¹⁸ – a synthesis of literature in relation to interpersonal listening, psychology, psychotherapy, democratic political theory, and ethics identifies what are referred to in this research as “Seven Canons of Listening”.

A definition of organizational listening was also developed based on review of literature in above fields as well as empirical research undertaken, as noted in the Executive Summary and reported in Section 5.

¹¹⁴ Bussie, J. (2011). Reconciled diversity: Reflections on our calling to embrace our religious neighbours. *Intersections*, 33, 30–35, p. 31.

¹¹⁵ Adler, R., & Rodman, G. (2011). *Understanding communication* (11th ed.). Oxford University Press, p. 136.

¹¹⁶ Bussie, p. 31.

¹¹⁷ Covey, S. (1989). *The seven habits of highly effective people: Powerful lessons in personal change*. Free Press, p. 251.

¹¹⁸ Glenn, E. (1989). A content analysis of fifty definitions of listening. *The International Journal of Listening*, 3(1), 21–31. https://doi.org/10.1207/s1932586xijl0301_3

Seven canons of listening

1. Giving **recognition** to others as having the right to speak, rather than selective listening;¹¹⁹
2. **Acknowledgement** of others' views and expressions of voice, ideally in a timely way, the importance of which has been demonstrated in the *Deliberatorium* online consultation experiment conducted by MIT¹²⁰ and in psychotherapy research;¹²¹
3. Paying **attention** to others.¹²² It is significant that people often use the term 'paying' in relation to attention, indicating that listening involves an investment;
4. **Interpretation** of what others say as fairly and receptively as possible. This recognizes that people are often not articulate or direct and will have different cultural backgrounds, educational levels, language skills, etc.;¹²³
5. Trying to achieve **understanding** of others' views, perspectives, and feelings;¹²⁴
6. Giving **consideration** to what others say such as in requests or proposals;¹²⁵ and
7. **Responding** in an appropriate way. Listening does not necessarily require agreement or acceptance of what is said or requested, but research shows that some response is required.¹²⁶

Figure. 3.3. Communications technologies are often confused with the processes of human communication.



¹¹⁹ Bickford, 1996; Honneth, A. (2007). *Disrespect*. Polity Press; Husband, C. (2009). Commentary: Between listening and understanding. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 23(4), 441–443.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10304310903026602>

¹²⁰ Klein, M. (2007, December 31). The MIT Collaboratorium: Enabling effective large-scale deliberation for complex problems (Working Paper 4679–08). MIT Sloan School of Management. <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1085295>

¹²¹ Schmid, P. (2001). Acknowledgement: The art of responding: Dialogical and ethical perspectives on the challenges of unconditional relationships in therapy and beyond. In J. Bozarth & P. Wilkins (Eds.), *Rogers' therapeutic conditions: Evolution, theory and practice*, (Vol. 3; pp. 155–171). PCCS Books.

¹²² Bickford, 1996; Honneth, 2007; Husband, 2009, p. 441.

¹²³ Husband, C. (2000). Media and the public sphere in multi-ethnic societies. In S. Cottle (Ed.), *Ethnic minorities and the media* (pp. 199–214). Open University Press; ILA (International Listening Association). (1995). An ILA definition of listening. *Listening Post*, 53, 1, 4–5, p. 4. <http://www.listen.org/ListeningPost>

¹²⁴ Bodie & Crick, 2014; Habermas, 1984, 1987; Husband, C. (1996). The right to be understood: Conceiving the multi-ethnic public sphere. *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Sciences*, 9(2), 205–215. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13511610.1996.9968484>; Husband, 2000.

¹²⁵ Honneth, 2007; Husband, 2009.

¹²⁶ Lundsteen, S. (1979). *Listening: Its impact on language and the other language arts*. ERIC Clearing House on Reading and Communication Skills; Purdy, M., & Borisoff, D. (1997). *Listening in everyday life: A personal and professional approach* (2nd ed.). University of America Press.

4. THE ORGANIZATIONAL LISTENING PROJECT

Introduction

The Organizational Listening Project was born based on a hunch. A *hypothesis* is a more formal research term, but the curiosity that led to the project was not to be resolved through scientific research such as an experiment in which hypotheses are tested and either proven or found null. The overall question that led to this research was not how many inquiries organizations respond to or how many consultations they conduct, but *how*, and particularly *how well*, they listen.

This qualitative question resulted from a deep and concerning suspicion formed during more than 20 years working in professional public communication practice spanning corporate and marketing communication and public relations as well as in communication and media research in a commercial research firm. Critical reflection released uncomfortable memories of two decades of speaking on behalf of organizations – press, radio, and TV ads; writing press releases (still called that in many places despite the evolution of broadcast and online media); producing brochures, newsletters, annual reports and other publications; building websites (mostly Web 1.0); staging launches and promotional events; writing speeches and presentations; and advising organizations on how to ‘get their message across’. This suspicion was then bolstered by academic research into public communication.

Pilot study

To test this hunch, a pilot study was undertaken in 2013/14 with three organizations – one large corporation, one government agency, and one NGO. The pilot study was unfunded, but was relatively easy to undertake by selecting two of the organizations in Sydney close to the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) and one in Melbourne and doing the field work during allocated academic research time¹²⁷ and travel for other purposes such as conferences.

Methodology

The pilot study was based on **in-depth interviews** with the senior communication executive of the three participating organizations and **content analysis** of relevant documents and data provided, such as communication strategies, reports of research, and statistics in relation to inquiries, correspondence and website requests processed, as well as social media interaction.

Findings

Findings from the pilot study supported the hunch that organizations and their various agencies such as advertising and PR firms, stakeholder engagement teams, customer relations departments, and so on, devote substantial resources to distributing the organizations’ messages (i.e., speaking) and relatively little to listening to their ‘stakeholders’¹²⁸ and ‘publics’.¹²⁹ Thus, the findings threw fuel of the fire of passion to explore this issue further.

Given the small sample, it is not appropriate to discuss findings in detail. However, the pilot indicated:

- A dominant flow of information from the organizations to their stakeholders and publics;
- Positive response to customer inquiries that related to sales or potential sales in the case of the corporation studied;
- But, beyond sales-related interaction, the organizations studied had no specialized methods, systems or technologies for listening to stakeholders and publics;
- There was little interaction by the organizations in social media. Social media were used by all three organizations, but primarily for posting their promotional messages.

¹²⁷ Standard academic workloads usually allow 40% of academic time to be devoted to research.

¹²⁸ *Stakeholders* is a widely used term to refer to “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s purpose and objectives”, a term coined in Freeman, R. (1984). *Strategic management: A stakeholder approach*. Pitman, p. 6. Stakeholders typically include shareholders, customers, employees, business partners, and local communities.

¹²⁹ Public relations practitioners use the term *publics* (plural) to refer to groups of people with whom interaction is desirable or necessary. The concept also is advocated by sociologists and political scientists such as Nina Eliasoph (2004), who has called for broad-based replacement of the singular term public with the plural publics to recognize social plurality and diversity. Media researcher Kate Lacey says “the idea of a singular, overarching public is a rhetorical fiction” (Lacey, 2013, p. 15).

5. LISTENING BY CORPORATIONS AND GOVERNMENTS

Introduction

After a pilot study of three organizations in Australia, which was used to test the concept, gain some initial findings to identify the likely scholarly and practical value of the research, and refine the methodology, a major study of how and how well corporations and government bodies listen to their stakeholders and publics commenced in September 2014 in the UK. This was followed by a month of intensive study of organizations in the USA in January 2015 and further research in the UK in May 2015. Additional organizations in Australia were studied in between international trips.

The Organizational Listening Project had no specific funding initially. However, an entrepreneurial approach led to underwriting the first stage of research by:

1. Undertaking a number of small contract research and consultancy projects that generated a profit and transferring this to a Research Investment Account¹³⁰ available to fund further research;
2. Combining local and international field research with existing travel (e.g., to conferences).

Methodology

The research used a naturalistic approach, so-named because it involves studying people and organizations in their natural setting going about their typical activities. This interpretive approach uses *qualitative* research methods to explore particular situations and contexts in depth.

While some argue that the 'scientific method' of research using quantitative methodology is more reliable (it is in statistical terms), and therefore preferable, methods such as surveys rely on self-reporting. In many situations, participants exaggerate and overstate in surveys. This was considered likely in this research. In fact, in initial interview questions, some participants greeted the researcher with responses such as "We are a listening organization". Subsequent study showed that this was far from the case.

While a large amount of empirical data were collected, the research was interpretative, requiring critical analysis of claimed activities such as engagement and consultation. This was not simply a study of how many inquiries organizations respond to, or how many consultations they conduct, but how they listen in terms of giving recognition, acknowledgement, attention, interpretation, consideration, understanding, and response to others as defined in the literature (see 'Seven canons of listening' in Section 4). Multiple research methods were used to verify interpretations, as described in the following.

As is common in qualitative research, a *purposive* sample of organizations was selected in the first stage of the project. The *sampling frame* was based on three dimensions: (1) large organizations were selected because these typically have large investments in public communication and the largest numbers of stakeholders, publics or constituents; (2) a balance of government and corporate organizations and some NGOs and NPOs was sought; and (3) participants from at least three countries were sought. Within that sampling frame, selection of participants was based a three-part approach for qualitative research outlined by Miles and Huberman.¹³¹ This recommends selecting: (1) some "exceptional" or exemplary cases; (2) some "discrepant", "negative" or "disconfirming" examples; and (3) some apparently "typical" examples in the population. In simple terms, this can be described as selecting some cases at each end of the spectrum and some in the middle. Exceptional and exemplary examples were identified from academic articles, media reports, and announcements of specific initiatives in organizational listening, such as the MasterCard *Conversation Suite*.¹³² Discrepant negative examples were identified from media and public criticisms of organizations for lack of listening and engagement with stakeholders and citizens, such as criticism of the UK Government and its Department of Health in relation to complaints that led to the 2013 Mid Staffordshire hospitals crisis.¹³³ Typical examples were chosen from large well-known organizations willing to participate.

¹³⁰ Unlike research grants, contract research and consultancies allow an academic's time to be charged to the client. Because academic staff are on salary, the funds cannot be received personally. At UTS and most universities, such funds can be accumulated in a Research Investment Account to be used to fund future research.

¹³¹ Miles, M., & Huberman, M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis*. Sage, p. 34.

¹³² Mastercard. (2014). The Engagement Bureau, The Mastercard Conversation Suite. <http://newsroom.mastercard.com/videos/mastercard-conversation-suite-video>

¹³³ Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 2013.

Table 5.1. Sample of organizations studied in Stage 1 of The Organizational Listening Project.

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

The first stage of The Organizational Listening Project used three research methods:

1. **In-depth interviews** with senior staff involved in corporate and/or government communication, public relations, engagement, and specialized fields of communication-related practice such as social and market research, public consultation, complaints processing, customer service, and correspondence;
2. **Content analysis** of documents related to government-citizen communication and engagement such as communication and engagement strategies, plans, and reports; and
3. **Field experiments** involving contact with a sample of organizations to test their response to online inquiries, requests for information, feedback, and complaints.

The sites, functions and channels of potential listening examined in this research included:

- Social and market research (often referred to as *insights*);
- Customer relations / customer relationship management (CRM);
- Public consultation;
- Public relations / corporate communication / strategic communication;
- Organizational communication (internal communication);
- Social media;
- Correspondence (letters and e-mail);
- Complaints.

Up to 7 interviews were conducted in some organizations to investigate the above functions, while in others the head of communication elected to field all questions and provide information requested.

The study received **Human Research Ethics Committee approval** from the University of Technology Sydney (HREC Ref. No. 2013000359).

The nine months of research in Stage 1 of The Organizational Listening Project resulted in:

- **104 interviews** of one hour to 1.5 hours which were digitally recorded, resulting in
- **1,000+ pages of transcripts**, which were analyzed using NVivo 10;
- **412 documents** such as communication strategies and plans, research reports, etc. that were analyzed using manual content analysis;
- **95 job descriptions** of communication positions that were reviewed to examine the role and activities specified;
- **25 field experiments** to test organizational response to inquiries, requests for information and complaints.

Key findings

This study yielded a number of significant findings, as well as an empirical basis for a definition of organizational listening and a theory of how organizational listening can be enabled and facilitated.

- **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. Public relations is widely theorized and claimed to be two-way engagement for building relationships between organizations and their stakeholders and publics.

- However, most organizations fail to ‘walk the talk’. Analysis showed that, **on average, around 80 per cent of organizational resources devoted to public communication are focussed on distributing the organization’s information and messages (i.e., speaking)**. Even social media, which were developed specifically for two-way interaction, are used by organizations primarily to disseminate their messages.
- Some organizations acknowledged that **up to 95 per cent of their so-called ‘communication’ is speaking**, while best cases have a 60/40 speaking/listening ratio (e.g., in customer relations and call centres).
- **When organizations do listen, it is mainly instrumental**, designed to achieve the organization’s objectives. For instance, research is mainly conducted to gain ‘intelligence’ and ‘insights’ to aid *targeting* of people as audiences and consumers. Customer relationship management (CRM) is largely focussed on ‘upselling’.
- The study concluded:

“Most organizations listen sporadically at best, often poorly, and sometimes not at all.”¹³⁴
- **There is a range of technologies that can aid organizational listening** such as media monitoring, including social media monitoring and analysis; online research tools such as e-surveys; text analysis software; and online public consultation platforms.
- However, **technologies alone cannot provide effective open organizational listening**. The study identified **a number of other characteristics and factors required for organizational listening** (see ‘A theory emerges – The need for an *architecture of listening*’ later in this section).
- Effective organizational listening **also requires the work of listening** – not only the work of speaking.
- **Neglect of listening in public communication by organizations and one-way communication is fostered by neoliberal capitalism** in which people are reduced to *consumers* and *customers*.

Figure 5.1. The author was invited to Number 10, Downing Street, the office of the Prime Minister of the UK, to discuss government communication with staff.



¹³⁴ Macnamara, J. (2016). *Organizational listening: The missing essential in public communication*. Peter Lang, p. 236.

A theory emerges – The need for an *architecture of listening*

Stage 1 of The Organizational Listening Project concluded that, in the name of public communication and engagement, organizations have created an ***architecture of speaking***. This is operationalized through advertising; media publicity; websites; publications such as corporate magazines and e-newsletters; events; presentations and speeches; social media; and other channels of communication. Aided by professionals in advertising, public relations, marketing and political communication, organizations have created a quite sophisticated and massively funded architecture of speaking.

The organizations studied mostly agreed that they should be listening to their stakeholders more than they were. So, why aren't they?

Some even developed plans to start listening better during the course of this research. So, how?

Senior organizational management today has a focus on and faith in technology to the extent that, when considering how to listen better, most envisage a technological solution. Identification of the catastrophic lack of listening in most organizations resulted in management most typically seeking a tool to 'bolt on' to their existing systems, such as social media listening software or an online survey. Others saw listening as an extra process such as conducting a "listening tour" or a "stakeholder forum".

This study concluded that to achieve true two-way communication and engagement, the architecture of speaking that informs the design of most organizational communication needs to be counter-balanced by creating an ***architecture of listening***.

Based on an extensive review of communication, psychology, political science and ethics literature, the study theorized **eight elements of an architecture of listening** as follows:

1. **Culture** – An organization must have a culture that is open as defined by Hans Georg Gadamer,¹³⁵ Axel Honneth,¹³⁶ Charles Husband,¹³⁷ and others – that is, one that inclusively recognizes others' right to speak, pays attention to them, and tries to understand their views, even when they are oppositional;
2. **Politics of listening** – An organization must address the *politics* of listening as discussed by Tanja Dreher¹³⁸ and Leah Bassel¹³⁹ to avoid selective listening and ignoring marginalized groups;
3. **Policies** – Policies that specify and require listening, including processes to address issues of power differentials and the politics of listening are required;
4. **Systems** – Systems need to be open and interactive, such as websites that allow visitors to post comments and questions, vote on issues, and so on;
5. **Technologies** – Technologies can play an important part in organizational listening, such as monitoring tools or services for tracking media and online comment, automated acknowledgement systems, text analysis software for sense-making, and even specialist argumentation software to facilitate meaningful consultation and debate;
6. **Resources** – To operate listening systems and do the "work of listening",¹⁴⁰ such as establishing forums and consultations, inviting comment, and monitoring, analyzing, and responding to comments and questions human resources need to be allocated;
7. **Skills** – Particular skills are required for large-scale organizational listening such as an ability to conduct text analysis on large bodies of textual data such as submissions to public consultations;

¹³⁵ Gadamer, H. (1989). *Truth and method* (2nd ed., J. Weinsheimer & D. Marshall, Trans.). Crossroad. (Original work published 1960). Gadamer noted that a prerequisite for listening is that "one must want to know" what others have to say. He added that openness requires asking questions and allowing others to "say something to us", even "recognizing that I must accept some things that are against me" (p. 361).

¹³⁶ Honneth, 2007.

¹³⁷ Husband, 1996, 2009.

¹³⁸ Dreher, 2009; Dreher, T. (2010). Speaking up or being heard? Community media interventions and the politics of listening. *Media, Culture and Society*, 32(1), 85–103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443709350099>

¹³⁹ Bassel, L. (2017). *The politics of listening: Possibilities and challenges for democratic life*. Palgrave Macmillan.

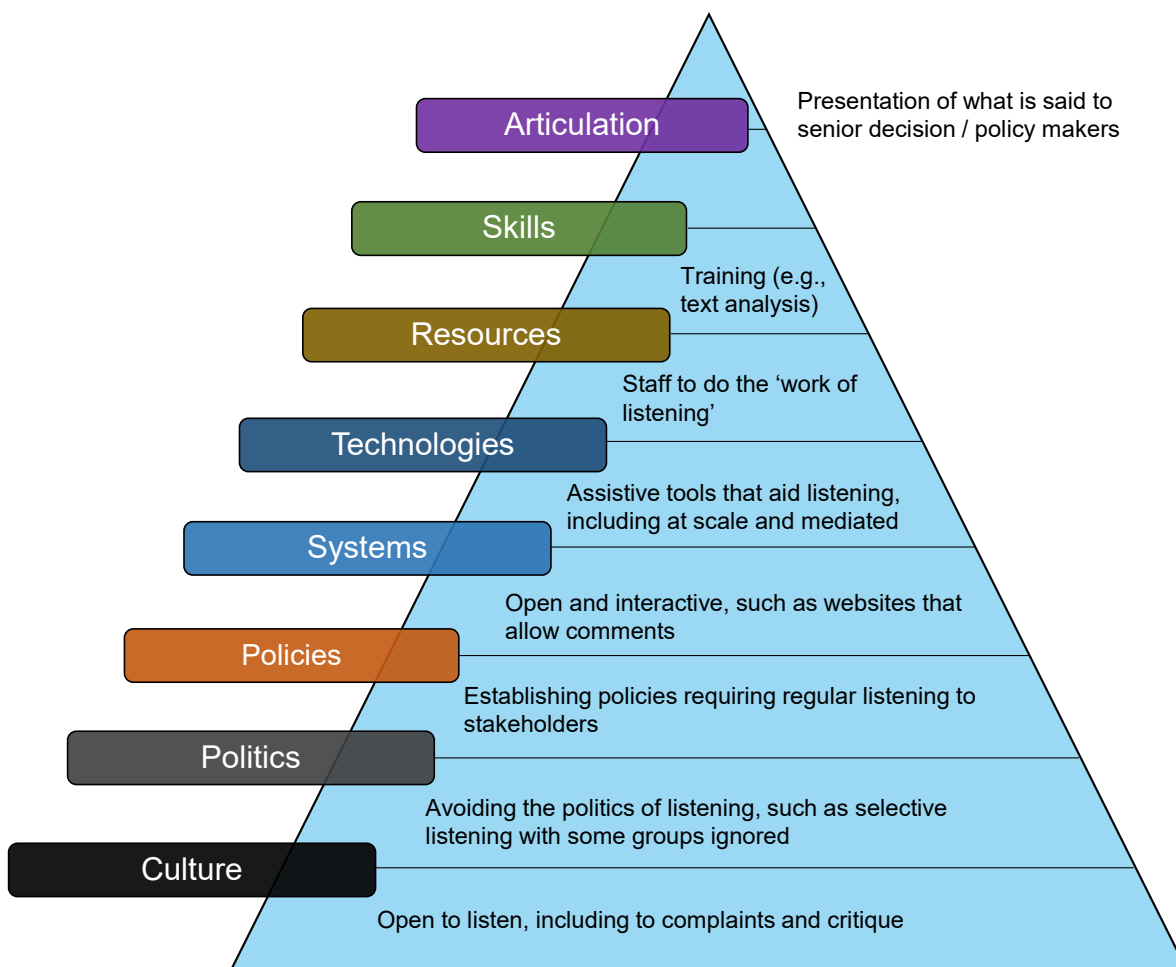
¹⁴⁰ Macnamara, J. (2013). Beyond voice: Audience-making and the work and architecture of listening. *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 27(1), 160–175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2013.736950>

8. **Articulation** – Finally, and very importantly, the voices of stakeholders and publics need to be connected to policy-making and decision-making. This research affirms that listening does not imply or require agreement in all cases. But, unless there is a link to policy-making and decision-making for consideration of what is said to an organization, voice has no value. In Nick Couldry’s terms, it does not matter.

The theory of *architecture of listening* as a necessary component of government, corporate, political and organizational communication and practices such as public relations recognizes the complexity of listening by and in organizations, particularly those with large and diverse stakeholder populations. While supporting the optimization of interpersonal listening whenever possible, it identifies the challenge of *scale*, which necessitates structures, systems, policies and resources to enable delegated, mediated listening. However, it rejects *technological determinism* – the view that technology can provide a solution. An open culture is a pre-requisite for organizational listening; no amount of technology will provide effective listening if an organization does not want to listen or believes it has all the answers. No technology can be effective without the resources, knowledge and skills required to use it appropriately. An architecture of listening informs us that listening needs to be designed into an organization. It cannot be simply added on with an occasional ‘listening tour’ or a piece of technology.

Proposing an architecture of listening to facilitate large-scale organization-public communication and engagement is not intended to be prescriptive or suggest a single solution. The framework of an architecture of listening not only leaves room for, but encourages customization, creativity, and innovation. Like built architecture, there can be many forms, styles, and infinitely varying scales. Furthermore, it is not only about creating structures, but about creating spaces in which people can interact with organizations in mutually beneficial ways and an environment that is open and inclusive.¹⁴¹

Figure 5.2. The elements and principles of an architecture of listening in an organization.



¹⁴¹ Macnamara, J. (2018). The missing half of communication and engagement: Listening. In K. Johnston & M. Taylor (Eds), *The handbook of communication engagement* (pp. 115–132. Wiley Blackwell.

A definition of organizational listening evolves

Judy Burnside-Lawry was one of the first to attempt a definition of *organizational listening*. In her study of listening competency of employees, she drew on a number of studies to say:

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.¹⁴²

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 were closely examined in this research. A definition published in 2016 in the book reporting Stage 1 of The Organizational Listening Project emphasized the eight elements or requirements of organizational listening and the 'Seven Canons of Listening' stating:

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.¹⁴³

However, while recognizing that listening is more than hearing, this definition still failed to fully reflect the scalable requirement of organizational listening and the characteristics of delegated and mediated listening, as well the 'Seven Canons of Listening' and the 'architecture of listening' required to support and enable organizational listening. This led to an expanded definition as follows.

“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.”¹⁴⁴

This definition emphasizes that organizational listening:

- Must occur at, or be articulated to, *decision maker and policy maker level* in order 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;
- 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.

¹⁴² Burnside-Lawry, J. (2011). The dark side of stakeholder communication: Stakeholder perceptions of ineffective organizational listening. *Australian Journal of Communication*, 38(1), 147–173, p. 149.

¹⁴³ Macnamara, J. (2016). *Organizational listening: The missing essential in public communication*. Peter Lang, p. 52.

¹⁴⁴ Macnamara, J. (2019). Explicating listening in organization-public communication: Theory, practices, technologies. *International Journal of Communication*, 13, 5183–5204, p. 5191.
<https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/11996/2839>

6. LISTENING BY THE UK GOVERNMENT BEFORE AND AFTER BREXIT

Introduction

Stage 2 of The Organizational Listening Project began in early June 2016 when the UK Government Communication Service (GCS), jointly headquartered in the Cabinet Office, Whitehall and Number 10, Downing Street, and the UK Department of Health agreed to co-fund research that specifically examined listening in the UK Government. Stage 2 involved full-time research working inside the UK Government during a six-month sabbatical plus a month's leave from the University of Technology Sydney.

The author had scarcely arrived and settled into a flat in Bloomsbury and an office at The London School of Economics and Political Science Media and Communications Department, and started working at the Cabinet Office and the Department of Health, when the UK referendum on membership of the European Union was held on 23 June 2016 and returned its shock result. While seen as problematic by many in and outside the UK, the referendum was fortuitous for this research project.

Following the landmark UK referendum, referred to as *Brexit* because of the vote by Britons to exit the EU, and the resulting resignation of the Prime Minister, David Cameron, the incoming Prime Minister, Theresa May, said to a Conservative Party conference in Birmingham:

“Our democracy should work for everyone,
but if you've been trying to say things need to change for years
and your complaints fall on deaf ears,
it doesn't feel like it's working for you.”¹⁴⁵

Prime Minister May also stated that *Brexit* was:

“... a revolution in which millions of our fellow citizens stood up
and said they were not prepared to be ignored anymore.”¹⁴⁶

Acknowledgement by the Prime Minister of a major democratic country that the voices of citizens “fall on deaf ears” and have been “ignored” by politicians and governments drew long overdue and compelling attention to the issue of organizational listening.

Within weeks, what was planned as a relatively small study focussed on the Department of Health as a case study turned into seven months of intensive research in 11 UK government departments and agencies (see ‘Methodology’). Unprecedented access was granted due to an urgent imperative to discover why confident predictions of a ‘remain’ vote were wrong. How could a government be so out of touch with the opinion and concerns of citizens?

Public concern about a lack of listening by government is not new and not confined to the UK. In 2009, a US citizen known as ‘Joe the Plumber’, gained popular support when he said on national television:

“... both parties routinely take American citizens for granted
... people are mad at their government for not listening.”¹⁴⁷

The 2016 US presidential election showed that Joe's went unheeded among major political parties and leaders in the USA and, in the UK, two years of indecision, flip-flopping, and growing public frustration followed the historic *Brexit* vote.

¹⁴⁵ May, T. (2016, October 5). Speech to the Conservative Party Conference 2016. Birmingham, UK, para. 45. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/theresa-may-speech-tory-conference-2016-in-full-transcript-a7346171.html>

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, para. 19.

¹⁴⁷ Wurzelbacher, S. (2009, October 12). Government doesn't listen. *The Washington Times*, Analysis/opinion, paras 4–5. <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/oct/12/government-doesnt-listen>

Methodology

The aim of this stage of the project was to work collaboratively with UK government communication and engagement staff to not only identify problems and gaps in communication, but to identify, test, and implement solutions. Therefore, **participatory action research** (PAR) was chosen as the overall methodology. PAR is an under-utilized but highly effective approach in research for at least two reasons – one pragmatic and one intellectual: (1) it is attractive to funders because it can lead to tangible benefits, not simply critical analysis and (2) it takes research beyond theoretical findings to *research translation* and *practical theory* involving *praxis* – actions to improve practices and society, which eminent communication researchers such as Robert Craig say is important.¹⁴⁸ While calling for more than applied research that narrowly addresses specific problems, Craig argues that communication is “a practical discipline”¹⁴⁹ in the same way that sociologists call for “public sociology” that seeks to improve society rather than merely point out its problems.¹⁵⁰

“Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways;
the point is to change it”.¹⁵¹

Another feature of this stage of research was to achieve deep immersion in the field and practices being studied and gain first-hand insights over a substantial period of time. ‘Dip in, dip out’ research methods such as surveys often lead to superficial understanding and lack context. Therefore, three research methods were used during a seven months full-time study from early June to the end of December 2016 as follows:

- **Ethnography** (first-hand observation of and participation in activities during an extended period);
- **In-depth interviews** with senior management and senior professional staff involved in government communication, policy development and advice, engagement, and specialized fields of communication-related practice such as social research, public consultation, complaints processing, customer service, and correspondence; and
- **Content analysis** of documents including strategic communication plans and reports of communication campaigns, consultations, complaints analysis, and correspondence.

Primary sites/participants

- The UK Government Communication Service (GCS), Cabinet Office, 70 Whitehall;
- Department of Health, 79 Whitehall (later moved to 39 Victoria Street, SW1H 0EU and expanded its named to Department of Health & Social Care).

Secondary sites/participants

- Department for Exiting the EU (DExEU), a new department housed at Number 9, Downing Street;
- Her Majesty’s Revenue & Customs (HMRC), 100 Parliament Street;
- Foreign & Commonwealth Office, King Charles St, Whitehall;
- Department of Work & Pensions (DWP), Caxton House, Tothill Street, London;
- Department of Transport, 33 Horseferry Road, London;
- Department of Energy, Business and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), 3 Whitehall Place;
- NHS England, Skipton House, 80 London Road and 133 Waterloo Road;
- Public Health England (PHE), Skipton House, 80 London Road and 133 Waterloo Road;
- Scotland Office, Edinburgh, Scotland;
- Scottish Government, Edinburgh, Scotland.

The study was covered under **Human Research Ethics Committee approval** from the University of Technology Sydney (HREC Ref. No. 2013000359).

¹⁴⁸ Craig, R. (2018). For a practical discipline. *Journal of Communication*, 68(2), 289–297. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqx013>

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 289.

¹⁵⁰ Burawoy, M. (2007). For public sociology. In C. Clawson, R. Zussman, J. Misra, N. Gerstel, R. Stokes, D. Anderton, & M. Burawoy (Eds.), *Public sociology* (pp. 23–64). University of California Press.

¹⁵¹ Marx, K. (1845). *Theses on Feuerbach*. In *Marx/Engels Selected Works*, Vol. 1, Thesis xi (Trans. W. Lough; pp. 13–15). Progress Publishers. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>

The seven months full-time research inside the UK Government resulted in:

- **76 formal and informal interviews** of 30 minutes to 1 hour with government communication, engagement, and policy executives, government service providers such as research companies, and industry and community organizations, which were recorded in detailed note taking;
- **54 meetings** attended, including executive meetings in departments such as the Department of Health, planning meetings (e.g., NHS England), and forums;
- **92 government documents** analyzed including communication strategies, research reports, public consultation plans and submissions, reviews, traditional and social media analysis, dashboards, etc.;
- More than **400 hours** of first-hand observation of communication activities.

Key findings

The following were key findings from Stage 2 of The Organizational Listening Project conducted inside UK Government departments and agencies.

- There is evidence of a strong commitment to **open government**.
- There is also evidence of a commitment to **evidence-based policy and decision making**.
- The above are demonstrated through **extensive use of research, both formative and evaluative**. The UK GCS is regarded as an international leader in evaluation of communication.¹⁵²
- The UK GCS, which includes more than 7,000 professional communicators employed in UK government departments and agencies, **devotes considerable resources to professional development and conducts regular skills audits** to enhance its communication effectiveness.
- The UK GCS is also progressive in introducing a **Data Ethics Framework** to guide the use of data within and by the UK Government.¹⁵³
- However, there is a **dominance of quantitative research** such as structured surveys by government departments and agencies and polls by political advisers – often with small samples and paid panels. Surveys do not produce deep findings and polls relying on paid panels are often not representative.
- While many public consultations are conducted (up to 50 in some years across the UK government), **public consultations primarily hear from the ‘usual suspects’** – major industry organizations, organized professionalized lobby groups, and activists. **Little outreach is undertaken, resulting in marginalized and disengaged groups being unheard – even part of a silent majority**.
- A major breakdown in listening identified in the UK Government was a **lack of text analysis** capabilities. Substantial bodies of information and feedback are received from stakeholders and citizens through submissions to public consultation, correspondence, and complaints. In one case, a public consultation received 127,400 submissions totalling more than 1 million pages. Staff had no textual analysis software necessary to systematically analyze such a large corpus of text.
- **Stakeholder engagement was acknowledged by senior practitioners in one department to be “pitch rolling”** – a cricket analogy referring to the smoothing over the pitch before a game. A Stakeholder Engagement executive explained that “we go out to meet with key stakeholders when we have some announcement coming up and we want to get them on side”.
- At the time, the UK Government **did not have a central knowledge management system** for social and market research and other data reporting the views, concerns, and interests of stakeholders and citizens such as reports of public consultations. Research reports, findings of public consultations and stakeholder engagement, and other feedback and input from stakeholders and citizens were mostly stored in **‘data siloes’** within departments and agencies and not shared.

¹⁵² For example, Alex Aiken, Executive Director of the UK GCS, has been invited as a keynote speaker and to present best practice case studies of evaluation to the International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC) Summits on Measurement on multiple occasions, as well as many other conferences.

¹⁵³ Government Communication Service. (2018, June). Introduction to the government Data Ethics Framework. In *Evaluation framework 2.0*. Her Majesty’s Government, UK.

Steps towards better organizational listening

It is important to acknowledge that, since this research was conducted in 2016 and reported in early 2017, the UK GCS implemented a number of initiatives, including several in line with recommendations of the report of this stage of research.¹⁵⁴ These include:

- **Hiring of two data scientists** in the Cabinet Office, Whitehall, to support UK Government communication;
- **Creation of a GCS Knowledge Hub** as an online community for UK Government communicators to share research findings, information, tools and tips to inform communication best practice;
- **Development of a data integration platform** built on the **R programming language** to bring together multiple data sets such as demographic, socioeconomic and market research data by area across the UK, called the **GCS Mapper**. Such integrated data can inform communication campaigns and comprise listening before speaking;
- **Implementation of social media listening / digital listening** through dedicated staff in departments and agencies;
- **Licensing of a social media monitoring and analysis tool** for use by departments and agencies (**Brandwatch**);
- **Licensing of a machine learning textual analysis application for analyzing large bodies of unstructured textual data** (a program developed jointly by the University of Sussex and Demos, **Method52**, was being trialled on a limited basis in 2018);
- **Conducting a review of public consultation procedures with a view to developing a model for public consultation**. This initiative was being led by communication staff in the Department of Health on behalf of the GCS in mid-2018. The results of the project have not been made public.

Figure 6.1. The author (right) discussing findings of the research in The Cabinet Office, Whitehall, with UK Government Communication Service executives. Executive Director of the UK Government Communication Service, Alex Aiken, is on the author's right.



¹⁵⁴ Macnamara, J. (2017). *Creating a 'democracy for everyone': Strategies for increasing listening and engagement by government*. London and Sydney: The London School of Economics and Political Science and University of Technology Sydney. <https://www.uts.edu.au/node/230356>

7. A LISTENING CORPORATION

Introduction

Stage 3 of The Organizational Listening Project began in March 2017 when the author was contacted by the head of strategic communication of Achmea International¹⁵⁵ headquartered in the Netherlands and asked to talk to a CEO Summit of the group's operating companies about the Organizational Listening Project and how Achmea could become a "listening organization".

With Stage 2 of The Organizational Listening Project focussed entirely on government communication, and government departments and agencies comprising around half of the sample of Stage 1 of the study, expansion of the research to include more corporations was on the 'wish list' for the research project. So, the call was fortuitous and an example of the importance of disseminating research results and spreading the word through professional as well as academic articles, conference presentations, and even social media. By this time, The Organizational Listening Project had received quite a deal of attention (see 'Publications – The Organizational Listening Project' in Appendix 1).

The May 2017 Achmea CEO Summit was held in Istanbul, Turkey, and travel schedules and work commitments meant that the presentation had to be given via Skype. However, Achmea International was enthusiastic and the entire CEO Summit was themed 'The value of listening'.

Figure 7.1. The theme of the 2017 Achmea International CEO Summit.



Achmea's CEOs were convinced that there was benefit to be gained in critically reviewing the companies' internal and external communication to identify ways to improve listening as a path to competitive advantage and improved performance (the objective of the project).

A research contract was signed in December 2017 for a January 2018 start of an 18 months research project. It was agreed that the research, titled 'Implementing an Architecture of Listening in Achmea', would be conducted with the **Achmea International** headquarters at Zeist in the Netherlands, and in three of its major operating companies as follows:

1. **Interamerican** in Greece, headquartered in Athens (life, health, automotive, property and travel insurance);
2. **Union poisťovňa** in Slovakia, headquartered in Bratislava (life, health, automotive, property and travel insurance);
3. **Achmea Australia** in Australia, headquartered in Sydney (mainly agricultural insurance).

This provided sites of study in established companies in Western Europe (the Netherlands); southern Europe (Greece); eastern Europe (Slovakia); and a relatively new office in an English-speaking Western country (Australia).

¹⁵⁵ Achmea International, headquartered in the Netherlands, is the corporate parent of six operating companies based in Australia, Canada, Greece, Slovakia, Turkey and the Netherlands. The company was founded in 1811 by Dutch farmers as a cooperative and remains a mutual (non-profit) company today. Achmea is the largest insurance group in the Netherlands, the largest health insurer in Europe, and the fifth largest insurance group overall in Europe, with around 13 million customers and 14,500 staff worldwide.

Methodology

To achieve the objective of critically reviewing the companies' existing listening methods and capabilities, implement improvements, and then evaluate results, the research was designed with three phases during the following periods.

Phase 1 – Review (January–March 2018)

This involved three months of full-time study of a wide range of communication and engagement activities, systems, and processes in the four companies undertaken during the first quarter of 2018 to:

- Map existing listening activities;
- Identify opportunities to expand and improve listening;
- Present recommendations in a written report.

Phase 2 – Implement (March 2018–mid-2019)

During this period, Achmea International and its operating companies reviewed the research report and implemented a number of its recommendations.

Phase 3 – Evaluate (June–July 2019)

In mid-2019, the author revisited the companies to:

- Conduct a second-round independent review of listening activities; and
- Evaluate the results of recommendations implemented.

Because the key objective of the research project was to improve listening within the operations of the companies, which required collaboration with management and employees, the primary methodology employed was **participatory action research** (PAR). This was supported by **critical analysis** in Phase 1 and **critical analysis informed by evaluation theory and best practice methods** in Phase 3.

The research methods used to inform critical analysis and PAR were:

1. **In-depth interviews** with company executives responsible for various functions, units and teams. These were digitally recorded as well as reported in extensive **note taking**;
2. **Content analysis** of documents, such as strategies, plans, reports, survey results, call centre records, etc.);
3. **Observation** of activities such as call centre operations and the work of social media teams. This was systematically documented using daily **journaling**;
4. **Collaborative deliberation and discussion** of findings, recommendations, and strategies to address gaps and plan initiatives with senior management and functional units and teams.

The sites and channels of potential listening examined in Achmea operating companies (i.e., functions, departments, units, and teams) included:

- Market research;
- Net Promoter Score (NPS) surveys;
- Customer relations, including Voice of the Customer (VOC) initiatives;
- Customer journey mapping research;
- Stakeholder engagement (including with insurance brokers, retailers, health provider partners, etc.);
- Complaints (including call centre operations);
- Correspondence (e.g., e-mails, letters, and feedback on the organization's websites);
- Employee surveys and forums;
- Online platforms for employees to submit ideas and suggestions;
- Social media (internal systems such as **Yammer**, **Jive**, **SocialCast** and public platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram).

Phase 1 of the research completed in January–March 2018 involved a minimum of two weeks spent at each operating company for interviews, observation, and collection of documents and other data. During time spent at the Achmea International headquarters in the Netherlands, some additional interviews were conducted with executives of **Zilveren Kruis**, a fully-owned subsidiary that is a leading health insurer in the Netherlands.

A further four weeks were devoted to analysis of data and preparing a report.

Across the Achmea group, Phase 1 research resulted in:

- **96 interviews** of 45 minutes to 1.5 hours with a range of executives and staff;
- **64 company documents** analyzed;
- **75 Web pages** on seven corporate websites and e-commerce sites reviewed;
- **6 meetings** with senior management of Achmea International and its operating companies.

Key findings – Phase 1

Prior to this research, Achmea International as a group had implemented a number of systems and processes that facilitate listening to understand its customers and other stakeholders such as business partners and employees. These notably included the following.

- Achmea International conducted **regular Net Promoter Score (NPS) surveys across the group with a ‘closed loop’ methodology that involves follow-up phone calls to ‘detractors’ to try to address their concerns; has advanced customer relationship management (CRM) systems; operates large call centres, and uses extensive online communication.**
- In some Achmea operating companies (e.g., Interamerican in Greece), these and other systems and methods of customer and stakeholder engagement are mobilized and optimized through **agile management** methods, **accelerator teams**, a **SixSigma-based Voice of the Customer (VOC)** market research approach, and adoption of a user-centred approach to problem solving.
- Interamerican has established an **Analytics Centre for Excellence (ACE)** to help integrate data across platforms and systems and interpret data into actionable insights for functional units such as sales and network management.
- Zilveren Kruis has used **online communities to engage customers in discussion** about product features, new products, and their needs and concerns, especially in relation to health insurance.
- All Achmea group companies use **customer satisfaction surveys, employee surveys, market research surveys, and surveys of their distribution channel** (brokers and insurance agents).
- **Social media monitoring and analysis are used widely** across the operating companies.
- In Australia, following a devastating cyclone, senior executives of **Achmea Australia travelled more than 1,000 kilometres to personally visit farmers whose crops had been destroyed** and whose livelihood was dependent on prompt insurance payouts.

However, gaps were also identified in external and internal communication, including the following.

- **Data containing market, customer, business partner (e.g., brokers and agents), and employee information and feedback are held in separate databases and management systems, many of which cannot ‘speak to each other’.** This applied to some extent in all the operating companies studied. A level of **‘data siloing’** is inevitable in large organizations that must contend with ‘legacy systems’ (existing computer systems for which upgrades or replacement is not yet cost-effective). However, this fragmentation of data limits the capability of organizations to gain a holistic picture of stakeholders and publics’ views, concerns and level of satisfaction. For instance, information on insurance customers in several Achmea companies is held in official policy records; a customer relations database; the complaints department; and their call centre. Some companies have multiple call centres supporting different products (e.g., life and auto insurance) with systems that are not compatible. Also, customer feedback is posted in social media, which are monitored, but records and analysis are held in a different system again. Thus, information about and feedback from customers, such as complaints, inquiries, and changes of circumstances (e.g., family, work, etc.) are scattered around the organization. This leads to a lack of understanding and insight.
- As was the case of the UK Government departments and agencies, **staff in most operating companies did not have access to textual analysis software. Thus, the voice of customers, employees and others expressed in text was not analyzed** other than through cursory reading. Two operating companies were experimenting with SAS text analysis tools, but the use was not extensive and staff had no training in textual analysis.

Figure 7.2. The view from the offices of Union poisťovňa in Bratislava, Slovakia, on a cold January day in 2018 during this research project.



- **A number of the Achmea International's innovative strategies and systems for collecting insights into the market and customers' experiences and needs, such as customer journey mapping and NPS surveys with the 'closed loop' methodology, were not consistently implemented across the group.** Some operating companies had not taken up these initiatives at the time of this research.
- **The 'closed loop' methodology associated with NPS surveys – i.e., outbound calls to 'detractors' to understand and try to resolve issues of concern – while being undertaken, was limited in scale** with relatively small numbers of unhappy customers being called. This is partly due to call centres being busy with incoming calls. The success of this method in turning 'detractors' in 'passives' and even 'promoters' suggests it is an effective method for listening, engaging and building relationships.
- Despite the establishment of an Analytics Centre for Excellence (ACE) at the Interamerican headquarters in Athens, **most operating companies were not able to analyze much of the data available to produce clear and actionable insights.** The multiple systems, sites, and forms of data (structured statistical and unstructured textual and sonic data such as digitally recorded calls to call centres) present a challenge to organizations.
- There was **little use of the Japanese management concept of *Gemba* (getting out of the office and visiting the factory or shop floor) or what is referred to in some Western management literature as MBWA (management by walking around).** Senior executives were often cocooned

in C-suites and missed opportunities to personally interact with key stakeholders (insurance brokers and agents in this case) and customers.

- Despite a strong focus on digital communication, **intranets were not used to any significant extent in the companies studied**. Achmea International has created an online platform called Imagine for employees to put forward ideas and suggestions, which are considered by management and recognition is given for those adopted. However, only one of the Achmea operating companies was using Imagine at the time of this research.

In June 2019, a second round of research was conducted with two Achmea operating companies, Interamerican in Greece and Union poisťovňa in Bratislava, and with the Achmea International head office in Zeist, the Netherlands to review changes made or initiatives introduced to improve listening to key stakeholders. This utilized interviews as well as data collected through research methods outlined in Table 7.1.

Interviews in this stage sought to gain frank feedback in relation to identified benefits (e.g., in partner and/or customer satisfaction, reduced complaints, etc.) as well as challenges or barrier met in implementing recommendations.

Phase 2 of research with Achmea International and its operating companies Interamerican and Union poisťovňa involved:

- **33 interviews** of 30 minutes to one hour with a range of executives and staff;
- **24 company documents** analyzed;
- **10 Web pages** related to products, services and direct sales reviewed;
- **200 social media posts** about the companies analyzed;
- **2 meetings** with senior management of Achmea International.

Key initiatives – Phase 2

Key initiatives introduced in the second phase of the project were as follows.

- **Text analysis using SAS Text Analytics and Microsoft Power BI** were introduced to analyze open-end comments in NPS surveys, as well as other written feedback and correspondence, most notably in Interamerican. This resulted from recognition that the *voice of customers* (VOC), the *voice of employees* (VOE) and the *voice of other stakeholders* (VOS) are primarily expressed in words not statistics.
- The **'closed loop' methodology of NPS surveys** in which call-backs are made to 'detractors' to attempt to understand and resolve their concerns was continued and expanded. Call-backs resulted in positive tangible results, moving a high percentage of 'detractors' to 'passives' and even to 'promoters'. For example, following call-backs to 'detractors' who agreed to be contacted, a second single-question NPS surveys was sent to 586 'detractors'. From this second survey, 107 responses were received. Of these **23 were converted to 'passives' and 52 were converted to 'promoters'** (i.e., only 32 remained "detractors"); and the **NPS score of 'detractors' increased from -87 to +18 through call backs to listen to customers' concerns and seek to address them**.
- **Mechanisms for instant, easy customer feedback on websites, such as Usabilla** (a pop-up mini-survey) were introduced.
- **Customer journey mapping** was introduced. This was done manually in Interamerican at the time, but Union poisťovňa was working with a specialist agency, **Clientology**, and was be close to an operational system, although visualization remained a challenge.
- A **Business Intelligence Manager** was appointed for the group to integrate the multiple data sets that exist across the companies and ensure senior management receives a holistic picture based on all of the data available. Union poisťovňa committed to recruiting a BI manager in second half 2019, while Interamerican effectively achieved this through its head of the **Analytics Center of Excellence (ACE)** and an expanded 17-member team of data analysts.

- A recommendation was also made to introduce **data integration tools** in a central **business intelligence unit** to allow integration and interpretation of all available data and conduct comparisons, triangulations, and trend analysis, and to appoint a **Head of Insights** to lead this initiative across the Group. Such an initiative would not necessarily centralize the data of all companies and functional units such as sales, CRM, call centres, etc., but should have ‘line of sight’ to all data sets in order to know what data are available, where, and to ensure access.
- All the operating companies established **focus groups to gain periodic ‘deep dive’ qualitative insights** from customers.
- Also, a number of **innovative approaches were trialled** including ‘customer councils’ (direct face-to-face meetings with panels of customers), regular meetings with agents, a ‘Customer Experience Board’ in Union poisťovňa, and a program in which all staff of Union poisťovňa spend a day in a Customer Contact Centre directly interacting with customers.
- The **voice of employees (VOE) and its potential to provide not only feedback on internal management but suggestions and ideas for process and product innovation is captured** through the Imagine Program at Interamerican, which expanded substantially during 2018.

The above listening capabilities were supported by broader corporate policies and actions including:

- Continuing **data integration through upgrading core systems and data warehouses**;
- **Agile management** techniques such as cross-functional accelerator teams applied to resolving problems and improving processes, particularly in Interamerican;
- Recognition of **contemporary management approaches to emergent strategy** that involves engagement and consultation with stakeholders, rather than unilateral, top-down approaches. Emergent strategy, also referred to as networked strategy, necessitates active listening to key stakeholders such as customers, agents and employees;
- Recognition of the importance of **organizational culture** to support change and innovation.

Evaluation of corporate listening – Phase 3

A key element of the research with Achmea International and its operating companies was evaluation to **identify benefits that accrue from organizational listening**. Table 7.1 shows factors identified as indicators of effects before and after listening activities.

Table 7.1. 10 factors that can be tracked and evaluated to show the benefits of organizational listening.

METRIC	METHOD	BEFORE	AFTER
Staff satisfaction rate (<i>qualitative</i>)	Staff survey		
Staff retention rate (<i>quantitative</i>)	HR data		
Management satisfaction with insights (<i>qualitative</i>)	Interview/survey senior managers		
Customer satisfaction (<i>qualitative</i>)	Customer satisfaction data		
Customer retention (<i>quantitative</i>)	Sales / marketing data		
Stakeholder satisfaction (<i>qualitative</i>)	Interview /survey stakeholders		
Reputation rating and/or rank (<i>quantitative & qualitative</i>)	Reputation tracking study		
Social media comments (<i>qualitative – e.g., sentiment or favourability</i>)	Social media content analysis		
Criticism (<i>quantitative & qualitative</i>) ¹⁵⁶	Media content analysis		
Crises (<i>quantitative & qualitative</i>) ¹⁵⁷	Media content analysis		
OVERALL INDEX	Chart showing consolidated data/scores over time		

¹⁵⁶ Should show a decrease, while other factors should increase or be rated highly.

¹⁵⁷ Should show an ability to identify issues and avoid crises, as well as a decrease overall.

- Union poist'ovňa reported with supporting data that:
 - **NPS scores by customers increased** in 2019 compared with 2018 and 2017;
 - **Employee retention increased** – i.e., staff turnover / resignations reduced, which results in cost savings in recruitment and training;
 - **Brand awareness increased** since 2017/18;
 - **Sales increased** year on year, with around 12% growth in gross income.
- Interamerican reported that:
 - The **NPS average score by customers was increasing**. For example, all 15 Interamerican service processes had positive NPS scores in 2019 higher than in 2017/18 (Road Assistance = 72); Health assistance/emergency medical = 71; Anytime customer service via telephone = 61); Motor claims = 61); Anytime online sales = 60;
 - **Customer complaints were a low 0.14%**;
 - **88.4% of customers reported being “very satisfied” or “satisfied”** in satisfaction surveys;
 - **95% of Anytime¹⁵⁸ customers reported being satisfied** with ‘customer service’; **88% said they were satisfied with ‘products’**; and 75% said they were satisfied with ‘cost’;
 - The **NPS average score of employees in 2019 was a relatively high 69**;
 - **Employee satisfaction in 2019 was 95%**;
 - **Employee turnover in 2019 was less than 1.5%**.
- Causation was examined. This established *temporal precedence* (i.e., the alleged causes preceded the effects) and *covariation* (there was a clear relationship between the alleged causes and the effects). The third rule for establishing causation (ruling out other possible causes as far as possible) is not possible for sales, which must be recognized as dependent on many factors including product quality and competitive offerings. Employee retention is also impacted to some extent by high unemployment in Greece – i.e., there are fewer jobs to go to compared with strong economies. However, no other significant potential causes for most of the above results were evident.

A summative (*ex-post*) evaluation of this research was presented as a keynote address to the 2019 International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC) Summit and published in an international journal article in 2020¹⁵⁹ and in a professional article in *European Business Review* in 2020.¹⁶⁰ Reports showed outstanding results from active effective listening.

For example, text analysis of open-ended comments from customers in NPS surveys revealed the leading concerns of ‘detractors’, as well as the main contributors to satisfaction among ‘promoters’, and the attitudes and views of ‘passives’. See Figure 7.4 for an analysis of customer comments by Interamerican [note labels in Greek].

The detail in relation to the concerns of ‘detractors’ (comments in red) informed follow-up phone calls to ‘detractors’ from call centres to acknowledge and try to resolve their concerns as part of the ‘closed loop’ NPS methodology.

A subsequent NPS survey sent to detractors who had been followed-up revealed that:

- 21.5% converted to ‘passives’;
- 29.9% remained ‘detractors’;
- **48.6% converted directly to be ‘promoters’** of the company and its products.

It is well-established in market research literature that ‘detractors’ are highly likely to become lost customers and that ‘promoters’ are likely to remain customers.

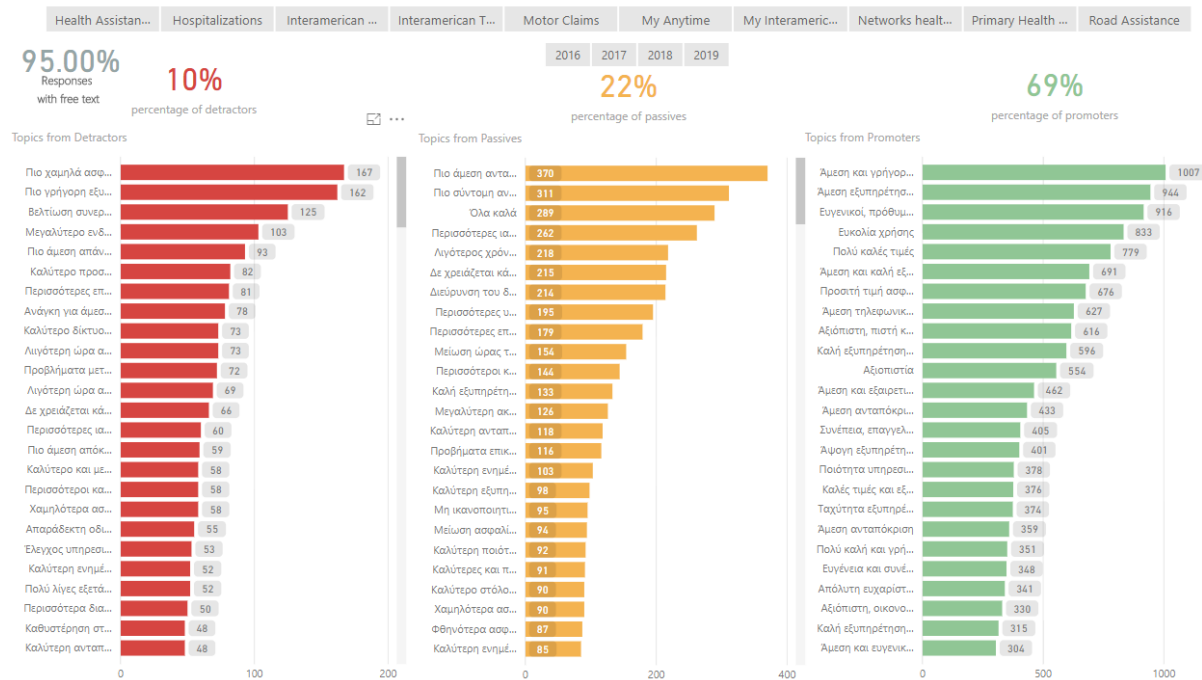
At the time, the Achmea group had 17,000 ‘detractors’ worldwide – just 0.17% of its total customer base, but a substantial number of at-risk customers nevertheless.

¹⁵⁸ Anytime is the trade name of Interamerican’s direct online sales website.

¹⁵⁹ Macnamara, J. (2020). Corporate listening: Unlocking insights from VOC, VOE, and VOS for mutual benefit. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 25(3), 377–393. <https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-08-2019-0102>

¹⁶⁰ Macnamara, J. (2020, May/June). Corporate listening provides insights and business value. *European Business Review*, pp. 16–21. <https://www.europeanbusinessreview.com/corporate-listening-provides-insights-and-business-value>

Figure 7.4. Text analysis showing leading negative (red), neutral (yellow), and positive (green) comments from customers. (The chart is in Greek and is a low-resolution screen shot, presented here for illustrative purposes only.)



Based on this, the researchers calculated that if 48.6% of 17,000 ‘detractors’ (8,262) could be retained as customers through listening (analysis of their comments and follow up action), based on a conservative average customer lifetime value (CLV) of €5,000, this will generate more than €40 million in revenue.

Even if only half of the 48.6% converting from ‘detractors’ to ‘promoters’ through listening-based communication are retained (a conservative calculation), this will generate more than €20 million in revenue (around US\$25 million).

This award-winning¹⁶¹ participatory action research project working with a progressive corporate group demonstrates a concrete return on investment (ROI), as well as other benefits from listening.

Listening systems

While emphasizing that organizational listening requires an *architecture of listening* that sets out principles and guides the design of listening for specific organizations, which can be scaled and customized to meet particular needs and contexts, the characteristics of organizational listening identified in this research – *scale, delegation, and mediation* – necessitate listening systems as well as interpersonal listening when possible.

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.

A key finding of research reported here is that **textual analysis** using *natural language processing* (NLP) is a key tool for organizational listening, given that the voice of citizens and organization stakeholders such as customers, employees, members, etc. is commonly expressed in correspondence such as letters and e-mails, written complaints, submissions to inquiries and public consultations, and in posts on social media.

¹⁶¹ Winner of a Gold award for ‘Most impactful use of insights and analytics recommendations’ in the 2020 awards of the International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC).

Also, this research shows that phone calls to call centres are digitally recorded in most organizations, allowing **voice to text (VTT) software** to convert the voice of callers to text, which can be analyzed using textual analysis methods to identify and understand common issues of concern. For large volumes of text, automated or semi-automated textual analysis applications that incorporate machine learning are necessary listening tools in organizations.

As well as employing qualitative research methods such as interviews and focus groups, organizational listening also can be implemented through a number of advanced research and engagement methods including **deliberative polling**;¹⁶² **participatory action research (PAR)** as discussed in in this report; **sense making methodology**;¹⁶³ **appreciative inquiry**;¹⁶⁴ **behavioural insights**;¹⁶⁵ **social and digital platforms** that can enable “responsive listening”;¹⁶⁶ and **customer journey mapping** in the case of commercial organizations,¹⁶⁷ which can be adapted to other stakeholders.

Organizations are increasingly using **artificial intelligence (AI)** tools such as *chat bots* to ‘listen’ to users of web pages and respond with relevant information, as well as learning algorithms based on natural language processing and machine learning code that responds to users’ data entry and selections.

The rapidly growing field of **data analytics** is another systematic way that the voices of stakeholders can be accessed and considered.

A number of listening systems as well as methods, tools, and processes are summarized in Table 3.3 in Section 2 – ‘Executive Summary’. This continues to be refined and developed.¹⁶⁸

The ethics of listening

It is important to note that some raise legitimate concerns about such technologies and their use as listening systems, and it is acknowledged that ethics needs to be carefully considered. Critical technosocial and technocultural scholars express concern about breaches of privacy; use of personal data; *digital surveillance*, also referred to as *dataveillance*;¹⁶⁹ and the effects of algorithms such as *algorithmic filtering*. As Robyn Caplan says, in many if not most online platforms, algorithms decide “the inclusion or exclusion of information”.¹⁷⁰ 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*.

In a 2020 book titled *The Power of Strategic Listening*, Laurie Lewis devoted a chapter to what she calls the “dark side of organizational listening”, referring to eavesdropping, competitive intelligence, espionage, and even listening to malicious gossip and incivility.¹⁷¹ Exploitive, manipulative, and illegal applications of organizational listening such as the way in which Cambridge Analytica accessed and ‘listened’ to personal information from 50 million Facebook accounts during the *Brexit* referendum and the 2016 US Presidential election, are not what is proposed in this analysis and related research. An architecture of listening should be guided by ethics as well as regulations in relation to privacy and data security.

¹⁶² Fishkin, J. (2011). *When the people speak: Deliberative democracy and public consultation*. Oxford University Press.

¹⁶³ Dervin, B., & Foreman-Wernet, L. (2013). Sense-making methodology as an approach to understanding and designing for campaign audiences. In R. Rice & C. Atkin (Eds.), *Public communication campaigns* (4th ed., pp. 147–162). Sage.

¹⁶⁴ Cooperrider, D., Whitney, D., & Stavros, J. (2008). *Appreciative inquiry handbook* (2nd ed.). Crown Custom

¹⁶⁵ Thaler, R., & Sunstein, C. (2008). *Nudge: Improving decisions about health, wealth, and happiness*. Yale University Press.

¹⁶⁶ Bartlett, J., Miller, C., Reffin, J., Weir, D., & Wibberley, S. (2014). *Vox digitas*. Demos.
https://www.demos.co.uk/files/Vox_Digitas_-_web.pdf?1408832211

¹⁶⁷ Court, D., Elzinga, D., Mulder, S., & Vetvik, O. (2009, June). The consumer decision journey. *McKinsey Quarterly*.
<https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/marketing-and-sales/our-insights/the-consumer-decision-journey>

¹⁶⁸ Macnamara, 2019.

¹⁶⁹ Gillespie, T. (2018). *Custodians of the internet: Platforms, content moderation, and the hidden decisions that shape social media*. Yale University Press; Landau, S. (2017). *Listening in*. Yale University Press; Napoli, P. (2014). Automated media: An institutional theory perspective on algorithmic media production and consumption. *Communication Theory*, 24(3), 340–360. <https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.1203>

¹⁷⁰ Caplan, R. (2018). Algorithmic filtering. In P. Napoli (Ed.), *Mediated communication* (pp. 561–583). De Gruyter, p. 564.

¹⁷¹ Lewis, L. (2020). *The power of strategic listening*. Rowman Littlefield, pp. 85–102.

The data that are proposed for analysis are *public* expressions of voice, such as customer feedback, calls to call centres, letters to organizations, submissions to public consultations, and posts in open social media. As David Brandt notes, these public expressions of voice can be both unrequested and unanticipated “inbound” voice, as well as purposeful outbound calls for feedback.¹⁷²

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’, data analytics, and applications of artificial intelligence (AI). Therefore, ongoing research to examine the effectiveness of such engagements from the perspective of stakeholders as well as organizations and related ethical issues is needed. On the other hand, ignoring the potential of these methods, systems, and technologies to facilitate active ethical organizational listening leaves them under-researched and open to misuse.

¹⁷² Brandt, D. (2020). The current state of corporate voice of the consumer programs: A study of organizational listening practices and effectiveness. *International Journal of Listening*, 34(3), 156–177, p. 174.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10904018.2018.1482747>

8. COGNATE STUDIES OF ORGANIZATIONAL LISTENING

Introduction

The following studies were standalone research projects not directly part of The Organizational Listening Project. However, all were informed by the organizational listening research reported in previous sections of this report and several were commissioned as a result of organizations learning about the project and wanting to conduct a similar review and exploration.

The discursive construction of a city – Making ‘Greater Sydney’

The population of Australia’s largest city, Sydney, grew by more than three-quarters of a million between 2006 and 2016. Another 1.6 million people are forecast to arrive in the next two decades, taking the population of Sydney well beyond its current 5 million. After a period of modest development, urban planning studies reported in 2017 that Sydney’s infrastructure was stretched to its limit.

“... Western Sydney has insufficient economic drivers, and a paucity of the infrastructures and political institutions that would typify such large concentration of people.”¹⁷³

Consequently, the NSW Government committed to one of the most intensive periods of development in Sydney’s history to address an identified lack of infrastructure and services, particularly in its western suburbs. This included several light rail public transport projects; major freeway and motorway construction; construction of new hospitals, schools, arts centres, and museums; and review of zoning regulations to increase medium-density housing to reduce ‘urban sprawl’ that has been creating long commute times.

The Greater Sydney Commission, established in January 2016 under the authority of *The Greater Sydney Commission Act, 2015*, is charged with the responsibility of coordinating planning to create “a more productive, liveable and sustainable Greater Sydney” over the coming decades.¹⁷⁴ The planning and coordination process involves:

- Development of a *Greater Sydney Region Plan*;
- Development of five District Plans that nest within the *Greater Sydney Region Plan*;
- Coordination between the various NSW Government departments and agencies involved in implementing development projects (e.g., transport, health, education, environment, etc.), commercial developers, construction companies, industry, and communities.

A key role of the Greater Sydney Commission is stakeholder and community engagement. Many interests needed to be reflected in the planned projects to best serve communities as well as industry and protect the environment.

Consequently, the Commission undertook an intensive period of **stakeholder and community engagement** between March 2016 and December 2017.

In March 2018 the Greater Sydney Commission commissioned the author via the University of Technology Sydney to conduct an independent review of its engagement activities in 2016–2017.

This review, conducted between April and the end of June 2018, was based on:

1. **In-depth interviews** with 12 senior communication and engagement executives of the Greater Sydney Commission (face-to-face) and 3 in-depth interviews with senior representatives of major stakeholder organizations (face-to-face and telephone) – 15 interviews in total, usually for more than one hour. Thematic analysis was undertaken of transcripts of interviews to identify major themes and issues discussed;

¹⁷³ Fagan, R., & O’Neill, P. (2015). *Work, places and people in Western Sydney*. Centre for Western Sydney, Western Sydney University, p. 7.

¹⁷⁴ <https://www.greater.sydney>

2. **Content analysis of more than 25 relevant documents** including communication and engagement plans, reports of engagement activities, research reports, submissions, and development plans;
3. **Social media analysis of a sample of 1,000 posts** in relation to the *Greater Sydney Region Plan*, District Plans and the Greater Sydney Commission;
4. **Comparative analysis** of findings with academic and professional literature related to stakeholder and community engagement, consultation, participation, dialogue and listening, including reports of The Organizational Listening Project.

This study was approved by the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) **Human Research Ethics Committee** (UTS HREC REF NO. ETH18-2571).

The independent review of stakeholder and community engagement of the Greater Sydney Commission found a number of positive features including the following.

- The Commission conducted extensive engagement activities including **direct discussions with more than 25,000 people and receipt of almost 3,000 submissions** (see Table 8.1).
- A number of **deliberative engagement and consultation activities were undertaken** including deliberative forums and ‘roundtable’ discussions.
- Professional **research companies and stakeholder engagement, multicultural communication, and youth engagement specialists were contracted** to carry out some specialized activities, including Ipsos Public Affairs (social and market research); Woolcott Research; RPS (engagement consultants); Diverse Communications (CALD/BAME¹⁷⁵ advisers); and The Advocate for Children and Young People.
- The Commission **appointed an Environment Commission and a Social Commissioner** to give focus to environmental and social issues in development, not only economic issues which traditional dominate planning and development.
- Overall, **most stakeholders and community groups were satisfied with the engagement activities** saying “they were open to the industry’s views”; “they have taken up the issues we are concerned about” and “they listened”.
- Analysis of revised plans and other documents of the Commission revealed that **some significant changes were made to draft plans based on stakeholder and community feedback and input**.

Table 8.1. Summary of Greater Sydney Commission engagement stages and activities.

STAGE 1 ENGAGEMENT	STAGE 2 ENGAGEMENT	STAGE 3 ENGAGEMENT
– <i>Towards Greater Sydney</i> – 6 District Plans developed	Exhibition of draft Greater Sydney and District plans (21 Nov 2016–31 Mar 2017)	Exhibition of <i>Greater Sydney Region Plan</i> 22 Oct–15 Dec and 5 revised District plans 26 Oct–15 Dec 2017
Mar 2016 – Nov 2016	21 Nov–31 Mar 2017 during exhibition of plans	Oct–Dec 2017 re revised plans
Engaged with 7,500 people	Engaged with 7,750 people via: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6,364 at public meetings • 586 on social media • 288 in 3-hour workshops • 38,402 views of Website 	Engaged with 9,300 people (5,000 attended events) 25,000 people approx. engaged in total over the 3 stages
	2,341 submissions ¹⁷⁶ from: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1,722 individuals • 186 industry bodies • 175 community groups • 119 peak bodies • 58 government bodies • 48 local councils • 32 other organizations 	585 submissions received and reviewed in relation to District Plans

¹⁷⁵ The term cultural and linguistically diverse (CALD) is used in Australia to refer to communities from foreign backgrounds, while black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) is used in the UK and some other countries. Sensitivities exist in relation to both terms.

¹⁷⁶ Reported as 2,345 in the *Engagement Strategy 2017*.

However, while the Greater Sydney Commission scored a number of ticks for listening, there were some limitations in its engagement. Also, a number of the findings of The Organizational Listening Project (Stages 1–3) were reflected in the findings of the independent review of the stakeholder and community engagement activities of the Greater Sydney Commission. These included the following.

- Despite the scale of its engagement activities, **the Commission interacted with just 0.5% of the population of Greater Sydney** during the 22 months of stakeholder and community engagement.
- The **development plans that were the subject of engagement inform development between 2016 and 2046** – i.e., over the next 40 years.¹⁷⁷ Even major infrastructure projects underway at the time had completion dates several years into the future. In long-term plans, projects inevitably fall behind schedule, run over budget, or are cancelled due to economic or political factors. The aphorism *‘there’s many a slip twixt the cup and the lip’* applies to most plans and development projects.
- Accordingly, most stakeholders and community representatives described the engagement as **“a good start” but “just the beginning”**. Many made comments such as “we’ve only scratched the surface”.
- The review concluded that **engagement needs to be ongoing**. This is a generalized recommendation for all engagement and listening. Engagement, including listening, are not effective if they are conducted as a one-off activity. Listening needs to be ‘always on’.
- A major failing of Greater Sydney Commission listening, common to many other organizations, was that the **almost 3,000 submissions received, many of which were quite lengthy documents, were not systematically analyzed**. Students were used to ‘triage’ the submissions, which involved sorting them into categories. Senior Commission executives personally read a number of submissions, which is commendable for the personal insight that this provides. However, the categorization and sampling for executive reading involved selectivity and subjectivity. Textual analysis software was not available to engagement or communication staff of the Commission. It is likely that the manual reading and analysis of submissions missed some issues and arguments considered important by the contributors and, without rigorous analysis procedures such as *coding* based on coding guidelines and use of multiple coders with *intercoder reliability assessment* to evaluate variance and/or covariance, the analysis fell short of research standards.
- As indicated above, **Commission staff lacked resources in some instances** to fully and thoroughly process large volumes of information and feedback. This supports this research project’s call for an *architecture of listening*. Resources and skills as well as policies, systems and technologies need to be available.

The independent review strongly recommended that stakeholder and community engagement by the Greater Sydney Commission be ongoing and that systematic listening be improved through the use of textual analysis software, digital recording of forums and meetings to provide a record, and use of voice to text software to enable systematic analysis of verbal communication, supported by training of staff to develop analysis skills.

The ‘Europe Dialogues’

During the course of The Organizational Listening Project, the Directorate-General for Communication (DG COMM) of the European Commission (EC) in Brussels commissioned the author to undertake several projects in relation to evaluation of its large communication program and provide advice on communication based on academic research. This involved consulting and conducting a number of collaborative workshops in Brussels.

As part of consulting on evaluation to increase the effectiveness of EC communication across its 28 member states (27 after the withdrawal of the UK), the issue of listening was discussed and examined. The EC spends hundreds of millions of euros on communication to inform European citizens of its work and services and to create a positive reputation of the Commission.

¹⁷⁷ Greater Sydney Commission. (2018). A vision of a metropolis of three cities. <https://www.greater.sydney/metropolis-of-three-cities/vision-of-metropolis-of-three-cities>

For example, EC 'corporate communication' campaigns to promote the EC between 2014 and 2018 cost €65.3 million.¹⁷⁸ A large part of this – the vast majority, in fact – was spent on informing and persuasion.

The EC DG COMM has a strong commitment to evaluation of its public communication. However, in the case of its expensive corporate communication campaigns referred to above, the metrics applied were limited to *reach* and *recall*. These traditional advertising metrics identify the potential size of the audience reached with media content based on newspaper circulation figures, radio and TV audience ratings, and website statistics, but they do not indicate whether people actually saw or heard the content and whether it had any effect. People ignore a large part – even most – of what is published, broadcast, and online. For example, TV sets are left on in homes when no one is in the room. Even recall of media content does not indicate effectiveness in communication – for example, people can recall TV advertisements for products and companies that they dislike or which are irrelevant to their needs.

Evaluation of communication using metrics such as reach and recall is an example of the predominant reliance on quantitative data, particularly media metrics. Evaluation of all communication needs to focus on *outcomes* and *impact* using qualitative as well as quantitative research. Only then can we know whether people are listening and whether stakeholders and publics are satisfied with an organization's services, products, and behaviour. (See 'Evaluating Public Communication – Finding Sources of the Problem, and Solutions' in Section 10.)

The EC has progressively come to recognize the importance of listening to European citizens and in the lead up to the 2019 elections to the European Parliament launched a series of **Citizen Dialogues**.¹⁷⁹

“President Juncker asked all College Members
to be politically active in the Member States
and in dialogues with citizens,
by presenting and communicating the common agenda,
listening to ideas, and engaging with stakeholders.”¹⁸⁰

The above request from the President of the EC, Jean-Claude Juncker, reflects a two-way approach to communication by referring to presenting, listening, and engaging. However, interestingly, it puts “presenting and communicating the common agenda” – the Commission's agenda – first. Nevertheless, the EC is one of the few governments to commit to a sustained, focussed program of listening. The Citizen Dialogues of the EC involved:

- Distribution of a 'white paper' on the future of Europe;¹⁸¹
- Online submissions;
- Open public debates held in cities across all member states.¹⁸²

Sceptics suggested that the Citizen Dialogues were held in an attempt to redress falling support for and trust in the EC in the lead up to the European parliamentary elections of May 2019.

However, in discussing evaluation of communication, the EC DG COMM – the directorate responsible for EC internal and external communication – invited discussion of listening and recognized the importance of listening to citizens not only to gain insights to inform outbound communication, but also as a *communicative act* – something that many organizations, and even professional communicators, fail to recognize.

As well as being a process to receive information, listening (or not listening) says something to others. While some people view the period of their silence while others speak as inactivity, **the act of listening communicates respect, interest and concern to others**. Thus, listening can be one of the most productive communicative acts that an individual or organization can perform.

¹⁷⁸ European Commission. (2018). Annex 1 to Invitation to Tender – Technical Specifications: Synthesis Study of the Corporate Communication Campaigns. Brussels, Belgium.

¹⁷⁹ European Commission. (2018). *Citizen dialogues*. https://ec.europa.eu/info/events/citizens-dialogues_en

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ European Commission. (2017). *White Paper on the Future of Europe*. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/white-paper-future-europe-reflections-and-scenarios-eu27_en

¹⁸² European Commission. (2018). Consultation on the future of Europe. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/consultation-future-europe_en

With falling levels of trust in the EU and national governments and falling citizen satisfaction rates,¹⁸³ the Commission and a number of governments face significant challenges over the next decade.

Listening as much or more than speaking will be key to rebuilding and maintaining public support.

Figure 8.1. The author (third from left far side in a dark coat) addressing a meeting of European Commission communication executives in Brussels.



The link between listening, dialogue, engagement, and consultation

While The Organizational Listening Project set out to specifically study organizational listening, the findings of the three stages of this project and the cognate studies reported in this section relate to and inform several nested concepts within the field of public communication including its specialist forms such as government communication, strategic communication, political communication, corporate communication, organizational communication, and public relations. Organizational listening also must necessarily be part of:

- **Dialogues;**
- **Stakeholder engagement** (including employee and customer engagement as priority stakeholders, as well as with members in the case of member-based organizations; business and supply chain partners in the case of corporations, students in educational institutions; etc);
- **Community relations**
- **Public consultations;**
- Analysis and interpretation of **research;**
- **Conferences, workshops, seminars,** and other interactive events.

Dialogic communication theorists Maureen Taylor and Michael Kent have pointed out that engagement is often poorly described, and often it is enacted as one-way communication rather than interaction. Governments and companies frequently seek engagement by stakeholders with them in order to convey

¹⁸³ European Commission, 2018.

their views and achieve their objectives, such as promote policies or sell products. Taylor and Kent argue for *dialogic engagement* that is two-way and mutually receptive.¹⁸⁴

However, research into organizational listening practice, and the discussion of the literal meaning of dialogue in this report, indicate that much greater attention needs to be paid to listening in all communication and in engagement.

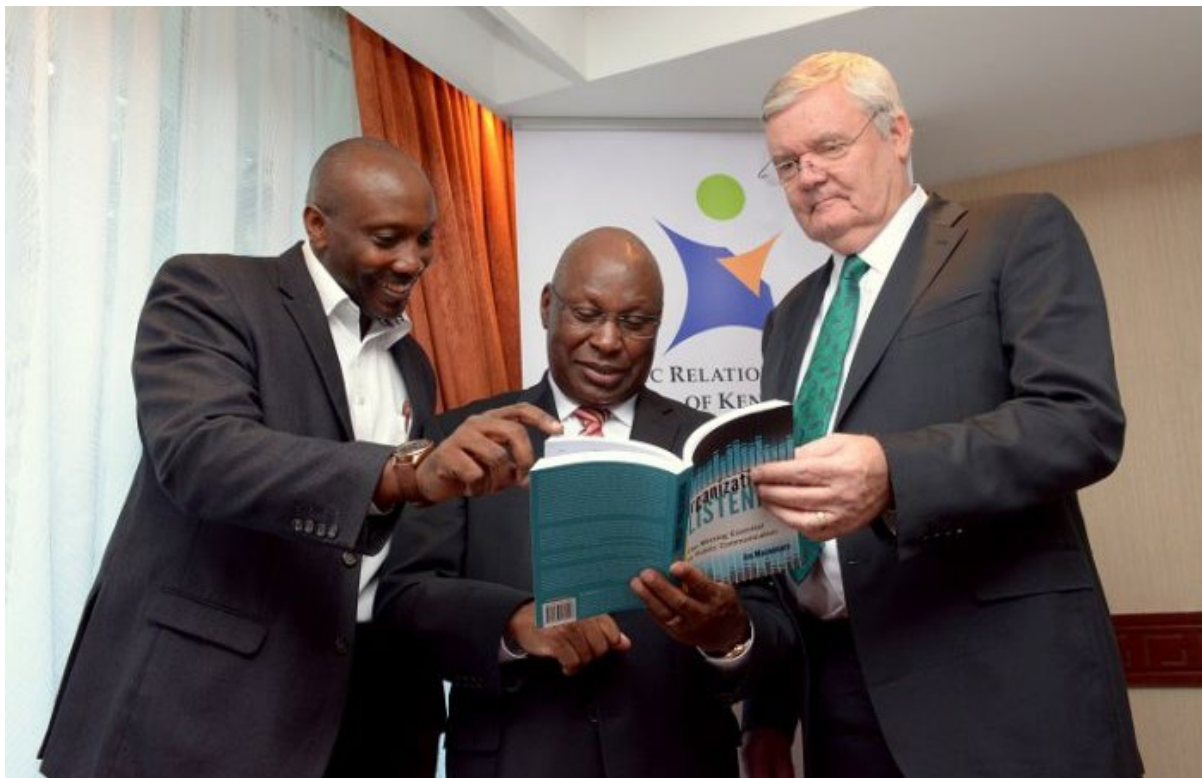
As noted in Section 1, the term dialogue is derived from the Greek *dia* (διά) meaning ‘through’ and *logos* (λόγος), which means ‘speech’, and is too often interpreted as turn-taking at speaking.

Engagement is also more than speaking and even more than listening, defined in psychology as involving three dimensions: *cognitive* (thinking about what others say), *affective* (emotional connection), and *participation* of some kind (e.g. supporting, advocating, joining, voting, etc.).¹⁸⁵

Taylor and Kent’s identification of principles of engagement including *mutuality* and their concept of *dialogic orientation* as a pre-requisite for dialogue¹⁸⁶ go some way towards identifying the importance of listening but, as in Couldry’s description of voice, listening remains largely implicit in many discussions of dialogue.

As discussed in Section 3, **listening needs to be made explicit in theories of communication, engagement, and dialogue and operationalized in public communication practices.**

Figure 8.2. The author (right) discussing his 2016 book on organizational listening with Chairman of the Kenya Public Service Commission, Stephen Kirogo (centre), and President of the Public Relations Society of Kenya, Dr Wilfred Marube (left), during a 2019 lecture tour.



¹⁸⁴ Taylor, M., & Kent, M. (2014). Dialogic engagement: Clarifying foundational concepts. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 26(5), 384–398, p. 387. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2014.956106>

¹⁸⁵ Kang, M. (2014). Understanding public engagement: Conceptualizing and measuring its influence on supportive behavioural intentions. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 26(5), 390–416; Macey, W., & Schneider, B. (2008). The meaning of employee engagement. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 1(1), 3–30; Rhoades, L., Eisenberger, R., & Armeli, S. (2001). Affective commitment to the organization: The contribution of perceived organizational support. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86, 825–236.

¹⁸⁶ Kent, M., & Taylor, M. (2002). Toward a dialogic theory of public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 28(1), 21–37, p. 25; Taylor, M., & Kent, M. (2014). Dialogic engagement: Clarifying foundational concepts. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 26(5), 384–398, p. 387. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2014.956106>

9. NEW STUDIES REINFORCE THE NEED AND OPPORTUNITIES

A number of other authors are taking up the issue of listening in and by organizations in various contexts. The research findings and case studies reported here, and a number of studies worldwide help fill the gap identified in previous sections and form an emerging body of theory as well as guidelines for practice. There is no longer an excuse for political and government leaders, corporate management, and heads of major institutions clinging to flawed and outdated concepts of one-way, top-down *mass communication* believing that they know best and therefore need to inform and persuade others to their viewpoints and promote their ideas and ideologies, rather than listen.

Katie Place has reported that actively listening to stakeholders and publics can make a substantial contribution to and even be “the driver” of **effective public relations strategy**. This conclusion was based narrowly on a single case study of a public relations agency in which listening is allegedly “used by individuals ... to become enculturated into agency life, develop relationships with colleagues and clients, and stay ahead of cultural and industry trends.”¹⁸⁷

More recently, and more critically, Place introduced the concept of *intersectionality* to discussion of organizational listening. Intersectionality refers to the power relations that exist in society and shape social categories and people’s lived experience, such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, age, and ability. Critical studies call for reflexivity among researchers and organizational leaders to recognize power relations and the disjunctures that occur in society, and to engage in reflection and listening across these boundaries.¹⁸⁸ Based on interviews with 38 public relations professionals working in government and non-profit organizations, Place argues that public relations practice can play a key role in organizational listening by introducing intersectionality as a framework, or as part of an ‘architecture of listening’. However, Place’s advocacy for public relations’ role in organizational listening remains normative, as she acknowledges that “absent from participants’ meaning making of listening with consideration for intersectionality were references to technologies, social media, or monitoring tools to conduct or facilitate listening”.¹⁸⁹ It would seem that PR professionals ‘talk the talk’, but there is a lack of evidence that many ‘walk the walk’.

In a 2020 study of young people online, Hanna Reinikainen, Jaana Kari, and Vilma Luoma-aho have noted that, as organizations follow young people on to social media where they interact, build relationships, and discuss issues of concern, attempts to engage young people mostly fail and that young people’s trust in institutions, brands, and organizations continues to decline. In a study of more than 1,500 young people aged 15–24, they found that authentic demonstrations of listening by organizations is connected to higher levels of trust in the information that brands, public authorities, and non-governmental organizations share on social media. They concluded: “The results highlight **the role of competent listening on social media**.”¹⁹⁰ However, in a 2018 study of organizational social media accounts, Sarah Maben and Christopher Gearhart concluded that “the one-way model seems to be a default for organizations ready to sell their wares and promote their causes”.¹⁹¹

David Brandt has studied how organizations listen to the “**voice of the consumer (VOC)**” and found that, while a majority of organizations capture consumer feedback, they are not effectively analyzing, disseminating, or utilizing findings to improve products, services, and consumer experiences.¹⁹² His 2020 findings confirm those of The Organizational Listening Project. Brandt concluded by pointing to the benefits as well as the challenges of processing both structured and unstructured data, which is also highlighted throughout the research cited in this report.

¹⁸⁷ Place, K. (2019). Listening as the driver of public relations practice and communications strategy within a global public relations agency. *Public Relations Journal*, 12(3), 1–18, p. 1. https://prjournal.instituteforpr.org/wp-content/uploads/katieplace_listening.pdf

¹⁸⁸ Rice, C., Harrison, E., & Friedman, M. (2019). Doing justice to intersectionality in research. *Cultural Studies↔ Critical Methodologies*, 19(6), 409–420. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708619829779>

¹⁸⁹ Place, K. (2022). Toward a framework for listening with consideration for intersectionality: insights from public relations professionals in borderland spaces. *Journal of Public Relations Research*. Advance online publication, p. 12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2022.2057502>

¹⁹⁰ Reinikainen, H., Kari, J., & Luoma-aho, V. (2020). Generation Z and organizational listening on social media. *Media and Communication*, 8(2), 185–196. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v8i2.2772>, p. 185.

¹⁹¹ Maben, S. & Gearhart, C. (2018). Organizational social media accounts: Moving toward listening competency. *International Journal of Listening*, 32(2), 101–114, p. 103. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10904018.2017.1330658>

¹⁹² Brandt, D. (2020). The current state of corporate voice of the consumer programs: A study of organizational listening practices and effectiveness. *International Journal of Listening*, 34(3), 156–177, p. 174. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10904018.2018.1482747>

Similarly, in a 2021 study of organizational **listening during organizational change**, Surabhi Sahay confirmed that organizations struggle to incorporate effective listening due to lack of systems, processes, structures, resources, and skill sets. He noted a prevalence of “inauthentic listening”, which has negative consequences for organizations and input providers.¹⁹³ He also calls for organizations to develop comprehensive analysis, as well as empathetic skills among those soliciting or receiving input.¹⁹⁴ This echoes the point made in Section 3 that, ultimately, it is humans in organizations who listen, or don't listen. Systems and technologies aid the process, particularly in instances of scale and the use of a wide range of media and forms of communication.

A 2021 study in the USA by Marlene Neill and Shannon Bowen found that **employees continue to be dissatisfied with their organization's listening efforts**, particularly non-managers and women.¹⁹⁵ Barriers to effective listening identified included:

... limited ability to share insights from listening with supervisors and other employees, poor or absent training for collecting and analyzing intelligence that can be gained from listening, and employees who were unwilling to speak up due to perceptions that management was not sincerely interested in what they have to say”.¹⁹⁶

These findings also confirm those of The Organizational Listening Project and recommendations for an *architecture of listening* that includes a *culture* of listening and *skills, technologies, and resources* for listening including for analyzing feedback in the form of text, often obtained in large volumes. The 2017–2021 study of listening by Tanya Dreher and Poppy de Souza also confirmed the importance of most of these criteria in their succinct focus on *recognition, receptivity, and response*.¹⁹⁷

Dreher has conducted many years of research looking at **how institutions and society listen to marginalized groups such as multicultural communities, people with disabilities, and Indigenous First Nation people**.¹⁹⁸ Her work presents clear evidence that such groups are not only denied or afforded limited voice, but their voices are rarely given the attention they deserve as citizens in a just civil society. In 2021, Dreher released a report on use of community media co-authored with Poppy de Souza. They found that community media attempted to represent their constituents and did so with some notable efforts, but “decision-makers and opinion-leaders were more likely to use community media as a channel to speak to diverse communities, rather than listen in.”¹⁹⁹

“Decision-makers and opinion-leaders are more likely to use community media as a channel to speak to diverse communities, rather than listen in to them.”²⁰⁰

A 2020 book by Laurie Lewis refers to “the power” of listening, which she describes as being derived from **“strategic listening” by organizations**.²⁰¹ Lewis is very careful to identify and warn against unethical uses of listening, devoting a chapter to what she calls ‘The dark side of organizational listening’, as discussed under ‘The ethics of listening’ at the end of Section 7. Lewis does not explore listening technologies and systems in any detail, devoting only two pages to this topic. She does, however, refer to and support the use of tools discussed in this author's book reporting on the Stage 1 of The Organizational Listening Project including media monitoring and analysis; text analysis and content analysis, specialist sense-making software, and even argumentation software and systems.²⁰²

¹⁹³ Sahay, S. (2021). Organizational listening during organizational change: Perspectives of employees and executives. *International Journal of Listening*. (Advance online publication), p. 2. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10904018.2021.1941029>

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 10.

¹⁹⁵ Neill, M., & Bowen, S. (2021). Employee perceptions of ethical listening in US organizations. *Public Relations Review*, 47(5), Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2021.102123>

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Dreher, T., & P. de Souza. (2021). *Listening in. Community media and the politics of listening*. University of New South Wales, Australia, p. 16.

¹⁹⁸ Dreher, T. (2009). Listening across difference: Media and multiculturalism beyond the politics of voice. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 23(4), 445–458, p. 446. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304310903015712>; Dreher, T. (2010). Speaking up or being heard? Community media interventions and the politics of listening. *Media, Culture and Society*, 32(1), 85–103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443709350099>; Dreher, T. (2012). A partial promise of voice: Digital storytelling and the limit of listening. *Media International Australia*, 142, 157–166. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X1214200117>

¹⁹⁹ Dreher, T., & P. de Souza. (2021). *Listening in. Community media and the politics of listening*. University of New South Wales, p. 45.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Lewis, L. (2020). *The power of strategic listening*. Rowman Littlefield, pp. 85–102.

²⁰² Lewis, L. (2020). *The power of strategic listening*. Rowman Littlefield, p. 65, citing Macnamara, J. (2016). *Organizational Listening: The missing essential in public communication*. Peter Lang.

Lewis defines strategic organizational listening as follows:

Strategic organizational listening is constituted in a set of methodologies and structures designed and utilized to ensure that an organization's attention is directed toward vital information and input to enable learning, questioning of key assumptions, interrogating decisions, and ensuring self-critical analysis.²⁰³

This definition can be compared with those developed during The Organizational Listening Project reported at the end of Section 5, particularly the 2019 definition.

Lewis emphasizes organizational listening to clients and customers, employees, and community members, as well as regulators, government oversight agencies, and funders and, while not specifically referring to the concept of an architecture of listening, she identifies organizational culture, creating "infrastructure", and building "listening routines and practices" in the appendices of her text which contain what are perhaps her most specific contribution to emerging theory and practice. In these, Lewis offers an *Observational Guide* with a template of points to note and an *Interview Guide* with a *Questionnaire Item Bank* containing an extensive list of questions to ask about approaches, activities, practices, resources, principles, values, and insights gained. Thus, Lewis contributes a number of practical tools. These alone make her book a useful contribution to the literature.

The work of Dreher and her colleague Poppy DeSouza, as well as this author's research and that of others now focussing on this under-studied field alerts us to the nuanced but important approaches of:

- **Listening to** (the '101' of listening when others speak in verbal, textual, or visual form);
- **Listening in** (in ethical ways to sites of voices and representation);
- **Listening for** (e.g., signals, calls for help or support; warnings, etc.);
- **Listening out** (to identify emerging issues, concerns, and injustices); and
- **Listening out for** (e.g., others who may not have a voice or who are overlooked in society).

A specialized research project that addresses several of these listening modes, particularly listening out and listening out for, is a *Forgotten Australians* initiative at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) in Sydney where Scientia Professor Jill Bennett and colleagues including Dr Gail Kenning, and Rebecca Moran, a PhD candidate specializing in trauma, are working with the National Round Table of Forgotten Australians using an innovative arts-based approach engaging 'care leavers' – people who were discharged from or elected to leave an institutionalized care system and were effectively then left to their own resources. The National Round Table estimates that 500,000 children grew up, or spent long periods of their life, in institutional or out-of-home care.²⁰⁴

Even in the professionalized business world, a gaping needs remains despite the emerging body of research and practical tools. The importance of addressing the lack of listening in organizations is shown in a 2021 Harvard Business School study by professors Raffaella Sadun and Joseph Fuller that found employees want CEOs to "set aside their slide presentations and work on their listening skills instead". In particular, employees want their leaders to "actively listen to others" and "empathize genuinely with others' experiences".

"Set aside your slide presentations and work on listening skills instead."²⁰⁵

²⁰³ Lewis, L. (2020). *The power of strategic listening*. Rowman & Littlefield, p. xvi.

²⁰⁴ The term 'care leavers' is used in various ways, but is used in this context to refer to children who were placed in institutional and other forms of out-of-home care during the last century including people who spent long periods in children's homes, orphanages, and other forms of out-of-home care (referred to as 'Forgotten Australians') and 'Former Child Migrants', who were placed in care for various reasons including being orphaned, being born to a single mother, family poverty, and because of domestic violence. Experiences common to the Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants include abandonment and loss, grief through separation from their parents and siblings, and loss of identity. Former Child Migrants also lost their connection to their country and culture. In addition, many children suffered from neglect, exploitation, mistreatment, and physical and sexual assault at the hands of their caregivers. [Australian Government, Department of Social Services. (2018). Families and children: Care Leavers. <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/families-and-children/programs-services/apology-to-the-forgotten-australians-and-former-child-migrants/questions-and-answers/care-leavers>.] See also Commonwealth of Australia. (2004). *Forgotten Australians: A report on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children*. https://www.apf.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/Completed_inquiries/2004-07/inst_care/report/index

²⁰⁵ Fitzgerald, J. (2021, October 26). What companies want most in a CEO: A good listening. *Working Knowledge*, Harvard Business School. <https://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/what-companies-want-most-in-a-ceo-a-good-listener>, paras 1 and 4.

Marlene Neill and Shannon Bowen commenced a study of organizational listening in February 2020, which was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. When the study resumed, they focussed on internal communication based on 30 in-depth interviews with communication professionals specializing in internal and external communication, followed by an online survey with approximately 250 communication professionals. They reported:

- A shift from annual surveys to more frequent pulse surveys;
- A challenge for organizations in staying connected and listening to colleagues working remotely;
- A need for empathy in organizational communication (this should not be a surprise, as empathy has always been recognized as important in human communication);
- A need for innovative ways to listen to frontline employees; and
- An even greater need to close the feedback loop.²⁰⁶

In 2022, Lisa Tam, Soojin Kim, and Helen Hutchings published findings of a 2020–2021 study that included a 3x4 experiment as well as a survey of stakeholders and interviews with public relations practitioners. One interesting and salutary finding from a representative sample of 426 citizens (by age and gender) was that “of the three channels tested (a community forum, online form, and Facebook), a “community forum is perceived to be the most effective in capturing diverse stakeholders’ feedback and increasing trust in an organization, while Facebook is the least effective channel.”²⁰⁷ This sends a message to organizations that believe effective listening can be achieved via online forms or social media platforms. A more focussed and customized environment is sought by stakeholders.

Studies of organizational listening continue around the world. For example, in 2022 Cecilia Claro reported a study of how organizational listening is being carried out in five Chilean retail institutions. Through semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis, Claro examined how the retail companies listen to customers and partners.²⁰⁸

Thus, a growing body of theory and practical tools are becoming available. Lack of knowledge or means is therefore not an excuse for lack of listening in and by organizations. In addition to traditional research and engagement methods, a range of digital technologies, systems, and tools can enable scalable, delegated, mediated listening. A number of these are summarized in Table 9.2.

²⁰⁶ Neill, M. (2020, November 23). Five lessons regarding organizational listening and empathy in times of global pandemic (Web log post). Institute for Public Relations. <https://instituteforpr.org/five-lessons-regarding-organizational-listening-empathy-in-times-of-global-pandemic>

²⁰⁷ Tam, L., Kim, S., & Hutchings, H. (2022). Organizational listening: Perceptions & practices. Arthur W. Page Center for Integrity in Communication. <https://www.bellisario.psu.edu/page-center>

²⁰⁸ Claro, C. (2022). Organizational listening and its implementation in the Chilean multi-store sector. *Public Relations Inquiry* (advance online publication). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2046147X221081173>

Table 9.2. Digital technologies and systems applicable to organizational listening.

Listening methods	Digital technologies and tools applicable
Surveys (including open-ended as well as closed-ended questions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of e-surveys (online) • Statistical analysis of quantitative data (e.g., SPSS, Excel) • Textual analysis of open-ended responses using natural language processing (NLP) software with machine learning capabilities
Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital recording (audio or video such as Zoom) • Automated transcripts using speech recognition software (e.g., Otter.ai; Temi; Microsoft Stream) • Textual analysis using NLP machine learning applications
Focus groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Textual analysis using NLP machine learning applications
Media content analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Automated algorithmic-based content analysis applications (quantitative and qualitative)
Social media analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Automated algorithmic-based content analysis applications (qualitative) • Google Analytics (quantitative)
Website content review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Google Analytics to track views, duration, bounces, conversions/clickthroughs
Website feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of web page plug-ins such as Usabilla that record user feedback
Public consultations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online public consultation sites (proprietary or using applications such as Citizen Space) • Textual analysis of submissions using NLP machine learning applications
Call centre telephone calls	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital recording • Automated transcripts using speech recognition software (e.g., Otter.ai; Temi; Microsoft Stream) • Textual analysis using NLP machine learning applications
Customer feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer satisfaction e-surveys • NPS surveys online
Customer experience study (CX)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer journey mapping (a wide range of software applications is available)
Community forums and public meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital recording • Automated transcripts using speech recognition software (e.g., Otter.ai; Temi; Microsoft Stream) • Textual analysis using NLP machine learning applications
Employee satisfaction / feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E-surveys • Intranet feedback site • Internal social media (e.g., Workplace by Facebook; Yammer; Socialcast)

10. EVALUATING PUBLIC COMMUNICATION – FINDING SOURCES OF THE PROBLEM, AND SOLUTIONS

As noted in the Introduction, The Organizational Listening Project was inspired by almost three decades of evaluation research in relation to public communication such as public relations and corporate, government, marketing, and organizational communication. More than a decade of this research was spent heading a commercial research company,²⁰⁹ followed by almost two decades as an academic researcher.

The connection and the trigger for looking closely at how and how well organizations listen to their stakeholders and publics was the frequent finding that public communication by organizations fails to achieve objectives. Despite the expenditure of many billions of dollars on advertising, public relations, and various other forms and modes of public communication such as websites, social media, publications, and events, the end of the 20th century and the new millennium saw:

- A sustained **decline in public trust** in government, corporations, media, and even NGOs;
- **Disengagement** by many individuals and groups in society from political participation including in leading democracies;
- **Reputational challenges** faced by major institutions including the Church, monarchies, and even major non-profit organizations;
- **Breakdowns in relationships** between organizations and their key stakeholders evidenced in declining employee and customer loyalty and the rise of activism and social movements opposing the policies and operations of governments and many major corporations.

The growing pervasiveness of these phenomena suggest that the cause is not endemic to particular types of organizations or styles of management, but pandemic (i.e., prevalent across whole countries and even the world). The link between communication and viruses and disease is not unintentional or extreme. In 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 an “infodemic” as well as a pandemic.²¹⁰ The WHO’s pronouncement emphasized the importance of public communication, as well its propensity to fail.

As *In Search of Excellence* author Tom Peters noted, what gets measured is what gets done.²¹¹ Therefore, evaluation gives us a clear view of the priorities, strategy, and tactics of organizations. The evidence of frequent failures in organization-public communication led to a search for the source or sources of the problem, noting that identifying a source or sources can also point to solutions.

Undertaking evaluation of many public communication campaigns and activities revealed several consistent findings including:

- A **focus on distributing the organization’s messages** (i.e., one-way communication);
- A predominant **focus on evaluating outputs, rather than outcomes and impact** – key stages identified in program logic models (See Figure 9.1);
- When it is discussed, **impact is often narrowly defined as “organizational impact”**. (See widely used evaluation models in Figures 9.2 and 9.3).

Figure 9.1. A classical program logic model used for planning and evaluation of programs of work.²¹²



²⁰⁹ The author was the founder and CEO of CARMA International (Asia Pacific), a leading Computer Aided Research and Media Analysis company, between 1995 and 2006.

²¹⁰ World Health Organization. (2020, February 2). Novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV). Situation report 13. <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200202-sitrep-13-ncov-v3.pdf>

²¹¹ Peters, T. (1986). What gets measured gets done. *Tom Peters’ Writing* [Web log]. <http://tompeters.com/columns/what-gets-measured-gets-done>. While this adage is often attributed to Tom Peters and used in his recent writing, in the popular book, *In Search of Excellence* written with Robert Waterman, the quote is attributed to organizational theorist Mason Haire. See Peters, T., & Waterman, R. (1982). *In search of excellence: Lessons from America’s best-run companies*. Harper Collins, p. 268.

²¹² Kellogg Foundation. (2004). *Logic model development guide*. <https://www.wkcf.org/resource-directory/resources/2004/01/logic-model-development-guide>. (Original work published 1998)

Review of both academic and professional literature on evaluation of public communication confirms this **organization-centric and one-way approach**. Analysis of more than a dozen widely used models of evaluation of communication revealed that only one included stakeholders, publics, or society in the model other than as ‘target audiences’ or ‘target markets’. (See Figures 9.2 and 9.3.)

Figure 9.2. The evaluation model of the Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC).²¹³

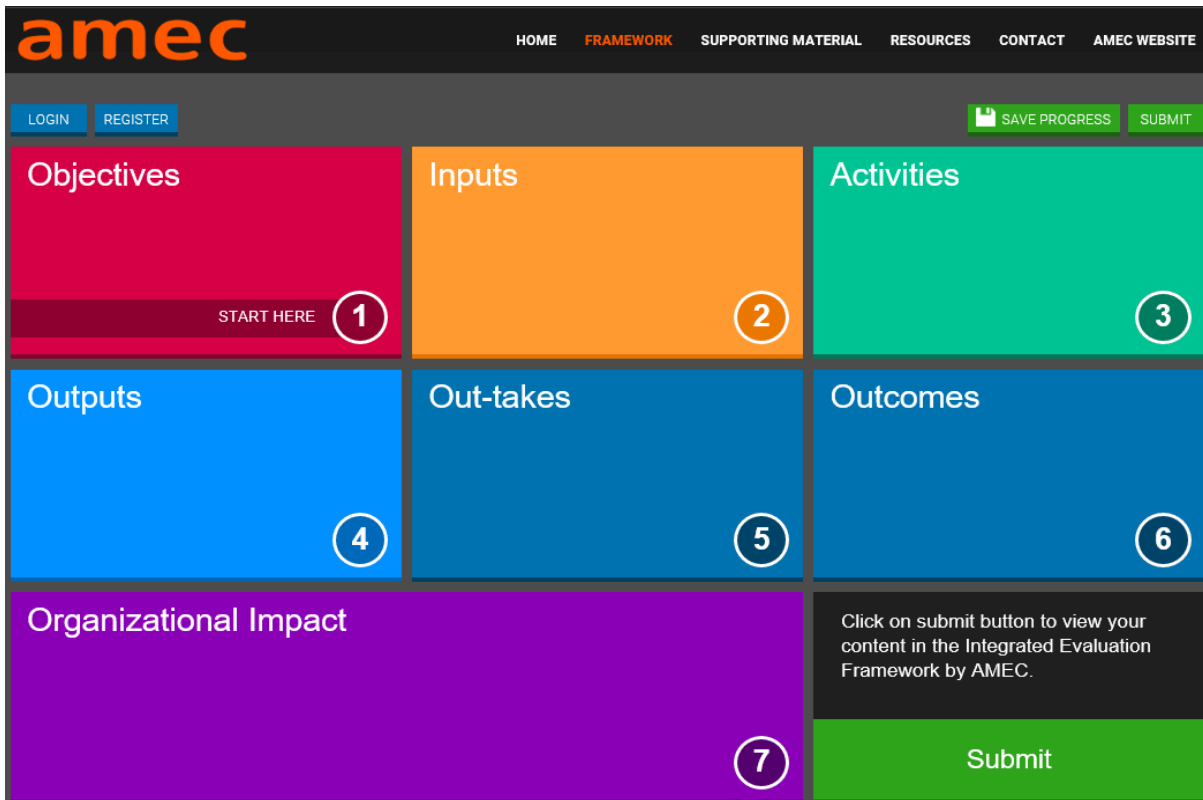
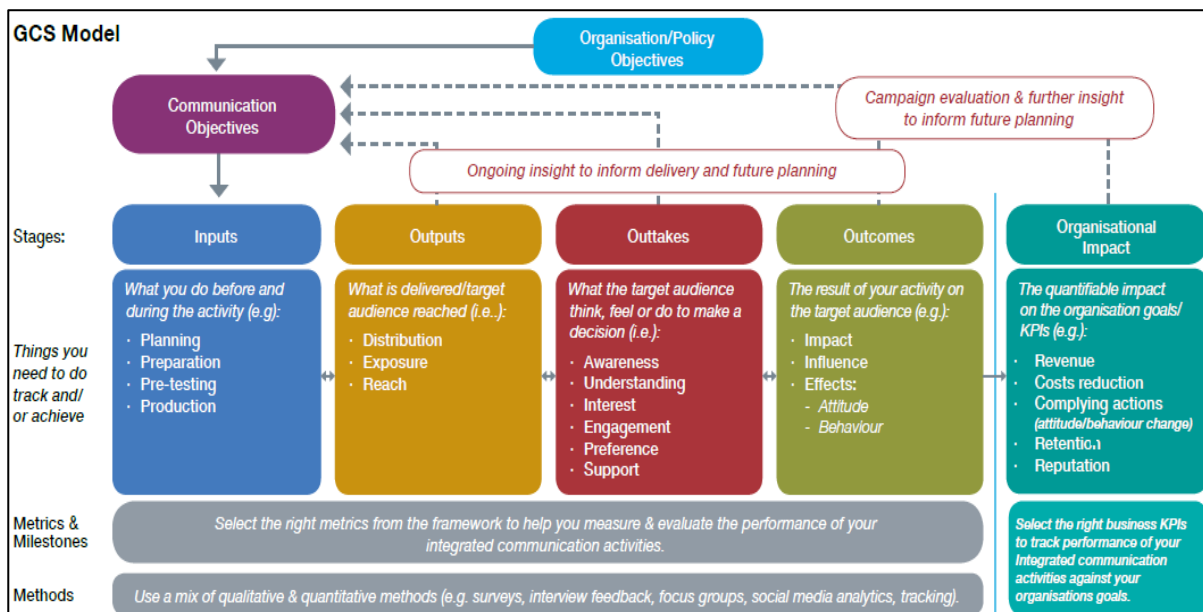


Figure 9.3. The evaluation model of the UK Government Communication Service (GCS).²¹⁴

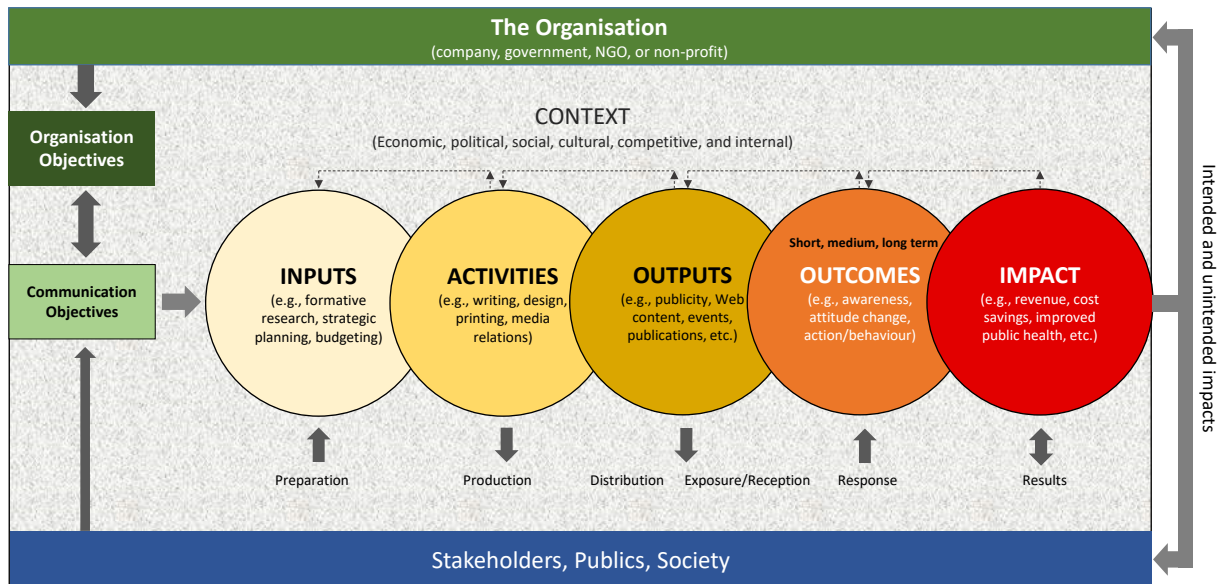


²¹³ Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication. (2022). AMEC integrated evaluation framework. <https://amecorg.com/amecframework>

²¹⁴ Government Communication Service). (2020). Evaluation framework 2.0. Cabinet Office, HM Government. <https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/guidance/evaluation/tools-and-resources>

This finding led to development of the Integrated Model of Planning and Evaluation for communication by the author that explicitly recognized stakeholders, publics, and society at all stages of communication and used arrows to denote a **two-way flow of information** at the stages of setting communication objectives, gaining inputs to inform planning, and identifying outcomes and impact, including unintended as well as intended impacts. (See Figure 9.4.)

Figure 9.4. The Integrated Model of Planning and Evaluation for communication.²¹⁵



The organization-centric and predominantly one-way communication approach of most planning and evaluation models conflicts with human communication theory,²¹⁶ normative theories of public relations and corporate communication that advocate two-way communication,²¹⁷ and democratic political theory that calls for stakeholder and citizen consultation and participation.²¹⁸ This has contributed to listening not being recognized as part of the process other than for periodic research to gain insights that aid organization planning and targeting. In short, evaluation theory and practice shows that **effectiveness of public communication by organizations is conceived primarily as their effectiveness at speaking**. Listening plays only an ancillary role to help substantiate speaking effectiveness.

The connection between listening and evaluation

Specifically, evaluation research reveals that most organizations do not listen adequately, and sometimes not at all, to their stakeholders and intended audiences *before* planning organization communication, thus failing to understand their attitudes, perceptions, concerns, and channel preferences. Also, they often fail to listen *during* and *after* organization communication other than in instrumental ways to identify if the organization's informational and promotional content has been successfully distributed. In most cases, because of the common focus on *outputs* rather than *outcomes* and *impact*, they are unable to identify changes in awareness, attitudes, perceptions, or behaviour and, furthermore, many organizations remain oblivious to the responsive and spontaneous communication of their stakeholders and publics. It dawned on me during these originally parallel research paths that evaluation requires listening – often intensive listening at the formative, process, and summative stages.

Several case studies illustrate the 'good, the bad, and the ugly' of organizational listening as identified through evaluation.

²¹⁵ Macnamara, J. (2018). *Evaluating public communication: New models, standards, and best practice*. Routledge, p. 136; Macnamara, J. (2020), Embracing evaluation theory to overcome 'stasis': Informing standards, impact and methodology. *Corporate Communications – An International Journal*, 25(2), 339–354. <https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-04-2019-0044>

²¹⁶ Craig, R. (1999). Communication theory as a field. *Communication Theory*, 9, 119–161. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.1999.tb00355.x>; Littlejohn, S., Foss, K., & Oetzel, J. (2017). *Theories of human communication* (11th ed.). Waveland.

²¹⁷ Grunig, L., Grunig J., & Dozier, D. (2002). *Excellent organizations and effective organizations: A study of communication management in three countries*. Lawrence Erlbaum.

²¹⁸ Bickford, S. (1996). *The dissonance of democracy: Listening, conflict and citizenship*. Cornell University Press.

Case study: Corporate social responsibility and social purpose reporting

In place of the 20th century Milton Friedman doctrine that the only responsibility of business is to shareholders and to make profits,²¹⁹ corporations today increasingly take a wider view of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and, most recently, even acknowledge a *social purpose*.²²⁰ According to the report of a 2021 survey conducted by the Public Affairs Council,²²¹ US companies are taking a stand on civil rights issues such as discrimination based on race, gender, and sexual orientation and are actively supporting the environment and sustainability. In particular, the survey reported that over 80% of companies are actively engaged in these causes based on both external influences and internal pressures from their employees.²²² Specific issues of alleged commitment are shown in Table 9.1.)

Table 9.1. Responses to a US survey question ‘Has your company been engaged through broad-based communication or advocacy in the following social issues in the past three years?’

POSITION	Very involved	Somewhat involved
Support for an end to discrimination / restrictions based on gender	37%	48%
Support for an end to discrimination / restrictions based on sexual orientation	36%	49%
Support for an end to discrimination / restrictions based on race	44%	40%
Support for environment and sustainability	46%	32%
Support for an end to discrimination / restrictions based on gender identity	38%	32%
Support for access to quality education	22%	36%
Support for voting rights	16%	31%
Support to relieve hunger and improve food security	15%	28%
Support for human rights abroad	15%	18%
Support to increase access to social services	4%	27%
Support for access to affordable housing	6%	21%

Surveys are the most widely used research method in market research, social research, and for evaluation. Surveys have many advantages, which undoubtedly contribute to, if not account for, their popularity including:

- They provide quantitative (numeric) data through the use of structured questions such as scales, ratings, and scores, which can be **statistically reliable and generalizable** to whole sectors of the population when sufficient sample sizes are obtained;
- Statistical data can be easily **visualized** to illustrate patterns and trends (e.g., charts and graphs);
- In the age of e-surveys distributed via the Web or e-mail, they are **cost-efficient**.

However, there are also significant limitations and even problems with surveys including the following.

- In the age of spam and aggressive telemarketing, popular methods of surveying such as computer-aided telephone interviewing (CATI) and e-mail surveys are achieving **low response rates**.
- While they allegedly report statistically reliable data, some studies show that many **surveys are often not completed by the person identified in the sample**. For example, studies have shown that surveys of senior executives are often passed on to assistant in organizations and surveys of households are filled out by a child.²²³ This can invalidate the findings of the survey.

²¹⁹ Smith, H. (2003, July 15). The shareholders vs. stakeholders debate. *MIT Sloan Management Review*. <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/the-shareholders-vs-stakeholders-debate>

²²⁰ Everitt, A. (2018). The rise of social purpose and its impact on brand success. *Journal of Digital & Social Media Marketing*, 6(3), 221–227.

²²¹ www.pac.org.

²²² Public Affairs Council. (2021). *Taking a stand: How corporations engage on social issues*, p. 2. <https://pac.org/wp-content/uploads/Taking-a-Stand.pdf>

²²³ Reichheld, F. (2008). *The ultimate question: Driving good profits and true growth*. Harvard Business School Publishing pp. 81–82).

- Surveys are made up of predominantly *closed ended* questions for which responses are restricted to ticking a box or selecting a number. Some have as few as one *open ended* question in which participants can actually say something in their own words. Surveys ask the questions that organizations want to ask about the issues they want to know about and **afford little opportunity for participants to speak**.
- Perhaps most significantly of all, surveys capture **self-reporting**. While this is an advantage and even essential in some cases when the sample is made up of people with access to specialized information or lived experience, in many cases participants are rating their own knowledge, expertise, and performance – and exaggeration is common.

Even at their best, reporting of surveys tends to focus on *means* (i.e., averages), and sometimes *medians* and *modes*. Averages are statistical calculations that can produce findings that often do not exist in reality – they are simply a middle point in a data set. Modes are better than means in this respect in that they at least identify the most commonly occurring response. But by virtue of focussing on averages, most statistical analyses exclude what are called ‘outliers’ in a data range, which can be a sizeable proportion of the population studied. While calculation of statistical significance (*p* values) and standard deviation (*SD*) can ensure statistical reliability of what is reported, it is what is *left out* of quantitative findings that is perhaps the most significant limitation – what the sample does not get to say. In addition, a number of scientists writing in prestigious journals such as *Nature* question the use of statistical significance, arguing that statistical significance (e.g., a *p* value higher than 0.05) does not prove some hypotheses and statistical non-significance does not prove a null hypothesis.²²⁴

So, let’s come back to the example of the Public Affairs Council survey in terms of how well it enabled listening, and how reliable it was as an evaluation method.

Under the ‘Methodology’ section, the report said “the Council distributed the survey to more than 1,000 private and publicly traded companies across a wide variety of industries in July 2021. The survey was shared via e-mail to unique corporate contacts and all data were reviewed to ensure the data set included distinct corporate responses.” This sounds like a substantial sample. Except that there are at least 4,000 publicly listed companies in the USA.²²⁵ Information on private companies is difficult to obtain, but it can be assumed that they greatly outnumber publicly listed companies trading on a stock exchange. Companies such as Dunn & Bradstreet track many thousands of companies in which stock is privately held. But worse, reading on in the Public Affairs Council ‘Methodology’ section reveals: “**A total of 82 companies provided usable responses.**”²²⁶ That’s a response rate of 8.2%.

Leading research company Qualtrics says that survey response rates typically “fall between 20% and 30%”, adding that “a survey response rate below 10% is considered very low. A good survey response rate is anything above 50%.”²²⁷ So, given that the Council only surveyed a relatively small proportion of companies, the responses are not statistically reliable.

Furthermore, they are self-reporting – they are what the companies’ senior managers say they do. To its credit, the Public Affairs Council did probe participants on actions they took in relation to these social issues, but the results provided further cause for concern. Some of the most commonly reported actions were “issued a press release or public statement” (65%); “lobbied through a trade association on an issue” (59%); or “signed a petition” (52%). Issuing a press/media release is a public relations response and often little more. Only 38% “issued a formal policy position” and only just over one-third (35%) “changed business practice” or “stopped selling a product or service that caused controversy related to a social issue”.²²⁸

There are, of course, reliable and useful surveys. But self-reporting from small samples, exacerbated at times by poor sampling methods, and the dominance of closed ended questions often result in meaningless numbers with little open, active listening and poor evaluation. Think of all the polls that confidently predicted a ‘Remain’ vote in the 2016 UK EU Referendum.

²²⁴ Amrhein, V., Greenland, S., & McShane, B. (2019). Scientists rise up against statistical significance. *Nature*, 567, pp. 305–307. <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-019-00857-9>

²²⁵ Gupta, V., Koller, T., & Stumpner, P. (2021, October 21). Reports of corporates’ demise have been greatly exaggerated. McKinsey & Company. <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/reports-of-corporates-demise-have-been-greatly-exaggerated>

²²⁶ Public Affairs Council. (2021), p. 3.

²²⁷ Qualtrics. (2022). How to increase survey response rates, para, 25. <https://www.qualtrics.com/au/experience-management/research/tools-increase-response-rate>

²²⁸ Public Affairs Council. (2021), p. 8.

Case study: The Pink Sari Project

In 2014, Cancer Institute NSW (New South Wales) in Australia awarded \$100,000 to the NSW Multicultural Health Communication Service (MHCS) to conduct a 12-month project from 1 July 2014 to 30 June 2015 to increase awareness and rates of breast screening (mammograms) among Indian and Sri Lankan women aged 50–74. Subsequently the project was extended to 30 June 2016. The funding (albeit modest) was awarded in recognition that women from Indian and Sri Lankan backgrounds, particularly recent immigrants, had among the lowest rates of breast screening in the country – the primary recommended strategy for early detection and treatment of breast cancer.

The objectives of the project included:

- Increase breast cancer screening rates among Indian and Sri Lankan women aged 50–74 in NSW by at least 5% from the baseline rate (annual rates of breast screening by ethnic background are recorded by Cancer Institute NSW based on data from breast screening clinics);
- Increase knowledge of enablers and barriers to address current low rates of screening among Indian and Sri Lankan women in NSW;
- Increase awareness of and create positive community attitudes towards breast screening.

To facilitate achievement and demonstration of its objectives, MHCS engaged a small team of academic researchers of which I was honoured to be one to assist in conducting formative and evaluative research to guide and report on the project.

MHCS also established a Project Steering Group comprised of key stakeholders including representatives of the NSW Refugee Health Service and BreastScreen Liverpool, a breast screening clinic in an area of south-west Sydney with an Indian and Sri Lankan migrant concentration, as well as MHCS social marketing executives. The Project Steering Committee also consulted with local area health services such as the South-Western Sydney Local Health District (LHD).

In line with program theory and program evaluation theory, formative research was conducted to inform planning of the project. This included:

1. A **survey** of 250 women in the target audience (n = 300) to identify their knowledge, awareness, and attitudes in relation to breast cancer; gain insights into their motivations and/or de-motivations in regard to breast cancer screening; and identify their primary sources of information in relation to health. The survey was administered online and in intercept interviews during gatherings of Indian and Sri Lankan women (e.g., Deepavali celebrations);
2. **Focus groups** (four) among Indian and Sri Lankan women in the target age range (n = 36);
3. A **global literature review** of academic and professional research in relation to cancer detection programs targeting CALD and BAME communities including screening for breast and cervical cancer. This produced a 24-page report detailing international research findings in relation to promotion of cancer detection services.

Formative evaluation research revealed a number of interesting and highly relevant findings that significantly shaped planning of the proposed public communication campaign. These included:

- A lack of knowledge about breast cancer;
- Lack of understanding of English and poor translations of information materials from English;
- Deep-seated fears and superstitions (e.g., that attending screening for breast cancer could indicate ill health in a family and reduce the chances of marriage for daughters);
- Concern for family honour if cancer is detected;
- Modesty, including concerns about bodily exposure in front of men working in breast screen clinics;
- A 'culture of silence' (cancer is just not something to talk about).
- While Indian and Sri Lankan women in the target age group use mass media including ethnic newspapers as a source of local news, they do not use or attach credibility to mass media as a major source of information about health issues;

- They rely mostly on their local doctors, particularly Indian and Sri Lankan women doctors, community leaders, and their families for health information. For older women their more educated and Westernized daughters were a particular source of influence.

Based on these research findings, the Multicultural Health Communication Service (MHCS) developed a strategy that involved:

1. Establishment of **community partnerships** with a wide range of organizations representing and interacting with Indian and Sri Lankan women. As well as members of the Project Steering Group such as the NSW Refugee Health Service and BreastScreen NSW clinics in relevant areas, these included the Sri Lankan Health Professionals' Association, the Indian Doctor's Association, the Sri Lankan and Indian Welfare Association, Migrant Resource Centres, and women's health services in Local Health Districts;
2. Identification of **community champions**. Through the partnerships established, a number of 'community champions' and leaders were identified and engaged in spearheading the project. These included Indian and Sri Lankan doctors, community and religious leaders, and some women who had survived breast cancer and were willing to support the project;
3. Community partner organizations and community champions were engaged in **co-design of public communication materials**. This included naming the campaign (The Pink Sari Project); developing the logo (see Figure 9.4); and deciding most of the public communication activities that were undertaken;
4. All information materials such as **brochures and posters were written 'in language' by native speakers** of each of the main languages used in the community groups – Tamil, Hindi, and Sinhalese – not as translations of English language materials that were found to be confusing and even offensive, with sexual rather than clinical terms used in some cases. Volunteers such as local Indian and Sri Lankan doctors drafted the materials.

Figure 9.4. The Pink Sari Project name and logo created by the Indian and Sri Lankan community.



The resulting public communication Pink Sari Project, co-designed with local community groups, raised a few eyebrows among government officials in the Department of Health. Along with a number of traditional public communication activities such as establishing a Pink Sari website; a Pink Sari Facebook page; and producing colourful posters and information brochures that were distributed through doctors' surgeries and meetings, the Pink Sari Project included the following.

- 55 **Pink Sari forums** were arranged and attended by 10,462 women from Indian, Sri Lankan or other Asian backgrounds during the first 12 months, at which information on breast screening was distributed and talks were given by doctors and community leaders. All were arranged by community volunteers.
- 100 **Tamil doctors voluntarily engaged in outreach** to Indian and Sri Lankan women in their communities to encourage breast screening.
- A '**Pink Sari**' pledge was designed, based on community advice that, while verbal commitments and intentions were often unrealized, the keeping of written promises was a cultural symbol of honour (see Figure 9.5).
- A **Pink Sari Fashion Show** was held in June 2015, planned and organized by volunteers. The event was a sell-out and raised additional funds to support the project.

- A **Pink Sari Photo Exhibition** of 14 breast cancer survivors was held in August 2015. Indian and Sri Lankan women came up with the idea, volunteered, and 14 leading photographers donated their time to create the exhibition that was publicly displayed for several months.
- 100 Indian and Sri Lankan women marched in pink saris in the **Parramasala parade**, a major annual festival involving street parades, food stalls, music, dance, poetry, film, art, and street performances, carrying banners promoting the Pink Sari Project in both 2014 and 2015.
- Given the influence of daughters on older Indian and Sri Lankan women, daughters were enlisted in asking their mothers to sign a pledge and also produced a **series of videos** on their cell phones calling on mothers in their community to protect their health through early detection of breast cancer via scanning. While the target audience were not major social media users, their daughters were reached through social media and generated a large amount of support for breast screening, with more than 1,000 video views on YouTube.
- Based on findings of formative evaluation research, media publicity was not a key part of the project. However, the activities initiated by the women themselves generated **substantial news coverage**, all of which was positive.

The Pink Sari Project was coordinated through regular **community forums** at which community leaders and community champions were briefed – and listened to.

Figure 9.5. An example of a pledge used in the daughters campaign to encourage their mothers to have a breast screen.

PINK SARI
— PROJECT PLEDGE —

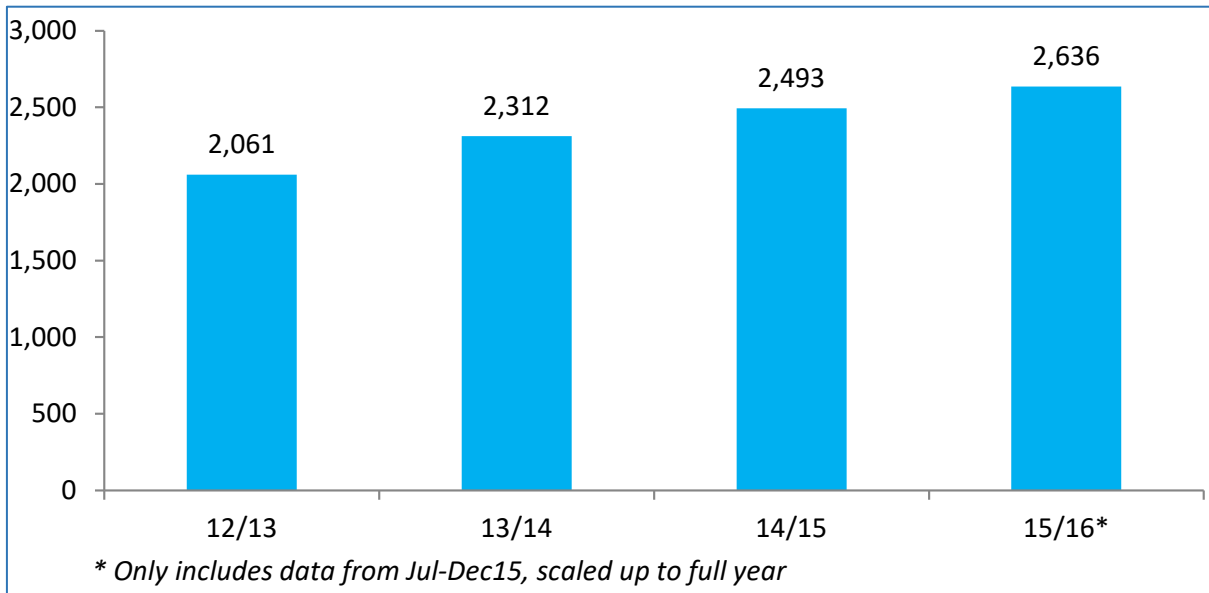
Share your pledge to raise awareness and increase breast screening rates to save women's lives in your community

To mum and all my aunties,
I will remind you - the way you have always reminded me and Rajan to take care of ourselves.
Ps. And will be your driver, if you need a lift to your appointments.

WRITE YOUR MESSAGE OF SUPPORT
Or register your support at www.pinksariproject.org

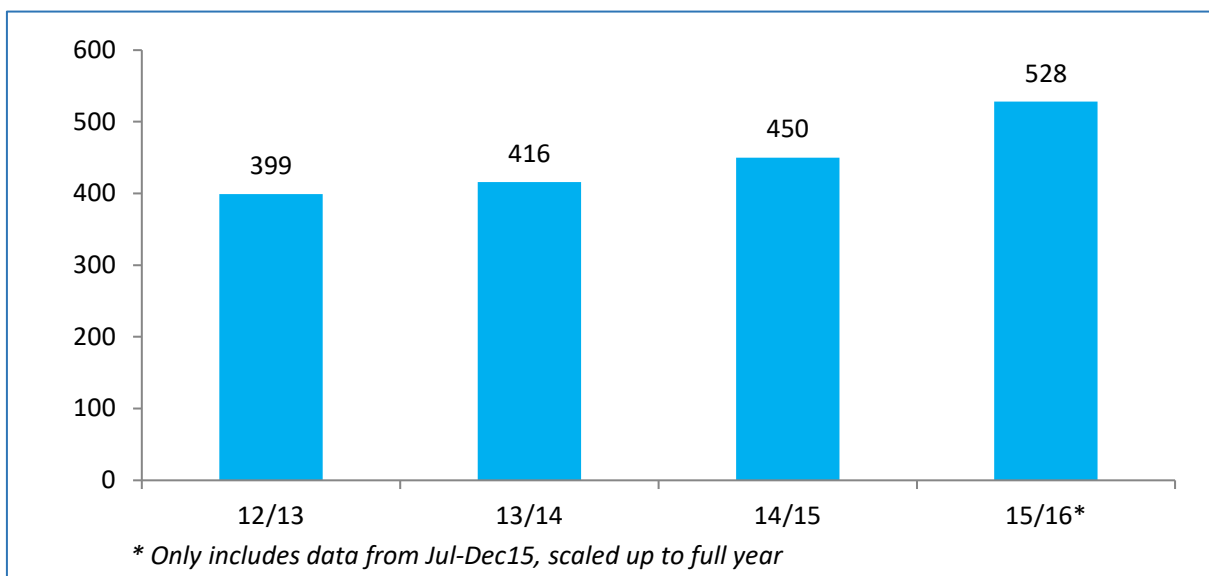
Independent data collected and provided by the Cancer Institute NSW (2016) showed that in the financial years 1 July 2014–30 June 2015 and 1 July 2015–30 June 2016 (the period of the Pink Sari Project), there was a **25% increase in the total number of Indian and Sri Lankan women aged 50–69²²⁹ living in NSW having a breast screen** compared with 2013–2014 (the year before the Pink Sari Project started). This was made up of an 8% increase in 2014–2015 over the previous year, followed by a 17% increase in 2015–2016 over 2014–2015. (See Figure 9.6.)

Figure 9.6. Overall increase in Indian and Sri Lankan women aged 50–69 having a breast screen (Source: Cancer Institute NSW, 2016).



Furthermore, there was an extraordinary **39% increase in the number of Indian and Sri Lankan women aged 50–69 living in NSW having a breast screen for the first time** in 2015–2016 compared with 2013–2014, the year before the Pink Sari Project started (see Figure 9.7). This result was important because once women have one breast screen, research shows that they are likely to continue with the practice.

Figure 9.7. Increase in Indian and Sri Lankan women aged 50–69 having a breast screen for the first time in 2014–2015 and 2015–2016 compared with previous years (Source: Cancer Institute NSW, 2016).



²²⁹ Until 2014, Cancer Institute NSW collected breast screening data only for 50–69 year women, not for 70–74 year women. Therefore this age range was used to allow comparison with previous years.

Summative evaluation based on breast screening rates provided empirical data showing that the Pink Sari Project was a success.

However, **listening continued through interviews with key stakeholders after completion of the funded project.** In August 2016, the research team interviewed senior representatives of five of the stakeholder groups most involved in the Pink Sari Project including leaders of community groups and local doctors. They were asked to report on their experience, perceptions, and feedback that they had received from their constituencies. Overall, key stakeholders rated the Pink Sari Project a “significant success”, with two rating it 9 out of 10. Comments included:

- “We were able to screen 47 women this weekend, mainly first timers”.
- “Sub-continent women who are generally shy are reluctant to have mammograms. The Pink Sari concept made a great impact on them and out of 150 who turned out for the Pink Sari Day, more than 90 wore pink saris. The Pink Project was well planned and well carried out.”
- The Director of the Westmead Breast Cancer Institute in Sydney said that “community events that are fun to attend” are the key to engagement. In addition, she said that engaging “community champions who latched on to the project” and led a “succession of events contributed to the success and scalability.”
- A multicultural health liaison officer said that “the ‘Portraits in Pink’ photo exhibition, information events, and the value of survivor stories told on video reduced the stigma associated with breast cancer and changed community attitudes”. He also said “the collaborative approach taken in engaging stakeholders and community groups had built trust and shown the benefits of working truly collaboratively”.²³⁰

Stakeholder groups were unanimous in saying that the Pink Sari Project should be continued after Cancer Institute funding was depleted.

This was realized when a group of key community supporters set up an incorporated association to continue the work of the Pink Sari Project. Pink Sari was officially handed over to Pink Sari Inc. at a morning tea on 26 October 2016.

In 2016, the Pink Sari Project took out the Gold Award for ‘Best campaign evaluation in the public and non-for-profit sectors’ and the ‘Grand Prix Platinum Award for “evaluation research by a consultancy or in-house communications team” at the International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC) Awards in London.²³¹

The considerable success of the Pink Sari Project was directly due to listening. From the first discussions about how to achieve the funder’s objectives, leaders and representatives of what traditional marketers would call the ‘target audience’ were not only consulted – they became interlocutors in the discussion, participants in planning, and ultimately partners in co-design and coproduction.

While Modernist thinking privileges experts as the possessors of knowledge, lay, local, and vernacular knowledge is increasingly recognized in many fields.²³²

People are often the best theorists of their own worlds.

²³⁰ University of Technology Sydney. (2016). Report on evaluation of The Pink Sari Project to the NSW Multicultural health Communication Service. Also see Macnamara, J., & Camit, M. (2017). Effective CALD community health communication through research and collaboration: An exemplar case study. *Communication Research & Practice*, 3(1), 92–112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2016.1209277>

²³¹ Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication. (2016). AMEC Award 2016 winners. <https://amecorg.com/awards/2016-winners>

²³² Simpson, H., Loë, R., & Andrey, J., (2015). Vernacular knowledge and water management – Towards the integration of expert science and local knowledge in Ontario, Canada. *Water Alternatives*, 8(3), 352–372; Wilcox, S. (2010). Lay knowledge: The missing middle of the expertise debates. In R. Harris, N. Wathen, & S. Wyatt (Eds.), *Configuring health consumers* (pp. 45–64). Palgrave Macmillan.

Case study: World Health Organization COVID-19 communication

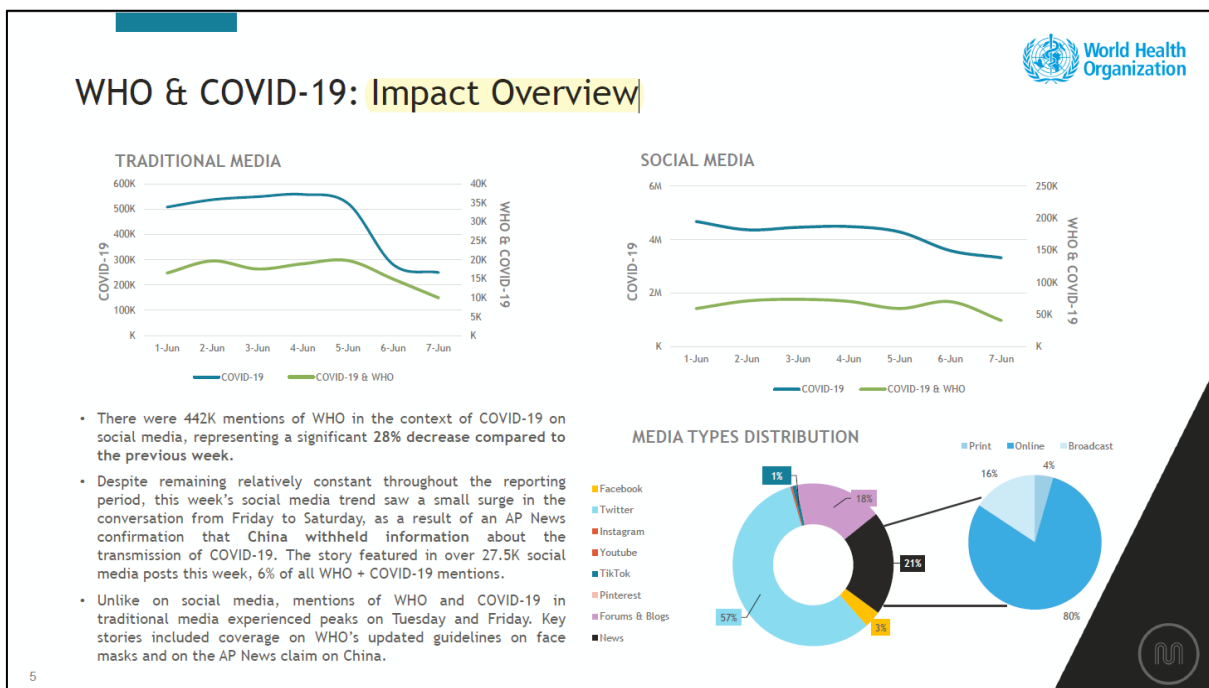
It has to be said from the outset that staff working in the Directorate of Communication (DCO) at the WHO head office in Geneva and in regional offices in Africa, the Americas, South-East Asia, the Eastern Mediterranean, and Western Pacific are dedicated and hard-working, recognizing that effective public communication contributes substantially to public health and can even save lives. This was ever more the case during the COVID-19 pandemic that was declared in March 2020 and continued through 2021 and 2022.

In early 2020, the WHO DCO called on a team of academic researchers, who I was proud to lead, to help it evaluate its public communication in relation to COVID-19 and global health days and weeks such as Global No Tobacco Day; Global Blood Donor Day, Global AIDS Day; and Global Antimicrobial Awareness Week.

Like many organizations, the WHO devotes significant attention to **media monitoring and analysis**. This was necessary and appropriate, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic when there was a cacophony of claims and counter-claims and information, misinformation, and disinformation in both traditional and social media. The WHO needed to know what messages were being conveyed and how its own information was faring in terms of reach, share of voice, and ideally response.

One of the media analysis companies contracted by the WHO in this period claims to report “impact” of public communication based solely on media *impressions*²³³ (see Figure 9.8). However, whether calculated for mainstream media, social media, or owned media such as websites, impressions are an estimate of the total number of people who could *potentially* access content based on publication circulation data, ratings of broadcast media, website visitor statistics, and social media followers. Impressions are *not* a measure of the impact of media content.

Figure 9.8. A media analysis company claim of volume of media coverage as ‘impact’ of communication.



Another leading media analysis company operating in the UK and Europe provides what it calls an *impact metric* based on “the *credibility* of the source, the *audience reach*, and the *relevance* of an article to a particular company and topic” calculated by a secret proprietary algorithm.²³⁴ How it determines the credibility of sources is undisclosed. In any case, the claimed impact is no more than a rating of the *potential* influence of a media article – assuming people actually read it, believe it, remember its messages, and then think or act in accordance with those messages. There are clearly a lot of assumptions involved in claiming this basic, largely subjective calculation as an indicator of impact.

²³³ Media Measurement. (2020). *COVID-19 weekly report*, 15–21 June, p. 5. Report to the World Health Organization.

²³⁴ Polecat. (2020). Impact metric. <https://help.polecat.com/en/articles/3132373-impact-metric>

While *social media listening* and *digital listening* via e-surveys and online consultation sites can access comments by users of those media, most media data reflect counts of clicks, revealing the digital trails of people online, but providing little information about what they think, feel, know, or want. **Listening to media is not listening to people.** The volume of media content does not necessarily correlate to audience access or use, and metrics such as ‘media sentiment’ reflect the tone of media content – and perhaps the sentiment of the journalist or editor – but not the sentiment of actual or potential audiences.

In reality, many people do not see or hear media content due to selective reading and viewing; others ignore or forget it; and even those who recall content and messages often do not believe or trust media, as reported in numerous Edelman Trust Barometer surveys and other studies. The 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer reported that only 57% of people trust traditional media and only 37% trust social media – and trust in media is falling.²³⁵

Focussing beyond activities and outputs to outcomes and impact

A focus on media and assumptions about media effects has led to confusion in many organizations about what constitutes an outcome or impact versus outputs. Many organizations report metrics such as media impressions (total potential audience reach), messages placed in media, and ‘media sentiment’ as outcomes, which is referred to as *substitution error*. Eminent public relations scholar, Jim Grunig, defined substitution error as using “a metric gathered at one level of analysis to [allegedly] show an outcome at a higher level of analysis.”²³⁶

Many organizations also focus on measuring their information outputs, such as the number of media releases issued, the number of presentations they give, ‘owned media’ such as publications distributed, and content placed on their own website.

Monitoring and measuring only what your organization says
is like singing in the shower.
It’s flattering, but it tells you nothing about the reality
of your vocal abilities or an audience’s response.

To combat substitution error, a ‘dissected’ program logic model for planning and evaluation of public communication was developed, showing that activities and outputs are things done or created by the organization’s staff or agencies (what is produced and put out), whereas outcomes are what stakeholders, target publics, and society do in terms of demonstrating reception, and particularly in terms of reaction and response (See Figure 9.9).

Furthermore, this ‘dissected’ program logic model for communication identifies where each action or phenomenon occurs – or, in evaluation terms, where the data is collected from. Data related to media of some type, such as media publicity, the organization’s posts on social media, and videos posted online are, by nature, outputs. They may be *en route* to audiences, but the data does not provide evidence of audience reception, reaction, or response. Evidence of outcomes necessarily must be data collected from audiences indicating their reception, reaction, and response to information.

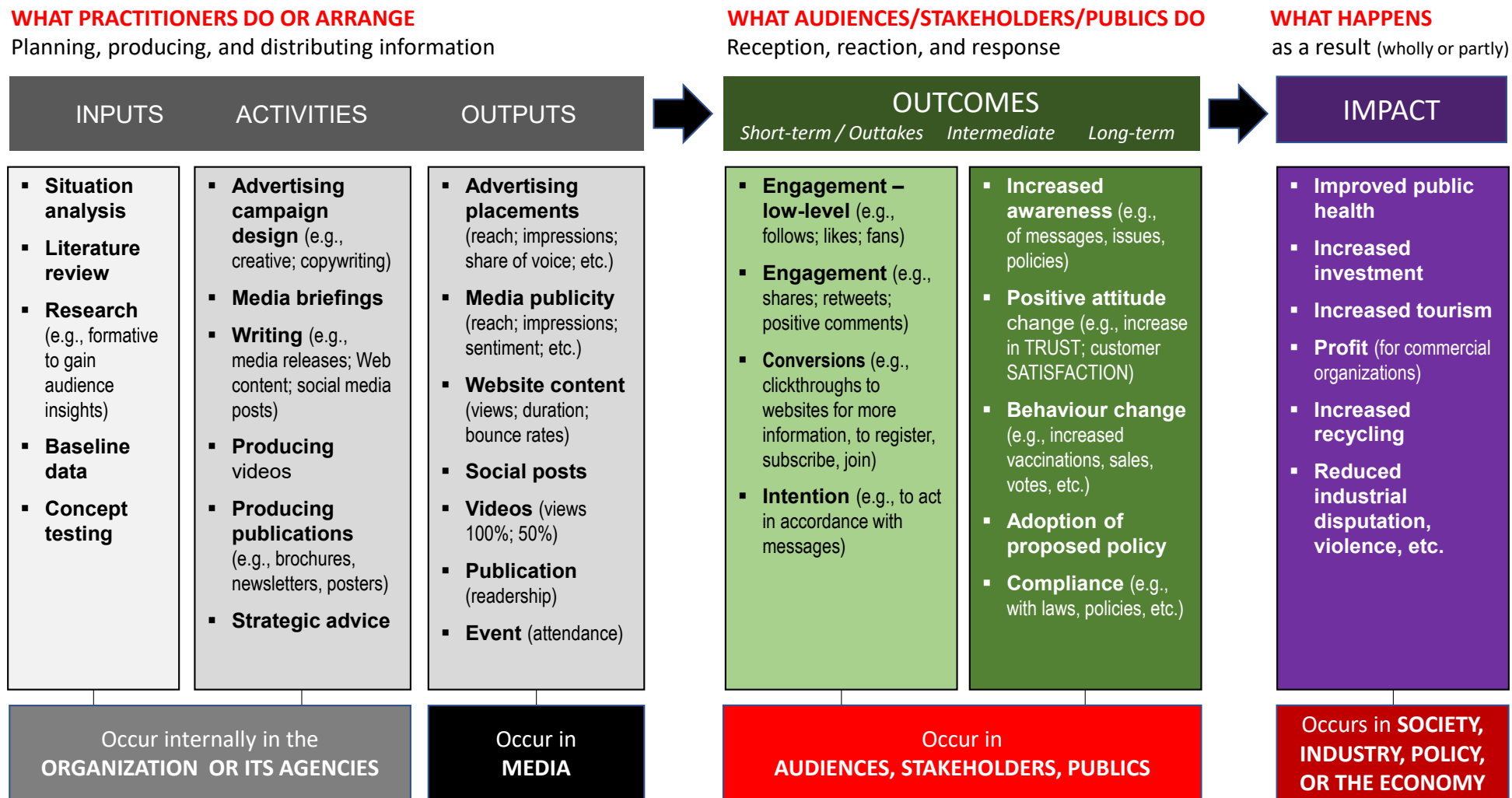
Two simple tests were developed to inform construction of the “dissected” program logic model for communication and enable it to accurately identify activities, outputs, outcomes, and impact and avoid ‘substitution error’. These are:

1. **The Doer Test** – which asks who is doing or creating the action or phenomenon reported. If it is the organization, or an agent of the organization (e.g., a public relations company), it is an activity or output. If it is a stakeholder or public in response to some communication activity or output, it is an outcome;
2. **The Site Test** – which asks where is the reported action or phenomenon occurring. If it is inside the organization or one of its agencies, it is an activity. If it is in media of some kind (such as publicity or website content, etc.), it is an output. If it is occurring among stakeholders, publics or society, it is an outcome, or even potentially an impact.

²³⁵ Edelman. (2022). *2022 Edelman trust barometer*, p. 7. <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2022-trust-barometer>

²³⁶ Grunig, J. (2008). Conceptualizing quantitative research in public relations. In B. van Ruler, A. Tkalac Vercic, & D. Vercic, D. (Eds.), *Public relations metrics: Research and evaluation* (pp. 88–119). Routledge, p. 89.

Figure 9.9. Example of a 'Dissected program logic model for public communication' with sample inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impacts relevant to various organizations.²³⁷



²³⁷ Based on Macnamara, J. (2021). *MEL Manual*. World Health Organization, Geneva and Macnamara, J. (in press). Dissecting outputs, outtakes outcomes and impact: A model for evaluation that overcomes common 'substitution errors'. *Public Relations Review*.

The 'dissected' program logic model for communication illustrates the necessity for listening to stakeholders, publics, and communities in a range of ways to gain feedback and identify reactions, response, and changes in awareness, attitudes, and behaviour.

Two-way listening and evaluation – A meta model to inform best practice

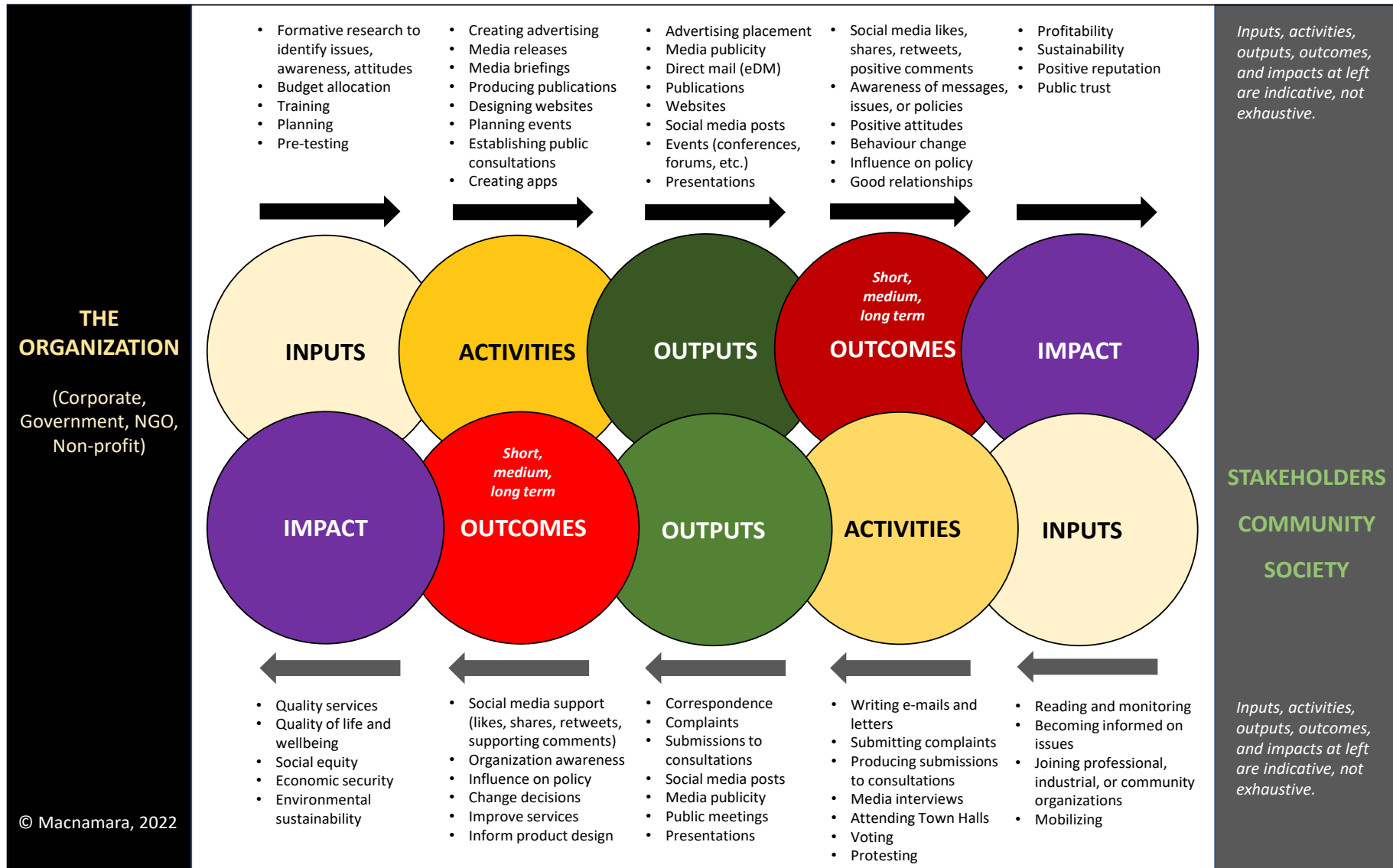
Subsequently, this author went further and proposed a meta-model that expands the basic program logic model by duplicating the five stages and flipping the duplicated program logic to represent communication from stakeholders, publics, and society (i.e., a reversed program logic model operating in parallel with the traditional organization-to-public model). This highlights the two-way nature of communication. Furthermore, under each stage it identifies typical activities and methods used by stakeholders and groups in society to communicate with or about organizations and their desired outcomes and impact, which may be significantly different to those of the organization. (See Figure 9.10.)

The Integrated Model of Planning and Evaluation for communication (Figure 9.4) and particularly the meta-model of organization-public communication (Figure 9.10) extend traditional program logic models that focus almost exclusively on tracking an organization's messages (organizational voice) by giving recognition to others who are impacted by the organization or seek to influence the organization's policies or operations.

In summary evaluation theory and practice shows that organizational listening is required for three reasons:

1. To identify the interests, concerns, levels of awareness of and attitudes towards certain issues; trusted sources; and preferred channels to receive information, which collectively inform planning of public communication;
2. To identify response to the organization's information and messages. Without organizational listening, such as through surveys, stakeholder or key informant interviews, social media analysis, and other forms of stakeholder and community engagement, organizations lack evidence of the effectiveness of their communication in achieving desired outcomes and impact; and
3. To identify, understand, and respond appropriately to what stakeholders, publics, and advocates representing environmental or societal interests are saying publicly in relation to the organization's operations and relevant issues, which can influence public opinion, policy, regulations, and legislation, shaping the environment in which an organization operates.

Figure 9.10. Meta-model of organization-public communication emphasizing two-way communication. © Jim Macnamara, 2022.



CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In an important 2019 book, Silvio Waisbord proposes that communication is a *post-discipline*. He bases his argument on the fact that communication studies is “an archipelago of research clusters”, rather than a single discipline.²³⁸ Communication studies – of *human* communication specifically – “was born at the crossroads of various disciplines and fields”²³⁹; including rhetoric, semiotics, psychology and social psychology, sociology, political science, systems theory, and media and information technology. Waisbord says communication studies is an “intellectually omnivorous, porous, multi-faceted, protean academic exercise” like a “large collection of Russian dolls of nested fields and sub-fields”.²⁴⁰

Waisbord argues that, instead of engaging in hyper-specialization in which research focusses on narrow topics and producing ever more middle range theories, there is a need for “big theoretical propositions” and to “engage with cross-cutting debates”.²⁴¹ He adds in his conclusion:

We should mobilize the institutional architecture of communication studies to build intellectual bridges; give scholars good reason to speak across silos to find common ground around ... the same problems; and foster commonalities that may not be obvious to researchers comfortably located in niche fields.²⁴²

It is proposed that the concept of organizational listening is one such ‘big theoretical proposition’ given that governmental, non-government, corporate, and non-profit organizations play a central role in society and all aspects of people’s lives, and that communication, to be effective, needs to be two-way. An ‘architecture of listening’ (see Figure 5.2), including the principles, elements and mechanisms outlined in this report, does not only apply to one discipline or field such as customer relations or public relations – it is relevant to every public communication discipline and sub-discipline and every type of organization. It is relevant to politics, business, management, human resources, even the law. It constitutes cross-cutting theory and guidance for practice.

Practical theory of communication

Noted communication scholar, Robert Craig, states that communication is a practical discipline and calls for *practical theory of communication*, rather than focus solely on normative theory (what ought to be). He clarifies that that practical theory is not “merely practical in the colloquial sense of technical or occupational training”, but rather it explores the “technical aspects of practical conduct” and involves “communicative *praxis* ... to improve communication and disseminate better communication practices.”²⁴³ The architecture of listening and models of public communication such as the Integrated Model of Planning and Evaluation for Communication (Figure 9.4) and the meta-model of organization-public communication (Figure 9.10) offer contributions to practical theory of public communication.

Research translation

Furthermore, the recommendations presented based on extensive research contribute to *research translation*. When the ‘dissected’ program logic model for public communication (Figure 9.9) and the associated ‘doer test’ and ‘site test’ were first presented in a journal article, the reviewers were disparaging, saying that they made no new contribution to knowledge. They were missing an important point. Academic research is increasingly called upon by government funding bodies and industry to translate research into practice. In medical research, this is colloquially referred to as ‘bench to bedside’. For example, in Australia the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) defines *research translation*, also referred to as knowledge translation, and its rationale, saying:

The creation of knowledge does not, of itself, lead to widespread implementation and positive impacts ... the knowledge must be translated into changes in practice and policy for the benefits and impacts to flow ...²⁴⁴

²³⁸ Waisbord, S. (2019). *Communication: A post-discipline*. Polity, p. 49.

²³⁹ Ibid. p. 17.

²⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 121.

²⁴¹ Ibid, p. 140.

²⁴² Ibid, p. 152.

²⁴³ Craig, R. (2018). For a practical discipline. *Journal of Communication*, 68(2), 289–297, pp. 289–290. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqx013>

²⁴⁴ National Health and Medical Research Council. (2022). Research translation. <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/research-policy/research-translation-and-impact>

APPENDIX 1.

PUBLICATIONS – THE ORGANIZATIONAL LISTENING PROJECT

(From most recent to earliest. Only post-2013 publications shown.)

Book

- Macnamara, J. (2016). *Organizational listening: The missing essential in public communication*, Peter Lang.

Book chapters

- Macnamara, J. (forthcoming 2023). Corporate listening. In K. Podnar (Ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of Corporate Communication*, Edward Elgar.
- Macnamara, J. (2022). Digital corporate communication and organizational listening. In V. Luoma-aho & M. Badham (Eds.), *Handbook of digital corporate communication*. Edward Elgar
- Macnamara, J. (2022). Organizational listening in the non-profit sector. In G. Gonçalves and E. Oliveira (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of non-profit communication*. Routledge.
- Macnamara, J. (2020). Creating healthy democracy: Voice + listening for meaningful engagement. In D. Worthington & G. Bodie (Eds.), *Handbook of listening* (pp. 385–395). John Wiley & Sons.
- Macnamara, J. (2018). The missing half of communication and engagement: Listening. In K. Johnston & M. Taylor (Eds.), *Handbook of communication and engagement* (pp. 115–132). John Wiley & Sons.
- Macnamara, J. (2017). Best practice measurement is about listening, learning, and adapting – not just changing others. In E. Juholin & V. Luoma-aho (Eds.), *Measurable communication* (pp. 36–42). ProComma Academic.

Academic journal articles

- Macnamara, J. (2020). Corporate listening: Unlocking insights from VOC, VOE, and VOS for mutual benefit. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 25(3), 377–393. <https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-08-2019-0102>
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- Macnamara, J. (2014). Organizational listening: A vital missing element in public communication and the public sphere. *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal*, 15(1), 90–108. <https://www.pria.com.au/journal/categories?id=60>
- Macnamara, J. (2013). Beyond voice: Audience-making and the work and architecture of listening. *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 27(1), 160–175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2013.736950>

Research Reports

- Macnamara, J. (2017). *Creating a ‘democracy for everyone’: Strategies for increasing listening and engagement by government*. London and Sydney: The London School of Economics and Political Science and University of Technology Sydney. Available at <http://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/CreatingADemocracyForEveryone.aspx> and <https://www.uts.edu.au/node/230356>
- Macnamara, J. (2015). *Creating an ‘architecture of listening’ in organizations: The basis of trust, engagement, healthy democracy, social equity, and business sustainability*. Sydney, NSW: University of Technology Sydney. Available at <http://www.uts.edu.au/sites/default/files/fass-organizational-listening-report.pdf>

Refereed conference papers

- Macnamara, J. (2021). Speaking (and listening) to empower voices rarely heard. Paper presented to the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) Research Symposium, Sydney, 2 December.
- Macnamara, J. (2017). Falling on deaf ears: The lack of listening that denies access and makes voice valueless. In G. Goggin, F. Martin, & J. Hutchinson (Eds), referred proceedings of the Australian and New Zealand Communication Association Conference (ANZCA) 2017, University of Sydney, 4–7 July. <https://www.anzca.net/conferences/past-conferences/2017-conf/p2.html>

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While listening has long been recognized as a vital part of human communication in an interpersonal context and been a focus in psychology, therapeutic fields, and leadership studies in which communication is mostly one-to-one or in small groups, how and well organizations listen to stakeholders more broadly has only been recently examined.

In this report, the instigator of The Organizational Listening Project and a pioneer in this field of research looks in detail at how organizations, which play a central role in contemporary societies, listen (or don't) to the stakeholders whose lives they affect and for whom they are often responsible. Government, corporate, non-government, and non-profit organizations often need to listen at *scale* requiring *delegated* and *mediated* methods, noting that the voices of customers, employees, and citizens are largely expressed through e-mails, complaints, responses in research, comments online, submissions, reports of inquiries, and other textual and digital means. Organizational listening therefore requires special processes, systems, technologies, resources, and skills, as well as policies and a culture that is open to listening.

What is significant about this report is that the author brings together 10 years of research in relation to listening by and in organizations, synthesizing the findings of a number of his own ground-breaking studies and those of others who have entered this important field of communication studies, creating an emerging body of theory and identifying practical tools and methods.

The primary research reviewed in this book took place in 60 organizations on three continents between 2013 and 2022 and involved more than 300 interviews; analysis of more than 600 key documents; more than 80 meetings and forums; analysis of hundreds of websites and thousands of social media posts; more than a year of direct first-hand observation (ethnography); and evaluations of the public communication of dozens of organizations in Australia, Europe, the UK, and the USA.

While specific project reports and academic journal articles have published the findings of individual studies, bringing together the data, findings, and recommendations of multiple studies undertaken over a decade provides a body of knowledge beyond that documented from any one study. This report identifies consistent patterns, conclusions, and recommendations based on a large body of evidence.

This report provides unprecedented insights for academic researchers and professionals in a wide range of fields including government, political, corporate, marketing, and organizational communication; public relations; specialist fields such as health communication; and those involved in practices such as stakeholder and community engagement, public consultation, and community relations.

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