ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Conceptualising public diplomacy listening on social media

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Abstract

Public diplomacy consists of the public and interactive dimensions of diplomacy. Although listening is one of its core activities, public diplomacy scholarship has not yet engaged with listening theory. This paper connects public diplomacy scholarship with a new wave of literature that has argued that listening is a critical and previously neglected component of dialogic engagement. By reviewing this literature, this paper develops a framework for the 'spectrum of listening' and categorises five types of public diplomacy listening on social media. The review is followed by a descriptive profile of each type of listening. Using this spectrum, this paper endorses active listening and the embedded concept of dialogic engagement as a concrete yardstick by which to assess successful public diplomacy listening on social media. Listening could be narrowly interpreted as a way to implement and readjust a national strategy, or more broadly and ambitiously as an activity that aims to advance international understanding. The paper considers listening to be a representational force: a public and active response to publics who are increasingly demanding not only to participate, but also to be listened to.

Keywords Listening · Public diplomacy · Digital diplomacy · Social media

Introduction

According to the academic literature, public diplomacy listening is of primary importance for strategy implementation (Gregory 2011; Cull 2008; Yepsen 2012). This preparatory function of listening has been challenged by the introduction of social media in public diplomacy. According to Pamment (2016, p. 2058), "listening is no longer a preparatory step, but instead becomes an on-going, real-time tool of monitoring, managing and enforcing discipline across the wider stakeholder network". Cull (2019) also notes that "the foundation of sound public diplomacy must always be listening" which is "the first duty of a public diplomat".

Despite the centrality of listening in the academic literature, its role remains mostly understudied in public diplomacy and much related scholarship that investigates public communication practices in organisational, governmental and political settings (Macnamara 2016, 2018). Listening is also strictly connected with another central element of

public diplomacy: evaluation. Since different evaluation approaches hold "implicit views of how public diplomacy works" (Pamment 2015, p. 367), a more articulated understanding of listening in needed.

To address and clarify the role of listening in public diplomacy, I focus my enquiry on social media listening. To do so, this paper explores a new wave of literature in the study of public communication that has argued that listening is a critical and previously neglected component of dialogic engagement. By reviewing the literature, this paper develops a framework for the 'spectrum of listening' and categorises five types of public diplomacy listening on social media. The literature review is followed by a descriptive profile of each of the types of listening.

I will argue that the "interconnected sphere" (Zaharna 2015, p. 22) created by public Internet communication requires governments and diplomats to move beyond questions of message, strategy and information gathering, and to also rethink the act of listening in a fundamental way. Listening is also a representational force, a public response to those non-governmental actors and citizens who are now increasingly requesting not only to participate, but also to be listened to. With changes to listening brought about by social media capacities and practices—since social media likes, follows, retweets and replies are all forms and indicators of

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listening—I argue that being seen to listen is now itself an act of public engagement.

Diplomacy as communication

The leitmotif that connects different views in the literature is that diplomacy is primarily a communication process that has evolved along with the evolution and interpretation of mediating technologies. In this sense, this paper agrees with the observations made by those scholars that see communication as a central aspect of diplomacy. For example, Bjola and Kornprobst (2013, pp. 201–203) propose the study of diplomacy as communication, while Jönsson (2016, p. 79) remarks that "without communication, there is no diplomacy", and Tran (cited in Jönsson 2016, p. 79) highlights that a lack of communication results in violent conflicts or atrophy. Rather than focusing on the newness of digital technologies, which are both part of and contribute to endless transformations in the environment within which diplomacy operates, the focus should instead be on the process of communication itself.

In the spectrum of public diplomacy initiatives suggested by Zaharna (2009, pp. 84–100), two core approaches to communication can be distinguished. The first approach is defined as a linear process of transferring information: this includes propaganda, national branding, media relations (such as press releases) and international broadcasting. The second approach is referred to as a relational approach to communication, which aims to build long-term relationships and contribute to a more peaceful international environment. This includes cultural and educational exchange, leadership visits, cultural and language institutes and aid projects.

This echoes the two contrasting models of communication distinguished by Carey (2009): the transmission and the ritual models. In the former, "messages are transmitted and distributed in space for the control of distance and people" (13). By contrast, in the ritual view of communication the message is directed "toward the maintenance of society in time" and "of an ordered, meaningful cultural world that can serve as a control and container for human action" (15).

Carey's distinction is pertinent in the context of public diplomacy. Propaganda and initial theorisations of public diplomacy were based on "transmissive" forms of communication, pertaining to "matters of government and trade" (27)—strictly related to the concerns of traditional diplomacy. By contrast, the relational shift in public diplomacy recalls the ritualistic communication model that aims to foster a "common culture" (27) where international dialogue can take place.

Social media platforms are now part of our communication environment and cannot be easily classified, since they can encompass both approaches. Traditional public diplomacy activities, such as international broadcasting, could be easily categorised under either communication approach. By contrast, social media can encompass the full spectrum of public diplomacy initiatives, from propaganda to network-building activities. This has created tensions between the design of public diplomacy strategies and their actualisation.

For example, in December 2016 the Australian Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) launched its *Digital Media Strategy 2016–18* (DFAT 2016). This move was encouraged by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Julie Bishop—considered the initiator of what has been labelled "emoji diplomacy" (Di Stefano 2015)—who is now leading Australian diplomacy from the prudence of the 2014–16 strategy (DFAT 2014) to a more consistent and comprehensive digital planning approach.

One of the priorities of the strategy is to generate engagement. According to DFAT's digital media strategy, engagement is a way to "strengthen and extend Australia's relationships through digital diplomacy, networking and by taking part to online discussions" (DFAT 2016, p. 19). Despite the DFAT's understanding of engagement as "taking part in online discussions", in practice the strategy suggests looking at "key performance indicators to ensure content has maximum *impact*" (DFAT 2016, p. 20, emphasis added). Therefore, although the strategy recognises that it needs to engage dialogically, it evaluates its engagement in terms of impact.

Indeed, despite the emphasis on dialogic forms of communication suggested by the focus on listening in the Australian strategy, the understanding of listening that emerges focuses on measuring the size of the audience and the reach of the message. Indeed, according to the strategy, social media monitoring and analysis aims to "ensure our content and messaging is reaching intended audiences" (DFAT 2016, p. 14).

This example explicates that it is not the adoption of social media that inevitably fosters a dialogical communication process, but rather the communication approach adopted. That is to say, the use of social media by diplomats does not necessarily imply dialogue between diplomats and foreign publics (see e.g. Bjola and Pamment 2018). It is how social media are used and conceived by public diplomacy actors that determines the categorisation of a certain public diplomacy activity on social media on the spectrum of communication approaches in public diplomacy, between the two extremes of linear/transmission and relational/ritual.

Cull (2008) comfortably classified media technologies of radio, television and the Internet—before web 2.0 developments—as international broadcasting with an outward flow of information (linear model). With the introduction of social media in public diplomacy, this classification is no longer straightforward. In mass media communication,

the distinction between sender and public was well-defined, given its one-to-many technological affordance. Social media have created what boyd (2011) defines as "networked publics". Social media's communication potential ranges from one-to-one to many-to-many forms of communication, forming networked publics that "are simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice" (boyd 2011, p. 41).

Social media platforms support new configurations of international audiences as "networked publics" which challenge previous definitions of public diplomacy. As Zaharna (2018, p. 1) argues "the quest [for public diplomacy] is how to understand the 'polyphony of voices' of new non-state actors". The developments in the media environment require us to rethink public diplomacy listening activities in ways that enable us to understand this 'polyphony of voices' beyond the mere measurement of public diplomacy organisational 'voice'.

Listening as part of diplomacy

Listening has been a defining characteristic of contemporary public diplomacy, distinguishing it from propaganda and earlier forms of public diplomacy.

One of the central activities in modern diplomacy, since its earliest practices, has been the gathering of information (Lazzarini 2015). With the definition of the professional role of diplomats, gathering information became a more sophisticated activity that led to the development of espionage as a standard activity in diplomacy (Mattingly 1988, p. 211). After the industrial revolution, the military needed to collect first-hand information about enemies' strategic infrastructures. Gradually, secret intelligence became an activity undertaken by defence departments, while diplomats used 'open' intelligence, such as journalistic and governmental sources.

Two important distinctions between military intelligence and diplomatic information-gathering activities emerged during this period. Firstly, "diplomatic sources and the methods used to develop them [might have been] confidential, but [were] not clandestine" (Jönsson and Hall 2005, p. 74). Diplomatic gathering of information has been legally framed by the 1961 Vienna Convention. Espionage, on the other hand, is currently tacitly practiced by military intelligence. Secondly, information-gathering activities have two different purposes. While for military intelligence information is related to military power, armed conflict and terrorism, for diplomacy, information "are adjuncts to policy and action" (Herman 1998, p. 17). In this sense,

Diplomats and foreign ministries – according to Herman (1998) – are the natural foreign experts, and in the daily decisions in foreign policy they make their own *interpretations* of all the information to hand; international affairs could not be conducted otherwise (8, emphasis added).

With the emergence of public diplomacy and its emphasis on foreign publics, scholars have reemphasised the importance of information-gathering activities (Jönsson and Hall 2003; Jacobson et al. 2018). More precisely, public diplomacy scholars have gone beyond traditional diplomacy's definitions and practical boundaries of information-gathering activities. Even before the digital turn, the term "listening" has emerged as a central component of public diplomacy (Cull 2008). With the growing possibilities to directly engage with foreign publics introduced by digital technologies, listening became a defining element of dialogic forms of communication (Bjola 2016).

Cull (2019) provides some examples of how listening takes place and how it is articulated by governments in public diplomacy, but listening still remains largely undertheorised. This, I argue, reflects underspecification in the conceptual vocabulary of public diplomacy, both in academic studies and in actual public diplomacy strategies. In particular, listening can be narrowly interpreted as a way to implement and readjust a strategy, or it can be considered more broadly and ambitiously as an activity that aims to advance international understanding.

The first interpretation of listening views it as a synonym for monitoring, which fulfils an important planning function (Gregory 2011, p. 335). In this way, listening not only increases the capacity of governments to assess and/or readjust a given strategy, it can also advise leaders on policy formulation and implementation. Here, listening improves awareness about public debate among diplomatic actors. For example, a public diplomat who is aware of the opinions shared in an online conversation will be more likely to engage with users since (s)he can promptly respond to critics and suggestions on social media. This understanding of listening can also function as a way to tackle "points of resistance" (Bjola 2016, p. 7) on the part of those actors who hold different interests and opinions. However, in the digital environment, this interpretation of listening is limited because it tends to consider social media users as a target audience, not as active interlocutors. In a certain sense, this type of listening reintroduces the concept of information-gathering activities mentioned earlier.

The second perspective on listening comes from the collaborative approach, where listening is considered as "a *genuine* interest in the other's perspective" (Fisher and Bröckerhoff 2008, pp. 23–24, emphasis added). This ethical approach to listening is based on sincere openness on the

part of diplomatic actors. In this way, listening goes beyond mere monitoring and explicitly aims to create opportunities for collaboration in a peer-to-peer model. However, this approach risks being "normative", when it suggests openness and genuine interest as an outcome that merely focuses on relation building rather than on the advancement of foreign policy goals.

These two positions suggest that the definition of listening is not straightforward. Although there is a general consensus on the need for listening in public diplomacy, this core activity remains understudied,—apart from the notable exception of Cull (2019) who has focused on cases and applications. While the tactical approach considers listening as a tool of public diplomacy designed for *monitoring publics* and *counteracting* criticism, "genuine" or "ethical" understanding considers listening as an *outcome in and of itself*. These contrasting understandings of listening do not provide many analytical prospects for the examination of the communication process, especially when they reflect dichotomies in the literature, such as listening or speaking, monologue or dialogue, competition or collaboration.

In my argument, there are various analytical opportunities—implicit in the literature and addressed above—that go beyond this binary logic. In this regard, this paper aims precisely to reconceptualise listening as *a spectrum of practices that reflect a range of methodological options* available to public diplomacy actors. It examines the possibilities and limitations of the different listening approaches and how they define the communication model and the type of engagement sought. This research interprets listening as an important component of public diplomacy actors' social media engagement and thus *a critical and defining element* of public diplomacy activities. In line with O'Donnell et al. (2009), this focus on listening in the research

> is intended as a shift away from speaking but not a shift against, and a strategic emphasis on neglected questions of listening is seen as a means of developing complex understandings of listening and speaking, and of their interconnections (436).

The translation of this remark into the theoretical framework of public diplomacy means rethinking public diplomacy as the interactive dimension of diplomacy. In this sense, public diplomacy is a communication process that involves the interplay of listening and speaking. The evaluation of public diplomacy, intended as an interactive and relational communication process, cannot be limited to the measurement of the message's dissemination (voice); instead, it needs to explore how the combination of listening and speaking can support the advancement, the legitimisation and implementation of a state's foreign policy by "fostering mutual trust and productive relationships" (Center on Public Diplomacy n.d.).

By connecting public diplomacy with other academic fields—such as public relations, communication theory, democracy studies and political science, the following section connects public diplomacy scholarship with a new wave of literature that has argued that listening is a critical and previously neglected component of dialogic engagement.

Active listening

As I have anticipated, other academic fields are increasingly recognising the need to go beyond the study of political participation indented as "voice" or "speaking" to focus on the importance of listening. Jim Macnamara (2016)—drawing on Nick Couldry (2009, p. 580) who sees voice as "the implicitly linked practices of speaking and listening"—points out that "communication and voice are predominantly associated with speaking and there is little attention paid in many fields of research or communication practice […] to listening" (Macnamara 2016, p. 29). Gemma Corradi Fiumara (1990) notices how the Greek term *logos* has been separated from the concept of listening in the history of Western thought.[1] This is part of the "tendency to constantly invoke dialogue in conjunction with [a] blind-spot on the issue of listening" (2). In this way, her "re-interpretation of *logos* […] is an attempt to retrieve the functions of listening which may allow truer forms of dialogue" (13).

Drawing on these philosophical considerations, scholars from the fields of public relations, communication theory, democracy studies and political science have recognised listening as a form of participation rather than only recognising voice or speaking up (Corradi Fiumara 1990; Bickford 1996; Burgess 2006; Dreher 2009; Thill 2009; Coleman 2013; Lacey 2013; Couldry 2010; Dobson 2014; Macnamara 2016; Bassel 2017). These scholars from different disciplines offer a theoretical background where a sophisticated understanding of listening can be built to advance the academic study of public diplomacy. Indeed, although Macnamara (2016, p. 108) in his book on *Organizational Listening* acknowledges that public diplomacy is one of the few disciplinary fields in public communication where "claims are made for listening", it is difficult to find a definition of listening in the literature on public diplomacy, as I have discussed in the previous section.

It is important to note that most of these authors focus their inquiries on the bottom-up agency of people, and ask the question of "who is heard?" rather than "who gets to speak?" (Burgess 2006, p. 203). This corpus of literature

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[1] Drawing on Heidegger, she points out that Western thought has separated the noun *logos* (reason, opinion or word) from its verb *legein* (to deliberate or consider).

aims to challenge "conventions, institutions and privileges which shape who and what can be heard in the media" (Dreher 2009, p. 445), challenging "hierarchies of attention" (446). Within this focus on listening, Couldry (2010) recalls the ethical dimension of "mutual recognition and political action (…) in part aimed at correcting those social conditions that interfere with the possibility of recognition" (67). Similar remarks can be found in the work of Coleman (2013). He emphasises that the "struggle to give dignity and autonomy to human voice" in democracies is based on the fact that "most people can say what they think, but some are much more likely to be heard and responded to than others" (para. 1). These scholars echo what Fitzpatrick (2013, p. 30) has called "the ethical dimension of public diplomacy" that challenges the importance of exercising power towards "a more ethical alternative based on relationships".

To clarify why this can be problematic in the context of international politics, where public diplomacy operates, Bickford (1996, p. 2) points out that listening "tends immediately to evoke ideas of empathy and compassion". In contrast, drawing from Aristotle and Hannah Arendt, Bickford accepts the "conflictual" and "contentious" nature of politics, and thus she argues that listening "does not necessarily resolve or do away with the conflicts that arise from uncertainty, inequality, and identity" (2). In short, this means accepting the importance of interactions without underestimating the conflictual nature of politics in the creation of communication spaces that allow for dialogue and participation.[2]

This point provides the opportunity to clarify that here listening is not intended as a means for popular empowerment but as a communication enabler. Public diplomacy's ultimate goal is to advance, legitimise and inform foreign policy. Dialogic forms of communication enable more effective ways for public diplomacy actors to do so. They create spaces where relationships can be cultivated and enhanced. Indeed, if diplomacy is "a sophisticated method of change management" (Bjola 2015, p. 1) that aims to conduct peaceful relations and prevent the use of hard power, listening becomes "what keeps us from being doomed to war, anarchy, or the relentless clash of unyielding wills" Bickford (1996, p. 2). Even attraction—particularly relevant within the concept of soft power—requires listening (Nye 2008, p. 103). It must also be noted that a public diplomacy actor can refuse to listen, since this in itself "is an effective kind of power" (Bickford 1996, p. 3). Selective refusal to listen (as with boycotting) is sometimes itself an important diplomatic gesture.

However, I am also arguing that this communication posture excludes any possibility for collaborative conflict negotiation,[3] and thus it has limited potential in relation-building public diplomacy.

These initial considerations in terms of listening indicate the complexity of this human activity and lead to further reflections to better define it. Indeed, I have already argued that a binary logic of listening and speaking does not provide many analytical prospects. Thus, it is useful to introduce some theoretical differentiations to the types of listening and then apply these demarcations in the context of social media in the following section.

The literature on public diplomacy makes only an initial distinction between the monologic and the dialogic in the first instance, with the latter as preferred outcome. Andrew Dobson (2014, p. 67) confirms this by arguing that monologic listening in democracies is a refusal to listen, while dialogic listening involves an interplay between speaking and listening.

Leonard Waks (2010, p. 2749) pushes the concept of listening further by distinguishing between *cataphatic* and *apophatic* listening. In the former the listener imposes his categories of interpretation while in the latter the listener makes a genuine effort to understand "feelings and personal connotations within or behind the words". Apophatic listening requires a genuine effort of complete openness, putting aside predetermined categories. The two types of listening represent the two extremes in a hypothetical spectrum of listening. Macnamara (2016, p. 71) reminds us of the theological origin of the two terms: apophasis is defined as a "negative" approach of listening to God which focuses on what "God is not", and thus requires openness to the possibility of what cannot be perceived. By contrast, a "positive approach", cataphasis, is limited to the description of what can be perceived. The theological origin of these terms links to the question formulated by Bickford (1996, p. 145) as to whether the extreme form of openness associated with apophasis or "hyperreceptivity is even possible (except in a mystical or meditative experience)".

Dobson (2014, 68) warns against the risks of cataphatic listening as it may reproduce "relations of power rather than have them challenged". It has also been argued earlier that public diplomacy's ultimate goal is not to empower people but rather to peacefully advance a country's foreign policy through interactions and international dialogue. Therefore, there must be more complexity between the two extremes of listening mentioned above, where listening openly can also work as an activity that facilitates and informs strategies

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[2] Note that this is part of a broader debate in democracy studies that counterposes Habermasian ideal forms of communication in the "public sphere" and the important role of antagonism in democracy highlighted by post-Marxists such as Laclau and Mouffe (1985).

[3] The widespread use of social media by organisations as a unidirectional communication channel is an example of how this form of power is quite common.

and goals. Even so, this might risk becoming the equivalent of "instrumental listening" or mere "self-serving organisational listening", as Macnamara (2015, p. 10) warns. Public diplomacy listening needs to overcome this risk and conduct *active* listening. Good listening must be active (Dobson 2014, p. 10) to produce constant interaction in a real dialogic form of communication, and thus dialogic engagement, which "enables organizations and stakeholders to interact, fostering understanding, goodwill, and a shared view of reality" (Taylor and Kent 2014, p. 391).

Active listening requires promoting and generating interaction, where "disorientation is definitely possible" (Bickford 1996, p. 146). This understanding of listening also recalls the relational mindset in public diplomacy described earlier in the paper, since it focuses on the agency of both diplomatic and non-diplomatic actors to listen or not listen. However, since public diplomacy actors carry interests and political goals, openness cannot be considered as uncritical acceptance of any opinion (apophatic listening), but rather as *active* listening "with one another with direction(s) and purpose(s)" (146). It is also important to note that active listening is directly connected to the concept of dialogic engagement mentioned earlier, based on interactive forms of engagement that go beyond mere 'reaction'. In active listening, listening and engagement are mutually embedded as if they were two sides of the same coin. In this regard, Comor and Bean (2012) notice that "how people think about and process their interactions […] can be modified, not just by what is communicated but also *through the communication process itself*" (208, emphasis in original). Therefore, "listening in public diplomacy has double value. It is of most value when it leads to a responsive and effective policy and/or approach to a foreign public. It also helps when it is seen to be done" (Cull 2019, p. 38). Active listening implies that public diplomacy actors "must be seen to listen" (Sorensen et al. 2019) to create spaces where "people can interact with organisations in mutually beneficial ways" (Macnamara 2016, p. 246).

Having established that the full potential of public diplomacy listening is achieved when listening is *active*, how can the different listening approaches can be classified?

Dobson (2014, p. 9) suggests an answer to this question by introducing an important distinction: listening can be analysed both as a *process* and as an *outcome*. He argues that it is understandable to evaluate listening in terms of outcomes, for example via policy changes in democracies. This is also true in public diplomacy, where listening activities have been evaluated especially in terms of a change in behaviour in diplomatic or non-diplomatic actors, or in terms of the achievement of forms of collaboration or influence. By contrast, listening as a process requires an analytical focus on the evaluation of those signs of paying attention that characterise dialogic forms of engagement. "The

signals"—explains Dobson (2014, p. 83)—"may be visual (is my interlocutor paying attention to me as I speak?) or dialogic (is s/he asking me questions that show s/he really wants to understand what I am saying?)". Dialogue does not necessarily lead to collaboration, as if the listener should suspend judgment. Instead, the dialogic dimension lies in the process itself.

To conclude, scholars in democracy studies have advanced our understanding of listening and dialogic forms of communication. However, the noisy communication environment generated by social media often makes it difficult even for public diplomacy actors to be heard. As a consequence, public diplomacy communication on social media can become a struggle to be listened to, where attention is the real currency of the digital communication environment. Following on from this metaphor, listening is thus a strategic investment, represented by acts of paying attention—embedded in dialogic engagement—on the part of both diplomatic and non-diplomatic actors.

Trust and emotions on social media

Real-time access to social media networks and the new ways of sharing content, particularly visual content, that often use humour, especially in online political debate, lead to an increasing importance in the role played by affect in the formation of online publics. Social media, according to Papacharissi (2015, p. 32), facilitate feelings of engagement within affective publics, where the technology brings users into the network, but only storytelling creates "soft structures of feeling" that connect distant publics and "sustain [their] feeling of being there".

In digital communication, Papacharissi (2015, p. 7) refers to the role played by affect, which, "as the sum of—often discordant—feelings about affairs, public and private, is […] the energy that drives, neutralizes, or entraps networked publics" and is therefore often "non-conscious". Other scholars have described "the digital realm as an emotional space" (Serrano-Puche 2015, p. 9), where "much of that communication is emotional, reflecting immediate feelings, sometimes as they occur" (Benski and Fisher 2014, p. 6).

Emotion was also a central concern for the scholars who studied propaganda. In particular, Lasswell (1927, p. 628) distinguished between the "deliberative" and "dispositional" logics of communication. The former refers to those forms of communication that produce "the search for the solution of a besetting problem with no desire to prejudice a particular solution in advance", while a dispositional logic generates "valuational dispositions or attitudes". Based on this distinction, most scholars pointed out that propaganda is more dispositional (Brown 2008; Snow 2012; Graham 2014), which is especially a problem in democratic contexts.

However, dispositions are not necessarily negative forces, since they can unintentionally contribute to the creation of social movements. For example, Castells (2015, pp. 13–14) studied how emotions drive networked movements. The two emotions that are most likely to produce social movements, according to the Spanish sociologist, are fear and enthusiasm. The first is paralysing, but it can become action when it is converted into anger; the second is connected to hope, and thus action.

Similar considerations are made in the study of the emotional aspects of international relations in the work of Crawford (2014, p. 536), who distinguishes between the emotions of fear and empathy, and calls for the institutionalisation of empathy.

> Empathy can be promoted and institutionalized, or alternatively, fear and a lack of identification with another may diminish empathy. To the extent that anarchy is understood as a self-help system, where trust cannot be expected, and groups exist in a relation of fear toward each other, it will be difficult to develop empathy between the leaders and peoples of states. Conversely, politicians may certainly believe, and publics may be told, that it is in their 'interest' to lower barriers to trade and travel, or that it is no longer necessary to increase military spending directed at their neighbors. The perception and creation of interests is an emotional process as well as one rooted in a material reality or drive for power. (Crawford 2014, p. 550)

Since "ingroup and outgroup empathy are potentially distinct", Crawford concludes that "empathic feelings and interpretations must be checked through the act of listening to the other (diplomacy)" (543). To translate this remark into more practical terms, it can be said that when a public diplomacy actor is seen to listen, it will likely create the conditions for a trustworthy environment, or a space for listening, as argued earlier in the paper. Public diplomats' investment in listening will enhance their credibility, and people will perceive this 'emphatic force'. A more trusting environment will more likely produce a space for mutual positive engagement than conflict. Thus, active listening is advantageous because it enhances trust when actors are seen to be listening. In this way, active listening can encourage positive attitudes and expectations from publics because they perceive that they are being heard. It can nourish a circular process that, by generating positive affect, can enhance credibility and thus generate trust.

As (Rolfe 2014, p. 79) confirms, "no matter how rational (*logos*) or emotional (*pathos*) a speech is, an audience will not listen if it lacks trust in the rhetorician". Trust is principally generated by the positive reputation, which is to say credibility, of public diplomacy actors. Since credibility is about perception, it does not "reside in a source" (public diplomacy actors) but rather "is bestowed on a source by an audience" (Gass and Seiter 2009, p. 156). Therefore, listening can generate credibility because it supports the interpretation of the "situation-specific" and "culture-bound" elements that foster an audience's trust (Gass and Seiter 2009, p. 157). Without listening, which shows goodwill and supports intercultural understanding, credibility and trust cannot be established.[4] The focus on listening in order to be seen as credible does not mean the neglect of other attributes that belong to the source—such as competence, composure and dynamism—that the literature in public diplomacy has highlighted as important for building trust (Gass and Seiter 2009, pp. 158–161). I am focusing on the concept of trust and credibility because these are strictly bounded with listening, indented as a function of relationship building. The audience's perception of being listened to can develop positive affect, which can be translated in positive emotions and attitudes in social media communication.

The spectrum of listening in public diplomacy

I have argued that the literature on public diplomacy has not provided an articulated understanding of listening despite largely recognising its importance, especially in the new digital environment. This article has extended the theoretical understanding of listening, going beyond the binary logic of listening vs. refusal to listen.

Table 1 shows the different types of listening drawing on relations between level of trust, types of engagement, communication goals and social media listening strategies. This table capitalises on the theoretical discussion conducted so far. The table summarises five types of listening, ranging from an ideal type of listening to unethical listening activities: *apophatic*, *active*, *tactical* listening, *listening in* and *surreptitious* listening.

It has been argued that *apophatic* listening, the 'ideal' form of listening, is unlikely to be applied to public diplomacy listening activities, which entail political direction and purpose. Since its theological origin, this type of listening encompasses a meditative or mystical experience as a form of 'listening to God' without preconceptions and implies self-negation. Nevertheless, *apophatic* listening is not always counterfactual, as for example listening to quasi-religious political leaders may induce forms of 'self-negation' (e.g. Brown 2015; Hackley and Hackley 2016). Although

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[4] There is also an extensive corpus of literature in management and leadership research that highlights the importance of listening to enhance trust (e.g. Helms and Haynes 1992; Flynn et al. 2008; Brunner 2008).

Table 1 Spectrum of listening

	Type of listening	Engagement	Goal	Listening approach on social media
High level of trust ↑↓ **Low level of trust**	*Apophatic* listening	Hypersensitivity and self-negation.	Listen to God. Meditative or mystical experience.	N/A
	Active listening	Dialogic and relation-building engagement. Creates spaces for listening.	Long-term strategy implementation and adjustment. Promotes trust and understanding.	Combination of qualitative and quantitative social media analysis.
	Tactical listening	Instrumental and reactive engagement.	Correct misconceptions and pursue short-term sub-goals.	Monitoring to identify issues and actors of concern.
	Listening *in*	Unidirectional engagement.	Assessment of message reach.	Social media metrics based on impact.
	Background/casual listening	Casual engagement.	Information gathering.	Scrolling, unsystematic and/or accidental encounter of content.
	Surreptitious listening	No signs of engagement.	Spying/ Surveillance.	Unethical/illegal acquisition of private data.

this type of listening might be unlikely to be applied from a public diplomacy prospective—which usually implies acting under the umbrella of more or less political and strategic goals—it is still useful to mention since it represents an 'ideal' yardstick by which to compare the different listening strategies in public diplomacy.

The desirable and feasible type of listening that I have implicitly endorsed in this paper is *active* listening, precisely because it requires the active participation of both diplomatic and non-diplomatic actors. In this case, the goal is to advance foreign policies by creating the conditions for international dialogue. Dialogic forms of communication do not imply self-negation but rather a constant negotiation of different attitudes to avoid conflicts and enhance trust, but "with direction(s) and purpose(s)" (Bickford 1996, p. 146). In short, listening in this case is a communication enabler. It creates a favourable environment where public diplomacy actors are seen to listen and therefore are considered credible interlocutors, and it enhances trust and enables the cultivation of long-term goals. The dialogue resulting from this type of listening is also more likely to produce meaningful conversations to be listened to by creating spaces for listening. Active listening is mindful to the extent that it is situation-specific and culture-bound. Since those engaged in active listening aim to fully understand the types of engagement within the cultural context and to hear all voices, it requires a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches to listening to publics on social media. Such combination allows the inclusion of so-called

peripheral voices that often represent 'ordinary' citizens and social media users.

Tactical listening aims to implement and readjust public diplomacy messages and correct misconceptions. It facilitates the identification of issues and actors of concern to provide a picture of the environment in which tactical goals operate. Forms of engagement are sometimes interactive, but with the clear goal of facilitating the accomplishment of a particular communication sub-goal (e.g. correcting misconceptions). In this case, the creation of a trusting communication environment and the credibility of public diplomacy actors are not the main concerns. Indeed, when tactical listening creates forms of dialogue, these are limited to the accomplishment of specific short-term (tactical) goals. According to the literature on public diplomacy, tactical listening is performed in "two-way asymmetrical public diplomacy [which] means that although communication might be both sent and received […], the effects of the communication are limited to the foreign audience" (Yepsen 2012, p. 10). Tactical listening is concerned only with actors that are perceived as influential or instrumental for the achievement of a specific goal; thus, it does not aim to listen to all voices. An example of tactical listening is the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's *Digital Media Strategy* mentioned earlier in the paper. Examples of "data-driven" approaches to social media listening are also present in the academic literature. For example, Bean and Comor (2018) have suggested an analytical framework for the evaluation of public diplomacy activities on social media which can

be classified under the tactical listening type in the spectrum. Indeed, the model proposes "social media metrics to assess the capacity of PD organizations to engage with the public, their networking power, and public perceptions and attitudes toward a country" (13). It computationally analyses Facebook users' reactions (comments) to public diplomacy online activities. A similar study has been conducted by Spry (2018), who has compered the public diplomacy Facebook activities of 24 nations.[5]

Listening in (Crawford 2009) is similar to tactical listening, but unlike the latter it does not contemplate signs of listening by public diplomacy actors. Listening in is equivalent to passive monitoring or traditional diplomatic information-gathering activities focused on measuring a public diplomacy actor's message reach and impact through social media analytics, such as number of views, followers, retweets and likes. In contrast with *surreptitious* listening, *listening in* gathers legitimate data with no invasion of privacy. An example of this type of listening can be found in the case of the Italian public diplomacy, where success is measured based on metrics (outputs). The Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation's (MAECI) *Statistical Yearbook 2017* (MAECI 2017) shows an increase in users visiting the official webpages of both La Farnesina and the consular network and a 35% increase in @ItalyMFA's Twitter followers (97) and retweets (196). These insights indicate that the success of the digital practices are being measured through basic social media metrics that say little about the types of engagement initiated by users.[6]

Background/casual listening is perhaps the most common approach adopted by social media users. To describe this type of listening, Crawford (2009) uses the analogy of tuning in and out while listening to the radio, with a constant but unsystematic—or casual—variation of the listener's levels of attention. "A Twitter user follows a range of people, some of whom will post updates that offer useful advice, amusing anecdotes, or interesting links. But many messages will simply be scanned quickly, not focused on, something closer to being tuned out rather than tuned in" (528). In relation to public diplomacy practices, Manor (2016) has reported that in some cases ministries of foreign affairs encourage diplomats to gather information from social media on specific issues. Manor revels that this type of unsystematic but recurring form of listening is usually used as a source of information for diplomatic reporting. Moreover, background listening can potentially lead to forms of casual engagement

that can result in the 'appearance of listening' by, for example, occasional retweeting or strategical following.[7]

Surreptitious listening (Singh 2015) is a kind of listening that implies spying or forms of mass surveillance. It has historically been used, and continues to be used, by governmental intelligence for espionage, sometimes justified for security and/or anti-terrorism reasons, sometimes for strategic military and geopolitical reasons (see Coddington 2017). Despite the fact that it is unethical and often illegal, governments seem to employ this type of listening in the context of what has been called cyberwar or cyberespionage, which can be offensive when governments actively seek to sabotage enemies' digital infrastructures (see Valeriano and Maness 2015). As this is clearly a digital extension of military power, this type of listening goes beyond the theoretical and practical boundaries of diplomacy and implies a very low level of trust among international actors.

In the resulting spectrum of listening, *active* listening and the embedded concept of dialogic engagement represent the yardsticks for assessing different approaches to listening available in public diplomacy. Public diplomacy actors need to create spaces for listening if they want to undertake meaningful and fruitful listening. The difference between active and passive listening also marks the crucial boundary between large-scale listening and mass surveillance on social media. A rhetoric of care, empathy and governmental protection are used to justify forms of mass surveillance. Interaction and active participation are characteristics distinctive to *active listening*, as opposed to *listening in* (Crawford 2009, pp. 531–532)—characterised by passivity (such as legitimate social media monitoring) or by illegal or unethical appropriation of information (such as illegitimate spying in on phone calls or emails) (Macnamara 2016, p. 44).

Conclusion

Listening has emerged as a core activity in many public diplomacy strategies, especially after the introduction of social media in public diplomacy. Despite claims for listening and engagement being made in many public diplomacy strategies,[8] these do not clarify their listening approaches and the kind of engagement that is sought and evaluated. Listening can be interpreted and conducted in different ways. Social media platforms are a powerful tool for listening to international publics, implementing

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[5] The data analysed in this study are also available at http://www.diplomatics.com.au.

[6] This was confirmed in an informal interview conducted in 2015, during which it was stated that MAECI's monitoring activities were limited to follower and retweet counts.

[7] The existence of this practice has also been confirmed by informal conversations with diplomats. For example, lurking expatriates' Facebook groups can offer insights into their experiences, needs and feedback that might be used to readjust consular services.

[8] For example, in the Australian DFAT's Digital Media Strategy (2016) mentioned earlier in this paper.

and adjusting communication strategies, and generating engagement. Listening can be interpreted as spying, as an activity to implement and readjust a strategy, or more ambitiously as a way to show publics that they are listened to and thus as a means for advancing international understanding and enhancing trust.

In this paper, I have connected public diplomacy scholarship to other fields of public communication and that have focused their enquiry on listening as a critical element of dialogic engagement. The theoretical discussion has been conducted in order to distinguish five types of listening and engagement in public diplomacy. The model developed in this paper supports the implementation of public diplomacy evaluation strategies by shifting the focus from speaking (advocacy and persuasion) to listening. The main argument here is that the type of listening a public diplomacy actor adopts explicitly defines its own understanding of engagement, communication goals and evaluation criteria. In this sense, the spectrum of listening has two key implications: practical and theoretical. Practically, the spectrum of listening can enable public diplomacy practitioners to be aware of the consequences of their listening approach. This seems particularly important for training diplomats on how to *actively* listen to publics as well as how to evaluate public diplomacy activities. Much of the confusion in the practical discussion about the introduction of social media to public diplomacy has been caused by a lack of consensual definitions of listening; without such definitions, there is a risk of reducing this foundational concept to a buzzword that is continuously redefined to suit the interests of the speaker. The model can guide practitioners when implementing their strategies by providing a more articulated terminology and understanding of listening, in order to avoid the disjuncture between strategic goals and actual practices.

Secondly, active listening could provide public diplomacy scholarship with a distinctive and critical theoretical framework and offer a space for ethical forms of governmental listening to be discussed and developed (as opposed to, for example, mass surveillance in governmental intelligence or measuring message reach and diffusion—outputs—in social media marketing).

A more precise understanding of listening developed in this research supports future academic debate on public diplomacy social media activities by providing clear definitions of the different listening approaches. Future research could practically complement and apply the theoretical discussion conducted in this paper. Indeed, the spectrum of listening can facilitate comparative research among different countries' listening approaches, as well as being used as a model for evaluating a country's listening activities. Listening has been correctly recognised as a key component of public diplomacy. It is now time to put listening firmly on the agenda of research and practice.

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