

Social listening in strategic communication

1 Background

Listening is a crucial part of effective communication. Within strategic communication, “social listening” usually refers to the practice of social media monitoring in proximity to the execution of some communication activity. Social listening can for example be part of a situation analysis that is undertaken prior to a planned communication event in order to inform the design of effective messages, or it can occur after a communication intervention in order to evaluate audience responses (Stewart & Arnold, 2018). Such reception analyses can then of course feed into the next iteration of the situation analysis. Yet another related application of social listening would be to monitor the so-called blogosphere in order to detect anomalies in conversation activity that have the potential to reach virality and thus severely impact brand image (Westermann & Forthmann, 2020).

Since social listening typically occurs in the context of situation analyses or evaluation of communication responses, this activity has the potential to form a natural part of several subfields within strategic communication, from organizational communication, to digital marketing, to crisis communication (Young et al., 2019). Within communication research connected to foreign influence operations and disinformation campaigns, social listening could have a significant impact as a tool for detecting and countering such inauthentic activities designed to generate political polarization in target audiences (Lukito, 2020; Michele Ewing & Lambert, 2019; Sultan, 2019). Various tactics for social listening have already been developed within e.g. nation branding organizations, but these efforts need to be more structured, continuous, and organized (Larson et al., 2009; Santa Maria, 2013; Wanless & Pamment, 2019).

2 Research proposal

The present research proposal suggests that the Dept. of Strategic Communication should invest efforts into designing a funding application that would allow the department to study the preconditions, feasibility, and implementation of social listening as a methodological toolset and a theoretical field that are relevant to several areas of communication research. As stated previously, there is currently no agreed upon methodology or best practices concerning the undertaking of social listening. The development of such methods could potentially benefit all communication research that involves collection of web material, and performing content analyses and network analyses on such netnographic observations. From a theoretical point of view, social listening could have clear implications for brand management and reputation management (Westermann & Forthmann, 2020), as well as in relation to existing theories of surveillance.

2.1 Preconditions

Even if it is evident that social listening can benefit strategic communication, this practice also needs to safeguard the personal integrity of individual social media

users. Since scientific social listening would ideally be based on continuous collection of social media data, it is paramount that these methods are designed in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Thus, important preconditions of any research project on social listening are that principal investigators avoid individual social media user content (which would require informed consent), but rather focus data collection on organizational communication, such as articles published on news websites, or on content posted by official organizational social media accounts. An ethical review is planned determine if social network analysis can be used to map out the spread (sharing) of such content, and if user responses are allowed on aggregate level (e.g. number of likes).

2.2 Feasibility

The feasibility of social listening is largely determined by how the preconditions surrounding GDPR compliance are defined and solved. Due to uncertainty concerning privacy regulations, current attempts at social listening tends to avoid systematic collection and processing of social media data. Instead, a tactics approach is often applied in which some subset of social media content related to typical disinformation themes (e.g. covid strategy, crime, immigration) is surveyed and qualitatively assessed. Although this approach is feasible, it is not necessarily the most effective and scientifically rigorous. Consequently, an important goal with the present project is to understand how and to what end organizations are currently performing brand management through social listening techniques, and based on this evidence, suggest other scientific and large-scale approaches that are feasible under current GDPR regulations.

2.3 Implementation

In order to implement social listening as situation analysis, online news articles and similar organizational communications on social media would be systematically collected on a global scale. It would also be desirable to be able to track how such organizational communication is spread across social media, and what type of aggregated user responses this communication receives. While there exists commercial software for this (e.g. [Brandwatch](#), [Crowdtangle](#), [Sinch](#)), these tools seem to lack flexible solutions for performing web scraping, database management, and computational content analyses (e.g. sentiment, intent, link, network analysis). Having completed this initial step, next it becomes possible to work with social listening as communication evaluation by designing and executing communication countermeasures and evaluating responses on social media.

3 Application plan

There are many possible funding bodies for the current research proposal. Since the project contains a fairly equal balance between basic and applied research, along with data science methods, the Swedish Research Council (VR) and the Marianne and Marcus Wallenberg Foundation (MMW) are the primary targets. The format of the research proposal would be a 3-year project with a PhD student, and around 50% research time for involved researchers. The potential for research collaborations with industry partners could be high ([Swedish Institute](#), [IKEA](#), [MSB](#)). The research group at ISK will meet once every week during February 2022 in order to complete all parts of funding applications to be sent in to VR and MMW and others.

Date	Activity
2022-02-02	Preconditions, compliance with GDPR, ethical review
2022-02-09	Feasibility, current practices, platform access, software
2022-02-16	Implementation, content analysis using machine learning
2022-02-23	Establish research collaborations, case studies, pilots
2022-03-02	Write up project application in Prisma for VR submission
2022-04-01	Write up project application for MMW submission

3.1 Researchers

Roles of involved researchers...

References

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