Department of Media and Communications public lecture
The Lost Art of Listening: the missing key to democratic and civil society participation

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Public Lecture

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The Lost Art of Listening –
The Missing Key to Democratic and Civil Society Participation

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Organised society
Communication – the theoretical framework

- “Society exists ... in communication” ... conversation (Dewey, 1916; Carey, 1989/2009)
- Communication is **two-way interaction** (Griffin, 2009; Littlejohn & Foss, 2008)
  - Not monologue and “monologue disguised as dialogue” (Buber, 1923/1958, 1947/2002)
- **Openness** to the ‘other’ (Gadamer, 1989)
- Dialogue is not turn-taking at speaking (Baxter, 2011)
- **Transactional**, not transmission of information (a la Shannon & Weaver, 19
- “Communication is talking and listening” (Craig, 2006, p. 39)
- Voice is “the implicitly linked practices of speaking and listening” (Couldry, 2009, p. 580)
Theoretical framework – what we say we do!

- **Vox populi – voice of the people** – central to political and government communication
- ‘Open Government’, open policy, ‘Gov 2.0’
- **Engagement** a buzzword in politics, government, marketing and PR
  - A “new paradigm of PR” (Johnston, 2014)
Listening
Defining listening – the ‘Seven Canons of Listening’

- **Recognition** of others – that they have a right to speak and something to say (Bickford, 1996; Husband, 2009; Honneth, 2007; Young, 2000)

- **Acknowledgement** (Obama campaigns, 2008, 2012)

- **Attention** (Bickford, 1996; Honneth, 2007; Husband, 2009)

- **Interpretating** what others say as fairly and receptively as possible (Husband, 1996, 2000)


- **Consideration** of what others say (Honneth, 2007; Husband, 2009)

- **Response** of some appropriate type (Lundsteen, 1979; Purdy & Borisoff, 1997)
The Organisational Listening Project

- Two-year, three country study (UK, US, Australia)
- **36 case studies** of medium to large organisations
  - 18 government; 14 corporate; 4 NGO
Sites of potential organizational listening examined

- **Research** – often referred to as *insights*
- **Corporate communication / public relations**
- **Government communication**
- **Organizational internal communication**
- **Customer relations**
- **Public consultation**
- **Social media**
- **Correspondence** units in government (inquiries, letters, e-mail, complaints)
Methodology – triangulation

1. **In-depth interviews** with senior communication-related managers
   - Up to seven interviews in some organizations
   - 1,000 pages of transcripts
   - Analysed in NVivo

2. **Content analysis** of communication, engagement and consultation plans, reports, evaluation dashboards, even job descriptions

3. **Field experiments** to test organisational listening
   - Inquiries, questions and comments on organisations’ Web and social media sites
Key findings – the crisis of listening

- 20% of organizations contacted did not respond
- On average, 80% of organizations’ communication resources and effort are devoted to speaking
  - Advertising, media releases, speeches, Web sites, tweeting, posting, etc.
- Up to 95% of so-called ‘communication’ in organizations is speaking
Key findings – the crisis of listening

- When organisations do listen, it is mostly **instrumental** and **organisation-centric**
  - Research to and public consultations to answer questions organisations want to ask
  - Research to gain insights and ‘intelligence’ for ‘**targeting**’
  - Customer relations either pacification or **CRM** focussed on **upselling**
  - Social media mostly used for distributing **organisations’ messages**

- “**Listening gives foundation for knowing what to say and thinking strategically of the best ways to frame and present appealing messages.**” (Heath & Coombs, 2006, p. 346)
Key findings – the crisis of listening

- The terms that most frequently occurred in communicators’ descriptions, written reports, and evaluations of their activities were “informing”, “disseminating”, “educating”, “showing”, “telling”, and “distributing”

- The study concluded that “most organisations listen sporadically at best, often poorly, and sometimes not at all”
An ‘architecture of listening’

- Technologies alone cannot provide a solution
- Effective organisational listening requires an ‘architecture of listening’ informing organisation design comprised of:
  - **Culture** for listening
  - **Politics** of listening to be addressed
  - **Policies** for listening
  - **Structures and processes** for listening
  - **Technologies** for listening
  - **Resources** for listening
  - **Skills** for listening
  - **Articulation** of listening to decision-making and policy making
Organisations can listen through:

- **Social and market research**
  - *Qualitative* as well as *quantitative*
- **Public consultation**
  - Office and online (e.g., Citizen Space)
- **Stakeholder relations / engagement**
  - E.g., Meetings; forums
- **Customer relations**
- **Correspondence, inquiries and complaints**
- **Social media listening**
Organisational listening best practice

- The MasterCard Conversation Suite
- Behavioural insights
- Listening posts
- Citizen juries
- Trust networks
- Study circles
- Customer engagement summits
- Reconciliation committees
- Ombuds
- Community liaison officer appointments
- Advisory boards and committees
- Turn taking at presenting with reciprocal listening
Other advanced methods of organisational listening

- National Commission for Public Debate (NCPD) [Commision Nationale du Débat Public]
- *Argumentation tools and argument mapping* – e.g., MIT Deliberatorium (Klein, 2007, 2015)
- Deliberative polls (Fishkin, 1995)
- Sense making methodology (Dervin & Foreman-Wernet, 2013)
Organisational Listening Project Stage II

- **Participatory action research** to implement and test methods for increased insights and better engagement
Latest findings

- Public consultation
  - Listens to the ‘usual suspects’
  - Submissions not acknowledged
  - Submissions not analysed in detail

- Correspondence – replies, but no overall analysis

- Complaints – processed, but no overall analysis

- Lack of data sharing and data management
  - ‘Data siloes’
  - No data centre of knowledge management system

- Social media listening
  - ✔
Other causes of organisational deafness

- Polling
- Campaigns
- Mediatization
Why is this significant?

- Declining trust in government
- Declining participation and disengagement in democracy
- Declining trust in business
- Declining employee loyalty and retention
- Declining customer loyalty and retention
- Increasing radicalization

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Source: Harvard University (2015)
Potential benefits

- Increased trust in government
- Increased participation in democratic politics and civil society
- Increased trust in business and improved reputation
- Increased employee loyalty, retention, and productivity
- Customer retention
- Reduced issues and crises
- A more equitable society
WARNING
I'M NOT LISTENING
Conclusion

- “We build too many walls, and not enough bridges”
- “We need to talk” ... no ‘we need to listen’
CREATING AN ‘ARCHITECTURE OF LISTENING’ IN ORGANIZATIONS

The basis of engagement, trust, healthy democracy, social equity, and business sustainability.

Free downloadable research report:
http://www.uts.edu.au/node/134066
Report and full findings


Thank You
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