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Maturity in leaps and bounds – organisational listening for customer engagement

Abstract

Much organisational development occurs during times of crisis when answers and solutions are urgently needed. The objective of this article is to show examples illustrating that organisational listening on social media may take leaps from immature to mature mainly due to the pressure from stakeholders, not often as a strategic tool of integrated marketing communications (IMC) or public communications. The first example is from the late 2010s, when stakeholders were introduced to a direct route to brands made available through social media. Many unanswered customer questions suddenly became visible and were subsequently addressed. Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic, as the second example, pressured organisations to respond to citizens' urgent concerns. These snapshots of development suggest that what matters for organisational legitimacy is understanding stakeholders' changing needs. This paper proposes that organisational listening – even in social media – should become a strategic function of organisations. Building on theories related to organisational listening, social media and IMC, this article argues for incorporating organisational listening as a strategic function into a model of integrated marketing and communications and/or strategic public communication.

Keywords: social media, stakeholder engagement, organisational listening, integrated marketing communications

1. **Introduction**

   'Gradually, then suddenly'. (Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*)

   Communication is a two-way process of listening, speaking and responding

(Littlejohn and Foss 2009; Macnamara 2018). Listening theories, mainly those on interpersonal listening have many definitions on the role and components, ethics and competencies of listening (e.g, Bodie, 2010; Bodie and Crick 2014; Burnside-Lawry, 2011, 2012). Organisational listening is a wide expression employing an organisation's processes, policies, structure, technologies and skills to pay attention, interpret and respond to its stakeholders (Macnamara 2016). Stewart and Arnold (2017) define *social listening* as an 'active process of attending to, and observing, interpreting and responding to a variety of stimuli through mediated, electronic and social channels' (12–13).

This article concentrates on organisational listening in social media because changes have been most visible in this context due to the lack of gatekeepers, such as legacy media institutions. Times of development can make positive changes possible, but when development is rapid, negative consequences can follow. For example, new places for information quickly fill up, not only with information but also with disinformation and spam. We introduce organisational listening in social media as a new strategic core function for organisations in the current communication environment; it also is becoming increasingly important for stakeholder relationship management (Crawford 2009; Dreher 2009; Maben and Gearhart 2018). As prior studies indicate, most organisations are present on social media, but they tend to concentrate on speaking, not listening (Theunissen and Wan Noordin 2012; Macnamara 2016; Kent and Lane 2017; Watkins 2017).

This paper identifies how organisational listening has matured in leaps and bounds and compares two time periods during which organisational listening developed at a particular speed. The first occurred in the late 2010s, when organisations adapted to the rapidly growing social media environment and addressed stakeholders' increasing demand for dialogue by introducing new platforms and measuring stakeholder interactions. The second occurred during the 2020s, when the COVID-19 pandemic forced organisations to adopt new platforms

to respond to urgent stakeholder needs.

Building on organisational listening, social media and integrated marketing communications, this article proposes that listening on social media as a corporate communication strategy or integrated marketing communications is a skill that can mature and build a basis for engagement and action. Based on our analysis of these examples, we propose that (1) trust and satisfaction, which are prerequisites for stakeholder engagement, are built by listening and interaction with stakeholders online, thereby forming a basis for relationship development. We would also like to propose with these examples that (2) listening in social media is as important as speaking; there should be a balance between them and (3) listening should be reflected in the model of IMC, as earlier research says it plays an important role in building and maintaining stakeholder relationships (e.g. Luxton et al. 2017, 215, 431).

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Organisational Listening on Social Media*

In a relative truism, Couldry (2010) claimed a 'crisis of voice' exists in contemporary societies. However, Macnamara (2016, 3) argued that the real problem is the 'crisis of listening'. Social media has increased the potential for organisations to engage in dialogue with various publics (Avidar et al. 2015, 215) and to manage their corporate reputation (Yaxley 2012, 431). Nevertheless, many organisations still shy away from interaction through social media due to the challenges they encounter in identifying the appropriate discussion topics, forming responses and responding quickly (Brandel 2010), especially when resources are tight and the number of comments is high (Macnamara 2020).

Nonetheless, organisational listening on social media has been linked to positive outcomes, including the engagement necessary to develop long-lasting relationships and the identification of stakeholder engagement strategies that build trust, enable legitimisation and

support corporate reputation and risk management efforts (e.g. Brandel 2010; Navarro 2018; Taiminen et al. 2015; Yaxley 2012). Listening organisations are also perceived as more authentic, and they receive more support from followers (Bentley 2010; Heath 2001; Kang 2014; Men and Tsai 2015). However, to succeed, participation, authenticity, resourcefulness and credibility are needed (Barker et al. 2013).

Online listening is strategic communication. The lack of a social media strategy, represented by underdeveloped policies, unclear goals and untrained staff, and the inability to use modern technology to measure social media outcomes and visibility, also impacts organisations' willingness to interact through social media (Barnes and Jacobsen 2014, 147). Technologies do not create listening or dialogue; they are tools to be used in the act of listening and interacting – tools that can be used poorly or effectively (Macnamara 2016, 265). The politics of listening concerns an organisation's strategic decisions about whether to listen, to what and whom to listen, what results are expected and with whom they should be shared (Macnamara 2016).

Therefore, organisations often find one-way communication easier. Integrated marketing communications (IMC) originally meant aligning the one-way distribution of organisations' messages via different channels (Delgado-Ballester et al. 2012), such as sharing a press release or posting an advertisement. Industry reports confirm that the topics that organisations prefer to address on social media are of little or no interest to stakeholders. Simultaneously, organisations ignore most topics that stakeholders prefer (Freundt 2013). The challenge of social media for organisations is to combine the multiple functions of content creation: 1) sharing interesting content, 2) listening to and managing questions and comments and 3) tackling disinformation, rumours and fake news. The ideal communication model calls for organisations to provide stakeholders with opportunities to engage in both positive and negative ways (Callison and Seltzer 2010; Kent et al. 2003; Seltzer and Mitrook 2007).

2.3. Models of Listening

Macnamara (2016) listed eight key elements of listening for organisations engaged in the politics of listening that relate to an organisation's decisions on whether to listen, what and whom to listen to and whether and how to distribute the data gathered through listening (Macnamara 2016, 254–255). Listening structures and processes align daily listening with the organisation's work. Social customer relationship management (CRM), which combines social media data with enterprise applications (CRM/BI [business intelligence]), is becoming more popular. Social CRM generally comprises five fundamental processes: 1) mapping social profiles with stakeholder data, 2) monitoring social media, 3) managing (i.e. creating processes and rules), 4) implementing middleware (enabling data flow between dashboards and systems) and 5) measuring (using BI to identify trends, measure sentiment and so on; Brandel 2010). Listening resources include professionals skilled in social media monitoring and analysis, customer service, reporting, consulting and correspondence processing. These functions already exist in many companies, but often focus on disseminating information in only one way even if they aim at engaging their customers.

2.4. Listening Is Engaging

Stakeholder or customer engagement has substantial value for organisations (Santini 2020; Pansari and Kumar 2016). Stakeholder engagement has been defined in various ways, for instance as an individual's eagerness to interact in communities (Algesheimer et al. 2005) or to act as a brand ambassador with brand-related content combined with affection and passionate, emotional behaviour (Baldus et al. 2015; Hollebeek et al. 2014; Obilo et al. 2020; Paruthi and Kaur 2017).

Earlier research states that social media is available to establish, foster and manage relationships online between the organisation and its key stakeholders (Allagui et al. 2016, 21). In organisations, it is often the role of public relations to support both the public and

organisations to build a community where dialogue and mutual understanding take place (Valentini, Kruckeberg and Stark 2012). When observing stakeholders, the public are often communicators themselves, creating and reacting to organisational content (Dellarocas 2003) and often keen to have direct contact with organisations and brands.

Santini et al. (2020) studied stakeholder (customer) engagement on social media and defined the customer engagement in social media (CESM) framework, which encompasses the following stages: 1) relationship formation, where trust and commitment impact satisfaction and positive emotion; 2) stakeholder (customer) engagement, which is built on trust, satisfaction and positive emotions; and 3) further stakeholder (customer) engagement, which converts into actions and word of mouth.

How an organisation manages online feedback is important, as sometimes it can pose a risk to the organisation's reputation. Responding, apologising and actively transferring the complaint enhance the complainant's satisfaction. Moreover, effectively handling complaints opens the door to considerable opportunities to augment the organisation's reputation among stakeholders (Einwiller and Steiler, 2015). Often, companies do not use response strategies that foster complaint satisfaction; they simply offer corrective action, such as thanking complainants for their feedback and asking them to contact customer service (Einwiller and Steiler 2015, 195, 201). Nonetheless, audiences want more than 'boilerplate responses from a corporate bot'; they want responses that are immediate, relevant and offer solutions that are most satisfying to the consumer (Gearhart and Maben, 2021, 179).

2.5. IMC and Organisational Listening

IMC has often been defined as quite limited regarding unified, consistent messaging distributed via different marketing communication tools/channels like PR and advertising (Delgado-Ballester et al. 2012). In recent years, scholars have redefined IMC from a more

holistic perspective as 'a stakeholder-centred interactive process of cross-functional planning and alignment of organisational, analytical and communication processes that allows for the possibility of continuous dialogue by conveying consistent and transparent messages via all media to foster long-term profitable relationships that create value' (Porcu, Del Barrio-García and Kitchen 2017, 294). Thus, IMC also includes organisational listening within a 'continuous dialogue'. Listening is needed for dialogue; hence, the development of IMC from one-way aligned messaging to holistic stakeholder-centric dialogue supports Macnamara's definitions of organisational listening and architecture (e.g. 2016, 2018).

The importance of social media channels in managing relationships has heightened over the past few years, with a significant number of stakeholders eager to give their feedback or dialogue directly with an organisation. In practice, social media is regarded as a marketing channel for reaching and engaging the masses. Social media integrates the marketing and communications of the organisation. Social media-related marketing research highlights the importance of engaging stakeholders through social media, defining it as 'an adaptive, technology-enabled process by which firms collaborate with stakeholders and partners to jointly create, communicate, deliver and sustain value for all stakeholders' (Kannan and Li 2017, 23). Marketing strategies aim to ameliorate sales by leveraging social media stakeholder management, which involves mapping social profiles to stakeholder data, monitoring (listening to) social media, managing (creating processes and rules), implementing management (ware) and measuring (using BI to identify trends and measure sentiment; Brandel 2010).

Martech is a well-established term today, but based on our findings, *CommTech* (communication technology) is needed to manage listening among the growing number of online discussions taking place in multiple spheres. The Arthur W. Page Society (2022) defines multiple stages in the progression of CommTech. The lowest level is the professional

level, which is where social platforms are monitored and content performance and sentiment are followed to gauge reputation. It is also where companies can detect cyberattacks and fake news. The mid-level stage is the pathfinder, where audiences are segmented by demographics, interests and behaviours and where delivery is automated, content and campaigns are optimised and stakeholder journeys are designed with sequential touchpoints. The highest level is pacesetter, which is where the focus moves from digital communications to performance communications.

2.7. Creating Trust and Satisfaction

Industry reports confirm that the topics organisations prefer to talk about online are of little to no interest to their stakeholders. Meanwhile, organisations ignore most of the topics their stakeholders prefer to discuss (Freundt, Hillenbrand and Lehman 2013). Organisations cannot always provide satisfactory replies to stakeholders for a plethora of reasons. If organisations respond in a way that does not meet the expectations of their stakeholders, they fail, which leads to the perception of organisational deafness, even if the organisation has, in fact, considered the views of its stakeholders.

Listening helps organisations understand the perspectives of their public and supports them in gaining their trust. However, no connection can occur if organisations do not follow through when stakeholders utilise opportunities to interact (Callison and Seltzer 2010, 145; Kent, Taylor and White 2003, 75; Seltzer and Mitrook 2007). Callison and Seltzer (2010, 145) recommended that organisations make themselves available for quality communication. Decisions regarding acceptable topics of discussion are not made by the organisation only. Participants in the dialogic process also contribute to the decision-making process (Theunissen and Wan Noordin 2012, 9). Wolvin and Coakley (1994) asserted that listening competency includes behavioural, cognitive and affective dimensions: knowing about

listening, being willing to listen and engaging in listening behaviours with an attitudinal component. Gutierrez-Garcia et al. (2015) claimed that the heart of dialogue is a simple but profound capacity to listen, and Couldry (2009, 80) tightly linked the practices of listening and speaking. Burnside-Lawry (2010) reported that organisations would better understand how to achieve good listening practices if they unified listening competencies with participatory communication criteria. Technology can support listening and facilitate stakeholder engagement. Organisations may play a transformative role, replenishing social resources at the micro level by engaging 'vulnerable' stakeholders through corporate social media (Fletcher-Brown et al. 2020).

Companies are increasingly providing customer service through social media, helping stakeholders on a real-time basis. In addition, customer service requires systematic listening. Gunarathne et al. (2018) studied three million tweets to seven major U.S. airlines on Twitter to investigate the drivers of differential treatment when customer service was delivered via social media. The researchers observed that the airlines were likelier to respond (and more quickly) to complaints from stakeholders who had more followers, which confirms the existence of a social media influence effect. Guo et al. (2020), who studied online customer service, argued that social media adoption helps organisations absorb resources from external stakeholders. These resources, including stakeholders' feedback and ideas, support organisations in establishing better reputations and a competitive advantage. This absorptive capacity of external stakeholders can take the maturity of listening to the next level, contributing to strategy, for example through innovative processes. It is important to learn from experience. As social media has made the markets even more complex and global, 'the ability to listen to, self-reflect and co-develop with stakeholders should underpin any approach to strategic communication management' (Johansen and Andersen 2012).

3. Illustrative Examples of Development

3.1. Airlines and the Growing Number of Social Media Users

This first example illuminates how the social media organisational listening of 17 European airlines developed over a one-year period. An analysis of three combined datasets (company policies, results of a 2016 analysis of the companies' Facebook and Twitter accounts and results of a 2017 analysis of the same) indicates that listening occurred across multiple social media channels. The developmental snapshot reveals that despite airlines' active social media usage, their focus on social media was (in January 2016) one-way speaking, while stakeholder requests were forwarded to a separate customer service function. In early 2016, only two of 17 airline companies provided 24/7 service through social media. Furthermore, the maturity of organisational listening in social media was passive, as customer requests were only forwarded to another email or telephone. Alternatively, these companies did not reply at all to customer requests online, or the possibility of doing so was non-existent.

Due to the rapid growth in social media's popularity, just a year later, in March 2017, clear changes were evident. Most airlines had streamlined their social media processes and had proactively used Twitter to listen to and respond to stakeholders; several had incorporated 24/7 services via social media, deploying direct messaging services to their Facebook pages. Twitter was popular for handling questions from customers about flight schedule changes and managing customer questions. The social media team had become the customer service team, and the channels were used proactively for listening and replying.

One of the most important topics concerning the development of organisational listening through social media is engaging stakeholders by showing respect and empathy when listening. This can be accomplished easily by creating a channel on social media without advertisements (Kent and Taylor 2016), as the airlines did when establishing their Twitter channels.

3.2. Public Sector Organisations and the COVID-19 Pandemic

The second example involves the recent and ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating how key public sector organisations in Finland faced an urgent need to align their strategic communications with social media to respond to more questions on the platforms. This sample was collected in the winter of 2020–2021 through preliminary interviews with 14 communicators from key Finnish public organisations responsible for COVID-19 communications with stakeholders. The interviews were transcribed and analysed following thematic content analysis guidelines.

The maturity level of listening was higher in these organisations than for airline organisations in their start phase. All had established strategic targets to increase online interactions, develop stakeholder relations or manage their reputation in social media. These organisations were primarily engaging in speaking to improve customer satisfaction or create engagement. Soon after the pandemic struck, they realised that posting vaccination guidelines and restrictions was not sufficient, as the number of questions, comments and followers on social media continued to grow by double digits to meet stakeholders' demand for information. They had to strengthen their social media teams to better manage listening activities. The findings indicate that the pandemic strained public organisations' communication skills and tools, forcing them to align their social media practices rapidly and reactively by listening online and enabling useful content, thereby limiting the opportunities for false or misleading content to develop. Once the listening function was organised and all questions had been answered, the feedback grew more positive.

This developmental snapshot suggests that the further development of listening structures and processes is needed to enable multivocal online discussion and strengthen trust and satisfaction among stakeholders.

4. Discussion

Maturity occurring in leaps and bounds describes how organisational listening develops during times of change, as discussed in this paper. In 2016, when the first examples were collected, not all organisations had social media accounts. Listening was conducted via regular customer feedback and surveys. The few existing social media channels were mostly passive and lacked a plan for regular content sharing. Next came the phase during which the account was used to post the user's own content. Social media was just one channel among others, and popularity was measured with simple occurrences, such as likes. In the second example, some public organisations were still passive or engaged only in one-way information sharing on social media before the onset of the pandemic. However, stakeholder pressure forced them to move to a more mature level of active listening and replying.

<<**Table 1.** HERE>>The four stages regarding the organisational maturity of listening. The biggest leap (black rabbit) occurred in both cases from developing to maturing during urgent times of change.

Our key findings, based on the two examples of development provided, indicate that organisations rush onto social media platforms to use one-way speaking and direct marketing to achieve engagement. They forget that a relationship must be established before social media engagement can occur. Such relationships are built on trust and satisfaction, and organisational listening online plays a key role in facilitating both.

The public organisations handling COVID-19 questions and the airlines with their customer service focus all realised that they could better engage stakeholders and create trust by establishing an architecture to support listening on their digital channels. Within 12 months, both had implemented listening functions and provided customer service via social media. Public organisations replied to all comments and questions through their own social media accounts, and airlines utilised their channels, especially Twitter, for the same purpose.

We suggest that to best utilise the pressure on organisations during times of rapid

change, communication professionals should embrace these times, as the giant strides in listening maturity reported in this paper highlight the importance of communication and enable organisations to mature more quickly than they otherwise would. The development towards online listening is highly beneficial, as it appears to increase trust and transparency and to accelerate online listening and customer service in all organisations, which are incentives for high stakeholder trust and satisfaction. Santini et al. (2020, 1223) recommended that organisations allocate resources to pleasant, satisfying touchpoints and observed that Twitter is the best channel for improving customer engagement via positive emotions and satisfaction.

Many organisations need a social media listening strategy or fully integrated marketing communications plan that establishes a listening function, defining the balance between speaking and listening. Modern technology can be used systematically for wider listening with limited resources and can enable participation in strategically important discussions in multivocal public spheres. The systematic organisational listening culture is open, but it also needs guidelines, processes and skills to collect, analyse and utilise data effectively (Macnamara 2018; Maben and Gearhart 2018).

<<**Table** 2. HERE >>

5. Implications

Development during times of crisis and change is challenging, as much effort and coordination is dedicated to surviving the change rather than to developing organisational functions. These snapshots of development call for a more strategic approach to organisational listening for organisations and the development of an integrated marketing communications model to reach their desired higher level of engagement and conversion to action. This prompts the following question: How can organisations ensure that times of change can, in fact, be exploited as strategic tools for organisational development?

Modern digital technology can be systematically used for wider listening and for establishing relationships with stakeholders online. However, the nonstrategic use of listening technology does not come with a guarantee of success and may even backfire. Taking on new technologies on the go remains a challenge, but once achieved, it can significantly enhance the organisational maturity level of listening. These leaps and bounds in growth imply that management, communication and marketing professionals also develop accordingly so they can ask the right questions to glean the most useful information from the data available. As organisational listening becomes a new core function, changes are needed not just in training but in the practice of communication and marketing to best utilise this strategic skill.

Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors report that there are no competing interests to declare.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. The four stages of the organisational maturity of listening. The biggest leap (black

rabbit) occurred in both cases from developing to maturing during urgent times of change.

Missing: No presence on social media	Immature: Passive presence	Developing: One-way communication	Leap	Maturing: Strategic listening
no accounts or presence on social media	accounts on social media but no strategy, organisation or regular postings	account(s) on social media, one-way communication with marketing, info-sharing content, random replies		some strategy in place, listening function established, active online presence and listening/replying to stakeholders even outside one's own accounts supported by technology

Table 2. Modified model following Santini, 2020: Customer engagement on social media

(CESM) with examples of organisational listening activities.

Illustrative example:	ORG. LISTENING: CONNECTION	RELATIONSHIP FORMATION: SATISFACTION & TRUST	ENGAGEMENT: SATISFACTION & POSITIVE EMOTIONS	ENGAGEMENT: ACTIONS & WORD-OF-MOUTH	MATURITY LEVEL
Airlines and social media	Establishing accounts on social media, getting followers to the org. account	Posting content and reacting to feedback (still to email/phone) -> no trust/ satisfaction yet	Twitter established customer service channel replying to questions and sharing information about flight delays etc. creates satisfaction	Not apparent	**Immature to developing**
Pandemic and social media	Listening started on org. channels as the number of followers rapidly grows	Satisfaction from the information shared and seeing replies on the wall	Getting replies to questions Finding the content and information shared interesting and helpful.	Useful content up-to-date, dialogue on the organisation's account, sharing content to spread information	**Developing**