

Book review: Organizational Listening for Strategic Communication: Building Theory and Practice in Contemporary Organizational Information Systems

by *Katie R. Place*

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This book edited by Katie R. Place, is an urgent academic response to the so-called “listening crisis” in modern organizations, where communication is still dominated by speaking with a ratio of 80 to 20 (p. 1). Beyond simply calling for the importance of listening, the book systematically builds an “architecture of listening” encompassing culture, policies, structures, resources, skills and technology to enable large-scale listening practices (p. xxii). Against the backdrop of contemporary issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, post-election social tensions and the climate crisis, Place asserts that ethical, fair and respectful listening is no longer merely an option, but a necessity for today’s strategic communication (p. 1).

Katie R. Place is a professor at the School of Communication, Quinnipiac University, USA, whose expertise focuses on the intersection of power, ethics and listening practices in public relations. Place’s credibility is evident in her ability to assemble a diverse global collective, including leading experts such as Jim Macnamara (a pioneer in organizational listening research), Debra Worthington, Shannon Bowen and Linjuan Rita Men, who come from countries as diverse as Australia, Switzerland, Germany, South Korea and Chile. The interdisciplinary backgrounds of these contributors give this book a rare analytical depth, blending interpersonal communication theory, management strategy, philosophical ethics, artificial intelligence and postcolonial studies.

This comprehensive book is divided into four mutually reinforcing thematic units. The first unit focuses on competency and technology. As an introduction, Worthington and Bodie found that stakeholders conceptualize organizational listening primarily as a process of learning and information acquisition, while critical dimensions such as debate were rated lowest, indicating that the public values organizations that listen to understand rather than to argue (p. 14). Gearhart and Maben then extend this concept to the digital realm, demonstrating that active-empathic listening responses in social media are judged to be significantly more competent than generic or automatic responses (p. 31). They allow for the creation of specially trained “listening agents” (pp. 35–37). Next, Kang and Moon address the issue of employee silence by developing the statistically valid Organizational Employee Listening Competency (OELC) Diagnostics, demonstrating that strong listening competency significantly reduces silences



based on fear and resignation (pp. 55–56). Concluding this unit, Zhou, Men and Tsai explore the role of artificial intelligence chatbots, theorizing that conversations designed with social presence and a conversational human voice can enhance perceptions of listening, transparency and positive corporate character (p. 74).

The second unit explores ethics and fairness. Neill and Bowen present the surprising finding that while managers rate their organizations' listening efforts positively, non-managerial employees give them poorer ratings, particularly regarding the organization's ability to solicit criticism and bad news (p. 111). Meanwhile, Tam, Kim and Hutchings uncover the roots of the "organization isn't listening" critique, finding that it often stems from a divergence in expectations between organizations that must balance multiple interests and stakeholders who want their specific problems addressed (p. 133). The most powerful case study comes from English, O'Neil and Lambiase, who analyze the police killing of Atatiana Jefferson in Fort Worth. They demonstrate how systemic failures to listen, particularly to Black people, reinforce structural racism and conclude that "action to change fosters trust" (p. 148). Coman and Vasquez conclude the unit with an assessment of the disparity between Amazon and its employee activism, revealing that no genuine dialog is taking place; Amazon positions itself as the hero while its activism is portrayed as the villain, a classic example of pseudolistening (p. 167, 170).

The third unit focuses on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). They find that while formal surveys and employee affinity groups (EAPs) are key methods of DEI listening, these practices often feel futile due to a lack of diversity in organizational leadership (pp. 192–193). Capizzo then makes the most daring educational contribution by using Hannah Arendt's philosophy of "plurality," arguing that genuine listening must go beyond passive acceptance to active, risky and present engagement, especially in an era of political polarization (pp. 206–207). Lim, Ciszek and Moon conclude this unit by developing a Perceived Organizational Listening (POL) scale in the context of LGBTQ advocacy and find that gender minorities and non-whites actually report higher levels of POL from a Pride campaign that explicitly highlights intersectionality (pp. 225–226).

The fourth and final unit provides cultural and global considerations. Bachmann and Labarca sharply critique theories of ethnocentrism based on listening from the Global North, arguing that such models may be inappropriate in Latin America, where distrust of institutions is rooted in a history of colonialism and political instability (pp. 254, 258). Using social cases from Chile in 2019, they show how failure to listen is directly linked to deep-seated distrust in society (pp. 260–262). Finally, Storie and Marschlich bring this concept to the realm of public diplomacy, presenting a model of the listening process that distinguishes between objectives (why), target publics (who) and instruments (how), while addressing the tendency of Western approaches to ignore subaltern voices (pp. 270, 280–281).

This book successfully achieves its goal of laying the groundwork for the next generation of organizational listening theory and practice. Its central conclusion is that listening is not merely a soft skill but a strategic, ethical and political imperative that demands a holistic organizational architecture. The authors emphatically argue that listening without action is merely a falsehood that undermines trust (p. 272). They shift the focus from the question "Do organizations listen?" to "Who is listened to, why and with what consequences?" (p. 288). In a conclusion co-authored with Debashish Munshi, Place invites readers to "problematize the notion of voice" and learn to listen joyfully as a form of resistance to unjust power (p. 291).

This book boasts significant theoretical, methodological and critical insights. Theoretically, it establishes organizational listening as a legitimate field of study separate from interpersonal listening, integrating philosophy, postcolonial theory and management into a communication strategy framework. Methodologically, it presents new, valid measurement tools, such as the OELC and POL scales, which will enable future quantitative research (pp. 53–54, p. 224). Critically, it advocates a paradigm shift from functionalism (listening for the benefit of the organization) to a normative perspective centered on social justice and deliberative democracy.

The book's key strengths are its clear structure, diverse and authentic global perspectives, and its excellent balance between theory and practice, with each chapter concluding with applicable recommendations. It also possesses commendable critical courage, not hesitating to criticize the practices of major industries like Amazon or Disney. However, the weight of the chapters is not entirely evenly distributed, and while there is an attempt to include Latin American perspectives, representation from regions like Africa, South Asia or the Middle East remains minimal. Furthermore, the language is highly academic, potentially challenging for novice practitioners or undergraduate students.

For thinkers and researchers, this book provides a roadmap for future research, complete with tested scales and identification of key gaps in areas such as artificial intelligence and listening practices in non-Western countries. For public relations and communications practitioners, this book offers ready-to-use diagnostic tools, concrete social media strategies and critical insights to distinguish between authentic and fake listening. For advanced students, this book is essential reading, equipping them with cutting-edge thinking that goes beyond basic textbooks. Finally, for organizational leaders, this book is a stark reminder that failure to listen is not a minor weakness but the root of reputational crises, lawsuits, and a loss of public trust (p. 117). Overall, this is a timely and monumental reference work on ethics, power, and humanity in organizational practice.

Yusri Yusri

Department of Management, Pelita Buana Makassar College of Economics, Kota Makassar, Indonesia

Rr Retno Wulansari Kus

Pelita Buana Makassar College of Economics, Kota Makassar, Indonesia

Melisa Yanuar Susilo

College of Administrative Sciences Abdul Haris, Makassar, Indonesia

Andi Syadaruddin

Petta Baringeng Soppeng College of Social and Political Sciences, Kota Makassar, Indonesia, and

Amal

Pelita Buana Makassar College of Economics, Kota Makassar, Indonesia