

Everybody's talking at me ... is anyone listening?



*Public information during the Brexit campaign – including that provided by **official civil service sources** – was criticised for bias and distortion. **Jim Macnamara**, Professor of Public Communication at the University of Technology Sydney and a Visiting Professor at LSE's Media and Communications Department, argues that governmental and other communications services should focus less on getting their message across, and learn to listen more to the public.*

We all know someone who talks all the time and never listens. They're usually regarded as a bore, boorish, and egocentric – only interested in themselves. We usually don't regard them very favourably and don't really want to engage with them.

But what about the organisations that are central to our society – government departments and agencies that are supposed to work for and serve the interests of citizens, corporations that want us to be loyal customers, and non-government organisations that seek our support for various causes and issues? Surely they should listen to the people they call their stakeholders and publics.

Well, if you have sensed that you are a 'target audience' for their communication and that your voice is often or frequently not heard, research says you're right.

Organisations today devote massive resources to public communication in various forms. For example, organisations spend more than **US\$600 billion a year on advertising** worldwide, which by nature is one-way information and persuasion. Public relations is also a multi-billion dollar industry **growing by up to 20% a year** in some markets. There is also corporate communication, government communication, employee communication, customer relations, and a host of other functions allegedly fostering communication between citizens and the organisations that dominate the political, social, and cultural landscape of industrialised and post-industrial societies.

Some of these functions claim to facilitate *two-way* communication. For instance, one of the dominant theories of public relations referred to as **Excellence theory** claims to build positive relationships between organisations and their stakeholders and publics even to the point of **symmetry**. Marketers today claim to want **engagement**, which **Forbes** recently described as "a prototypical buzzword". Politicians of course represent us – the people – and supposedly are guided by *vox populi*, the voice of the people.

To achieve two-way communication, positive relationships, engagement, and represent people, there has to be listening – not just talking. But listening is in short supply among our major public and private sector organisations.

An in-depth **study** of 36 large public and private sector organizations in the US, UK, and Australia completed in late 2015 found that, on average, 80% of the communication resources and systems of organisations are focussed on distributing the organizations' messages – i.e., speaking. In some organizations, up to 95% of communication resources and activities are focussed on speaking on behalf of the organization.

Furthermore, the study observed that when organisations do listen, it is often an instrumental form of listening – that is to say, they listen to gain answers to questions that they want to ask and to gain information that they need to achieve their objectives. For example, public consultations are often narrowly framed with limited options, frequently dominated by the 'usual suspects' – large lobby groups and elites such as business organisations – and often nothing changes **afterwards**.

Customer relations is focussed mostly on upselling us to more products and services rather than fixing problems. Even social media, which by nature are designed for open two-way interaction, are used by most organisations for posting their promotional messages rather than listening to the views and conversations of communities and the nation.

The study concluded that most organizations “listen sporadically at best, often poorly, and sometimes not at all”.

But what about voting such as the EU referendum in the UK, you might ask? The Brexit vote was a case of people shouting sufficiently loudly and in such numbers that Westminster could not but hear. And the government and most major organisations and institutions were **shocked** by what they heard, which is only further evidence of a lack of listening. Why were they not aware of the disaffection and concerns of citizens about a range of issues long before 23 June 2016?

The research summarised that organizations construct a sophisticated ‘architecture of speaking’ through advertising, PR, corporate communication, Web sites, events, and other strategic communication activities and proposed that to engage stakeholders and publics and rebuild trust, organizations need to counter-balance this with an *architecture of listening*.

Listening on a large-scale as required by organisations requires systems, but it is not as simple as adding a piece of technology such as automated social media monitoring or an online consultation application. The research identified eight elements of an ‘architecture of listening’ as: (1) a culture of listening; (2) policies for listening; (3) addressing and overcoming the politics of listening, which causes some groups to be ignored or excluded; (4) structures and processes for listening; (5) technologies for listening; (6) resources for listening; (7) skills for listening; and (8) articulation of listening (what is heard) to decision-making and policy making.

The Organisational Listening Project, as the study is called, proposed that the cost of organisations not listening include voter disengagement in democracies, lack of trust in government and business, declining customer loyalty, and internal problems such as high staff turnover and poor productivity.

Conversely, the study argues that improved organizational listening has significant potential to increase trust and reputation, customer loyalty and retention, staff retention and productivity, voter engagement and participation, and create more equitable and stable societies.

The findings of this research are summarised in a free downloadable **research report** and reported in more detail in a book, *Organizational Listening: The Missing Essential in Public Communication* (Peter Lang, New York, 2016).

The findings of the first stage of The Organisational Listening Project and ongoing research with the UK government to improve listening will be the subject of a **public lecture at LSE on 23 November 2016**.

This post gives the views of the author and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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