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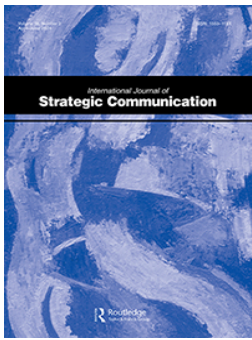
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# Organizational Voicing Architecture in the Age of Social Media – a Case Study in Professional Service Organizations

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## ABSTRACT

Digital communication technologies, particularly social media, enable members of organizations at all levels and across all functions to communicate with external stakeholders. This has required organizations to rethink and restructure their strategic communication management, especially the orchestration of their communicative human resources. Using a qualitative case-study approach, this article examines how professional service organizations create and maintain their stakeholder relations in the contemporary media landscape through the orchestration of employee voice and enactment as organizational spokespersons. The findings show that organizations have created structural architectures that they use as a basis for strategic communication management. Based on these findings, the study introduces a novel concept of organizational voicing architecture, which refers to the conceptual structure and overall logical arrangement of organizational spokespersons who act as organizational representatives in the corporate communication system. Additionally, by integrating the findings related to the voicing architecture with existing knowledge about organizational listening, the study broadens understanding of the mechanism with which organizations strategically orchestrate their stakeholder relationships, and hence contributes to the strategic and corporate communication and public relations literature.

During the past decade, digitalization and related changes in the communication environment have transformed strategic communication management by expanding the ways in which organizations and their stakeholders can develop and co-create their relationships (Brockhaus, Buhmann, & Zerfass, 2023; Leonardi & Treem, 2020). As social media platforms enable direct dialogue with an accelerated tempo in multiple forums (O'Connor & Shumate, 2018; Kent & Lane, 2017; Maben & Gearhart, 2018), it has been posited that organizations are increasingly dependent on the many voices of their individual members, who can speak on their behalf (Andersson et al., 2023; Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011; Pekkala, 2020), shaping the role of the organizational spokesperson, “who gives the organization a voice within a community” (Troester, 1991, p. 528). With this voice, individual members of an organization are “initiating, maintaining and improving stakeholder relationships” (Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019, p. 154) and thus becoming increasingly important strategic assets for organizations.

In addition to using their voice, organizational members play a critical role in listening to and making sense of events and discussions among diverse organizational stakeholders on social media

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(Macnamara, 2016, 2024). In fact, when it comes to developing relationships, listening is claimed to be as important as using one's voice, and recent research on stakeholder engagement has highlighted the role of organizational listening (e.g., Stewart & Arnold, 2018). Professional management of organizational voice and listening is fundamental to organizational decision-making and strategy alignment and may contribute to increasing trust and engagement (Erkkilä & Luoma-Aho, 2023; Macnamara, 2024; Pekkala, 2020). However, there is currently little research that would shed light on how organizations have organized their communicative human resources to support these aims.

This study focuses on strategic communication management, which refers to the management of strategically significant communication by a focal entity or organization (Zerfass et al., 2018). The article explores how professional service firms have organized themselves to build and maintain organizational reputation and stakeholder engagement through employee voice and enactment as spokespersons in an increasingly digitalized media environment. According to Elsbach (2003), whose definition we follow: "Organizational spokespersons convey or explain symbolic actions to organizational audiences. Spokespersons include anyone who is perceived by an audience member as representing the organization."

In addition to creating content and interacting with a variety of stakeholders as organizational representatives in social media, employees have an opportunity to gain new knowledge and industry insights, which duly enhances organizational learning (Nguyen et al., 2015). As a consequence, employees also have an important role in "gathering environmental information about organizational, societal, and technological development" (Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019, p. 154). Although the research focusing on drivers of excellence related to strategic communication management has gained traction (e.g., Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017; Zerfass et al., 2018), surprisingly little empirical research has focused on managerial strategy work related to employees' role in organizational representation and enabling organizational listening.

In this article, we draw on previous literature on strategic communication management, management of communicative organization, organizational spokespersons, and organizational listening. We begin with a literature review to illustrate how the social media environment has shaped the conceptualization of an organizational spokesperson and employee voice. After that, we demonstrate through a qualitative case study of two professional service organizations how organizations strategically orchestrate their communicative human resources. We contribute to the previous literature by introducing the concept of *organizational voicing architecture*, by which we mean *the strategically organized structure of organizational spokespersons that guides their communicative roles and capabilities in the corporate communication system*, thereby broadening understanding of employees' roles in strategic communication.

## Theoretical framework

### ***Strategic communication management, voicing and listening in organizations***

According to Zerfass et al. (2018, p. 497), "strategic communication management is the attempt to manage the communication of strategic significance with regard to a focal entity." Following this definition, strategic communication management in an organizational context pertains to the orchestration of communicative resources and activities that are regarded as critical success factors for the organization. In the digital communication environment, characterized by the increased significance of user-generated content, the strategic role of employees' communicative activity and competence has increased its importance (Verhoeven & Madsen, 2022). This is not only important in building relationships and trust with stakeholders but also in strategizing, which takes account of the views of stakeholders and happens through actively listening to them (Macnamara, 2024, 104–105).

Strategic communication management is a sub-area of general strategic management, which in turn has been defined as "a continuous process of thinking through the current mission of the organization, thinking through the current environmental conditions, and then combining these

elements by setting forth a guide for tomorrow's decisions and results" (Greene et al., 1985, p. 536). Strategic communication management is largely about the alignment between organizational strategy and abilities, the external environment, and stakeholder expectations (Volk & Zerfass, 2018), as well as communication activities and resources that are particularly relevant for an organization (Zerfass et al., 2018).

This study focuses on the strategic orchestration of communicative human resources, that is, organizational members that represent organizations to external stakeholders through communicative action in which they acquire, transfer and create knowledge (Pekkala, 2020). The approach leans towards (social) agency theory (Eisenhardt, 1989), which becomes helpful in explaining how communicative work (Pekkala, 2021) is delegated by the principal party to an agent, who then performs that work in a unique contextual setting. In this case, the principal party is an organization, represented communicatively by an agent – an individual employee – who acts as a spokesperson by giving a voice and listening capacity to the principal party, in this case their employer organization. In this paper, we adopt the term *orchestration*, which refers to the coordination of independent and interconnected members of a knowledge network by a hub actor (Ritala & Gailly, 2023), in this case the organization, which is represented by its members.

### **Organizational voicing**

According to the constitutive view, organizations emerge from multiple voices (Taylor & Cooren, 1997). In this study, we pay particular attention to the managerial approach towards organizational voicing, which refers to the strategic orchestration of communicative human resources affecting "how employees do voice and the way they make themselves heard" (Cassinger & Thelander, 2020 p. 198), so that those multiple voices are aligned to become a unified whole (Volk & Zerfass, 2018).

Distribution of agency in relation to organizational voice has been discussed under the term polyphony (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011), referring to "the integration of a multiplicity of internal and external voices into communication processes that are performed on behalf of the organization" (Schneider & Zerfass, 2018, p. 19). Polyphony is being understood as an emergent mode of strategic communication (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2016). In these settings, it has become critical to be able to integrate "different voices (plurality) into perceptible values of communication (unity) as well as in the alignment to strategic goals of the organization" (Schneider & Zerfass, 2018, p.19). As organizations have become more dependent on their employees' voice (i.e., their communication activity and competence), much of "communication management is transforming into the management of people who communicate" (Pekkala, 2020 p. 563).

It should also be noted that in the communication literature, agency has been approached from the relational perspective (Cooren, 2017, p. 142), which means that the agent is seen not only to "act for principals" but also "with and through" principals – and other actors. By adopting this view of organizational members as active agents functioning in relation to other actors, including their organizations, it becomes evident that individuals as organizational spokespersons may not only gain visibility and social capital for their organizations, but may also enhance their personal brand or role as a thought leader in the industry (Barry & Gironda, 2019). A thought leader is typically understood as a well-known industry expert who has an ability to exert significant influence over the decisions of others with their knowledge and communicative action (Barry & Gironda, 2019; Harvey et al., 2021). Thought leadership is based on a two-way process of communication that inspires thinking and learning (Young, 2013), and hence developing and disseminating knowledge are fundamental processes in generating thought leadership (Harvey et al., 2021).

Prior empirical research in the field of communication management has identified practices and processes that relate to the management of communicative human resources and has demonstrated that these practices derive from the behavioral management tradition (Pekkala, 2020). In this research, we aim instead to shed light on the strategic orchestration of these communicative human resources by exploring how organizations are structured to enable spokesperson agency, particularly in the social media environment.

### **Organizational listening**

Strategic communication scholars have recently emphasized that in addition to gaining visibility and using their voice, organizations should think much more about how they listen, namely pay attention to, interpret, and understand their stakeholders (Macnamara, 2013, 2016, 2018). This is particularly important for strategic alignment with the operating environment along with the multifaceted and constantly changing expectations, beliefs, and demands of different stakeholder groups (Vercic & Zerfass, 2016; Volk & Zerfass, 2018). Digitalization has further accelerated the pace of change in the operating environment and increased the role of employees in continuous listening and monitoring, making them active agents who contribute to the strategic alignment of the organization and influence its success (Macnamara, 2024).

This type of organizational listening is considered an important organizational capability for enhancing operations and offerings (Macnamara, 2016, 2024), for creating stakeholder trust and engagement (Bannister & Connelly, 2014), especially in the social media environment (Gearhart & Maben, 2023; Stewart & Arnold, 2018), and also for combating misinformation (Clemente-Suarez et al., 2022). Organizational listening consists of “a combination of an employee’s listening skills and the environment in which the listening occurs” (Burnside Lawry, 2011, p.1). Particularly the skill of social listening, referring to “an active process of attending to, observing, interpreting, and responding to a variety of stimuli through mediated, electronic, and social channels” (Stewart and Arnold, 2018, p. 86), has become a prerequisite for a spokesperson to be able to interact in these arenas. “Without listening carefully to stakeholder needs, satisfying these needs and establishing a real conversation, organizations will not be able to attain the sought-after engagement that leads to a stable and lasting relationship with the public” (Navarro et al., 2018, p. 28).

In his seminal work, Macnamara (2016), introduced the ‘organizational listening architecture’, describing key elements for managing listening professionally, including organizational culture, policies, systems and structure, as well as the resources, skills, technologies, and practices used by an organization to listen to its stakeholders and use this knowledge strategically to enhance its performance. Lewis (2020) defined strategic organizational listening broadly as “a set of methodologies and structures designed and utilized to ensure that an organization’s attention is directed toward vital information and input to enable learning, questioning of key assumptions, interrogating decisions, and ensuring self-critical analysis.” In general, earlier research focuses on defining the key elements, expectations and benefits of listening as well as definitions of organizational listening, but what is missing are practical case examples of how organizations manage their listening (Gearhart & Maben, 2023, Macnamara, 2016, 2024; Volk, 2023).

One of the challenges involved in listening on social network sites relates to the sheer number of stakeholders and relevant networks, and hence the large amount of information available: “organizations are commonly expected to listen to thousands, or even hundreds of thousands of people” (Macnamara, 2024, p. 79), which in practice means that organizations need to scale up their listening methods. To overcome this challenge, organizational listening can be delegated to a range of departments and teams (Macnamara, 2024, p. 48), highlighting the role of employees operating within organizational boundaries, such as acting as an organizational spokesperson on social media.

### **The role of the spokespersons in strategic communication**

Organizational members are regarded as one of the most important strategic constituencies for corporate reputation because they interact with the company’s stakeholders daily (Kim & Rhee, 2011, p. 243). On the other hand, they can be a company’s strongest supporters – or most vocal critics if they are not engaged or are treated unfairly (Miles & Mangold, 2014). Through social media sites, CEOs, managers or employees in any position or function can communicate their workplace experiences to hundreds or even thousands of people outside the organization (Miles & Mangold, 2014).

Traditionally, organizational spokespersons were visible leaders or public relations practitioners (Elsbach, 2003; Järventie-Thesleff et al., 2011; Pressgrove & Kim, 2022). Several researchers have particularly emphasized the CEO’s role as an organizational spokesperson, who personifies the

organization, acts as the highest-level corporate spokesperson, and sets the tone for internal communication practice, thereby influencing employee attitudes, trust in leadership, and performance (Park & Berger, 2004; Zerfass & Viertmann, 2016).

Digital communication technologies, particularly social media, have affected the way that individuals and organizations communicate. From an organizational point of view, the digitalization of the communication environment has allowed corporate communications to become a shared responsibility with many different actors, allowing organizations to communicate with many different voices simultaneously (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011).

Verhoeven and Madsen (2022) suggest that the strategic communication of organizational members toward external stakeholders could be characterized by eight functional roles. The first four roles – the embodier, promotor, defender, and relationship builder – describe ambassador, that is, spokesperson roles referring to employees using their voice on behalf of their organizations. The last four roles – scout, sensemaker, innovator, and critic – can be interpreted as describing employees' roles in organizational listening and organizational development.

Given these multiple roles, conventional structures designed to support the communication of only a single actor, such as the official spokesperson, do not work in today's dynamic and complex operational environment, in which polyphony and dialogue are expected. Thus, the ongoing change in organizational representation requires new ways of organizing communicative roles and, as we argue in this article, new organizational voicing architectures that help organizations to orchestrate their communicative human resources.

### ***The role of spokespersons on social media***

Among the many definitions of social media, we follow Vaast (2020), who has defined social media as “web-based applications that enable their users to connect, communicate and exchange with multiple others beyond geographical or temporal distance and organizational boundaries” (Vaast, 2020, p. 1675). In line with this definition, we aim to highlight that social media is founded on the idea of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) and provides multiple arenas for information sharing and interaction between organizations and their stakeholders (Watkins, 2017).

Social media has become a valuable platform for organizations to share information and interact with stakeholders and the public (Rautiainen & Jokinen, 2022). Stakeholder engagement is important for organizations (e.g., de Oliveira Santini, 2020), and developing relationships through communication and interaction with stakeholders is a key objective of strategic communication (Zerfass et al., 2018). Traditionally, the communications department is responsible for managing social media presence and engagement (Valentini et al., 2012), posting content and eventually listening, which involves asking and answering questions online (Maben & Gearhart, 2018). But due to the multiple channels and discussion forums online, the ability of employees to communicate and interact independently on social media has become a critical area for strategic communication management.

Therefore, it has been posited that the adoption of social media as a strategic communication platform has changed organizational voice mechanisms (Riemer, Stieglitz & Meske, 2015) and required organizations to adopt new processes and practices to enable and motivate employees to communicate on their behalf (Pekkala, 2020). It has been found that employees are increasingly aware of the opportunity to use their voice to share their views about their organization on social media (Cassinger & Thelander, 2020), and that some employees consider work-related social media communication as part of their work role (Pekkala & van Zoonen, 2023). Recent empirical studies have shown that individuals can cultivate relationships to build social capital on social media (Chen & Lee, 2022), and duly become corporate influencers who are able to shape their readers' perceptions through parasocial interactions (Egbert & Rudeloff, 2023). On the other hand, empirical studies show that organizations differ in their maturity when it comes to including social media in their operations (Pekkala, 2020), and that employees may lack confidence in their competence to use social media professionally (Pekkala & van Zoonen, 2022). In the current media environment, organizations need



spokespersons with diverse skills and competences, ranging from digital content creation to the skill of listening (Macnamara, 2018; Pekkala, 2020).

## Method

To explore how organizations orchestrate their communicative human resources in the age of social media, we conducted a case study (Yin, 2018) in two professional service firms operating in the financial sector in Finland. Our research approach is qualitative, and our aim is to generate first-hand insights into this novel phenomenon by conducting semi-structured interviews with managers responsible for spokesperson strategy, and by observing organizational spokespersons in the respective organizations. Through the case-study design, we were able to conduct an in-depth and context-sensitive interpretive analysis (Welch et al., 2011; Yin, 2018) of the spokesperson strategies and organizational voicing architectures in use.

Both case organizations operate in the financial sector in Finland and provide financial services to both private and corporate customers. It is widely acknowledged that trust plays an important role in the financial sector. Prior literature suggests that consumers' need for trust arises in the financial services sector as they seldom have full knowledge about the products and services available to them. Hence, "for a customer to accept vulnerability, they must be confident that the product provider has the expertise to deliver what is promised" (Ennew et al., 2011, p. 68). Relatedly, the financial sector is typically a relatively regulated field, and operations in this field (including corporate communication and public relations activities) are regulated in Finland, for example, by national and EU-level institutions such as the Financial Supervisory Authority (FIN-FSA). Selecting case organizations that operate in a regulated field was considered particularly interesting because social media as a communicative context is found to challenge strategic communication by increasing polyphony and decreasing the opportunities to control the communicative acts of individual members of an organization.

Both case organizations are relatively large in size and employ thousands of employees that are dispersed in local offices in many locations in Finland. They have both been present in social media environments for more than a decade and have used social media as a platform to communicate with their stakeholders, building their brands, managing their reputation, and listening to online discussions concerning the company, field of industry, or public service.

## Data and analytical process

Since our objective was to shed light on media spokesperson strategies in use and to explore how organizations have strategically organized stakeholder engagement with their communicative human resources, the primary empirical data consists of recorded semi-structured interviews with communications and human resource managers ( $N = 10$ ). In both case companies, we interviewed communications and HR executives and managers involved in the strategic orchestration of employees' social media communication. In addition to the interview data, we familiarized ourselves with further data such as the companies' social media policies and publicly available information on their websites (e.g., corporate blogs and press releases) and in social media (e.g., social media posts and shared content).

A common characteristic of all interviewees was their managerial position related to spokesperson strategy and employee communication programs in the case organizations. In this respect, we applied purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002). The interviews lasted between 45 and 120 minutes and were conducted face-to-face by the first author between April 2019 and June 2020. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The analysis started by reading the interview transcripts and identifying the parts that were linked to organizing spokespersons and their communicative activities. Following the first reading, open coding using Atlas.ti software was conducted. In the second phase, we examined similarities and interrelations between the open codes with the aim of identifying patterns, insights and conceptual



categories within the data. After identifying the conceptual categories in the interview data, we realized that we were dealing with organized structures that reveal how spokespersons in the case organizations are orchestrated. Hence, we went back to the communication management literature and iteratively compared our findings with the extant literature on structures and architectures (Macnamara, 2013, 2016). Descriptions of the case organizations and the findings of our analysis are provided in the following sections.

## Case organizations

The first organization, referred to here as Alpha, operates in the financial sector in Finland and employs approximately 3,000 people. The company's operations are spread across regional areas in Finland and serve both private and corporate customers. One of the organization's strategic priorities is to establish a culture where every member of the organization feels that they are authorized and able to represent their organization in the digital media environment, and to interact with customers and other stakeholders. To this end, Alpha had recently defined a new spokesperson strategy, which it had invested in implementing by training its employees, for example.

The second case organization, Beta, also operates in the financial sector in Finland and employs approximately 12,000 employees. Beta's operations are likewise distributed across regional areas in Finland, serving both private and corporate customers. Beta has also systemically developed its employees' capabilities to act as organizational spokespersons and has continuously developed its strategic communication management model to respond to the changing needs of the increasingly digital and social communication environment.

## Findings

This section introduces the findings of the study. It begins by explaining how the case organizations had involved employees as spokespersons in their strategy work and how the interviewees described the process. It then outlines the different voicing architecture designs and describes in more detail how case organizations Alpha and Beta designed their voicing architecture.

### **Objectives and strategy in defining a voicing architecture**

Both case organizations had organized their communicative human resources to orchestrate the support, activities, and competence development for different spokesperson groups. Hence, they had created an organizational structure specifically for strategic communication management purposes, for example by providing guidance related to different roles and the development of related capabilities. Accordingly, this *organizational voicing architecture*, as we call it in this article, defined the strategic organization of how the different individual members of staff were encouraged and equipped to represent the organization to external stakeholders.

The case organizations used to have traditional, dedicated media spokespersons (e.g., the CEO and specific industry professionals such as economists) who served the news media and gave the organization a voice in different situations related to organizational achievements, changes, and crises. However, the interviews in both case organizations showed that social media and its affordances had required the organizations to rethink their spokesperson architecture and to formulate a strategy and design a structure that included the whole personnel instead of just the dominant coalition and specific experts. Furthermore, the spokesperson role was no longer seen as being a transmitter of the organizational voice in situations of change, achievement, or crisis. Instead, spokespersons and their individual experiences and expertise were seen to create a competitive advantage through thought leadership, a positive employer brand, and the creation and maintenance of stakeholder relationships. In the following sections, we report on how these organizational voicing architectures, and their emergence, was described by the interviewees from the case organizations.

### **The differing designs of voicing architecture**

Both organizations had voicing architecture defined as part of their strategic communication management, describing how members of the organization with varying organizational positions, work roles and communicative capabilities are encouraged and equipped to represent their organization to external stakeholders. By duly defining the spokesperson types and primary channels for their communication, organizations can plan how they educate, support, and monitor different spokespersons and thus guide their activities in line with the overall corporate strategy.

Both case organizations covered several media outlets in their voicing architecture. Hence the strategy was not only focused on news media, but also included the respective organization's own media (e.g., organizational blogs and podcasts targeted at their external stakeholders) and their employees' own media (primarily their personal social media). At a more tactical level, the voicing strategy also included how the spokespersons were trained, guided and supported.

### **Case Alpha**

The way in which the voicing architecture was designed differed between the two organizations. In *Alpha*, the voicing architecture included four different levels and spokesperson types that differed in their responsibilities and opportunities to gain organizational support. The spokespersons at these four different levels were trained, supported and monitored in a different manner. The four different levels were based on employees' work roles and willingness to act as organizational spokespersons. Alpha's Head of Communications described the way they designed their architecture as follows:

We started to do this systematically, and then we decided to establish this type of spokesperson strategy. We have four levels, the highest – or lowest, depending on how you describe it, is the CEO category, and they are our primary spokespersons in the media. They are the ones who set the direction and serve as role models, and in our cultural transformation we need our leaders to be committed and to lead by example so that the rest of the organization has the courage to start acting. (Alpha interviewee 1)

The voicing architecture of organization Alpha is presented in [Table 1](#). As the table shows, different spokesperson levels included a different type of media coverage, training opportunities and follow-up in the form of performance analysis. In addition, in Alpha, the architecture also included generic content themes that were agreed together with spokespersons at different architecture levels. For

**Table 1.** Spokesperson architecture in case company Alpha.

Spokesperson type	Spokesperson role within organization	Media outlets	Content themes	Training	Follow-up
Leader spokesperson	Primary spokespersons, role models	News media, social media	Business, industry news, strategic themes	Media training (news & social media)	Monthly follow-up meetings, Media statistics analysis Follower statistics
Professional spokesperson	Expertise area spokespersons	News media, social media	Expertise themes	Media training (news & social media)	Monthly follow-up meetings
Employee advocate	Organizational spokespersons	Social media (internal & external)	Personal expertise, organizational achievements, workplace culture	Social media training, webinars, clinics	Follow-up webinars
Employee representative	Organizational representatives	Social media (internal and external)	Depending on personal interest	Social media training, webinars, clinics	No systematic follow-up

**Table 2.** Spokesperson architecture in case company Beta.

Spokesperson type	Spokesperson role within organization	Media outlets	Content themes	Training	Follow-up
Influencer	Advanced news media and social media spokespersons	News media, social media	Own interests	Media and social media training and personal coaching	Personal media and social media monitoring and analytics
Expert	Experienced and active social media users	Social media	Own interests	Social media training	According to own interest
Employee representative	Employee representatives	Social media	Own interests	Social media training (basic course compulsory)	According to own interest

example, they had set a target for their area CEO-level spokespersons to maintain a certain level of activity on social media.

And what it means for them is that they tweet three to seven times a week, they participate in conversations started by others, they like and comment and are present there. So we have defined what it means to be active on social media as a CEO-level spokesperson. (Alpha interviewee 1)

With the voicing architecture, the case organization aimed to create a structure that would help them to orchestrate employees in different spokesperson roles. As one of the interviewees in Alpha commented:

I think that systematic work in this type of employee empowerment and development is important . . . and it helps individual employees to be more active, so our target is to create a structure that provides a way for individuals to upskill. (Alpha interviewee 2)

To be able to do this, interviewees also emphasized that organizational spokespersons need to listen to and monitor different media, especially social media where they are personally present.

And maybe monitoring channels in your own job. This used to just involve email and the intranet, but now there's so many that you need to manage and deal with, so you have to have some systems in place to make sure that things aren't happening there without you noticing. (Alpha interviewee 5)

Around the same time that Alpha were creating their voicing architecture, they were aware that the media environment is in a constant state of flux. Hence, they realized that they had to be ready to adapt their architecture in response to changes in the media environment or in stakeholder expectations:

. . . We need to be able to adapt all the time, so if we find that the biggest need is on Instagram, for example, then we go there. So we don't get locked into the mindset that we've already decided that we're on Twitter or on LinkedIn, and if something else is needed, we develop our operations accordingly. (Alpha interviewee 1)

### Case Beta

The voicing architecture in case organization *Beta* (presented in Table 2) was based on the idea of employees' capability to exert an influence. This meant that employees, when selected for certain roles, were considered to have a certain level of influence and the best knowledge about the interests of their stakeholders. The Communications Manager from Beta stated that:

We've constructed our representation on social media in such a way that we've selected key experts that we want to enhance our thought leadership, and so we have a pool of all kinds of individual experts that receive advanced coaching, which includes media training such as interview techniques, and social media coaching is also a part of that. We've set specific objectives for these individuals, such as how many followers they should aim to get this year on Twitter and how they should grow their network and personal brand. (Beta interviewee 1)

The first level in their voicing architecture included strategic corporate spokespersons and corporate influencers, who were considered the most influential and active group of spokespeople. This group included spokespersons who were dedicated to the organization (e.g., the CEO and key industry

experts such as economists), but also employees who were ‘self-made’ influencers, who had built up a large following among their networks and were actively communicating to that network for work-related purposes. The influencers were expected to have advanced skills and they received both news and social media training at an advanced level. The second level of Beta’s spokesperson architecture consisted of experts who had basic skills, were already active on social media, and were willing to develop their communication and interaction skills, particularly in the social media environment. The third level of Beta’s spokesperson architecture included all employees, who were provided with basic training and compulsory training modules (e.g., social media policies) that they needed to complete as an employee of the company.

Regarding the different levels of our employee representation, all employees have access to basic social media training sessions, which are provided as online courses. One of them is actually obligatory for all employees. More individualized training is typically provided for leaders or leading experts. (Beta interviewee 1)

In their spokesperson training, Beta emphasized the importance of listening to and understanding different channels and stakeholders and their expectations.

You need to be able to scrutinize the environment and weak signals and trends. (Beta interviewee 1)

### ***The execution of spokesperson strategy***

By defining the spokesperson strategy and formulating the organizational voicing architecture, both organizations were able to plan how they educate, support and monitor their communicative human resources, and therefore prioritize their activities in line with the overall corporate strategy in the current communication environment and the existing organizational capability. In terms of skills, the architecture included how the spokespersons were trained, supported, and developed to be able to communicate and interact on behalf of their organization.

As the spokesperson capabilities evolved, it was also possible to develop the activities that were suggested for each spokesperson group. Both organizations mentioned that the implementation of voicing strategy is not a one-way street. Rather, the whole process is developed together with the spokespeople, who help develop organization-wide processes by pointing out what does and does not work according to their experience, and generally suggesting what they think should be done, as they were considered to know their networks best.

## **Discussion**

The increased significance of social media in strategic and corporate communications has enhanced the role of staff at all organizational levels and in all functions when it comes to communicating with external stakeholders. This has required organizations to rethink and restructure their strategic communication management, especially the orchestration of their communicative human resources. The study at hand focused on the strategic management of communications in an organization with multiple spokespersons, namely organizational members that represent their organization to external stakeholders, and specifically on how organizational spokespersons’ communicative activity is structured in professional service organizations.

Based on earlier research, one of the key processes in the strategic orchestration of communicative human resources includes empowering individuals, that is, giving individual employees agency in the process of organizational representation. The findings of this study suggest that this process is organized via organizations’ voicing architecture. By establishing an organizational voicing architecture, any employee in an organization can become a spokesperson and a boundary spanner (Kim & Rhee, 2011) that uses their voice and listening capability for their employer. With this study, we contribute to prior research by demonstrating how case organizations strategically manage their spokespersons and their communicative activities by introducing a novel concept of *organizational*

voicing architecture, referring to the strategically organized structure of organizational spokespersons that guides their communicative roles and capabilities in the corporate communication system. In so doing, we extend the structural understanding of strategic communication management in the contemporary media landscape (e.g., Macnamara, 2016).

### Theoretical implications

This study contributes to the literature on strategic communication management, which deals with the management of communicative resources and activities that are regarded as critical success factors for the organization (e.g., Zerfass et al., 2018). In the increasingly digital communication environment, characterized by the growing significance of user-generated content, the strategic role of employees' communicative activity and competence has increased in importance (Kim & Rhee, 2011; Pekkala, 2021; Verhoeven & Madsen, 2022). We contribute to the prior literature by identifying spokesperson strategies in use and by conceptualizing the structuring of organizational spokespersons in the age of social media as organizational voicing architecture, thereby widening the understanding of employees' roles in strategic communication. Following Kim and Rhee (2011), this case study provides examples of how to orchestrate individual employees' work as boundary spanners-in-practice, serving as agents between the organization and its environment, and acting as megaphones (speakers) and scouts (listeners). By demonstrating how the orchestration is coordinated, through roles and related expectations and support, we also contribute to the literature and discussion on the strategic management of employee communicators (Andersson, 2019) and the management of communicative organizations (Pekkala, 2020). This study also contributes to the literature related to organizational listening (Macnamara, 2013, 2016) by integrating the organizational listening and voicing architectures into the integrated model of two-way communication in an organization (Figure 1), and shows how organizational members in social media can contribute to the work of aligning the organization's strategy (Volk & Zerfass, 2018) and act through an emergent approach (Macnamara, 2024).

First, the findings suggest the concept of organizational voicing architecture, which seem to involve employees from all functional and hierarchical levels. The data showed that social media and its affordances had required organizations to rethink their spokesperson strategies and to formulate

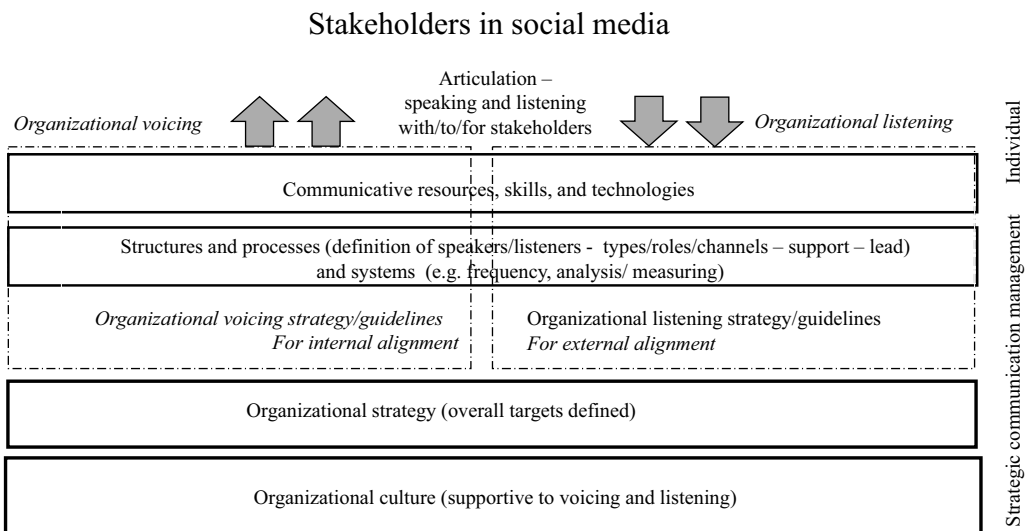


Figure 1. Architecture of organizational voicing and listening (adapted from Macnamara, 2010, 2013).

a strategy and structure that included not only dedicated (news media) spokespersons but the personnel more widely.

Second, the role of spokesperson was not seen as a transmitter of the organizational voice in specific situations such as organizational change, achievements, or crisis. Instead, spokespersons, and their individual experiences and expertise, were seen to have an important role in co-creation of meaning with different stakeholders. In other words, they created a competitive advantage through their contribution to thought leadership, a positive employer brand, acquiring knowledge and the creation and maintenance of stakeholder relationships by listening to and monitoring discussions in social media. These findings expand the earlier description of organizational spokespersons, whereby they are defined as those who “convey or explain symbolic actions to organizational audiences” (Elsbach, 2003).

Third, the data showed that organizational voicing architecture was an important element of strategic communication management in the case organizations. The voicing architecture consisted of a conceptual structure wherein the organization is represented to external stakeholders by different individual members of the organization with varying organizational positions, work roles and communicative capabilities. By defining the spokesperson types and primary media for their communication, organizations can plan how they educate, support and monitor different spokesperson types and therefore plan their activities in line with the overall corporate strategy.

Macnamara, (2016, p. 315) called for further research and “real-life models” on process structures in practice, namely how organizations enable interaction with their stakeholders by putting established architectures and processes in place. In these real-life case study examples, the case organizations have cultures supporting a multi-spokesperson strategy, with the requisite resources, skills and processes; spokespersons receive training and support to act in social media, and they also monitor and participate in discussions and reply to comments in their own posts. Thus, their role also requires skills in social listening and interaction (Stewart and Arnold, 2018). Based on these case examples, we propose a holistic model integrating the organizational voicing architecture with the organizational listening architecture proposed by Macnamara (2013).

Figure 1 presents an integrated model of organizational voicing and listening as applied to Macnamara’s listening architecture (Macnamara, 2010, 2016). The new elements demonstrate the interconnectedness of these two structures, which rely on employee agency and coordinated orchestration. The model shows the balance between the two: internally aligned messaging supports the strategic targets of an organization and external alignment requires active listening, whereby insights and feedback are received and applied by the organization. This model aims to support an organization’s strategy in its orchestration of its employees as speakers and listeners, or megaphones and scouts for the company. In accordance with the model, individual employees act on the boundary between the organization and its stakeholders, and hence the resources, skills and technologies used by each individual moderate both processes, voicing and listening. The management of both processes is founded on the idea of alignment with a voicing strategy and guidelines for speaking and listening, which require structures, processes, and practices. An operative structure with roles and responsibilities, as well as supportive processes and practices, is needed to achieve the best results. Spokespersons use their voice and listening capability based on these resources to articulate the insights externally and internally. The balance between speaking and listening varies depending on the situation.

In summary, the integrated model of organizational voicing and listening provides a way to analyze the strategic orchestration of organizational spokespersons. In this case study, the voicing and listening architectures that were identified differed between the two case organizations. In case organization Alpha, the architecture was formed based on organizational roles and employees’ own willingness to act as organization spokespersons. In the case of organization Beta, the key principle in the design of the architecture was organizational members’ ability to exert an influence. This identified difference provides an interesting avenue for future research.

## **Practical implications**

This article focuses on the strategy work that relates to building and maintaining organizational reputation and strategically orchestrating stakeholder relationships through organizational spokespersons in an increasingly digital media environment, duly providing multiple contributions for strategic and corporate communications practitioners.

The results demonstrate two different ways of designing an organizational voicing architecture in the professional service sector, providing practical examples of how the architecture can be formulated, and the kind of elements that are needed in the architecture to allow the strategic management of organizational voicing and listening. We hope that making these architectural designs visible will help organizations across sectors to define an architecture for their strategic (digital) communication management that is best suited to their branch or field.

Moreover, the findings will help practitioners to understand how they can differentiate themselves by strategically orchestrating their communicative human resources, for example with the aim of generating thought leadership, namely the organization's ability to reshape industry thinking in ways that benefit brands (Barry & Gironda, 2019). Thought leadership has become a strategic tool for companies to differentiate themselves in the marketplace (Bourne, 2015) and to exemplify their social capital (Barry & Gironda, 2019). Indeed, industry reports confirm that thought leadership is the key to gaining customers' attention (Edelman & LinkedIn, 2022) and hence it has been empirically associated with enhancing business revenue (Korzynski, Paniagua, & Mazurek, 2022).

By defining their voicing architecture, organizations can plan how they educate, support and monitor their communicative human resources, and therefore prioritize their activities in line with the overall corporate strategy in the current communication environment and their existing organizational capability.

In addition, the results provide new insights into how communicative human resources contribute to the value creation process through organizational listening and acting as boundary spanners, enabling flexibility and strategy adjustment (Zerfass et al., 2018). Macnamara (2023) points out that organizational listening requires and depends on the systematic analysis of data, and hence the communication management function is in a key role in coordinating the different methods of listening (Volk, 2023). In this study, we argue that these activities should be planned in coordination with organizational voicing to ensure optimal external alignment.

Finally, by providing an integrated framework for organizational voicing and listening, organizations can plan more effectively how to develop their listening as "an active process of attending to, observing, interpreting, and responding to a variety of stimuli through mediated, electronic, and social channels" (Stewart and Arnold, 2018, p. 86).

## **Conclusions and limitations**

In this article, we first illustrated through a literature review how the increased significance of social media has shaped the role of organizational spokespersons. Second, we demonstrated through a case study how companies strategically organize their employees in these multiple spokesperson roles. We contribute to the prior literature by introducing the concept of organizational voicing architecture and by identifying spokesperson strategies in use. Finally, we propose a holistic model of organizational voicing and listening, mapping the individual and organizational-level functions in orchestrating communicative human resources, thereby broadening understanding of employees' role in strategic communication.

The case organizations in this study operate in the professional service sector, and therefore the generalizability of our results must be left to further studies that explore the spokesperson architecture across industrial sectors. We also acknowledge that our analysis is interpretive and descriptive, and hence the results may not encompass all possible dimensions of the phenomenon in question.



## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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