

Falling on deaf ears: The lack of listening that denies access and makes voice valueless

Jim Macnamara, University of Technology Sydney, jim.macnamara@uts.edu.au

Abstract

The presence of a concerning and seemingly growing ‘democratic deficit’ in a number of democratic countries is widely acknowledged and discussed in political communication, sociology and critical literature. In 2016, in the wake of the shock UK referendum vote to leave the European Union, commonly referred to as Brexit, British Prime Minister Theresa May publicly acknowledged that many citizens feel their voices are ‘falling on deaf ears’. This article reports the findings of an intensive six-month ethnographic and participatory action research project working inside the UK government from June to December 2016, immediately following the Brexit vote, which examined government communication and identified a number of serious failings in listening to and engaging with stakeholders and citizens. It argues that this ‘listening deficit’ makes a significant contribution to the democratic deficit and identifies strategies necessary to improve listening in order to increase access to policy-making and give voice value, which in turn can reinvigorate democracy, increase trust and create social equity.

Keywords: access; engagement; listening; speaking; trust; two-way communication; voice

Why more than voice matters

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. (May, 2016a, para. 45)

This statement by Theresa May, made shortly after she became Prime Minister of the United Kingdom in the aftermath of the shock European Union (EU) Referendum vote (Brexit), draws long-overdue attention to an aspect of communication, sociology and politics that is under-studied and often overlooked by scholars and practitioners.

Voice – particularly speaking – has been studied since the early Western civilisations of ancient Greece and Rome, where rhetoric – the art of speaking persuasively – became recognised as one of the foundational liberal arts based on the writings and oratory of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian (Atwill, 1998). Rhetoric remains one of the major traditions of human communication scholarship and practice identified by Craig (1999) and expounded in a number of communication theory texts (e.g. Craig & Muller, 2007; Littlejohn & Foss, 2008).

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

When citizens experience a lack or loss of voice, researchers point to significant social, cultural and political problems. For instance, Husband (2000) and others have drawn attention to the lack of voice afforded to many ethnic minorities, and argued that this constitutes oppression and injustice. Feminism has similarly identified the lack of voice available to women as a social inequity, negatively impacting the status and identity of women in many societies, and fostered a tradition of debate focused on speaking, voice and representation (Butler, 1999; Weatherall, 2002).

Human communication theories have long rejected transmissional notions of communication and emphasise two-way *transactional* approaches involving dialogue (Bakhtin, 1984, 1986; Buber, 1958, 2002; Craig & Muller, 2007; Littlejohn & Foss, 2008). Communication theorist Robert Craig (2006, p. 39) specifically says that communication involves ‘talking and listening’. Nick Couldry (2009, p. 580) describes voice as ‘the implicitly linked practices of speaking and listening’.

However, an examination of scholarly and professional literature reveals that communication and voice are associated predominantly with speaking, and that there is little attention paid in many fields of research or communication practice to the vital corollary of speaking, listening.

Listening in the literature

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

Susan Bickford (1996) identifies a lack of attention paid to listening in democratic politics in her landmark text *The Dissonance of Democracy: Listening, Conflict and Citizenship* – a cause taken up recently by Andrew Dobson in his book *Listening for Democracy*. Dobson (2014, p. 36) says ‘honourable exceptions aside, virtually no attention has been paid to listening in mainstream political science’.

Dobson (2014, p. 36) points out that efforts to improve democracy have focused mainly on ‘getting more people to speak’. As Gideon Calder (2011) points out, however, the real problem in democratic politics is not being denied a voice; it is being denied an audience. Tanja Dreher (2008) makes a similar point in her analysis of marginalised communities. For instance, in discussing Muslims living in Australia (2008, p. 7), she reports that there is no shortage of articulate spokespeople and commentators within the Muslim community. The challenge faced by Muslims in this predominantly Christian country is ‘being heard’. In a following analysis, Dreher (2009, p. 446,

emphasis added) concludes that 'in much research and advocacy, there is a strong emphasis on the democratic potential of *voice, representation, speaking up and talking*'.

Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl (2012) identify a lack of recognition felt by citizens today in their examination of the central role of organisations in contemporary industrial and post-industrial societies – or what Couldry (2010, p. 100) calls 'complex societies'. However, public relations (PR) and the largely synonymous fields of corporate, government and organisational communication, which are theorised as enablers of dialogue, engagement and relationships between organisations and their stakeholders and publics (e.g. Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002; Kent, 2013; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Taylor & Kent, 2014) also fail to address listening.

A search of PR journals and books reveals that scant attention has been paid to listening. For example, a keyword search of the two leading PR journals, *Public Relations Review* from 1976 to 2015 and *Journal of Public Relations Research* since its launch, found only three articles focused specifically or substantially on listening. One was 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); another was an analysis of audience research by arts institutions (Foreman-Wernet & Dervin, 2006). Only one article discussed organisational listening in any depth, saying that 'building a culture of listening and engagement' is one of three roles of public relations professionals and listing eight requirements to build a culture of listening in an organisation (Gregory, 2015, p. 598).

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 PR Excellence theory text (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002). On the few occasions that listening is discussed in PR literature, it is with an organisation-centric focus. For example, in *Today's Public Relations: An Introduction*, Heath and Coombs (2006, p. 346) state that 'today's public relations practitioner gives voice to organisations'. They add that 'this process requires the ability to listen'; 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' (2006, p. 346).

Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl (2012) discuss the use of new open, interactive media and communication technologies as potential enablers of engagement between organisations and their various stakeholders and publics, such as customers, members, employees, citizens and community groups. However, even in the age of Web 2.0 and interactive 'social media' – which hypothetically increase two-way communicative interaction – Kate Crawford (2009, p. 526) notes that 'speaking up has become the dominant metaphor for participation in online spaces' and 'listening is not a common metaphor for online activity'. Studies of online election campaigns and e-democracy in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States have found that social media are used mainly for the transmission of information and messages (i.e. speaking), rather than listening and engaging in dialogue (e.g. Gibson, Williamson & Ward, 2010; Macnamara & Kenning, 2014; McChesney, 2013; Vergeer, 2013).

In *Why Voice Matters*, Couldry (2010, p. 146) concludes that across a wide range of media, sociology and political science literature, 'surprisingly, little attention has been given to what listening involves'. Dobson (2014, pp. 74, 124) notes that organisations face particular challenges in listening due to the requirement to listen on a large scale, often to thousands, hundreds of thousands or millions of people.

Such concerns were the genesis of the Organisational Listening Project, a two-stage, three-country research project to examine how, and how well, organisations including government departments and agencies, non-government organisations (NGOs) and corporations listen to their stakeholders and publics. The research reported here comprised Stage 2 of the Organisational Listening Project, focused specifically on examining listening in government.

When examining organisational listening, it is important to have a clear and realistic definition of what this process might entail. If we set unrealistically high expectations, listening is bound to fall short. On the other hand, it is important to recognise that, as well as non-listening, there are many forms of fake listening such as *pretend* listening (Bussie, 2011, p. 31) and *pseudo-listening* (Adler & Rodman, 2011, p. 136). From psychology and the emerging body of listening literature, as well as ethics literature, listening was defined for the purposes of this study as involving seven key elements:

- giving *recognition* to others as having the right to speak (Bickford, 1996; Honneth, 2007; Husband, 2009)
- *acknowledgement* of others' views and expressions of voice, the importance of which was demonstrated in the Obama presidential election campaign (Macnamara, 2014)
- paying *attention* to others (Bickford, 1996; Honneth, 2007; Husband, 2009, p. 441)
- *interpreting* what others say as fairly and receptively as possible (Husband, 1996, 2000; International Listening Association, 1995, p. 4)
- trying as far as possible to achieve *understanding* of others' views, perspectives and feelings (Bodie & Crick, 2014; Habermas, 1987; Husband, 1996, 2000)
- giving *consideration* to what others say (Honneth, 2007; Husband, 2009), and
- *responding* in an appropriate way (Lundsteen, 1979; Purdy & Borisoff, 1997). Scholars agree that 'appropriate' does not necessarily mean agreement or acceptance of what is said or requested, but research shows that some response is required.

Research questions

The key research questions explored in this study were as follows:

RQ1: What are the primary processes, methods, systems and mechanisms through which government listens to stakeholders and citizens?

RQ2: How effectively do these processes, methods, systems and mechanisms work in terms of affording stakeholders and citizens access to and a voice in policy-making and decision-making?

RQ3: What challenges exist and need to be overcome to improve access and voice for stakeholders and citizens?

Methodology

The Organisational Listening Project has used a qualitative case study methodology (Stake, 2008; Yin, 2009), conducted within a naturalistic interpretive approach. In this stage of the project, which was designed to examine organisational listening in detail inside one or more government organisations, it was decided that ethnography (direct observation conducted in a naturalistic setting) was necessary, along with interviews and content analysis of relevant documents, to gain authentic and accurate insights. In particular, an *emic* ethnographic approach that involves observation from inside the studied group and sometimes participation in the activities studied was used to gain an 'up-close' and insider perspective; an *etic* approach, which observes from outside (Neuman, 2006, p. 381), was also utilised.

Given that ethnography needs to be undertaken over an extended period of time (Creswell, 2009; Tedlock, 2008) and that participation in activities requires a high degree of cooperation and collaboration with the host organisation/s, the research was undertaken as *participatory action research* (PAR), in which the group being studied were co-researchers (Hearn et al., 2009). An advantage of PAR is that, as Dick (2000) notes, members of the participating group are encouraged to not only carry out the activities being studied, but to critically reflect on their actions and to contribute ideas or solutions to problems identified. As part of critical reflection, PAR asks what worked well; what did not work well; what could be improved; and how the action or actions could be done in another way with better results.

Sample

This stage of The Organisational Listening Project was conducted inside the UK government for two reasons. First, the UK Government Communication Service (GCS) responded positively to Stage 1 of this research by inviting a presentation of the findings in the Cabinet Office, Whitehall and expressing interest in Stage 2 of the research. The GCS agreed to support the research in partnership with the UK Department of Health as a primary site for investigation, in addition to facilitating access to other UK government departments and agencies.

Second, the political environment in the United Kingdom in the period 2014–16 was characterised by increasing and unprecedented signs of citizen discontent with the national government and major political institutions, as evidenced in the Scotland Referendum in 2014, which narrowly maintained UK unity, and particularly in the 2016 EU Referendum referred to as Brexit, in which citizens made a historic decision to leave the EU against the policies and recommendations of the government. The surprise and shock that greeted the Brexit decision was a clear indication that the

government of the United Kingdom was out of touch with the views and wishes of citizens – a situation acknowledged by incoming Prime Minister Theresa May in a speech to launch her campaign for the leadership in July 2016, in which she said there was ‘a gaping chasm between wealthy London and the rest of the country’ (May, 2016b, para. 19).

The organisations studied in Stage 2 of this project were as follows.

Primary sites/participants

- The UK Government Communication Service (GCS) headquartered jointly in Number 10 Downing Street and the Cabinet Office, 70 Whitehall
- Department of Health, 79 Whitehall.

Secondary sites/participants:

- Department for Exiting the EU (DExEU), 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.

Research methods

Three research methods were used to operationalise participatory action research:

- 1 *Ethnography* conducting during a period of six months working full-time inside the UK Government Communication Service in the departments and agencies participating in the study (June to December 2016)
- 2 *In-depth interviews* with senior management and professional staff involved in government communication, policy development and advice, engagement and specialised fields of communication-related practice such as social research, public consultation, complaints processing, customer service and correspondence
- 3 *Content analysis* of relevant documents including strategic communication plans and reports of communication campaigns, consultations, complaints analysis, and correspondence.

Data collection and analysis

In accordance with ethnographic procedures, the lead researcher used daily journaling to record observations. In addition, weekly and monthly reports were collected from UK government staff involved in the studied activities, as well as recording and analysis of minutes of all meetings to discuss communication-related activities.

All formal interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were analysed using NVivo 10 to identify key themes, major issues, and patterns in discussion, in line with qualitative textual and content analysis procedures (Neuman, 2006; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). In addition, more than 400 relevant documents including plans and reports related to communication, research, consultation, complaints, correspondence, and stakeholder and citizen engagement were analysed.

Findings: The ‘crisis of listening’

In the space available here, four key areas of UK government communication that are primary sites for listening to stakeholders and citizens are discussed, starting with what can be called the ‘three Cs’ of organisational listening.

Consultation

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

The UK Government has established a single official website, Gov.UK, for announcing and reporting consultations. However, the website does not provide a full-service consultation function. It serves as a central location only to announce consultations; provide a description and details of consultations such as background information, terms of reference and sometimes questions for response; and post summary reports of consultations.

Typically, consultations announced and described on Gov.UK link to specialist web consultation applications such as Citizen Space, which is widely used by UK government departments and agencies. Even these specialised tools need additional applications and plug-ins to be effective. For example, Citizen Space is best used in conjunction with Dialogue, a complementary application that allows participants in Citizen Space consultations to rate suggestions and ideas using a peer-rating system.

Furthermore, experienced consultation staff in the UK Government note that public consultations need to be actively promoted and explained beyond what is possible on the Gov.UK website to make stakeholders and citizens aware of them and encourage participation. One approach used is to publish a blog specifically devoted to publicising and discussing issues relevant to the consultation (e.g. using Wordpress). Email is also used when addresses are provided.

These learnings draw attention to the fact that considerable skills are required among government policy and communication staff to conduct effective consultations,

as well as a number of specialised tools. Such skills, and the use of tools such as those noted above, are patchy across the government. For example, in planning a consultation in relation to disability, some policy and communication staff involved confessed to being unfamiliar with consultation methods and tools.

From observation, interviews, examination of consultation reports and analysis of consultation submissions, the following ten failings in consultation were identified:

- Many consultations are *framed narrowly with specific questions* written by government department or agency staff that limit discussion to the government's agenda.
- A number use technical and *official language*, even when addressing the 'general public'.
- In most cases, submissions to consultations are *not acknowledged*.
- Many have *short timeframes* for comments that may be practical for major industry and professional organisations with sufficient expert resources to prepare submissions, but disadvantage or preclude many citizens and small groups from participation.
- The preceding limitations are created largely because of *a one size fits all approach* to consultation. Some consultations are aimed at experts and industry, and legitimately have a very specific and limited scope. However, others seek (or should seek) views from a wide cross-section of the public. However, there is no clear distinction between the different types and levels of consultation in terms of language, accessibility, or timeframe.
- Most consultations *attract and are dominated by the 'usual suspects'* – that is, major organisations and even professional lobbyists. The following finding exacerbates this bias.
- Consultation *lacks outreach*. All consultations studied involved a passive approach in which the government called for and then waited for submissions to be made. This ignores the reality that some groups and individuals affected by a policy or issue under consultation are unlikely to initiate a submission. Such an observation applies particularly to those with low socioeconomic status and/or low education levels, and those who are not easily able to articulate their views. The research team agreed that consultation could productively be enhanced through outreach to affected groups, including a wider range of community groups, social movements and activist organisations, and even by visiting affected areas and communities for direct discussions.
- There is a *lack of analysis of consultation submissions*. The focus is predominantly on collecting *inputs*, and often very little planning and scant resources are devoted to how submissions will be analysed. Furthermore, many departments and agencies lack the tools to analyse large volumes of unstructured data (i.e. text).
- There is *no sharing of the findings of consultations* when there is content relevant to other government departments and agencies, as discussed further below.

- There is also a *lack of reporting back following consultations*. Reports of consultations are posted on Gov.UK. However, while major stakeholder organisations that ‘understand the system’ might readily access these reports, citizens are unlikely to search for the results of a consultation. Proactive reporting to relevant stakeholders and citizens could be undertaken easily and cost-effectively using technology such as auto-generated emails when email addresses are provided, or simply publishing reports and summaries in relevant media such as local newspapers or newsletters.

Given the importance of consultation, it is worth illustrating the failures in listening in this form of potential engagement with an example. The *NHS Mandate* is published annually by NHS England to outline the objectives and priorities of the UK National Health Service based on stakeholder and public consultation. The NHS Mandate public consultation conducted in October 2015 to develop the *NHS Mandate 2016–2017* attracted an unprecedented 127,400 submissions, many of which were ten or more pages in length. Neither NHS England nor the Department of Health had the tools or resources to analyse more than one million pages of text, even though it was in digital form collected through Citizen Space, email or PDF documents that could be ‘text scraped’.

Civil service staff endeavoured to analyse the massive volume of public feedback without any specialised textual or data-analysis tools. In July and early August 2016, as part of this PAR, the NHS Mandate consultation submissions were re-analysed using a sophisticated textual analysis Web application, Method52, developed by the University of Sussex in partnership with DEMOS. The application uses natural language processing (NLP) and machine learning, but with active analyst control to correct classifications and add categories (e.g. of topics or issues) if required (referred to as *active learning*). The developers provided training for Department of Health staff as well as consulting throughout the analysis. This analysis revealed a number of major findings that were not discovered or reported in the initial consultation report, including the following:

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

Complaints

Along with consultation submissions, complaints are another direct and important form of voice received by organisations. This analysis indicated that complaints to UK government departments such as the Department of Health are individually processed and responded to in what seems to be an effective manner. However, three weaknesses were observed in complaints processing:

- *Rating systems are orientated to volume.* The rating system observed in some departments including the Department of Health is based on volume. For instance, an NHS Trust or a hospital with a high volume of complaints is assumed to pose a greater risk than one with a low volume of complaints. However, many complaints are often in relation to quite minor matters such as car parking. Qualitative analysis of complaints is important – for example, one complaint about a life-threatening issue is more serious than 100 about minor matters. Organisations that actively seek customer feedback are often also active in addressing issues raised, but this is not reflected in quantitative complaints reporting and analysis.
- *There is a lack of pattern or trend analysis over time.* Even more importantly, no evidence was found of complaints data being analysed over time to identify patterns, trends, prominent issues and ‘hot spots’, even though academic studies have shown the deep and valuable insights can be gained from such analysis (Reader, Gillespie & Roberts, 2014). This process could be undertaken annually or even more frequently using the same textual analysis applications used for consultation submissions and correspondence, given that complaints are in textual form.
- *Complaints via social media are often not accepted.* Some government organisations do not accept or even monitor complaints via social media. While serious complaints require a formal process, social media are increasingly used by people to voice complaints. Often the first signs of dissatisfaction or concern can be identified in social media. Broader monitoring (i.e. listening) via social media can provide early detection of dissatisfaction and identification of issues.

The importance of listening effectively to complaints, including through ongoing data analysis and response, was starkly illustrated in the final report of the Mid-Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust Public Inquiry into Deaths in Hospitals, chaired by Robert Francis QC, which stated:

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

Recently, another tragic result of a failure by government organisations to listen occurred in the United Kingdom despite promises by the government to create ‘a democracy for everyone’ (May, 2016a). The 2017 Grenfell Tower fire in London, which claimed at least 80 lives and injured 70 other people, has been directly

attributed to a 'failure to listen' (Ghelani, 2017, para. 1). This is based on warnings of inadequate fire safety standards by the Grenfell Action Group posted on its website up to four years before the disaster (Ghelani, 2017, para. 5) and reports identifying the dangers of combustible cladding and buildings submitted to the UK Parliament as early as 1999 (House of Commons, 1999).

Correspondence

UK Government departments and agencies receive between 40,000 and 70,000 pieces of correspondence a year in the form of letters and emails from stakeholders and citizens. Email is increasingly being used, meaning the text of correspondence is received and stored in digital form.

As with complaints, departments and agencies appear to have reliable systems for receiving, recording and processing correspondence, including referral and escalation procedures when information needs to be sought from particular branches, units or senior management. Most use databases to hold correspondence records.

However, none of the departments and agencies studied conducted qualitative analysis of the content of correspondence over time (e.g. annually or even over several years). Such analysis, using textual analysis applications such as NVivo, Leximancer, Method52 or even free open-source tools such as MaxQDA, can reveal the most frequent topics and issues raised, themes and patterns to inform management and policy-making.

Research

The UK Government uses social research extensively as a basis for evidence-based policy and decision-making. However, two key issues became evident in relation to social research during this study:

- *Focus on polls and quantitative data.* Social research conducted by the UK Government is predominantly quantitative (e.g. polls, surveys, quantitative media monitoring and economic analysis). A much smaller investment is made in qualitative research. This is compounded by the lack of analysis of large qualitative (unstructured) data sets collected from public consultations, correspondence, and complaints, as discussed in the preceding sections. While generalisable quantitative research is important, research that probes beyond simple scores and ratings, explores ranges and diversity beyond *means* (i.e. averages) and accesses *affective* (i.e. emotional) as well as rational responses is necessary for understanding stakeholders and citizens. This was particularly highlighted in the EU Referendum, after which qualitative research revealed that emotional factors such as fears and confusion in relation to immigration and pent-up frustration with the government led to the unexpected result in the poll.
- *Lack of data centralisation/pooling and sharing.* A major over-arching finding of this research that emerged from analysis of social research as well as consultations, correspondence and complaints is that the UK Government had no central database or knowledge management system for collecting and holding

the 'voice' of citizens, and which, in turn, would enable integration of multiple data sets, triangulation and meta-analysis over periods of a year or several years. This lack of a central repository of data also means that there are limited opportunities for sharing of data between departments and agencies. Despite some initiatives that have attempted to share data, such as the former Central Office of Information (COI), which was closed in 2012, and an Excel list of research studies maintained by the Citizen Insights Network (CIN) in the Department of Health, public feedback resides in 'data siloes' within various department and agencies. This represents a lost opportunity to gain insights and understanding of stakeholders and publics; a risk when important information is overlooked (which conveys non-listening to publics); and a cost through duplication of research in some cases.

Conclusions

This study draws attention to the importance as well as the challenges of organisational listening. While Crawford (2009, p. 531) is somewhat critical of *delegated* listening, noting that it is 'engagement-at-arm's-length' and is not the same as 'being there', organisations such as government departments and agencies with large, diverse and dispersed stakeholders and publics inevitably have to employ various forms of *delegated listening* through functions such as social research, public consultation, correspondence processing, complaints handling and social media monitoring. It also illustrates that, even though listening is ultimately a human undertaking, organisational listening at scale requires systems, processes, technologies, resources and skills for collecting, analysing and making sense of large bodies of data in unstructured and structured form.

This research supports the findings of Stage 1 of the Organisational Listening Project, which concluded that 'most organisations listen sporadically at best, often poorly, and sometimes not at all' (Macnamara, 2015, p. 7; Macnamara, 2016, p. 236). It summarised that, in the name of public communication, organisations have created an 'architecture of speaking' operationalised through advertising, media publicity, websites, publications, events, presentations and speeches, and even social media. It argued that, in order to achieve two-way communication and engagement, this needs to be counter-balanced by creating an *architecture of listening*. The study theorised eight elements of an architecture of listening as:

- an organizational *culture* that is open to listening and that *recognises* others' right to speak, *pays attention* to them and tries to *understand* their views
- addressing the *politics* of listening, as discussed by Dreher (2009) – that is, 'listening out' for marginalised and ignored voices, rather than selective listening. The politics of listening were starkly illustrated in the case of London's Grenfell Tower, in which the voices of poor and mainly non-white residents were consistently ignored.
- *policies* that specify and require listening, including processes to address issues of power differentials and diversity

- *systems* that are open and interactive, such as websites that allow visitors to post comments and questions and vote
- *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
- *resources*, including staff to operate listening systems and do the work of listening, such as establishing forums and consultations, inviting comment, and monitoring, analysing and responding to comments and questions
- *skills* for listening
- *articulation* of the voices of stakeholders and publics to policy-making and decision-making. While listening does not imply or require agreement in all cases, unless there is a link to policy-making and decision-making for consideration of what is said to an organisation, voice has no value – in Couldry's terms, it does not matter.

Learning from participatory action research conducted as Stage 2 of the Organisational Listening Project has informed a number of specific initiatives in the UK Cabinet Office, and several departments and agencies, including the following:

- There is potential for the Government Digital Service (GDS) to establish a *central online public consultation site* on the official Gov.UK website as a uniform platform with a central database for storing consultation data is being investigated to make consultations more accessible and more directly informative about policy and decision-making.
- The Department of Health has *linked its email system to its Citizen Space consultation platform* to provide enhanced feedback – for example, participants and interested parties can sign up to be advised of the outcome of consultations and notified of future consultations.
- The UK Cabinet Office has licensed Method52 on a trial basis to conduct in-depth analysis of consultation submissions as well as letters and emails to the Prime Minister.
- It is also planned to analyse correspondence to the Department of Health. If these trials are productive, analysis of correspondence could be rolled out across all government departments and agencies.
- Digital and social media analysis staff have increased their focus on *digital listening* through social media, noting that social media provide early and often real-time insights into the views and reactions of stakeholders and citizens. This includes established a 'digital insights' team in departments such as the Department of Health.
- A Cabinet Office committee has been established to investigate the legal status of *sharing data* from various sources including social research, public consultation submissions, correspondence and complaints within the UK Government.

- In late 2016, the Economic and Domestic Secretariat (EDS) and the Government Communication Service agreed to review the potential for the Health Complaints Analysis Tool (HCAT) developed by researchers at the London School of Economics (LSE) for analysing all types of complaints. The GCS tasked a special committee to investigate wider use of the HCAT.
- Data analysis training is being incorporated into the professional development program conducted by the UK GCS for communication staff across the UK Government.

Limitations and further research

This research did not engage with stakeholders and publics of the organisations studied; rather, it focused on what happens in response to expressions of voice by citizens and communities when they are presented to government organisations that have the power to affect people's lives and a responsibility to do so in positive and equitable ways in a democracy. This approach was taken because the vast majority of existing research on voice has focused on 'speaking up' and 'speaking out' as acts of emancipation. However, further research is desirable to identify the expectations of citizens in relation to listening. For example, will improved government listening 'open a floodgate' and create impossible expectations? How can large-scale listening deal with agonistic debate that involves dissonance rather than consensus, and potentially cacophony?

Further research is also desirable to explore the extent to which an *architecture of listening* in government organisations can increase access to policy-making and contribute to reinvigorating democracy and increasing trust and social equity.

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