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Defining Social Listening: Recognizing an Emerging Dimension of Listening

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Social listening occurs in a variety of mediated contexts, but it has yet to be clearly defined in the realm of communication and listening studies. This report explores social listening as a developing listening type extending from the existing taxonomy of listening, posits a definition of its meaning, evaluates its role in organizational and interpersonal communication, and discusses its value as an additional listening dimension. Based on a review and synthesis of literature across multiple fields of study, we describe social listening as a dimension of listening comprising a blend of purposes complementary to the existing appreciative, comprehensive, critical, discriminative, and therapeutic listening types discussed in Wolvin and Coakley's (1993) listening taxonomy. As mediated communication continuously evolves within the communication landscape, the urgency to understand social listening will surely increase. With this in mind, we introduce and define social listening as an emerging type of listening and as a means of attaining interpersonal information and social intelligence that can empower relationships and influence the way we listen to and communicate with one another through increasingly popular mediated channels.

INTRODUCTION

Social listening emerges in how we communicate and listen to others using a domain of social media and communication technologies which influence our interpersonal engagement. According to the International Listening Association (1995), listening is the process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages. Further, Wolvin (2013) suggests that "listeners vary considerably in their cognitive functioning while engaging as listening communicators" (p. 105). The increase in constant interaction brought about by social media and mobile technologies appears to challenge the way we attend to stimuli and to affect how individuals listen and respond to messages. In this article, we use a standard systematic literature review method employing a manual search of 33 academic sources in the disciplines of listening and social media. Through a review and synthesis of the literature, we present the recognition of social listening as a specific type of listening that is a compilation of existing listening purposes. By exploring social listening through mediated channels and

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discussing its role as listening in interpersonal communication and organizational contexts, this article presents a definition of social listening for use within the communication field and listening paradigm.

DEFINING SOCIAL LISTENING

Social listening occurs in a variety of contexts including but not limited to interpersonal messaging on digital applications (i.e., Snapchat, YikYak, Kik), online social networking sites (SNSs; i.e., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter), and messaging on mobile devices. However, in the listening literature, few studies have addressed the "contextual fit" between listening preference or how listening styles may adjust to changing and evolving contexts (Bodie, Worthington, Imhof, & Cooper, 2008; Chesebro 1999; Imhof, 2004; Worthington, 2001). Elements of the process of social listening have often been recognized in the form of a variety of terms, including social media monitoring, surveillance, cyberstalking, and online creeping. Despite these references, a clear definition of social listening is lacking within the literature in communication and listening studies. Throughout this report, the nuances that make social listening distinctive from the aforementioned terms are presented and discussed in interpersonal and organizational realms.

We 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. Wolvin and Coakley (1996) define listening as "the process of receiving, attending to, and assigning meaning to aural and visual stimuli" (p. 69). Their original model illustrates the process of listening and the decoding of stimulus through the auditory and visual senses and reflects that throughout the listening process that our listening is defined by the efficiency of the sensory system and the interpersonal objectives we set for ourselves. Further, it emphasizes that the total communication process is highly personal, multifaceted, and complex. Social listening is defined as an active process, although it can occur in more passive contexts. For instance, certain types of online monitoring behavior might purposely remain anonymous, while, the desired outcome of engaging in social listening is to arrive at the point of an overt response. The step of responsiveness is what causes an intersection among the otherwise distinctive worlds of social media and the listening process, arriving at social listening.

The process of social listening is also dynamic; the ever-changing nature of the digital communication landscape and the increasing use of mediated channels influence how people interact. The multidimensional nature of social listening invites opportunities for listening within internal and external communication events. For instance, 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. Figure 1.1 represents how the process of social listening relates to the listening process presented by Wolvin and Coakley (1996). In addition, it describes how social listening occurs within interpersonal and organizational contexts.

EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL LISTENING

The onslaught of constant digital messages, regardless of the content and whether or not intended, exposes humans to involuntarily face the challenges of media multitasking. Media-

multitasking refers to the behavior of engaging with multiple media outlets or devices simultaneously, such as watching television while scrolling through Facebook on a tablet or smartphone (Hill & Stephens, 2005). The increasing prevalence of media multi-tasking forces the listening process to rewire, incorporating the constant presence of mediated messages layered into the listening process. Such behavior of listening to mediated messages encourages the recognition of social listening as an identifiable term in communication studies. Social listening also distinguishes itself among established dimensions of listening, while developing from their qualities, which is discussed later on. Given the dynamic use of mobile technology and social networking for all age groups today, the need for social listening is expanding significantly.

THE NEED FOR SOCIAL LISTENING

Recent data on the prevalence of smartphones and mobile use of social media platforms support the need for the recognition of social listening distinctively. A 2015 Pew Internet and American Life Project report indicates that nearly two-thirds of Americans own a smartphone, and 91% of smartphone owners between the ages of 18 and 29 use their device for social networking, making it one of the most popular mobile activities. Older smartphone users are also social networking via mobile technology, with 55% of users over the age of 50 using their devices for this purpose. Second only to text messaging, social networking and Internet use are most frequent smartphone behaviors among young adults (Smith, 2015). On a global scale, there were 1.86 billion smartphone users worldwide in 2015, with projections that the number of users would increase to 2.32 billion by 2017 and 2.87 billion by 2020 (Statista, n.d.). Currently, China leads the world in smartphone use with about 500 million mobile users (Statista, n.d.). Additionally, online activity dominates time spent on mobile devices. The total share of online digital time on mobile equates to 71% in China and the United States, 67% in Spain, 61% in the UK, 75% in Mexico, and 91% in Indonesia (Chaffey, 2017).

Social media use is also diversifying. While Facebook remains fairly consistent with approximately 71% of adults using the platform, Instagram use by adults increased from 13% in 2012 to 26% in 2014 and Twitter grew from 16% to 23% during the same time period. While Facebook remains the leading social networking site across the social media landscape, 52% of adults who are online use two or more social media sites, up from the 42% in 2013 (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015). These growing figures are clear indications of media multitasking which may present hurdles to listening behavior. As listeners, our attention is being pulled in many live and virtual directions, and choosing what messages to attend to and process is becoming increasing challenging in this contemporary digital era.

This rapid growth in digital communication technologies arguably encourages listening scholars to pioneer the recognition of social listening as its own distinctive type. While other purposes of listening, such as appreciative, critical, comprehensive, discriminative, or therapeutic listening, may occur in these social venues, existing research is emerging in support that something greater and exclusive is happening within this social media realm when it comes to listening behavior. In interpersonal and relational contexts, people and entities are now in a position to proactively seek out cues and information about each other. This intelligence may be used for a variety of social purposes, including relationship initiation and maintenance, consumer relations, and marketing decisions. Such a rich array of personal information is shared

among SNSs and this type of unique visibility and the choice to attend to it are accounted for in our introduction of social listening as an emerging listening purpose. Although social listening is developing as its own listening type, it comprises elements from the original purposes of listening.

COMPARING SOCIAL LISTENING TO THE LISTENING PURPOSES

The posited definition of *social listening* as an active process of attending to, observing, interpreting, and responding to a variety of stimuli through mediated, electronic, and social channels is influenced by previous listening research. As introduced in 1993 by Andrew Wolvin and Carolyn Coakley, there exists a conceptual taxonomy of listening purposes. Further these scholars used the taxonomy of listening purposes as a framework for understanding listener motivations. The purposes of listening include discriminative, comprehensive, critical, therapeutic, and appreciative.

Discriminative Listening

Wolvin and Coakley suggest the first type of listening is discriminative listening, which is listening to distinguish auditory and/or visual stimuli. Discriminative listening is essential to acquiring information that enables us to adapt effectively to our environment and is placed first among the five purposes of listening because it is basic to all other four purposes (Wolvin & Coakley, 1993, 1996). In discriminative listening, individuals' first exhibit sensitivity to both verbal and nonverbal cues and is much like a supra-structure for other types of listening (Welch & Mickelson, 2013; Wolvin & Coakley, 1996).

Similar to discriminative listening is social listening in that the process of distinguishing auditory and/or visual stimuli applies to mediated communication in a variety of modes. For example, various forms of personal messaging such as FaceTime and Snapchat allow for face-to-face mediated interaction where both auditory and visual discrimination are required to interpret the messages being sent by the participating individuals. The only interpersonal difference is that the face-to-face interaction is mediated through video rather than in person, which still involves auditory and visual discrimination. However, there are times in social listening where you may interpret only visual stimuli like postings on Facebook or Instagram that may or may not result in a written response or comment. In this case, the visual discrimination is more of a reaction and observation to the visual-only stimuli. Unlike in face-to-face listening interactions, social listening does not always require the auditory cues component when discriminating the visual stimuli. In this case, social listening can be both interactive and observational only when decoding and processing a message. Not only do individuals discriminate stimuli, but they also need to comprehend messages.

Comprehensive Listening

Comprehensive listening goes beyond discriminately dissecting aural and visual stimuli and further into understanding and comprehending the message. Remembering the message is important to comprehensive listening as a purpose to go beyond understanding and into retention

of the message (Wolvin & Coakley, 1993, 1996). Listening research often refers to comprehensively listening to a message as a face-to-face interaction. To fully comprehend what individuals are saying requires providers to hear the words, understand the body language, and extract the key messages from the conversation. Comprehensive listening can be used when we need to retain key details of the encounter.

Social listening also refers to understanding and processing messages for the sake of remembering both aural and visual stimuli. Sometimes social media involves aural messages, such as the various personal video messaging features, and sometimes it is reading and interpreting visual only stimuli, such as text posts and comments. The difference is that the visual stimuli can take place in both a face-to-face messaging format or as a sole observer interpreting and processing the visual messages. The social listener strives to retain and understand messages of others whether it be a socially driven message (Facebook examples can include personal messages like someone's birthday, birth announcement, or death notice) or postings citing current events, educational, political opinions, and personal commentary messages. Comprehensively listening via social listening may take on more contexts in which to retain and remember the information, but the process can be arguably similar to an in person face-to-face listening format. Once a message is comprehended and understood, the dimension of judging the message takes place.

Critical Listening

Critical listening is evaluative in that an individual can assess the message based on what is heard and perceived (Welch & Mickelson, 2013; Wolvin & Coakley, 1993, 1996). This type of listening is used when providers are required to make a decision, form an opinion, or solve a problem. In critical listening the listener can accept or reject a message particularly when exposed to messages with the intent to influence or persuade. We are inundated with persuasive messages be it face-to-face interpersonal relationships or via social mediated messages where evaluating the merit of messages can be difficult. Both skills used in discriminative and comprehensive listening aid in the development of critical listening abilities. Social listening differs from critical listening evaluation in that part of the accepting or rejecting messages or forming opinions on the visual stimuli may be more of an internal observational process rather than an overt reaction to another person.

One could still argue that listeners of mediated messages still engage in the evaluative process of critical listening but may not publicly respond to the persuasive message but rather internally respond. Mediated social venues such as Facebook and Twitter are able to manage an online presence for friends, family, significant others, and co-workers and may influence many of these groups of people be it cognitively or through an overt reaction (Crawford, 2009). Individual listening styles may adapt to changing contexts, but few studies have addressed the "contextual fit" between listening preference and listening situations (Bodie, Worthington, Imhof, & Cooper, 2008; Imhof, 2004; Worthington, 2001). Therefore, engaging in critical listening via social listening contexts is arguably feasible both as an overt response with aural and visual stimuli, such as video messaging, and as an internal observational response to written and nonverbal messages, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. However, there are times when a listener needs to suspend judgments and the purpose should not be critical in nature especially when listening therapeutically (Wolvin & Coakley, 1996).

Therapeutic Listening

Wolvin (2013) notes that therapeutic listening "requires the listener to be a sounding board, enabling the speaker to talk through an issue—ideally to his/her own resolution" (p. 105). Therapeutic listening involves listening with empathy and understanding, listening beyond words and into emotional understanding (Welch & Mickelson, 2013; Wolvin & Coakley, 1996). Arguably, the need for an empathic/therapeutic listener exists in practically everyone. Some of the skills involved in therapeutic listening include focusing attention, demonstrating attending behaviors, promoting a supportive communication climate, exhibiting empathic listening, and responding appropriately (Wolvin & Coakley, 1996). While therapeutic listening has been an interpersonal, face-to-face interaction, social listening can expand that environment into the online community. Social support, empathic response, and listening can be enacted in a mediated environment.

For instance, social media outlets allow for individuals to post birth, death, wedding, and engagement announcements and often reach hundreds of friends, family, and co-workers who are not available on a day-to-day basis. The many comments and responses to these announcements from the listeners can bring a plethora of empathic supportive statements from many social listeners through their mediated source. Arguably social listening can elicit therapeutic responses from a broader audience than individuals' interpersonal face-to-face environment. However, sometimes listening is solely for enjoyment and pleasure where individuals listen for the sole purpose of stimuli appreciation.

Appreciative Listening

Appreciative listening is "the highly individualized process of listening to obtain sensory stimulation or enjoyment through the works and experiences of others" (Wolvin & Coakley, 1996, p. 363). With appreciative listening, individuals listen to stimuli for the sheer enjoyment and pleasure of listening. Individuals focus on vocal qualities of a message or environmental sounds and any type of visual or auditory stimulus that promotes enjoyment for the listener (Welch & Mickelson, 2013; Wolvin & Coakley, 1996). Appreciative listening is subjective and is often one's emotional response to visual and/or auditory stimuli. Kaufman (1993) notes that the process of listening appreciatively may consist of several steps: tuning in to the stimulus, connecting to the stimulus emotionally, and critically evaluating the stimulus. Social listening is also highly individualized and can require an emotional response to the visual and/or auditory mediated stimuli. Often individuals browse their mediated sources for pleasure and/or enjoyment, to socially observe their friends and family's posts, updates, video clips, music samples, and so forth. The plethora of cat videos, food porn, humorous memes, and Buzzfeed articles and quizzes that are available in the social community suggest that there is a niche who enjoys consuming mindless entertainment online. Sometimes social listening results with an overt response, such as an emotional comment, or other time it elicits an internal response, such as experiencing enjoyment from an online observation.

Recognizing Social Listening

We argue that social listening incorporates a variety of listening purposes and is both a listening process that encompasses both active and passive elements. Listening discriminately,

comprehensively, critically, therapeutically, and appreciatively can be applied to social listening with the exception that social listening often takes place outside of a face-to-face interaction and into a mediated context. Listening is a complex, intricate process in that within a single conversation, various types of listening may occur (Mickelson & Welch, 2013). Arguably, social listening via mediated channels can also involve a conversation employing various types and/or purposes of listening. However, due to listener's individualized and internal process, interactants would have difficulty determining what purpose of listening, such as discriminative, comprehensive, critical, therapeutic, or appreciative, was being employed in a conversation (Mickelson & Welch, 2013). Crawford (2009) argues that paying attention and engaging online should be considered practices of listening. Further, Crawford notes that "listening is useful; it captures some of the characteristics of the ongoing processes of receptivity that mark much of online engagement" (p. 525). Now that the relationship between social listening and original listening purposes is explored, it is important to understand the role of social listening in context.

INTERPERSONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIAL LISTENING

This is not exclusively limited to our personal relationships; it also includes how organizations understand the nuances of consumer behavior of the members of their target audiences, and how they use this understanding to enhance customer relationship management (CRM). With this in mind, social listening presents a space where tenets of interpersonal and organizational communication intersect. By definition, we promote social listening as the process of attending to, observing, interpreting, and responding to a variety of stimuli through mediated, electronic, and social channels. As demonstrated in Figure 1.1, social listening has implications within both interpersonal and organizational realms. In this section, we expand upon responses to social listening, its role in relationships, complications, and social listening for engagement.

Social Listening: Getting to Response

As is the goal in all listening acts, the desired outcome of social listening is to yield a response to stimuli. Social listening strategists have referred to social listening as "the process of monitoring digital media channels to devise a strategy that will better influence consumers" (TrackMaven, 2015). TechTarget (2015) and Jaume (2013) define social listening as a common process of identifying and assessing what is being said about a company, person, product, or brand online. Taking information directly from the venues where their consumers participate online is invaluable data which can enhance any marketing strategy. Companies can then use the information they gather to analyze consumer behavior, determine the sentiment of their public(s), and make comparisons between their company and their competitors (TrackMaven, 2015).

These actionable outcomes that affect consumers are examples of how interpersonal interactions influence consumer response. These overt responses bridge social listening and the listening process, which is feedback-centered, as well as distinguish social listening from more passive forms of monitoring, cyberstalking, lurking, or watching. With these behaviors, one party may not want the other to know they are attending to, watching, and listening to online content so the behavior can remain anonymous if that is preferred. With social listening, the

Social Listening According to the Traditional Listening Process	Social Listening in Organizational Communication	Social Listening in Interpersonal Communication
Stimuli	Mediated messages & interactions For example: • Social media posts (i.e. Facebook statuses, Tweets) • Social media images (i.e. Instagram posts, SnapChat stories) • Photo captions • Comments • Likes & Favorites • Personal media messages and videos (i.e. SnapChat and Facebook messenger)	
Receiving To focus on one item among all items competing for attention	Limit the scope of mediated messages and interactions to those focused on select brand names, keywords, and hashtags.	Concentrate on a single person, profile, or content item beyond all others that comprise the overall online community/following.
Attending To focus on the message of that single item	Actively engaging in monitoring behavior in the online environment; aggregating social media data.	Center on a specific mediated message among all that comprise the profile or aggregated content.
Assigning meaning Decoding the message to understand what it means	Establish and analyze metrics, gauge sentiment, assess the value of consumer feedback, create action items from the intelligence derived.	Connote the mediated message, assess the sentiment, and make attributions.
Responding overtly Use the meaning and information to reply to the source or sending in a productive manner	Engage with consumers, interact with online community, improve customer relations management, innovate products, and address action items.	Reply to the mediated message; utilize the cues and information uncovered to make interpersonal assessments.

FIGURE 1. The social listening process in organization and interpersonal contexts.

process exceeds beyond making observations regarding social and consumer intelligence; the goal is to reach a point of response, engagement, and interaction.

Social listening occurs through a variety of attending and observational procedures, yielding varying outcomes influencing the type and degree of responsiveness. By comparison, social listening can be compared to "working the room" in a networking event or participating in a live competition; monitoring behaviors, such as online lurking, are more similar to people-watching or being a spectator of a sport. As such, the social listening process intersects with different types of listening in both organizational and interpersonal contexts in a variety of ways. The information gleaned by social listening has infinite possibilities to personal relationships as well as between organizations and consumers, yet research remains limited on the precise uses and effects of the evolving use of social media within organizations and challenges remain present (Walters, 2013).

Barnes and Jacobsen (2014) suggest that aspects of social media initiatives correlate with listening to electronic word of mouth, or eWOM, in certain industries, including business, nonprofits, and academia. Demonstrating the interpersonal and organizational overlap within social listening, Walters (2013) attempts to advance the concept of business intelligence by referring to it as social intelligence, or the combination of social media data with traditional customer data gathered to yield consumer information that will drive marketing and business decisions. Several benefits to using social intelligence include: (1) enhancing visibility and understanding of customers for better insight, foresight, and development of customer advocacy; (2) proactively protecting and enhancing brand reputation by monitoring and managing sentiments, perceptions, and trends; and (3) spurring product or service innovation by leveraging market insights gained by listening, analyzing, and engaging with customers through social media (Walters, 2013). The concept of social intelligence recognized by Walters reinforces the noticeable shift in the relationship between brands and consumers. In many ways, this critical alteration represents the relational impact on CRM which further emphasizes the need to recognize social listening exclusively.

Social Listening in Relationships

Social listening invokes a more dynamic process of online attention and suggests it is an embedded part of social engagement and reflects the fact that everyone moves between the states of disclosing and listening online as forms of interpersonal participation (Crawford, 2009). Bostrom and Waldhart (1980) note that "listening behavior seems not to be a singular skill but a very complex process" (p. 221) and further distinguishes short-term listening as interpersonal listening. From this interpersonal standpoint, the inception of cyberspace invites people to engage in online surveillance, monitoring the people in their lives through online channels. Social listening invites the opportunity for informed response.

A recognizable shift in interpersonal social listening emerged in 2007, when the first class of incoming college freshmen had the opportunity to "meet" their future roommates via Facebook and MySpace (Heimlich, 2007). By virtually listening to the content posted and conversations facilitated by the social media by these student peers, prospective roommates were, and continue to be, afforded the opportunity to learn more about one other's hobbies, traits, interests, and opinions without the need for verbal interaction. More recently among teens, 83% indicate that social media makes them more connected to information about their friends' lives and 70% state

these social platforms enhance their connection to their friends' feelings, suggesting that teens area engaging in social listening in large volumes (Lenhart, 2015). Social listening also enhances the sense of community among users through shared conversation and thereby promotes more rich and dynamic online social interaction (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004; Shepherd, Braham, & Elston, 2010). Listening to what peers are communicating about online can help reduce a sense of autonomy or social isolation and help to augment online relationships with others (Shepherd et al., 2010).

As with any growth in communication processes there are several benefits and pitfalls to acknowledge. Trottier (2012) recognizes the swelling normalcy of social surveillance as a central feature of daily life as individuals becomes increasingly accustomed to online disclosure, exposure, and public visibility, calling it "a pervasive condition of social life on social media" (p. 330). A research study examining psychological stress and social media use reveals that social stress, or that which stems from exposure to troublesome life events, might be intensified by the ability to be more aware of stressful events in the lives of those the users care about because of social listening (Hampton, Rainie, Lu, Shin, & Purcell, 2015). Further, online engagement and the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as online social media or mobile devices, are found to be associated with prolonged stress, depression, and sleep disturbances in college students (Thomée, Eklöf, Gustafsson, Nilsson, & Hagberg, 2007; Thomée, Härenstam, & Hagberg, 2012). Such transference of stress and other physiological health implications indicate that social listening behavior and its potential association to increased social connection further validate its purpose as a distinguishable type of listening.

Complications to Social Listening

Complications arise from the paradox that occurs from social media and how it can present both bright and dark side consequences. From the interpersonal standpoint, social media are proven to simultaneously make people feel more attached, while also contributing to feelings of uncertainty and jealousy (Anderson, 2015; Stewart, Dainton, & Goodboy, 2014). As an example, in teen romantic relationships, 59% of teens with relationship experience indicate that social media makes them feel more connected, and 44% share that it makes them feel emotionally closer to their romantic partner. In contrast, 27% of teens reveal that social media makes them feel uncertain or jealous about their relationship, and 7% indicate they feel this way "a lot" (Anderson, 2015). Existing research on undergraduate college students suggests that SNSs allow romantic partners to maintain their relationships online, yet when partners perceive uncertainty in their relationship they use more monitoring on Facebook to maintain their relationship (Stewart et al., 2014). These findings suggest that individuals are listening to one another online and that there are actual relational consequences as a result.

Other complications arise from the wealth of social data available which can only be harnessed fully by participating in social listening. An overwhelming amount of both positive and negative information is being put out in public view resulting from interpersonal interactions online. Mediated conversations comprise information that may be helpful to a brand or business, such as receiving positive ratings and recommendations or new product suggestions. In other cases, online exchanges may be potentially harmful to an individual or organization, such as when misinformation or rumors are disseminated. Due to the increasing pervasiveness of social

listening, it becomes more difficult for individuals and organizations to escape what is being said about them in an online environment.

For example, an American University library revealed that social listening by searching hashtags afforded their staff critical insights to conversations containing both positive and negative sentiments. In one instance, a student complained on social media about experience of rude customer service at the library. In this case, social listening enabled the library to be made aware of and respond to the student's dissatisfaction; however, it simultaneously revealed the presence of such a complaint in a highly public forum that may be visible by other students. Nonetheless, by repairing the student's experience, social listening allowed the library to build goodwill through their responsiveness (Stewart, Altiano, & Arnold, 2016).

Another example demonstrating the paradoxical nature of social listening occurred during the events of Hurricane Sandy in 2012. The New York City Fire Department used social listening to respond directly to individuals who posted false information online during the storm. Their strategist revealed how social media simultaneously encouraged the spread of rumors while also serving as the primary tool to identify and debunk misinformation (Stewart & Wilson, 2015). These examples illustrate the potential complications to personal relationships as well as the relationships between organizations and their consumers brought about by the development of social listening. Further, they support the need to clearly understand and recognize social listening as its own listening type and warrant the need for ongoing evaluation as it evolves.

Engagement in Social Listening

The process of social listening involves consuming and assessing information in an active way; however, according to existing studies, it does not require a person or organization to necessary establish presence or engage in using their voice in order to monitor what is being discussed about them online (Crawford, 2009; Macnamara, 2013). Crawford (2009) identifies specific behavior associated with social listening and the process of responding via online engagement encompassing actions such as posting comments; "liking" Facebook pages or status updates; and "following" on Twitter, re-tweeting content, voting, tagging, "bookmarking," subscribing, and monitoring. Social media and mobile communication have changed the way the people carry out conversations, establish and maintain relationships, and listen to one another. These social platforms serve as conduits among the interactants in the way that people are influenced based on their online engagements, so listening to them becomes important.

In terms of public opinion and citizenship, Macnamara (2013) recognizes that the emergence of new media is seen as an empowering development contributing to the democratization of voice. Support exists for the argument that listening is a useful metaphor for online engagement, although it is not necessarily synonymous with speaking up and being involved in an online environment (Crawford, 2009; Macnamara, 2013). These results support that social listening occurs in both active and passive manners and that attending and observing to online messages vary with regarding to levels of interaction, engagement, and response. These variations invite ongoing examination in order to better understand the outcomes of social listening as mediated communication develops.

THE ROLE OF LISTENING IN A SOCIALLY MEDIATED CULTURE

(Crawford, 2009) exemplifies the concepts of background listening and reciprocal listening to assist with understanding of online listening as they relate to social listening. Background listening, Crawford (2009), explains is where a constant stream of commentary and conversations continue as a personal backdrop throughout the day, reducing time and quality of concentrated attention. The process of background listening is critical because it provides intimate access to the details of a someone's life in a means that would normally be reserved for family, loved ones, and trusted friends. Reciprocal listening is described as hearing and responding to comments and direct messages on social media (Crawford, 2009). This is particularly critical in organizational contexts so that companies can listen to the conversation that their consumers are having about their product online.

Social media has a clear impact not only on the way humans interact with one another but also on the type of relationships that businesses and institutions can forge at an interpersonal level given the outlet of social media and mobility. The value of relationship-building and listening for companies can be considered in three important ways: (1) being seen as a means to participate in a community and observe consumer opinions, (2) utilizing a rapid and cost-effective measure of customer support, and (3) gaining a global perspective on how a brand or product is talked about among the marketplace or audience. With all of this potentially for organizational gain via social media, there is some concern about the way social media is rewiring human attentiveness—a required step of the listening proves (Crawford, 2009).

For instance, Crary (1999) accuses online technology of contributing to a crisis of attentiveness, wherein people continually push attention and distraction to new limits and exposes themselves to an endless stream of content, products, people, new sources of stimulation, and streams of information. Indeed, the presence of social media and online mobile human limits of attention and focus, and challenges the listening process, while also opening the doors for recognition of online listening through social listening. Important to realize is that many people divert their attention as they media-multitask and struggle to maintain a balance between online and actual presence within the lives of those with whom they have relationships. In some ways it seems it might be easier to view a friend's Facebook page to monitor how their child's soccer team is doing than engage in a non-virtual conversation about it. Thus, social listening truly offers a new dimension to original listening styles in the contemporary digital age fueled by social media and mobile technology.

FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

A critical analysis of existing literature from a variety of areas, including listening, interpersonal communication, organizational communication, and social media strategy, is synthesized for the purpose of pioneering social listening in concert with already established listening purposes. This report draws from these diverse areas to connect them where they intersect within the realm of listening. We suggest that social listening has surfaced as its own listening dimension, complementing the existing appreciative, comprehensive, critical, discriminative, and therapeutic listening purposes. We 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. In addition, we identify how social listening emerges in how we communicate and listen to others using a domain of social media and communication technologies which influence our interpersonal engagement. Communicating via the domain of social media and communication technologies is what separates social listening's purpose from the more traditional face-to-face listening. The increase in connectivity brought about by mediated technologies appears to alter the way in which we attend to stimuli, affecting how individuals listen and respond to messages. The presence of social media and availability of mobile technologies contribute to the construction of social listening, which is becoming more recognizable in an increasingly mediated society. Social listening appears to have clear implications among interpersonal relationships, organizations, and the relationships between businesses and their consumers; therefore, it is critical at this time that the dimension of social listening is recognized and further explored along with the original taxonomy of listening purposes. As human behavior using mediated communication tools continuously develops the urgency for social listening understanding will surely increase as well.

Implications for Social Listening

There are several implications for future examination of social listening. From an interpersonal perspective, both qualitative and quantitative approaches may be used to determine the extent to which adults are social listening via SNSs and to what ends. Some interesting areas of investigation could be in testing if communication and receiver apprehension are reduced or increased in online engagements. Since social listening takes place in a mediated versus face-to-face context, do the levels of apprehension differ, alter, or even exist in the more private interpersonal environment? Also, further investigation into the effectiveness of mediated supportive responses, levels of self-disclosure, and detection of deceptive cues by interactants are all potential research areas to explore in the context of social listening.

In-depth interviews with social media users may afford us a better understanding of the motivations and gratifications behind social listening. The amount of time spent carrying out online surveillance of peers may also lend insight as to the true breadth of social listening occurring in a growing and diversifying social media climate. From an organizational perspective, there are a plethora of digital tools available to aid in social listening and provide metrics to organizations regarding their online sentiment and reach. These metrics provide the social intelligence needed by organizations to make critical marketing and customer-facing decisions. In addition, studying social listening affords a better understanding of what types of information people and organizations are attending and listening to, and what they are looking to gain from this type of surveillance. At the most broad level, exploring social listening in greater depth allows us to begin addressing the question: What are we listening for, how are these listening behaviors affecting us, and what are looking to do with the information we discover using SNSs?

Emerging from this article are some specific next steps to further investigate social listening where it intersects with both interpersonal and organization communication studies. Our plan includes conducting a case study of how social listening affects customer relations practices toward students within an institution of higher education. For instance, we plan to explore the way entities within a college who interact with students on a daily basis subscribe to social listening to listen to their students in order to gain intelligence about this particular population

and how to better meet their needs. Our supposition is that by social listening to college students on their SNSs, institutions can gain valuable insight into student needs, experiences, and ideas; this information may then be used to respond to areas of need and improve the overall college experience, thereby addressing issues such as student retention and satisfaction, all by engaging in social listening to their constituency.

Conclusion

Osborn and Osborn (1991) comment that listening is more of a dynamic process made up of interacting phases. Perhaps social listening could also be included as a dynamic process of listening through mediated channels whose purpose is to engage individuals via an online community. "Listening has not been given sufficient consideration as a significant practice of intimacy, connection, obligation and participation online; instead, it has often been considered as contributing little value to online communities" (Crawford, 2009, p. 527). Bodie and colleagues (2008) note that as the listening field grows and matures, listening scholars must begin addressing differing listening definitions, methods, and theoretical frameworks. As this report reveals, listening scholars should no longer turn away from recognizing the emerging role that online engagement has on listening behavior.

Halone and Pecchioni (2001) comment that "few people would deny the importance that "listening" plays in the enactment, development, and maintenance of an array of social and personal relationships, yet little empirical evidence exits to support such a claim" (p. 59). Perhaps we need to recognize social listening as a means of attaining interpersonal cues and social intelligence that can empower relationships and alter the way we listen to one another through increasingly popular mediated channels. As such, we promote recognizing the definition of social listening as the process of attending to, observing, interpreting, and responding to a variety of stimuli through mediated, electronic, and social channels. Surely, the concept of social listening is worth additional exploration in listening, interpersonal, and organizational realms. Further research will yield the potential significance of social listening within the realm of communication and listening studies.

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