

JYU DISSERTATIONS 793

Taina Erkkilä

Towards Maturity in Alignment

**Balancing Organizational Listening
and Speaking on Social Media**



JYVÄSKYLÄ UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS

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ABSTRACT

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The swift progression in the popularity of social media has significantly impacted organizations. Over the past decade, the role of corporate communications has undergone a significant transformation, evolving into the management and alignment of a dynamic system where interconnected components contribute to organizational representation.

This thesis explores factors that either facilitate or impede effective listening and speaking processes on social media within organizations. It enhances our understanding of how organizations can leverage social listening also in management to align strategies or services to better meet the needs of stakeholders. The dissertation consists of four articles along with this overarching summary. Sub-studies 1 and 2 delve into the maturity and triggers for organizational presence and listening in social media. Sub-study 3 is an empirical, qualitative examination of how communication departments in public organizations, responsible for COVID-19-related communication to citizens, managed the considerable number of comments and questions on their social media channels. Sub-study 4 is a case study on the strategic management of social media communication in two large financial organizations, proposing a new voicing architecture.

The findings suggest that organizations undergo distinct phases of maturity in their adoption of social media. Triggers for active speaking and listening are often related to crisis or issue management. A challenge lies in maintaining a balance between speaking and listening. To support the management of this dynamic system, employees serving as spokespersons for an organization can also act as listening agents. This dissertation elucidates the process of developing and strategically managing the organizational voicing and listening function to optimally support strategic alignment with an emergent approach. A professionally managed social listening approach supports an organization's resilience and external alignment in the rapidly changing operating environment, fostering trust and engagement among stakeholders.

Keywords: organizational listening, listening agent, social media, strategic communication management, voicing and listening architecture

TIIVISTELMÄ (ABSTRACT IN FINNISH)

Erkkilä, Taina

Sosiaalisen median kuuntelun ja puhumisen tasapaino organisaation strategisten linjausten tukena

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Nopeasti kasvanut sosiaalisen median suosio on vaikuttanut merkittävästi organisaatioihin. Viime vuosikymmenen aikana organisaatioviestinnän rooli on muuttunut merkittävästi, sillä sosiaalisessa mediassa organisaation toiminnot ja sen sidosryhmät kohtaavat, ja kanavissa läsnäolo ja toiminta vaatii ammattimaista johtamista.

Tämä väitöskirja tutkii eri tekijöiden vaikutusta organisaatioiden aktiivisuuteen sosiaalisessa mediassa, ja edistää tietämystämme siitä, miten organisaatiot voivat hyötyä sosiaalisesta kuuntelusta, ei ainoastaan viestinnän vaan myös johtamisen välineenä, ja voivat mukauttaa strategiansa tai palvelunsa vastaamaan paremmin sidosryhmiensä tarpeita. Väitöskirjaan kuuluu neljä tutkimusartikkelia ja tämä yhteenveto. Osatutkimukset 1 ja 2 käsittelevät esimerkein organisaation läsnäolon ja kuuntelun kypsyyttä ja motiiveja sosiaalisessa mediassa. Kolmas osatutkimus on empiirinen, laadullinen tutkimus siitä, miten COVID-19:ään liittyvästä kansalaisviestinnästä vastaavien julkisten organisaatioiden viestintäosastot hallitsivat huomattavan määrän kommentteja ja kysymyksiä sosiaalisen median kanavissaan. Neljäs osatutkimus on tapaustutkimus sosiaalisen median viestinnän strategisesta johtamisesta kahdessa rahoitusalan organisaatiossa ja ehdottaa uutta mallia kuuntelun ja puhumisen tasapainottamiseen.

Tulosten mukaan organisaatiot käyvät läpi erilaisia kypsyysvaiheita sosiaalisen median käyttöönotossa, ja kriisi usein aiheuttaa nopean kehitysloikan passiivisesta läsnäolosta aktiiviiseen. Haasteena voi olla puhumisen ja kuuntelemisen tasapainottaminen. Organisaation työntekijöitä voidaan myös valjastaa viestijöiksi tukemaan viestintää. Tässä väitöskirjassa selvitetään, miten organisaation sosiaalisen median puhe/kuuntelutoimintoa johdetaan strategisesti niin että se parhaiten tukee organisaation strategisia linjauksia. Ammattimaisesti johdettu kuuntelu organisaation resilienssiä mahdollistaen nopeat strategiset linjaukset muuttuvassa toimintaympäristössä, luoden luottamusta ja sitouttaen sidosryhmiä.

Avainsanat: organisaation kuuntelu, kuunteluagentti, sosiaalinen media, strategisen viestinnän johtaminen, puhumisen ja kuuntelun johtamisen malli.

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LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS AND DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

In addition to the shell part, this dissertation consists of four independent articles.

Article I

Erkkilä, T. & Syvänen, S. (2019). Kuuntelun ja dialogin kypsyyss sosiaalisessa mediassa. In V. Luoma-aho & K. Pekkala (Eds.), *Osallistava viestintä* (pp. 1–12). *ProComma Academic*, 2019. <http://doi.org/10.31885/2019.00008>

Authors' contributions: Erkkilä: study design, data gathering, and analysis built on the original data gathered by a group of students' first (80/20%), theory framework, conceptual analysis, writing the article, review & editing. Syvänen: writing contribution to theory part. Luoma-aho V. & Pekkala K (eds.): advice on article focus, review & editing.

Article II

Erkkilä, T. & Luoma-aho, V. (2023). Maturity in leaps and bounds – organizational listening for customer engagement. *Journal of marketing communications*, 29(2), (pp. 179-190).
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Authors' contributions: Erkkilä: conceptualization, data gathering and forming to illustrative examples, theoretical framework, writing the article, visualization, review & editing. Luoma-aho: conceptualization, review, contribution to conclusions, commenting on the manuscript and visuals.

Article III

Erkkilä, T. & Luoma-aho, V. (2023) Alert but somewhat unaligned: Public sector organizations' social media listening strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Communication Management (London, England)*, 27(1), (pp. 120–135). <http://doi.org/10.1108/JCOM-02-2022-0015>

Authors' contributions: Erkkilä: study design, theoretical framework, conducting interviews, data gathering, methodology and analysis, findings/conclusions, writing/editing the article, visualization. Luoma-aho: advice on theoretical framework, contribution to conclusions, review, commenting on different versions and visuals.

Article IV

Pekkala, K. & Erkkilä, T. (2024). Organizational voicing architecture in the age of social media – a case study in professional service organizations. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, published online 11 April 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2024.2325690>

Authors' contributions: Pekkala: study design, theoretical framework, data collection, methodology, analysis, findings, and discussion/conclusions. Writing and editing the article. Erkkilä: study design, theoretical framework, visualization discussion/conclusions. Writing and editing the article.

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The journey has been quite extensive. In the spring of 2016, I made the decision to resign from my job, feeling that it was time for a new chapter. Reflecting on my extensive experience and learnings in the field of Communications and Marketing, I realized that adopting a researcher's perspective offered unexplored opportunities even after several decades in my career. Motivated to delve into this "green field," I reached out to Professor Vilma Luoma-aho, who warmly encouraged me to apply for doctoral studies. My study plan was accepted in the autumn of 2016.

The experience has been an adventure, undoubtedly one of the most demanding roles I have ever undertaken. Embarking on doctoral studies means setting aside everything learned in the business realm and starting afresh, from a clean slate. Yet, here I am now, with the journey completed.

I am genuinely grateful – and simultaneously quite weary. My dissertation embodies over seven years of effort put in during evenings, weekends, holidays, and nights. It encompasses countless hours of research, reflection, and unwavering dedication. There were moments when I came close to giving up after a couple of years, but Elina Jokinen – your invaluable support during the one-week studying retreat in Konnevesi in November 2020 revitalized my commitment. Following that week, I regained my momentum, and I am profoundly thankful to you for that.

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This dissertation is dedicated to the future strong women, my dear granddaughters Méa, Minea and Matilda.

Espoo, May 2024
Taina Erkkilä

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ORIGINAL ARTICLES

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the research

The concept of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989) was defined as a domain where public opinion is shaped when citizens engage in debates, and it acts as a mediating layer between the government and citizens. Over the past decade, social media has emerged as a crucial channel for communication between organizations and their stakeholders (Macnamara, 2024), and could be called a modern multi-sphere for public discussion.

The rapidly growing popularity among citizens in using social media platforms has contributed to social media development, allowing anyone to engage in discussions and become a media entity. Digitalization has thus significantly expanded the original concept of the public sphere and transformed the role of organizational communication management. It has shifted from mere gatekeeping to strategic oversight of the entire organization's communications and digital interactions with key stakeholders (Avidar et al., 2015).

Organizations utilizing social media can, however, facilitate dialogue between citizens and the government (Yi et al., 2013), and this interaction has the potential to impact agenda setting, a process explored by Conway et al. (2015). Several studies have examined the intersection of social media and the public sector from various angles. For instance, Bowden et al. (2016) explored citizen engagement, Canel and Luoma-aho (2019) focused on citizen participation, and Tuurnas (2020) investigated co-creation in this context. Achieving these organizational objectives necessitates not only effective communication but also organizational listening, which has not been widely studied.

Social media provides a direct and public link between organizations and their stakeholders. Managing reputation and cultivating trust in this evolving multisphere environment has introduced new challenges for both public and private organizations. The boundaries between individual and mass

communication within public spheres have become increasingly blurred, resulting in the emergence of multiple public spheres, and leading to a decrease in reach for individual media and communicators (Seeliger & Sevigani, 2022).

Private companies have faced challenges when they receive rankings and public feedback from one customer related to their services in real time; a popular post can become a piece of news. When a company is not able to manage these multivocal discussions, it may impact their business. These numerous digital voices have compelled organizations to establish a presence on social media platforms, and many still struggle. This social media presence is essential for tasks such as monitoring rapid changes in the operating environment, promoting services, disseminating information, and offering services to stakeholders to build trust and engagement, as well as manage reputation (e.g., Macnamara, 2016).

Strategies or management of organizational listening in social media have not been widely studied. Organizational listening in social media is claimed to require guidelines, processes, technology, and resources to manage (Macnamara, 2018), but how to strategically manage communication in this multivocal digital environment with often limited organizational skills and resources calls for further research.

This dissertation elucidates the evolution of organizational social media listening practices and proposes a listening and voicing architecture as a model for communication management.

1.2 Theoretical context

This dissertation contributes to the field of organizational listening in corporate communication and is built on the definition and earlier work of Macnamara (2010, 2016, 2024). This work concentrates on organizational listening in social media within the framework of public sphere and strategic communications management and focuses on communication (i.e., speaking and listening with external stakeholders). Macnamara (2016) conducted a broad study on listening theories, therefore this dissertation excludes the listening theory review.

Social media is situated within the framework of the public sphere. Habermas (1989) defined the public sphere as a domain where public opinion is shaped—a space where citizens engage in debates about government policies that are distinct from state and economic interests. Later (2022), he claimed that social media entities cannot be regarded as part of the public sphere and the central public sphere role should be given back to print media. On the other hand, researchers have identified social media as playing an important social role by fostering dialogue between citizens and the government (Yi et al., 2013) and contributing to agenda setting (Conway et al., 2015). This study takes a positive approach to social media as a channel that needs to be well managed to get the best out of it, thus relying more on the positive findings of earlier research.

This dissertation can also be linked to strategic communication management and the concept of internal and external alignment (Volk & Zerfass, 2018). Strategic communication, as defined by Cornelissen (2017), is characterized as being objective-driven and aligned with strategic targets. Strategic communication, as described by Cornelissen (2017, p. 487), “encompasses critical communications necessary for an entity’s survival and prosperity.” It involves purposeful communication aimed at engaging in strategically significant dialogues, including those with citizens (Zerfass et al., 2018), contributing to “closing the gaps between citizens and public organizations” (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019). According to Volk & Zerfass (2018), the primary alignment in strategic communication is that of communication strategy with corporate strategy. Communications activities are aligned secondarily according to communications strategy. But listening is not included in their definition.

Organizational listening online is defined to comprise organizational structure and processes, culture, and policies and claimed that it requires even resources that are trained as well as technologies and practices for the management of listening. Professional listening means recognition, acknowledgment, interpretation, consideration, understanding, and response to the citizens or other stakeholders (Macnamara, 2016, p. 52). This dissertation builds on Macnamara’s concept of organizational listening architecture, with a focus on social media.

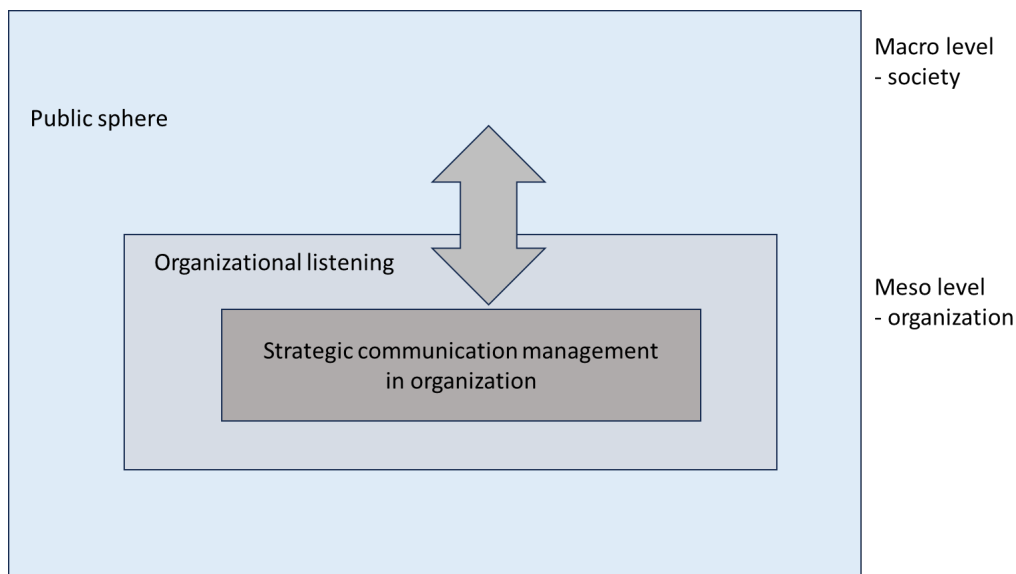


Figure 1. Theoretical context of the dissertation.

1.3 Research objectives and questions

The purpose of this dissertation is to shed further light on the strategic management of organizational listening on social media to external stakeholders in private and public organizations. It also shows how different factors help or hinder effective listening and speaking processes in today's multi-sphere digital communications environment. This dissertation draws upon established theories, existing models, and practical examples, elevating them to a new conceptual and strategic architecture for understanding listening within diverse organizations.

The first assumption in this study is that most organizations are present today on social media due the rapid growth in its use, but still use it more for sharing information than actively listening. Second, lifting social media communication from an operational one-way speaking function to a strategic level speaking and listening supports organizations' external alignment in the multi-voice public sphere. as organizations need to strategically manage their communication online, following the idea of listening architecture by Macnamara (2016).

Combining organizational listening with strategic communication management and the role of spokespersons and architecture, the research question of this dissertation is as follows:

Why and how do organizations build and develop their listening strategies on social media?

This dissertation aims to clarify how organizations should develop and strategically manage the social media listening function to best support their strategic alignment and proposes a listening and voicing architecture as a tool for strategic communication management.

1.4 Scope and structure of the dissertation

This thesis is divided into two parts: the first part introduces the study's theoretical framework, methodology, results, and contributions, and the second part includes four original articles reporting sub-studies.

The literature review in Chapter 2 introduces the theoretical frameworks of public sphere, organizational listening and listening architecture. Previous studies in this field are reviewed, as well as studies in the field of strategic communication management.

Chapter 3 concentrates on the methodology used, introducing the research paradigm pragmatism and explaining the methodological choices of the sub-studies discussing their generalizability, reliability, and validation. Chapter 4 presents the sub-studies' theoretical views, results, and theoretical and managerial contributions. Chapter 5 concentrates on the conclusions and contributions of the thesis, concluding the first part of the thesis. Chapter 5 also

critically examines the quality of the research and the trustworthiness of the measures used and the results obtained.

The second part of the thesis comprises the sub-studies, the original articles on which the research is based.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This section introduces the key theories/concepts related to this study. This chapter first reviews the concept of public sphere as the wider framework of the study, as well as research on organizational listening and listening architecture in social media, and then the second part defines and discusses strategic communication management from an organizational viewpoint. No AI was used in this dissertation.

2.1 Public sphere

Habermas (1989) defined the concept of the public sphere as a domain for public communication and debate. His concept did not include the term listening; for him, it was more about creating a forum for disseminating information in democratic society, offering a possibility for the public to debate. The role of the media was to consolidate the different views and act as gatekeepers. Still, debate is usually defined as a structured contest, with speaking about and listening to arguments about an issue with two sides—one supporting, one opposing. In Habermas' concept, the media gather different views and filters them to the government. Fuchs (2014) criticizes Habermas' original definition of the public sphere and would like to see social media and the internet become a public service and commons-based media, a mediating layer between the government and citizens. Fuchs claims that social media may not be social at all, and that the channels that are called social media are marketing channels—not at all social. He would like to see social media ownership move from “corporate and state control and turn them into truly social media and a public sphere” (2014, p. 97).

These definitions in the time of social media seem a bit outdated, as the role of media has rapidly changed and social media offers citizens a channel, a direct way to contact decision-makers. Even presidents use the opportunity widely—and sometimes wildly. This transformation upgrades the user role, as criticized by Habermas (2022). In his view, the media system is important to the political public sphere, an infrastructure in which competing public opinions are filtered by professional journalists, or gatekeepers. The rapid and massive growth in the

use of social media has rapidly decreased the role of traditional media, making social media channel owners rich and thus fostering advancement toward “commodification of lifeworld contexts” (Habermas, 2022).

At the same time, traditional media outlets are struggling to defend their old positions. Public sphere phantomization creates difficulties for traditional media, ruining their economics and changing the way media works today (Jarren & Fischer, 2021). Suddenly, their former audience has developed from readers to authors, increasing the complexity of public communication and fragmenting the public sphere into “homosocial filter bubbles and echo chambers” (Seeliger & Sevignani, 2022, 11). Habermas (2022) claimed that social media users who act as authors destabilize the public sphere, as they can get many followers and likes. He saw those influencers as disturbers; they lack professional filtering, and he claimed that because of them, the political public sphere may no longer be “an inclusive space for discourse and generalization of interests.” Johannessen et al. (2016) found that the user role from reader to author tends to increase the number of concerns presented in the public discussion and thus increases the complexity of public communication.

Seeliger and Sevignani (2022) claimed that the expansion of digital public spheres results in the emergence of multiple public spheres and a decrease in reach for individual media or communicators. This phenomenon supports a tendency toward populism with “a specific flow of communication streams and interplay of publics after the erosion of mass media gatekeepers” (Seeliger & Sevignani, 2022, pp. 11–12). This criticism offers a crucial perspective from the organizational standpoint, addressing the challenge of getting one’s voice heard, building trust, and fostering engagement in a landscape where the influence of traditional media has diminished, and the public sphere is split into multiple social media discussion bubbles. There is no longer a single channel to reach the audience effectively.

Still, journalists today seem to have learned to use social media channels as a source of information, they are present on the channels, follow the discussion, i.e. listen, and can filter the data to pick up news as well as use has their own social media accounts to spread them. So, is social media just another way to listen to citizen opinions and filter those to media?

2.2 Strategic communication management

The practice of organizational communications has undergone a radical change during the past two decades due to digitalization. Today, organizations operate in a multi-sphere digital environment, where individuals want to engage with organizations and their representatives, and anyone can be a media, creating their own virtual “bubbles” in the digital world. This brings both opportunities and challenges to organizations in managing the multiple voices of the organization in several virtual discussions (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011). To manage reputation and trust among stakeholders, listening is essential, a

strategic element for modern organizations. This dissertation shows that organizations often fail to listen due to proper strategic management of listening (Erkkilä & Luoma-aho, 2023a, 2023b).

Organizational listening is a process through which the organization contributes to the strategic targets set for its operation. Therefore, it is important to review research in the field of strategic communication management as well. Strategic communication management was defined in the 1980s 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)

Organizational communication involves actively promoting the organization's mission (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 4), with the goal of aligning communication activities and subdisciplines in the service of the organization (Frandsen & Johansen, 2015). Traditionally, the communication function with the top management of the organization was the only one responsible for communication acting as "gatekeepers" (Elsbach, 2003), being responsible for media relations, giving statements, and influencing public opinion through issue management (Troester, 1991). Earlier research also emphasizes the CEO's role as an organizational spokesperson (Zerfass et al., 2016), being "the face" of the organization and acting as the highest-level corporate spokesperson (Berger & Park, 2003; Zerfass et al., 2016).

According to the latest definition, strategic communication management oversees an organization's strategically significant communication. The process involves many employees and deals with communication activities and resources that are important to an organization (Zerfass et al., 2018). Later strategic communication literature highlights the role of internal alignment in coordinating communications from different sources to achieve the desired results (Vercic & Zerfass, 2016). External alignment has been defined in strategy and management literature as "harmony of the organization (vision, goals, and tactics) with its external environment" (Volk and Zerfass, 2018).

In their studies of strategic communication alignment, Volk & Zerfass (2018) found that primary alignment means aligning communication strategy with corporate strategy. Secondary alignment aligns communications activities according to the communications strategy. Thus, their definition excludes the world outside the organization, and alignment is only internal, even though they refer in their article to a wider definition from the business and strategy literature (p. 444). They also propose further research on how communication practitioners orchestrate and integrate all communications in the multi-voice environment.

Being forced and pushed by the changes in the operating environment (i.e., digitalization and rapid growth in the use of social media), it seems that strategic communication management in an organization has moved from a very strong internal alignment toward a combination of internal and external alignments (the definition according to the business and strategy literature), or management of

resources and activities that are considered key success factors supporting the strategic targets of the organization.

Organizational listening develops stakeholder trust and engagement (Bannister & Connolly, 2014), especially in the social media environment (Stewart & Arnold, 2018). Technologies are often used for listening, but they do not provide any analyzed results for company management, so they are not used effectively (Macnamara, 2016).

Strategic decisions of an organization include whether to listen, to which channels, to whom, the expected results, and with whom they should be shared (Macnamara, 2016). Macnamara (2016) identified the elements of organizational listening architecture as using knowledge strategically in developing operations and offerings, but he also called for more research on organizational listening strategies and models, as these are not a widely studied areas.

Social media management must generate information from different business areas to be used in social media and needs to feed and spread information extracted from social media back into the relevant organizational business units. This process can be described as the dialogic integration function of social media management. (Ruehl & Inghoff, 2015, p. 297)

This dissertation explores how the concept of strategic alignment in communication management, as proposed by Volk and Zerfass (2018), can be applied to the management of organizations' social media, encompassing both talking and listening aspects. It draws from the definition of organizational listening architecture and the key elements of listening outlined by Macnamara (2010, 2016).

2.3 Organizational listening

Listening has been widely studied. Glenn (1989) identified 50 definitions of listening. Numerous theories delve into the multifaceted realm of listening, covering aspects such as interpersonal listening, role identification, key components, and the significance of listening. Additionally, there has been an exploration into the ethical dimensions of listening and the development of listening competency (e.g., Bentley, 2010; Bodie, 2011; Bodie & Crick, 2014; Burnside-Lawry, 2011; Glenn, 1989; Lipari, 2009, 2015; Purdy, 2000).

Concerning organizational listening, Flynn et al. found in 2008 that little empirical research had been conducted on listening in the workplace or listening as a success factor in business. They claimed, however, that effective listening in an organization requires an organizational culture in which listening is regarded as an important value, and that it also requires an infrastructure of listening. A later definition was that organizational listening encompasses both the context in which listening takes place and employees' listening abilities. It is shaped by the organization itself and impacts the overall organizational image (Burnside-Lawry, 2011; Flynn et al., 2008).

Early studies of organizational listening between 1980 and 2000 were related to the role of organizational listening in face-to-face communications in customer service, employee communication, and training, for instance (e.g., Brownell, 1994; Helms & Haynes, 1992; Wolvin & Coakley, 1991). In the subsequent decades from 2000 to the 2010s, research continued to explore similar topics, with reasons for listening including aspects such as the quality of management, employee motivation, and stakeholder service (e.g., Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Russell & Stone, 2002).

Katz and Te'eni (2007) identified that the rapidly expanding computer-mediated communication brought challenges in addition to opportunities, mentioning higher risks of misunderstandings and the overload of information. Crawford (2009) mentioned listening as posting comments, liking, following, tagging, bookmarking, retweeting, or even lurking, noticing that these practices require technical knowledge and recommended further research. But is it real listening? Numerous researchers have raised concerns about the lack of emphasis on listening within organizations (Coleman, 2013; Couldry, 2010; Dobson, 2014; Dreher, 2009; Macnamara, 2016). It was identified that listening was missing, but it was a conclusion without further studies. Macnamara (2016) requested further research on topics related to listening: how do organizations listen in practice, do they have strategies for listening, and who orchestrates the whole process and presence in social media?

2.4 Social media and organizational listening

Social media is built on the idea of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) and provides arenas for information sharing and interaction between organizations and their stakeholders (Watkins, 2017). During the past 15 years, the popularity of social media has grown remarkably, and even the research around the channel: research has mainly focused on what to achieve from the talking and the number of articles/studies is not thousands but rather hundreds, and research on social media and on organizational listening has increased slowly.

During the initial stages of social media adoption, most organizations refrained from active engagement in these channels. This reluctance stemmed from the difficulties they faced in pinpointing relevant discussion topics, crafting timely responses, and maintaining swift interactions (e.g., Brandel, 2010; Macnamara, 2020). The fast speed of social media forced organizations to react quickly to many questions and comments (Brandel, 2010), which they found demanding, especially if they had resources only to disseminate information one way (Mergel, 2013). Therefore, scholars proposed that organizations would need to provide stakeholders with opportunities to engage in both positive and negative ways (Avidar et al., 2015; Callison & Seltzer, 2010; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007), as developing relationships through communication and interaction with stakeholders is a key objective of strategic communication (Zerfass et al., 2018),

and lack of attentive listening or inadequate listening can lead to adverse outcomes for both organizations and their stakeholders (Burnside-Lawry, 2011; Yaxley, 2012).

Macnamara (2010, 2016) claimed that organizations spend their resources on talking rather than listening and listed key elements for organizations to organize effective large-scale online listening (Figure 2): background reading on the topics for the discussion moderators, a moderation function to manage comments, acknowledgment function that may be auto-generated, a categorization function to group information and comments, editors' summaries to update latecomers to the conversation, collection of comments in a database, and an interface with decision-makers so that the majority of voices can lead to change/action (2016, p. 282).

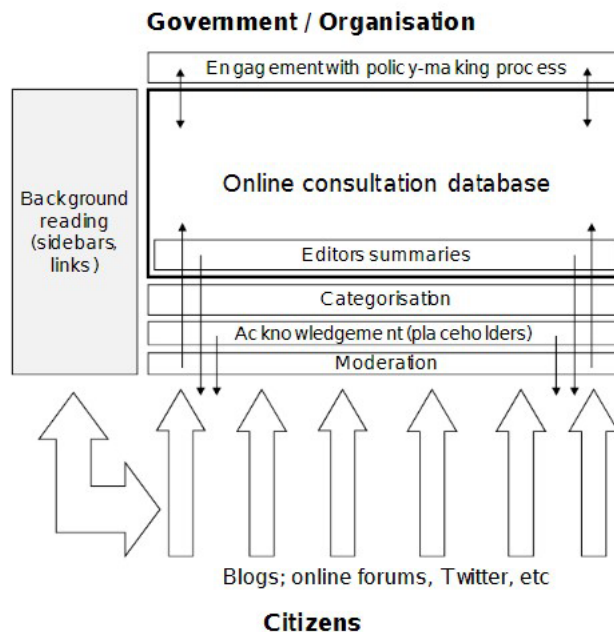


Figure 2. An “architecture of listening” for wide public consultation and communication from the organization’s management perspective (Macnamara, 2010,2016).

Later, “social listening” was defined as “an active process of attending to, and observing, interpreting and responding to a variety of stimuli through and mediated, electronic and social channels” (Stewart & Arnold, 2018, pp. 12–13). Organizational listening online “comprises the culture, policies, structure, processes, resources, skills, technologies, and practices applied by an organization to give recognition, acknowledgement, attention, interpretation, understanding, consideration and response to its stakeholders and publics” (Macnamara, 2016, p. 52).

Organizational listening on social media has a positive impact. It supports organizations in their strategic targets of relationship development and

engagement, builds the trust and legitimization of the organization, and supports reputation and risk management efforts (e.g., Navarro et al., 2018; Taiminen et al., 2015; Yaxley, 2012). Listening organizations are regarded as more authentic (e.g., Kang 2014; Men & Tsai, 2015), and organizational listening architecture provides a concrete framework and forum for public organizations to listen to, enhance awareness of different stakeholders, and develop engagement in the context of civic discourse (Capizzo & Feinman, 2022; Heath & Ihlen, 2018; Macnamara, 2020). The new negative phenomenon of increasing trends of mis/disinformation and AI generated fake photos and videos have got a lot of attention recently and increases the pressure for organizations to be aware and actively defend their reputation, keep sharing the facts and correct false news.

Results confirm that increasing citizen trust and engagement is crucial for public organizations (Bannister & Connolly, 2014; Burnside-Lawry, 2012; Mergel, 2013; Mergel & Desouza, 2013), but they tend to prioritize speaking over listening on social media, as evidenced in studies by Kent and Lane (2017), Macnamara (2016), and Watkins (2017). The challenge lies in deficient listening practices attributed to organizations' inadequate social media strategies and underdeveloped architecture. This includes unclear objectives and a lack of effective methods for assessing digital presence, as highlighted by Barnes and Jacobsen (2014, p. 147).

2.5 Organizations' spokespersons as speakers and listeners on social media

In the modern, digital multi-sphere, multi-voice environment, effectively communicating, building trust, and fostering engagement pose significant challenges. The communications department usually carries the responsibility for the management of social media-related communication (Valentini & Kruckeberg, 2012), which means talking, elaborating, offering advice, and listening online (Maben & Gearhardt, 2018). Due to the multiple forums and discussions in social media, spokespersons' ability to communicate and interact independently, as well as communications departments' work in social media management, has become a critical area for strategic communication management. This development has a big impact on strategic communication management, but there is a gap in the literature on how to best manage strategic communications in today's digital world.

An organizational spokesperson is an individual who provides the organization with a voice within a community, as defined by Troester (1991, p. 528). This role involves conveying and explaining symbolic actions to organizational audiences. Spokespersons can be anyone perceived by an audience member as representing the organization (Elsbach, 2003). In this capacity, the spokesperson actively initiates, maintains, and cultivates relationships with stakeholders, as highlighted by Madsen and Verhoeven (2019, p. 154).

Organizational spokespersons have traditionally been named top management representatives or public relations practitioners (e.g., Elsbach, 2003; Pressgrove et al., 2022), and the CEO's role as an organizational spokesperson has been central. Modern corporate communications may not have the CEO acting as the only spokesperson any longer, but communications may have become a shared responsibility with many different actors and multiple voices (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011).

On social media channels, any CEO or employee from any position or function can communicate with a vast number of stakeholders outside the organization (Miles & Mangold, 2014), and the role of employees has therefore been identified as a key strategic factor for corporate reputation (Kim & Rhee, 2011, p. 243). The power of voice in today's digital media environment is not related to the title of the person but his/her visibility/audience online. To maximize the organization's power of voice online, employees may be invited to act as brand ambassadors, i.e., sharing news and other organizational content in their private social media channels, and when doing that, they interact with the company's stakeholders and can be regarded as brand builders and reputation managers (Kim & Rhee, 2011).

Using social media as a strategic communication platform has changed organizational voice mechanisms (Riemer et al., 2015). Verhoeven and Madsen (2022) suggest that "digital spokespersons" communication with external stakeholders could be characterized by different roles. The first four roles describe an ambassador of the organization – the embroider, promotor, defender, and relationship builder – where employees act as spokespersons/voices of their organization. The other roles – scout, sense maker, innovator, and critic – describe employees' roles in organizational listening. So, in addition to speaking, the named "digital spokespersons" could also listen online and support this way the strategic alignment, reporting back to the organization of the things they identify. As employees have become an important strategic asset for organizations, the concept of micro-boundary spanning was introduced (Kim & Rhee, 2011) to describe the communication of any employee in an organization and its strategic public.

3 METHODOLOGY AND EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

In the initial section of this chapter, the research paradigm of pragmatism is introduced. Subsequently, the chapter delves into the explanation of the data collection methods and the analysis conducted for sub-studies.

3.1 Research paradigm: Pragmatism

Research paradigms help and guide researchers in looking for specific features in their research and then studying them (Morgan, 2007). Paradigm determines methodological decisions and guides the choice of competing methods of theories (Sayer, 1992). Methodology refers to the process of devising a strategic plan or design, including the selection of methods, to attain the desired research objectives (Byrne, 2016).

The primary objective of this dissertation is to contribute new insights into the factors that facilitate or impede listening on social media and how organizations can organize their social listening. The focus is on understanding the role of listening in strategic communication management, and its external alignment. The examination of this phenomenon is approached from an organizational management perspective.

With my decades-long professional experience in leading corporate communications, my approach in this dissertation was strongly focused on showing in practice how organizations can develop and benefit from social listening. Despite one's working experience, it is crucial to maintain scientific objectivity and ensure that perspectives, including personal interests, do not unduly influence the. Reiss and Sprenger (2017) claim that while achieving complete "unbiased science may be impossible," researchers have methods at their disposal to safeguard their reasoning against undesirable forms of bias.

Pragmatism is a philosophy of science that emphasizes the practical nature of knowledge. It is a school of philosophy that was developed by Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) and later followed by William James and John Dewey. In recent years, pragmatism has gained popularity among management and organizational researchers (e.g., Kelemen et al., 2019). It has been defined as “a doctrine holding that truth and value can only be determined by practical application and consequences” (O’Leary, 2007, p. 220) and contains a wide range of orientations, united by an emphasis on action and a practical orientation in research, problem solving, and knowledge production. Simpson (2009) claimed that the social meanings shaping our thoughts are continuously constructed and re-constructed. Case studies, originated in the 1800s by Frederic Le Play, are used when the researcher wants to observe behavior and understand a phenomenon better. Interviews, observations, and historical documentation are used to gather data. A pragmatic approach supports when a researcher has a need to conduct research that is time-bounded, engages with theories or frameworks, and supports application in practice. The pragmatic approach to analysis borrows from and combines established qualitative approaches using typically an existing framework with explicit research and practice change goals (Ramanadhan et al., 2021).

This dissertation is epistemologically situated close to pragmatism, even if pragmatism often has a mixed-methods approach with a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, and this study uses only qualitative methods. The contribution of this dissertation is very pragmatic. The first two sub-studies concentrate more on giving a holistic picture of a phenomenon and how social media is used by organizations, and the latter two build on the first ones, providing even more pragmatic and concrete information and ideas that are useful in action.

3.2 Research design: Qualitative research methods

The research question of this dissertation is, why and how do organizations build and develop their listening strategies on social media? As the aim is to clarify how organizations develop and strategically manage the social media listening function, qualitative research is the chosen approach in the sub-studies. Qualitative research is carried out when the phenomenon under exploration is less known and the researcher wants to learn more from individuals’ actions. The explorative purpose of this dissertation is thus addressed using a qualitative research method.

In qualitative research, the number of units selected is not very large, and they are studied, so the quality of the data is important. Qualitative analysis is characterized by inductive reasoning, which seeks to generalize and make inferences based on what emerges from the data (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998). A difference between qualitative and quantitative research is that in qualitative research, the research question may change during the study, and in quantitative

research, the research problem is formulated precisely prior to the study (Hirsjärvi et al., 1997).

The sub-studies of this dissertation have all used qualitative methods, with the aim of exploring the phenomenon to better understand the practices around organizational listening in social media (Denscombe, 2008).

In the sub-studies, the data were gathered in real-life situations to clarify how organizations and their stakeholders, people, act in different situations. Concerning meanings investigated, the semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted in two sub-studies during the pandemic (material used in Articles 2 and 3), and in those interviews, emotions, stress, and attitudes could have influenced the language used. In addition, the interviewee's role within the organization and the audience context (such as in group interviews) might also have an impact on linguistic expressions.

TABLE 1 Overview of the dissertation sub-studies' main methodology, data collection, and analyses

Article	Research question	Object of the study	Data collection method	Data collection period	Analysis method
I	How organizational listening and presence in social media developed in 17 European airlines over a period of one year	Maturity of social listening	Following development activities in 34 social media accounts (FB, Twitter) of 17 European airlines – data collected in two phases, first by a group of students at the university and second time by the first author (who even double checked the first data in 2017).	January 2016 and March 2017	Conceptual, as the data collection was exploratory, based on grounded theory.
II	What are the triggers for organizations to start listening/engaging their stakeholders in social media?	Customer engagement by listening	Identifying/listing trends/development of content in social media 34 social media accounts FB, Twitter, of 17 European airlines and 14 recorded semi-structured interviews with communication professionals from selected public organizations	Airlines' social media posts: Period 1: January 2016 Period 2: March 2017 Interviews: winter 2020–2021 for public organizations	The data were thematically categorized following the contextual framework of the article – shown as illustrative examples
III	What kind of social media/listening strategies do the key public organizations in Finland have during COVID-19?	Organizational listening strategies and strategic alignment	14 recorded in-depth semi-structured interviews with communication professionals and desktop Study of four strategy and policy documents related to their communications	Between November 2020 and March 2021	Thematic analysis of both interview data and strategy and policy documents. Re-coding as per new topics identified

Article	Research question	Object of the study	Data collection method	Data collection period	Analysis method
			strategies/policies available on their websites		
IV	How do you strategically manage your spokespersons/communicative organization in social media?	Spokesperson architecture	Primary: 10 recorded semi-structured interviews with communication and human resource managers	Interviews: between April 2019 and June 2020	Case study/in-depth and qualitative content analysis

In the first sub-study reported in Article 1, a group of students from the Jyväskylä University collected trends of social media usage by 17 European airlines in January 2016. I repeated the same data gathering a year later, in March 2017, while also revisiting the previous checkpoint in January 2016 to re-evaluate the earlier data collection needed for the article. Employing ideas of grounded theory, I identified themes/trends from the data collected, across three combined datasets (publicly accessible company policies on their websites, findings from a 2016 examination of their Facebook and Twitter accounts, and outcomes from a 2017 review of the same). Themes were conceptually categorized and coded depending on their activity level on social media. This approach examines the phenomenon from an external perspective, considering stakeholders' perspectives without knowledge of the reasons, motives, or demands on the airlines' side. However, it reveals the rapid development in the implementation of social media as a listening channel.

The second article utilized the data collected from sub-studies one and three, involving the analysis of the social media presence of 17 European airlines in 2016/2017. It also incorporated the analysis of 14 transcripts from interviews with 14 communication professionals representing eight Finnish public organizations. The aim was to identify reasons for rapid developments, triggers for change, and effective engagement strategies. Thematic coding was applied to the data based on two frameworks: one related to the maturity of listening and the other modified from the model of "customer engagement on social media" (de Oliveira Santini et al., 2020).

In the third sub-study, reported in Article 3, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 communicators representing eight leading Finnish government and public sector organizations responsible for COVID-19 communications. Interviewees were selected using purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) and represented communication professionals from key public organizations with the most relevance during the pandemic. These individuals were responsible for Finland's governmental pandemic strategy and citizens' health and well-being. The semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted via Teams, lasted 45–70 minutes, and took place between November 2020 and March 2021.

The transcriptions were thematically analyzed, listing words and expressions to identify similarities using NVivo software. The results were compared interview by interview, followed by a comprehensive reading and evaluation to identify any new themes. Desk research was performed on strategies and policies available on websites (they mostly referred to common governmental office guidelines), and they were examined, condensed, and studied following thematic content analysis guidelines. The results were grouped according to the themes and even submitted to the interviewees for respondent validation.

The fourth sub-study, reported in Article 4, employed a case-study design with an in-depth and context-sensitive interpretive analysis (Welch et al., 2011; Yin, 2018) to examine spokesperson strategies and organizational voicing

architectures. The empirical material, obtained through purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002), included recorded semi-structured interviews (45–120 minutes) with 10 communication and human resource managers. The interviews were conducted between April 2019 and June 2020, and the interviews were recorded and transcribed. In addition to the interview data, we reviewed publicly accessible company social media policies available on the companies' websites (2) and social media platforms (2).

The transcripts were read and open-coded using Atlas.ti software. Similarities and interrelations between the open codes were examined, aiming at identifying patterns and conceptual categories in the data. Thereafter, we identified organized structures for managing the spokespersons, went back to communication management literature, and compared the findings with earlier research (Macnamara, 2010).

4 FINDINGS AND SUMMARIES OF THE ARTICLES

In this section, we provide succinct summaries of the attached research articles and explore the primary findings concerning the research question: **How and why do organizations build and develop their listening strategies on social media?**

The first study examines the progression organizations undergo in developing their maturity in social media listening. The second study sheds further light on the reasons and triggers behind organizations making sudden leaps or facing limitations in social media listening. The third study provides an illustrative case of a sudden leap in listening, outlining the strategy development and emphasizing the necessity to manage and balance both talking and listening on social media. The fourth study builds upon earlier findings, merging them with the concept of a communicative organization, and proposes an architecture for voicing and listening in strategic communication management.

4.1 Article one: Understanding the different phases of maturity in organizational listening in social media

Being or becoming active in social listening is a strategic choice of the organization. These conceptual examples shows how organizational listening and presence in social media developed in 17 European airlines over a period of one year.

The empirical contribution of this study to earlier research is a model that elucidates distinct levels in the maturity of presence in social media and the corresponding level of dialogue, proposing ways to move forward.

TABLE 2. Development of an organization’s social listening maturity

	No presence	Passive presence	Active one-way communication	Active listening and dialogue
Activity in social media	No accounts nor presence	Accounts in social media, no regular content posting nor replying	Account(s) in social media, content marketing-type one-way communication, occasional replies	Different roles for different channels, e.g., Twitter for customer service. Participation in discussions even outside own channels, replying to comments and questions in own channels
Level of listening/dialogue	No dialogue	No replies to stakeholder questions or comments	Occasional replies to stakeholders, forwarding them by telephone or email	Social media account for customer service, strengthening brand
Channels of listening/dialogue	No accounts	Facebook most popular	Facebook and Instagram one-way	Twitter/Facebook for customer service, Instagram for marketing



Concerning the wide literature review, it showed that listening in organizations has been studied in terms of interaction (e.g., Bodie & Crick, 2014), ethics (e.g., Bodie, 2011; Dreher, 2010; Lipari, 2015), and listening competencies (Burnside-Lawry, 2011, 2012; Wolvin & Coakley, 1996), but research on stakeholder listening in digital media has only become active in the last decade (e.g., Maben & Gearhart, 2018; Macnamara, 2018). Organizations have been hesitant to engage in dialogue when they have no strategy for social media, the idea of customer engagement through listening is unclear (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Chiang et al., 2020), and the extreme overload of information and rapid pace in the virtual discussions make it challenging to join the debates (e.g., Kent & Lane, 2017; Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012). Earlier scholars proposed that specific characteristics, processes, or behavioral patterns of listening should be defined by future research, and the aim should guide how listening models are conceptualized and taken subsequently (Worthington & Bodie, 2017).

Second, the social media channels of the 17 European airlines were studied. The data collection was conducted in two phases: in the first phase, the first batch of the data was collected by a group of communication master's students at the University of Jyväskylä as part of their coursework in January 2016. They examined 17 major European airlines and listed their social media accounts (Twitter and FB) and activity related to customer inquiries. The next phase took place a year later, in March 2017, when the first author reviewed the same companies and posts on their social media accounts (Twitter and Facebook) from January 2016 to March 2017, employing ideas of grounded theory. In this example, the focus was not on how the airline organizes its listening practices but rather on how the dialogue appears from a customer perspective. And following The data was analyzed from the following angles:

1. Whether the company has active social media channels or not.
2. Whether the pages are passive or if there is content production, responses to questions, or dialogue.
3. How quickly the company promises to respond.
4. Whether certain channels are designated as customer service channels. Based on this, the maturity of the airline's listening practices was evaluated."

The presented data collection and analysis indicated that the transformation from a passive or one-way marketer to a mature social listener and participant in dialogue happened successfully in European airlines only within one year, 2016–2017. In early 2016, only two companies out of 17 had 24/7 service on social media or home page. One year later, 16 out of 17 companies established a customer service channel on Twitter.

This article showed ways forward to engaging in dialogue by using the example of the development of social listening in 17 European airlines. These organizations demonstrated their rapidly developed listening skills when they moved from a non-existing presence in social media to appropriately responding to questions and providing customer advice on their own channels.

4.2 Article two: Identifying the triggers for organizational listening in social media

The popularity of social media is undeniable, and the absence of a presence in these channels does not imply that discussions about your organization are nonexistent. Emerging information channels rapidly become inundated not only with factual content but also with spam and disinformation. The objective of this article was to illustrate reasons and examples of sudden development – leaps and bounds – of organizations adopting organizational listening on social media mainly due to the pressure from stakeholders.

The empirical contribution of this article supported the findings of earlier research on the lack of listening and proposed as a new feature that a push from stakeholders online or a crisis may cause a rapid leap of development in organizations' communication, from speaking to even listening in social media. The theoretical contribution of this article argued for incorporating organizational listening as a strategic function into a model of integrated marketing and communications and/or strategic public communication,

This article was built on the finding of the maturity of social listening (Article 1) and earlier studies (e.g., Kent & Lane, 2017; Macnamara, 2016; Watkins, 2017) claiming that organizations are present in social media with a lack of listening and that there is a crisis of voice in contemporary societies (Couldry, 2010). Social media facilitates the establishment and cultivation of relationships between organizations and their stakeholders (Allagui & Breslow, 2016). Furthermore, stakeholder engagement holds significant importance for organizational success (de Oliveira Santini et al., 2020). Technologies as such do not create dialogue or listening, but the organization needs to decide to whom, where, and when to listen (Macnamara, 2016). Thus, instead of just talking, organizations should be listening – what makes them move from only talking to even listening and engaging their stakeholders? The rapid leap of listening was illustrated by two examples in this article, the first one from the late 2010s, when 17 European airlines customers started demanding answers and contacting companies through social media, and the second one from the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, when key public organizations responsible for COVID-19 management in Finland were suddenly forced to start responding to citizens' urgent concerns via social media.

The first example showed how the organizational listening of 17 European airlines developed in social media over a one-year period. Back in January 2016, airlines primarily used social media for outbound communication, while any stakeholder inquiries were redirected to a dedicated customer service department. The maturity of their organizational listening in social media was passive. In the span of just one year, the surge in social media's popularity became unmistakably apparent. Most airlines implemented a social media strategy and a digital 24/7 customer service on Twitter.

The subsequent instance pertained to the current and persistent COVID-19 pandemic and the urgent need for key public sector organizations in Finland to start responding to citizen questions in their social media channels in the winter of 2020–2021. The information was gathered during initial interviews with 14 communication professionals from prominent Finnish public organizations tasked with COVID-19 communications. Every organization had strategic aims to develop stakeholder relations or to manage reputation with interaction in social media, but they still focused on speaking. Amid the pandemic's impact, the influx of inquiries and social media followers surged significantly, prompting organizations to bolster their social media teams for more effective interaction management.

In response to the pandemic, public organizations swiftly adjusted their social media strategies by emphasizing active online listening and promoting valuable, accurate content. This case underscores the importance of enhancing listening frameworks and procedures to bolster stakeholder trust and satisfaction, as publicly available analysis conducted during the pandemic confirms that the citizens were rather pleased with the communication (Government of Finland, report 2021:1). Many interviewees in the sub-study (3) interviews confirmed that even if the cross-organizational cooperation was weak or lacking, they could manage the pandemic communication rather well by replying to the citizen questions and being active in their social media channels.

4.3 Article three: Understanding the need for balance in speaking and listening in strategic communication management

This research investigated the significance of organizational listening in the context of social media communication within public organizations. It includes an illustrative case study demonstrating how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the social media approaches and activities of organizations tasked with COVID-19 management.

The practical impact of this study revealed how active listening plays a pivotal role in bridging the divide between citizens and public organizations (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019). Additionally, the theoretical significance lies in the implications, highlighting the necessity of revising strategic communication theory and practice to strike a better balance between speaking and listening. This adjustment is crucial for effectively addressing the emerging dual role with improved external alignment.

Given the significance of listening in communication alignment, this study draws upon Macnamara's work on organizational listening (2016, 2018, 2020). Additionally, it applies the conceptual framework of internal and external alignment in strategic communication proposed by Volk and Zerfass (2018). Furthermore, the study reviews recent research on gaps in public sector communication, as highlighted by Canel and Luoma-aho (2019).

Finland boasts transparent governance within its public sector (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019) and is renowned for fostering high levels of trust in both society and authorities. While ministries and authorities typically operate independently in their communication, an exception occurred during the most critical phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the Prime Minister's Office invoked the Emergency Powers Act to assume coordination of crisis communications.

The data for this study were gathered earlier by conducting interviews with communication managers who represented Finnish authoritative, regulatory, and legislative organizations that managed the governmental pandemic strategy and citizens' health and well-being. The in-depth interview data included

interviews with communicators (N = 14) from these organizations overseeing pandemic communication. The study was qualitative, and the findings were analyzed to assess the degree of alignment in strategic communication on social media.

As public sector communication evolves into a more strategic endeavor, the importance of organizational listening grows. The findings suggest that citizen experiences will play an increasingly crucial role in determining how well public sector communications align with their expectations. To gain deeper insights, enhanced listening practices are essential. Strategic planning and measurement of the cyclical process of listening and communicating are vital for delivering lasting value.

Moreover, the findings indicated that the organizations under scrutiny exhibited a degree of misalignment regarding the goals and catalysts for online listening. While their social media communication objectives were strategic, emphasizing one-way messaging, the triggers for listening were reactive and tied to website and service traffic. The analysis revealed that during the crisis, the organizations began to adopt a partially strategic approach to listening. Top management demonstrated a better grasp of communication's value, yet this mindset shift did not permeate the core level of organizational listening beyond immediate social media monitoring. While online listening for external alignment was not initially deemed strategically crucial, the absence of systematic processes and thorough analysis of listening data was evident. However, there is potential for rapid maturation toward more strategic levels, especially as top management demonstrates increased interest in citizens' viewpoints. Given the permanent shift in citizen expectations, reverting to pre-crisis communication practices is no longer viable.

The findings also captured insights from communication professionals regarding the most critical areas for strategic communication during emergent situations. A common challenge reported by most organizations was insufficient resources to meet the heightened expectations of citizens. Interestingly, this resource constraint was anticipated to persist even in the post-COVID era. Additionally, the pandemic appeared to reinforce the importance of external alignment for public sector organizations on social media. While the traditional goals of fostering intangible assets such as citizen trust and engagement remain central to communication, a secondary role for listening has emerged post-pandemic: that of a limiting and protective function. Organizational listening plays a crucial role in establishing guardrails for authorities and effectively managing citizens' expectations. The findings reveal that organizations strategically reduced interactions due to overwhelming demand. The use of listening to manage decreased citizen engagement emerged as a novel phenomenon during the COVID-19 pandemic in public sector communication.

The crisis posed significant challenges to communication practices across various organizations, straining resources, and existing plans. Traditional public sector communication alone no longer suffices in an environment where citizens' demands are urgent and multifaceted. Given the heavy reliance on social and

real-time media, organizations must prioritize enhancing their listening capabilities and fortifying their online presence to effectively address citizens' needs.

4.4 Article four: Conceptualizing an architecture for voicing and listening for strategic communication management

In contemporary times, numerous organizations endorse their employees' engagement in social media communication with external stakeholders. This research draws insights from the strategic communication management and organizational spokesperson literature, shedding light on how organizations can revamp their strategic communication management and establish a robust framework for their communicative human resources.

This research builds upon existing studies by framing the strategic empowerment of an organization's employees on social media as a deliberate orchestration of communicative human resources. Additionally, it introduces the concept of "spokesperson architecture," which extends Macnamara's (2016) model of organizational listening architecture.



Figure 3. Architecture of organizational voicing and listening, Pekkala & Erkkilä, 2024 (adapted from Macnamara, 2010, 2016)

In the digital communication environment, the strategic role of employees' communicative activity and competence has become more important (Verhoeven & Madsen, 2022). Organizational spokespersons assume the responsibility of staying abreast of the latest information regarding organizational, societal, and

technological developments in the operating environment (Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019, p. 154). However, the challenge arises in understanding how to stay updated on the latest themes and issues in the digital multi-sphere virtual world. Lately, interest in the drivers of excellence related to strategic communication management has increased (e.g., Zerfass et al., 2018; Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017), but little empirical research has focused on managerial strategy work related to employees' roles as organizational representatives and spokespeople.

The findings of this study suggest that in the era of social media, all employees have the potential to assume the role of organizational spokespeople. The architecture of spokespersonship within organizations appears to encompass employees across various hierarchical levels. Interestingly, the traditional view of a spokesperson solely transmitting the organizational voice, especially during crises, is challenged. Instead, individual spokespersons, drawing from their unique experiences and expertise, can strategically contribute to competitive advantage. By actively listening to and monitoring social media discussions, they play a crucial role in stakeholder relationship development and maintenance. These findings extend beyond the conventional portrayal of organizational spokespersons as mere conveyors or interpreters of symbolic actions to organizational audiences, as previously described by Elsbach (2003).

Based on the findings, spokesperson architecture emerges as a pivotal component within the realm of strategic communication management for the case study organizations. The spokesperson strategy, the "voicing" strategy, is characterized by a well-defined conceptual framework. By precisely delineating various spokesperson categories and the appropriate communication channels for their engagement, organizations can strategically design training, support, and monitoring mechanisms. These efforts align with the overarching corporate strategy, ensuring effective communication and stakeholder engagement.

Macnamara (2016, p. 315) called for further research and "real-life models" on organizational listening, that is, how organizations enable interaction with their stakeholders with established architectures and processes in place. This sub-study clarifies real-life architecture for management, proposing a model for integrating organizational talking and listening into one, based on Macnamara's model of listening architecture (2010). In the multivocal multi-sphere digital environment, we claim that this architecture may tackle many of the challenges organizations have. With extra resourcing in voicing and listening, it supports the external alignment (Volk & Zerfass, 2018), not only in disseminating strategically aligned communication, but in being resilient.

5 DISCUSSION

Social media has become a key channel for organizational communications during the past decade. At the same time, the role of traditional media, like newspapers and journals, has diminished and thus changed the “infrastructure of public sphere” as Habermas (2022) calls it. This has brought new challenges not only to the media but also to public and private organizations in their communication with their stakeholders. The traditional role of communication department as a gatekeeper for organizational messaging has evolved. The proliferation of communication arenas, especially in the digital realm, has empowered individuals to function as media themselves. The feedback and comments from individuals are now public, in contrast to the pre-social media era where communication was typically limited to emails or telephone service. In this digital multi-sphere environment of communications, where misinformation and disinformation, fake news, and facts flourish, organizations need new processes and tools for managing their reputation and creating trust. One interesting finding in this dissertation is that the need and the way of organizing social listening is quite similar in public and private organizations. Nowadays, even public organizations talk about “customers,” not “citizens,” and “engagement” instead of “informing.”

The aim of this dissertation was to contribute novel insights to the existing body of knowledge, building on earlier research on strategic communication management and organizational listening (e.g., Macnamara, 2016, 2018). As these, as well as my own professional experience in corporate communication management, showed that the focus in organizations was rather on speaking than listening, it was important to shed light on the phases of when and how organizations learn to listen on social media as well as identify the triggers for listening there (Articles 1 and 2). Furthermore, it was important to understand how listening strategies are formed, how they support the overall strategy of the organization, and how organizations may strategically orchestrate their organizational listening (Articles 3 and 4).

The research question was, **Why and how do organizations build and develop their listening strategies on social media?**

The results of the first sub-study identified the path of organizations from a passive social media account holder to an active speaker and listener in social media, presenting different phases of maturity. Listening starts first in the last phase of the study from 2016 to 2017, but the major focus in this example is still on talking one way, as shown in Figure 4.

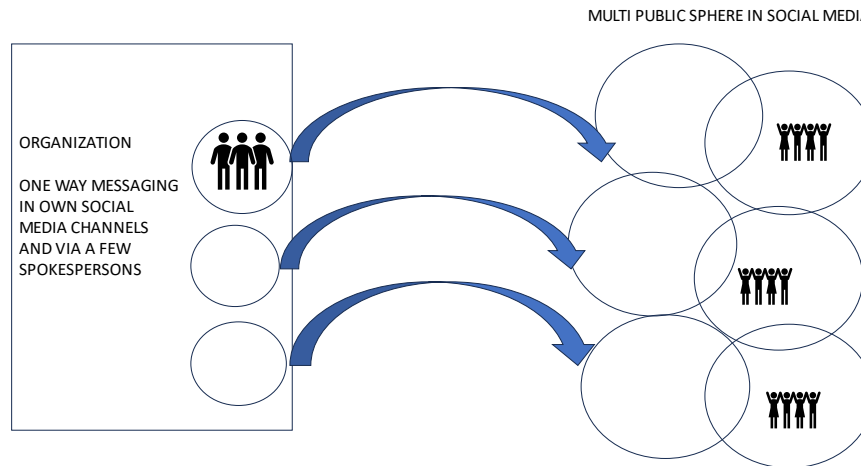


Figure 4. Immature information dissemination from organization to stakeholders.

Sub-study two identified big leaps and bounds in the development of listening. Key triggers often are either an unexpected strong push from the audiences in social media, i.e., customers or fans, or a crisis, which often shows in the number of comments or questions in an organization's social media accounts. Sudden changes force organizations to activate their listening. Very often, they do not really know how to listen and measure engagement with likes and number of fans. Organizational listening is not about the number of fans but the way you interact with your stakeholders on social media. And listening engages.

5.1 Support for strategic alignment

The third sub-article, building on earlier findings related to maturity and triggers, exposes gaps in resourcing and the challenge of balancing speaking and listening and identifies a developmental area concerning the management of external alignment in communication. According to Canel and Luoma-aho (2019), organizations can effectively manage situations, foster trust, and enhance positive engagement by bridging gaps between audiences and the organization

and should therefore regard their organizational listening as a strategic tool within strategic communication management (Volk & Zerfass, 2017).

Organizational listening plays a crucial role in supporting the external alignment and resilience of an organization, and the examples and results of this dissertation propose to extend the Volk & Zerfass (2018) definition of external alignment of communication to include organizational listening, a loop out of the organization. Thus not aligning communications activities just with the strategy but even with the world outside. And it is a continuous process. It involves engaging in interaction between people and carefully analyzing reports of social media traffic, as per Macanamara’s definition (2016). Through organizational listening, organizations can identify topics, issues, and important elements that require a thoughtful and strategic response.

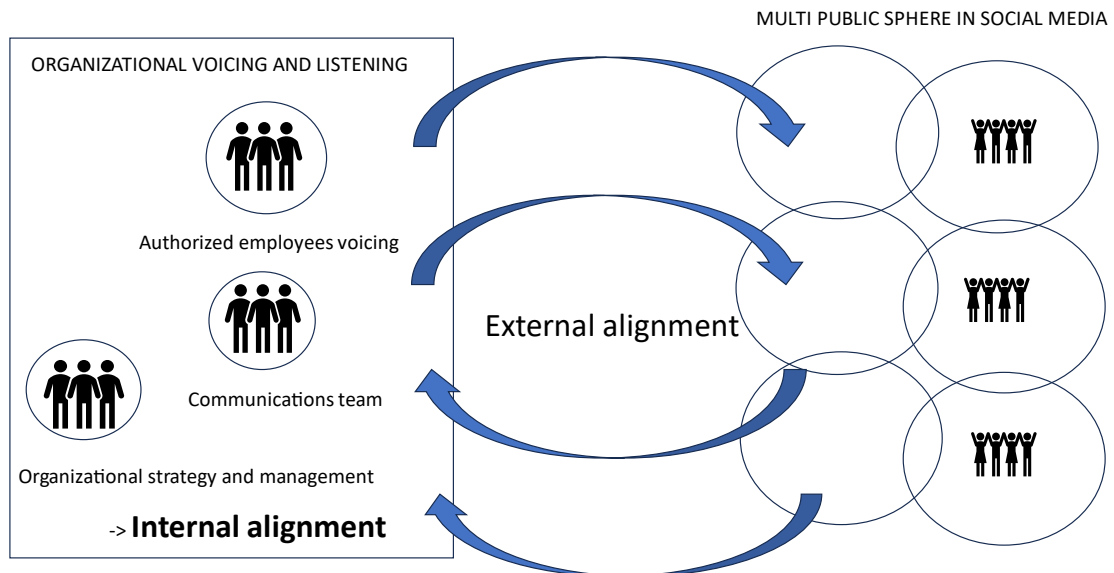


Figure 5. Organizational communication, voicing, and listening are managed by an architecture where input feeds the output and supports the strategic alignment.

Professionally managed organizational listening in social media completes the “looped” interaction. The balance between speaking and listening varies depending on the situation and supports—when well managed—an organization’s external alignment.

In the context of public sphere theory, this dissertation adds to the recent criticism highlighting the challenges of getting one’s voice heard in today’s digital, multi-voice, multi-sphere environment (e.g. Habermas, 2022). It demonstrates how organizations can enhance their management of discussion arenas by employing professional online listening strategies and leveraging their own employees and spokespersons as effective listening agents.

Concerning research on organizational listening, earlier scholars have focused on identifying why organizations do not listen and why they should listen, but this dissertation advances a more nuanced understanding of what organizational listening on social media is, what it does, and how it contributes to corporate communication. The examples in the sub-studies shed light on and emphasize the strategic role of social voicing and listening in supporting the alignment of an organization in the public sphere.

5.2 Theoretical and managerial implications

Including organizational listening in the strategic communications management of an organization is important, as it supports the vision and strategic targets. Organizational listening fills the gap in reaching external alignment, which is defined in business and strategy literature (Volk & Zerfass, 2018). It is a continuous process; there are several persons in the multivocal environment who listen and bring up topics that are of special value to an entity. The results of this dissertation propose an extension to the definition of external alignment by Volk & Zerfass (2018), which is to include organizational listening in the process and definition of external communication alignment, instead of only disseminating information aligned with communications strategy of organization. This is the first theoretical contribution of this dissertation.

With the proposed voicing architecture, which is an adapted version of Macnamara's architecture launched in 2010, it may be easier to tackle communications in a multi-sphere, multivocal environment. The channels and ways of communication should always be adjusted according to societal changes, contrary to Habermas (2022). The voicing architecture supports both internal and external alignment and strategic communications management and is the second theoretical contribution.

A voicing architecture would support even the execution of the earlier mentioned Open Government strategy in Finland, which aims to reinforce dialogue in society. The strategic targets are to strengthen the role of dialogues in the government mode and to reinforce interactive skills in the public sector, to improve knowledge in the public sector about how digital interaction channels work, and to encourage their broader and more active use of these channels in dialogue (www.avoinhallinto.fi). The results of sub-study 3 clearly show the challenges of balancing speaking and listening, as well as the need for flexible resourcing, both of which can be supported by implementing a voicing architecture with defined resources, roles, processes, and technologies.

Furthermore, the architecture could support cross-governmental office cooperation. The government report (Deloitte, 2021, p. 1) talks about the weaknesses in communication and cooperation between the governmental offices responsible for pandemic communication, which partly caused the large number of questions from citizens in social media. In these financially challenging times this type of development projects tends to be delayed, but

gathering all feedback for the future development of cooperation would be essential. It is more about creating a common understanding first between the parties, then describing and aligning cross-governmental-office communication processes, and finally perhaps testing when a crisis is not “on” to be best prepared for a future potential crisis. Furthermore, a fluent information flow would cut down the number of questions in social media, create further trust among the stakeholders and improve operational efficiency.

Many interviewees confirmed the importance of being present in social media to tackle false information, misinformation, and disinformation. Public organizations especially feel that they need to repeat the facts, be active, and in that way, create trust among citizens. Listening and the intensity of listening are always a strategic decision of an organization. An organization may regard its role as only to disseminate information. But if an organization does not listen, what happens when it ends up in a situation in which it must lead a change in citizen behavior (e.g., during the COVID-19 crisis or having to make a big safety recall of a product)?

The pandemic proved that in a crisis, organizations need more resources to manage the discussions, and it is important to repeat the message, listen, and reply to eventual questions and comments—to follow and guarantee that the message is understood, learned, and that action is taken. What impacts the number of comments and questions may also be related to the motivation of audience members and their ability to learn, understand, remember, and accept the content of the message (Ramburuth & Mldadenovic, 2004). The same applies, of course, internally in an organization. Getting the employees of the multivocal organization committed to the common strategy and goals is crucial for success. This might be an interesting topic for future research.

The challenge in social listening is related to the multivocal multi-sphere environment where fake news and AI created false photos and videos spread easily. It is impossible to listen to all the social media “buzz” and tackle all mis/disinformation and at the same time keep speaking. Finding the balance of voicing and listening is the key as well as defining your audiences for that.

5.3 Limitations and future research

While acknowledging the limitations inherent in this dissertation and its constituent sub-studies, the findings also present valuable avenues for future research. My intention was to examine pragmatically the management of organizational listening in the context of social media within organizations. There are perspectives that remain unexplored, especially concerning the perspectives and requirements of different audiences; hence, the findings and proposals provide only a partial view of the studied topic.

Regarding the methodological choices, my dissertation started with some conceptual approaches utilizing ideas from grounded theory to describe the phenomenon, i.e., the maturity of listening that develops in phases. The first

article described the trends and maturity in social listening, some theme analysis was done for the illustrative cases in the second article which explained the triggers for social listening and engagement, and the two latter sub-studies were more deductive in their research approaches focusing on the organizational management of the social listening architecture.

Concerning limitations related to generality, reliability, and validity, social media is global, but the results may be descriptive only within the cultural parameters. The data of the sub-studies were collected in four phases during 2017–2023, and they mainly focused on the Finnish context, looking at the listening strategies from a slightly different viewpoint. Furthermore, the interviews in sub-study three were conducted under special circumstances. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the studied organizations had been forced to start listening due to the thousands of questions coming online from the worried citizens. It did give interesting data to my research, but the exceptional situation may have impacted the interviewed organizations' interest in listening, and the stress at work may have impacted the interviewees' answers. The pandemic was global, so the same type of challenges may have been encountered even in other cultural contexts. Moreover, the world is changing. Twitter is now X, and new channels like BlueSky and Trends are taking over; chatbots or AI in many organizations may have replaced the social media teams answering questions online. Thus, the operating environment keeps changing, which also impacts the research context.

Moreover, the findings from sub-study three predominantly relied on interview data, potentially leading to an overemphasis on individual perspectives beyond the context of the previously mentioned stressful situation. To mitigate this, I conducted desk research and interviewed members from multiple organizations. However, it is important to note that the case organizations in the fourth sub-study operate within a specific service sector, which may limit the generalizability of the results and necessitate further investigation. Additionally, the analyses in Articles 3 and 4 are interpretive and descriptive, implying that the results may not encompass all conceivable dimensions of the phenomenon under scrutiny. Concerning ideas for future research, the implications drawn from our findings underscore the necessity of revising and enhancing existing strategic communication theory and practice. Specifically, attention should be directed toward balancing speaking and listening within this framework while also addressing the dual role that emerges with enhanced external alignment.

Sub-study three sheds light on the increasing strategic significance of public sector communication. Consequently, there is a growing demand for organizational listening, which may necessitate the development of guidelines for best practices in public sector communication. It is important to recognize that in the multivocal public sphere, where disinformation and misinformation occasionally play a role in citizen discussions, the traditional understanding of communication activities and updates can become volatile.

While increased listening within the public sector may be perceived as “a step toward censorship or a panopticon” (Erkkilä & Luoma-aho, 2023a), it is essential to acknowledge that without effective listening, the multivocal public sphere could potentially detrimentally impact society. Listening, however, represents only the initial phase; the true power lies in how organizations utilize citizens’ information and meet their expectations. Consequently, organizations that actively engage in stakeholder listening are bestowed with newfound influence.

SUMMARY IN FINNISH

Tämä väitöskirja käsittelee organisaatioiden kuuntelustrategioita sosiaalisessa mediassa. Työssä selvitetään, miten organisaation strategista viestintää ja sosiaalisen median kuuntelutoimintoa voidaan kehittää ja johtaa strategisesti. Aktiivinen kuuntelu sosiaalisessa mediassa tukee organisaation joustavuutta mahdollistaen nopeasti strategiset linjaukset muuttuvassa toimintaympäristössä, luoden luottamusta ja sitouttaen sidosryhmiä.

Sosiaalisen median ja sen mukanaan tuoman monialaisen digitaalisen ympäristön aiheuttama muutos on ollut merkittävä. Nopeasti kehittynyt viestintäteknologia on vaikuttanut radikaalisti organisaatioihin ja myös viestintäorganisaation toimintaan. Sosiaalisesta mediasta on tullut risteyskohta, jossa yhdistyvät sekä organisaation toiminnot että sidosryhmät, ja kanavissa tapahtuva moniääninen viestiminen vaatii organisaatiolta kyvykästä johtamista. Viestintätoiminnon entinen tehtävä organisaation tiedonjaon portinvartijana on näin nopeasti siirtynyt kohti strategisempaa roolia neuvonantajana ja valmentajana.

Tutkimuskirjallisuudessa organisaatioiden kuuntelua koskeva aiempi tutkimus on keskittynyt pääasiassa tarkastelemaan kuuntelua yleisesti asiakaspalautteena, asiakaskyselyinä, kansalaisinafoina, ja sosiaalisessa mediassa kuuntelua lähinnä ilmiönä todeten, että sosiaalinen media tuo organisaatioiden sidosryhmät lähelle toisiaan mahdollistaen suoran dialogin, jolloin kuuntelu olisi tärkeää mutta siihen ei panosteta riittävästi. Aiemman tutkimuksen mukaan organisaatiot käyttävät suurimman osan budjeteistaan puhumiseen sosiaalisessa mediassa. Sitä, minkälaisia kuuntelustrategioita tai -malleja organisaatioilla on, ei ole tutkittu aiemmin.

Tämä väitöskirja tuottaa viestinnän tutkimuksen kentälle uutta tietoa organisaatioiden kuunteluaktiivisuudesta ja kuuntelun motiiveista. Tutkimus osoittaa, miten eri tekijät auttavat tai estävät viestintää sosiaalisessa mediassa ja ehdottaa organisaatiolle mallia puhumisen ja kuuntelun hallitsemiseen sosiaalisessa mediassa. Tutkimus edistää tietämystämme siitä, miten organisaatiot voisivat hyödyntää sosiaalisessa mediassa kuuntelua strategisesti ja hyödyntää palautetta strategisissa päätöksissään mukautuen odotuksiin ja muutoksiin toimintaympäristössä.

Organisaation kuuntelu on työn avainkäsite ja digitaalisessa ympäristössä tapahtuvan kuuntelun mallissa on aiemmin kuvattu organisaatorakenne ja -prosessit, kulttuuri ja toimintaperiaatteet, sekä henkilöt, taidot, teknologiat ja käytäntöjä kuuntelun hallintaa varten. Ammattimainen kuunteleminen on määritelty tarkoittavan kansalaisten tai muiden sidosryhmien tunnistamista, tiedostamista, tulkintaa, huomioon ottamista, ymmärtämistä ja vastaamista.

Tämän väitöskirjan empiirinen osa koostuu neljästä osatutkimuksesta, joista ensimmäinen käsittelee organisaation sosiaalisen median käytön kehittymistä ja kuuntelun motiiveja sosiaalisessa mediassa. Toinen osatutkimus käsittelee organisaation kuuntelua sitouttamisen keinona ja luottamuksen vahvistajana. Kolmas artikkeli tutkii, millä keinoin COVID-19:ään liittyvästä kansalaisviestinnästä vastaavien julkisten organisaatioiden viestintäosastot hallitsivat

huomattavan määrän kommentteja ja kysymyksiä sosiaalisen median kanavissaan. Neljäs osatutkimus on tapaustutkimus sosiaalisen median viestinnän strategisesta johtamisesta kahdessa suuressa rahoitusalan organisaatiossa. Tässä tutkimuksessa selvitetään, miten ammattimaisesti toimivat organisaatiot hallitsevat moniäänistä kuuntelua ja viestintää sosiaalisessa mediassa ehdottaen uutta mallia kuuntelun ja puhumisen tasapainottamiseen. Tutkimuksen paradigmana on pragmatismi, ja osatutkimukset laadullisia.

Tutkimus osoittaa mitkä tekijät vaikuttavat organisaatioiden kuuntelu- ja puheprosesseihin sosiaalisessa mediassa, ja näin edistää tietämystämme siitä, miten organisaatiot voivat hyötyä sosiaalisesta kuuntelusta myös strategiansa linjaamisessa. Tulosten pohjalta ehdotetaan organisaatiolle mallia/konseptia puhumisen ja kuuntelun hallitsemiseen sosiaalisessa mediassa, arkkitehtuurin mallia, joka perustuu Macnamaran 2010 kehittämään malliin. Väitöskirjan pohjalta ehdotetaan lisäksi viestinnän strategisen linjaamisen määritelmän (Volk & Zerfass, 2018) ulottamista ulkoisten sidosryhmien kuunteluun.

Tutkimuksen luotettavuuteen ja pätevyyteen liittyvien rajoitusten osalta voidaan todeta, että sosiaalinen media on maailmanlaajuinen, mutta tulokset voivat olla kuvaavia vain kulttuuristen parametrien sisällä. Myös metodien osalta alun artikkelien (1-2) metodiikassa olisi vielä parannettavaa.

Osatutkimusten aineisto kerättiin neljässä vaiheessa vuosien 2017-2023 aikana, ja ne keskittyivät pääasiassa suomalaiseen kontekstiin tarkastellen kuuntelustrategioita hieman eri näkökulmasta. Lisäksi osatutkimuksen kolme haastateltua toteutettiin erityisolosuhteissa. COVID-19-pandemian aikana tutkittujen organisaatioiden oli ollut pakko aloittaa kuuntelu, koska huolestuneilta kansalaisilta tuli tuhansia kysymyksiä verkkoon. Se antoi kyllä mielenkiintoista tietoa tutkimukselleni, mutta poikkeuksellinen tilanne saattoi vaikuttaa haastateltujen organisaatioiden kiinnostukseen kuunnella, ja työstressi saattoi vaikuttaa haastateltavien vastauksiin. Pandemia oli maailmanlaajuinen, joten samantyyppisiä haasteita olisi voinut esiintyä myös muissa kulttuurisissa yhteyksissä. Lisäksi maailma muuttuu. Twitter on nyt X, ja uudet kanavat, kuten BlueSky ja Trends, ovat valtaamassa alaa; monissa organisaatioissa chatbotit tai tekoäly ovat saattaneet korvata verkossa kysymyksiin vastanneet sosiaalisen median tiimit. Toimintaympäristö muuttuu siis jatkuvasti, mikä vaikuttaa myös tutkimuskontekstiin.

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ORIGINAL PAPERS

I

KUUNTELUN JA DIALOGIN KYPYSYYS SOSIAALISESSA MEDIASSA

by

Taina Erkkilä & Salla Syvänen 2019

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KETKÄ?

Taina Erkkilä ja Salla Syvänen

- *FM Taina Erkkilä on viestinnän johtamisen tohtoriopiskelija Jyväskylän yliopiston kauppakorkeakoulussa. Hänen väitöskirjansa aiheena on organisaatioiden kuuntelustrategiat sosiaalisessa mediassa. Tällä hetkellä Taina työskentelee Pihlajalinna-konsernin viestintä- ja sijoittajasuhdejohtajana. Hänellä on 20 vuoden työkokemus viestinnän ja brändityön johtotehtävistä kansainvälisissä pörssiyrityksissä sekä yliopistomaailmassa.*

FM Salla Syvänen on toimittaja, joka on tällä hetkellä tohtorikoulutettava Jyväskylän yliopiston kauppakorkeakoulussa. Hän on työskennellyt lähes 15 vuoden ajan Yleisradiossa juontajana ja toimittajana. Jyväskylän kauppakorkeakoulussa hän opettaa mediasuhteita ja tutkii väitöskirjassaan asiakaspalveluviestintää verkossa ja erityisesti chattirobottien käyttöä organisaation viestinnässä.

KUUNTELUN JA DIALOGIN KYPSYYS SOSIAALISESSA MEDIASSA

Sosiaalisen median käytön yleistyemisestä huolimatta monet organisaatiot pistävät panoksensa vain yksisuuntaiseen markkinointiviestintään, eivätkä systemaattisesti kuuntele digitaalisia keskusteluja tai lähde mukaan dialogiin. Organisaation sosiaalisen median tiimin tulisi kuitenkin olla tiimi, joka kuuntelee ja keskustelee eikä vain tuota sisältöä. Käymme tässä artikkelissa läpi viimeaikaista tutkimusta organisaation kuuntelusta sosiaalisessa mediassa ja ehdotamme tapoja edetä dialogin aloittamisessa. Aktiivisuus sosiaalisessa kuuntelussa on strateginen valinta, ja havainnollistavana esimerkkinä ovat eurooppalaiset lentoyhtiöt, jotka ovat muuttaneet strategiaansa sosiaalisen median käytön nopean kasvun myötä.

Johdanto

Kuuntelua on tutkittu organisaatioissa muun muassa vuorovaikutuksen (mm. Bodie 2011, Bodie & Crick 2014), etiikan (mm. Bodie 2010, Dreher 2010, Lipari 2014) ja kuuntelun kompetenssien (Burnside-Lawry 2011 ja 2012, Wolvin & Coakley 1996) näkökulmista, mutta verkkomediassa tapahtuvan sidosryhmien kuuntelun tutkimus on aktivoitunut vasta viimeisen vuosikymmenen aikana (esim. Crawford 2009, Dreher 2009, Maben & Gearhart 2018, Macnamara 2018). Kansainvälisessä

tutkimuksessa kuuntelussa on tunnistettu puutteita, mutta käytännön tutkimukset strategisten mallien toimivuudesta puuttavat vielä.

Ymmärrys kuunteluprosessin tärkeimmistä elementeistä on puutteellista, sillä ei ole riittävästi tietoa siitä, miten sosiaalisen median käyttäjä ja digitaaliset työkalut prosessoivat tietoa ja vastaavat siihen. Kuuntelun tutkijat ovat jättäneet teknologian vaikutuksen kuunteluun huomioida, ja tämä saattaa vaikuttaa siihen, että kuuntelun määritelmässä ja malleissa kuunteleminen mielletään auditiiviseksi prosessiksi (Keaton & Worthington 2018). Ensin tulisi määritellä, mitä kuuntelun erikoispiirteitä, prosesseja tai käyttäytymismalleja ollaan tutkimassa, ja tutkimuksen tavoitteen tulisi ohjata sitä, miten kuuntelun malleja konseptoidaan ja otetaan käyttöön myöhemmin (Worthington & Bodie 2018,11).

Organisaatioiden kuuntelu on kattava toimintatapa, joka yhdistää organisaation rakenteen, politiikat, kulttuurin, prosessit, taidot, resurssit, teknologiat ja käytännöt ja mahdollistaa vahvistamisen, huomion antamisen, tulkinnan, harkinnan, ymmärryksen ja vastauksen antamisen sidosryhmille ja suurelle yleisölle (Macnamara 2016, 52). Käytännössä kuuntelu näin laajassa merkityksessä edellyttää kuuntelun arkkitehtuuria, jossa organisaatio määrittää prosessit, roolit ja vastuut sekä huolehtii kuuntelusta vastaavien henkilöiden koulutuksesta ja työkaluista kuuntelun sujumiseksi. Kuuntelun rakenteet ja prosessit luovat mallin päivittäiseen kuunteluun ja organisaatiossa työskentelyyn.

Kuuntelu on kuvattu myös organisaation tavaksi reagoida vastaamalla yleisönsä tarpeisiin, mikä tapahtuu kuuntelemalla asiakkaita, kilpailijoita tai muita kohdeyleisöjä, joihin halutaan luoda suhde. Kuuntelun avulla organisaatiolla on mahdollisuus lisätä henkilöstön tuottavuutta, tuotteiden laatua ja asiakastyytyvyyttä ja saavuttaa sen myötä parempi maine (Worthington & Fitch-Hauser 2018). Sosiaalinen kuuntelu (*social listening*) voidaan kuvata myös prosessiksi, jossa sosiaalisen median kanavalla tulkitaan viestejä, havainnoidaan ja reagoidaan eri ärsykkeisiin (Stewart & Arnold 2018). Kuunteleminen sosiaalisessa mediassa on muutakin kuin vain salakuuntelua, tarkkailua ja valvontaa: organisaation sosiaalisen median tilin seuraajat odottavat tulevansa kuulluksi ja saavansa laadukkaat ja asialliset vastaukset ja kommentit kysymyksiinsä (Maben & Gearhart 2018).

Organisaation kuuntelun kypsyy

Couldry (2010) väitti, että nyky-yhteiskunnassa on puhumisen kriisi (*crisis of voice*), mutta Macnamaran (2016, 3) mukaan todellinen ongelma on kuuntelun kriisi (*crisis of listening*). Länsimaissa valtaosa organisaatioista on läsnä sosiaalisessa mediassa, ja niistä Facebook on suosituin kanava (Smart Insights 2018). Sisällöntuotanto sosiaalisessa mediassa on kuitenkin useimmiten yksisuuntaista ja markkinointihenkistä. Satunnaisesti voidaan esimerkiksi ohjata asiakasta kysymyksiin ottamaan yhteyttä sähköpostitse tai puhelimitse. Suurin osa organisaatioista kuuntelee ”hetkittäin hyvin, usein kehnos-

ti ja joskus eivät lainkaan” (Macnamara 2018).

Digitaalisen viestinnän kehitys edustaa mahdollisuutta viestintäosastoille ei pelkästään paremman näkyvyyden saamiseksi vaan myös digitaalisten suhteiden kehittämiseen sekä organisaation maineen hallintaan (Yaxley 2012, 431). Maineen hallinnan ja kriisien ennakoinnin kannalta organisaation on tärkeä seurata sosiaalisen median keskusteluja.

Organisaatiot epäröivät dialogiin ryhtymistä, koska niillä ei ole suunniteltua strategiaa tai tavoitteita sosiaalisen median käyttöön ja koska ajatus sidosryhmän tai asiakkaiden sitouttamisesta dialogin avulla on epäselvä (Huang & Yang 2015; Bortree & Seltzer 2009). Sosiaalisen median nopea tempo ja informaatiotulva vaikeuttavat organisaatioiden strategian suunnittelua, keskusteluun ryhtymistä ja sitä kautta myös sidosryhmien sitouttamista sosiaalisen median kanavissa (mm. Kent & Lane 2017; Martino & Lovari 2016; Theunissen & Wan Noordin 2012). Sosiaalista mediaa on myös vaikea hallita, sillä sen käyttöön ja dialogin toteuttamiseen ei useinkaan ole riittävästi resursseja (Romenti ym. 2014; DiStaso ym. 2011).

Kuvassa 1 nähdään organisaation kypsyminen passiivisesta läsnäolijasta aktiiviseksi toimijaksi: kun organisaatio rutinoituu yksisuuntaisessa viestinnässä ja huomaa, että kanaville tulee myös kommentteja ja kysymyksiä, se siirtyy vähitellen aktiivisempaan kuunteluun ja dialogiin. Dialogista viestintää ei tapahdu, jos organisaatiot eivät seuraa sidosryhmiensä toimia ja hyödynnä mahdollisuuksia tai eivät ole


käytettävissä laadukkaaseen viestintään (Callison & Seltzer 2010, 145; Kent ym. 2003, 75; Seltzer & Mitrook 2007).

Myöhemmin esittelemässämme esimerkissä muutos passiivisesta tai yksisuuntaisesta markkinoijasta kypsäksi sosiaaliseksi kuuntelijaksi ja dialogin osallistujaksi

onnistui eurooppalaisissa lentoyhtiöissä vuodessa. Lentoyhtiöt siis havaitsivat sidosryhmiensä aktiivisuuden sosiaalisessa mediassa ja siirsivät asiakaspalvelunsa sinne.

KUVA 1. Organisaation sosiaalisen kuuntelun kypsyyden kehittyminen

	Ei läsnäoloa sosiaalisessa mediassa	Passiivinen läsnäolo	Aktiivinen yksisuuntainen viestintä	Aktiivinen kuuntelu ja dialogi
Aktiivisuus sosiaalisessa mediassa	ei tilejä eikä läsnäoloa some-kanavilla	tilit sosiaalisessa mediassa, ei säännöllistä sisältötuotantoa tai kommentointia	tili(t) sosiaalisessa mediassa, sisältö markkinointityyppistä yksisuuntaista viestintää; satunnaisia vastauksia	eri kanaville eri roolit: esim. Twitter asiakaspalveluun, keskustelujen monitorointi myös oman sivuston ulkopuolella, vastaukset kysymyksiin kanavilla
Kuuntelun/dialogin aste	ei dialogia	ei vastata mahdollisiin sidosryhmäkysymyksiin tai kommentteihin	vastataan joskus, asiakaskyselyt ohjataan puhelinnumeroon tai sähköpostiin	sosiaalinen media toimii asiakaspalvelukanavana ja brändin vahvistajana
Kuuntelun/dialogin kanavat	ei tilejä	Facebook suosituin	Facebook ja Instagram yksisuuntaisesti	Twitter/Facebook asiakaspalveluun, Instagram markkinointiin


KUUNTELUN KYPSYYDEN KEHITTYMINEN

Miksi on tärkeää kuunnella?

Toiminta sosiaalisessa mediassa on kuuntelun lisäksi siis myös interaktiota ja keskustelua sidosryhmien edustajien kanssa. Tutkimuksissa on todettu, että aktiivisuus ja dialogi organisaation ja asiakkaiden välillä lisää sitoutumista (*engagement*) ja että erityisesti sosiaalisessa mediassa dialogin merkitys on hyvin tärkeää (Ji ym. 2017). Keskustelevat yritykset pitävät asiakkaansa sitoutuneina (Rybalko & Seltzer 2010.), ja tällaiset organisaatiot myös investoivat enemmän sosiaaliseen mediaan, koska ymmärtävät sidosryhmäsuhteen ja toisaalta myös maineenhallinnan merkityksen menestykselle (Wang ym. 2016). Valentini, Kruckeberg & Starck (2012, 8) väittävät, ettei sosiaalista mediaa ole ilman käyttäjiä, ja esittävät, että sosiaalisen median viestinnän avainasia on yhteistyö.

Kuunteleminen ja dialogi auttavat organisaatioita ymmärtämään yleisönsä näkemykset ja mielipiteet. Organisaatiot eivät kykene sitouttamaan tärkeitä sidosryhmiään tai suurta yleisöä, jolleivät kuuntele näiden tarpeita myös sosiaalisen median kanavissa, jolleivät reagoi niihin ja aloita aitoa keskustelua (Narvarro 2018). Dialogi pohjautuu vahvasti kuunteluun ja vastapuolen huomioimiseen sekä molemminpuoliseen mielipiteiden arvostamiseen (Macnamara 2016, 41–43). Tehdyt tutkimukset vahvistavat, että yritykset viestivät verkossa asioista, jotka eivät itse asiassa kiinnosta heidän asiakkaitaan, eivätkä huomioi aiheita, joista asiakkaat olisivat kiinnostuneita (Freundt, Hillebrand & Lehmann, 2013). Sosiaalisen median hyödyntäminen yksittäisen sidosryhmän

sitouttamisessa voi joskus epäonnistuaakin. Tällöin sidosryhmän edustajien pitäisi saada mahdollisuus kyseenalaistaa kanavan käyttö, ja viestintäkanavasta pitäisi sopia tiiviissä yhteistyössä ja keskustellen sidosryhmän edustajien (Theunissen & Wan Noordin 2012, 9). Gutierrez-Garcia ym. (2015) mukaan dialogin ydin perustuu yksinkertaisesti kuuntelemisen taidolle, ja myös Couldry (2010, 80) linkittää kuuntelun taidon ja puhumisen tiiviisti yhteen. Mikäli organisaatio kuuntelee huonosti, sillä on negatiiviset vaikutukset sekä organisaatioon että sen sidosryhmiin (Burnside-Lawry, 2011). Organisaatiot oppisivat kuuntelemaan oikein, jos ne yhdistäisivät kuuntelun kompetenssit osallistavan viestinnän kriteereihin (Burnside-Lawry, 2010) ja täyttäisivät kuuntelun vajeen (*close the listening loop*) käymällä keskustelua täyttämättömistä odotuksista (Macnamara 2016, 231).

Kuunteluvastuu organisaatiossa

Kuuntelemiseksi mielletään monesti *share of voice* -raportit tai niin kutsuttujen tykkääjien määrän kehityksen seuraaminen, mutta ammattimainen sosiaalinen kuuntelu on paljon muutakin. Organisaation kuuntelun kompetenssi yhdistää kuuntelun ilmapiirin ja henkilöstön edustajan kuuntelemisen taidon (Burnside-Lawry 2011, 149). Organisaation kuuntelun resurssit ovat käytännössä

- 1) ammattilaisten tiimi, joka monitoroi ja analysoi sosiaalista mediaa, 2) asiakaspalvelu, 3) raportointi, 4) konsultointi ja 5) viestien vaihto.

Sosiaalisen median tiimi on useimmi-

ten organisaatiossa viestinnän ja markkinoinnin alaisuudessa, eikä luonnollista linkkiä asiakaspalveluun ole, vaikka se olisi työssä tärkeää.

Kuuntelun arkkitehtuurissa muun muassa luodaan yhtenäiset prosessit ja tavat toimia eri yksiköiden välille, pyydetään asiakkaiden kysymyksiin apua asiakaspalvelutiimiltä, välitetään asiakaspalaute asiakaspalveluun ja tärkeimmät asiat myös organisaation johdolle. Sosiaalinen media yhdistää organisaation eri osat ja edellyttää toimivaa yhteistyötä osastojen ja tiimien välillä. Sosiaalisen median tiimin lisäksi myös muu henkilökunta voi toimia aktiivisesti verkossa henkilökohtaisten tiliensä kautta. Burnside-Lawry (Emt.) käsittelee organisaation henkilökunnan tehtävää kuuntelijana, mutta ehkä meidän pitäisi puhua myös asiakkaan tai muun sidosryhmän edustajan tehtävästä kuuntelijana.

Hyvän kuuntelun ja dialogin ominaisuudet

Hyvä kuuntelu edellyttää kuuntelemisen osaamisen lisäksi osallistavan viestinnän taitoja (Burnside-Lawry 2010). Hyvät kuuntelutaidot antavat organisaatiolle paremmat mahdollisuudet vastata tuleviin viesteihin, sillä eri tilanteet vaikuttavat vastapuolen odotuksiin ja antavat arvokkaita näkemyksiä siitä, miten ammattitaitoisesti organisaation kuuntelu käytännössä tapahtuu (Burnside-Lawry 2012). Sosiaalisen median tiimin pitää olla aktiivinen ja empaattinen kuulija, pyytää lisätietoa, tarjota neuvoa, esittää kysymyksiä ja vastata niihin sosiaalisen median

profileissa ja näin pyrkiä hyvään dialogiin organisaation yleisön kanssa (Maben ja Gearhardt 2018).

Organisaatiot eivät kykene sitouttamaan tärkeitä sidosryhmiään tai suurta yleisöä, jolleivät kuuntele näiden tarpeita myös sosiaalisen median kanavissa, jolleivät reagoi niihin ja aloita aitoa keskustelua (Navarro 2018). Kuuntelun politiikalla tarkoitetaan sitä, kuunnellaanko lainkaan, ketä kuunnellaan, mitä kuunnellaan ja kenelle tuloksista kerrotaan ja kuinka tarkasti (Macnamara 2016, 254–255). Asiakkaan sitouttamisen ja asiakaskokemuksen parantamisen lisäksi keskusteluista voi olla hyötyä esimerkiksi organisaation päätöksenteossa, sillä keskustelujen avulla asiakastuntemus paranee (Moe & Schweidel 2017; Ji ym. 2017; Elving & Postma 2017; Rybalko & Seltzer 2010).

Dialogin käytön hyötyjen ja haittojen välisten ristiriitojen vähentämiseksi tutkijat ovat kehittäneet strategioita, joita organisaatiot voivat hyödyntää sosiaalisen median keskusteluissaan. Romenti, Murtanelli ja Valentini (2014) määrittelevät neljä erilaista dialogityyppiä:

1. Tarkoituksena on kehittää yhteinen näkemys ja heijastaa keskustelussa mukana olevien mielipiteitä ja koskettaa jokaista keskustelijaa.
2. Tarkoituksena on analysoida organisaatioon liittyviä aiheita ja kysymyksiä eri näkökulmista ja laajentaa merkityksiä ja luoda uusia arvoja
3. Tarkoituksena on vahvistaa vuorovaikutusta sidosryhmien kanssa ja siirtää keskustelun aikana huomio

- aiheesta toiseen, jotta kriittisen aiheen saama huomio vähenee.
4. Tarkoituksena on käynnistää keskustelu, jossa mielipiteitä vaihdetaan ja jossa osallistujat ovat sitoutuneet arvostamaan toistensa mielipiteitä. Organisaatiot tunnistavat eri perspektiivit ja näkökulmat, mutta eivät välttämättä halua muuttaa mielipidettään tai asemaansa. Tuottava dialogi voi edistää luottamuksen ja avoimuuden syntymistä keskustelukumppaneiden välille. (2014, 14–15.)

Näiden erilaisten dialogistrategioiden toimivuudesta tarvitaan vielä lisätutkimusta ja käytännön kokemuksia, mutta määritellyt strategiat voivat toimia hyvänä pohjana organisaation oman sosiaalisen median strategian suunnittelussa.

Lentoyhtiöt oppivat kuuntelemaan

Sosiaalisen median merkitys asiakas-suhteen hallinnassa on kasvanut viime vuosina (mm. EACD Monitor 2016), ja kuluttajat ovat innostuneet mahdollisuudesta antaa palautetta ja käydä suoraa dialogia organisaatioiden kanssa. Monet organisaatiot käyttävät nykyään Twitteriä asiakaspalvelutoimintansa kanavana (Barnes & Jacobsen 2014, 155). Organisaatiolle sosiaalinen media on mahdollisuus ja haaste, sillä toisaalta se mahdollistaa sen, että asiakkaalle annetaan nopeasti vastaus, jonka myös muut asiasta kiinnostuneet näkevät, mutta toisaalta mahdollinen negatiivinen palaute jää elämään sivustolle ja saavuttaa sadat, tuhannet tai

jopa miljoonat silmäparit. Dialogi saattaa kehittää eettistä tapaa toimia, mutta se ei voi pakottaa organisaatiota käyttäytymään eettisesti (Kent & Taylor 2002), eikä se myöskään voi saada organisaatiota automaattisesti ryhtymään keskusteluun sidosryhmiensä kanssa (Theunissen & Wan Noordin 2012, 12).

Lentoyhtiöiden kova kilpailu on tuonut mukanaan vahvat asiakasuskollisuusohjelmat, ja tutkimuksen mukaan ne parantavat asiakkaiden lojaalisuutta (Sandada 2015). Asiakasuskollisuus on tärkeää lentoyhtiöille, koska asiakkailla on varaa valita monesta. Maineenhallinnan vuoksi lentoyhtiön on tärkeää seurata keskusteluja sosiaalisessa mediassa: lento-onnettomuudet, tekniset viat ja myöhästelyt sekä asiakaspalvelun ongelmat nostavat lentoyhtiön helposti otsikoihin (mm. Greer 2003, Gerken 2016, Park 2016). Malaysia Airlinesin taannoisen lentokoneen katoamista seuranneen kriisin jälkeen tehdyssä tutkimuksessa todettiin sosiaalisen median lisänneen tiedonvälityksen nopeutta ja kontrollin menetystä, eli sosiaalinen media on tärkeä kanava myös organisaation kriisiviestinnästä vastaaville (Husain 2014). Kriisit voivat syntyä ja leviätä sosiaalisessa mediassa, ja muun muassa blogit ja Twitter voivat toimia organisaatiossa tehokkaina kriisikanavina (Schultz ym. 2011).

Havainnollistavassa esimerkissä on tutkittu asiakasnäkökulmasta, miten 17 suurimman eurooppalaisen lentoyhtiön kypsyys kuunnella ja keskustella sosiaalisessa mediassa kehittyi yhden vuoden aikana. Lentoyhtiöiden välinen kilpailu

on kovaa, niillä on paljon nopeatempoista asiakaspalvelutyötä, ja luotettavuus ja maine ovat yhtiöiden menestykselle erittäin tärkeitä. Kovassa kilpailutilanteessa myös toimintatapoja tarkkaillaan ja kopioidaan.

Tutkimus tehtiin kahdessa vaiheessa: ensimmäisen vaiheen datan keräsi viestinnän maisteriopiskelijaryhmä Jyväskylän yliopistossa osana kurssityötä tammi-kuussa 2016. He kävivät läpi 17 suurinta eurooppalaista lentoyhtiötä ja listasivat niiden sosiaalisen median tilit ja aktiivisuuden asiakaskysymyksissä. Seuraava vaihe toteutettiin vuotta myöhemmin, maaliskuussa 2017, jolloin me kirjoittajat kävimme läpi samat yhtiöt ja sosiaalisen median tilit ja analysoimme asiakaskeskustelua.

Tässä esimerkissä ei tutkittu lentoyhtiön kuuntelun organisointia vaan keskityttiin siihen, miltä dialogi näyttää asiakasnäkökulmasta. Data analysoitiin seuraavista näkökulmista:

- 1) onko yhtiöllä sosiaalisen median kanavilla tilejä vai ei, 2) ovatko sivut passiivisia, vai onko siellä sisällöntuotantoa, vastauksia kysymyksiin tai dialogia, 3) miten nopeasti yhtiö lupaa vastata 4) onko jotkin kanavat nimetty asiakaspalvelukanaviksi.

Tämän pohjalta arvioitiin lentoyhtiön kuuntelun kypsyyttä. Kuva 2 osoittaa, miten vastaukset tai dialogi sosiaalisessa mediassa analysoitiin laadullisesti. Heikko kypsyyttä tarkoittaa vastaamattomuutta ja kypsä dialogi 24/7-tyyppistä sosiaalisen median kanavissa tapahtuvaa asiakaspalvelua.

KUVA 2. Lentoyhtiöiden dialogin analysointi

Dialogin taso	Dialogin kypsyyttä osoittava tieto	Esimerkki
Heikko	ei vastauksia kysymyksiin tai kommentteihin sosiaalisen median sivustoilla	ei vastausta tai vain lyhyt kiittäus ”yritämme ratkaista”, mutta asiaan ei koskaan palata kanavalla (esim. Air France)
Passiivinen	vastaa mutta pyytää ottamaan muualle yhteyttä	”Ottakaa yhteyttä asiakaspalveluumme” (mm. AirBerlin, Alitalia, Austrian Airlines)
Suhteellisen hyvä	ammattitaitoinen palvelu mutta rajoitettu: asiakkaat eivät voineet kysyä mitään Facebookissa tai asiakaspalvelun aukioloaika oli rajoitettu	Facebookissa ei annettu vastauksia negatiivisiin kommentteihin, asiakaspalvelu käsittelee Twitterissä helpot kysymykset suoraan (esim. Easyjet)
Kypsä	yhtiöllä asiakaspalvelu vuorokauden ympäri, käy keskustelua ja vastaa asiakaskysymyksiin sekä Facebookissa että Twitterissä	”Meidän asiakaspalvelumme on aina auki Twitterissä ja Facebookissa, ja voit kysyä meiltä lennoista, lipuista ja uudelleenvarauksista” (Swiss)

Lentoyhtiöiden asiakkaiden kuuntelu ja dialogi sosiaalisessa mediassa 2016

Alkuvuonna 2016 vain kahdella lentoyhtiöllä seitsemästätoista oli sosiaalisessa mediassa tai kotisivullaan palvelua 24/7 eli ympäri vuorokauden. Muut kehittivät ottamaan yhteyttä asiakaspalveluun puhelimitse tai sähköpostitse. Sosiaalisen median kypsyyden taso oli passiivinen, jos kyselyt vain ohjattiin eteenpäin, ja olematon, jos kyselyihin ei koskaan vastattu verkossa. Tapa sitouttaa oli kannustimien kautta, kuten kilpailut, palkinnot ja erikoishinnat.

Yksikään lentoyhtiöistä ei aktiivisesti vastannut negatiiviseen palautteeseen tai keskusteluun oman some-sivustonsa ulkopuolella. Kaksitoista yhtiöstä pyysi julkisesti anteeksi, jos sen sosiaalisen median kanavalle tuli negatiivinen kommentti. Mitä dialogiin tulee, vain neljä yhtiöstä vastasi avoimesti asiakaspalautteeseen omalla sosiaalisen median kanavalla, muut käänsivät keskustelun heti muualle tai eivät reagoineet lainkaan. Sosiaalisen median tiimin tehtävänä oli lähinnä ohjata asiakas pois sivulta.

Lentoyhtiöiden asiakkaiden kuuntelu ja dialogi sosiaalisessa mediassa 2017

Alkuvuonna 2017 sosiaalisen median tileillä oli tapahtunut selkeää kehitystä niin kuuntelussa kuin dialogissa. Kehitystä tukee yhtäältä sosiaalisen median käyttäjien kasvava määrä, toisaalta koko ajan tiukentunut kilpailu ilmatilasta, mikä pakottaa nopeaan asiakaspalveluun maineen ja imagon hallinnan vuoksi. On myös luontevaa edetä yksisuuntaisesta viestinnästä

dialogiin, kun huomaa että organisaation omiin yksisuuntaisiin viesteihin alkaa tulla kommentteja ja kysymyksiä. Jos asiakas on kilpailijayrityksellä saanut asiakaspalvelua esimerkiksi Facebookissa, hän olettaa saavansa saman palvelun myös toiselta yritykseltä.

Tulosten mukaan parhailla yrityksillä oli palvelua 24/7 ja asiakaskysymyksiin vastattiin sekä Facebookissa että Twitterissä. Vuoden aikana Twitteristä oli tullut suosituin kanava, josta asiakkaat saivat tietoa lentoaikataulujen muutoksista ja kriisitilanteista, ja sieltä sai vastaukset asiakaskysymyksiin ja -valituksiin. Kuudelta toista lentoyhtiöllä seitsemästätoista oli asiakaspalveluun tarkoitettu Twitter-tili. Monimutkaisempiin kysymyksiin annettiin online-linkki, joka ohjasi asiakaspalveluun, pikaviestijärjestelmään, tai puhelinumero, jotta asia saatiin kerralla kuntoon. Myös Facebook-sivut olivat suosittuja, ja kaikilla lentoyhtiöillä oli yksi tai useita omia tilejä. Kilpailut, promootiokampanjat ja hinnanalennukset olivat edelleen mukana, mutta interaktiota oli lisätty. Palvelu oli nopeampaa, sillä neljä yhtiöstä tarjosi palvelua 24/7, ja kolme ilmoitti selkeästi 10–12 tunnin palvelupäivystyksestä sosiaalisessa mediassa.

Lentoyhtiöiden läsnäolo sosiaalisessa mediassa oli hyvin näkyvää, ja helpommat kysymykset ja palaute käsiteltiin avoimesti sivustolla, ja siellä kuunneltiin asiakkaita, kommentoitiin ja kyseltiin lisätietoja. Vaikeammat tapaukset ohjattiin edelleen eteenpäin, mutta myös niissä tapauksissa some-asiakaspalvelu teki tehtävän helppoksi muun muassa linkein ja dokumen-

tein. Näissä tilanteissa prosessi kuvattiin selkeästi ja tehtiin asiakkaalle helpoksi. Näin sosiaalisen median tiimistä oli tullut asiakaspalvelutiimi. Kanavia käytettiin proaktiivisesti paitsi omaan viestintään myös asiakkaiden kuunteluun ja dialogiin.

Yhteenveto

Tärkeimmät tavat organisaation sosiaalisen median kuuntelun kehittämiseksi ovat sidosryhmien sitouttaminen, arvostaminen ja empatian osoittaminen. Organisaation on mahdollista luoda sosiaaliseen mediaan oma sosiaalisen verkostoitumisen kanavansa, jossa ei ole lainkaan mainoksia eikä myyntipuheita (Kent & Taylor 2016).

Organisaatio osoittaa kuuntelutaitonsa vastaamalla asianmukaisesti kysymyksiin, antamalla neuvoja ja ylläpitämällä keskustelua omilla kanavillaan. Sosiaalisen median tiimi on itse asiassa kuuntelutiimi, ja tämä tulisi huomioida niin henkilövalinnoissa kuin koulutuksissa, jotta tiimillä on tarvittava osaaminen keskustelujen hallintaan (Maben & Gearhart 2018). Kuuntelutaidoltaan kehittyneissä organisaatioissa kuuntelua harjoittavat muutkin kuin viestinnässä tai markkinoinnissa työskentelevä sosiaalisen median tiimi, ja henkilöstöä voidaan kannustaa seuraamaan oman alan tai aihepiirin keskustelua ja työskentelemään yhdessä sosiaalisen median vastuuhenkilöiden kanssa. Vaikka ihminen – tai organisaation työntekijä – on se, joka kuuntelee, organisaatiossa tapahtuva systemaattinen kuunteleminen vaatii paitsi kuuntelulle avointa kulttuuria, myös ohjeet, prosessit, rakenteen, teknologian, resurssit ja taidot tiedon keräämi-

seen, analysointiin ja hyödyntämiseen (Macnamara 2018).

Lentoyhtiöesimerkkimme osoittaa mielestämme, että kuuntelussa ja dialogisissa taidot kypsyvät harjoituksen kautta. On tärkeää olla siellä, missä monet asiakkaat ovat – vuonna 2018 jo yli 3 miljardia ihmistä käytti sosiaalista mediaa (Smart Insight 2018).

Suosituksia

Muutos kohti kuuntelun kulttuuria vaatii tiivistä yhteistyötä ja integroitua prosessia. Eniten hyötyvät ne organisaatiot, jotka keräävät sosiaalisessa mediassa saamaansa palautetta ja hyödyntävät sitä aktiivisesti (Brandel 2010,15). Lentoyhtiöesimerkin ja aiemman tutkimuksen perusteella eli Macnamaran (2016) kuunteluarkkitehtuurin mallia mukailen ehdotamme sosiaalisen median kuuntelun ja dialogin suunnitteluun seuraavia asioita:

1. **Valitse sopivin sosiaalisen median kanava:** organisaation tulee ilmoittaa sidosryhmälleen selvästi – kaikkien asiakasviestintäkanavien kautta – jos yksi kanavista on tarkoitettu juuri asiakkaiden kysymyksille ja keskustelulle. Ennen kanavapäätöstä kannattaa seurata, minkä kanavan kautta tulee eniten kysymyksiä ja kommentteja.
2. **Resurssit:** valitse strategia ja tavoitteet resurssien mukaan. On parempi kuunnella ja keskustella yhdellä kanavalla kuin olla monella kanavalla vain julkaisemassa tie-

- toa. Tee yhteistyötä organisaation sisällä muiden osastojen kanssa, esimerkiksi henkilöstöhallinnon, asiakaspalvelun ja myynnin. Joskus myös passiivisuus on strateginen päätös.
3. **Nopeus:** sosiaalisessa mediassa pitää vastata nopeasti. Prosessia nopeuttaa, jos eri asiat tai vastaus-tyypit on kategorisoitu etukäteen ja vastaukset mietitty osittain valmiiksi ja koordinoitu asiakaspalvelun tai muun asiantuntijan avulla.
 4. **Organisaation johdon informointi:** tärkeimmästä palautteesta on hyvä raportoida organisaation johtoryhmälle. Joskus kyseessä on ongelma tai haaste, ja joskus esimerkiksi tuotekehitysidea, joka on hyvä saattaa ylimmän johdon tietoon.
 5. **Toiminnan seuranta:** sosiaalisen median tiimi tarvitsee tukea. Jatkuva keskusteluyhteys on tärkeää, jotta yllättäviin tilanteisiin ja potentiaalisiin kriiseihin pystytään reagoimaan nopeasti. Myös uhkaileviin tai epäasiallisiin kommentteihin reagoiminen tulee olla ennalta suunniteltua.
 6. **Läpinäkyvyys:** asiakkaan asiaa ei aina voida hoitaa loppuun asti sosiaalisen median kanavalla, ja jos hänet ohjataan toisaalle, prosessista kannattaa kertoa avoimesti,

jotta muutkin sivustolla kävijät ymmärtävät ja jotta positiivinen mielikuva organisaatiosta säilyy.

7. **Toiminnan analysointi ja mitaaminen:** sisältöjen vaikutuksia on tärkeää analysoida ja mitata säännöllisesti – missä on onnistuttu ja missä on vielä kehitettävää. Analyysin avulla voidaan myös miettiä tavoitteet, joihin toiminnalla halutaan päästä, ja sopia toimintatavat esimerkiksi kriisitilanteeseen.

Sosiaalisen median merkitys on kasvanut organisaatioviestinnässä viime vuosina huomattavasti, eikä toimintaa näillä kanavilla ei voi jättää viestinnän suunnittelun ja strategioiden ulkopuolelle.

Keaton ja Worthington (2018) haluavat haastaa tutkijat medioidun kuuntelun mutkikkuuden ja kompleksisuuden taklaamiseen: ”Me emme pysy tahdissa konseptuaalisesti, metodologisesti emmekä teoreettisesti tällä tärkeällä tutkimuksen alueella.” Mielenkiintoinen jatkotutkimuksen aihe olisi esimerkiksi perehtyä siihen, minkälainen kuuntelemisen arkkitehtuuri on kypsässä organisaatiossa, eli tarkastella arkkitehtuuria ja luoda malleja havaintojen pohjalta.

Toinen mahdollinen tutkimusalue on keskustelun tyyli: audiitiiviseen kuunteluun tehdyn mallin pohjalta voisi tutkia, miten esimerkiksi mimiikan ja äänenpainon arvot saadaan muutettua digitaaliseen muotoon. Kasvotusten tilanteessa on helppoa olla ystävällinen ja hymyillä, mut-

ta miten viedä sama sosiaalisen median asiakastyöhön. Seuraava Burnside-Lawryn (2010) laatima lista tehokkaan kuuntelun ominaisuuksista, joka on mukaeltu Wolvin & Coakleyn mallista (1996, 41), voisi toimia pohjana sosiaalisen median dialogin analyysille: palautteeseen vastaaminen ja selvitystä kaipaavien kysymysten hoito (1), ystävällinen asiakaspalvelu (eleet, *body language*) (2), systemaattisuus (3), prosessien selkeys (4), katsekontakti (5), empatian osoittaminen (6) ja aitous (7).

Näistä voit aloittaa:

<https://www.uts.edu.au/sites/default/files/fass-organizational-listening-report.pdf>

<http://www.lse.ac.uk/Events/Events-Assets/PDF/2016/20161123-Jim-Macnamara-Transcript.pdf>

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II

MATURITY IN LEAPS AND BOUNDS – ORGANIZATIONAL LISTENING FOR CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

by

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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



III

ALERT BUT SOMEWHAT UNALIGNED: PUBLIC SECTOR ORGANISATIONS' SOCIAL MEDIA LISTENING STRATEGIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

by

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Alert but somewhat unaligned: public sector organisations' social media listening strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Purpose – During the COVID-19 pandemic, public sector organisations produced thousands of social media messages weekly answering citizens questions and informing the public on safety related matters. The purpose of this study was to investigate how the pandemic shaped social media listening in Finland's public sector organisations and how these organisations aligned their listening and strategic communication to address emerging questions, news (real and fake) and rumours during the pandemic.

Design/methodology/approach – Building on a theoretical background from strategic communication, organisational listening, digital marketing and public sector communication, qualitative interview data included communicators ($N = 14$) from all central Finnish public sector organisations in charge of COVID-19 communication. Findings were themed and analysed qualitatively to understand the level of alignment of strategic communication on social media.

Findings – The findings revealed that the pandemic had strained public sector organisations' communication capabilities, forcing them to align their processes and resources reactively to enable useful content and limit false/misleading content. The results confirmed that organisational listening remained somewhat unaligned. A dual role of public sector communication as speakers but increasingly as listeners was highlighted.

Originality/value – The study's findings point to organisational listening on social media being a central requisite for public sector organisations overcoming a crisis.

Keywords Pandemic, Public sector communication, Organisational listening, Social media, Strategic communication

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Globally, public sector organisations are challenged with complexity and bureaucracy but must comply with the political view of “doing the right things” (Thijs and Staes, 2008, p. 9). Citizens assess public sector communication based on “whether it meets their needs and answers their questions” (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019, p. 7). Citizen needs were great during the social isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Luoma-aho *et al.*, 2021). In fact, Chakraborty *et al.* (2021) reported that social media became the primary means of communication during the isolation.

Scholars agree that social media platforms lack dialog (Macnamara, 2016; Theunissen and Wan Noordin, 2012; Watkins, 2017) but remain crucial for public sector organisations (Crawford, 2009; Maben and Gearhart, 2018) owing to their capabilities for relationship building, participation, organisational learning and listening (Kent and Taylor, 2016).



Strategic listening to stakeholders may help build organisational social capital by fostering collaboration (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019), but in practice, organisations remain challenged by the topics, dialog and slowness (Brandel, 2010; Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019). Global crises tend to illuminate these, and alignment of strategies remains a challenge.

Listening to citizens is central for democracy (Delli Carpini, 2020). While listening can be negative, as when used as a weapon against citizens in less democratic societies, it can also provide benefits such as increased public good, improved democracy, stakeholder trust and sustainable relationships (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019; Macnamara, 2020). Listening online as a human resource-based approach differs from monitoring computer-based qualitative metrics offering opportunity for live interaction vs. monitoring reports with numbers rather than content. All data from citizens require ethical considerations (Mau, 2019) around issues such as privacy and identity (Davis and Patterson, 2012), as conclusions drawn based on these data may be skewed (Espeland and Sauder, 2007).

Combining strategic communication, organisational listening, digital marketing and public sector communication research, the present study investigated how the emergent global pandemic impacted public sector social media listening in Finland. Finland is a country of high generalised trust in society, high utilisation of technology among citizens, and its public sector operations are guided by the principles of transparency and openness of process enabling citizen engagement (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019). Building on frameworks of organisational listening (Macnamara, 2016, 2018, 2020) and public sector communication (e.g. Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019), the study examined the strategic alignment of online listening (Volk and Zeffass, 2018). These findings contribute to strategic communication theory through a new emphasis on how the listening role of organisations requires more strategic alignment of external communication, calls for new practices and guidelines of strategic online listening.

Literature review

Aligned and two-way strategic communication

Strategic communication research focuses on how organisations interact with stakeholders and present themselves as social actors in creating public culture and discussing public issues (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007). Originally, “strategic communication” was defined to support organisations in advancing their missions (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007; Holtzhausen and Zeffass, 2015). Communication is strategic when it is objective driven and aligned with strategic targets (Cornelissen, 2017; Christensen *et al.*, 2008; Volk and Zeffass, 2018). Zeffass *et al.* (2018) defined strategic communication as encompassing communications crucial for “the survival and sustained success of an entity” (p. 487), indicating the purposeful use of communication to engage in strategically important conversations such as citizen dialogs.

Strategic listening helps organisations recognise and react to changes in the environment more quickly (Macnamara and Gregory, 2018), while listening on social media helps identify weak and strong signals from multiple spheres in decision-making processes to maintain or achieve an external fit (Zeffass *et al.*, 2018). Volk and Zeffass (2018) highlighted the importance of aligning strategic communication on both the primary (with the environment) and secondary levels (inside organisations). The secondary level relates to agreement between strategy and organisational operations.

Strategies should be adaptive to change according to societal changes, citizen feedback moving from “a prescriptive to an emergent perspective on strategic management” (Frandsen and Johansen, 2015, p. 230). Thus, strategic communication must not only engage stakeholders but also build and implement strategies (van Ruler, 2018).

Organisational listening on social media

Organisational listening is “the culture, policies, structure, processes, resources, skills, technologies, and practices applied by an organisation to give recognition, acknowledgement, attention, interpretation, understanding, consideration, and response to its stakeholders and public” (Macnamara, 2016, p. 52). Earlier research has confirmed that organisational listening on social media requires that both citizens and organisations are present, active, observing and responding to stimuli through the channels (Brandel, 2010; Dellarocas, 2003). Ideally, this could lead to long-lasting relationships that build trust between citizens and organisations and strengthen legitimacy (Navarro, 2018; Yaxley, 2012). Furthermore, listening organisations are perceived as authentic and tend to receive more citizen support on social media (Kang, 2014; Men and Tsai, 2015), whereas poor listening has negative consequences for organisations and stakeholders (Burnside-Lawry, 2011).

Listening is a starting point for dialog, as dialogic communication requires organisations to provide opportunities for stakeholders’ positive or negative engagement (Seltzer and Mitrook, 2007). Organisations may fear negative feedback and even lack resources (Macnamara, 2020) to quickly address the many citizen comments on social media (Brandel, 2010). Public sector organisations tend to utilise social media merely as a one-way information channel (Mergel, 2013). However, listening should be approached as a strategic framework or “an architecture” for understanding stakeholders (Macnamara, 2016). Macnamara (2016) claimed that a crisis of listening exists in organisations today, but little is known about how the pandemic shaped this in the public sector.

Public sector communication and social media

Public sector organisations are central actors that facilitate public discourse in democratic societies (Capizzo, 2018; Macnamara, 2016; Sommerfeldt, 2013; Taylor and Kent, 2014). Unfortunately, most public sector organisations still focus on traditional speaking roles, even on social platforms that enable listening and dialog (Macnamara, 2016; Theunissen and Wan Noordin, 2012; Watkins, 2017). The weak listening culture reportedly results from organisations’ lack of social media strategy, underdeveloped policies, unclear goals, untrained staff and lack of methods for measuring digital presence (Barnes and Jacobsen, 2014, p. 147).

Building trust between citizens and public sector organisations is believed to help society survive times of crises such as pandemics. The idea of “antifragile communication” (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019) suggests that such trustworthy connections and a good reputation create organisational intangible capital, which enables collaboration in more challenging times as well. Social media has become one central arena for trust building, as public sector organisations look to engage citizens in dialog wherever they are.

Society exists in the dialogic public sphere (Bronn and Bronn, 2003), where stakeholders engage simultaneously on multiple digital media platforms. On these platforms, extremes may be overrepresented, and dialog is ruled by affect (Levine, 2011). Studies on social media have viewed social media and public sector communication through citizen engagement (Bowden *et al.*, 2016; Piqueiras *et al.*, 2020), participation (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019) and co-creation (Tuurnas, 2020). Becoming antifragile implies transitioning from informing to engaging, creating a strong organisational culture where listening is continuous and interaction is based on changing citizen expectations (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019).

The pandemic has raised awareness among many public sector organisations of the need to transition from informing to listening and dialog (Luoma-aho *et al.*, 2021) and for increased transparency to reach citizens (Levine, 2011; Macnamara, 2020). Increasing citizen trust and engagement is central (Mergel, 2013). Studies have suggested that ‘digital micro-encounters’ with public administrators take place in different arenas (Zavattaro and Brainard, 2019, p. 562). Maben and Gearhardt (2018), applying Bodie’s (2012) listening model, called for public authorities to practice emphatic listening.

Data-driven listening

Much social media research has been built on studies on digital marketing, highlighting affective, cognitive and behavioural consumer engagement (Bowden *et al.*, 2016) through social media as a technology-enabled process by which firms collaborate with customers and partners to jointly create and sustain value for all stakeholders (Kannan and Li, 2017, p. 23). However, engagement does not occur according to industry reports, which confirm that organisations address topics on social media that are not of interest to customers while ignoring most topics that customers prefer (Freundt, 2013).

Computer-mediated communication is datafied on social media platforms that have matured into data companies, with business models derived from their ability to harvest and repurpose data (van Dijck and Poell, 2013). Datafication means networked platforms can render many perspectives into data, such as demographic information, customer profiles and mobile phone metadata (Mayer-Schoenberger and Cukier, 2013), which are valuable for marketing purposes. Facebook and Twitter increasingly mine social media traffic for trending topics, keywords or sentiments (van Dijck and Poell, 2013). Organisations buy these data for use in measuring social media outputs such as ‘likes’ or the numbers of followers (Kagarise and Zavattaro, 2017). Brandel (2010) defined monitoring as an automated system that recognises and reads items such as comments, discussions and topics that are important to the organisation, whereas measurement emphasises volume such as the number of fans, likes, comments and leading topics, sources and sentiment. The latter is used in digital marketing, but communications can benefit from both monitoring and measurement in their analyses. And when a crisis arises, both tools are important in planning the actions.

Crisis management in social media

Pandemics require crisis or issue management. Signs of a developing crisis may appear online before a full crisis manifests (Coombs and Holladay, 2012); thus, online listening is one stage ‘of intervention for management to combat misinformation’ (Clemente-Suarez *et al.*, 2022, p. 15). Crisis stages are reflected on social media in real time (Houston *et al.*, 2015); thus, being active on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic was crucial for public organisations.

Earlier research has proposed that organisations should have a strong presence on multiple social media platforms to have a dialog with the public during crises (Guidry *et al.*, 2017; Lin *et al.*, 2016), as social media simultaneously facilitates the growths of crises and provides channels for crisis communications (Coombs and Holladay, 2012). The best approach to public health crisis communication is to focus on communication channels that encourage “listening, feedback, participation, and dialogue” (Covello, 2003, p. 5).

Response strategies, ranging from dialog to corrective actions (Romenti *et al.*, 2014), are intended to manage all stakeholder-related social media risks (Horn *et al.*, 2015). They require timely reactions, top management involvement and steering the narrative to protect the organisation’s reputation and create trust (Yeo *et al.*, 2020). Coombs and Holladay (2014) proposed that organisations develop contingency strategies; that is, the message efficiency should be monitored and assessed while keeping responses professional and remaining active on all channels. A well-handled case of crisis may even improve relationships with the public (Romenti *et al.*, 2014).

Building on Volk and Zerfass’s (2018) concept of alignment to identify current and emergent challenges, we investigated the status of strategic public organisations’ social media listening during the pandemic and whether their listening was as weak as indicated by previous research (e.g. Macnamara, 2016; Theunissen and Wan Noordin, 2012; Watkins, 2017). These were studied by addressing the following research questions and using an exploratory qualitative approach (Bryman, 2016), guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. What role does listening play in public sector organisations' strategic social media communication?

RQ2. How did the pandemic impact social media communications and resources?

RQ3. How has the pandemic changed public sector organisations' social media strategies?

Methods

Finland is known for high generalised trust in society and authorities and transparent governance in the public sector (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019). All ministries and authorities are independent in their communication, but during the crisis the Prime Minister's Office decided to apply the Emergency Powers Act and take over coordination of COVID-19 related communications. This new policy was applied first after the interviews of this study, where we chose the eight leading government and public sector organisations responsible for COVID-19-related communications to citizens in Finland. Owing to the heavy workload of their communicators, participating in survey or focus groups was not preferred, and tailored interviews matching individual schedules were chosen. To complement the individual data, data from previous publications and reports were analysed. Desk research was performed on documents, and 14 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with communication managers from leading Finnish government and public sector organisations from November 2020 through March 2021. Interviewees were selected based on the organisation represented and its relevance during the pandemic, focusing on the authoritative, regulatory and legislative organisations responsible for Finland's governmental pandemic strategy and citizens' health and well-being.

The interviewees were highly motivated, despite the additional demands of the pandemic. Only one of the eight central organisations declined to participate, citing a lack of social media engagement with citizens as the reason. Four interviewees represented ministries, and ten represented national authorities. The interviewees and their organisations' anonymities were ensured, and the interviews were conducted in accordance with the semi-structured interview guidelines that addressed existing strategies, resources, presence, social media activities, top management involvement, the impact of the pandemic and the outlook of listening on social media. The data collection complied with General Data Protection Regulation requirements. All interviews were conducted online in Finnish and recorded; the recordings were stored in password-protected files. Each of the 14 interviews lasted 45–70 min. One was a team interview, as suggested by the organisation because of time constraints. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using the NVivo software.

The interview guide consisted of themes such as triggers (do you/why and where do you listen to your stakeholders), strategies and operations, focus areas on social media presence, the aims of listening, the use of the data, the link to the strategy and targets set, the impact of the crisis in resourcing and activity, roles and responsibilities and the future role of listening. Both the documents and interview data were thematically analysed.

In the data analysis, the organisations' communication and/or social media strategy/guidelines were studied to identify themes such as "social media", "digital communications", "(online) listening", "customer service" and "customer/stakeholder engagement".

Following the thematic content analysis guidelines, the data were examined using the strategic online listening method described in the literature review: strategy alignment, listening practices, measures, targets, management involvement and the impact of emergent changes to the operating environment. The interview data were then condensed and studied as expressions and keywords under the themes and research questions.

Findings

RQ1: Primary alignment to the organisational strategy

The first question explored the role of listening in public sector organisations' strategic social media communication. Our results show a primary alignment with the organisational strategy: customer/stakeholder approach or engagement is defined as a strategic aim for Finnish public organisations, and communication supports this target but without specific guidelines or targets.

The interviewees were asked to share their organisations' communication and/or social media strategy/guidelines. The documents were studied to identify themes such as "social media", "digital communications", "(online) listening", "customer service" and "customer/stakeholder engagement". The interviewees were asked if the communication/social media/listening strategy supported organisational strategic targets. As the organisations were all public, they relied on central government documents and produced their own communication guidelines. The document mentioned most frequently was the Finnish government's 2013 communications strategic policy (VNK, 2013), which describes social media as a channel for civil dialog but sets no measurement method for managing it. This policy encourages web communicators to tighten their cooperation on services related to social media. The documents revealed that the measurable targets for social media were generic; only one organisation identified key performance indicators.

The Prime Minister's Office subsequently published documents that acknowledged listening as a central tenet. The 2016 government communication guide (VNK, 2016, part 4) prescribes listening to citizens and suggests that their expectations from authorities inform administration and service development. This establishes listening as a strategic aim for Finnish public organisations but without specific guidelines.

The analyses of the interview data and organisational documents revealed that communication strategies were aligned to organisational strategy targets in all organisations. Interaction/customer engagement was mentioned in several documents as an organisational strategic target and communications target:

It starts from strategy—we have a customer strategy and a communication strategy, and both emphasise the customer aspect and the ease of operating on the customer's terms and the ease of customer service channels. (Interviewee 11, Organisation 7)

Several organisations have confirmed that listening supports efforts to increase interactions or improve customer relations. Some followed conversations to correct disinformation/misinformation or manage their reputation. The interviewees mostly mentioned "customers" (interviewees 1, 2, 3, 5, 10 and 11) instead of "citizens" (interviewees 10 and 12), and interactions were aimed at being "human" (interviewees 6 and 8) or "engaging" (interviewees 1, 3, 7, 11 and 14) and making communication open and transparent (interviewee 12). Customer viewpoints and relationship management were referenced.

Some organisations developed social media policies that included listening or interaction:

Our communication is interactive and modern; we take advantage of digitalisation and the opportunities of online communication. We use social media systematically. We listen to stakeholders already in the preparation phase. (Organisation 5)

We want to highlight health and well-being issues on social media, i.e. in forums where people are already active. Our aim is to promote the availability and dissemination of reliable information. We use social media channels to inform and stimulate discussion about our activities, events and current affairs. Profile administrators follow the conversations on weekdays and answer questions on a discretionary basis. We cannot answer all questions, and we cannot answer individual personal health enquiries. (Organisation 2)

The Finnish government crisis guidelines (VNK, 2019) offer advice to stakeholders on listening during states of emergency, but they concentrate on communication management from the inside out. However, how these guidelines are followed in practice often depends on the available resources.

RQ2. Secondary alignment of strategic social media listening

The second question focused on how the pandemic impacted social media communications and resources. The results showed that primary alignments existed but were inflexible in that the strategies and policies did not change often (Volk and Zerfass, 2018). Concerning secondary alignment, structures and processes were established for speaking that supported the strategy, but systematic listening was not regarded strategic. All organisations had a presence and maintained accounts on social media, most commonly on Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. All organisations confirmed primarily disseminating information, while some posted campaign-type contents for key target groups. Social media teams and content were managed under communication functions. The pre-pandemic team size ranged from 0 to 4.

Most organisations used digital tools for listening but inactively before the pandemic. The customer approach triggered two organisations' listening, as they "go to where their customers are going", that is, to social media. After the pandemic was announced, listening became necessary because of increased social media traffic. However, social media reports were primarily used by communication personnel.

Several interviewees confirmed activating listening when organisational names appeared in the media or when the number of social media follower/visitor increased. One interviewee's organisation decided whether to react to new topics on social media as they emerged and prepared fact sheets for those responsible for responding. Another trigger was an issue of public concern:

Before the pandemic, there have been other themes of human interest important to people, and we have concluded that we must get involved in social media discussions to present our view. (Interviewee 11, Organisation 7)

The resources for managing social media content sharing, listening and interactions were limited, with only temporal increases or re-arrangements of personnel during the pandemic. The interviewees confirmed doing their best to listen and reply to all questions on their own social media accounts. Only one interviewee reported that organisational resources were available for replying or commenting outside their own accounts.

I hope and I bet there's no going back to that old way of doing social media. We have an insanely large number of followers now, and of course, when there are large numbers of followers, the number of comments will increase. But what used to be that maybe there was one comment a day. One Monday I went through 1,400 comments so . . . yes—we do not have resources to be active anywhere else but on our own channels. (Interviewee 2, Organisation 2)

Four organisations made temporary arrangements to accommodate the increased activity on their social media accounts. At the time of the interview, the crisis period had already lasted over a year, and the amount of discussion on social media had not decreased.

We had one person responsible for answering Facebook and Instagram questions. One person focused fully on Twitter, as the news flow is extremely fast there, so you must keep following it all the time. During the laws in effect related to the state of emergency, we had four persons working during the weekends, and I had 6-day workweeks. We had to react to the feed also on Saturdays and Sundays. When this phase is over, the crisis continues, and the need for communications remains. We are suffering from an acute lack of resources for listening and replying to citizen comments and questions in social media. (Interviewee 9, Organisation 1)

Several interviewees had organised social media training for management or specialists assisting with replies during the pandemic, and many were planning to involve more personnel in these activities. The important strategic role of social media in communications was evident.

Outcomes and impacts should be measured (Macnamara, 2018). The organisations interviewed had no measurable online communication targets and aimed for “interaction” or “good customer service”. They followed sentiments such as emojis and numbers of followers, with reports produced using a digital tool, which were widely available and, in three organisations, were also shared with top executives. Others gave management access to the reports but could not confirm whether they used the data. Based on the interviews, no strategy alignment was based on social media feedback from citizens, apart from the temporary resource allocation to manage the increased activity. Hence, external noise was not considered strategically important. Only two organisations regularly measured stakeholder satisfaction.

To summarise, some primary alignments existed, but they were inflexible in that the strategies and policies did not change often. According to the secondary alignment, structures and processes were established for speaking that supported the strategy. Online listening occurred mainly on users’ own social media channels or performed by parties responsible for social media. However, the impact of speaking and listening was not routinely measured or used in strategy work (external alignment).

RQ3. The pandemic revealed gaps in strategic social media listening

The third question asked how the pandemic had changed public sector organisations’ social media strategies. Our assessment of the emergent change revealed gaps in the communication strategies of the identified organisations: it is challenging to maintain the balance of speaking and listening in crisis. External alignment concerning listening could be strategically stronger if listening ‘data’ are actively used in communication, if resources are available for social media teams and organisation management utilises the data collected for external alignment.

External alignment. The COVID-19 crisis had lasted for more than 2 years already, with a remarkable impact on the number of social media followers of the government organisations involved in crisis management. The number of followers increased by 200% the year before the interview at one interviewee’s organisation. Another organisation received “tens of thousands of questions and comments and mentions per week” during critical crisis periods. Many organisations had not previously communicated directly with citizens, and the pressure to interact exceeded their resources and capacity, resulting in efforts to discourage engagement. Some public sector organisations discontinued efforts to reach pre-crisis strategic communication targets for sharing engaging content because the comment flow during the crisis was too high.

The topics raised in the interviews included doxing, disinformation and fake news, which must be corrected and trigger listening. Completely eliminating disinformation and doxing may not be possible but increasing the volume of facts communicated and having real experts available on social media to answer questions can help organisations meet customer requirements.

One communication leader (interviewee 3, organisation 6) observed, “The public organisation needs to earn its place. It is not automatically given these days.” Organisations can manage their reputations and win public trust by being active on social media to, for example, correct facts and participate in online discussions. One interviewee commented:

It is important to be there and monitor discussions. We do not have to respond to all comments, but we are able, through listening, to identify the so-called opponents' arguments and opinions, usually representing activist groups that are passionate about things. We can then communicate widely the correct facts and do not always need to get involved in dialogs with individuals. (Interviewee 8, Organisation 2)

Social media listening resources. A central communication bottleneck was presented by the resources available to communication departments. Only one organisation believed its team was properly staffed, while others experienced major challenges in managing the usual postings and massive volume of activities via news media and online channels.

Management involvement and emergent strategy alignment. The interviewees reported that the pandemic prompted attitude changes in leadership. Top management was described as more interested in social media listening and interactions, raising the strategic importance of online listening. The management at three organisations was interested in comments and questions, and replies were often discussed. All organisations must make emergent alignments to their communications during the pandemic by adding resources and actively informing citizens of developments.

Structural and process alignments. Ministries and public sector organisations regularly operate independently of communications. During the pandemic, interaction and collaboration with other authorities increased to some extent (VNK, 2021). All interviewees acknowledged the importance of listening but confirmed that the listening and communication architecture in government offices remained stiff and lacked close cooperation, aligned messaging and efficient crisis communications with citizens. According to one interviewee, discussions were held on whether the crisis should be utilised to identify bottlenecks and agree on how to avoid them in the future:

I don't see that we can go back to the pre-pandemic way of working. We have had strategy discussions in our management team, and we all agree on this. If there is anything good about this pandemic, it is the new way of doing things. I am convinced customers and stakeholders will not agree to anything else. You also want them to interact more. (Interviewee 10, Organisation 5)

Discussion and conclusion

Public sector organisations have traditionally relied on disseminating information rather than engaging in dialog and concerted listening (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019). The COVID-19 crisis challenged communication practices on several levels and has taxed personnel skills, resources and plans. In an environment of urgent citizen and media demands, heavy reliance on social and real-time media and the heightened effects on communication, traditional public sector communication is no longer sufficient; organisations must increase their listening to be able to respond to constantly changing citizen needs. Figure 1 depicts the strategic approaches followed before and during the pandemic.

Citizens' voices must be heard by public sector organisations for a society to function sustainably. The results of this study confirmed that the pandemic significantly increased citizens' interest in and comments on public sector organisations, especially online.

An organisation's listening competency is determined by the environment and available skills (Burnside-Lawry, 2011). The COVID-19 complicated the environment, so many organisations embraced listening, often starting with social media. However, skill development has not kept pace with the changes in the environment. Thus, communication leaders felt new engagement pressures, even in organisations previously considered outside citizens' radar. Furthermore, our findings confirmed that teams, customer service and correspondence were not sufficient according to the resources necessary for listening, as suggested by previous studies (Burnside-Lawry, 2011; Macnamara, 2016),

Before COVID-19: focus on information sharing in social media



Social media listening strategies

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During and post COVID-19 Information sharing but also listening and dialogue in own social media channels



Figure 1. From information sharing to listening and interaction

because challenges were reported. None of the interviewees used the term *listening*, while discussion occurred around the topic related to engagement and interaction on an operational level. If an organisation does not listen, it may not identify disinformation/misinformation, which should be addressed. Moreover, without monitoring and measuring impact (Macnamara, 2018), strategies cannot be aligned externally.

The Deloitte study on Finland's COVID-19 communications indicated that more collaboration between authorities and among ministry leaders was needed (Deloitte, 2021). Our findings point to increases only at the leader level. COVID-19 has increased the expectations of public sector organisations' communications; thus, responding to citizens through social media has become the new minimum, with discussions often occurring outside organisational channels. Resources have been temporarily increased but will return (or already have returned) to normal after the urgency passes.

To answer the research questions on how strategic social media listening in public organisations is and how organisations manage the secondary alignment of their social media practices, the organisations studied can be described as somewhat unaligned regarding the aims and triggers of their listening. Their objectives for social media communication were strategic and aligned with the overall objectives of the organisation, including a range of activities, from reputation management and improved interactions to better relationships with citizens and correcting disinformation/misinformation. The listening triggers for the organisations studied were mostly reactive and dependent on the traffic of their websites and services.

The analysis of organisational listening practices revealed that the organisations were partly strategic about their listening: top management appeared to better understand the value of communication, but this attitude change did not reach the primary level of organisational listening beyond immediate social media monitoring. Online listening, as well as external alignment, was not regarded as strategically important, as its impact was not clear.

According to our results, public sector organisations' listening occurred mostly in reaction to mentions, traffic and discussions. One organisation was clearly ahead of others in its listening and strategic thinking, while the in-progress nature of strategic listening was reflective of a trigger-only paradigm for the rest of the organisations. Moreover, the lack of

systematic procedures and analysis of the listening data was noticeable. However, as top management appeared more interested in citizens' perspectives, listening may mature quickly into more strategic levels. The interviewees reported that citizen expectations appeared to have changed permanently. Hence, turning back to pre-crisis communication is not an option, even when resources return to normal.

The final research question pursued the communication professionals' perspectives on the biggest development areas of strategic communication in an emergent situation). Although practices followed new, urgent demands and resources were allocated, they were primarily temporary. Despite this, most organisations reported a lack of resources necessary to meet the extensive citizen expectations. The pandemic appeared to have prompted a slight strengthening of the public sector organisations' external alignment in social media communication. The traditional aims of building intangible assets online, such as citizen trust and engagement, remain at the core of organisational listening, but owing to the pandemic, a second role for listening is emerging: a limiting and guarding function. Organisational listening is needed to build guardrails for authorities and to manage citizen and media expectations. The interviewees reported having to strategically diminish interactions because the demand was too high. Utilising listening for diminished citizen engagement was a new phenomenon brought about by COVID-19 in public sector communication.

On the operational level, unrealistically high expectations may prove challenging, as the temporary extra resources allocated during the COVID-19 crisis continue to diminish as the urgency subsides. This finding supports suggestions from previous research on the potentially ideal neutral levels of trust and reputation for public sector organisations (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019), which would ensure critical operating distances. Expectation management has been suggested as a new task for public sector organisations in uncertain environments (Luoma-aho *et al.*, 2013).

Towards a strong external alignment

The results of the interviews with leading communicators in central organisations responsible for pandemic-related communications in Finland's public sector confirmed that the pandemic stretched public sector organisations' communication capabilities and forced them to collaborate more and think more strategically. A need for external alignment with social media listening emerged: the second role of diminishing speaking was an unexpected finding. Posting content or disseminating information was deemed insufficient for managing the crisis, while listening to multiple discussions, answering questions and correcting misinformation/disinformation were considered strategically important. Organisations may raise important topics/themes in their communications, indicating a need for a strategic speaking/listening balance. Listening is needed to understand and manage citizen expectations so that they do not become unrealistically high, considering existing resources. The interviewees recounted that they could not answer all individuals but could pick up a topic and communicate about it to all followers at once. Overall, the pandemic marked the beginning of an era of expectation management for public sector organisations, as citizen expectations heightened owing to constant developments.

Strategic communication can be conceptualised as an agile management process that feeds the arenas in which meanings are presented, negotiated, constructed or reconstructed for strategy building and implementation. Moreover, strategic decisions can be tested by presenting and negotiating them in a continuous loop (van Ruler, 2018). Therefore, we recommend that public organisations consider an agile external alignment with continuous social media listening, thereby implementing a dual model for communication: speaking and listening. Furthermore, to strengthen organisational listening's external alignment, strategies that are best for the organisation must be given more consideration, rather than merely

adding more channels and increasing listening. Strategies should not be too stiff; they should adapt to changing environments because strategy development is a continuous process. Listening can help with strategic alignment; having dialogs and collaboration in the multivocal public sphere also creates trust. Measuring the impacts provide a tool for strategy alignment.

We highlighted changes in organisational listening strategies and the need for more strategic practices. The findings call for future studies to investigate whether similar changes occur in various cultural settings and whether these changes remain beyond the pandemic and to examine factors contributing to the increased maturity and strategic nature of organisational listening. Future studies should also investigate whether the dual role is apparent in other organisations and cultures and identify its long-term consequences for organisations and society at large.

Implications

This study was rooted on the work on the organisational listening by [Macnamara \(2016, 2018, 2020\)](#), applied the conceptual framework of internal and external alignment of strategic communication ([Volk and Zeffass, 2018](#)) and showed how listening can support in closing the gaps between citizens and public organisations ([Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019](#)).

The implications of our findings include the need to update the strategic communication theory and practice on the balance between speaking and listening to address the dual role emerging with better external alignment. As public sector communication becomes increasingly strategic, the need for strategic listening increases. Our results imply that citizen experiences will become increasingly relevant to the degree to which public sector communications meet their expectations. Increased listening is required to understand this. Listening should be strategic, and the cyclic nature of listening and communicating should be planned and measured to provide a lasting value.

This may require rewriting guidelines for public sector communication best practices. The traditional understanding of communicating activities and updates can flare up in the multivocal public sphere, where at times the role of disinformation/misinformation in citizen discussions may be necessary.

Increased listening in the public sector may be a step towards censorship and panopticon, but without listening, the multivocal public sphere may harm the whole society. Listening is merely a first step, as the real power lies in what organisations do with citizens' information and expectations. Hence, new power is given to those organisations that listen to stakeholders more closely.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. The findings were based in part on interview data, so individual perspectives might have overstated actual practices, a limitation mitigated by conducting desk research on materials and interviewing members of multiple organisations. Further, as the study focused on the Finnish context, the results are descriptive only within their cultural parameters. Nevertheless, because the pandemic was global, similar challenges are likely encountered in other cultural contexts as well.

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IV

ORGANIZATIONAL VOICING ARCHITECTURE IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA—A CASE STUDY IN PROFESSIONAL SERVICE ORGANIZATION

by

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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

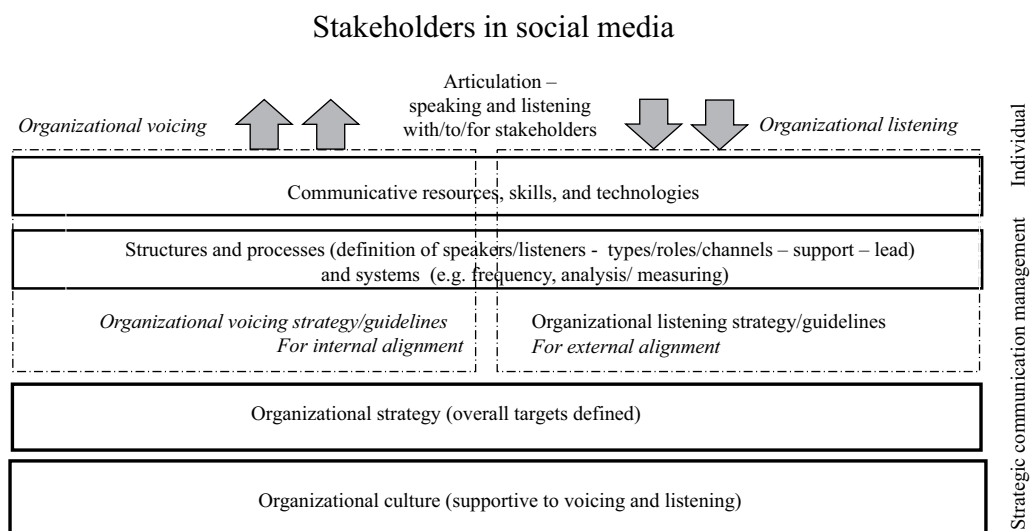


Figure 1. Architecture of organizational voicing and listening (adapted from Macnamara, 2010, 2013).

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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