

Social listening in strategic communication

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1 Background

Listening is a crucial, but often neglected part of strategic communication (Macnamara, 2016b). 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 facilitate the design of effective messages, or it can occur *after* a communication intervention in order to evaluate audience responses (Stewart & Arnold, 2018; Westermann & Forthmann, 2020).

Social listening can also be a new way of understanding citizens’ ideas, needs and reactions, and could thus contribute to enhancing our democracy. Since social listening typically occurs in the context of situation analyses or reception analyses, this activity has the potential to form a natural part of several subfields within strategic communication, from organizational communication (Macnamara, 2016a), to digital marketing, to crisis communication (Young et al., 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. 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, engagement, participatory communication, and democracy.

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, it is likely that content generated by *individual* social media users needs to be avoided (since this could require informed consent), and that data collection should focus on the digital communications undertaken by public and private *organizations*. An ethical review is planned to determine how the spread of organizational communication can be analyzed (e.g. sharing), and if user responses can be collected on an 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 tend 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 is surveyed and qualitatively assessed. Although this approach is feasible, it is not necessarily the most effective and scientifically rigorous. An important goal with the present project is to understand how and to what end organizations are currently performing reputation management through social listening techniques, and based on this evidence, suggest other more 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. As an example, we could consider international news reports on the topic of Swedish covid strategy. Each such article would be analyzed in order to extract content features (e.g. narratives and sentiment). By tracking the relationship between an article's content features and how it gets spread and reacted to on social media, it would then become possible to use machine learning to predict the social media impact a certain news article would generate. Based on such forecasts, we could design and execute communication countermeasures, and again use social listening as *communication evaluation* to determine effective strategies for countering negative news reporting.

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 postdoc, and 25–50% research time for involved researchers. The potential for research collaborations with industry partners could be high, including private companies (e.g. [Ikea](#)) as well as public sector organizations (e.g. [Swedish Institute](#), [MSB](#), City of Stockholm). 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

Nils Holmberg: Has the role of project leader, and will have main responsibility for writing the research application. He has the methodological competence needed for implementing social listening.

Rickard Andersson and Charlotte Simonsson: Have the role of researchers in the project. They will ensure that project outcomes on social listening are relevant for strategic communication applications and theory.

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