The power and influence of Canadian not-for-profits: Organizational listening and citizen voice

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Abstract

Canadian not-for-profits are the organized voice of civil society. Their expertise and insights support democratic processes and advance social equity. When not-for-profits lobby governments and advocate within civil society, they do so on behalf of those directly affected by their cause, i.e. their cause-related publics, which can help rebuild citizens' trust in private and public organizations. This study explores how not-for-profits listen to their cause-related publics, how they engage governments on their behalf, and their approach to two-way transactional and dialogic communications. This study was intended to contribute to organizational listening as an emerging body of knowledge and provide Canadian not-for-profits insights to support their work. An analysis of the results of a survey (n=107) and interviews (n=23) revealed key findings such as that there are not-for-profits that do not see advocacy or lobbying as a priority, that communications and government relations appeared to be largely undervalued, and that - although there were substantial organizational listening activities being conducted - the majority of structured listening was face-to-face and without consideration of cause-related publics in the planning process, exposing not-for-profits to strategic and reputational risk. This study identified a number of recommendations that Canadian not-for-profits could put into practice with minimal effort and cost, most simply involving a shift in thinking and current practices. This study also recommends a number of areas for future inquiry, both to fill gaps in existing bodies of knowledge and to contribute to organizational listening as an emerging body of knowledge.

Keywords: Non-profit, not-for-profit, NPO, NGO, organizational listening, two-way symmetrical communication

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Introduction

The Canadian not-for-profit sector is facing unprecedented challenges. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, not-for-profits are seeing an estimated 30% decrease in revenues (Ayer, 2020). The

reasons for that drop may be even more alarming, pointing at issues that need to be addressed. "The pandemic has exposed deep flaws in Canadian philanthropy and revealed the fragility of many non-profits" (Waldie, 2020, para. 7). Canadian not-for-profits are now facing an uncertain future, with multiple provincial and national studies suggesting that at least 20% of not-for-profits will not survive the pandemic (e.g. Lasby, 2020; Vantage Point, 2020; Waldie, 2020).

Canadian not-for-profits role are "civil society's organized voice" (Garsten & Bruce, 2018, p. 13), lobbying governments and otherwise advocating on behalf of every day citizens. Through their services and programming, they provide comfort, support, and guidance to a countless number of Canadians. Canadian not-for-profits employ more than two million people, and provide volunteer opportunities to another 13 million ("Sector Impact," n.d.). Canada's not-for-profit sector "contributes an average of 8.1% of total Canadian GDP, more than the retail trade industry and close to the value of the mining, oil and gas extraction industry" ("Sector Impact," n.d., para. 2). If even just 20% of the 170,000 not-for-profits in Canada ("Sector Impact," n.d.) have to close their doors, that loss could affect individuals and communities coast to coast.

This study was born as a response to this situation. By exploring how not-for-profits act as the voice of Canadian citizens – or how they can serve as the bridge between citizens and government – this study aims to provide Canadian not-for-profits best practices and insights that can strengthen and sustain their operations past COVID recovery and into the future.

Research Opportunity

Recent research found governments encourage citizens to use their voice, but cannot or will not listen (Macnamara, 2014). For example, public consultations tend to engage the "power elites," while others are left out of the consultation process (Macnamara, 2015), which can undermine democratic decision-making. Further, citizens feeling governments were not hearing them can lead to significant social, cultural and political problems (Macnamara, 2014).

Not-for-profits often directly or indirectly engage governments on behalf of those directly affected by their cause, i.e. their cause-related publics. For example, an anti-poverty advocacy group's campaign affects those experiencing homelessness. The effectiveness of not-for-profit advocacy can depend on how well not-for-profits listen, i.e. how well they understand their cause-related publics.

Research Questions

This study explored how not-for-profits listen to their cause-related publics, how they engaged governments on their behalf, and their approach to two-way transactional and dialogic communications.

RQ1. How and to what extent are Canadian not-for-profits' listening to their cause-related publics?

This research question explored research participants' organizational listening activities. For this study, listening was defined as: structured listening, responsive listening, and passive listening.

Structured listening included such proactive efforts as town halls, surveys, and advisory groups. Responsive listening was how an organization responds to what individuals or groups ask of them, e.g. the management of inbound communications, social media direct messaging, correspondence – electronic and print – and telephone calls. Passive listening contributes to sense-making,[1] which includes digital and social listening and media monitoring. Specific questions explored each listening category and looked at plans, policies and measurement/evaluation.

RQ2: How and to what extent are Canadian not-for-profits' corporate communications two-way transactional and dialogic?

This research question explored research participants' approach to communications with its publics, namely whether they were two-way transactional and dialogic. Specific questions explored research participants' deliberate attempts to set a welcoming communications environment, and whether their communications demonstrated co-orientation[2] and control mutuality.[3]

RQ3: How and to what extent are not-for-profits engaging with governments?

This research question explored research participants' lobbying and advocacy activities. For this study, lobbying is considered direct government engagements, e.g. meetings, letters, phone calls. Advocacy is considered indirect engagements within civil society, e.g. earned and paid media, social media, and collaborations with others. Specific questions explored types of government engagements and looked at plans, policies and measurement/evaluation.

Literature Review

The Not-for-Profit Sector

Canadian not-for-profits operate in a highly-regulated environment, bound by both provincial and federal legislation, even at times municipal. This legislative environment governs the activities of those not-for-profits that choose to incorporate, register as a charity with the Canadian Revenue Agency and/or register as lobbyists with their local, provincial and/or federal government. Legislation can affect how, or how often, a not-for-profit engages with government, how transparent they are with their financial reporting, and how they use their donated revenue. This regulatory environment may therefor have an substantive affect on the practice of public relations[4] in the sector overall and within specific jurisdictions. However, there is a scarcity of

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[1] Sense-making can be defined as "literally the act of making sense of an environment, achieved by organizing sense data until the environment 'becomes sensible' or is understood well enough to enable reasonable decisions" (Cordes, 2020, para. 6).

[2] Co-orientation is when an organization orients itself toward its stakeholders/publics' views and interests while orienting its stakeholders/publics to the views and interests of the organization (Macnamara, 2016).

[3] Control mutuality is "an acceptance by the parties in a relationship that each should be able to influence the other" (Macnamara, 2016a, p. 147).

[4] For this study, public relations is defined as "the strategic management of relationships between an organization and its diverse publics, through the use of communication, to achieve mutual understanding, realize organizational goals and serve the public interest" (Flynn, Gregory, & Valin, 2008, para. 4).

research into public relations in Canada, let alone in a Canadian not-for-profit setting or in specific Canadian jurisdictions. This scarcity leaves broad questions unanswered, such as how is the practice of public relations in a Canadian not-for-profit different from a Canadian for-profit? Perhaps even more importantly, what of the existing public relations theories, models and best practices are relevant in the Canadian not-for-profit sector.

This review of the research on the not-for-profits was further frustrated by the variations of the term "not-for-profit," which include "non-profit," "non-profit organization" (NPO), and "non-governmental organization" (NGO). Some not-for-profits choose to incorporate, or be registered as a separate legal entities, and – those who operate for a purpose other than profit – are then tax-exempt. ("What is the difference between a registered charity and a non-profit organization?," 2016). These organizations can be referred to as "incorporated not-for-profits" or "non-share organizations." Then there are those who incorporate as a "not-for-profit corporation," which can make a profit, but then are not tax-exempt ("Are all not-for-profit corporations the same?", 2020).

Further, "not-for-profit" and related terms are often used interchangeably with the term "charity." "Charity" can refer to a not-for-profit that is a registered charity, e.g. Greenpeace Canada, or a philanthropic organization[5] that is a registered charity, e.g. United Way of Centraide Canada. The available literature often did not adequately define the terms used.

> The variety of labels, dimensions, and classificatory systems that are currently in use has resulted in a Tower of Babel environment in which policy dialogue and the advancement of knowledge are constrained because no one can be truly confident that they understand precisely what others are talking about (Febbraro, Hall, & Parmegiani, 1999, p. 7).

Fortunately, all not-for-profits share a common characteristic – they, other than not-for-profit corporations, cannot use their income for individual benefit ("What is the difference between a registered charity and a non-profit organization?" 2016). If an organization cannot pursue profits, then its *raison d'être* needs to be elsewhere. For not-for-profits, their *raison d'être* typically will be oriented to one or more causes, e.g. a strong economy, a sustainable environment, poverty alleviation, social justice, or the advancement of the arts. The identification, development and advancement of causes are at the core of civil society.

Civil Society

Civil society is a well-researched concept. It is understood to be the space between governments and for-profit enterprise where "citizens come together in formal organisations, networks or social movements to discuss, deliberate and try to influence the society to which they belong" (Arvidson, Johansson, Meeuwisse & Scaramuzzino, 2018, p. 341). It is where social capital and shared values are built, which are "prerequisites for participation and creation of a viable representative democracy and an equitable society" (Macnamara, 2016b, p. 20).

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[5] For this study, philanthropic organizations are those that use donated assets and income to fund programs and services for social benefit.

Through civil society, individuals and organizations are held to account, societal issues are brought to the fore, and power is given to the marginalized (Jezard, 2018, para. 4). It is from within civil society that citizens self-organize, gather allies, power and influence. It should then be no surprise then that governments are – or at least they should be – paying close attention to activities within this space, if not actively encouraging them.

For not-for-profits, civil society is their arena. The authors of the book, *Communicating causes: Strategic public relations for the non-profit sector,* describe not-for-profits "as civil society's organized voice" (Garsten & Bruce, 2018, p. 13). Within civil society, not-for-profits "provide ongoing opportunities for citizen engagement and participation in associational affairs, and more broadly, in in the political process" (Smith, 2008, p. S132). They not only support and inform citizens' voices, they – using their expertise and knowledge - these voices with governments to support and inform democratic decision-making.

There is an increasing focus on civil society and acknowledgment of its increasing importance (e.g. Garsten & Bruce, 2018; Jezard, 2018; Macnamara, 2016b). There are numerous cautions, however, for its continued success.

One caution is cultivating communities that contribute to divisiveness versus societal wellbeing. As not-for-profit executive Dan Cardinali describes in his article, *The adaptive challenge of restoring trust in civil society*, people are self-selecting their communities that reinforce existing viewpoints, which is undermining civil society, if not fuel polarization (2018). "When community is limited to those with whom you share a worldview, then [American] civil society is deeply compromised in its ability to build a common good that extends beyond any limited, self-selected group" (Cardinali, 2018, para. 17).

Competitiveness in civil society is another caution. A diversity of voices supports democratic decision-making; listening to only a select few is part and parcel for declining public trust (Macnamra, 2014). A not-for-profit that competes with other not-for-profits to lessen or eliminate their voice can work against civil society's contribution to democracy and social equity. An emerging best practices suggest aligning with other not-for-profits, such as in a network model, which encourages diversity of thought and innovation, and provides opportunities to share/leverage resources. "The network approach helps to identify common cause and then distribute power and resources to involve many people in building solutions" (Taylor, 2018, para. 7).

With over 170,000 not-for-profits in Canada (Imagine Canada, 2019), not-for-profits can collectively organize, inform and amplify a diversity of voices to enhance civil society itself, while supporting democracy and advancing social equity.

How not-for-profits behave in civil society or act as civil society's voice can be tied to the question, *with whom do not-for-profits want have a relationship?* This question opens the door to a literature review relating to stakeholders and publics.

Stakeholder and Publics

Stakeholders and publics are also a well-researched phenomena. A stakeholder is commonly understood to be someone who can hinder or help an organization, i.e. individuals and formal entities with power over an organization's decision-making (e.g. Freeman, Harrison, & Zyglidopoulos, 2018; Grunig, 2005). Traditional stakeholder groups include employees, investors, members, governments, and donors. In practice, stakeholder groups are prioritized by available resources and level of influence. Because of this prioritization, organizations "are likely to under allocate value to stakeholders with low power and high strategic importance" (Freeman et al., 2018, p. 68).

The term *stakeholder* is often used interchangeably with the term *public*, which can introduce risk, especially with undervalued stakeholders. A stakeholder group typically remains a stakeholder group regardless of what is happening within the organization's environment. However, a stakeholder group's level of engagement[6] and its influence can fluctuate, depending on what decisions are being made, which brings about the concept of publics.

As public relations scholar James E. Grunig theorizes, "publics arise when organizations make decisions on people inside and outside the organization who are not involved in that decision" (Grunig, 2005, p. 778). According to Grunig's Situational Theory, publics can exist within stakeholder groups (Grunig, 2005), which can affect stakeholder groups' prioritization at any one point in time, depending on what decision is in play. Identification of who can help or hinder an organization is therefore is part of a dynamic process, not simply limited to periodic stakeholder analyses

Grunig also broke down publics into four different categories (2005):

1. Non-public: No problem is recognized or exists.
2. Latent public: A problem exists, but one or more publics is not aware of it.
3. Aware public: One or more publics is aware of the problem.
4. Active public: One or more publics are aware of the problem and organizes to respond to it.

Consequently, an organization should continually monitor its environment looking for the behaviours of specific publics, not just stakeholders. In a traditional sense, this type of vigilance is necessary to address any problems or issues that arise before a situation escalates into a crisis. However, for not-for-profits active in civil society, this monitoring could identify opportunities. For example, through passive listening, a not-for-profit may identify latent or aware publics potentially aligned with their cause. The not-for-profit could make deliberate efforts to activate those publics such as by engaging them in in two-way transactional and dialogic communications, helping to inform and shape these publics' voice. These active publics can then become their cause-related publics.

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[6] For this study, engagement is defined as "two-way relational, give-and-take between organizations and its stakeholders/publics, with the intended goal of (a) improving understanding among interactants; (b) making decisions that benefit all parties, not simply the organization; and (c) fostering a fully functioning society" (Heath, 2006; Taylor & Kent, 2014 as cited in Macnamara, 2016a).

Engaging publics in two-way transactional and dialogic communications introduces the next area of review, the two-way symmetrical communication model.

The Two-way Symmetrical Communication Model

The two-way symmetrical communication model is a well-researched area of inquiry. It is one of James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt's four public relations models (1984), and continues to evolve. This model is one of the most referenced in public relations (Huang-Horowitz, 2012), and is said to be the most ethical communications model, as it recognizes "the organization is not considered the primary beneficiary of public relations activity. Rather, stakeholders and society are both important considerations" (The Arthur W. Page Center, n.d., para. 1).

The two-way symmetrical communication model is more than just inbound and outbound communications channels. It is not a two-step process of "one party speaking while the other listens followed by the second party speaking and the first listens" (Macnamara, 2016b, p. 232). The model is a "give-and-take communications process rather than outcome, that involves listening, negation, argumentation, dialogue, understanding, and relationship building" (Duhé & Wright, 2013, p. 94). This *give and take* can be leveraged by levels of co-orientation[7] and control mutuality,[8] helping to build trust and mutually-beneficial relationships (Macnamara, 2016).

The two-way asymmetrical communications model is different from the two-way asymmetrical model, a "more 'scientifically persuasive' way of communicating with key audiences" (Roberts, 2016, para. 4). Which model is used with whom and when should be aligned with the multidimensional nature of stakeholder relations (Flynn, 2006). For example, a philanthropic organization can use the two-way asymmetrical communication model in one instance, e.g. a fundraising campaign, and the two-way symmetrical communication model in another, e.g. exploring their cause-related publics' advocacy priorities.

The adoption of the two-way symmetrical communications model into practice is not without its challenges or criticism. One is the idea that the two-way symmetrical communication model must have dialogue, or "a specific instance of two-way discussion" (Macnamara, 2016, p. 3). As public relations scholar Terry Flynn explains in his article, *A delicate equilibrium: Balancing theory, practice, and outcomes,* an organization cannot – nor should it want to – maintain a continual dialogue with its stakeholders/publics (2006). Instead, the two-way symmetrical communication model requires dialogic thinking,[9] the precursor to dialogue (Macnamara, 2016).

Another criticism is that the two-way symmetrical communication model is a normative ideal, "rather than a positive description of the industry – the way in which practitioners perhaps would like to do public relations, but in no way can actually do it in the real life" (Laskin, 2009, p. 45). It is possible that attempts to fully adopt the two-way symmetrical communication model in practice will be limited in a for-profit model. Although for-profits are under increasing pressure t

[7] Co-orientation is when an organization orients itself toward its stakeholders/publics' views and interests while orienting its stakeholders/publics to the views and interests of the organization (Macnamara, 2016).

[8] Control mutuality is "an acceptance by the parties in a relationship that each should be able to influence the other" (Macnamara, 2016a, p. 147).

[9] Dialogic thinking informs "a procedural approach to create an open, interactive communications environment in which the views and interests of others are recognized and respected" (Macnamara, 2016, p. 3).

to operate ethically and to be socially responsible, for-profit organizations focus will remain on the bottom line.[10] As such, it can reasonably be expected that the for-profit model may restrict their ability to adopt the two-way symmetrical communication model with their stakeholders and publics, namely in grades to allowable degrees of co-orientation and control mutuality.

With their central focus on cause, not-for-profits may be able to adopt the two-way symmetrical communication model in practise, at least between them and their cause-related publics. A desire to understand to what extent a not-for-profit can adopt the two-way symmetrical communications model in practice not only may be frustrated not only by the lack of research specific to the not-for-profit sector, but also the lack of research into how the two models can be differentiated in practice (Laskin, 2009).

The challenges of adopting the two-way symmetrical communication model into practice may help explain the current practice in which organizations prioritize broadcasting organizational-centric messaging over listening (Macnamara, 2015). Further, any listening is done for organizational-centric purposes, e.g. program evaluation (Macnamara, 2105).

> Fields of practice that explicitly claim to facilitate two-way communication, engagement, dialogue, and create and maintain relationships such as public relations, corporate communication, and relationship marketing are overwhelmingly one-way information transmission representing the voice of organizations. This substantial theory-practice gap demands transformative change in specialist public communication fields such as political communication, corporate communication, and public relations to become more ethical and socially responsible (Macnamara, 2016b, p. 237).

With up to 95% of corporate resources devoted to organizational speaking (Macnamara, 2015), this review turns to the missing element, organizational listening.

Organizational Listening

While there is a broad and deep body of knowledge regarding listening in interpersonal settings, researchers acknowledge that empirical research into organizational listening is scarce (e.g. Brandt, 2018; Macnamara, 2016). That organizational listening remains an uncharted frontier could be considered surprising, especially given the enduring prominence of the two-way symmetrical communication model and the plethora of digital platforms now available (Macnamara, 2016), e.g. real-time chatrooms and social media. Instead, "listening is not a common metaphor for online activity" (Crawford, 2009 as cited in Macnamara, 2016). Organizational listening in public relations literature is most often environmental scanning and media monitoring (Sonninfeld, 1982 as cited in Macnamara, 2016), typically passive activities not dependant on interaction, let alone engagement.

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[10] In the United States, corporate law enforces the supremacy of shareholder value over all other forms of value a for-profit can generate. In Canada, the situation is more nuanced, given that Canadian corporate law says that the directors of a for-profit corporation may balance shareholder value with other forms of value such as social responsibility.

Communications scholar Jim Macnamara, an internationally known expert in organizational listening, led a two-year, three-country exploratory study that "examined how, and how well, government, corporations, non-government, and non-profit organizations implement two-way communication, engagement, and dialogue" (2015, p. 5). The study findings, presented in the report *Creating an 'architecture of listening' in organizations: The basis of engagement, trust, healthy democracy, social equity, and business sustainability,* included:

- organizations *talk the talk* of the two-way symmetrical communication model, with up to 95% of corporate communications devoted to speaking, i.e. broadcast;
- organizations are not doing enough structured large-scale listening activities, e.g. public consultation and surveys, and what is done is organization-centric, i.e. self-serving; and
- inbound communications, e.g. comments, questions and complaints, are often overlooked, if not ignored, i.e. the organization responds only to what it wants to hear (Macnamara, 2015).

Macnamara suggests effective organizational listening requires eight key elements (2015):

- A corporate culture that is open and willing to listen, not just for organization-centric reasons, and one that embraces the two-way symmetrical communication model.
- Governance, e.g. policies, that provide direction on who should be listened to and how.
- Culture/governance that addresses the politics of listening, e.g. listening only to most influential stakeholders or not sharing complaints or otherwise negative content.
- Governance, e.g., structures and processes, supportive to listening that include fair and reasonable criteria to determine "whether, and to what extent, attention and consideration will be paid to certain voices" (Macnamara, 2015, p. 49).
- Technologies to enable listening, e.g. media monitoring, social listening, content analysis software and sense-making technologies.
- Resources – human, time, and budgets – to support the work of listening.
- Skills, knowledge and expertise in listening, including qualitative and quantitative research methods, interactive digital environments, text and content analysis, and big data analysis.
- Articulation, or "lines of reporting and accountabilities to ensure that what an organization hears and has merit is acted upon in some appropriate way" (Macnamara, 2015, p. 52).

There are high-profile and credible organizations building on organizational listening's emerging body of knowledge. For example, the Arthur W. Page Centre is funding the project *Ethical organizational listening for stakeholder engagement and responsibility,* which is expected to be released in 2021 (Bowen & Neill, 2020) and the Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS) commissioned the discussion paper, *The elevation of public relations: A discussion paper on a profession's present – and its possible future* (Tisch, 2017).

Showcasing the Canadian context, the CPRS discussion paper outlines the megatrends prevalent in public relations, outlining their challenges and opportunities. Of the megatrends discussed,

one was devoted to organizational listening, suggesting "many speak, few listen" (Tisch, 2017, p. 1). The paper suggested that organizations primarily use communication technology to improve amplification, not to improve listening. Citing Macnamara's research, the CPRS discussion paper suggested that the most common communications metrics remain geared toward outbound communication, not listening. Further, it suggested poor organizational listening may be exacerbating the long-term decline in public trust in private- and public-sector organizations (Tisch, 2017).

For not-for-profits active in civil society, organizational listening provides an opportunity to tap into the needs of their cause-related publics, to help rebuild that trust. For example, a not-for-profit engages their cause-related publics in organizational listening activities. The not-for-profit then uses the results of those listening activities to help shape informed conversation within civil society and to engage governments. When the cause-related publics see those activities, they can feel heard and their input is of use, generating trust both in the not-for-profit and government.

As organizational listening's body of knowledge expands and deepens, more attention is being paid to the concept of voice, the final segment of this literature review.

Voice

Voice, similarly to organizational listening, is an emerging field of inquiry. To listen, someone has to say something. However, the concept of voice is not just about speaking, i.e. using your voice box, writing a letter, posting to social media, or calling someone on the phone. A working definition of the concept of voice can be:

> Any attempt at all to change, rather than to escape from, an objectionable state of affairs, whether through individual or collective petition to the management directly in charge, through appeal to a higher authority with the intention of forcing a change in management, or through various types of actions or protests, including those that are meant to mobilize public opinion. (Hirschman 1970, as cited in (Macnamara, 2020, p. 379).

Voice is commonly identified with democratic governments and typically goes hand-in-hand with a legislated right to freedom of speech. Democratic governments encourage their citizens to *speak up*, to *have your say*, and *tell us what you think* (Macnamara, 2016b).

Voice is also "widely misunderstood … with little or no attention to who is listening and how listening can be effectively accomplished" (Macnamara, 2016b, p. 235), which is acknowledged as contributing to deepening distrust and polarization (e.g. Macnamara, 2015; Tisch, 2017).

Governments tapping into citizens' voice may be an ongoing challenge. How can a federal government effectively *hear* their citizens, acknowledge their voice? How can governments avoid the perception of *consulting for consulting sake*? Do they need permission, e.g. obtain *social licence*, to exercise their authority?

> It is wholly undemocratic, however, to say that you simply disregard the decisions of

> duly constituted constitutional and democratic authority as without merit or foundation, as if your views are the only ones that deserve to be heard or taken account of ("Social licence and Canadian democracy," n.d., para. 17).

Governments are not the only ones with challenges in organizational listening, which is driving emerging research into voice in a private sector context. For example, there is emerging research into the voice of the consumer (VoC), the voice of the employee (VoE), as well the voice of the stakeholder (VoS) programs (e.g. Brandt, 2018; Macnamara, 2020). This research suggests that, when successful, these programs can directly contribute to "increased engagement, loyalty, satisfaction, and the contribution of useful insights and ideas" (Macnamara, 2020, p. 379). However, when done poorly, these programs can lead to "criticism, disengagement, decreased productivity, and loss of customers and employees" (Macnamara, 2020, p. 379).

Methodology

Given organizational listening in a Canadian not-for-profit setting has received little or no systematic empirical scrutiny, an exploratory approach was warranted (Stebbins, 2001). The research design used both quantitative and qualitative methods and applied inductive reasoning to ensure a "broad-ranging, purposive, systematic, prearranged undertaking designed to maximize the discovery of generalizations leading to description and understanding of an area of social or psychological life" (Stebbins, 2001, p. 2).

As shown in Figure 1, the development of a research area typically progresses from exploratory to conclusive research, from inductive to deductive reasoning (Stebbins, 2001). However, the first step must be exploration with inductive reasoning "because deductive logic alone can never uncover new ideas and observations" (Stebbins, 2001, p. 7).

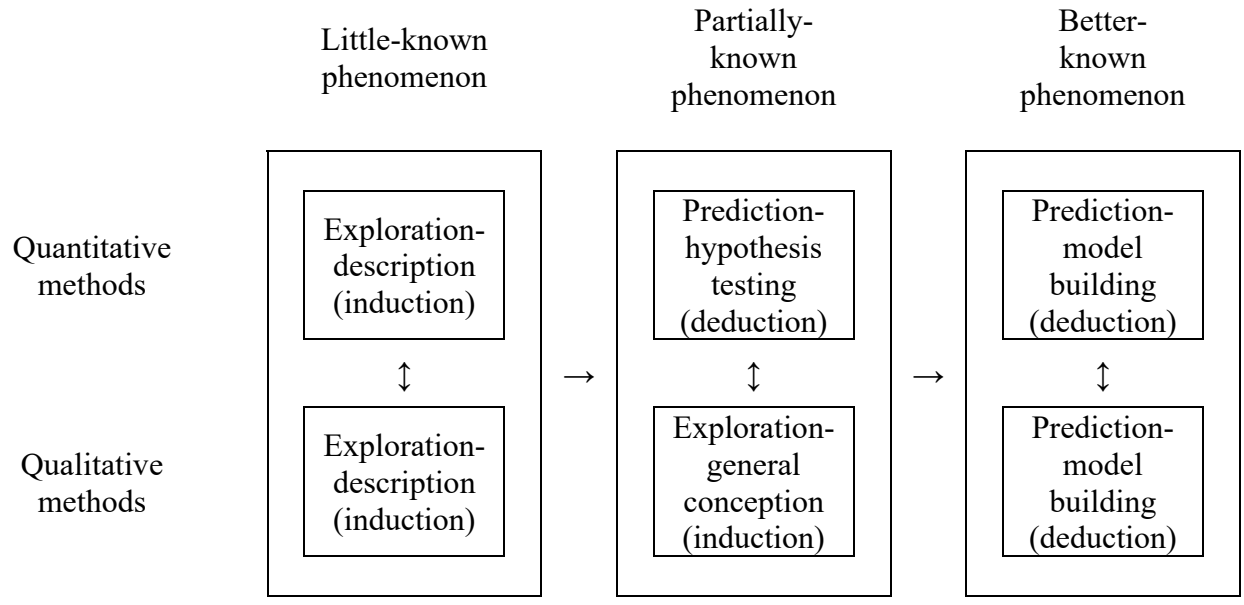

Figure 1: The relationship of qualitative and quantitative methods. Retrieved from *Exploratory research in the social sciences* by Robert A. Stebbins (2001, p. 6).

This exploratory study used three data collection methods: an online survey, virtual interviews, and document reviews. The 10-minute quantitative surveys asked questions relating to structured, responsive and passive listening and government engagement. The 60-minute qualitative interviews built on survey results, exploring the research questions in more detail.

For the document review, the researcher reviewed interviewees' corporate websites for governance, mandate, communications channels, and related information. Further, she searched provincial and federal lobbying registries and the Canadian Revenue Agency's website to confirm whether the interviewees' organizations were registered as lobbyists and charities. The document review both helped the researcher prepare for the interviews and provided additional insights into interviewees' responses.

This exploratory study used non-probability sampling methods, specifically a mix of purposive and self-selection sampling. The recruitment campaign included direct email and social media promotion, third-party endorsements, and an invitation to participate in the interviews within the survey itself. The researcher built a contact list of over 500 communications contacts working for Canadian not-for-profits, which was then used for direct email campaigns. The researcher posted the research opportunity on her social media accounts and in select Facebook and LinkedIn groups. Further, the researcher asked select member-based associations to include the invitation in their member communiques and to share on their social media channels.

For the survey, the goal was a minimum of 100 surveys, and for the interviews, a minimum of 10 interviews. Although this may be considered a small sample for a conclusive study, especially one in a national context, this sample size is appropriate for an exploratory study (Nargundkar, 2003 as cited in Dudovskiy, n.d.).

The research sample was communications[11] practitioners working for Canadian not-for-profits. Not-for-profits can be separated by privately-funded, e.g. philanthropic organizations,[12] member-based associations,[13] and think tanks, and publicly-funded, e.g. public universities, regulatory agencies, and public hospitals. The sample was those working for not-for-profits, regardless whether they whether they were privately- or publicly-funded, or had charitable or lobbyist status.

The research design acknowledged that those who managed communications might be shared with other functions, e.g. marketing and fundraising. Consequently, the researcher provided the interviewees with the interview questions three days to allow them time to consult with others beforehand. The research design also acknowledged the distinction between the unit of analysis – the not-for-profit – and the data collection unit – the research participant.

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[11] For this study, communications includes those whose primary role is in public relations, public affairs, government relations, but typically excludes those whose primary role is marketing, events, graphic design, and the like.

[12] For this study, philanthropic organizations are those that use donated assets and income to fund programs and services for social benefit.

[13] For this study, member-based associations were not-for-profit organizations focussed on a profession, industry, activity, interest, geographical location, offering members exclusive or discounted access to benefits, programs or services.

The researcher ensured the research methodology was exploratory with inductive reasoning[14] and was flexible and adaptive to support research objectives and to identify areas for future inquiry.

> An exploratory study may not have as rigorous as methodology as it is used in conclusive studies, and sample sizes may be smaller. But it helps to do the exploratory study as methodically as possible, if it is going to be used for major decisions about the way we are going to conduct our next study (Nargundkar, 2003 as cited in Dudovskiy, n.d., para. 7).

Analysis

The survey was open between October 19 and December 7, 2020, collecting 107 responses, which exceeded the goal of 100. The researcher conducted 24 interviews between November 6 and December 22, 2020,[15] exceeding the goal of 10. Although the researcher did not see data saturation and felt new insights could still have been collected, she had to cease scheduling interviews to compelte this study on time.

Research Participant Profile

The majority of the research participants – 83% of survey respondents and 22 of 23 interviewees[16] – worked in a full-time communications role. Interviewees titles' ranged from coordinator to CEO, 11 of which had have titles of director and above. Those with titles below director appeared to have a similar role in strategic decision-making and direct access to the executive. This observation suggests that titles may not be as reflective of responsibilities in smaller organizations as they might be in larger organizations.

As shown in Table 1, the majority of research participants – 61% of survey respondents and 19 of 23 interviewees – were from Ontario and British Columbia, which may be where the researcher's network and McMaster's influence are strongest. Although direct email invites were sent to organizations in all 13 Canadian provinces and territories, there were no research participants from the Northwest Territories, Nunavut and Yukon.

Table 1

Research participants: By geography

	AB	BC	MB	NB	NF	NS	ON	PE	QC	SK	NA	Total
Survey	18	22	3	3	2	4	44	1	3	5	2	107
Interviews	0	9	1	0	1	1	10	0	1	0	0	23

Note. N/A includes participants who preferred not to disclose or were not sure.

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[14] Inductive reasoning makes broad generalizations from specific observations, e.g. analyze data, identify patterns, make a generalization, then offer an explanation (Bradford, 2017).

[15] One interviewee chose to withdrawal from the study, and their interview responses were deleted in full.

[16] One interview included people in different roles, including communications. Although multiple interviewees, the researcher counted as one in the quantitative interview results.

Of note, over sixty people volunteered for the one-hour interviews via the survey, social media and direct emails. Further, nearly 90 people – over 75% of the survey respondents and 100% of the interviewees – requested a copy of this study's published results when available. This level of interest suggests practitioners are interested in new models, theories and best practices to support public relations practice in Canadian not-for-profits.

Organizational Types and Corporate Activities

Research participants – survey respondents and interviewees – represented organizations of different types and sizes. During the survey, respondents were asked questions about their activities relative to Statistic Canada's subsector and whether they were a registered charity. During the preliminary analysis of the survey results, the researcher questioned how respondents answered the question relative to Statistic Canada's subsector, and as such, omitted this question from the analysis.

Although 71 of 107 survey respondents said they were a registered charity. However, the preliminary analysis found the resulting data did not provide any useful insights, even when cross referenced with subsector and category of not-for-profit. Consequently, the researcher did not pursue more in-depth analysis.

Also during the preliminary analysis of survey results, the researcher questioned how respondents answered the not-for-profit category question and as such, omitted this question from analysis. Instead, the researcher moved to capture the type of not-for-profit in the interviews.

As shown in Table 2, the majority of the interviewees' organizations were member-based associations and philanthropic organizations, which include public and private foundations. The researcher acknowledges there are more types of not-for-profits than what was reflected in this study, e.g. faith-based organizations and activist groups.[17] Two of the interviewees worked for a publicly-funded not-for-profit.

Table 2

Interviewees: Type of not-for-profit

	Registered charity[18]	Total
Member-based	1	9
Philanthropic	8	8
Advocacy	1	3
Think Tank	2	2

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[17] For this study, activist groups typically "use direct, often confrontational action, such as a demonstration or a strike, in opposition to support a cause" (Advancing Partners and Communities as cited in Lechtenberg, 2020, para. 3). Advocacy groups "bring attention to an injustice, subsequently aiding the activist in their fight against that same injustice"(Lewis, 2018, para. 5). There is a nuanced difference between the two, but both are needed in civil society.

[18] Member-based associations and public post-secondary institutions often have separate, but associated, foundations.

Public post-secondary	0	1

Also in Table 2, slightly less than half of the interviewees worked for a registered charity, eight of which were philanthropic organizations. During the preliminary analysis, the researcher did not find any useful insights relative to charitable status.

For registered lobbyists, Table 2 shows just over half of interviewees worked for an organization registered provincially or federally as a lobbyist, with seven of nine being member-based associations. Lobbying status may be more related to strategic positioning than to the type of not-for-profit. For example, one interviewee who worked for a independent think tank said they were not a registered lobbyist, because they chose to did not engage governments directly. They said, "we don't just want governments to make decisions that we agree with, we want Canadians to agree with those decisions, too. We want Canadians to think about things similarly to the way that our experts are thinking about things or consider the same issues that we're considering." Although charitable and lobbying statuses did not warrant more in-depth analysis, the researcher did find they supported interview preparation.

Organizational Size

As shown in Table 3, the majority – 89% of survey respondents and 20 of 23 interviewees – worked for organizations that fell in the small business category, or less than 99 paid employees (Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, 2020).

Table 3

Research participants: Organizational staffing

	Micro	Small			Medium	Large	Total
	0-9	10-19	20-49	50-99	100-499	500+	
Survey	43	26	21	5	7	5	107
Interviews	2	9	7	2	2	1	23

Organizational size did not seem to dictate their scope. All interviewees, including those whose organizations that fell in the small business category, said their scope remained provincial or national. Two interviewees who worked for organizations with five or fewer employees, led a provincial network of other not-for-profits.[19] The broad scope of these smaller organizations may be due to alliances and partnerships with other not-for-profits. For example, one-third of research participants in the small business category – 30% of survey respondents' and eight of 18 interviewees – said they were part of a federation[20] or a network model.

Structured Listening

Specific to structured listening, i.e. what organizations ask of individuals or groups, the majority of research participants – 101 of 107 survey respondents and all interviewees – said they conducted some kind of structured listening activity. Generally and in relation to the research

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[19] For this study, networks are independent organizations that share similar causes but with different branding, e.g. Community Foundations of Canada.

[20] For this study, federations are independent organizations that share the same cause and brand, e.g. United Way.

question, "how and to what extent are Canadian non-profits' listening to their cause-related publics," research participants' responses indicated their structured listening included a breadth of activities tailored to stakeholders and publics, the majority face-to-face listening. Many of the interviewees struggled when asked who were their cause-related publics. Consequently it is unknown whether they these were included in current structured listening activities. Interviewees they were included in these activities alongside other publics and stakeholders. The organizational approach to the majority of structured listening activities appeared to be in response to an emerging issue or opportunity, and as such, may have been more tactical and responsive in nature. Further, there appeared to be few enabling technologies, other than web-based surveys and polls, used to support large-scale structured listening, which may have emerged as a issue during the COVID-19 pandemic, and may intensify as the stages of response and recovery continue.

Although the survey respondents appeared highly satisfied with their structured listening activities' quality and frequency, these high levels of satisfaction appear to be incongruent with the number and nature of their comments regarding what they wanted to change. This incongruency may point to something unique to the culture of not-for-profits and/or a small organization. As such, satisfaction results were omitted from the analysis, and was not discussed in the interviews.[21]

When asked how they conducted their structured listening activities, survey responses revealed that the most common types were dyadic (one-to-one) and in small groups, which may be unique to smaller organizations. As shown in Table 4, the majority of structured listening was via advisory groups and committees, individual interviews and meetings, followed closely by representation on the boards of directors and in-person events. This focus may be deliberate, as part of setting a welcoming communications environment. Further, may reflect a focus on relationship building, i.e. public relations.[22]

Table 4

Survey responses: Structured listening activities

	Total
Advisory groups or committees	74
Individual interviews and meetings	73
Representation on the board of directors	71
Surveys and opinion polls	70
In-person events, e.g. townhalls, community meetings.	69
Organized groups, e.g. focus groups, workshops, learning circles	60
Meetings with external groups, e.g. neighbourhood associations	45
Online consultation	43

Also as shown in Table 4, surveys and opinion polls were the most common organizational

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[22] For this study, public relations is defined as "the strategic management of relationships between an organization and its diverse publics, through the use of communication, to achieve mutual understanding, realize organizational goals and serve the public interest" (Flynn, Gregory, & Valin, 2008, para. 4)..

listening tool. Although the survey asked what kind of survey or poll, e.g. web-based, phone, in-person, or mail-in, the resulting data did not provide any useful insights during the preliminary analysis. Consequently, the researcher did not pursue more in-depth analysis in the interviews.

Formalization

Regarding the level of formalization, interviewees revealed structured listening is rarely reflected in strategic plans/planning. Many said this led to listening activities falling off the side of their desks, losing out to competing priorities or not being done well. However, given the majority of interviewees worked for small organizations, this may be more indicative of communications in general or organizational listening specifically being undervalued than reflective of a need for formal plans, policies and procedures.

Some interviewees felt that for-profit practices were affecting their not-for-profit focus. For example, some spoke of how the staff leading finance or operations have too much influence over communications-related activities, which can move corporate focus from advancing the cause to revenue generation. As one interviewee joked, their "CFO has a relationship with the ATM." However, this sentiment was not echoed by all interviewees. Another said, "if we deliver on our mandate and we are excellent at what we do, the money will flow as opposed to the other way around." Especially for not-for-profits whose revenue sources were separate from their cause-related publics, such as philanthropic organizations and anti-poverty advocacy/activism groups, for-profit practices may introduce operational and reputational risk.

When asked how they measured the success of their structured listening activities, i.e. knew they were doing them well, interviewees said they did not have any measurements specific to listening. Some said they used indirect measurements, e.g. town hall attendance. Others said that they relied on stakeholder feedback to evaluate structured listening. For example, when a report was published, they were on target if there was no-one of influence objecting. Canadian not-for-profits may need organizational listening measurements and metrics so they could "'close the listening loop' by identifying how well an organization relates to and adapts to its stakeholders and publics" (Macnamara, 2016b, p. 153).

Areas for improvement or change

When asked what they would like to improve or change about their structured listening activities, many research participants said they wanted to enhance and improve their structured listening activities. As one survey respondent said, they wanted to listen to "get a better sense of how they could help."

Research participants frequently said they wanted a more consistent and proactive approach to structured listening. Some interviewees said that this would contribute to trust and relationship building. One said improved listening would "enhance our understanding of how our [cause-related publics] go through their journey with us, and as well, just make the [person] feel more valued and recognized." However, their responses revealed that listening might be undervalued. This undervaluation could explain why research participants said there was a lack of supportive technologies, which affects how data was collected, interpreted, disseminated, and available for

future use.

Research participants' responses pointed to a need to address what Macnamara refers to as the politics of listening (Macnamara, 2015), which can lead to a refusal to listen to someone. As one research participant said, "we need to accept feedback from our [cause-related publics] at face value, as opposed to people 'complaining' about perceived issues … when there is feedback to suggest something is broken, we dismiss it as 'whining.'"

Not surprisingly, when asked what they wanted to improve, many research participants said they needed more resources. As one said, they wanted to "increase bandwidth in terms of internal capacity to listen, respond, and report." Although resources – human, time, and budgets – will be needed to support the work of listening (Macnamara, 2015). In light of the other responses, perhaps the availability of resources may not be as much of an issue as it is the value placed on listening in and by itself.

Passive Listening

For passive listening, which includes social listening and media monitoring, 98 of 107 survey respondents said they listened to their digital, including social media, environment. Generally and in relation to the research question, "how and to what extent are Canadian non-profits' listening to their cause-related publics," the majority of passive listening appeared to be social listening and media monitoring. There did not appear to be passive listening activities exclusively dedicated to cause-related publics. Further, it appeared passive listening was reactive function, one that communications staff was not able to action until the risk, if not threat, was acknowledged elsewhere in their organization. The lack of passive listening dedicated to cause-related causes may be due to the lack of existing policies or related planning to ensure corporate-wide agreement on to whom staff should be passively listening, and when.

Similar to structured listening, although survey respondents appeared to be highly satisfied with the quality and frequency of their passive listening activities, these high levels of satisfaction appear to be incongruent with the number and nature of comments regarding desired change and improvements. As such, satisfaction results were omitted from the analysis.[23]

When asked whether they used free or paid platforms to monitor their digital environment, 41% of survey respondents said they only used free platforms, 16% only used paid, and the remainder said they used a mixture of paid and free. When asked what type of passive listening platforms they used, the top three free platforms were Google Alerts, followed by the free version of Hootsuite and Tweetdeck. The top three paid platforms were Meltwater, SproutSocial and the paid version of Hootsuite.[24] During the preliminary analysis, the researcher found the kind of platforms used for passive listening did not provide useful insights. Consequently, she did not pursue more in-depth analysis and did not discuss passive listening technologies in the qualitative interviews.

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Areas for improvement or change

When asked what they would like to improve or change about their passive listening activities, the majority of research participants said they wanted to be wanted to use passive listening to do more of something. For example, they wanted to improve the collection/sharing of monitoring results, respond to social media posts and messages in a timelier manner, and better use monitoring data. The overall theme of these responses appeared to be that they wanted their digital and social listening to be more than be defensive and tactical. They wanted their passive listening to be strategic, proactive and collaborative. As one said, they wanted "a way to use the information we gather would be helpful." Another said, "I think there's a lot more data available from our social media following that we don't really utilize right now. We're just sort of using it as an engagement tool and not as a data collection tool." As another pointed out, "data collected means nothing unless it is evaluation or acted upon." These not-for-profits may benefit from enhanced knowledge management[25] and mobilization,[26] and by extension, improved access to Discussion

Cause-related Publics

To set the stage to explore the research questions, interviewees were asked who were their cause-related publics, which for many, appeared to be a new line of thought, which suggests consideration of cause-related publics may be absent during planning processes.

Interviewees working for member-based associations in particularly struggled with identifying their cause-related publics. The initial response tended to be that members were their cause-related publics. With more exploration, interviewees acknowledged their members were representative, or as one said, "were the eyes and ears," of a wider group.

Other than those working for community foundations, interviewees working for philanthropic organizations also struggled when asked to identify their cause-related publics, often confusing them with their donors. Their efforts focussed on fundraising and donor relations to meet their mandate, which they saw as raising funds. They often also said they did not do any lobbying and did not advocate for a cause. For example, one interviewee denied doing any advocacy or lobbying, as their efforts were specific to soliciting funding from government. They saw being critical of government as the objective of advocacy and lobbying, which would be barriers to soliciting public funding.

Interviewees working for community foundations tended to have a clear understanding of their cause-related publics, perhaps due to their participation in the internationally-recognized and long-running Vital Signs program, a structured approach to listening to community needs. They

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[25] "Knowledge management can be considered "unlocking and leveraging the knowledge of individuals so that the collective knowledge becomes available as an organizational resource" (Ansari, Tehraninasr, & Murugesan, 2009, p. 3)

[26] "Knowledge mobilization is an umbrella term encompassing a wide range of activities relating to the production and use of research results, including knowledge synthesis, dissemination, transfer, exchange, and co-creation or co-production by researchers and knowledge users" ("Guidelines for Effective Knowledge Mobilization," 2012, para. 4)

acknowledged that philanthropic organizations' listening to donors over cause-related publics, i.e. letting donors influence program and service delivery, was a risk. There were echoes of this same risk in the survey, as one described as "white saviourism."[27]

Organizational listening

When exploring the question, "how and to what extent are Canadian non-profits' listening to their cause-related publics," research participants felt communications, and by extension organizational listening, were undervalued, often due to for-profit behaviours, e.g. focus on bottom-line revenues. They appeared to be doing a fair about of organizational listening conducted, but often without formal strategies, plans, policies or measurement. Given this research study found consideration of cause-related publics is often absent during planning processes, there is the question whether not-for-profits are listening to the right people, i.e. their cause-related publics, and in the most effective manner.

Research participants appeared to do and want more passive listening than structured and responsive listening. They also wanted passive listening to be more proactive and strategic, saying that the current practice was to support tactical or operational decision-making, e.g. social engagements, program evaluation, and issues management. As a whole, it did not appear current passive listening practices were used to make sense of their overall communications environment, i.e. sense-making, and were limited in their use in strategic decision-making.

Although social listening and media monitoring are traditional forms of passive listening, they are limited to the digital environment, which may skew decision-making. For example, a reliance on digital-based passive listening excludes those without easy access to online technologies. As another example, the exclusion of incoming correspondence – electronic and print – and telephone calls from passive listening may also skew decision-making.

Further, research participants often said their structured activities were more project-based, and often fell off their side of their desks, while responsive listening was more administrative or operational, which suggests that communications or organizational listening may be undervalued. The researcher noted that the reliance on face-to-face listening could be an effective relationship-building strategy, especially when successfully using representation as a large-scale organizational listening strategy. However, the lack of enabling large-scale listening technologies exposes not-for-profits to risk, complicating transitions to virtual environment, such as was required during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Representation as a listening strategy

Not-for-profits apparent predisposition towards relationship-building could explain why research participants favoured structured listening through face-to-face engagements, e.g. one-on-one and small group listening and at in-person events. Given that the interviewees' organizations had a provincial or national scope, this preference for face-to-face engagements, i.e. interpersonal listening, over large-scale listening suggests engaging their cause-related publics could be

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[27] In the context provided by the respondent, it appears to mean a person of privilege helping those without power and influence in an ignorant or self-serving manner.

complex and costly, difficult to achieve quickly if needed.

Not-for-profits may be using representation, i.e. using a smaller population of cause-related publics to represent the larger, to mitigate this risk. Philanthropic organizations and member-based associations in particular appeared to favour representation as a listening strategy, such as through the composition of advisory boards, panels and committees. For example, one interviewee working for a philanthropic organization said they were setting up a panel for those with lived experience.[28] Interviewees working for member-based associations had members on their boards of directors and related committees as a strategy to represent their wider membership, if not population. Further, interviewees acknowledge members themselves can be a form of listening, i.e. are the eyes and ears of their wider population.

Interviewees also said representation can come with risk. For example, interviewees working for member-based associations said that meeting their recruitment and retention objectives becomes challenging when their members are not representative of the target group, e.g. industry or profession. When membership is not representative of their tareget group, a member-based association may lose credibility in their government engagement efforts and from within its population, eroding trust, credibility and influence, consequently restricting member recruitment and retention and subsequently, revenue streams.

Acknowledgment as a best practice

Acknowledgement, or how an organization demonstrates they *heard* someone frequently came up as a topic of discussion in the interviews. Some interviewees said that they acknowledged what they heard on the spot, such as at in-person events. Others said they did so via satisfaction and membership surveys, e-newsletters, and published reports. The use of these tools suggests a time delay, e.g. such as in an annual report, or a lack of specificity, e.g. a general question in a satisfaction survey, and may be more about closing the listening loop than acknowledging people as being heard. Timely and specific acknowledgements, even if only to convey when a response would be available, may go a long way in signalling an organization's willingness to listen (Macnamara, 2015).

Existing technology can provide opportunities for acknowledgement, such as through automatically-generated emails and social media direct messages to confirm their response was received with an indication of how long until a response can be expected. Few interviewees reported use of this technology. Those that did use auto-acknowledgements appeared to do so more for as a means to mitigate issues with capacity than to signal their willingness to listen.

There is also emerging technology that can both support acknowledgement and close the listening loop. In one notable case, a chamber of commerce referenced a platform in use within provincial networks,[29] which allow the collection of both aggregate and longitudinal data,

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[28] In the context of interview responses, lived experience was defined who has personal experience in an area, e.g. someone who was homeless. Lived experience is generally considered at least equal to, but not less than, those who has knowledge of an area, e.g. an academic, and those with experience, e.g. a health care provider.

[29] These platforms are called BCMindReader (British Columbia), AlbertaPerspectives (Alberta), L'Observatoire (Quebec), and AtlanticImpressions (Atlantic provinces).

including pulse surveying,[30] in a secure, transparent space. This platform was managed by their provincial chamber of commerce, shared by local and regional chambers of commerce, and was directly accessible by the membership of each. As the interviewee said, "it's just a very powerful tool where we can share the data with our members and tell them exactly why their engagement matters." This platform is an example of a large-scale organizational listening tool that can be used responsively and transparently to inform advocacy and lobbying efforts, while building trust with cause-related publics.

Architecture of listening

Research participants demonstrated a strong interest in improving their current listening, by listening more deeply, more proactively, and with more people. This interest may flow from the above discussed predisposition to relationship-building, in that research participants appeared to intuitively understand they needed to listen to build relationships, trust and goodwill. Efforts to enhance or improve their organizational listening may be frustrated by the undervaluation of communications, and by extension organizational listening itself. That calls for a shift in corporate culture, which may be achieved through the adoption of an architecture of listening.

An architecture of listening can balance an existing architecture of speaking, i.e. one-way, organization-centric corporate communications (Macnamara, 2015). "The policies, systems, structures, resources, and technologies devoted to speaking need to be counterbalanced by policies, systems, structures, resources, and technologies for listening" (Macnamara, 2015, p. 47). The first step towards this architecture starts with a culture of listening, or one that, "that affords recognition to stakeholders and publics, including stakeseekers in some cases, and is prepared to engage in the processes of listening" (Macnamara, 2015, p. 47).

While research suggests successful implementation of a listening culture hinges on the "attitude and approach of the CEO" (Macnamara, 2015, p. 47), there is other research that suggests communications leaders have a key role in shaping culture (MacDonald, 2019). Further, given small businesses' responsiveness (Evatt et al, 2005), those operating in a small business setting may find that shaping culture and downstream workplace behaviours may be easier than similar efforts in a larger setting.

Organizational listening as a strategic function

Research participants frequently mentioned how organizational listening both supported relationships with their stakeholders and publics, and contributed to the credibility and influence of their lobbying and advocacy. This acknowledgment that organizational listening supports not-for-profits' mandate and contributes to its organizational objectives suggests organizational listening is a strategic management function, one that would be of interest and value to more than just in a communications role.

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[30] Pulse surveys are short check-ins with the same audience, allowing the collection of longitudinal data. These surveys are traditionally used internally, tapping into what employee insights. They can be used elsewhere, e.g. within engaged networks.

As seen with existing voice programs, e.g. VoC, VoS, and VoE, organizational listening should not be undertaken lightly, let alone left to a side a person's desk. There may be substantive risk to not conducting an organizational listening activity well, especially if a not-for-profit listens to the wrong people or they convey the wrong insights. If a not-for-profit rolls out a flawed voice program, the not-for-profit could experience a backlash that erodes existing trust and goodwill. Although some interviewees said they did not conduct structured listening for this specific reason, most acknowledged listening to cause-related publics as a strategic imperative where risk must be managed.

Two-way Transactional and Dialogic Communications

In regard to the research question, "how and to what extent are Canadian not-for-profits' corporate communications two-way transactional and dialogic," research participants in general demonstrated a predisposition towards the two-way symmetrical communication model, particularly in structured listening activities. Their primary focus on face-to-face listening was conducive to two-way transactional communications and demonstrated dialogic thinking. They used large-scale listening tools, primarily surveys and polls, to generate more dialogue, e.g. to help shape the conversations in civil society, to inform and activate publics, and engage governments.

That being said, research participants appeared to falter in responsive listening. They approach responses to inbound communications with more of a task orientation. Interviewees understood quality and timely responses to inbound communications contributed to trust and goodwill. However, there did not appear to be dialogic thinking in responsive listening itself, i.e. how a response might start a dialogue. That may be specific to incoming correspondence – print an electronic – and phone calls, which tended to be areas managed by non-communications staff. Research participants did demonstrate dialogic thinking in social media, particularly in regard to media posts and messaging, areas traditionally managed by communications.

Research participants appeared to be committed to setting a welcoming communications environment to encourage people to engage with them, the starting point of two-way transactional and dialogic communications. Interviewees shared numerous best practices they employ to create a welcoming communications environment, such as offering a choice of easily accessible communication options, e.g. inbound channels on the same platform they offer outbound, and direct access to staff, e.g. providing a face to a name. Further, some offered communications environments specific to cause-related publics, e.g. member-only access on their website or private social media groups. One philanthropic organization offered streamlined communications channels that directed all inbound communications to specifically trained professionals, to ensure their cause-related publics got the best person in the quickest, most efficient manner, something critical in crisis scenarios such as emergency disaster response or a suicide intervention.

Protecting the inbox

A theme of discussion emerged how attempts to set an welcoming communications environment could conflict with issues related to unwanted attention or engagement. A frequently shared

challenge was the need to *protect their inbox* from spam or cyber threats. As one said, "posting staff emails and phone numbers is an invitation to cyber attacks." Protecting staff inboxes proved to be more than a cybersecurity issue. It can be a matter of protecting staff from abuse or conversations they are not trained to handle. As one said, "I would like to have funding to have a counsellor or trained peer support worker available to handle questions that, as a communications professional, I am not legally qualified to help with."

This theme also extended beyond email inboxes to telephone calls and social media direct messaging. As one said, "we worked on a campaign a few years ago where we heard from a lot of upset people, people who were feeling disenfranchised and weren't being heard in mainstream media. We had to turn off our Facebook Messaging because [of] the vitriol. It was awful." Another said, "we found Twitter can be a very hostile environment."

Protecting organizations from spam and cyber threats and staff from abuse or from situations they are not equipped to handle should be top of mind. However, closing down channels to avoid these situations may be the equivalent to powering off your computer, effective but not necessarily the best solution, especially in regard to setting the stage for two-way transactional and dialogic communications. Instead, opening inbound channels exclusive to cause-related publics would provide safe and dedicated space for not-for-profits to cultivate two-way transactional and dialogic communications.

Government Engagement

When exploring "how and to what extent are not-for-profits engaging with governments," research participants appeared to be in agreement, not-for-profits has the expertise and insights that governments needed to make informed and democratic decisions. the researcher segment research participants into those with government relations staff and those without. Those not-for-profits that had staff with that specific government relations expertise tended to do more government engagement, lobbying and advocacy, than those without. Some that did have government relations expertise had mature and sophisticated approaches and systems, including large scale organizational listening technologies. Such practitioners tended to consider government as a key stakeholder, with whom they cultivating two-way transactional and dialogic communications. Of note, those with government relations expertise and resources were not limited to a particular size or type of not-for-profit. For example, some member-based associations and philanthropic organizations had government relations expertise and resources, while others did not. Whether a not-for-profit secures inhouse government relations expertise may be a result of factors such as their cause or culture.

Those without government relations expertise tended to see lobbying and advocacy as threats, e.g. to their non-partisan status or future funding. They tended to see governments a low priority stakeholder, almost a throw-away audience in communications planning. Some thought of lobbying as something done by someone else, e.g. an industry watchdog. In these not-for-profits, interviewees appeared to have more challenges related to resource availability or undervaluation of communications compared to other activities.

That there are not-for-profits who do not see government advocacy or lobbying as a priority is a

cause for concern. It may be these not-for-profits do not acknowledge their role as the organized voice of civil society, which may undermine the advancement of their cause and limit the diversity of voices from which governments can access to inform decision-making.

It is difficult to envision a scenario where a not-for-profit that embraces organizational listening, at least in the context of the two-way symmetrical communication model with degrees of co-orientation and control mutuality, would be without some level of government engagement. Once a not-for-profit incorporates cause-related publics into their strategic planning, and develops a program to listen to and organize their collective voice, government engagement should follow.

It then makes sense that public relations leaders and practitioners, especially those working in a not-for-profit environment, should embrace government relations as a sub-specialty of the public relations profession. After all, government relations could be considered relationship building with a specific stakeholder; the skills and knowledge are the same as those used with other stakeholders and publics.

Research Gaps

Research participants were in agreement, when seeking to advance their cause, not-for-profits have the credibility and influence that for-profits' could not replicate. But it is unknown why that might be so. How are not-for-profits are different than for-profits? How does organizational size affect these differences? How does the practice of public relations – including reputation management – differ? How are these differences affected by jurisdiction?

Public relations in not-for-profits

When analysing responses, the question how or if a not-for-profit was different than a for-profit came up regularly. The researcher applied abductive reasoning to bridge from her observations to the likeliest possible explanation, i.e. she made "an educated guess after observing a phenomenon for which there is no clear explanation" (Bradford, 2017, para. 11). It makes sense that not-for-profits would have a different corporate culture than for-profits. That a not-for-profit might have a unique culture might explain why interviewees were satisfied with the status quo, perhaps reflecting a pragmatic approach flowing from sustained fiscal restraint measures, but still have a interest to do more.

By acknowledging that not-for-profits are different from for-profits, it may also make sense that the practice of public relations in a not-for-profit setting requires a different approach than in a for-profit. However, many research participants spoke to how communications, including organizational listening and government relations, took a back seat to revenue generating activities. e.g. donations, sponsorships, member dues, event revenues, and grants. This focus appears to be a for-profit behaviour, which may be driven or amplified by board of director – often comprised of for-profit leaders – direction and oversight.

Some examples of how public relations in a not-for-profit may require is measurement. In a not-for-profit, strategic objectives may need to be tied to cause-related outcomes versus financial.

That there is not already existing means of measurements may explain why interviewees struggled to answer how they measured their organizational listening and government engagement. It also may explain why some interviewees expressed frustration tying their activities to their organization's bottom line, a practice perhaps better suited to a for-profit setting.

Research into the public relations practice in a not-for-practice setting could provide the specific models, theories and best practices to support the work of not-for-profits and their contribution to civil society. Identifying the difference between a not-for-profit and for-profit can also support other areas of research, e.g. for-profits' activities in civil society, such as cause marketing and corporate social responsibility (CSR) campaigns.

Public relations in small businesses

There is exploratory and conclusive research that suggests public relation practices in small organizations may be more responsive, requiring less formalization, and may be more aligned to relationship building than in large enterprises (e.g. Evatt, Ruiz & Triplett, 2005; Huang-Horowitz, 2012; Moss, Ashford & Shani, 2003). However, it appears that major public relations theories, models and best practices favour large enterprises, or ones with 500 or more employees (Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, 2020). For example, Grunig's Excellence Theory, recognized as the underpinning theory of public relations, may be skewed to public relations practices in large enterprises (2012). "This bias toward large companies is in large part attributed to the design of the original excellence study, which required at least 16 employees within an organization to fill out a survey questionnaire" (Huang-Horowitz, 2012, p. 15).

Given the majority of research participants' organizations fell in in the small business category, this may explain why interviewees appeared to achieve success in organizational listening and government engagement in the absence of formal strategies, plans, policies. It also may explain the focus on face-to-face engagements, particularly dyadic and small groups, for structured listening.

If the Canadian not-for-profit sector is proportionally the same as its umbrella private sector, which is over 97% small businesses (Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, 2020), then the majority of Canadian not-for-profits will also be small, i.e. have less than 99 paid employees. As such, research into the practice of public relations practices in the small business sector will also benefit Canadian not-for-profits.

Canadian culture

Major public relations theories, models and best practices also may not be applicable to the practice of public relations in the Canadian context. For example, Grunig's Excellence Theory is based on research on organizations from the U.S., U.K. and Canada, and includes government, for-profit and not-for-profit organizations. (Grunig & Grunig, 2008)

It is commonly understood that Canadian culture is different from other jurisdictions, e.g. the

United States and the United Kingdom. There is some research that supports the idea that public relations in Canada is different than other jurisdictions, for reasons such as Canadians' willingness to compromise rather than to compete or win (Guiniven, 2002). That Canadian culture might be unique to others might help explain the degree of co-orientation and control mutuality evidenced in this study's findings, and suggest a potential predisposition to relationship-building in general and the two-way symmetrical communication model in particular. It is difficult; however, to ascertain whether that potential predisposition may be due to being Canadian, a not-for-profit, because of their organizational size, or some kind of mix. Consequently, research into how, and to what extent, Canadian culture affects the practice of public relations may provide value to the overall practice and support different branches of research, e.g. the affect of the Canadian regulatory environment or data protection/privacy laws on the practice of public relations.

Limitations and Lessons Learned

This study unfolded as expected for an exploratory study in the social sciences (Stebbins, 2001). The researcher adhered to the research methodology and took a rigorous approach to data collection and analysis. She was responsive to emerging lines of questioning, particularly during the transition between the quantitative survey and qualitative interviews, and was able to capture sufficient data to support research objectives and identify areas for future inquiry.

During the preliminary analysis of the survey results and interview responses, the researcher identified issues related to how research participants interpreted specific questions. For example, during the interviews, the researcher found a lack of common understanding on what was a cause-related public, which then pointed to similar issues with related survey results. Although the survey design allowed the researcher to adapt lines of questioning during the transition between the survey and the interviews, she cautions this may be an challenge for future conclusive research, especially those using a quantitative survey.

The researcher did experience a number of unexpected challenges related to the recruitment of research participants for the survey, which added unexpected complexity and required more time to reach the survey goal of 100 responses. Although the researcher was able to overcome these challenges, she acknowledges future researchers may have experience similar challenges. Consequently, she offers the below as lessons learned for future researchers.

The lack of agreement on terminology was certainly one challenge. For example, the direct email campaign saw numerous philanthropic organizations responding to the researcher's direct email, turning down the invitation to participate. The stated reasons for the decline were most often based on their understanding of not-for-profit status, e.g. they did not acknowledge their role advancing a cause or self-identify as a not-for-profit. Although the terminology may not have been a limitation to exploratory research, the researcher recommends for future conclusive studies, the design or recruitment campaign be targeted by type of not-for-profit, e.g. member-based associations or community foundations.

The different interpretation of the nature of communications appeared to be another. The design

of this study focused on those not-for-profits that had communications staff, for which the recruitment materials were specifically designed. The researcher acknowledges this design may have excluded those with the desired responsibilities but without traditional communications-related titles. For example, the direct email campaign was oriented mainly to not-for-profits that had staff with titles including keywords as *communications*, *public relations*, *public affairs* and *government relations*. While researching websites to build the contact list, the researcher found were many titles without these keywords, e.g. *community engagement*, who may have had full or partial communications responsibilities. Further, those who self-identify as working in the field of communications may choose membership with a communications association like CPRS, it will exclude those who do not and as such, distributing research opportunities within these communities comes with a risk. For future conclusive research, the researcher recommends caution when considering purposive sampling or self-selection as desired sampling methods.

Another challenge related to how a not-for-profit managed its communication environment. The researcher found those that had closed communications environments, e.g. only listed a general email or phone number on their website, proved a barrier to identifying, and consequently recruiting, eligible participants. For example activist groups' proved particularly hard to engage in this study, as the researcher could not identify eligible participants via websites or LinkedIn.

Areas for Future Research

As can be expected in an exploratory study, especially one relating to an emerging bodies of knowledge such as organizational listening and citizen voice, this study found a wide variety of potential areas of inquiry. Some of these areas are directly related to organizational listening and citizen voice, while others were gaps in existing bodies of knowledge.

To fill the gaps in existing bodies of knowledge, the researcher recommends future research into how public relations is practiced in a Canadian not-for-profit setting and in a small business environment. This research includes how the practice of public relations in a not-for-profit differs from in a for-profit, how the practice of public relations in a small business differs from a large enterprise, and how the practice of public relations differs in Canada than in other jurisdictions. This opens the field of inquiry to other branches of research, e.g. the protection of privacy and organizational listening in a not-for-profit setting, how the regulatory environment affects not-for-profits' organizational listening, even how for-profits can most effectively engage in civil society, e.g. CSR. This research would then provide the models, theories and best practices to support practitioners' work, while enriching civil society and supporting democratic decision-making and bolstering the small business sector – all of which will be sorely needed as Canada slowly emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic.

For ones directly related to organizational listening, there were numerous. One is ethics, specifically the ethical considerations of not-for-profits using the results of organizational listening in advocacy/lobbying. Another is the affect of for-profit behaviours and bottom line focus can affect cause-related communications. Others veins of research inquiry could exploring the multitude of best practices identified in this study, such as the network model, representation, acknowledgment, and enabling technology. An example project could be into Community Foundations of Canada and its network of 191 local and regional community foundations. This

network provides a valuable research opportunity into the practice of public relations and organizational listening from within the network model, focussing on their use of Vital Signs as a listening tool to *"*inspire civic engagement, to provide a focus for public debate, and to help a range of actors take action and direct resources where they will have the greatest impact" ("Vital Signs," n.d., para. 2).

For areas of inquiry tied directly to citizen voice, the researcher recommends research into the measurement and evaluation of Canadian not-for-profit lobbying and advocacy programs. Such research will allow not-for-profits better identify and share lobby and advocacy successes, while elevating the value of communications and professionalism of government relations. An example project could be into the BC Chamber of Commerce. This provincial chamber of commerce leads a provincial network of local and regional chambers of commerce, as well as is part of the larger Canadian Chamber of Commerce network. The members of the overall network share common and formalized lobbying and advocacy programs and measurements. From within this network, researchers have a valuable opportunity to examine lobbying and advocacy programs' measurement and evaluation.

Conclusions

Not-for-profits are distinctly unique from for-profits. They are the organized voice of civil society, engaging governments on behalf of the citizens to support democratic processes and to advance social equity. Their services and programs provide comfort, support and guidance to countless Canadians. When not-for-profits lobby governments and advocate within civil society, they do so on behalf of those directly affected by their cause-related publics, which can help rebuild citizens' trust in private and public organizations. When seeking to advance their cause, they have the credibility and influence that for-profits' cannot replicate.

This study found that there are not-for-profits that do not see advocacy or lobbying as a priority, which may be a cause for concern. It may be these not-for-profits do not understand or acknowledge their role as the organized voice of civil society, which may undermine their cause and limit the diversity of voices needed to inform democratic decision-making. Without access to that diversity of voices, governments will struggle to rebuild trust, which may continue to fuel polarization in society, preventing the advancement, if not healing, of the social, cultural and political problems society faces.

This study found communications and government relations appeared to be largely undervalued, mostly reactive and tactical. For those not-for-profits where communications and government relations is prioritized below revenue-generation, this undervaluation may only increase during COVID-19 recovery.

There are strong suggestions that when prioritized and resourced adequately, cause-related communications could become a revenue driver in and by itself. There are also strong suggestions that organizational listening, especially when related to citizen voice, is a strategic management function, which can contributes to advancing a cause and to organizational objectives, e.g. revenue generation, donor relations, and member recruitment. This could mean

that organizational listening has the potential to become a horizonal integrator, positioning communications leaders and practitioners as strategic advisors over tacticians.

This study identified a number of recommendations that Canadian not-for-profits could put into practice with minimal effort and cost, most simply involving a shift in thinking and current practices. The first is positioning organizational listening – with two-way transactional and dialogic communications – as a strategic management function. A part of that positioning is incorporating cause-related publics into planning processes, including representation as a listening strategy. Another shift in thinking is consider ways and means to incorporate an architecture of listening. This would include approaching current passive and responsive listening activities as part and parcel of sense-making.

Small shifts in current practices could include isolating advocacy from corporate communication in the planning process, from which methods of measurement and evaluation may organically emerge. Another small shift could include ensuring lobbying efforts are transparent in advocacy activities to showcase the not-for-profit's work on behalf of their cause and cause-related publics. Others, related to the shift of thinking in responsive thinking, is using existing functionality to enable sensemaking, e.g. webform reporting, and acknowledgement, e.g. automatic email and direct messaging.

This study also recommends a number of areas for future inquiry, to fill gaps in existing bodies of knowledge and exploring branches of inquiry specific to organizational listening and where it intersects with other bodies of knowledge.

In the end, the researcher acknowledges that that incorporating an architecture of listening into a busy, pressure-filled not-for-profit, especially those that may be struggling to keep their doors open, can seem like a daunting task. However, given research participant's strong interest in organizational listening, and given their intuitive understanding of how such activities may contribute to relationship building and trust, it may be that all that is needed is small shifts in thinking and practice. These small shifts will support not-for-profits role as the organized voice of civil society, help increase the diversity of voices that governments need to inform their decision-making – not just select ones, but the kaleidoscope of voices to represent the diversity of Canada's citizens. These shifts may be what Canadian not-for-profits need to keep their doors open throughout the pandemic, help them succeed through the recovery and into the future.

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