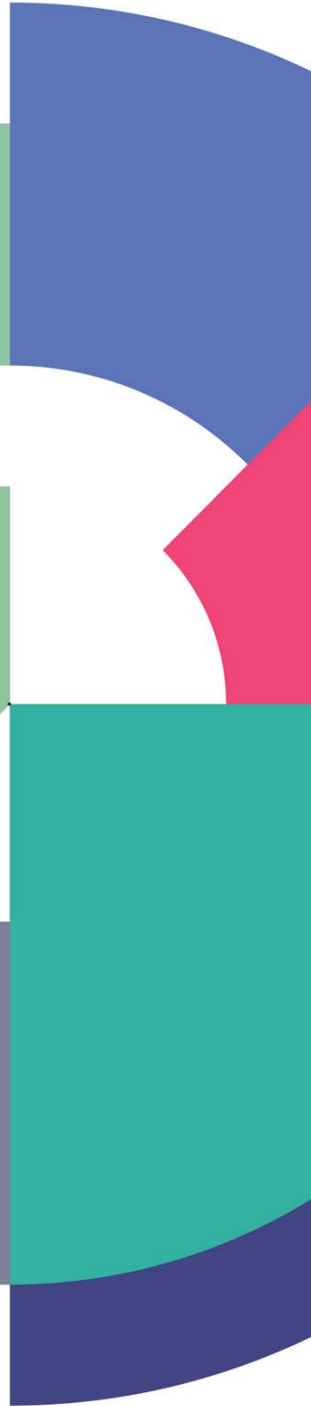


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PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE POWER OF CREATIVITY

**STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES,
INNOVATION AND CRITICAL CHALLENGES**

**ADVANCES IN PUBLIC
RELATIONS AND
COMMUNICATION
MANAGEMENT**



PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE POWER OF CREATIVITY

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MANAGEMENT VOLUME 3

PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE POWER OF CREATIVITY: STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES, INNOVATION AND CRITICAL CHALLENGES

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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INTRODUCTION

In 2017, the EUPRERA community went to London to get our creativity to blossom under the banner *strategic opportunities, innovation and critical challenges*. The coveted ability of creativity was discussed over three days at UAL – University of the Arts – London, London College of Communication. One hundred and twenty abstracts were received from 28 countries, making this 19th Annual Congress a truly international gathering. Pulling from a large list of articles for the conference, this volume gathers 12 outstanding contributions from scholars based in Germany, Finland, Austria, Romania, the UK, Spain, France, Norway, Turkey and the USA.

PART I with the title, ‘Leadership, Ethics and Creativity’, contains three chapters: the first of these, written by the German duo Maria Borner (FTI Consulting, Germany) and Ansgar Zerfass (University of Leipzig), focuses on the corporate value of listening. In a theoretical essay with the title, ‘The Power of Listening in Corporate Communications: Theoretical Foundations of Corporate Listening as a Strategic Mode of Communication’, the authors take us beyond the relational paradigm of listening.

While the first chapter discards normative ethical ideals of mutual understanding, the second chapter zones in on ethical leadership and interpersonal communication competence. Anne Laajalahti (University of Jyväskylä, Finland) and her literature review chapter, ‘Fostering Creative Interdisciplinarity: Building Bridges between Ethical Leadership and Leaders’ Interpersonal Communication Competence’, points to the need to work interdisciplinarily, something addressed by many at the conference.

The third chapter comes from the same country, Finland, and also discusses leadership communication. In keeping with the topic of the conference, Tiina Weman (Kuopio University Hospital, Communication Unit, Finland) and Helena Kantanen (University of Eastern Finland, Business School, Finland) discuss how leaders promote innovativeness. The chapter is titled, ‘Communicative Leaders, Creative Followers?’.

PART II puts together four chapters under the title, ‘Knowledge and Collaboration for Fostering Creativity’. During the conference, the organisers were experimenting with different structures and formats meant to foster creativity. Several chapters also address this topic: the first one, by Astrid Spatzier and Jessica Breu (University of Salzburg, Austria), relates it to education types: ‘Public Relations and Communication in Education: Is Creativity the Opposite of Knowledge?’.

One of the many exciting opportunities offered by the technological development is the phenomenon of crowdsourcing. The Rumanian duo Diana-Maria

Cismaru and Raluca Silvia Ciochina (National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania) discuss creativity in this connection in the chapter titled, 'The Role of Trust and Intrinsic Motivation in Enhancing Participation and Creativity in Crowdsourcing Communities'.

The topic of the latter chapter dovetails with the following one, written by Harri Ruoslahti (Laurea University of Applied Sciences and University of Jyväskylä, Finland). The chapter is titled, 'Co-Creation of Knowledge for Innovation Requires Multi-Stakeholder Public Relations'. Based on a literature review, it is suggested that four types of projects exist where such co-creation typically takes place.

Collaboration is also key for the final chapter in this part. The cross-national cooperation of Paul Willis (University of Huddersfield, UK) and Elisenda Estanyol (Open University of Catalonia, Spain) has resulted in the chapter, 'Collaborative Creativity, Leadership and Public Relations: Identifying and Addressing Research Limitations'. The authors specifically address what they call an overreliance on the 'creative individual' in current approaches.

PART III consists of five chapters introducing "New Creative Approaches to Public Relations. Culture is the focus of the chapter written by Alex Frame (University of Burgundy France-Comté, France) and Øyvind Ihlen (University of Oslo, Norway) – 'Beyond the Cultural Turn: A Critical Perspective on Culture Discourse within Public Relations'. The authors use the prism of creativity as a vector of cultural change which also raises ideological issues.

The next chapter introduces a new approach for public relations. Ute Hilgers-Yilmaz, Ralf Spiller and Christof Breidenich (all from Hochschule Macromedia University of Applied Sciences, Germany) apply a so-called design-thinking approach in discussing visual communication strategies: '2,000 Years of Visual Storytelling: Alternative Approaches for Visual Communication of Christian Churches in the Age of Social Media'.

Creativity is also celebrated in the industry, as demonstrated by industry awards. Pinar Aslan (Istanbul University, Turkey) and Tugce Ertem-Eray (University of Oregon, USA) analyse how creativity is perceived by the PRWeek Awards, as well as the PRWeek Global awards – 'Creativity in Public Relations: What Do Award-Winning Campaigns Tell Us?'.

Turning the attention back to innovation and research itself again, Kristina Henriksson, Harri Ruoslahti and Kirsi Hyttinen (all from Laurea University of Applied Sciences, Finland) advocate that commitment and active participation of end-user group is key for dissemination of research projects. In the chapter titled, 'Opportunities for Strategic Public Relations: Evaluation of International Research and Innovation Project Dissemination', they report from three EU-funded projects in this regard.

The volume is rounded off by Melanie Malczok (Hochschule Osnabrück University of Applied Sciences, Germany) and the chapter is fittingly titled, 'Let Me Draw Your Attention to: Exploring the Potentials of Visual Methods for Strategic Internal Communication Management'. The main argument related to creativity here is connected to visualisation of organisational structures, again pulling on design thinking that is novel to public relations theorising.

Taken together, the chapters demonstrate a range of possibilities for creative thinking about public relations management and collaboration in different settings and with different purposes. The chapters hint at opportunities, point towards innovation and, yes, challenge our thinking about the power of creativity.

Øyvind Ihlen
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PART I
LEADERSHIP, ETHICS AND
CREATIVITY

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THE POWER OF LISTENING IN CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF CORPORATE LISTENING AS A STRATEGIC MODE OF COMMUNICATION

Maria Borner and Ansgar Zerfass

ABSTRACT

This chapter attempts to broaden corporate communications and public relations research by introducing a theoretical foundation for the inbound (in contrast to the outbound) perspective of communication. The idea of organisational listening has recently been introduced by a small number of researchers. However, current concepts are mostly based on the relational paradigm of public relations. Listening is positively connoted in those concepts because it might help to foster mutual understanding, advance favourable relationships with stakeholders and support normative ideals of deliberation in democratic societies. This is not convincing from the point of view of communication managers who align their strategies and budgets to overarching organisational goals. The chapter aims to develop a new approach beyond the relational approach by linking corporate listening to corporate value. In a first step, current definitions and concepts of organisational listening are discussed in order to underline the need for a new approach. Secondly, the need for an inbound perspective of communication is explained by referring to Giddens' structuration theory and its consequences for managing communications. Thirdly, corporate listening is conceptualised as a strategic mode of

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communication by referring to the overarching concept of strategic communication. Last but not least, the chapter elaborates on the value of listening for corporations and concludes with a broadened understanding of strategic communication.

Keywords: Corporate communications; strategic communication; listening; messaging; inbound dimension; outbound dimension

INTRODUCTION

Today's hypermodern world is characterised by ambiguity, complexity, globalisation and societies in overdrive. Businesses are observed and evaluated by multiple stakeholders with diverging, sometimes irrational, interests. This leads to an increased sensitivity towards stakeholders and new challenges for communication management. Traditional gatekeepers, who used to influence public communication, have lost their relevance – the traditional public sphere does not exist anymore: 'Now everybody matters in what is a communication sphere rather than a public sphere' (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015, p. 6). Markets have turned to conversations (Searls & Weinberger, 2000) and stakeholders are able to reach out to companies in many direct ways to articulate their concerns. Consequently, the ability to understand stakeholder perceptions and needs gains in importance as a driver for corporate success.

However, corporate communications are often misunderstood as one-way messaging activities. There is a rich academic debate about messaging strategies (Werder, 2015a) and integrating communication across multiple channels (Schultz, Patti, & Kitchen, 2011). At the same time, practitioners establish corporate newsrooms to address audiences more efficiently (Moss, 2016) and they run integrated campaigns to frame public debates and build consistent images (Werder, 2015b). Nevertheless, strategic potential lies both in the outbound (conveyance, speaking) and in the inbound dimension of communication (perception, listening).¹ Although dialogues with stakeholders – a process in which speaking *and* listening are integrated per definition – have long been propagated as an instrument of corporate communications, theoretical approaches of perception and listening have seldom been discussed. In recent years however, the idea of listening in an organisational context has been introduced by a few researchers (Burnside-Lawry, 2012; Macnamara, 2016; Muzi Falconi, Grunig, & Galli Zugaro, 2014; Tench, Verčič, Zerfass, Moreno, & Verhoeven, 2017). Listening has also gained international attention in the profession through the *Melbourne Mandate*, published in 2012 by the *Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management*. The manifesto describes listening as an important asset of corporate culture and an important task for communication practitioners. Nevertheless, empirical surveys of communication professionals across Europe have shown that listening strategies and techniques are less prevalent than messaging strategies or overall

communication strategies in all kinds of organisations (Zerfass, Verčič, Verhoeven, Moreno, & Tench, 2015, pp. 52–69).

Obviously, listening as an overall concept as well as the inbound dimension of corporate communications in general are still in their infancy. The aim of this chapter is therefore to examine inbound aspects of corporate communications by examining the research question:

RQ. How can Corporate Listening be conceptualised as an integral part of corporate communications?

This overarching question will be broken down into three more specific questions:

RQ1. Why is it necessary for corporations to adopt an inbound (outside-in) perspective?

RQ2. How can Corporate Listening be defined as a strategic and value-oriented set of communication activities?

RQ3. How can Corporate Listening contribute to the creation of corporate value?

LITERATURE REVIEW: CURRENT RESEARCH ON ORGANISATIONAL LISTENING

Apart from communication science and organisational studies, listening is discussed in different disciplines – not only in psychology, but also in counselling, psychotherapy or rhetorical training. Key hubs for the international discourse are the *International Listening Association (ILA)* and the *International Journal of Listening*. The topic has seldom been studied in the domain of communication management, public relations, strategic communication and corporate communications. An analysis of academic journals in this field reveals a surprisingly small number of articles mentioning ‘listening’ somewhere in the text (Macnamara, 2016, p. 135). The existing approaches examine organisational listening either in an internal and mainly interpersonal context (intra-organisational listening) or as activities between organisations and their stakeholders (inter-organisational listening).

INTRA- AND INTER-ORGANISATIONAL LISTENING APPROACHES

Intra-organisational concepts of listening are mainly rooted in business communication (for an overview, see Flynn, Valikoski, & Grau, 2008). They analyse listening as a key managerial ability, a valuable competency of employees (Cooper, Seibold, & Suchner, 1997) or as part of corporate culture (e.g. Goby & Lewis, 2000; Welch & Mickelson, 2013).

Inter-organisational approaches can be found in the communication management and public relations literature. Heath (2009) describes inter-organisational listening from a *rhetorical perspective* as prerequisite to co-create shared meaning in the public sphere by aligning the interests of organisations and stakeholders. He emphasises the necessity of listening for messaging: '[...] no communicator or manager can be effective without first being a good listener who wants to know, appreciate, and respect what others believe and think – and why they hold those positions' (p. 19).

Macnamara (2013, 2014, 2016, 2017) examines organisational listening on a *macro-level* as an integral part of democratic societies and public participation. He was the first to systematically analyse listening as an organisational activity through empirical studies on listening practices in corporations and government. The author proposes an architecture of listening (Macnamara, 2014, p. 102) for any organisation, which includes integral parts such as a participating corporate culture, open systems and listening policies. Macnamara embeds listening in a normative framework when he argues:

listening can be seen to involve a substantive level of human cognitive engagement with the expressed views of another or others involving attention, recognition, interpretation to try to discover meaning, ideally leading to understanding, as well as responding in some way [...]. (Macnamara, 2013, p. 163)

While Macnamara has greatly advanced the debate on organisational listening by presenting a concise definition and a broad literature overview, his approach is closely linked to normative ideals of social participation and developing 'voice' in a democratic sense. The value of listening for corporations is only discussed indirectly; his thoughtful conceptualisation does not provide arguments for allocating financial and human resources to such activities.

Most approaches to listening on the *meso- and micro-levels* in communication management are linked to the relational and co-creational paradigm of public relations (e.g. Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). The main goal of listening is described normatively as initiating mutual understanding or favourable stakeholder relationships. Burnside-Lawry (2012) has empirically investigated the listening skills of two Australian organisations during various stakeholder engagement events. The study analysed which factors are relevant for effective organisational listening. Burnside-Lawry (2012) describes listening:

as the presence of affective, cognitive, and behavioral attributes that contribute to 'accuracy', the perception that the listener has accurately received and understood the message sent, and 'effectiveness', where the listener demonstrates supportive behavior to enhance the relationship between speaker and listener. (p. 104)

The author emphasises the role of listening for the expectation management of organisations by showing how mutual understanding can be achieved by listening through appropriate organisational behaviour, sincerity, knowledge, comprehension, corporate culture and speech. However, the study and the underlying concept focus on interpersonal listening between managers and external stakeholders and neglect other methods, structures or strategies of listening.

Mutual understanding and acceptance is part of a description of active listening proposed by [Harris and Nelson \(2008, pp. 253–271\)](#), who define listening from a more psychological point of view as a process of sensing, interpreting, evaluation and responding:

Active listening enables receivers to check on the accuracy of their understanding of what a sender said, express acceptance of feelings, and stimulate senders to explore more fully their thoughts and feelings. (p. 264)

[Brunner \(2008\)](#) stresses listening as a key element for the development and maintenance of corporate relations. The author conducted qualitative interviews with public relations practitioners in the United States and examined factors that contribute to the genesis of relationships between companies and their stakeholders. She concludes: ‘Active listening and communication are essential for successful business/organizational relationships to be built and maintained’ ([Brunner, 2008, p. 77](#)). However, it is not explained how organisational listening can be implemented as integral part of communication management.

[Muzi Falconi \(2014\)](#) also argues for the desirability of listening from a normative point of view, but he introduces a more detailed, stakeholder-oriented conceptualisation. Organisational listening is described as an essential element of stakeholder engagement in global stakeholder relationship governance:

listening is the process of receiving, constructing meaning from and re-responding to a spoken and/or nonverbal content. ([Muzi Falconi, 2014, p. 34](#))

His basic assumption is that managerial decision-making can be improved if organisations implement stakeholder management infrastructures that include systematic listening. This enables organisations to change perspective and see themselves in a broader societal context ([Muzi Falconi, 2014, p. 33](#)). By doing so, the quality of the decision-making process will be increased and long-term relationships with stakeholders can be established by integrating their interests into the company’s activities. The author describes listening in more detail by presenting its role in the management process as a task of the communicator and as an element of the infrastructure of stakeholder governance. This approach examines listening from the perspective of communication management. It provides interesting and detailed insights into the managerial function of listening. Nevertheless, a theoretical framing of listening in organisational theory is still missing, and the strategic dimension of listening is scarcely discussed.

Hence, the review of current literature on listening leads to the following conclusions:

- Existing conceptualisations of listening in communication management and corporate communications are rooted in the relational paradigm of public relations. They argue that the main benefit of organisational listening is building mutual beneficial stakeholder relationships. This normative perspective, which emphasises participatory, consensual relationships as a general goal of communications, can be criticised as too narrow and one-sided. Companies are embedded in markets and societies alike and forced to define successful

strategies that secure economic success and legitimisation at the same time. This cannot be understood as a conflict-free and consensual process. In fact, fulfilling all stakeholder claims and using symmetrical communication processes to balance conflicting interests is an illusion that neglects the basic constraint of all business activities: Material and immaterial resources are always limited and have to be allocated effectively and efficiently to serve multiple demands (Zerfass & Piwinger, 2014). Approaches that avoid normative pitfalls and analyse the value of organisational listening beyond building relationships are missing until now.

- An important reason for this theoretical gap is the missing link to organisational theories in the current debate on listening. The value of listening can only be explored to its full extent if the interdependence between businesses and their environment, and therefore the need for a general sensitivity towards stakeholders, is explored.
- Furthermore, many definitions in the current listening literature are based on models of communication that are inappropriate for a modern understanding of corporate communications. A comprehensive definition of corporate listening should be based on a symbolic-interpretative understanding of communication.
- Last but not least, existing instruments of the inbound dimension of corporate communications (e.g. issues monitoring, scanning, corporate foresight, etc.) are seldom integrated in the conceptual discourse on organisational listening.

This gap can be closed by conceptualising organisational listening as a strategic mode of communication that integrates both inter- and intra-organisational approaches.

THE INBOUND PERSPECTIVE OF CORPORATIONS

Any reasoning about corporate and organisational communications should start with the organisation as the reference point. Thus, exploring the inbound dimension of communication poses the question why organisations are dependent on their environment and why they need to integrate an inbound perspective.

An answer is given by structuration theory (Falkheimer, 2009; Giddens, 1984). According to this perspective, corporations are social systems and profit-oriented organisations which are reflexively and recursively bound into interdependent social relationships. As a social agent, any company is subject to the duality of structuration by producing and reproducing those social structures, which it in turn relies on (Ortmann, Sydow, & Windeler, 2000, p. 19). By complying with social norms, e.g., the idea of economic efficiency or ecological responsibility, companies adopt those rules as structural elements which enable and restrict their entrepreneurial activities at the same time. This recursive interaction is the reason for the highly interactive relationship between any company as a social actor and its environment. As companies, as well as other social agents, tend to act intentionally and interest-driven, their actions may conflict and a coordination of either actions or interests is necessary (Zerfass, 2008). This requires companies to learn about the interests, needs and expectations of

other actors and to gather additional information about their social environment (such as conditions, events, developments). Corporations are able to fulfil their basic task of providing goods or services and satisfy market demands only if they interact with their business and their social environment. An inbound perspective, in which impulses from the environment are considered and integrated into corporate decision-making, is thus essential for any business activity.

However, apart from this very general necessity it is a strategic management decision *how* sensitive companies are to their environment, and how much resources are invested into inbound structures and processes. To put this into concrete terms, it is useful to introduce some key concepts of strategic management. The coordination of the interaction with the environment is a task of corporate management. This interaction is deeply shaped by the company's strategies, which are, in a classic view, the result of a profound analysis and planning process. However, the prescriptive process of strategy development does not fit reality (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985) because the company's environment is highly complex, ambiguous and dynamic (Schreyögg, 1993). This is the reason why managers cannot consider every external development, event or circumstance when making decisions. Managers are bounded in their rationality (Simon, 1997), which means that objective rationality appears as an ideal. Hence, managerial decisions are made under conditions of high uncertainty and contingency² – management cannot be sure whether all relevant information has been gathered, all alternatives are considered and whether the anticipated outcome will become true. Corporations can deal with this by systematically including processes of interpretation and reconstruction into their decision-making: 'Managers literally must wade into the ocean of events that surround the organisation and actively try to make sense of them' (Daft & Weick, 1984, p. 286). Thus, the assessment of whether an environmental event is a threat or a rare opportunity is largely a matter of interpretation and the conclusions drawn. Every inbound-oriented activity includes an interpretation process. In recent decades, a number of management tools have been introduced to transform masses of available information into a 'manageable size': strategic issues monitoring, environmental scanning and corporate forecasting (Krystek & Müller-Stewens, 1993; Liebl, 1996; Rohrbeck & Bade, 2012).

To put those insights in a nutshell and answer the first research question (RQ1): Holding an *inbound orientation* as a corporation means to be sensitive to environmental actors in order to receive impulses and to integrate them into managerial decisions. Inbound refers not only to the process of developing such a sensibility, but also to the interpretation of any insights received.

The extent to which companies take an inbound perspective is always a strategic decision, as outlined by Daft and Weick (1984) and their concept of interpretative organisations. Organisations with a high inbound orientation maintain their environmental awareness (e.g. in the form of scanning and monitoring) with a comprehensive management process, executed by specific departments or external service providers. These *sensitive organisations* bundle their environmental contact points at single structural nodes and are open-minded to innovative formats of environmental monitoring (e.g. corporate foresight). Based on

those scanning results, they often try to influence the environment actively, e.g., by actively positioning issues or by anticipating developments in their stakeholder networks, and they see changes in the environment as opportunities for developing their business and gaining legitimacy. In contrast, *insensitive organisations* restrict themselves to absorb obvious impulses which cannot be ignored (e.g. in crisis situations) and thus act mostly reactively. They gather information sporadically, usually when there is a specific reason. The environment is perceived as a potential risk, which is why an internal perspective dominates decision-making processes. Along this line the inbound orientation of a company can be depicted on a continuum between sensitive and insensitive.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR CORPORATE LISTENING

In order to complete the theoretical framework with which the overall research question can be addressed, it is necessary to elaborate on the concepts of corporate communications and strategic communication.

In order to maintain social interaction – and thus entrepreneurial activity – a clarification of interests and a coordination of actions between the company and its stakeholder groups are essential. At this point corporate communications plays an integral role as it supports and supplements established forms of coordination (such as the exchange of goods and services on markets, delegation of authority in hierarchies or conflict resolutions through law) (Zerfass, 2008). As a purposive endeavour, corporate communications should be aligned to the strategic goals and positioning of the company. This has stimulated a debate on the concept of strategic communication (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007; Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015). It tries to unite ongoing debates and interferences between historically grown disciplines by linking communication back to the purpose of organisational entities and can be defined as ‘the practice of deliberate and purposive communication a communication agent enacts in the public sphere on behalf of a communicative entity to reach set goals’ (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015, p. 4).

Parallel to the genesis of strategies in general management, communication strategies are either the result of a prescriptive planning process or created through emergent processes. In the classic approach – described in the literature as functional perspective (Botan & Taylor, 2004), modernist approach (Holtzhausen, 2002) or traditional model (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2016) – communication strategies are planned and conducted in a linear top-down process. The communication function is seen more or less as a ‘fortress’ between the corporation and the outside world in order to fulfil the task of positioning the corporation in the public sphere (Cornelissen, 2011, pp. 53–54; Zerfass & Viertmann, 2016). This paradigm is questioned by newer approaches like the ‘communication constitutes organisations’ perspective (e.g. McPhee & Zaug, 2008) or the idea of a communicative organisation (Hamrefors, 2010). They focus on the complexity of organisations and the dynamics of their environment and integrate the idea of polyphony, stating that organisations communicate

holistically through multiple voices with many shades and distinctive features (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2016). In this model, employees are empowered to play an active role in strategy and communication processes by getting trained in communicative skills. As a result, strategies and decisions develop in emergent processes and are rationalised ex post.

In summary: strategic communication can be described on a continuum between the traditional *functional* understanding and an innovative *emergent* understanding. Due to the comprehensive character of the concept, the term *strategic communication* is useful to embed the term of *corporate listening*, as shown in the following section.

CORPORATE LISTENING – A DEFINITION

The literature review on organisational listening has shown that most definitions lack a differentiated understanding of communication. To overcome this foundational lack, this chapter will ground organisational listening onto a clear basic understanding of communication by exploring the elaborated concept of interpersonal listening and transferring this to an organisational context.

First of all, listening has to be differentiated from hearing: whereas hearing is the physiological process of receiving acoustic signals, listening is a more complex cognitive process. Current definitions of interpersonal listening derive from psychology (e.g. Imhof, 2010) or communication science (e.g. Brownell, 2010; International Listening Association, 1996; Menzel, 2008; Purdy, 1997; Wolvin & Coakley, 1992). They describe listening as a process of (attention-controlled) receiving, interpreting and evaluating of content and response to received content. Those definitions are based on an understanding of communication as the transmission of meaning. They overemphasise the normative outcome of listening by referring to putative positive outcomes of listening in social interactions. However, this assumption is quite normative and rather one-sided.

From a social-constructivist point of view, communication can be defined as symbolic interactions, in which the actors negotiate meaning interactively and interpretively (Blumer, 1986; Burkart, 2002; Mead, 1995). Thus, listening is always intentional. It is related to the goals of the communication participants and can occur in different contexts, in face-to-face and mediated interpersonal communication, as well as in the reception of mass media and music, or in public communication. Hence, *interpersonal listening* can be defined as the process of intentional and selective perception, interpretation, evaluation and integration of acoustic, verbal symbols and signs, in which substantial, personal and situational context variables are also be considered.

Perception is about receiving verbal and non-verbal symbols via the human senses, in particular hearing and seeing. Interpretation refers to the process of understanding – the triggering of associations in order to assign meaning. Meaning is evaluated in a next step (What conclusions emerge from the message for me? Do I react? How do I react? etc.) and is optionally integrated into the cognitive system of the listener (processes of learning, integration into long-term memory, etc.). Those individual sub-processes follow a certain temporal logic

(one can only interpret something after perceiving it, etc.), but they are not separated sequentially and rather overlap at some point. In this respect, the distinction of the sub-processes is mainly analytical. The process of listening is characterised by selective attention. The listener decides to whom or what he listens. Furthermore, listening is always an intentional process – not only in terms of selection, but also with regard to the main goal or interest of the listener. Listening might support mutual understanding or deepening the relationship to the communication partner, but it can also be used to gather information for personal decisions or for planning persuasive and even propaganda-like activities. Listening is no longer a normative and always beneficial concept – it is a mode of communication that can be used strategically to reach a broad range of goals.

This definition of interpersonal listening can be transferred to the organisational context. In order to do so, it has to be broadened in terms of what is received in the perceptual process – because organisations are not natural entities with perceptual sense which can absorb acoustic or verbal symbols. In this respect, sensory perception must be transferred to a more abstract level: as corporations are embedded in social interdependencies, it seems useful to think about articulated stakeholder impulses instead of any acoustic or verbal symbols when conceptualising organisational listening. Insofar as companies listen by receiving *articulated stakeholder impulses* and integrating them – complementary to the cognitive processing by humans – into the organisational decision-making process. By absorbing inquiries and comments, topics, needs, opinions and reviews, corporations retain their capability to act and position themselves successfully in markets and societies.

According to the social-constructivist view of communication, articulations are expressed through symbols – which means that they can be systematically identified and analysed. Such an impulse could be a newspaper article as well as a customer complaint on the corporate Facebook page or data from an employee survey. Articulations are distinct to behaviour. As such, tracking of customer behaviour in sales or marketing which might identify demands and patterns not even known to the consumers themselves is something other than listening. However, listening is also dependent on analysis, and therefore it seems useful to consider behavioural parameters additionally when evaluating articulations (How does a specific relevant stakeholder group communicate? Which communication channels do they use? etc.). For that reason, a definition of corporate listening needs to include context variables as well.

Keeping these considerations in mind, the previously introduced concepts can be linked to each other: The inbound orientation of organisations refers to the sensitivity to impulses from the environment and is based on strategic intent – companies can act more sensitive or rather insensitive. Communication management can also be more *sensitive* or *insensitive* towards stakeholders. Depending on strategic objectives, corporate communications includes outbound and inbound activities – messaging and listening.

Corporate listening should not be misunderstood as a single activity or a new communication instrument. This would impede a clear distinction to other

inbound activities like issues management. Instead, corporate listening can be conceptualised on a more abstract level and understood as a strategic mode, so to speak, as a strategic ‘attitude’. Corporate communications can be realised in two different modes: as communication conveying information and interpretations to stakeholders or as communication perceiving impulses from them. Thus, the following definition is proposed:

Corporate listening is a strategic mode that represents the inbound dimension of corporate communications. Articulated impulses from stakeholders as well as relevant context variables are intentionally and selectively perceived, interpreted and evaluated in order to support corporate decision-making.

The analytical counterpart of corporate listening is corporate messaging, which represents the outbound dimension of corporate communications and focuses on conveying information or interpretations:

Corporate messaging is the process of conveying content (corporate messages) and is thus associated analytically to the outbound dimension of corporate communications. Corporate messages are ‘coordinated and clearly formulated messages derived from the corporate or communication strategy’. (Huck-Sandhu, 2014, p. 652; translated)

Corporate messages can involve every kind of content: corporate values as well as a claim or a slogan. Insofar as corporate messages are the visible expression of what is communicated. By contrasting the concepts of corporate listening and corporate messaging, it becomes obvious that both modes of communication are equally important. Their implementation is based on managerial decisions. It is a strategic decision whether and how intensive a communication function focuses on corporate messaging – the conveyance of content – or on corporate listening – the receiving of articulated impulses. However, in many situations both dimensions are relevant, e.g., it is often essential in listening situations to show an immediate response in the form of a message. In particular, the dynamics of social media often require a quick response, e.g., if a customer expresses a complaint or a wish on the company’s Facebook page. It just becomes obvious that the company has actually listened when a response is made. The design of that response (scope, style, etc.) is – in turn – a question of messaging.

The term *corporate listening* was chosen because ‘corporate’ illustrates that listening is a cross-functional, strategic mode which comes across the whole organisation (as a ‘corpus’) and shall not be misinterpreted as a single measure.

From the perspective of structuration theory, corporate listening supports the recursive constitution and maintenance of the companies’ ability to act in a dynamic and contested environment. Integrating external impulses enables companies to employ given rules and resources and reproduce them recursively. Moreover, listening enables the company to change its inside-out perspective and perceive themselves as part of a complex stakeholder structure. Through corporate listening, companies gather – to paraphrase Giddens (1984) – discursive knowledge of their environment, which is important to align their activities and interests. Listening contributes to the recursive reflection by ‘translating’ different *rules of signification* or *rules of sanctioning* (Giddens, 1984, p. 18) which

are expressed in various rationalities of corporate activities. Every social sphere – like politics, law, economy, etc. – is deeply shaped by specific social rules and rationalities like the economic principle, procedural justice, deliberation, etc. These rationalities give orientation to organisations and individuals acting within each sphere. Companies are always confronted with various stakeholders from different spheres, so the rationalities and rules of significance may conflict with each other. Communication management can translate impulses from one rationality and sphere to another and thus support decision-making processes. This supports reflective activities as part of the overall task set of corporate communications (Ruler & Verčič, 2005; Tench et al., 2017, pp. 43–60).

CORPORATE LISTENING AS A STRATEGIC MODE

Taking these theoretical considerations into account, corporate listening should not be misinterpreted as a single activity, but understood as a major communication mode which is expressed in the structures, strategies, processes and activities of corporate communications (see Fig. 1).

Activities

A variety of methods, which are often used for analysing or evaluating communications, can be subsumed under the concept of corporate listening: surveys, issues monitoring, social media monitoring, etc. Corporate listening is an integral part of many dialogical communication activities. For example, stakeholder dialogues can be used to convey one’s own points, to perceive the ideas of the other participants or to initiate messaging and listening activities alike.

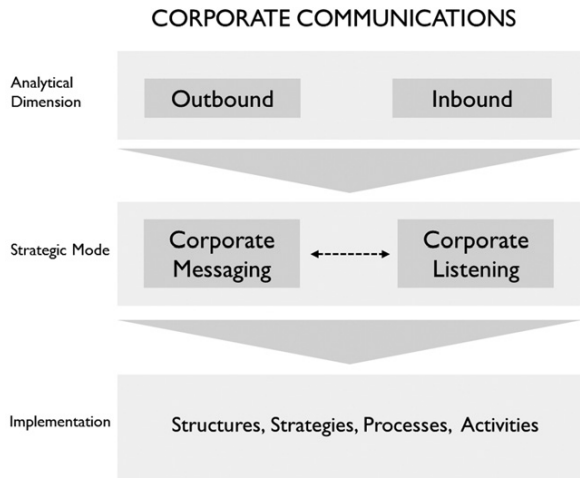


Fig. 1. Corporate Listening and Corporate Messaging as Strategic Modes of Corporate Communications.

Empirical findings indicate, however, that the outbound dimension often dominates in two-way communication settings (Macnamara, 2016). Interactive tools, such as comment functions on corporate websites or social media channels, are also suitable tools of corporate listening.

Structures and processes

Corporate listening needs to be understood as a cross-divisional function. As impulses from various social spheres and stakeholders are relevant for decision-making, interdepartmental coordination is necessary. This has to be formalised to a certain extent, but requires flexibility as well. Some ideas about a design of such a coordination model can be found in literature on issues management (Ingenhoff, 2004). Furthermore, the ‘architecture of listening’ presented by Macnamara (2013, 2014, 2016) describes a range of elements that translate the idea of organisational listening to real-world processes and structures, e.g., through guidelines or interactive systems. Case studies and reports from professionals provide further suggestions (e.g. Galli Zugaro, 2014).

Strategies

Activities as well as structures and processes should be based on listening strategies. Those strategies reflect different intentions, depending on the overall strategic objective of the company and its overarching communication strategy. While there are plenty of different strategic options within corporate listening, an empirical study by Macnamara (2014, p. 99) in Asia-Pacific revealed that listening is often used in the context of situation analyses and only used to optimise messaging activities. The 2015 edition of the European Communication Monitor has also shown the limited use of strategic potentials of listening in practice (Zerfass et al., 2015, p. 53). While nearly 85 per cent of surveyed organisations pursue an overall communication strategy, 78 per cent have a messaging strategy, but only 56 per cent claim that they have a listening strategy. The studies suggest that there is huge unused strategic potential for listening in corporate communications.

Any decision on activities, structures, processes and strategies of listening or messaging depends on a range of factors. Like any aspect of strategic communication, corporate listening is always dependent upon the goals of top management and their approach to environmental interaction (rather sensitive or insensitive). This can differ between companies and industries, or depends on specific contexts or situations. Corporate listening may have quite different relevance in practice. It might be assumed that established companies following successful development paths of their industries have less need for orientation and thus less interest in listening to stakeholder impulses. By contrast, corporate listening is of utmost importance for start-ups, which go for new markets and might need to search avenues for legitimacy (e.g. Uber). Moreover, systematic listening appears to be more relevant for businesses in the B2C sector: listening to customers makes it possible to identify fast-moving trends early and to exploit

innovation potentials through co-creation. Several empirical studies have shown that listening is especially relevant for customer relations (Macnamara, 2014, p. 100; Zerfass et al., 2015, p. 65). Furthermore, listening seems more essential for companies operating in heavily regulated or sensitive industries – e.g., in the health, insurance or energy sector – where empathy and trust play an important role. Customers contact insurance companies often in times of crises and expect professional handling of their inquiries. Pharmaceutical and energy companies are largely dependent on political decisions and need to know exactly which future legal provisions are discussed in the political realm. Conversations with policy-makers and interpersonal listening as well as listening based on media monitoring and big data analyses are important to prepare strategic decisions in such situations.

Corporate cultures are also an important ‘starting point for organisational listening’ (Macnamara, 2016, pp. 247–252). Cultures are collective orientation structures that influence employee behaviour significantly. If professional listening is a part of corporate culture, then all employees, not just the communicators, are sensitised for listening to the needs and impulses of stakeholders with whom they are in contact. It is also necessary to add corporate listening to the task profile of communication professionals. Empirical studies show that listening is not part of the job description for most practitioners (Macnamara, 2014, p. 99; Zerfass, et al., 2015, p. 61). However, establishing listening as a task and objective on the individual level is a first step to establish it in communications and in other organisational functions.

Another factor which influences the design and importance of listening in corporations is the involvement of communication departments in strategic decision-making processes. Research has identified four major roles of communicators in decision-making processes: they are participating in decisions, but can also support by advising, facilitating or disseminating (Mykkänen & Vos, 2015). For successful corporate listening, the advisory and participatory influence of communicators are most important. This helps to integrate impulses from stakeholders into strategic decision-making. Empirical studies have shown that excellent communication departments are characterised by a high degree of executive and advisory influence (Tench et al., 2017, pp. 69–77). At the same time, a majority of corporations has not leveraged this potential to its full extent, and there is much room for improvement.

TWO STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES ON CORPORATE LISTENING

Considering the two perspectives on strategic communication – the *functional* approach and the *emergent* understanding – as well as the distinction between *sensitive* and *insensitive organisations*, listening plays quite different roles.

In the functional approach, companies as well as their communications are steered by top management and mostly *insensitive* to stakeholders. Therefore, corporate listening will be used only sporadically through formalised management tools and processes, which are governed by clear task profiles and

guidelines. The main goal of listening (often in the form of issues monitoring) is to avoid crises. Companies following this approach do not actively initiate opportunities for listening. Impulses from stakeholders are only integrated when they cannot be ignored – such as heavily negative media coverage or shitstorms on social media. Participatory communication formats are seldom used, and if so, then they are mostly used for optimising corporate messaging strategies. Corporate communications aim at conveying corporate strategies and simultaneously offer a ‘buffering’ function (Cornelissen, 2011, pp. 53–54) in order to protect the company from reputational risks.

Companies with an emergent understanding of strategic communication, on the other hand, are more *sensitive* to stakeholders and public opinion. Flexible structures allow them to pass strategic impulses along and across internal decision routines. This fosters the emergence of communication strategies and organisational decisions based on inside-out views. Corporate listening can be used to maintain an ongoing learning process in order to cope with environmental complexity. For this reason, all employees have to be empowered to act as communicators, which includes the ability to listen. The main task of the communication department is to train communication skills of employees – on the outbound as well as on the inbound level of communication (see also Zerfass & Franke, 2013). In order to use the potentials of both levels, participatory communication forms are actively initiated. Here the company’s corporate culture, as well as a participative leadership style, plays an integral role, as it contributes to the embedding of listening as an interdepartmental function. Corporate listening is partly standardised through common management tools and processes. But interpersonal listening is appreciated as well as it can absorb informal impulses. Listening operates internally as well as externally. As such it is important that every employee has a comprehensive understanding of the company’s overall strategic objectives. All in all, corporate listening contributes to the dynamics of decision-making and opens those strategic processes for impulses from the environment.

This provides a comprehensive insight to answer the second research question (RQ2) on the definition of corporate listening as a strategic and value-oriented set of communication activities. Corporate listening is a strategic mode on the inbound dimension of communication, in which impulses from stakeholders are perceived, interpreted and integrated into the company’s activities. It is an essential communication mode consisting of various structures, strategies, processes and activities embedded in the overall stream of corporate communications and communication management. In business reality it is a strategic decision whether more efforts are put on messaging or listening. That decision is dependent on the design of the communication function (emergent or functional) and the inbound orientation of the company (sensitive or non-sensitive). Integrating impulses from stakeholders helps companies to perceive themselves as part of a complex stakeholder structure and break through a traditional self-centred, outbound-only orientation.

VALUE CREATION THROUGH CORPORATE LISTENING

Since strategic communication operates on behalf of corporate management, it appears obvious that the value created through listening has to be connected to business value. It is not sufficient to argue with the normative desirability of listening and stakeholder integration on a macro-level when allocating resources in the corporate world.

A first attempt to depict the value of communications in a generic way has been proposed by [Zerfass and Viertmann \(2017\)](#) with the *Communication Value Circle*, a multidimensional framework of value creation through communication. The authors claim that any corporation needs to generate four generic types of value: tangible assets, intangible assets, room for manoeuvre and opportunities of development.

While *tangible assets* are material values, which are represented in the balance sheet, *intangible assets* are non-monetary without any physical substance, but they are the basis for future profits ([Möller & Piwinger, 2014](#), p. 956). *Room for manoeuvre* is necessary to preserve the license to operate and a prerequisite for current and future business activities. It reflects the basic insight that companies are always dependent on the societies in which they operate. *Development of opportunities* refers to the capabilities of a company to create value in the long term, e.g., by mitigating crises or fostering innovation ([Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017](#)). Corporate communications and specifically corporate listening can contribute to value on all dimensions:

Tangible Assets

Communication enables operations by the creation of awareness, customer preferences or employee commitment. Through corporate listening customer preferences as well as employee insights are systematically integrated into decision-making processes.

Intangible Assets

Communication creates intangibles such as reputation, brands or corporate culture. By integrating employee's insights listening strengthens the corporate culture. Through monitoring processes, the company gets an idea how stakeholders perceive its reputation or brand as its main intangible assets.

Room for Manoeuvre

Communication ensures the company's flexibility by maintaining relationships, trust and legitimacy. Listening is valuable in situations of gaining public acceptance and legitimacy, e.g., in infrastructural projects with huge public interest, when through listening wishes or fears of citizens can be integrated into the negotiating process.

Development of opportunities

Communication helps to adjust strategies through thought leadership, innovation potential and crisis resilience. Through listening new trends can be gathered very early, which strengthens the innovation potential as well as thought leadership. Furthermore, listening will be beneficial in crises, like shitstorms, when it is necessary to get a quick overview over key influencers and the framing of public debates.

These first thoughts show how corporate listening can contribute to the creation of corporate value, as asked in the third research question (RQ3). Further research is needed to conceptualise this in more detail and gain empirical insights into opportunities and challenges in practice.

CONCLUSION

This chapter tried to provide a theoretical and conceptual foundation for further studies of listening in corporate communications by combining existing ideas to a consistent definition and framework. Corporate listening has been grounded in organisational theory and strategic communication. This overcomes the restrictions of former definitions: Through the elimination of mutual understanding as a normative ideal of communication and public relations, listening can be linked to the intention of the parties involved. Organisational listening depends on the strategic objectives of corporate management. The proposed definition benefits from its interdisciplinary foundation. It relies on psychology and interpersonal communication as well as on a modern understanding of corporate communications. Furthermore, corporate listening is an integrated concept: Organisational listening refers not only to the public sphere or issues, but in general to all articulations of stakeholders. Thus, the new approach bridges intra- and inter-organisational approaches: corporate listening takes place both internally and externally, interpersonal or mediated, through quantitative and qualitative methods, etc. This new approach takes an initial step to understand strategic communication more holistically and offers a starting point for further theoretical and empirical investigations.

NOTES

1. Originally the term *inbound* has its roots in marketing research and practice. Inbound marketing describes the reception of customer insights ('inbounds') in call centres responsible for customer relationship management. This chapter uses the term *inbound* in different ways. *Inbound dimension* refers to the generic direction of organisational activities such as communications; they might be intended to influence insights and actions of someone else (outbound) or oneself (inbound). Furthermore, the terms *inbound perspective* and *inbound orientation* are used to depict the general orientation of a social system, which can either act from an inside-out (outbound) or an outside-in (inbound) point of view.

2. According to [Luhmann \(2000\)](#), contingency means that something could be one way or another. Decisions therefore always face a certain contingency.

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