Illuminating and addressing two 'black holes' in public communication

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Abstract

A critical literature review followed by a two-year, three-country study of the public communication of 36 government, corporate, and non-government organisations in the UK, US, and Australia identified what this analysis calls two 'black holes' in public communication, as they lack illumination and can cause the implosion of organisation-public relationships. This study, which included in-depth interviews, document analysis, and field experiments, identifies this 'dark matter' in the organisation-public communication universe as (1) a lack of listening by organisations and (2) a narrow organisation-centric approach to strategy that focuses on serving the interests of organisations. This analysis proposes that organisations need to counter-balance the 'architecture of speaking' that characterises strategic communication today with an **architecture of listening**, which in turn will contribute to participatory, networked, or **emergent strategy** that realises the normative theories of **two-way** communication, **dialogue**, and **engagement** and which can provide tangible benefits to organisations and their stakeholders and publics.

The growth and role of public communication industries

Worldwide expenditure on paid media advertising is in excess of US$500 billion a year, according to PriceWaterhouseCoopers (2014) and advertising industry tracking data (E-marketer, 2014; Statista, 2014). The CEO of global public relations agency Ketchum, Rob Flaherty (2013), stated that the 'public relations business' was worth US$10–$12 billion a year in 2013. This is almost certainly conservative given that a 2011 census by the Public Relations Consultants Association (PRCA) in the UK estimated that the public relations industry in Britain is worth £7.5 billion a year – almost US$5billion (PRCA, 2012; Spinwatch, 2014). Advertising is predicted to grow to more than US$600 billion in 2016 (E-marketer, 2014) and the public relations industry is growing by around 10 per cent a year on average in developed markets and by more than 20 per cent a year in fast-developing markets such as Brazil (ICCO, 2011).

Advertising and public relations, along with the related fields of corporate, political, government, and organisational communication, exist ostensibly to facilitate public _communication_ (whether these are external or internal 'publics' of organisations). All, and particularly marketing, political, and government communication, claim to foster _engagement_ between the organisations they represent and their stakeholders and publics. Some areas of marketing and public relations claim that they create and maintain _relationships_. Public relations goes further and emphasises _two-way_ communication, _dialogue_, and relationships even to the point of _symmetry_.

However, this analysis discusses the findings of a two-year, three-country study, which shows that the advertising and public relations industries and the related practices of corporate, marketing, political, government, and organisational communication create an _architecture of speaking_ and predominantly do the work of speaking on behalf of organisations. They do not, in the majority of cases, foster engagement, relationships, dialogue, or two-way communication. In fact, it can be argued that they are not involved in communication at all most of the time but, rather, in information dissemination and one-way attempts at persuasion.

This paper argues that this is damaging politically, socially and commercially and proposes a transformation of theory and

practice in public communication. In doing so, it offers a framework that affords potential major benefits for organisations and their stakeholders and publics.

Theoretical framework for examining public communication

Despite lingering positivist perspectives of systems theory, functionalism, and behaviourism that contribute to thinking of communication as *transmission* of messages, information, and persuasion (Carey, 1989; Craig & Muller, 2007, p. 1), understanding of human communication is fundamentally informed by the seminal work of Buber (1958, 2002), Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986), Gadamer (1989) and contemporary theorists such as Dewey (1916, 1927), Carey (1989), and Craig (1999). In particular, Gadamer's argument for openness to the other; Buber's notion of *I/thou* versus *I/it* interaction and his discussion of monologue, 'monologue disguised as dialogue', and dialogue (Buber, 1958, 2002); and Bakhtin's *dialogism* (1981, 1984) give rise to understanding communication as a two-way *transactional* process (Craig, 1999; Craig & Muller, 2007).

In various disciplinary literatures, communication is similarly and quite explicitly theorised as two-way, dialogic, and conversational. In public relations, excellence theory advocates that the *two-way symmetrical* model of public relations is the most ethical and the most effective (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2006) – although this model has been criticised as normative and unrealistic in practice (e.g., McKie & Munshi 2007; Pieczka, 2006). Nevertheless, other major theoretical frameworks of public relations such as *relationship theory* (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, 2000) and *dialogic* theory (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Taylor & Kent, 2014) similarly make big claims for two-way interaction. In *rhetorical* theory of public relations, Heath (2007) acknowledges that rhetoric includes advocacy, but states that "advocacy is a two-way street" (p. 47), allowing and even inviting "counter-advocacy" (p. 51). *Engagement* is a buzzword in marketing, political communication, and public

relations. For example, in 2014 Johnston noted that "engagement has been heralded as a new paradigm for public relations in the 21st century" (2014, p. 381). *Relationship marketing* has allegedly replaced transactional marketing (Berry, 1983; Palmatier, 2008), and social media literature extensively and often euphorically claims that these new media afford dialogue, engagement, and conversation (Curran, 2012; Macnamara, 2014).

In its recommended form of dialogue, communication must involve speaking and *listening* (Craig, 2006, p. 39). Dialogue is more than a single *utterance* and also more than turn-taking at speaking. In her analysis of dialogue and relationships, Baxter says that a "change of speaking subjects" does not constitute dialogue (2011, p. 49). Dialogue is comprised of an *utterance chain* in which a series of utterances need to be linked by listening. Recently, many authors have noted the fundamental importance of listening in public communication. For instance, in *Listening publics*, Lacey says, "without a listener, speech is nothing but noise in the ether" (2013, p. 166). In the context of democratic politics, Downing (2007) notes that there is no point in having a right to free speech if no one is listening.

Voice is widely used as a metaphor for communication as well as representation and is cited as a human right (Husband, 1996, 2009); as an essential element of relationships (Baxter, 2011); as the foundation of democracy, which is based on vox populi – the voice of the people (Fishkin, 1995); and as a necessity for social equity (Couldry, 2010). Couldry describes voice as "the implicitly linked practices of speaking and listening" (2009, p. 580).

However, as the following research findings show, this is not the case in reality. Couldry's warning of a "crisis of voice" in contemporary societies (2009, p. 581) is more accurately described as a crisis of listening. This analysis recognises arguments that information transmission and persuasion are legitimate practices in some circumstances (Pfau & Wan, 2006), but focuses on the broader claims of communication as essentially two-way and dialogic, and specifically examines listening within major public communication practices.

Defining listening

Before leaving the broad transdisciplinary terrain of social science and humanities literature to examine specific public communication practices, it is important to have a realistic as well as a clear definition of listening, particularly one that can apply in an organisational context rather than interpersonal communication or specialist fields such as therapeutic practices. If we set unrealistically high expectations, listening is bound to fall short. On the other hand, if we are insufficiently specific, generalised claims for two-way communication, dialogue, listening, and engagement are accepted uncritically. In a literature review in the *International Journal of Listening*, Glenn (1989) identified 50 different definitions of listening. However, a number of elements of listening are consistently described and highlighted. Research in interpersonal communication, politics, psychology, sociology, phenomenology, and ethics tells us that listening requires:

• Giving *recognition* to others as people or groups with legitimate rights to speak and be treated with respect (Bickford, 1996; Honneth, 2007; Husband, 2009);

• *Acknowledgement* of others' views and expressions of voice, ideally in a timely way, the importance of which was demonstrated in the Obama online election campaigns (Macnamara, 2014);

• Paying *attention* to others (Bickford, 1996; Honneth, 2007; Husband, 2009);

• *Interpreting* what others say as fairly and receptively as possible (Husband, 1996, 2000);

• Trying as far as possible to achieve *understanding* of others' views, perspectives, and feelings (Habermas, 1984, 1987; Husband, 1996, 2000);

• Giving *consideration* to what others say such as in requests or proposals (Honneth, 2007; Husband, 2009); and

• *Responding* in an appropriate way after consideration has been given (Lundsteen, 1979; Purdy & Borisoff, 1997). Scholars agree that 'appropriate' does not necessarily mean agreement or acceptance of what is said or requested, but research shows that some response, even in the case of disagreement, is required.

These definitions are informed and supported by human communication theories already noted, such as Gadamer's (1989) concept of openness and the dialogism and dialogue espoused by Bakhtin (1981, 1984) and Buber (1958, 2002), as well as theories of receptivity (Kompridis, 2011); reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960); hospitality (Silverstone, 2007); and interactivity (Pelias & VanOosting, 1987). Also, literature on the ethics of listening (Beard, 2009; Bodie, 2010; Conquergood, 1985; Gehrke, 2009) is applicable to this analysis and informs theory building and practice in public communication.

In examining listening in organisations it is recognised that only humans can listen as defined – and, therefore, interpersonal communication is involved in the listening practices of organisations. However, in the same way as the term 'organisational communication' is used to denote the range of systems, channels, media, and processes used as well as human interaction, the term 'organisational listening' is not used anthropomorphically, but rather to refer to the systems, channels, media, and processes as well as human resources and practices applied to listening on behalf of organisations.

Methodology

The following analysis is drawn from The Organisational Listening Project that was undertaken by the author between early 2013 and mid-2015. The aim of this two-year research project was to investigate industry/disciplinary literature specifically related to listening and then to examine the practices, resources, effort, and time committed by organisations to listening to stakeholders and publics and compare that with the practices, resources, effort, and time committed by the same organisations to speaking to disseminate their messages to their stakeholders and publics. Second, the project sought to identify internal and external factors that influence the balance of speaking and listening, as well as tools, systems, technologies, resources, and practices that facilitate dialogue and engagement. The Organisational Listening Project involved:

1. A critical review of industry/discipline literature to identify theories and recommended practices in relation to listening to stakeholders and publics; and

2. In-depth analysis of 36 case studies of public communication by major public and private sector organisations to explore practices in relation to listening.

Research question

The overarching research question explored in the primary research undertaken was 'how, and how well, do organisations listen to their stakeholders and publics?', noting that listening is a fundamental corollary of speaking to achieve two-way communication, dialogue, engagement, and create and maintain relationships as identified in communication literature. In addition, a number of specific research questions sought insights into the policies, methods, systems, resources, and practices applied to listening, as well as challenges, barriers, and obstacles encountered.

Approach

Addressing the research questions involved an examination of organisations going about their typical public interactions. Therefore, case studies explored qualitatively using a naturalistic approach – i.e., in their 'natural setting' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) – within the interpretivist/post-positivist tradition (Neuman, 2006) were identified as the most appropriate methodology for this study. While a large amount of empirical data was collected, the research was interpretative as it required analysis of claims, observed behaviours, activities such as research and consultations, and documents such as plans and reports, and it was qualitative as the purpose was to explore how, and how well, organisations listen. This was not simply a study of how many inquiries organisations 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. Hence, the research was conducted using qualitative case study methodology (Stake, 2008; Yin, 2009) within a naturalistic interpretive approach.

Sample

The study was particularly interested in how organisations with substantial numbers of stakeholders and publics listen (i.e., large-scale listening rather than dyadic or small group listening). Also, it was conducted with the intention of identifying common practices in different types of organisations in a range of industries and sectors and in a number of geographic regions to ensure the maximum relevance and transferability of findings. Therefore, a purposive sampling method was used in which selection of units or cases is "based on a specific purpose rather than randomly" (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003, p. 713). As Miles and Huberman (1994) note, defined case (purposive) sampling for qualitative studies is informed by the conceptual question, not a concern for "representativeness" (p. 29). However, as Bryman (1988) and others note, well-selected defined cases produce findings that have a broad generalisability to particular contexts, or what Lincoln and Guba (1985), Shenton (2004) and others prefer to call transferability.

The sampling frame employed Miles and Huberman's three-stage approach for qualitative research sampling by (1) selecting some "exceptional" or exemplary cases; (2) some "discrepant", "negative" or "disconfirming" examples; and (3) some apparently typical examples (1994, p. 34). Exemplar cases were identified from media reports such as the much-publicised launch of MasterCard's 'Conversation Suite' [1] (Weiner, 2012). Negative cases were identified from media reporting and official reports of unaddressed complaints to various bodies such as the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC, 2015) and the UK government – e.g., those that led to the Mid Staffordshire hospitals crisis for the National Health Service (Stationery Office, 2013). In addition, random selections of government, corporate, and non-government organisations were made from Fortune 500 and governmental lists – albeit some convenience sampling was involved given that some organisations declined to participate. However, as well as drawing on Miles and Huberman, the sampling approach reflected purposive sampling strategies recommended by Teddlie and Yu (2007) including *typical case* sampling,

extreme or *deviant case* sampling, *revelatory case* sampling, and *critical case* sampling, and a relatively large sample of cases was studied. The sample of 36 organisations in total comprised:

1. A mix of government (n = 18), corporate (n = 14), and NGO and non-profit organisations (n = 4) at national, state and local level;

2. Organisations in each of the above categories in three countries – the UK (n = 18), the USA (n = 11), and Australia (n = 7);

3. Organisations with a large number of stakeholders and publics that are leaders or 'top three' in their sector.

Research methods

To aid recruitment of the sample and frankness in discussions, de-identification of all participating organisations and individuals was offered. Noting that, even with de-identification, self-reporting by organisation staff had the potential to overstate listening and that some organisations were likely to be reluctant to make admissions that indicated a lack of listening, the project used a triangulation approach to draw data from three sources as follows:

1. *In-depth interviews* with senior executives in communication-related roles including marketing, corporate, and organisational communication, public relations, and specialist sub-fields such as customer relations, employee relations, public consultation, and social media. All interviewees were heads or senior managers of communication-related functions and units in their organisation. Up to seven interviews were conducted in some organisations. A total of 104 interviews were conducted, an average of almost three interviews per organisation. All interviews were conducted face-to-face by the author and ranged from 1.25 hours to three hours;

2. *Content analysis* of key documents such as 'strategic communication' plans, reports of communication programmes and activities, records of public consultations, and evaluation reports to validate claims made in interviews. More than 400 relevant documents were obtained and analysed for evidence of organisational listening;

3. *Field tests (experiments)* were conducted in which the author and research associates submitted genuine enquiries, questions, complaints, and comments warranting a response via e-mail or to the websites and social media of organisations studied. During the period of research 25 such communications were submitted to organisations and responses were monitored and recorded. The number of field tests was limited as only genuine enquiries, questions, etc. were submitted to organisations to comply with ethical guidelines for research (i.e., no fake issues or 'tricks' were used).

Data capture and analysis

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim and transcripts were analysed using NVivo 10 in two stages. First, the statements of interviewees were analysed inductively to identify key issues, topics, and concepts discussed by participants in line with qualitative textual and content analysis procedures (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Almost 1,000 pages of transcripts were analysed in NVivo to produce lists and 'word clouds' showing the most frequently occurring terms, concepts and phrases. After initial *open* coding focused on identifying key terms and topics in the texts, NVivo was used to undertake second-level *axial* and *pattern* coding to group terms and concepts into categories such as 'listening-orientated' terms (e.g., consult, ask, hear, consider, etc.) and 'speaking-orientated' terms (e.g., tell, inform, send, etc.), as well as identify comments in relation to key issues such as organisation culture, policies, technologies, resources, skills, and other factors (Glaser, 1978).

While bringing a systematic approach to data analysis, this somewhat mechanistic analysis told only part of the story, however. An important part of interpretative analysis was comparing interviewees' statements with key documents accessed, as well as with theories identified in the literature. For instance, if an interviewee claimed public consultation was undertaken, a report of the consultation was requested and examined to confirm or disconfirm claims made. Concurrently, results of field tests were tabulated to identify the rate and types of responses received.

Black hole #1: The 'crisis of listening'

In examining disciplinary literature, listening theorist Purdy (2004) notes that there has been only a small amount of qualitative research in relation to listening per se and that this is primarily grounded in cognitive psychology, mostly with a therapeutic focus. Lipari (2010) acknowledges that listening is studied in "humanities-based communication scholarship" as well as in "social science and cognitive science literature", but that this is predominantly in the context of interpersonal listening (p. 351).

Bickford (1996) pointed out this gap in the context of politics and the public sphere in her landmark text *The dissonance of democracy: Listening, conflict and citizenship* in which she criticised the lack of attention to listening – a cause recently taken up by Dobson (2014) in *Listening for democracy*. Dobson says "honourable exceptions aside, virtually no attention has been paid to listening in mainstream political science". He adds that efforts to improve democracy have mainly focused on "getting more people to speak" (2014, p. 36). But, as Calder (2011) points out, the real problem in democratic politics is not being denied a voice; it is being denied an audience.

In his sociological analysis, Couldry observes that, "surprisingly, little attention has been given to what listening involves" (2010, p. 146). Dreher (2008, 2009) highlights this in her analysis of marginalised communities. For instance, in discussing Muslims living in Australia, she reported that there is no shortage of articulate spokespersons within the Muslim community. The challenge faced by Muslims in this predominantly Christian country is "being heard" (2008, p. 7).

Lacey notes that, "listening has long been overlooked in studies of the media as well as in conceptualisations of the public sphere" (2013, p. 3). Even in the age of Web 2.0 and interactive social media that offer increased potential for two-way communicative interaction, Crawford concludes that "'speaking up' has become the dominant metaphor for participation in online spaces" and "listening is not a common metaphor for online activity" (2009, p. 526). 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-organisational human resources management context (Flynn, Valikoski, & Grau, 2008).

Listening in public relations literature

While advertising can be expected to predominantly comprise one-way transmission of messages, it is particularly troubling that organisational listening is little studied or discussed within public relations and related corporate and marketing communication literature that makes explicit claims for two-way communication, dialogue, engagement, and relationships. For example, a search of two leading public relations journals, *Public Relations Review* and *Journal of Public Relations Research*, found only a handful of articles that discuss listening in public communication.

A keyword search of *Public Relations Review* articles published between 1976 and 2014 found only 217 that mention listening anywhere in their text. Only two articles focus specifically on listening – an analysis of President Nixon's 'Listening Posts' that began in 1969 but were quietly closed down in 1971 after being deemed a failure (Lee, 2012), and an analysis of audience research by arts institutions (Foreman-Wernet & Dervin, 2006). A search of *Journal of Public Relations Research* identified 132 articles that mention the word 'listening', but, despite considerable discussion of dialogue, even fewer articles in this journal pay specific attention to listening and none examines how organisational listening is operationalised in organisation-public relationships. Listening is mostly referred to in passing with no examination of what listening entails at an organisation-public level. On the few occasions that methods of listening are discussed in public relations literature, listening is mostly equated with monitoring and environmental scanning (e.g., Sonnenfeld, 1982).

Listening also receives little attention in public relations research monographs and textbooks. For instance, listening is not listed in the index of the main public relations excellence text (Grunig et al., 2002) or in the index or contents of a dozen other international

public relations and corporate communication texts examined (e.g., Botan & Hazelton, 2006; Cornelissen, 2011; Tench & Yeomans, 2009; Wilcox & Cameron, 2010). Listening is mentioned once in the edited volume *The future of excellence in public relations and communication management* (Toth, 2007), but this is in a chapter focused on interpersonal communication. Heath and Coombs (2006) provide the only definition of public relations that makes explicit mention of listening, describing public relations as:

> The management function that entails planning, research, publicity, promotion, and collaborative decision making to help any organization's ability to listen to, appreciate, and respond appropriately to those persons and groups whose mutually beneficial relationships the organisation needs to foster as it strives to achieve its mission and vision. (p. 7)

On the few occasions that listening is discussed in public relations literature, it is with an organisation-centric focus. For example, in *Today's public relations: An introduction*, Heath and Coombs say "today's public relations practitioner gives voice to organisations" and add that "this process requires the ability to listen" (2006, p. 346). However, they go on to narrowly 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" (p. 346).

The only detailed discussion of listening in public relations literature appeared in the Melbourne Mandate, a concept paper developed in 2012 by the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management (Global Alliance, 2014) and expanded in a subsequent article by Gregory (2015). Gregory identifies one of three key roles of public relations practitioners as "build a culture of listening and engagement" (2015, p. 601) and lists eight requirements to build a culture of listening in an organisation (p. 602).

Listening in practice

Even worse, listening is little evident in practice. The case study analyses of 36 organisations in three countries, which are reported in detail elsewhere (Macnamara, 2016), found that organisation-public communication is overwhelmingly comprised of organisational *speaking* to disseminate organisations' messages using a transmissional or broadcast model. Analysis found that, on average, around 80 per cent of organisational resources devoted to public communication are focused on speaking (i.e., distributing the organisation's information and messages). Even social media, which were developed specifically for two-way interaction, are used by organisations primarily to disseminate their messages. Some organisations acknowledge that up to 95 per cent of their so-called communication is speaking, while best cases have a 60/40 speaking/listening ratio, but these are usually restricted to short periods such as during public consultations or research conducted once a year or every few years. The Organisational Listening Project concluded that "it can be said that organisations construct and deploy an *architecture of speaking* composed of internal professional communication staff as well as specialist agencies and consultants using increasingly sophisticated information systems, tools, and technologies" (Macnamara, 2016, p. 235). The study reported that, "most organisations listen sporadically at best, often poorly, and sometimes not at all" (2016, p. 236).

Furthermore, listening that does occur through research, social media, customer relations, or public consultation, is predominantly instrumental – that is, undertaken to serve an organisation's interests such as gaining insights to help sell products, services, projects, or policies. Most relationship marketing, customer relationship management (CRM), and public relations was found to be focused on reselling, upselling, advocating, and persuading on behalf of organisations.

Public relations, corporate communication, and marketing communication executives were surprisingly frank in acknowledging this. For example, the senior vice president and vice president of the digital and social media team in the New York office of one of the world's leading public relations firms described their work as follows:

> The majority of what we do for clients is monitoring their own stuff – 90 per

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

They described their social media management for clients as designed to "jump on" to issues for promotional gain, which they referred to as "news jacking" and "meme jacking". They gave the following example.

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

The head of communication for a global automotive company headed by engineers described the culture of his organisation as a "command and control one". He said that in addition to 70 public relations staff in its headquarters, the marketing staff of the company's two major global brands that are distributed through 18 national sales companies around the world are almost exclusively focused on marketing and promotion of products (Personal communication, January 30, 2015).

While going under the title 'communication', 'communications', or 'comms' for short, rather than public relations, a number of US and UK government departments and agencies also exhibited a focus on one-way transmission of information (i.e., speaking) with little attention to listening. The terms that most frequently occurred in their descriptions, written reports, and evaluations of their activities were "informing", "disseminating", "educating", "showing", "telling", "distributing", and "broadcasting".

Black hole #2: Organisation-centric strategy

The transmissional broadcasting approach to communication identified is fostered and accentuated by a focus on *strategic communication*, which is central to marketing and public relations (Grunig et al., 2002) and used as an alternative term for public relations in many countries (Aarts & Van Woerkum, 2008), along with *communication management* (van Ruler & Verčič, 2005). Being 'strategic' is described as being "outcome focussed" (Lukaszewski, 2001) and is particularly associated with power and decision-making related to achieving the goals and objectives of an organisation (Mintzberg, 1979).

Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, and Sriramesh (2007) noted narrow organisation-centric understandings of the term 'strategic', but argued that "alternative and more positive notions of strategy have … emerged" based on two-way symmetrical models of public relations (p. 27). They, as well as Cornelissen (2011) in his recent writing on corporate communication, say that strategic communication is balancing the interests of an organisation and its stakeholders and publics. It is argued that this is being, or can be, achieved through new approaches to strategy such as *emergent communication strategy* (King, 2010), *participatory* strategy (Falkheimer & Heide, 2011), and what Murphy (2011) calls *networked* strategy.

However, The Organisational Listening Project found no such emergence in communication strategy. In all strategic communication plans, job descriptions, evaluation reports, and other documents examined, strategy is described as achieving the goals and objectives of the organisation. When some level of listening was observed in organisations, the study described this as "*strategic listening*" (Macnamara, 2016, p. 148), as it was based on traditional narrow notions of organisation strategy rather than being open ethical listening as defined earlier. Furthermore, while investing in substantial and sometimes massive resources for speaking, organisations do not have an effective infrastructure for recognising, acknowledging, paying attention to, interpreting, understanding, considering, and responding to their stakeholders and publics. While stakeholder and public participation in

organisational strategy to the extent of 'partnership' as defined in Arnstein's (1969) 'ladder of participation' and the IAP2 (2015) model may be unrealistic, emergent strategy that evolves dynamically through interaction and dialogue with stakeholders and publics is realistic and can be seen as necessary to achieve engagement, dialogue, and build and maintain relationships.

Discussion and conclusions

Organisational listening is an essential corollary of organisational speaking to enact two-way communication, dialogue, engagement, and relationships. Organisational listening involves particular challenges compared with interpersonal and small group listening that need to be addressed. In organisations, listening is mostly delegated to particular functions such as research, customer relations, and social media monitoring that need to respond accordingly. Second, and very importantly, organisations are required to undertake large-scale public communication to engage with hundreds and sometimes thousands, hundreds of thousands, or even millions of people. Such "scaling up", as Dobson (2014, p. 75) calls it, requires resources and specialist tools.

But, based on extensive analysis, from which only a few of 31 key findings can be reported here, this study concluded that "organisational listening cannot be achieved simply by adding a listening tool or 'solution', such as automated software applications, listening posts, or a tokenistic 'have your say' page on a Web site" (Macnamara, 2016, p. 237). While technologies are part of the solution, research indicates that effective ethical organisational listening requires an *architecture of listening* comprised of:

1. A *culture* that is open to listening;
2. *Policies* for listening;
3. Addressing the *politics* of listening such as recognising voices that are marginalised;
4. *Systems* that are open and interactive;
5. *Technologies* to aid listening such as monitoring tools or services for tracking media and online comment, automated acknowledgement systems, text analysis software for sense-making, and even specialist

argumentation software to facilitate meaningful consultation and debate;
6. *Resources* for listening;
7. *Skills* for listening; and
8. *Articulation* of the voice of stakeholders and publics to policy making and decision making.

These eight key elements are identified and described as an *architecture of listening* because they need to be designed into an organisation and applied as key principles to guide public communication. It is recognised that there are situations in which organisations need to *inform* people through one-way transmission of information, such as advising them of new policies and issuing health warnings, and there are cases in which persuasion is legitimate, such as road safety campaigns and the sales promotion of legal products and services. But communication is more than 'telling and selling'. There also needs to be listening. This research concluded that there is too much telling and selling, and too little listening.

Without organisational listening, the voices of stakeholders and publics disappear over an event horizon into a black hole without trace. This implosion of energy and pent up forces inevitably lead to destructive outcomes. The effects of this lack of true *communication* are increasingly evident in contemporary societies: alarmingly low levels of trust in government, corporations, and many institutions (Edelman, 2015; Harvard University, 2015), disengagement by youth from traditional politics and civic participation (Dalton, 2011), declining employee loyalty (Leite, 2015), and so on.

Conversely, academic and industry studies suggest that there are significant benefits to be derived from effective ethical organisational listening and an inclusive approach to strategy for organisations as well as for their stakeholders and publics. While detailed discussion of these is beyond the scope of this article, listening is positively associated with increased trust in organisations such as government, corporations, and institutions; increased employee retention, loyalty and productivity; improved customer relations and retention; reduced crises and conflicts affecting

organisations; and increased citizen engagement in politics and civil society (Bentley, 2010; Dobson, 2014; Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013; Kluger, 2012; Leite, 2015). Exploring the concept of an 'architecture of listening' in organisations is therefore a key direction for future research.

Acknowledgement

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[1] De-identification was offered to all organisations and individuals involved in the study, but MasterCard agreed to be named.