

The Role of Listening-based Government Communication in Developing Collaborative Governance: A Case Study in the Basque Country

Ion Muñoa Errasti

 0009-0005-7290-9605

Deusto University, Spain

Xabier Barandiarán Irastorza

 0000-0002-7557-9331

Deusto University, Spain

María José Canel Crespo

 0000-0002-5048-124X

University Complutense Madrid, Spain

Jim Macnamara

 0000-0003-1387-3882

University of Technology Sydney, Australia

Abstract: This study introduces a novel link between organizational listening and collaborative governance, reframing government communication as a dynamic driver of democratic engagement. Using an in-depth case study in the Basque Country (Spain), it investigates how structured listening practices within government organizations can foster more effective collaboration with citizens. Thematic analysis of qualitative data from policymakers reveals that active participation in collaborative governance transforms how officials interpret and respond to public feedback, bridging the gap between institutional and citizen perspectives. The research highlights how a shared commitment to listening not only enhances mutual understanding but also encourages adaptive, joint policy development. By situating this inquiry within a real-world collaborative governance initiative, the manuscript offers actionable insights for policymakers aiming to embed meaningful listening at the core of democratic decision-making processes.

Keywords: Government communication; Public sector communication; Collaborative governance; Listening; Organizational listening.

INTRODUCTION

Faced with what many researchers refer to as a “democratic deficit” (Norris, 2011) and even a “crisis of democracy” (Przeworski, 2019; Van der Meer, 2017) caused by low public trust in government, polarization, and the continuing marginalization of many groups (Garland, 2021; Uslaner, 2018), progressive democratic governments are looking for ways in which to rebuild trust, maintain legitimacy, and foster social equity. Collaborative governance has emerged as an approach in the face of such democratic challenges (Emerson et al., 2012; Emerson and Nabatchi, 2015; Christensen, 2024), and is defined as:

“A governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets.” (Ansell & Gash, 2008, p. 544)

While engagement with stakeholders and citizens is a fundamental tenet of how democratic governments function in an effective *public sphere* (Habermas, 1989), and deliberation has been widely advocated to achieve informed public input, collaborative governance formalizes identification by a “sponsor” (e.g., a civic organization, agency, or foundation) of problems to be fixed or issues to be addressed.

Consequently, collaborative governance is grounded in and dependent on communication between government and a range of non-state actors. Specifically, this involves what is referred to and studied as *public communication* (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2021; Rice & Atkin, 2013), *government communication* (Howlett, 2009; Sanders & Canel, 2013), and *public sector communication* (Delli Carpini, 2020; Luoma-aho & Canel, 2020).

Furthermore, this study is informed by the growing body of literature on *organizational listening* (Dobson, 2014; Macnamara, 2013, 2016, 2018, 2019, 2024), given that key components of communication, such as engagement and dialogue, are meaningless without listening. As Michael Delli Carpini says in relation to public sector communication:

“Public sector communications become more democratic as citizens move from passive givers and receivers of information to active and authoritative participants in the selection of public issues to address, the debate over and selection of solutions to public problems, the implementation of chosen solutions, and the assessment and reconsideration of these solutions.” (Delli Carpini, 2020, p. 41)

For citizens to become active and authoritative participants in a democratic public sphere as described by Delli Carpini, there need to be “institutional structures that allow citizens to be information producers” (Delli Carpini, 2020, p. 33) and for their voices to be listened to openly, inclusively, ethically, and effectively (Macnamara, 2016, 2019, 2024).

This study examines one such institutional structure. While many recent studies have theorized the adoption of an “architecture of listening” (Macnamara, 2013, 2024, pp. 234–257) in engagements between organizations and the public, only a few have explored the practices of organizational listening and the extent to which they can contribute to collaborative governance leading to positive social and political change.

This research taps into that vacuum and explores a novel connection between collaborative governance and listening-based communication. It does so by presenting a qualitative case study focused on the Basque Country. The study was possible because a public authority within the provincial government of Gipuzkoa (the capital of which is San Sebastian in Northern Spain) decided to undertake a systematic process of listening to society to improve how it was implementing a collaborative governance program to engage stakeholders in policymaking. Etorkizuna Eraikiz (“building our future” in Basque) is a pioneering initiative designed to foster collaborative governance through participatory and listening-based communication strategies. Its context arises from a regional commitment to democratic innovation, where public institutions actively engage citizens, stakeholders, and experts in shaping policy directions. The project’s background is rooted in the recognition that traditional top-down governance models often fail to capture diverse perspectives and build trust (Barandiarán, Murphy, & Canel, 2022; Barandiarán, Canel, & Bouckaert, 2023); instead, Etorkizuna Eraikiz seeks to bridge this gap by creating platforms for open dialogue and collaborative problem-solving. This provided a great opportunity to explore what really happens when policymakers put into practice normative assumptions about listening.

This research addresses the following research question: *What ways do policymakers’ experiences and interpretations of citizen feedback shape organizational listening practices, and what role does this listening-based communication play in developing collaborative governance?*

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, the theoretical framework outlines the concepts of collaborative governance and organizational listening. Second, the context is presented, followed by the methodology. Based on the findings of the case study analysis, the discussion section highlights the key implications for the theory and practice of organizational listening in public sector organizations.

THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE

Interactions between public and private organizations are inherent to the concept and practice of collaborative governance. In this regard, Sirianni (2010) defines collaborative governance as the context in which public administrators interact with society as a whole to stimulate collective deliberation processes to identify priorities and develop lines of action to address a range of situations, based on the inherent strengths of communities and individuals.

Key features of collaborative governance found in a number of different sources (Barandiaran et al., 2023) make it possible to connect this concept with communication research and practice: collaborative governance entails a public body directly engaging non-state stakeholders in a formal, consensual, deliberative, collective decision-making process, involving new governance structures and transcending the boundaries of levels of government, and the public, private, and civic spheres, in order to achieve common goals and carry out a public purpose that could not otherwise be accomplished. As a preliminary point, communication is needed to articulate interactions among the different actors involved, to elicit shared meanings in defining problems and solutions, and to define common goals.

ORGANIZATIONAL LISTENING

While interpersonal listening has long been studied across disciplines, organizational listening beyond dyadic communication has received systematic attention only in recent years (Barbour, 2017; Dobson, 2014; Lewis, 2020; Macnamara, 2013, 2019, 2024). Research has repeatedly shown that public sector organizations struggle to listen effectively, particularly to disadvantaged or critical voices, often prioritizing information dissemination or strategic persuasion over engagement (Dreher, 2009; Macnamara, 2017). Despite a growing normative literature on organizational listening, empirical studies examining how listening is practiced, learned, and embedded within public institutions remain limited.

This study examined listening practices through a major case study that placed society at the core of public policy via collaborative governance, in which government, communities, and the private sector work together to develop policies (Barandiaran et al., 2023). This research draws upon Macnamara's work on listening and from a number of other studies in this emerging field, including those carried out by Canel et al. (2022), Kang and Moon (2023), Lewis (2020), Qin and Men (2021), Reinikainen et al. (2020), and Yip and Fisher (2022). It uses Macnamara's definition of organizational listening as:

“... the creation and implementation of scaled processes and systems that enable decision makers and policymakers in organizations to actively and effectively access, acknowledge, understand, consider, and appropriately respond to all those who wish to communicate with the organization or with whom the organization wishes to communicate interpersonally or through delegated, mediated means.” (Macnamara, 2019, p. 5191)

This research also uses Macnamara’s “Seven Canons of Listening”: (1) *recognizing* others’ right to speak; (2) *acknowledging* what others say; (3) *paying attention* to what others say; (4) *interpreting* what others say fairly; (5) *understanding* others’ perspectives; (6) *considering* what others say, and (7) *responding* in an appropriate way (Macnamara, 2016, pp. 41–43). Macnamara noted that response does not necessarily involve agreement but must include consideration and some form of response.

Finally, in examining organizational listening practices, this study also draws on the eight elements of Macnamara’s *architecture of listening*, in which he stressed that organizational listening needs to be designed into an organization, starting with (1) a *culture* that is open to listening and (2) avoiding the *politics of listening*, which leads to selective listening. With these in place, organizations need to (3) develop *policies* for listening, (4) *systems* for listening such as structures and processes, supported by (5) *technologies* for listening, (6) *resources* for listening with (7) *skills* for listening at scale and through mediated means, and finally (8) *articulation* of what is learned to senior decision makers and policymakers (Macnamara, 2016, pp. 247–273; Macnamara, 2024, p. 256).

LISTENING AND COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE

There is extensive literature relating listening to the enhancement of democracies, and, more specifically, to deliberative theories that regard listening as a condition of deliberative democracy (see, for instance, Morrell, 2010; Mansbridge & Latura, 2017). Moreover, studies on public leadership (Ospina, 2016; Crosby & Bryson, 2017) highlight the normative idea that public leaders should develop listening skills for building common spaces in which to respond to citizens’ demands. Democracy means paying attention (Bellah et al., 1991, p. 254), and hence developing democracy entails engaging in active listening and deliberation that involve diverse, representative actors in a participatory process.

Delving deeper into the relationship between listening and collaborative governance reveals three major points of connection. Firstly, listening facilitates co-creation, and co-creation is at the heart of collaborative governance: it opens the conversation to collaboration. Secondly, public sector organizations have

a responsibility to represent and act in accordance with public opinion, and “to do so requires active attentive listening” (Macnamara, 2019, p. 5184). Finally, listening is also important for engaging citizens in the deliberation processes that underpin collaborative governance (Dobson, 2014; Mansbridge & Latura, 2017), as the actors involved need to move beyond the passive role of being recipients of information and merely making sense of data. Listening for collaborative governance may require creating spaces with communication geared towards fostering dense interactions and relationships from which shared meanings about problems and solutions emerge.

THE CASE: THE *ETORKIZUNA ERAIKIZ* COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE PROGRAM

The Basque Country, and Gipuzkoa in particular, possesses a distinctive political and institutional landscape within Spain that is crucial to understanding the development and impact of initiatives like *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*. The Basque Autonomous Community enjoys a high degree of self-government, enshrined in the Statute of Autonomy of 1979, which grants extensive legislative, fiscal, and executive powers to its institutions. The Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa (Diputación Foral de Gipuzkoa) operates as a central actor within this system, holding significant authority over areas such as taxation, social policy, and economic development. This unique arrangement, rooted in the historical “fueros” (local laws and privileges) and reinforced by strong regional identity and traditions of participatory governance, fosters a political culture that emphasizes collaboration, consensus-building, and civic engagement. In Gipuzkoa, the interplay between local institutions and an active civil society has historically enabled innovative approaches to governance, paving the way for experimental and inclusive projects like *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*. This context not only shapes the program’s ambition for collaborative policy-making but also underpins its legitimacy and capacity to mobilize diverse stakeholders, making the Gipuzkoa setting particularly fertile ground for pioneering models of open and deliberative governance.

The collaborative governance program *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* consisted of several projects in which public authorities and citizens, represented by business, societal, educational, and civic organizations, engaged in listening and experimentation sessions to define both the province’s agenda and the implementation of solutions to public problems.

The project was officially launched in May 2016 and, since its inception, has involved more than 1,400 organizations with 68,000 beneficiaries. By 2023, a total of 150 experiments had been funded, from which 11 strategies and reference centers

were established with their own structures and dynamics, involving actors from different sectors of society, with a focus on critical areas such as cybersecurity, mobility, climate change, and aging. Direct communication and participation channels were also established with the public (open and cross-border budgets), along with a ‘think tank’ in which societal organizations representative of the public policy ecosystems were involved. This ‘think tank’ served as a space for reflection and debate on the threats, challenges, and solutions facing Gipuzkoa, and its work had real implications for policymaking (Barandiarán et al., 2023).

Analysis of this government program showed that developing collaborative governance entails significant changes to governance structures and procedures (Canel, Luoma-aho, & Barandiarán, 2020). In terms of communication, research has shown that developing collaborative governance leads public authorities to interact more frequently with stakeholders, transforming an initial ‘selling’ approach to communication into a ‘listening’ and learning approach. Therefore, the role of communication within a collaborative governance program became more about inviting people to act together and take joint action than about one-way communication. This led the researchers to conclude that collaborative governance is, in itself, communication (Muñoz, 2023), and if so, the development and implementation of governmental programs of collaborative governance require specific listening organizational structures, tools, and attitudes.

The assumption underlying this research is that collaborative governance involves building relationships at the heart of management, and relationships cannot be built without listening-based communication (Canel et al., 2022). This article explores and reports on a systematic listening process conducted with policymakers to improve their listening skills and better develop a collaborative governance program. The listening process was put in place throughout the government’s term of office between May 2019 and May 2023, and researchers collected data to track the evolution of policymakers’ attitudes towards and reflections on listening.

METHODOLOGY APPROACH AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This manuscript adopts a case study methodology to explore the dynamics of collaborative governance and listeningbased communication within the *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* initiative in the Basque Country. The case study approach is well-suited to examining complex, contextdependent phenomena; it enables theory development, refinement, or extension through close engagement with empirical reality; and allows for indepth analysis of processes, mechanisms, and outcomes associated with a specific reality (Merriam, 1988), in this case, a regional project. By centering the research on *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* as an illustrative case,

the study generates nuanced insights into how participatory practices and the institutionalization of listening contribute to democratic innovation.

The methodological design was guided by principles of case study research, emphasizing both the depth and transferability of insights. Findings from Etorkizuna Eraikiz are discussed in relation to their theoretical and practical implications for collaborative governance, with attention to the potential lessons for similar initiatives in other contexts. This methodological framing ensures that the study not only advances understanding of the phenomenon under investigation but also offers actionable knowledge for practitioners and policymakers.

Among its unique features, Etorkizuna Eraikiz stands out for institutionalizing listening practices within its participatory mechanisms—such as deliberative forums and collaborative workshops—where participants’ voices are systematically integrated into decision-making processes. This approach exemplifies listening-based communication as central to collaborative governance, enabling mutual understanding, co-creation of solutions, and shared ownership of outcomes. As an exemplary case, Etorkizuna Eraikiz illustrates how attentive communication can transform institutional relationships and foster more inclusive, responsive governance models, offering valuable lessons for similar initiatives worldwide.

This research explores a novel connection between communication and collaborative governance, and is guided by the following research question: *What ways do policymakers’ experiences and interpretations of citizen feedback shape organizational listening practices, and what do these practices tell about the role of listening-based communication in developing collaborative governance?*

To help policymakers develop listening skills and promote a culture of listening that includes the “Seven Canons of Listening” (Macnamara, 2016, 2024), a listening process was devised that involved collaborative reflection on feedback from society. The listening process was introduced during the 2019–2023 term of government and consisted of six sessions that ran from March 2021 to February 2023. For each session:

- a) Prior to the face-to-face meeting, policymakers were surveyed about what they thought citizens’ responses had been in relation to various issues regarding social trends and behaviors that relate to public policies. These public opinion data were taken from the *Sociómetro*, an entity attached to the Provincial Council that regularly collects feedback from citizens.
- b) At the face-to-face meeting, data were presented on the differences between the responses that policymakers assume citizens will give and citizens’ actual responses.
- c) At the end of the meeting, participants were asked to provide qualitative responses to questions aimed at triggering reflections on the concept, practice, purpose, and contribution of listening for policy-making.

Therefore, the data for analysis include:

1. Quantitative data comparing citizens' responses on certain social issues (such as the consequences of the pandemic and public and social policies) and public sector organizations (their performance and trust in them), and policymakers' assumptions about citizens' responses. Citizens' response data were collected by the *Sociometro* (N=1,200 citizens from Gipuzkoa via telephone). For policymakers' responses, a specific sheet was sent to participants, including selected items from the citizens' survey, and they were asked what they thought citizens had responded to (N=18; the panel ran for 6 sessions). We are aware that this N for policymakers was insufficient for a consistent quantitative analysis, and, in this regard, we want to stress that these data were used merely to show policymakers the gap between their responses and citizens' responses and to subsequently trigger discussion and reflection.
2. Qualitative data, including reflective responses to questions from two questionnaires. The first questionnaire looked at the gap between policymakers' responses and citizens' responses with questions such as:
 - What surprised you and why?
 - What do these data tell you about civil society?
 - What do these data tell you about you as a politician/policymaker?

Participants discussed responses to these questions in groups.

The second questionnaire was distributed at the end of the session to collect data on what policymakers had learned from the session and the listening process, focusing on the concept, practice, purpose, and contribution of listening to policymaking. Questions included:

- What do you know today about civil society that you did not know before?
- Are you able to identify the implications of what you learned today as part of your work as a policymaker?
- Why is it important for you to collect feedback from citizens?
- What is the hardest thing for you to make sense of in the citizens' feedback data?
- What value do you place on the opinion of Gipuzkoan citizens to help you do your job better and why?
- To what extent is this listening process helping you learn more about citizens?

It was decided to bring an emic perspective to the fore by making use of grounded theory (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Therefore, the core of the data was the qualitative responses given by participants when trying to make sense of feedback from society about public issues and policies. These qualitative data were thematically analyzed. According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79), “thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data”, and despite the wide discussion on its strengths and weaknesses (Braun & Clarke, 2006), there is agreement that it is a useful method for qualitative analysis of diverse data. Thematic analysis is not ‘wedded to any pre-existing theoretical framework’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81).

Following Braun and Clarke’s (2012) criteria for high-quality thematic analysis—and drawing on concrete applications such as Fay (2011)—we undertook the following steps. First, the data were read and reread to conduct open coding of participants’ responses. Recurring patterns in the data were used to identify themes. Finally, axial coding was applied to explore connections between categories and to merge those with overlapping conceptual content.

FINDINGS

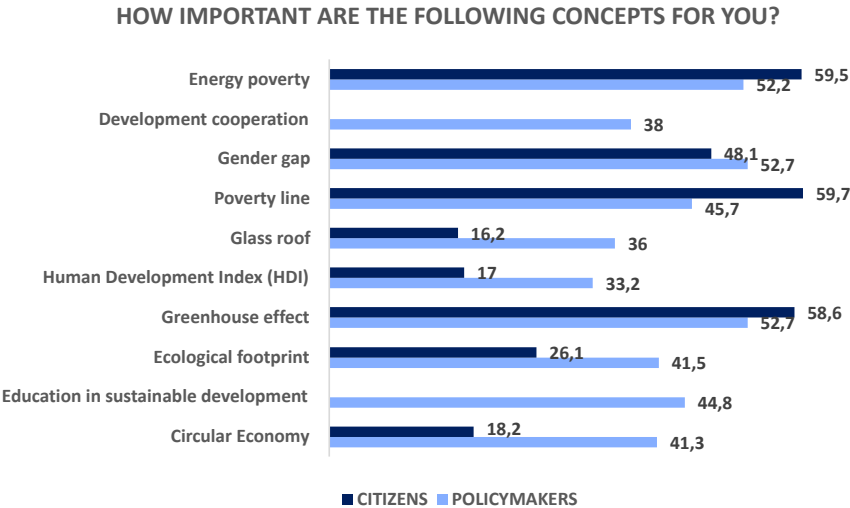
The presentation of findings has been arranged in line with the logic of the data collection. Firstly, certain quantitative data are included to illustrate the gap that emerged from comparing policymakers’ and citizens’ responses. As mentioned earlier, these data are being reported to show what informed participants’ qualitative reflections, based on the understanding that the goal of this research is not to gauge the size of the gap, but to explore policymakers’ attitudes towards it. After introducing the gap, the findings evidenced in the qualitative data representing policy makers’ reflections –the core of this research data– are reported.

BECOMING AWARE OF THE GAP BETWEEN “US-THE POLITICIANS” AND “THEM-THE CITIZENS”

At the face-to-face session, participants were shown data demonstrating the existence of a gap regarding several issues related to citizens’ behaviors and attitudes towards public policies. The first session included several items on the changes caused by the pandemic. On the whole, data show that policymakers thought that citizens had changed more as a result of the pandemic than they actually had changed. The gap is particularly apparent in their priorities regarding social issues: the data show that policymakers are not aware of citizens’ priorities in terms of social and public policies. Specifically, participants were asked what they thought citizens’ concerns were regarding several social issues. Figure

2 represents the percentage of those whose responses were “important” and “very important”.

Figure 1. Importance attached to social issues

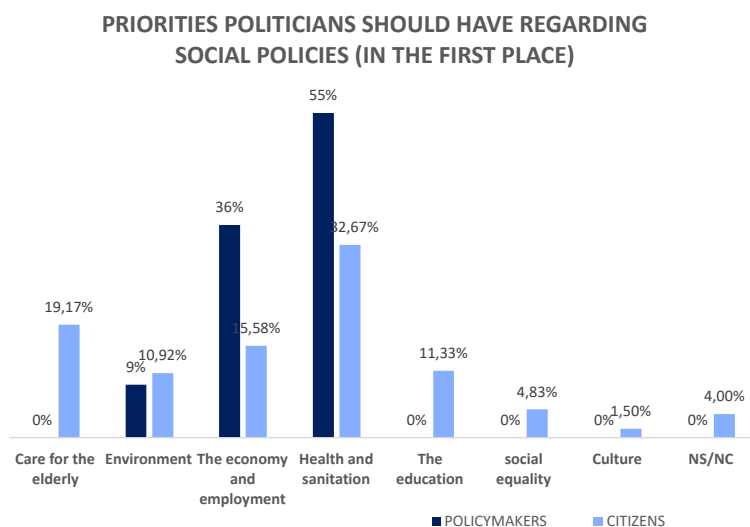


Source: Own elaboration

Figure 1 shows that, except for the gender gap, where responses are closer, there is a significant gap across all other social issues. Policymakers underestimate citizens’ concerns about the poverty line and about energy poverty. Interestingly, when policymakers overestimate citizens’ concerns, that is when the issues assessed are expressed in technical language (e.g., glass roof, ecological footprint, human development index): it may be the case that citizens are not as knowledgeable about these technical concepts as policymakers think they are. The largest gaps can be seen in the importance given to cooperation on development (where policymakers believe that the importance given by citizens is 38%) and education for sustainable development (44.8%), where, in fact, the importance reported by citizens was zero.

Data were also collected on the priorities that citizens think politicians should have, and again, data show there is a gap between these responses and what policymakers thought citizens would respond.

Figure 2. A gap regarding the priorities that politicians should have



Source: Own elaboration

Figure 2 shows that policymakers are unaware of the priorities citizens feel they should have. There is, on the one hand, an overestimation with regard to “the economy and employment”, and “health and sanitation”: policymakers believe that these issues are perceived as being twice as important as citizens actually perceive them to be. At the other extreme, there are social issues which policymakers believe citizens do not perceive as important, where they actually do: “care for older people” (19.17%) and “education” (11.3%).

After presenting data on the gap, participants were first asked to complete a qualitative questionnaire about the meaning of the data, then to discuss in groups what the data meant, and finally to complete a second qualitative questionnaire to capture their reflections on listening.

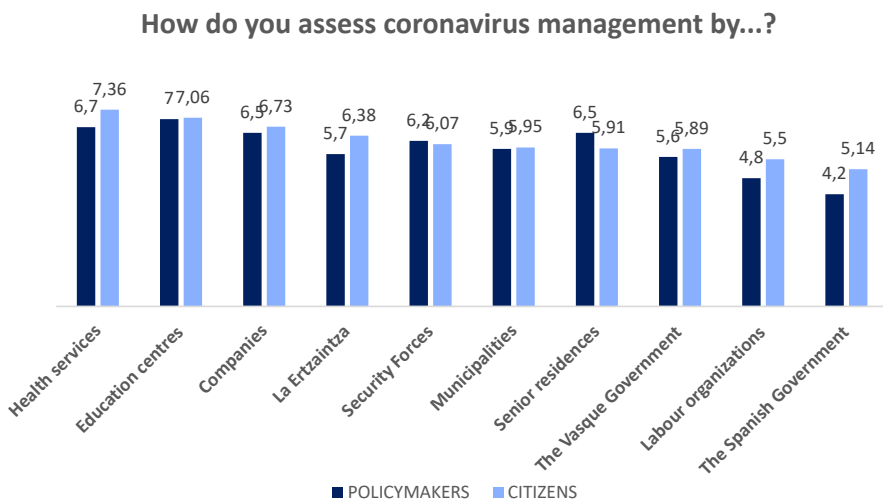
Analysis of the qualitative data yields an emerging recurrent category of awareness of a gap that participants did not expect. It seems that reflecting on this gap made policymakers feel out of touch with citizens and more aware of the need to collect and consider citizens’ feedback. The following quote is one example of many others referring to this awareness:

“This kind of information is essential to bring about a straightforward dialogue with Gipuzkoa’s citizenry (...) it is necessary to conduct an analysis of this information, to make sense of it properly”.

THE SURPRISE OF A LESS HOSTILE AND MORE POSITIVE CIVIL SOCIETY THAN EXPECTED

Data were collected during the pandemic about how citizens were behaving in terms of resilience, and also about complying with hygiene measures and social distancing to prevent them from catching the virus. Citizens were also asked to assess how different entities were performing in dealing with the coronavirus crisis. The quantitative data (see Figure 3, which shows mean scores on a scale of 1 to 10) indicate that policymakers expected citizens to be slightly more negative.

Figure 3. Comparative assessments of organizational management of the pandemic



Source: Own elaboration

Strikingly, for almost all of the entities included in this item, citizens were slightly more positive than policymakers expected about how different organizations performed.

The analysis of the qualitative data collected from policymakers' response to the question of 'What has surprised you today?' shows a common recurrent of positive surprise, as is shown in the following excerpts:

"It surprises me that assessments [about institutions' performance] were not as adverse as I imagined";

"[I was surprised by] society's high level of self-criticism and self-blame for the pandemic".

Of particular interest were the positive categorizations that policymakers attributed to civil society, thereby acknowledging the gap between themselves and citizens, as the following excerpts show: *“Society is more mature than I thought.”* *“We always believe society is more vulnerable to surrounding influences than it actually is.”* *“Disaffection is not as widespread as I thought”.*

This pleasant surprise about society is remarkable, bearing in mind that the listening process was carried out as part of a collaborative governance program, through which policymakers were attempting to engage civil society. A recurrent semantic code emerges from the data about the listening process of help to become more aware of the high capital they have in the citizens they want to engage with, as the following excerpt shows: *“I believe it is useful to home in on the fact that this ‘black box’ which is society, is showing signs of life”.* Engaging becomes easier for a public sector organization when it is made explicit that the other side trusts it. The following excerpt provides a good end to this section about this positive surprise: *“They [citizens] trust us more than we think. We must gain greater knowledge if we are to get it right. We must boost our ability to empathize with people’s feelings”.*

LEARNING TO LISTEN THROUGHOUT THE LISTENING PROCESS

Across successive sessions, policymakers perceived a gradual convergence between their assessments and citizens’ views, which they attributed to repeated engagement with feedback and collective reflection. Participants described the listening process as a learning experience that enhanced their understanding of citizens’ needs, expectations, and perceptions of public action. This learning was not limited to acquiring information; it also involved developing greater attentiveness to how citizen feedback should be interpreted and used. As awareness of the gap increased, so did policymakers’ recognition of listening as a necessary condition for exercising public responsibility more effectively.

The following are some of the excerpts:

“We have improved in terms of putting ourselves in the shoes of the people of Gipuzkoa. The gaps are now considerably smaller”;

“We are moving closer to what citizens really think”.

This closeness to citizens’ perceptions led participants to positively appraise the listening process through which they learned about citizens’ needs and expectations. More specifically, the listening process was categorized as being useful when it came to exercising public responsibilities, as these excerpts show:

“These sessions have shown me how citizens perceive certain realities to which we would otherwise have no access.”

“These sessions have given me great insights into society”.

COMPLETING THE CIRCLE? THE CHALLENGE OF LISTENING TO IMPROVE POLICYMAKING.

As mentioned earlier, the listening process analyzed was conducted within a collaborative governance program to better understand those whom policymakers sought to engage and collaborate with. What do the data tell us about policymakers' willingness to give a response through policymaking?

While policymakers expressed a strong normative commitment to listening and its relevance for democratic governance, concrete links between listening and policy change remained uneven. Participants emphasized the importance of integrating citizen feedback into policymaking, but often struggled to articulate specific policy implications beyond communication practices. The most tangible examples emerged from the communication department, where listening-informed messaging strategies oriented toward empathy, transparency, and trust. Overall, the findings indicate that listening was widely valued as a democratic and relational practice, but its translation into systematic policy responses remained a continuing challenge within the collaborative governance process.

DISCUSSION

This research explored the experiences and lessons of public leaders participating in a collaborative governance process, focusing on how a listening process implemented within that framework contributes to the development of collaborative governance.

In what ways do policymakers' experiences and interpretations of citizen feedback shape organizational listening practices?

The listening process implemented exposed participants to a range of data depicting a gap between citizens' opinions and judgments about social issues, public policies, and the performance of public sector institutions, and policymakers' expectations of them. In doing so, the process held political leaders up to a mirror, revealing the extent to which they were sympathetic to and in tune with those with whom they wanted to collaborate. Policymakers' engagement with citizen feedback was shown to trigger new awareness of gaps between institutional and public perspectives, encourage the development of shared values around listening, and, to some extent, facilitate adaptive approaches to joint decision-making.

Taken together, these findings extend scholarship on organizational listening by showing how participation in collaborative governance shapes policymakers' listening orientations and practices. Interpreted through Macnamara's Seven Canons of Listening, sustained engagement with citizen feedback fostered recognition, acknowledgment, and reflexive attention rather than procedural compliance. In contrast to prior studies documenting selective or instrumental listening in public sector organizations (Macnamara, 2017), exposure to discrepancies between policymakers' assumptions and citizens' expressed views prompted reflexivity and a shared sense of responsibility for informational gaps. The collaborative governance setting provided the cultural conditions for cultivating an "architecture of listening" (Macnamara, 2013, 2024), even in the absence of fully developed listening infrastructures, suggesting that collaborative policymaking can function as a generative context for embedding listening-based communication within public institutions. This response aligns with deliberative accounts that conceptualize listening as a democratic practice grounded in relational engagement (Dobson, 2014; Morrell, 2010).

The findings further indicate that engagement with citizen feedback strengthened policymakers' normative commitment to listening and reinforced its perceived value for democratic governance. Rather than being experienced as a formal requirement, listening was understood as a meaningful practice that legitimized investing time and resources despite organizational constraints. This provides empirical support for normative claims in the literature that listening is foundational to democratic governance (Morrell, 2010; Mansbridge & Latura, 2017; Ospina, 2016), while showing how such commitments emerge through collaborative policymaking processes.

This research explores a novel connection between listening-based communication and collaborative governance. The findings show that the shared normative approach to policymaking-oriented listening provides a cultural foundation for developing an effective architecture of listening. Even where institutional capacities are limited, collaborative policymaking enables mutual understanding and helps policymakers move beyond individual agendas to co-construct priorities with civil society.

The results also indicate that listening must be collaborative to be effective: collecting citizens' input alone is insufficient without joint reflection to interpret it.

Finally, collaborative governance initiatives create new opportunities for gathering listening data, to the extent that collaboration entails joint actions, and acting together provides knowledge in both directions.

This potential for listening data helps complement what has been found elsewhere regarding the role communication plays in collaborative governance (Muñoa, 2023). An analysis of the communications department of *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* showed that communication was focused more on inviting people to act

together and undertake joint actions than on one-way reporting on a project. The development of collaborative governance led public authorities to interact more frequently with stakeholders, and this dense interaction transformed an initial 'selling' communication attitude into a 'listening' attitude. The findings of this research show that acting together becomes a rich source of listening data, and if these listening data are interpreted collaboratively, they may form the basis for policymakers' openness to organizational change and adaptation to joint policymaking.

This study contributes to theory by establishing a novel empirical connection between listeningbased communication and collaborative governance, repositioning listening as a constitutive mechanism of collaboration rather than a normative prerequisite or supportive condition. While existing literature has emphasized the democratic value of listening (Morrell, 2010; Mansbridge & Latura, 2017) and identified organizational listening as an underdeveloped capacity in public institutions (Macnamara, 2013, 2016, 2019), empirical accounts of how listening is enacted, learned, and institutionalized within collaborative governance remain limited. By examining policymakers' lived experiences of interpreting citizen feedback, this research shows how listening practices are shaped through collaborative sensemaking processes embedded in policymaking itself. In doing so, it extends organizational listening theory by demonstrating that listening orientations are not merely individual competencies or cultural dispositions, but relational and processual accomplishments produced through structured interaction.

The study also shows that listeningbased communication supports collaborative governance only when citizen input is collectively interpreted. Collecting feedback alone proved insufficient; collaborative reflection was necessary to make sense of citizens' perspectives and translate them into shared understandings. This highlights sensemaking as a core listening competence within collaborative governance, reinforcing recent work on collaborative governance capacities (Sørensen & Torfing, 2019).

The implications of these findings must be understood through the logic of analytic generalization that underpins qualitative case study research. Drawing on an indepth examination of a listeningbased collaborative governance initiative in the Basque Country (the Gipuzkoa province), the study does not seek to generalize outcomes statistically, but to theorize mechanisms through which listeningbased communication can contribute to collaborative governance. In this case, listening emerges not as a discrete procedural step, but as a constitutive communicative practice through which shared meanings, reflexivity, and openness to institutional change may be produced. By foregrounding policymakers' situated experiences of engaging with citizen feedback, the case illustrates how

developing an “architecture of listening” may strengthen collaborative governance under specific institutional and political conditions.

At the same time, the findings are shaped by clear context dependencies that delimit their scope of inference. The case is embedded in a regional governance context characterized by a sustained commitment to democratic innovation, an existing collaborative governance program, and organizational arrangements that enable repeated interaction between policymakers and civil society actors. The listening process involved a bounded group of policymakers participating in a systematized and facilitated reflection on citizen feedback, and the qualitative design privileges depth of interpretation over representativeness. These features caution against assuming that similar listening processes would generate comparable effects in contexts marked by different administrative cultures, political incentives, power asymmetries, or levels of institutional trust.

Despite these constraints, the case offers analytically transferable insights that may inform theory and practice beyond the empirical setting studied. Rather than proposing direct replication, the findings identify mechanisms—such as the collective interpretation of citizen input, the emergence of shared normative orientations toward listening, and the embedding of listening within policymaking processes—that can be examined in other collaborative governance contexts. The value of the case lies in its capacity to specify how listeningbased communication operates within collaborative governance, and under what conditions it may foster reflexivity and adaptive capacity. Scholars and practitioners can use these insights as sensitizing concepts to assess whether and how similar mechanisms might be activated in other institutional settings, taking into account local governance traditions, organizational capacities, and stakeholder relationships. In this way, the study contributes to cumulative theory building while recognizing that the effects of listeningbased communication are contingent, contextbound, and subject to reexamination in each new case.

CONCLUSION

This study examined a previously underexplored connection between listeningbased government communication and the development of collaborative governance through an indepth case study of the *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* initiative in the Basque Country, and more specifically within the provincial government of Gipuzkoa. Situated in a regional context characterized by a sustained commitment to democratic innovation, strong public institutions, and an established collaborative governance program, the case provides a privileged empirical setting for exploring how organizational listening is enacted, learned, and valued by policymakers collaborating with civil society. Rather than treating listening

as an abstract democratic ideal, the study shows how listeningbased communication is experienced and interpreted by policymakers when it is embedded in concrete policymaking processes.

Findings indicate that, in the Gipuzkoa context studied, participation in a systematized listening process exposed policymakers to discrepancies between their assumptions and citizens' expressed views, triggering reflexivity and a reevaluation of their relationship with civil society. These experiences contributed to the emergence of a shared normative orientation toward listening, understood not merely as a procedural requirement but as a meaningful condition for democratic governance and effective collaboration. Within *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*, listeningbased communication supported collaborative governance by fostering shared understandings, reinforcing policymakers' willingness to engage with citizen input, and legitimizing the allocation of time and resources to listening activities despite organizational and political constraints.

At the same time, the conclusions drawn from this research are shaped by the specific institutional, cultural, and political conditions of Gipuzkoa. The presence of an existing collaborative governance framework, repeated interaction between policymakers and societal actors, and a political culture receptive to experimentation and reflexivity provided enabling conditions for the listening process analyzed. These contextual features caution against assuming that similar outcomes would automatically follow in settings marked by less familiarity with collaborative governance initiatives, weaker participatory traditions, or more adversarial relationships between government and civil society. The case, therefore, does not support claims of statistical generalization, but instead contributes through analytic generalization by specifying mechanisms—such as collective sensemaking, reflexive interpretation of citizen feedback, and the cultural grounding of an architecture of listening—that may be examined in other contexts.

Despite its contextspecific nature, the study offers lessons of broader relevance for scholars and practitioners interested in collaborative governance. It suggests that listeningbased communication is most likely to contribute to collaboration when it is integrated into policymaking processes, supported by opportunities for collective reflection, and embedded within organizational cultures that value openness and learning. For practitioners, the Basque case illustrates that developing collaborative governance is not only a matter of designing participatory structures, but also of cultivating listening collaborative capacities among policymakers themselves. For researchers, the study highlights the value of case-based inquiry for advancing theory on organizational listening by showing how listening operates as a relational and processual practice within collaborative governance arrangements.

In sum, this research contributes to debates on democratic governance by demonstrating how listeningbased communication functions in practice within the specific regional context of Gipuzkoa. By grounding its conclusions in the Basque case while articulating analytically transferable insights, the study advances understanding of how listening can support collaborative governance, while recognizing that its effects are contextbound and must be reexamined in each institutional setting.

REFERENCES

- Agranoff, R. (2006). Inside collaborative networks: Ten lessons for public managers. *Public Administration Review*, 66(s1), 56–65.
- Ansell, C., & Gash, A. (2008). Collaborative governance in theory and practice. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 18(4), 543–571. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mum032>
- Barandiarán, X., Murphy, A., & Canel, M. J. (2022). ¿Qué aporta la escucha al Capital Social? Lecciones de un proceso de aprendizaje de líderes públicos. *Gestión y Política Pública*, 31(1), 1–30.
- Barandiaran, X., Canel, M., & Bouckaert, G. (2023). *Building Collaborative Governance in Times of Uncertainty: Pracademic Lessons from the Basque Gipuzkoa Province*. Leuven University Press.
- Barbour, J. (2017). Listening and organizing. In C. Scott & L. Lewis (Eds.), *The international encyclopedia of organizational communication* (pp. 1–5). Wiley Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118955567.wbieoc126>
- Bellah, R., R. Madsen, W. Sullivan, A. Swidler y S. Tipton (1991). *The Good Society*. New York: Knopf.
- Bimber, B., Flanagan, A., & Stohl, C. (2012). *Collective action in organizations: Interaction and engagement in an era of technological change*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bingham, L. B., Nabatchi, T., & O’Leary, R. (2005). The New Governance: Practices and Processes for Stakeholder and Citizen Participation in the Work of Government. *Public Administration Review*, 65(5), 547–558.
- Birkland, T. (2020). *An introduction to the policy process: Theories, concepts, and models of public policy making*. Routledge.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper (Ed.), *Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology* (pp. 57–71). American Psychological Association.
- Canel, M. J., Luoma-aho, V., & Barandiarán, X. (2020). Public Sector Communication and publicly valuable intangible assets. In V. Luoma-aho & M.-J. Canel (Eds.), *Handbook of Public Sector Communication* (pp. 100–114). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Canel, M., Barandiaran, X., & Murphy, A. (2022). What does learning by listening bring to citizen engagement? Lessons from a government program. *Public Relations Review*, 48(1).
- Christensen, I. (2024). Understanding tradeoffs in the institutional design and leadership of collaborative governance. *Public Performance & Management Review*, 47(2), 263–290.
- Crosby, B. y J. Bryson (2017). Why Leadership of Public Leadership Research Matters: And What to Do about It. *Public Management Review*, 20(9), 1265–1286

- Delli Carpini M. (2020). Public sector communication and democracy. In V. Luoma-aho & M.J. Canel (Eds.) *The Handbook of Public Sector Communication* (pp. 31–44). Wiley Blackwell.
- Dobson, A. (2014). *Listening for democracy: Recognition, representation, reconciliation*. Oxford University Press.
- Dreher, T. (2009). Listening across difference: Media and multiculturalism beyond the politics of voice. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 23(4), 445–458. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304310903015712>
- Dreher, T. (2010). Speaking up or being heard? Community media interventions and the politics of listening. *Media, Culture and Society*, 32(1), 85–103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443709350099>
- Emerson, K., Nabatchi, T., & Balogh, S. (2012). An integrative framework for collaborative governance. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 22(1), 1–29.
- Emerson, K., & Nabatchi, T. (2015). *Collaborative Governance Regimes*. Georgetown University Press.
- Fay, M. J. (2011). Informal communication of co-workers: A thematic analysis of messages. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, 6(3), 212–229.
- Garland, R. (2021). *Government communications and the crisis of trust: From political spin to post-truth*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere*. Cambridge, UK: Polity. (Original work published 1962)
- Head, B. (2007). The public service and government communication: Pressures and dilemmas. In S. Young (Ed.), *Government Communication in Australia* (pp. 36–50). Cambridge University Press.
- Howlett, M. (2009). Government communication as a policy tool: A framework for analysis. *Canadian Political Science Review*, 3(2), 23–37. <https://doi.org/10.24124/c677/2009134>
- Kang, M., & Moon, B. (2023). Developing organizational employee communication competency diagnostics. In K. Place (Ed.), *Organizational Listening for Strategic Communication: Building Theory and Practice* (pp. 41–62). Routledge.
- Lewis, L. (2020). *The power of strategic listening*. Rowman Littlefield.
- Luoma-aho, V. & Canel, M. (Eds.) (2020) *The Handbook of Public Sector Communication*. Wiley Blackwell.
- Macnamara, J. (2013). Beyond voice: Audience-making and the work and architecture of listening. *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 27(1), 60–75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2013.736950>
- Macnamara, J. (2016). *Organizational listening: The missing essential in public communication*. Peter Lang.
- Macnamara, J. (2017). *Creating a 'democracy for everyone': Strategies for increasing listening and engagement by government*. The London School of Economics and Political Science and the University of Technology Sydney. <https://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/assets/documents/research/2017/MacnamaraReport2017.pdf>
- Macnamara, J. (2018). Towards a theory and practice of organizational listening. *International Journal of Listening*, 32(1), 1–23. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10904018.2017.1375076>
- Macnamara, J. (2019). Explicating listening in organization-public communication: Theory, practices, technologies. *International Journal of Communication*, 13, 5183–5204. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/11996/2839>
- Macnamara, J. (2020). Public Sector Communication Measurement and Evaluation. In V. Luoma-aho & M. J. Canel (Eds.), *Handbook of Public Sector Communication* (pp. 361–365). Wiley Blackwell.

- Macnamara, J. (2024). *Organizational listening II: Expanding the concept, theory, and practice*. Peter Lang.
- Mansbridge, J., & A. Latura. (2017). The Polarization Crisis in the US and the Future of Listening. In T. Norris (Ed.), *Strong Democracy in Crisis: Promise or Peril?* (29–54). Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Merriam, S. B. (1988). *Case study research in education: A qualitative approach*. Jossey-Bass.
- Morrell, M.E. (2010). *Empathy and Democracy: Feeling, Thinking and Deliberation*. Penn State University Press.
- Muñoa, I. (2023). Communicating for collaborative governance. In X. Barandiarán, M. . Canel, & G. Bouckaert (Eds.), *Building Collaborative Governance in Times of Uncertainty. Pracademic Lessons from the Basque Gipuzkoa Province* (pp. 139–156). KU Leuven University Press.
- Norris, P. (2011). *Democratic deficit: Critical citizens revisited*. Cambridge University Press.
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. (2021). OECD report on public communication: The global context and the way forward. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/22f8031c-en>
- Ospina, S. (2016). Collective Leadership and Context in Public Administration: Bridging Public Leadership Research and Leadership Studies, *Public Administration Review*, 77(2), 275–287.
- Przeworski, A. (2019). *Crisis of democracy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Qin, Y., & Men, L. (2021). Why does listening matter inside the organization? The impact of internal listening on employee-organization relationships. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 33(5), 365–386. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2022.2034631>
- Reinikainen, H., Kari, J., & Luoma-aho, V. (2020). Generation Z and organizational listening on social media. *Media and Communication*, 8(2). 185–196. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v8i2.2772>
- Rice, R., & Atkins, C. (2013). *Public communication campaigns* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Sanders, K., & Canel, M. (2013). *Government communication: Cases and challenges*. Bloomsbury.
- Sirianni, C. (2010). *Investing in Democracy: Engaging Citizens in Collaborative Governance*. Brookings Institution Press.
- Smith, N. (2010). The public administrator as collaborative citizen: Three conceptions. *Public Administration Quarterly*, 34, 238–262.
- Sørensen, E., & Torfing, J. (2019). Designing institutional platforms and arenas for interactive political leadership. *Public Management Review*, 21(10), 1443–1463.
- Uslaner, E. (Ed.) (2018), *The Oxford Handbook of Social and Political Trust*. Oxford University Press.
- Van der Meer, T. (2017). Political trust and the crisis of democracy. *Oxford research encyclopedia of politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Agranoff, R. (2006). Inside collaborative networks: Ten lessons for public managers. *Public Administration Review*, 66(s1), 56–65.
- Ansell, C., & Gash, A. (2007). Collaborative governance in theory and practice'. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 18(5), 543–571.
- Barandiaran, X., Canel, M. ., & Bouckaert, G. (2023). *Building Collaborative Governance in Times of Uncertainty: Pracademic Lessons from the Basque Gipuzkoa Province*. Leuven University Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper (Ed.), *Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology* (pp. 57–71). American Psychological Association.
- Emerson, K., & Nabatchi, T. (2015). *Collaborative Governance Regimes*. Georgetown University Press.
- Emerson, K., Nabatchi, T., & Balogh, S. (2012). An integrative framework for collaborative governance. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 22(1), 1–29.

- Worthington, D., & Bodie, G. (2018). *The sourcebook of listening research: Methodology and measures*. Wiley Blackwell.
- Wolvin, A., & Coakley, C. (1994). Listening competency. *Journal of International Listening Association*, 8(1), 148–160. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10904018.1994.10499135>
- Yip, J., & Fisher, C. (2022). Listening in organizations: A synthesis and future agenda. *Academy of Management Annals*, 16(2). <https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2020.0367>