
Editorial 28.4: Interpersonal communication and social listening

Editorial

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Communication is the use of symbols that represent ideas, which then create meanings that can be shared, and as such, communication takes many forms, magazines and newspapers, podcasts, conversations, weblogs, books, signs, etc. (Solomon and Theiss, 2018). However, interpersonal communication is different because we use symbols in the form of gesturing, talking, and writing, representing and giving meaning to the ideas we are trying to communicate. Therefore, “whereas communication, in general, includes any use of symbols to represent meanings, interpersonal communication refers more specifically to communication that occurs between people and creates a personal bond between them” (Solomon and Theiss, 2018, p. 4). The basic elements of interpersonal communication are sender, receiver, message, channel, feedback, noise (Wrench *et al.*, 2022) and context (DeVito, 2022). Historically, channels we used were face-to-face communication and written communication, but in an increasingly interconnected world, interpersonal communication is also digitalised, and people receive and give messages differently than ever before. This can lead to impersonal communication and simply sending messages and treating others respective of their roles and not treating them personally. Therefore, interpersonal communication can be defined as a distinctive form of human communication, which then involves elements such as influence used for managing relationships and these relationships can be managed face-to-face as well as online, the latter form of interpersonal communication often initially being seen as impersonal but judged more positively when experienced in more depth (DeVito, 2022). Digital communication has enabled people to communicate instantly online. Some studies have shown that people who communicate well face-to-face will become richer when having access to online communication because their relationships will become richer as online communication will not substitute face-to-face communication but extend it (DeVito, 2022). However, what happens when there is no intertwined relationship between face-to-face and online interpersonal communication?

The literature has mentioned issues with remote working such as causing the absence of informal conversations, which positively affects employee well-being (Fay and Kline, 2012) and increased stress when employees are isolated (Viererbl *et al.*, 2022). In the context of the pandemic COVID-19, women employees have expressed negative effects of working from home, which slowed down their careers and women also faced financial, personal and professional issues (Deloitte, 2020; UN Women, 2020; UK Government, 2021). In this issue, Shalini Nath Tripathi, Deepa Sethi, Nishtha Malik, Aparna Mendiratta and Manisha Shukla wrote about Indian working women professionals and the relevance of effective communication in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Authors argued that women professionals faced issues such as “gendered burnout, mental health issues, reduced effective communication (formal and informal), increased household responsibilities (unpaid care work and teaching kids), job insecurity, work–life conflict, gender inequalities, reduced financial independence, domestic violence and exploitation, etc”. What is more, results showed that “the reduced effective communication (both formal and informal) was again a major underlying cause for increased frustration. Job insecurity was another major factor that contributed toward increased stress levels of these females”. In addition to that, findings also showed the negative effect of working remotely such as the feeling of exclusion due to the absence of informal communication between working peers, and this has decreased productivity and effectiveness whilst increasing stress due to the absence of informal communication such as conversations. This paper shows that despite digital



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communication adding to our ability to talk and connect with others, and in some ways enriching relationships, basic human contact is still necessary as humans are social beings. It also shows the importance of interpersonal relationships and informal structures that benefit employees, which are still relevant and have been exacerbated by the pandemic, and organisations should listen to these concerns.

In Editorial 28.1, I wrote about listening and the importance of it for studying communication asking if we are truly listening (Topić, 2023a). Listening is important because, as humans, and with the rise of technology, we do not always listen to one another and our attention span has decreased significantly since the rise of digital communication (Firth *et al.*, 2019) and listening to others has benefits not just on a human level but also for organisations because listening to employees increases engagement, satisfaction, loyalty, retention and work productivity (Bashshur, 2015; Ruck *et al.*, 2017) and it also increases profitability and instigating organisational change (Harvard Business School, 2013; Freeman and Medoff, 1984; Hirschman, 1970). However, organisations must also listen to their publics and find a way to communicate with them effectively. How do we do that in a digitalised world?

Social media use is constantly on the rise. According to Statista (2023a, b), there are 4.76bn social media users globally. This is relevant for organisations because individuals increasingly use user-generated content, enabling informal communication between brands and the public (Hegner *et al.*, 2021). Using big data effectively can increase corporate profit by 60% according to some studies because humans produce data in unprecedented volumes (Chen *et al.*, 2014) due to the rise of individuals who produce data (Internet of people) and more devices generating data (Internet of things). However, the challenge lies in velocity as more and more data produced everyday results with increased speed in which the data are produced, thus presenting a challenge for data analysis because systems are required to handle these data in real-time, which is particularly relevant for social media data which individuals and organisations use around the clock. What is more, individuals and organisations produce various forms of data (variety). This presents a challenge and an opportunity for communications practitioners because data created on social media by publics provides a lot of information that can help practitioners understand the needs of publics, and thus some authors raised an issue of social listening and analytics as key skills for practitioners that need to find a way into the curriculum along with digital storytelling, social purpose, big data and behavioural research (Ewing *et al.*, 2018; Tam and Kim, 2019). Social listening can benefit organisations in their reputation management and improve the quality of their relationship with the publics (Tam and Kim, 2019; Westermann and Forthmann, 2021). Social listening, which is linked to communication on social media, influences our interpersonal engagement because the increase in interactions due to the rise of social media affected how individuals and organisations listen and respond to messages (Stewart and Arnold, 2018). Stewart and Arnold (2018) define social listening as “an active process of attending to, observing, interpreting, and responding to a variety of stimuli through mediated, electronic, and social channels” (p. 86). The process of social listening is dynamic because of the changing nature of digital communication. These changes influence human interactions, including how we communicate and what and how we listen. Social listening is thus multidimensional, and it opens an opportunity for internal and external communication that can be listened to. For example, “organizations can listen externally to consumers and clients, consumers and clients can listen to one another, and both groups can listen internally to employees and other critical stakeholders” (Stewart and Arnold, 2018).

In this issue, three papers tackle social media communication and its relevance and one also the issue of analytics as a necessary skill for communications practitioners, with all papers showing the importance of (social) listening. Senay Yavuz and Engin Tire analysed the opinions and knowledge of Turkish corporate communications professionals on social

listening and using social analytics. Authors argued that practitioners value social listening but need better systems and conclude that “social listening and analytics has high potential to benefit companies (. . .) It is time for organizations to question how much they speak versus how much they listen (80:20 on average according to the pioneering organizational listening project by Macnamara) and what they do with what they hear”. Jelena Mušanović, Jelena Dorčić and Maja Gregorić analysed corporate communications on social media before and during the COVID-19 pandemic looking particularly at how Italian hotel brands communicate on social media. In this, the authors looked at informal communication on social networks because the hotel industry is increasingly affected by social media conversations due to many consumers preferring to turn towards user-generated content (Deng and Li, 2018). Thus, the authors argue that the hotel industry needs to take into consideration of user-generated content to better understand the expectations, satisfaction and experiences of visitors and social media and digital communication has generally been proven as the most powerful communication tool within the industry (Granata, 2020). Audra Diers-Lawson writes about activist communication in media-rich and multi-platform environments arguing that crisis is the trigger that motivates people to activism by using the Scottish independence movement. In that, the author argues we must look at factors driving the communicative behaviour connected to activism. The findings showed that the unified model of activism (focussing on hostile media perception, situational motivation in problem-solving and affective injustice) is valid because it provides an opportunity to predict the factors driving people to activism. In addition to confirming the unified model of activism (Chon and Park, 2020), the author also argued that this theory can be extended by demonstrating additional insights into constraint and involvement recognition, which in this case were the Union, Politics, Economy and Independence Referendum, all of which were specific to Scotland and their socio-political and economic situation surrounding the Independence debate and political events that occurred afterwards such as the exit of the UK from the European Union, *Brexit*. Francesca Conte and Alfonso Siano studied talent management and recruitment and argued that “a lack of the use of 4.0 technologies and big data analytics in employee and labor market relations and reveal some sectoral differences in the adoption of 4.0 technologies (. . .) the study points out that the development of HR analytics is hampered by short-term perspective, data quality problems and the lack of analytics skills”. What is more, authors argued that the delay in organisations in Italy which were studied in this work in implementing big data in HRM “seems to be in line with the trends found in the European context relating to the state of maturity of the adoption of HR analytics (. . .) European firms are not yet quite ready, compared to the rest of the world, to develop a strategic vision for HR analytics and they are lacking of a mix of skills from HR, psychology, computer science, data science, consulting and storytelling”. These papers show the importance of understanding analytics as skills communications practitioners need because it increases the ability to listen to publics and their concerns and given the vast amount of data and online conversations, this means it is becoming difficult to engage with publics without processing and analysing information on what matters to them. Engaging with social listening goes in line with Grunig’s (2006) argument that PR practitioners should scan the environment by “monitoring strategic decisions of management to identify consequences on publics, monitoring Web sites and other sources of information from activists, using the situational theory to segment publics, developing a database to analyze information, and monitoring media and other sources to track the process of issue management” (p. 162). In addition to that, Grunig (2009) argued that digital communication can be used by looking at people’s personal content for environmental monitoring and the mass media for evaluating the effectiveness of media programmes, which can contribute towards creating a database to segment stakeholders

and publics. Grunig (2006, 2009) suggestions on using situational theory and analysing the environments in which publics exist and daily operate, including the digital one, seem ever more relevant as papers in this issue showed.

However, the rise of social media communication and its increasing relevance for organisations does not mean that traditional forms of communication have lost relevance, e.g. written communication. Despite the rise of digitalisation, written communication has relevance for corporate communications and can have an impact on the organisation. A large part of corporate communication relies on CEOs who have a central role in organisational communication because they can set the tone and the message of the organisation and thus might persuade, align mission, vision and goals as well as set mindsets and inspire action, which means their role is as communicative as it is strategic (Shanahan and Seele, 2015; Hallahan *et al.*, 2007; Thomas *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, chief executive officers (CEO) letters are sometimes considered a key part of organisational communication because they are often the most-read section of an annual report, and this form of communication is not bound by any rule, which enables CEOs to convey their message in their own way and this can draw attention to certain topics without constraints (Amernic and Craig, 2013; Fuoli and Paradis, 2014). As such, this form of communication can focus on organisational achievements, goals and future direction but what is central is that this form of communication also reveals the thought process of a CEO, which in turn can cause a variety of messages and reactions such as favourable perception, increase legitimacy and trust and reputation, but also gain accusations of greenwashing (Amernic and Craig, 2013; Boudt and Thewissen, 2019; Hamza and Jarboui, 2022), thus showing the importance of listening to publics as well as having good communication skills and being able to connect with publics rather than writing impersonal corporate messages that might easily alienate them. For this issue, Javier Galan-Cubillo, Beatriz Garcia-Ortega and Blanca de-Miguel-Molina analysed CEO letters from 2017–2019 from the top 25 best-performing CEOs according to Harvard Business Review ranking from 2019. Results showed that best-performing CEOs (BPCs) show a high level of moral reasoning compared to previous studies and improvable areas such as the extended absence of autocritique at the organisation and personal level or the lack of leverage on the need for agility and proactive adaption. In other words, authors argue that “when assessing strategic levers separately, the sampled BPCs provide evidence of their persuasive communication, their widespread strategic vision with a long-term approach, their focus on engaging stakeholders beyond shareholders, their leverage on intangible resources and their relatively high level of moral reasoning. Yet, the extended lack of autocritique, either at the firm or personal level, is the most prominent area for improvement. Additionally, compared to intangible resources recurrently recalled such as talent, know-how, or innovation, CEOs more seldomly refer to agility, flexibility and proactive adaption. Lastly, listening to stakeholders is the third non-widespread lever”. Similarly, for this issue, Salah Aldain Abdullah Alshorman and Martin Shanahan write about annual letters to stakeholders by analysing the chair’s and the CEO’s letters from Australian companies examining whether they are on the same page arguing that language content matching (LCM) between the chair and the CEO is associated with firm’s profitability. So, “when the firm is profitable, there is a lower level of chair-CEO LCM than when the firm is unprofitable and that profitability is related to a lower level of chair-CEO LCM”. In other words, communication via corporate letters such as those from the chair and the CEO is connected to the economic situation and is thus the outcome of strategic considerations. Authors explain these findings by arguing that “this may represent an attempt to increase the persuasiveness of the chair’s and CEO’s letters to shareholders and/or manage impressions by conveying solidarity between the CEO and chair of low profit firms. Sharing the same persuasive goal, by leading audiences to the same conclusions, has been identified as a key motivation that underlines LCM (. . .) repeated statements are perceived by readers to be more truthful (.) the necessity to produce a persuasive statement becomes more

pronounced in times of adversity”. These two articles show how important it is to know how to communicate and listen to the publics as crisis often derives from inappropriate communication and poor relationship-building skills.

Finally, organisations are generally trying to attract and retain talent, and employer brand has a large role in this endeavour (Elving *et al.*, 2013) because how organisations communicate their brand has relevance for their perception among prospective employees. For this issue, Ana Špoljarić and Đurđana Ozretić Došen conducted a literature review on international employer brands, which is almost non-existent in the literature along with employer brand research being scarce too. Authors argue this research needs more visibility in academic studies because organisations that operate in the international market often also recruit international employees, but “employer brand developed and managed locally differs from the one developed and managed globally”. Thus, this paper opens a new area of research largely unexplored in communications journals and scholars could ask questions on how these international organisations communicate and recruit talent, and the different ways of promoting their work to employees in different cultures, which is why organisations need to engage in listening across markets in which they operate and show flexibility in cultural differences regarding working patterns.

Interpersonal communication and listening, as its integral form are relevant, always have been and continue to be after the pandemic COVID-19 as the world recovers and attempts to normalise things following years of lockdowns and isolation. Whilst listening might need to move to social listening on digital channels due to the increased use of these channels for communication, listening to one another and having interpersonal contact and communication remains relevant for publics but also organisational employees. Organisations need to find new ways to listen to the publics and try to communicate with them, which social listening analytics provide, but organisations also need to listen to their employees who need interpersonal communication for their well-being but also work productivity, innovation and creativity. As we try to move towards digital transformation, corporate communications have a key role “in managing digital transformation as well as fostering a sense of community and belonging and creating an environment where everyone matters and everyone’s voice is heard” (Topic, 2023b, p. 173) and enabling interpersonal communication between employees, as well as engaging with listening to the publics to try to foster interpersonal relationships in an increasingly digitalised world is as important as ever.

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Further reading

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