

**Managing a cacophony of views:  
Findings from interviews with public relations practitioners in Australia**

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Deetz (2007) states: “Good communication rests not in the finding of common ground but in assuring requisite diversity and contestation coupled with the ability to invent creative options that sustain mutual commitment, difference, and mutual accomplishment of diverse goals.” (p. 268) When social problems arise, communication could and should be used to co-generate new solutions by generating interactions amongst individuals with diverse interests. Despite this, the contestation of ideas is only possible if individuals, many of whom have conflicting interests, are willing to listen to and consider others’ interests while also expressing their own. According to Kim and Grunig (2021), individuals are prone to engage in cognitive retrogression, that is, they make cognitive and communicative efforts to find evidence to support their preferred conclusions.

For this reason, even if organisations invest resources in organisational listening to gather diverse views, they still face the challenge of having to deal with a cacophony of diverse views among stakeholders (Macnamara, 2016), who are interested in expressing their own views but not in understanding or accepting others’ views. In managing organisational-public relationships, public relations practitioners are the designers and managers of organisational listening activities which seek to empower voices for ideas to be contested.

Although there is ample research on how organisations should incorporate voices into decision making, there is a lack of research on how practitioners design organisational listening activities to ensure that diverse views are heard and more importantly, contested.

In this Arthur W. Page Center-funded study, we conducted phone interviews with 28 Australian public relations practitioners between November 2020 and February 2021 and made the following findings:

1. **Using different channels:** Practitioners create the structure and mechanism for organisational listening. It is ideal to engage with diverse voices including the marginalised and disengaged but the stakeholders who are willing to express their views are often the loud majority, not the silent majority. A variety of channels are used to collate different views. Despite this, practitioners’ roles are limited to synthesising different views and presenting them to management. Ultimately, it is management who makes the final decision.
2. **Setting expectations:** Practitioners emphasise that listening activities can affect expectations from stakeholders. Stakeholders, who have expressed their views, expect that their voices will have an influence over the outcomes. But there are differences between *listening* and *hearing*, between *hearing* and *understanding*, and between *understanding* and *decision making*. Not all stakeholders’ feedback can be implemented. Practitioners must be careful in setting expectations and commitments and negotiating outcomes with stakeholders.
3. **Putting stakeholders on the same page:** Given that stakeholders have different interests, practitioners are responsible for providing some information to them so that they can have some common information to start with before expressing their views. When creating this information, practitioners should be aware of the decision-making criteria before engaging with stakeholders so that stakeholders are aware of what can and cannot be done. Practitioners should also oversee the decision-making and implementation processes and provide stakeholders with feedback on how decisions are made. (498 words)

## References

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