

Alert but somewhat unaligned: public sector organisations' social media listening strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Purpose – During the COVID-19 pandemic, public sector organisations produced thousands of social media messages weekly answering citizens questions and informing the public on safety related matters. The purpose of this study was to investigate how the pandemic shaped social media listening in Finland's public sector organisations and how these organisations aligned their listening and strategic communication to address emerging questions, news (real and fake) and rumours during the pandemic.

Design/methodology/approach – Building on a theoretical background from strategic communication, organisational listening, digital marketing and public sector communication, qualitative interview data included communicators ($N = 14$) from all central Finnish public sector organisations in charge of COVID-19 communication. Findings were themed and analysed qualitatively to understand the level of alignment of strategic communication on social media.

Findings – The findings revealed that the pandemic had strained public sector organisations' communication capabilities, forcing them to align their processes and resources reactively to enable useful content and limit false/misleading content. The results confirmed that organisational listening remained somewhat unaligned. A dual role of public sector communication as speakers but increasingly as listeners was highlighted.

Originality/value – The study's findings point to organisational listening on social media being a central requisite for public sector organisations overcoming a crisis.

Keywords Pandemic, Public sector communication, Organisational listening, Social media, Strategic communication

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Globally, public sector organisations are challenged with complexity and bureaucracy but must comply with the political view of “doing the right things” (Thijs and Staes, 2008, p. 9). Citizens assess public sector communication based on “whether it meets their needs and answers their questions” (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019, p. 7). Citizen needs were great during the social isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Luoma-aho *et al.*, 2021). In fact, Chakraborty *et al.* (2021) reported that social media became the primary means of communication during the isolation.

Scholars agree that social media platforms lack dialog (Macnamara, 2016; Theunissen and Wan Noordin, 2012; Watkins, 2017) but remain crucial for public sector organisations (Crawford, 2009; Maben and Gearhart, 2018) owing to their capabilities for relationship building, participation, organisational learning and listening (Kent and Taylor, 2016).



Strategic listening to stakeholders may help build organisational social capital by fostering collaboration (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019), but in practice, organisations remain challenged by the topics, dialog and slowness (Brandel, 2010; Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019). Global crises tend to illuminate these, and alignment of strategies remains a challenge.

Listening to citizens is central for democracy (Delli Carpini, 2020). While listening can be negative, as when used as a weapon against citizens in less democratic societies, it can also provide benefits such as increased public good, improved democracy, stakeholder trust and sustainable relationships (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019; Macnamara, 2020). Listening online as a human resource-based approach differs from monitoring computer-based qualitative metrics offering opportunity for live interaction vs. monitoring reports with numbers rather than content. All data from citizens require ethical considerations (Mau, 2019) around issues such as privacy and identity (Davis and Patterson, 2012), as conclusions drawn based on these data may be skewed (Espeland and Sauder, 2007).

Combining strategic communication, organisational listening, digital marketing and public sector communication research, the present study investigated how the emergent global pandemic impacted public sector social media listening in Finland. Finland is a country of high generalised trust in society, high utilisation of technology among citizens, and its public sector operations are guided the principles of transparency and openness of process enabling citizen engagement (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019). Building on frameworks of organisational listening (Macnamara, 2016, 2018, 2020) and public sector communication (e.g. Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019), the study examined the strategic alignment of online listening (Volk and Zeffass, 2018). These findings contribute to strategic communication theory through a new emphasis on how the listening role of organisations requires more strategic alignment of external communication, calls for new practices and guidelines of strategic online listening.

Literature review

Aligned and two-way strategic communication

Strategic communication research focuses on how organisations interact with stakeholders and present themselves as social actors in creating public culture and discussing public issues (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007). Originally, “strategic communication” was defined to support organisations in advancing their missions (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007; Holtzhausen and Zeffass, 2015). Communication is strategic when it is objective driven and aligned with strategic targets (Cornelissen, 2017; Christensen *et al.*, 2008; Volk and Zeffass, 2018). Zeffass *et al.* (2018) defined strategic communication as encompassing communications crucial for “the survival and sustained success of an entity” (p. 487), indicating the purposeful use of communication to engage in strategically important conversations such as citizen dialogs.

Strategic listening helps organisations recognise and react to changes in the environment more quickly (Macnamara and Gregory, 2018), while listening on social media helps identify weak and strong signals from multiple spheres in decision-making processes to maintain or achieve an external fit (Zeffass *et al.*, 2018). Volk and Zeffass (2018) highlighted the importance of aligning strategic communication on both the primary (with the environment) and secondary levels (inside organisations). The secondary level relates to agreement between strategy and organisational operations.

Strategies should be adaptive to change according to societal changes, citizen feedback moving from “a prescriptive to an emergent perspective on strategic management” (Frandsen and Johansen, 2015, p. 230). Thus, strategic communication must not only engage stakeholders but also build and implement strategies (van Ruler, 2018).

Organisational listening on social media

Organisational listening is “the culture, policies, structure, processes, resources, skills, technologies, and practices applied by an organisation to give recognition, acknowledgement, attention, interpretation, understanding, consideration, and response to its stakeholders and public” (Macnamara, 2016, p. 52). Earlier research has confirmed that organisational listening on social media requires that both citizens and organisations are present, active, observing and responding to stimuli through the channels (Brandel, 2010; Dellarocas, 2003). Ideally, this could lead to long-lasting relationships that build trust between citizens and organisations and strengthen legitimacy (Navarro, 2018; Yaxley, 2012). Furthermore, listening organisations are perceived as authentic and tend to receive more citizen support on social media (Kang, 2014; Men and Tsai, 2015), whereas poor listening has negative consequences for organisations and stakeholders (Burnside-Lawry, 2011).

Listening is a starting point for dialog, as dialogic communication requires organisations to provide opportunities for stakeholders’ positive or negative engagement (Seltzer and Mitrook, 2007). Organisations may fear negative feedback and even lack resources (Macnamara, 2020) to quickly address the many citizen comments on social media (Brandel, 2010). Public sector organisations tend to utilise social media merely as a one-way information channel (Mergel, 2013). However, listening should be approached as a strategic framework or “an architecture” for understanding stakeholders (Macnamara, 2016). Macnamara (2016) claimed that a crisis of listening exists in organisations today, but little is known about how the pandemic shaped this in the public sector.

Public sector communication and social media

Public sector organisations are central actors that facilitate public discourse in democratic societies (Capizzo, 2018; Macnamara, 2016; Sommerfeldt, 2013; Taylor and Kent, 2014). Unfortunately, most public sector organisations still focus on traditional speaking roles, even on social platforms that enable listening and dialog (Macnamara, 2016; Theunissen and Wan Noordin, 2012; Watkins, 2017). The weak listening culture reportedly results from organisations’ lack of social media strategy, underdeveloped policies, unclear goals, untrained staff and lack of methods for measuring digital presence (Barnes and Jacobsen, 2014, p. 147).

Building trust between citizens and public sector organisations is believed to help society survive times of crises such as pandemics. The idea of “antifragile communication” (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019) suggests that such trustworthy connections and a good reputation create organisational intangible capital, which enables collaboration in more challenging times as well. Social media has become one central arena for trust building, as public sector organisations look to engage citizens in dialog wherever they are.

Society exists in the dialogic public sphere (Bronn and Bronn, 2003), where stakeholders engage simultaneously on multiple digital media platforms. On these platforms, extremes may be overrepresented, and dialog is ruled by affect (Levine, 2011). Studies on social media have viewed social media and public sector communication through citizen engagement (Bowden *et al.*, 2016; Piqueiras *et al.*, 2020), participation (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019) and co-creation (Tuurnas, 2020). Becoming antifragile implies transitioning from informing to engaging, creating a strong organisational culture where listening is continuous and interaction is based on changing citizen expectations (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019).

The pandemic has raised awareness among many public sector organisations of the need to transition from informing to listening and dialog (Luoma-aho *et al.*, 2021) and for increased transparency to reach citizens (Levine, 2011; Macnamara, 2020). Increasing citizen trust and engagement is central (Mergel, 2013). Studies have suggested that ‘digital micro-encounters’ with public administrators take place in different arenas (Zavattaro and Brainard, 2019, p. 562). Maben and Gearhardt (2018), applying Bodie’s (2012) listening model, called for public authorities to practice emphatic listening.

Data-driven listening

Much social media research has been built on studies on digital marketing, highlighting affective, cognitive and behavioural consumer engagement (Bowden *et al.*, 2016) through social media as a technology-enabled process by which firms collaborate with customers and partners to jointly create and sustain value for all stakeholders (Kannan and Li, 2017, p. 23). However, engagement does not occur according to industry reports, which confirm that organisations address topics on social media that are not of interest to customers while ignoring most topics that customers prefer (Freundt, 2013).

Computer-mediated communication is datafied on social media platforms that have matured into data companies, with business models derived from their ability to harvest and repurpose data (van Dijck and Poell, 2013). Datafication means networked platforms can render many perspectives into data, such as demographic information, customer profiles and mobile phone metadata (Mayer-Schoenberger and Cukier, 2013), which are valuable for marketing purposes. Facebook and Twitter increasingly mine social media traffic for trending topics, keywords or sentiments (van Dijck and Poell, 2013). Organisations buy these data for use in measuring social media outputs such as 'likes' or the numbers of followers (Kagarise and Zavattaro, 2017). Brandel (2010) defined monitoring as an automated system that recognises and reads items such as comments, discussions and topics that are important to the organisation, whereas measurement emphasises volume such as the number of fans, likes, comments and leading topics, sources and sentiment. The latter is used in digital marketing, but communications can benefit from both monitoring and measurement in their analyses. And when a crisis arises, both tools are important in planning the actions.

Crisis management in social media

Pandemics require crisis or issue management. Signs of a developing crisis may appear online before a full crisis manifests (Coombs and Holladay, 2012); thus, online listening is one stage 'of intervention for management to combat misinformation' (Clemente-Suarez *et al.*, 2022, p. 15). Crisis stages are reflected on social media in real time (Houston *et al.*, 2015); thus, being active on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic was crucial for public organisations.

Earlier research has proposed that organisations should have a strong presence on multiple social media platforms to have a dialog with the public during crises (Guidry *et al.*, 2017; Lin *et al.*, 2016), as social media simultaneously facilitates the growths of crises and provides channels for crisis communications (Coombs and Holladay, 2012). The best approach to public health crisis communication is to focus on communication channels that encourage "listening, feedback, participation, and dialogue" (Covello, 2003, p. 5).

Response strategies, ranging from dialog to corrective actions (Romenti *et al.*, 2014), are intended to manage all stakeholder-related social media risks (Horn *et al.*, 2015). They require timely reactions, top management involvement and steering the narrative to protect the organisation's reputation and create trust (Yeo *et al.*, 2020). Coombs and Holladay (2014) proposed that organisations develop contingency strategies; that is, the message efficiency should be monitored and assessed while keeping responses professional and remaining active on all channels. A well-handled case of crisis may even improve relationships with the public (Romenti *et al.*, 2014).

Building on Volk and Zeffass's (2018) concept of alignment to identify current and emergent challenges, we investigated the status of strategic public organisations' social media listening during the pandemic and whether their listening was as weak as indicated by previous research (e.g. Macnamara, 2016; Theunissen and Wan Noordin, 2012; Watkins, 2017). These were studied by addressing the following research questions and using an exploratory qualitative approach (Bryman, 2016), guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1. What role does listening play in public sector organisations' strategic social media communication?
- RQ2. How did the pandemic impact social media communications and resources?
- RQ3. How has the pandemic changed public sector organisations' social media strategies?

Methods

Finland is known for high generalised trust in society and authorities and transparent governance in the public sector (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019). All ministries and authorities are independent in their communication, but during the crisis the Prime Minister's Office decided to apply the Emergency Powers Act and take over coordination of COVID-19 related communications. This new policy was applied first after the interviews of this study, where we chose the eight leading government and public sector organisations responsible for COVID-19-related communications to citizens in Finland. Owing to the heavy workload of their communicators, participating in survey or focus groups was not preferred, and tailored interviews matching individual schedules were chosen. To complement the individual data, data from previous publications and reports were analysed. Desk research was performed on documents, and 14 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with communication managers from leading Finnish government and public sector organisations from November 2020 through March 2021. Interviewees were selected based on the organisation represented and its relevance during the pandemic, focusing on the authoritative, regulatory and legislative organisations responsible for Finland's governmental pandemic strategy and citizens' health and well-being.

The interviewees were highly motivated, despite the additional demands of the pandemic. Only one of the eight central organisations declined to participate, citing a lack of social media engagement with citizens as the reason. Four interviewees represented ministries, and ten represented national authorities. The interviewees and their organisations' anonymities were ensured, and the interviews were conducted in accordance with the semi-structured interview guidelines that addressed existing strategies, resources, presence, social media activities, top management involvement, the impact of the pandemic and the outlook of listening on social media. The data collection complied with General Data Protection Regulation requirements. All interviews were conducted online in Finnish and recorded; the recordings were stored in password-protected files. Each of the 14 interviews lasted 45–70 min. One was a team interview, as suggested by the organisation because of time constraints. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using the NVivo software.

The interview guide consisted of themes such as triggers (do you/why and where do you listen to your stakeholders), strategies and operations, focus areas on social media presence, the aims of listening, the use of the data, the link to the strategy and targets set, the impact of the crisis in resourcing and activity, roles and responsibilities and the future role of listening. Both the documents and interview data were thematically analysed.

In the data analysis, the organisations' communication and/or social media strategy/guidelines were studied to identify themes such as "social media", "digital communications", "(online) listening", "customer service" and "customer/stakeholder engagement".

Following the thematic content analysis guidelines, the data were examined using the strategic online listening method described in the literature review: strategy alignment, listening practices, measures, targets, management involvement and the impact of emergent changes to the operating environment. The interview data were then condensed and studied as expressions and keywords under the themes and research questions.

Findings

RQ1: Primary alignment to the organisational strategy

The first question explored the role of listening in public sector organisations' strategic social media communication. Our results show a primary alignment with the organisational strategy: customer/stakeholder approach or engagement is defined as a strategic aim for Finnish public organisations, and communication supports this target but without specific guidelines or targets.

The interviewees were asked to share their organisations' communication and/or social media strategy/guidelines. The documents were studied to identify themes such as "social media", "digital communications", "(online) listening", "customer service" and "customer/stakeholder engagement". The interviewees were asked if the communication/social media/listening strategy supported organisational strategic targets. As the organisations were all public, they relied on central government documents and produced their own communication guidelines. The document mentioned most frequently was the Finnish government's 2013 communications strategic policy (VNK, 2013), which describes social media as a channel for civil dialog but sets no measurement method for managing it. This policy encourages web communicators to tighten their cooperation on services related to social media. The documents revealed that the measurable targets for social media were generic; only one organisation identified key performance indicators.

The Prime Minister's Office subsequently published documents that acknowledged listening as a central tenet. The 2016 government communication guide (VNK, 2016, part 4) prescribes listening to citizens and suggests that their expectations from authorities inform administration and service development. This establishes listening as a strategic aim for Finnish public organisations but without specific guidelines.

The analyses of the interview data and organisational documents revealed that communication strategies were aligned to organisational strategy targets in all organisations. Interaction/customer engagement was mentioned in several documents as an organisational strategic target and communications target:

It starts from strategy—we have a customer strategy and a communication strategy, and both emphasise the customer aspect and the ease of operating on the customer's terms and the ease of customer service channels. (Interviewee 11, Organisation 7)

Several organisations have confirmed that listening supports efforts to increase interactions or improve customer relations. Some followed conversations to correct disinformation/misinformation or manage their reputation. The interviewees mostly mentioned "customers" (interviewees 1, 2, 3, 5, 10 and 11) instead of "citizens" (interviewees 10 and 12), and interactions were aimed at being "human" (interviewees 6 and 8) or "engaging" (interviewees 1, 3, 7, 11 and 14) and making communication open and transparent (interviewee 12). Customer viewpoints and relationship management were referenced.

Some organisations developed social media policies that included listening or interaction:

Our communication is interactive and modern; we take advantage of digitalisation and the opportunities of online communication. We use social media systematically. We listen to stakeholders already in the preparation phase. (Organisation 5)

We want to highlight health and well-being issues on social media, i.e. in forums where people are already active. Our aim is to promote the availability and dissemination of reliable information. We use social media channels to inform and stimulate discussion about our activities, events and current affairs. Profile administrators follow the conversations on weekdays and answer questions on a discretionary basis. We cannot answer all questions, and we cannot answer individual personal health enquiries. (Organisation 2)

The Finnish government crisis guidelines (VNK, 2019) offer advice to stakeholders on listening during states of emergency, but they concentrate on communication management from the inside out. However, how these guidelines are followed in practice often depends on the available resources.

RQ2. Secondary alignment of strategic social media listening

The second question focused on how the pandemic impacted social media communications and resources. The results showed that primary alignments existed but were inflexible in that the strategies and policies did not change often (Volk and Zerfass, 2018). Concerning secondary alignment, structures and processes were established for speaking that supported the strategy, but systematic listening was not regarded strategic. All organisations had a presence and maintained accounts on social media, most commonly on Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. All organisations confirmed primarily disseminating information, while some posted campaign-type contents for key target groups. Social media teams and content were managed under communication functions. The pre-pandemic team size ranged from 0 to 4.

Most organisations used digital tools for listening but inactively before the pandemic. The customer approach triggered two organisations' listening, as they "go to where their customers are going", that is, to social media. After the pandemic was announced, listening became necessary because of increased social media traffic. However, social media reports were primarily used by communication personnel.

Several interviewees confirmed activating listening when organisational names appeared in the media or when the number of social media follower/visitor increased. One interviewee's organisation decided whether to react to new topics on social media as they emerged and prepared fact sheets for those responsible for responding. Another trigger was an issue of public concern:

Before the pandemic, there have been other themes of human interest important to people, and we have concluded that we must get involved in social media discussions to present our view. (Interviewee 11, Organisation 7)

The resources for managing social media content sharing, listening and interactions were limited, with only temporal increases or re-arrangements of personnel during the pandemic. The interviewees confirmed doing their best to listen and reply to all questions on their own social media accounts. Only one interviewee reported that organisational resources were available for replying or commenting outside their own accounts.

I hope and I bet there's no going back to that old way of doing social media. We have an insanely large number of followers now, and of course, when there are large numbers of followers, the number of comments will increase. But what used to be that maybe there was one comment a day. One Monday I went through 1,400 comments so . . . yes—we do not have resources to be active anywhere else but on our own channels. (Interviewee 2, Organisation 2)

Four organisations made temporary arrangements to accommodate the increased activity on their social media accounts. At the time of the interview, the crisis period had already lasted over a year, and the amount of discussion on social media had not decreased.

We had one person responsible for answering Facebook and Instagram questions. One person focused fully on Twitter, as the news flow is extremely fast there, so you must keep following it all the time. During the laws in effect related to the state of emergency, we had four persons working during the weekends, and I had 6-day workweeks. We had to react to the feed also on Saturdays and Sundays. When this phase is over, the crisis continues, and the need for communications remains. We are suffering from an acute lack of resources for listening and replying to citizen comments and questions in social media. (Interviewee 9, Organisation 1)

Several interviewees had organised social media training for management or specialists assisting with replies during the pandemic, and many were planning to involve more personnel in these activities. The important strategic role of social media in communications was evident.

Outcomes and impacts should be measured (Macnamara, 2018). The organisations interviewed had no measurable online communication targets and aimed for “interaction” or “good customer service”. They followed sentiments such as emojis and numbers of followers, with reports produced using a digital tool, which were widely available and, in three organisations, were also shared with top executives. Others gave management access to the reports but could not confirm whether they used the data. Based on the interviews, no strategy alignment was based on social media feedback from citizens, apart from the temporary resource allocation to manage the increased activity. Hence, external noise was not considered strategically important. Only two organisations regularly measured stakeholder satisfaction.

To summarise, some primary alignments existed, but they were inflexible in that the strategies and policies did not change often. According to the secondary alignment, structures and processes were established for speaking that supported the strategy. Online listening occurred mainly on users’ own social media channels or performed by parties responsible for social media. However, the impact of speaking and listening was not routinely measured or used in strategy work (external alignment).

RQ3. The pandemic revealed gaps in strategic social media listening

The third question asked how the pandemic had changed public sector organisations’ social media strategies. Our assessment of the emergent change revealed gaps in the communication strategies of the identified organisations: it is challenging to maintain the balance of speaking and listening in crisis. External alignment concerning listening could be strategically stronger if listening ‘data’ are actively used in communication, if resources are available for social media teams and organisation management utilises the data collected for external alignment.

External alignment. The COVID-19 crisis had lasted for more than 2 years already, with a remarkable impact on the number of social media followers of the government organisations involved in crisis management. The number of followers increased by 200% the year before the interview at one interviewee’s organisation. Another organisation received “tens of thousands of questions and comments and mentions per week” during critical crisis periods. Many organisations had not previously communicated directly with citizens, and the pressure to interact exceeded their resources and capacity, resulting in efforts to discourage engagement. Some public sector organisations discontinued efforts to reach pre-crisis strategic communication targets for sharing engaging content because the comment flow during the crisis was too high.

The topics raised in the interviews included doxing, disinformation and fake news, which must be corrected and trigger listening. Completely eliminating disinformation and doxing may not be possible but increasing the volume of facts communicated and having real experts available on social media to answer questions can help organisations meet customer requirements.

One communication leader (interviewee 3, organisation 6) observed, “The public organisation needs to earn its place. It is not automatically given these days.” Organisations can manage their reputations and win public trust by being active on social media to, for example, correct facts and participate in online discussions. One interviewee commented:

It is important to be there and monitor discussions. We do not have to respond to all comments, but we are able, through listening, to identify the so-called opponents' arguments and opinions, usually representing activist groups that are passionate about things. We can then communicate widely the correct facts and do not always need to get involved in dialogs with individuals. (Interviewee 8, Organisation 2)

Social media listening resources. A central communication bottleneck was presented by the resources available to communication departments. Only one organisation believed its team was properly staffed, while others experienced major challenges in managing the usual postings and massive volume of activities via news media and online channels.

Management involvement and emergent strategy alignment. The interviewees reported that the pandemic prompted attitude changes in leadership. Top management was described as more interested in social media listening and interactions, raising the strategic importance of online listening. The management at three organisations was interested in comments and questions, and replies were often discussed. All organisations must make emergent alignments to their communications during the pandemic by adding resources and actively informing citizens of developments.

Structural and process alignments. Ministries and public sector organisations regularly operate independently of communications. During the pandemic, interaction and collaboration with other authorities increased to some extent (VNK, 2021). All interviewees acknowledged the importance of listening but confirmed that the listening and communication architecture in government offices remained stiff and lacked close cooperation, aligned messaging and efficient crisis communications with citizens. According to one interviewee, discussions were held on whether the crisis should be utilised to identify bottlenecks and agree on how to avoid them in the future:

I don't see that we can go back to the pre-pandemic way of working. We have had strategy discussions in our management team, and we all agree on this. If there is anything good about this pandemic, it is the new way of doing things. I am convinced customers and stakeholders will not agree to anything else. You also want them to interact more. (Interviewee 10, Organisation 5)

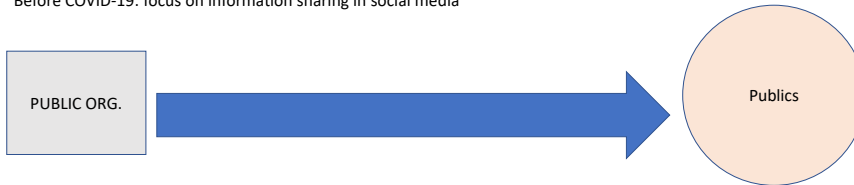
Discussion and conclusion

Public sector organisations have traditionally relied on disseminating information rather than engaging in dialog and concerted listening (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019). The COVID-19 crisis challenged communication practices on several levels and has taxed personnel skills, resources and plans. In an environment of urgent citizen and media demands, heavy reliance on social and real-time media and the heightened effects on communication, traditional public sector communication is no longer sufficient; organisations must increase their listening to be able to respond to constantly changing citizen needs. Figure 1 depicts the strategic approaches followed before and during the pandemic.

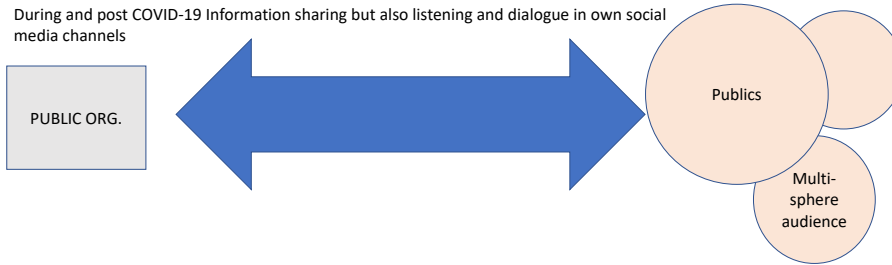
Citizens' voices must be heard by public sector organisations for a society to function sustainably. The results of this study confirmed that the pandemic significantly increased citizens' interest in and comments on public sector organisations, especially online.

An organisation's listening competency is determined by the environment and available skills (Burnside-Lawry, 2011). The COVID-19 complicated the environment, so many organisations embraced listening, often starting with social media. However, skill development has not kept pace with the changes in the environment. Thus, communication leaders felt new engagement pressures, even in organisations previously considered outside citizens' radar. Furthermore, our findings confirmed that teams, customer service and correspondence were not sufficient according to the resources necessary for listening, as suggested by previous studies (Burnside-Lawry, 2011; Macnamara, 2016),

Before COVID-19: focus on information sharing in social media



During and post COVID-19 Information sharing but also listening and dialogue in own social media channels



Social media listening strategies

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Figure 1.
From information sharing to listening and interaction

because challenges were reported. None of the interviewees used the term *listening*, while discussion occurred around the topic related to engagement and interaction on an operational level. If an organisation does not listen, it may not identify disinformation/misinformation, which should be addressed. Moreover, without monitoring and measuring impact (Macnamara, 2018), strategies cannot be aligned externally.

The Deloitte study on Finland's COVID-19 communications indicated that more collaboration between authorities and among ministry leaders was needed (Deloitte, 2021). Our findings point to increases only at the leader level. COVID-19 has increased the expectations of public sector organisations' communications; thus, responding to citizens through social media has become the new minimum, with discussions often occurring outside organisational channels. Resources have been temporarily increased but will return (or already have returned) to normal after the urgency passes.

To answer the research questions on how strategic social media listening in public organisations is and how organisations manage the secondary alignment of their social media practices, the organisations studied can be described as somewhat unaligned regarding the aims and triggers of their listening. Their objectives for social media communication were strategic and aligned with the overall objectives of the organisation, including a range of activities, from reputation management and improved interactions to better relationships with citizens and correcting disinformation/misinformation. The listening triggers for the organisations studied were mostly reactive and dependent on the traffic of their websites and services.

The analysis of organisational listening practices revealed that the organisations were partly strategic about their listening: top management appeared to better understand the value of communication, but this attitude change did not reach the primary level of organisational listening beyond immediate social media monitoring. Online listening, as well as external alignment, was not regarded as strategically important, as its impact was not clear.

According to our results, public sector organisations' listening occurred mostly in reaction to mentions, traffic and discussions. One organisation was clearly ahead of others in its listening and strategic thinking, while the in-progress nature of strategic listening was reflective of a trigger-only paradigm for the rest of the organisations. Moreover, the lack of

systematic procedures and analysis of the listening data was noticeable. However, as top management appeared more interested in citizens' perspectives, listening may mature quickly into more strategic levels. The interviewees reported that citizen expectations appeared to have changed permanently. Hence, turning back to pre-crisis communication is not an option, even when resources return to normal.

The final research question pursued the communication professionals' perspectives on the biggest development areas of strategic communication in an emergent situation). Although practices followed new, urgent demands and resources were allocated, they were primarily temporary. Despite this, most organisations reported a lack of resources necessary to meet the extensive citizen expectations. The pandemic appeared to have prompted a slight strengthening of the public sector organisations' external alignment in social media communication. The traditional aims of building intangible assets online, such as citizen trust and engagement, remain at the core of organisational listening, but owing to the pandemic, a second role for listening is emerging: a limiting and guarding function. Organisational listening is needed to build guardrails for authorities and to manage citizen and media expectations. The interviewees reported having to strategically diminish interactions because the demand was too high. Utilising listening for diminished citizen engagement was a new phenomenon brought about by COVID-19 in public sector communication.

On the operational level, unrealistically high expectations may prove challenging, as the temporary extra resources allocated during the COVID-19 crisis continue to diminish as the urgency subsides. This finding supports suggestions from previous research on the potentially ideal neutral levels of trust and reputation for public sector organisations (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019), which would ensure critical operating distances. Expectation management has been suggested as a new task for public sector organisations in uncertain environments (Luoma-aho *et al.*, 2013).

Towards a strong external alignment

The results of the interviews with leading communicators in central organisations responsible for pandemic-related communications in Finland's public sector confirmed that the pandemic stretched public sector organisations' communication capabilities and forced them to collaborate more and think more strategically. A need for external alignment with social media listening emerged: the second role of diminishing speaking was an unexpected finding. Posting content or disseminating information was deemed insufficient for managing the crisis, while listening to multiple discussions, answering questions and correcting misinformation/disinformation were considered strategically important. Organisations may raise important topics/themes in their communications, indicating a need for a strategic speaking/listening balance. Listening is needed to understand and manage citizen expectations so that they do not become unrealistically high, considering existing resources. The interviewees recounted that they could not answer all individuals but could pick up a topic and communicate about it to all followers at once. Overall, the pandemic marked the beginning of an era of expectation management for public sector organisations, as citizen expectations heightened owing to constant developments.

Strategic communication can be conceptualised as an agile management process that feeds the arenas in which meanings are presented, negotiated, constructed or reconstructed for strategy building and implementation. Moreover, strategic decisions can be tested by presenting and negotiating them in a continuous loop (van Ruler, 2018). Therefore, we recommend that public organisations consider an agile external alignment with continuous social media listening, thereby implementing a dual model for communication: speaking and listening. Furthermore, to strengthen organisational listening's external alignment, strategies that are best for the organisation must be given more consideration, rather than merely

adding more channels and increasing listening. Strategies should not be too stiff; they should adapt to changing environments because strategy development is a continuous process. Listening can help with strategic alignment; having dialogs and collaboration in the multivocal public sphere also creates trust. Measuring the impacts provide a tool for strategy alignment.

We highlighted changes in organisational listening strategies and the need for more strategic practices. The findings call for future studies to investigate whether similar changes occur in various cultural settings and whether these changes remain beyond the pandemic and to examine factors contributing to the increased maturity and strategic nature of organisational listening. Future studies should also investigate whether the dual role is apparent in other organisations and cultures and identify its long-term consequences for organisations and society at large.

Implications

This study was rooted on the work on the organisational listening by [Macnamara \(2016, 2018, 2020\)](#), applied the conceptual framework of internal and external alignment of strategic communication ([Volk and Zeffass, 2018](#)) and showed how listening can support in closing the gaps between citizens and public organisations ([Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019](#)).

The implications of our findings include the need to update the strategic communication theory and practice on the balance between speaking and listening to address the dual role emerging with better external alignment. As public sector communication becomes increasingly strategic, the need for strategic listening increases. Our results imply that citizen experiences will become increasingly relevant to the degree to which public sector communications meet their expectations. Increased listening is required to understand this. Listening should be strategic, and the cyclic nature of listening and communicating should be planned and measured to provide a lasting value.

This may require rewriting guidelines for public sector communication best practices. The traditional understanding of communicating activities and updates can flare up in the multivocal public sphere, where at times the role of disinformation/misinformation in citizen discussions may be necessary.

Increased listening in the public sector may be a step towards censorship and panopticon, but without listening, the multivocal public sphere may harm the whole society. Listening is merely a first step, as the real power lies in what organisations do with citizens' information and expectations. Hence, new power is given to those organisations that listen to stakeholders more closely.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. The findings were based in part on interview data, so individual perspectives might have overstated actual practices, a limitation mitigated by conducting desk research on materials and interviewing members of multiple organisations. Further, as the study focused on the Finnish context, the results are descriptive only within their cultural parameters. Nevertheless, because the pandemic was global, similar challenges are likely encountered in other cultural contexts as well.

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