The Spectrum of Listening

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Introduction

Gathering information on a nation’s friends and enemies has always been a key characteristic of diplomacy. With the emergence of public diplomacy and its emphasis on foreign publics, information-gathering activities have been reframed as “listening” by public diplomacy scholarship in order to distinguish it from propaganda and earlier forms of information gathering in diplomacy. Listening has now become a core activity in public diplomacy and a defining element of dialogic forms of communication. Although the literature on public diplomacy largely agrees on the central role of listening, a definition of this activity and parameters defining how listening should be conducted and evaluated has largely been missing. Indeed, there are different listening approaches available to public diplomacy actors, each of which holds “implicit views of how public diplomacy works.” In this chapter, I make the different listening approaches in public diplomacy explicit by describing the spectrum of listening, a framework that consists of six type of listening approaches.

Listening can be narrowly interpreted as a way to implement and readjust a strategy, or it can be considered more broadly and ambitiously as an activity that aims to advance international understanding. One interpretation of listening defines it as a synonym for monitoring, which fulfills an important planning function. The second perspective on listening comes from the collaborative approach in public diplomacy, where listening is considered as “a genuine interest in the other’s perspective.” This ethical approach to listening is based on sincere openness on the part of diplomatic actors.

These two positions suggest that the definition of listening is not straightforward. Although there is a general consensus on the need for listening in public diplomacy, this core activity remains understudied, apart from the notable exception of Cull who has focused on cases and applications. While the tactical approach considers listening as a tool of public diplomacy designed for monitoring publics and counteracting criticism, “genuine” or “ethical” understanding considers listening as an outcome in and of itself. These contrasting understandings of listening do not provide many analytical prospects for the examination of the communication process, especially when they reflect binary logics in the literature such as listening or speaking, monologue or dialogue, competition or collaboration. There are various analytical opportunities that go beyond this binary logic. In this regard, this chapter aims precisely to reconceptualize listening as a spectrum of practices that reflect a range of methodological options available to public diplomacy actors. It examines the possibilities and limitations of the different listening approaches and how they define the communication model and the type of engagement sought.
The spectrum of listening provides a framework that makes explicit public diplomacy listening approaches, ranging from the ideal type of apophatic listening to surreptitious listening activities. In between these two extremes, there are three approaches for listening in public diplomacy: active, tactical, and background/casual listening (Table 3.1). Each of these approaches entails a different understanding of engagement. Active listening, which I endorse here as the yardstick for public diplomacy listening, is driven by long-term goals, such as the creation of a fruitful communication space where national foreign policy can be advanced through dialogic engagement. Public diplomacy actors need to create spaces for listening if they want to undertake meaningful and fruitful listening. The difference between active and passive listening also marks the crucial boundary between large-scale listening and mass surveillance, both increasingly used by governments with the introduction of social media in the workings of relations between countries and non-state actors.

I first summarize and discuss the different types of listening that comprise the spectrum of listening. The discussion builds upon academic fields such as public relations, communication theory, democracy studies, and political science. In the second part I discuss active listening as a representational act and then describe how active listening can be methodologically framed, focusing on the case of social media data.

### Apophatic Listening

The first type of listening in the spectrum (Table 3.1) is borrowed from Waks, who discusses listening in the context of educational leadership. He distinguishes between cataphatic and apophatic listening. In the former, the listener imposes his categories of interpretation while in the latter the listener makes a genuine effort to understand “feelings and personal connotations within or behind the words.” Apophatic listening requires a genuine effort of complete openness, putting aside predetermined categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of listening</th>
<th>Engagement</th>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Listening approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Apophatic listening</strong></td>
<td>Hypersensitivity and self-negation</td>
<td>Listen to God Meditative or mystical experience</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Active listening</strong></td>
<td>Dialogic and relation-building engagement</td>
<td>Long-term strategy implementation and adjustment</td>
<td>Combination of qualitative and quantitative methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tactical listening</strong></td>
<td>Instrumental and reactive engagement</td>
<td>Correct misconceptions and pursue short-term sub-goals</td>
<td>Monitoring to identify issues and actors of concern</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Listening in</strong></td>
<td>Unidirectional engagement</td>
<td>Assessment of message reach</td>
<td>Measuring outcomes or metrics based on impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Background/casual listening</strong></td>
<td>Casual engagement</td>
<td>Information gathering</td>
<td>Scrolling, unsystematic and/or accidental encounter of content</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Surreptitious listening</strong></td>
<td>No signs of engagement</td>
<td>Spying/surveillance</td>
<td>Unethical/illegal acquisition of private data</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Supplied by author.
The two types of listening represent the two extremes in a hypothetical spectrum of listening. Macnamara reminds us of the theological origin of the two terms: apophasis is defined as a “negative” approach of listening to God that focuses on what “God is not,” and thus requires openness to the possibility of what cannot be perceived. By contrast, a “positive approach,” cataphasis, is limited to the description of what can be perceived. The theological origin of these terms links to the question formulated by Bickford as to whether the extreme form of openness associated with apophasis or “hyperreceptivity is even possible (except in a mystical or meditative experience).” Therefore, it is questionable whether apophatic listening, the “ideal” form of listening in the spectrum in Table 3.1, is likely to be applied to public diplomacy listening activities, which entail political direction and purpose.

Determined by its theological origin, this type of listening encompasses a meditative or mystical experience as a form of “listening to God” without preconceptions and implies self-negation. This echoes Habermas’s notion of the “ideal speech situation.” Indeed, Habermas presents in his theory of communicative action an idealized situation that concrete situations must be measured against. In an ideal speech situation, participants can interact free of any kind of coercion with the mere desire to collaboratively create a rational consensus. This form of idealized communication is intentionally counterfactual, something that can be approximated but never fully realized.

Although this type of listening is unlikely to be found in public diplomacy actors’ communications, it is useful as an “ideal” yardstick by which to compare the different listening strategies. The conceptualization of ideal forms of communication or listening—as in the case of apophasic listening—is a fascinating theorization of hypothetical forms of international communication that public diplomacy actors could aim for. This ideal form could allow for the implementation of an evaluation framework based on the comparison of concrete situations with idealized forms of communication and listening.

**Active Listening**

If apophatic listening is ideal and counterfactual, a more concrete yardstick for the evaluation of public diplomacy listening comes from the concept of active listening. This concept has been developed by Dobson, who argues that good listening must be active in order to produce constant interaction in a real dialogic form of communication. In the context of public diplomacy, active listening requires the active participation of both diplomatic and non-diplomatic actors. The goal is to advance foreign policies by creating the conditions for international dialogue. Listening in this case is conceived as a communication enabler. An active listener creates a favorable environment where public diplomacy actors are seen to listen and are therefore considered credible interlocutors.

Active listening enhances trust and enables the cultivation of long-term goals. The dialogue resulting from this type of listening is more likely to produce meaningful conversations when people feel that they are being listened to and by creating spaces for listening. The active listener is mindful to the extent that listening is situation-specific and culture-bound. During the process of active listening, a public diplomacy actor aims to fully understand the types of engagement that fit the particular cultural context and to hear all voices.

In order to achieve the goals of active listening, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches for listening to publics is required. In more practical terms, the assessment of public engagement is primarily framed by the methods applied in its analysis. Thus, tracking active listening requires a combination of thin and thick description, a distinction borrowed from Geertz. In the context of social media, thin description is performed by analyzing complexity in large-scale listening (e.g., big data analysis), whereas thick description is performed with the help of
small or “deep data,” which refers to approaches such as interviews or case studies. I will discuss this combination further below after describing the remaining types of listening.

**Tactical Listening**

According to the literature on public diplomacy, *tactical* listening is performed via “two-way asymmetrical public diplomacy [which] means that although communication might be both sent and received … the effects of the communication are limited to the foreign audience.” Tactical listening aims to implement and readjust public diplomacy messages and correct misconceptions. It facilitates the identification of issues and actors of concern to provide a picture of the environment in which tactical goals operate. Forms of engagement are sometimes interactive, but with the clear goal of facilitating the accomplishment of a particular communication sub-goal (e.g., correcting misconceptions).

In the case of tactical listening, the creation of a trusting communication environment and the credibility of public diplomacy actors are not the main concerns. Indeed, when tactical listening creates forms of dialogue, these are limited to the accomplishment of specific short-term (tactical) goals. Tactical listening is concerned only with actors that are perceived as influential or instrumental for the achievement of a specific goal; thus it does not aim to hear all voices.

An example of an analytical framework for the evaluation of public diplomacy activities on social media that can be classified under the tactical listening type in the spectrum is that proposed by Park and Chung. Their model proposes “social media metrics to assess the capacity of public diplomacy organizations to engage with the public, their networking power, and public perceptions and attitudes toward a country.” It computationally analyzes Facebook users’ reactions (comments) to public diplomacy online activities. A similar study has been conducted by Spry, who has compared the public diplomacy Facebook activities of 24 nations.

**Listening in**

If interaction and active participation are characteristics distinctive of active listening, *listening in* is characterized by passivity (such as legitimate social media monitoring), which is different from illegal or unethical appropriation of information (such as illegitimate spying in on phone calls or emails). *Listening in* is similar to tactical listening, but unlike the latter, it does not contemplate signs of listening by public diplomacy actors (linear model of communication). *Listening in* is equivalent to passive monitoring or traditional diplomatic information-gathering activities focused on measuring a public diplomacy actor’s message reach and impact through analytics (e.g., number of views, followers, retweets and likes on social media). In contrast with *surreptitious* listening, *listening in* involves the gathering of data legitimately with no invasion of privacy. In this case, the success of a public diplomacy initiative is the primary concern. Methodological approaches for *listening in* are based on metrics (outputs) designed to capture publics’ reaction to a certain content rather than interpret the types of engagement initiated by publics.

**Background/Casual Listening**

To describe *background* or *casual* listening, Crawford, who coined the term, uses the analogy of tuning in and out while listening to the radio, with a constant but unsystematic—or casual—variation of the listener’s levels of attention. In the context of public diplomacy, the emergence of social media technologies has catalyzed the arrival of new actors to the international relations scene. This means that diplomats can now listen to those actors directly.

Often ministries of foreign affairs encourage diplomats to gather information from social media on specific issues. This type of unsystematic but recurring form of listening is usually used as a source of...
information for diplomatic reporting. It is therefore particularly common on social media. It is not the case that when describing background listening Crawford focuses on the case of Twitter. “A Twitter user,” according to Crawford,

follows a range of people, some of whom will post updates that offer useful advice, amusing anecdotes, or interesting links. But many messages will simply be scanned quickly, not focused on, something closer to being tuned out rather than tuned in.

Background listening can potentially lead to forms of casual engagement on Twitter that can result in the “appearance of listening” by, for example, occasional retweeting or strategic following.

Spying or Surreptitious Listening

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

Active Listening Requires the Combination of Thick and Thin Description

In order for public diplomacy actors to actively listen in the context of social media communications, they need to be able to make sense of vast amounts of data originating from various publics online. The ways in which public diplomacy actors approach social media data analysis in order to tease out what publics are saying, then, becomes crucial for the type of listening that is being targeted. The particular methodological approach to analyzing social media data adopted by the actor, in other words, will define their listening approach. This is why the question of method remains particularly relevant to the field of public diplomacy, especially with the emergence of forms of large-scale and data-driven listening approaches.

Social media big data makes it possible for information about international populations to be easily accessed for use in a wide range of areas, including public diplomacy. Such information would be otherwise difficult to gather via traditional research instruments such as questionnaires and census data due to the high investment in time and budget. In particular, social media analytics provide the possibility of tracking the evolution of political engagement and discussion over time, as opposed to a single “snapshot” produced using a survey, for example. A deep analysis of social media data can provide valuable insights upon which communication strategies can be developed and readjusted.

Social media big data promises new opportunities for governments to listen to their publics, both at home and abroad. Some public diplomacy scholars have argued that social media big data “can serve to provide new insights, challenge biases, and corroborate information,” as well as “the ability to understand patterns and trends in discourse, to tailor messages, and to measure the effectiveness of a communication campaign.” Others have even suggested that, “in some ways,
if they learn to operate in this new environment, governments have the potential to move from reactive to proactive, to pre-emptive, to even predictive.”

There are, however, several challenges posed by the use of social media big data in public diplomacy listening. The analysis of huge amounts of information begs methodological questions as to how listening can be ethically and practically accomplished in the digital environment. In this sense, the implementation of listening methodologies needs to address the ethical boundaries among monitoring, genuine listening, and surveillance. At the same time, listening needs to be meaningful, otherwise it might risk limiting our understanding of social media big data in public diplomacy as mere “technological fetishism.”

To answer the question of method in public diplomacy, some have argued for a balance of qualitative and quantitative approaches. For example, in the report *The Soft Power 30*, Brown has called for political leadership “to encourage risk-taking and an open, non-defensive way” of analyzing public diplomacy activities. Brown argues precisely against a quantitative evaluation approach that is based on return on investment (ROI) and focused on the analysis of message reach rather than evaluating how effectively social media has been used to listen. This call reflects the need to build “real quantitative and qualitative research skills [among practitioners] to help determine frameworks to assess which strategies and tactics work in complex environments to build trust and understanding.”

As I suggested above when describing active listening, the analysis of public diplomacy engagement should be methodologically framed by employing the related concepts of thin and thick description. To explain this, Geertz provides the famous example of one boy winking at another and the different ways that this act can be interpreted when the interpreter understands the context and when they do not. As Geertz writes, the boy’s wink could be a conspiratorial sign to a friend, an involuntary twitch, or something else entirely. All of these interpretations are dependent on the interpreter’s understanding of the context in which the wink takes place.

Applying Geertz’s concept to social media, the active listener should combine the capture of large-scale communication dynamics of public diplomacy within a complex array of mediators, without neglecting the thick elements of the description, such as tone, visuals, and irony embedded in social media communication and contextual elements. A thick analysis of the signs of listening on social media can provide a deeper understanding of the cultural meaning of these acts and is therefore critical to implement forms of active listening.

It is important to recognize that the listening approach indirectly defines the type of engagement sought and valued by public diplomacy actors. Despite the wealth of attention in recent years to data-driven approaches in public diplomacy, there has not been an exhaustive debate about the methodological toolkit available to public diplomacy practitioners, and particularly about what scholars can provide to practitioners in terms of methodological instruments to support investigative strategies and monitoring activities. Adopting a dialogic communication model implies a listening approach that is able to recognize dialogic forms of engagement and go beyond evaluation of the audience’s message reaction. In short, if one considers listening as a foundational component of dialogic communication, we should start thinking seriously about what methodological approaches, or their combination, are able to interpret the dialogic elements (e.g., questioning) embedded in a message and go beyond quantifiable signs of engagement, such as counting the number of views, followers, likes, retweets, and mentions on social media.

**Active Listening Is a Representational Act**

In discussing listening in public diplomacy, I have argued that listening is not limited to monitoring and evaluation activities, but that it also represents a communicational and representational act on its own. As also noted by Cull, “listening in public diplomacy has double value.” It is not
only important “when it leads to a responsive and effective policy and/or approach to a foreign public. It also helps when it is seen to be done.”31 This is in line with what Comor and Bean have argued: “how people think about and process their interactions … can be modified, not just by what is communicated but also through the communication process itself.”32

If we consider public diplomacy as the “interactive dimension of diplomacy”—as per the definition provided by the Center on Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California33—then being seen to listen or showing signs of “paying attention” should be considered as a central communication act. For example, in personal communication there are different ways of knowing if someone is listening. “The signals,” explains Dobson, “may be visual (is my interlocutor paying attention to me as I speak?) or dialogic (is s/he asking me questions that show s/he really wants to understand what I am saying?).”34

Since the primary characteristic of two-way forms of communication is listening, engagement is intrinsically linked to listening, since it requires that both the diplomatic actors and the public pay attention to each other. This understanding of engagement is also defined as “dialogic engagement” when it “enables organizations and stakeholders to interact, fostering understanding, goodwill, and a shared view of reality.”35

Listening interpreted as a representational act (active listening) requires us to rethink and discuss how this should be translated into public diplomacy practices. A failure to listen could effectively indicate a lack of adequate organizational culture, policies, technologies, skills, structures, and resources. Such organizational requirements are essential conditions for listening intended as a communication enabler, that is, beyond message spreading. Listening requires an important organizational corollary, what Macnamara calls the “architecture of listening.”36 This architecture requires public diplomacy actors to create spaces where “people can interact with organizations in mutually beneficial ways.”37

**Conclusion**

With the spectrum of listening, I aim to bring epistemological awareness in public diplomacy monitoring activities, in particular in relation to social media listening. Indeed, each type of listening not only frames the way a public diplomacy actor evaluates activities, but it also defines understanding of the communication process. The evaluation of public diplomacy, intended as an interactive and relational communication process, cannot be limited to the measurement of the message’s dissemination (voice); instead, it needs to explore how the combination of listening and speaking can support the advancement, the legitimization, and implementation of a state’s foreign policy by “fostering mutual trust and productive relationships.”38

Public diplomacy is becoming a widespread governmental activity around the world. Although its conceptualization and definition remain disputed, it provides governments with the possibility of allocating resources for long-term goals and international dialogue. This might not be directly and explicitly beneficial to the short-term political goals of national governments, but it does provide opportunities for cultivating a country’s international reputation in a fast-changing communication environment, and for legitimizing its foreign policies.

New uncertainties and complexities are coming to light in the current geopolitical context. The hype surrounding the introduction of social media in diplomacy has been replaced by concerns about new forms of digital propaganda and the spread of “fake news” on social media. Moreover, the Internet is becoming highly strategic because of its potential not only to build communication bridges but also to enact new forms of hard power through cyberwar and cyberespionage. In addition, forms of surreptitious listening have been confirmed by the revelations of Edward Snowden in 2013. Recent events have also revealed that a private company, Cambridge
Analytica, was able to breach Facebook policies and illegitimately acquire personally identifiable information, then used for political and electoral purposes.

The current context may dissuade the implementation of ideal forms of listening and precipitate a move towards strategies that deal with these pressing challenges arising from the current digital environment. This, I believe, would be a reaction to current events rather than an advancement in public diplomacy practices. While geopolitical and technological evolutions need to be taken into account, the focus on listening as a method for the evaluation of public diplomacy can provide a renewed and proactive, rather than reactive, framework. At the same time, in an epoch in which new surreptitious forms of listening seem to be growing, public diplomacy—intended as a governmental practice—offers a space where the quality—rather than the reach—of governmental listening can be implemented and developed.

In conclusion, the spectrum of listening can help achieve two broad goals. In practical terms, this framework can be employed in order to develop, implement, and evaluate listening practices, and as a tool for training diplomats. Indeed, the spectrum supports practitioners and decision makers in becoming more aware of their own listening approaches. This is achieved by aligning listening with strategic communication goals, enabling listening activities to be incorporated into organizational resources, culture, policies, technologies, and skills. The spectrum can be used and expanded for training diplomats as it succinctly illustrates the different listening approaches. The spectrum of listening can also help public diplomacy actors to go beyond the mere chasing of technological advancements. Indeed, the spectrum pushes public diplomats to think about listening activities as an integral part of their communicational and relational goals. The ultimate goal of the spectrum of listening is to guide practitioners in conceiving, framing, and calibrating ethical, effective, and meaningful listening activities.

Notes
3 I have also discussed the spectrum of listening in Luigi Di Martino, “Conceptualising Public Diplomacy Listening on Social Media,” Place Branding and Public Diplomacy (2019): 1–12.
8 Jim Macnamara, Organizational Listening: The Missing Essential in Public Communication (New York: Peter Lang, 2016), 71.
18 Ibid.
20 Crawford, “Following You,” 528.
21 The existence of this practice has also been confirmed by informal conversations with diplomats. For example, lurking expatriates’ Facebook groups can offer insights into their experiences, needs, and feedback that might be used to readjust consular services.
27 Andreas Sandre, Digital Diplomacy: Conversations on Innovation in Foreign Policy (Maryland, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 261.
30 Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures.
31 Cull, Public Diplomacy, 38.
34 Dobson, Listening for Democracy, 83.
37 Macnamara, Organizational Listening, 246.
38 USC Center on Public Diplomacy.