

(How) do universities listen? Evidence from institutional websites of the world's top universities

¿(Cómo) escuchan las universidades? Un estudio sobre los sitios web de las mejores universidades del mundo

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Abstract:

Introduction: this study investigates the implementation of organizational listening methods in Higher Education through a comparative analysis of institutional websites from top global universities and leading Lithuanian institutions. Emphasizing the role of these websites as pivotal digital platforms, the research aims to discern the extent to which universities facilitate two-way communication with stakeholders through digital platforms. **Methodology:** Websites were selected based on world university rankings, encompassing institutions from each continent. Websites were selected based on global university rankings, spanning institutions across continents. Qualitative content analysis employed predefined and emergent categories to evaluate interactivity and organizational listening features on these platforms. **Findings** reveal consistent stakeholder mapping but significant disparities in communication tools and channels, which impacts real-time, asynchronous, and symmetric engagement effectiveness. Communication structures range from integrated governance roles to fragmented responsibilities, influencing stakeholder accessibility and institutional transparency. **Discussion:** implications for organizational communication practices are discussed, highlighting strategies to enhance stakeholder engagement via institutional websites. The study underscores the pivotal role of communication management teams in fostering transparency and responsiveness. **Conclusions:** advocating for leveraging technological advancements, conclusions propose transforming websites into proactive platforms for organizational listening. Recommendations emphasize developing tailored

communication strategies to optimize engagement and effectiveness in Higher Education contexts.

Keywords: organizational listening; higher education; university; digital communication; websites; stakeholders; interactivity, two-way communication.

Resumen:

Introducción: Este estudio investiga métodos de escucha organizacional en la enseñanza superior mediante análisis comparativo de sitios web de principales universidades globales y las tres mejores de Lituania. Se enfatiza el rol de estos sitios como plataformas digitales y evalúa cómo facilitan la comunicación bidireccional con partes interesadas. **Metodología:** Se seleccionaron los sitios web según clasificaciones mundialmente conocidas, incluyendo instituciones de cada continente. El análisis cualitativo utilizó categorías predefinidas y emergentes para evaluar interactividad y características de escucha organizativa. Resultados: Se identificó un mapeo consistente de partes interesadas, con disparidades en herramientas y canales que afectan la participación efectiva en tiempo real, asíncrona y simétrica. Estructuras de comunicación variaron de roles integrados a responsabilidades fragmentadas, influenciando accesibilidad y transparencia. **Discusión:** Se abordan implicaciones para prácticas de comunicación organizacional, enfocándose en soluciones para mejorar el compromiso a través de sitios web institucionales. Se destaca el papel crucial de equipos de gestión de comunicación. **Conclusiones:** Al promover el aprovechamiento de avances tecnológicos, se propone transformar los sitios web en plataformas proactivas para la escucha organizacional, recomendando el desarrollo de estrategias de comunicación adaptadas para optimizar el compromiso y la eficacia en contextos de educación superior.

Palabras clave: escucha organizacional; enseñanza superior; universidad; comunicación digital; sitios web; partes interesadas; interactividad; comunicación bidireccional.

1. Introduction

Listening, as a mode of communication, extends beyond mere auditory perception – it serves as a cornerstone alongside speech in cultivating effective organizational communication dynamics (Macnamara, 2022). Macnamara (2022) defines organizational listening as encompassing various actions: recognizing others' right to be heard, legitimizing perspectives, attentiveness, unbiased interpretation, empathy, consideration of input, and appropriate responses. These principles underscore how listening bolsters relationships, informs decision-making, builds trust, and enhances organizational reputation. Moreover, within organizational contexts, effective listening is pivotal for identifying blind spots, gauging the ramifications of decisions on public perception, and unveiling emerging demands and expectations (Fernández-Gubieda, 2024). For universities, proficient listening forms a crucial avenue for establishing reciprocal relationships with strategic stakeholders. Fernandez-Gubieda (2024) identifies three pivotal aspects of relationship cultivation through listening: comprehending stakeholders' experiences, evaluating perceptions of institutional performance and brand sentiment, and assessing public attitudes towards the university (Fernández-Gubieda & Rojas, 2023).

The interactions between universities and their stakeholders are rooted in diverse experiences and expectations, emphasizing the necessity to identify and prioritize strategic audiences. Establishing robust two-way communication channels with these stakeholders is critical, leveraging technological advancements and artificial intelligence tools while acknowledging the indispensable role of human interaction in relationship cultivation.

Given the intricate nature of organizational-level listening, this study aims to explore how leading global universities deploy methods and tools for organizational listening through their institutional websites – a primary digital medium owned and managed by universities.

1.1. Theoretical framework

Organizational listening within higher education institutions (HEIs) is situated within the broader context of communication and public relations theories, complementing and enriching traditional communication practices (Macnamara, 2016). Despite its acknowledged significance, literature on organizational listening remains relatively sparse compared to extensive discussions on communication asymmetry and dialogic communication (Macnamara, 2016, p. 9). This gap underscores the disparity in attention given to communication structures focused on outbound messaging versus those fostering genuine, reciprocal listening experiences within organizations.

According to Bimber et al. (2012), contemporary organizations engage with stakeholders through diverse communication technologies, prominently featuring institutional websites as pivotal platforms for interaction. These digital interfaces not only disseminate organizational information but also facilitate bidirectional communication, dialogue, and relationship-building (Marzena, 2015 ; Hill & White, 2000). They empower stakeholders to actively engage in communication exchanges, shaping organizational perceptions and fostering mutual understanding.

1.1.1. Relevance of the Topic

Understanding the dynamics of organizational listening within HEIs through institutional websites is crucial. Firstly, these websites serve as primary digital touchpoints for stakeholders – prospective students, current students, alumni, faculty, staff, and the wider community – seeking information and engagement with the institution (Marken, 1998). Secondly, they reflect the institution's commitment to transparency, responsiveness, and inclusivity, significantly influencing organizational trust and credibility (Yang et al., 2015).

Theoretical perspectives advocate for an integrated approach where organizational culture, policies, systems, technologies, resources, and skills converge to facilitate effective listening practices (Macnamara, 2016). This integrated approach is particularly pertinent as HEIs navigate complexities in stakeholder relations, aligning strategic communication efforts with organizational goals and societal expectations (Fernandez, 2024).

In this context, this research aims to investigate how leading global universities deploy methods and tools for organizational listening through their institutional websites. Specifically, it explores the implementation of interactive features and listening tools, the visibility of communication management functions, and the prioritization of stakeholder groups within these digital platforms. By examining these aspects, the study aims to contribute to understanding how HEIs can optimize their digital presence to foster meaningful stakeholder relationships and enhance organizational effectiveness.

As pertinently expressed by Gustavsen and Tilley (cited in Sande et al., 2017), digital communication of organizations and institutions may fall short of its potential interactivity, or it might already meet current needs adequately. However, the buzz surrounding the terms 'interactivity' and 'engagement' do not always reflect the actual interactive experience offered by today's corporate websites. Their research findings highlight the need for deeper exploration and clarification regarding how we assess and gauge the effectiveness of more symmetrical stakeholder relations and interactivity in online contexts.

1.1.2. Theoretical Perspectives on Organizational Listening

The theoretical underpinning of organizational listening posits that effective communication entails not only transmitting messages but also actively listening to and engaging with stakeholders. Macnamara (2016) argues that while organizations heavily invest in outward-facing communication strategies, insufficient attention is often paid to the infrastructure for genuine listening. This discrepancy is evident in the allocation of resources towards technologies and platforms that facilitate organizational discourse, such as websites, social media, and traditional media channels, as opposed to those supporting bidirectional communication and dialogue (Macnamara, 2016).

Bimber et al. (2012) delve into how advancements in communication technologies have expanded organizational interactions with stakeholders, highlighting institutional websites as central hubs for interactive communication. These platforms not only serve as repositories of organizational data but also enable stakeholders to actively participate in dialogue, provide feedback, and contribute to organizational decision-making processes (Marzena, 2015 ; Hill & White, 2000).

Dialogue implies at least two interlocutors able to engage in a two-way communication process developed through speaking and listening, taking turns along the interactions. Thus, listening presupposes a certain degree of interactivity.

The concept of interactivity is multifaceted and has been studied for decades by several scholars. Meikle (2014) identifies four categories of interactivity: transmissional, registrational, consultational and conversational. For the purposes pursued in this study, conversational interactivity is the most relevant type as it enables bidirectional or two-way communication whereby both interlocutors can give and receive information and create (new) meaning along the communication process.

Interactivity in mediated environments such as websites has also been examined. Durlak's exploration of interactive media developers highlighted three primary goals: to simulate face-to-face communication, to sustain this illusion, and to introduce novel communication opportunities (Durlak, 2012). Interactivity also involves a level of control over the communication process, allowing participants to exchange roles during their interactions.

Interactivity encompasses the extent to which a website engages users in reciprocal interactions during their usage. It's important to note that usability and interactivity, while related, are not interchangeable terms. A website can be highly usable if it effectively encourages interaction and is user-friendly. Besides, if interactivity of websites implies the possibility for visitors or users to alter content and its form in real time, this presupposes certain technological solutions implemented by the website designers or administrations, which should be requested by the owners (the institution), and this would reflect the intention and openness of the institution to embrace and welcome users' needs, concerns and suggestions. In short, "for a website to be interactive in any meaningful sense, it has to be

designed with two-way input as a goal” (Meikle, 2014, p. 30). Summarily, complete interactivity, according to Hansen (cited in Naval et al., 2012) necessitates mutual responsiveness where both parties react and respond to each other. Therefore, conversational interactivity needs to be technically enabled in websites to facilitate stakeholder dialogue with clearly identified and strategically addressed publics.

1.1.3. Importance of User-centric Institutional Websites in Digital Organizational Communication

Institutional websites play a pivotal role in contemporary organizational communication strategies, particularly for HEIs aiming to manage relationships with diverse stakeholder groups. As primary digital interfaces, these websites serve as gateways for stakeholders seeking information about academic programs, institutional achievements, faculty expertise, and campus life (Marken, 1998). Moreover, they function as platforms for engaging stakeholders through interactive features and listening tools, fostering transparency and accountability in organizational communications (Yang et al., 2015).

The evolving landscape of the scientific field necessitates a heightened focus on professionalizing communication efforts. This shift underscores the rising significance of public relations specialists equipped with the requisite expertise to shape institutional images and foster favourable relationships with the broader environment, including media professionals (Kohring et al., 2013). Furthermore, this dynamic is compounded by the phenomenon of science becoming increasingly mediated, a trend that has gained traction recently, further amplifying the role and impact of public relations initiatives (Walther & Jang, 2012).

The latest generation of computer-mediated communication platforms involves participatory websites, commonly referred to as Web 2.0 or social web sites. These platforms present a blend of messages sourced from various authors: central messages authored by the website's owner and user-generated content contributed by other readers. Participatory websites are characterized by elements that facilitate discussion, such as proprietor content (messages created and displayed by the main author or owner of a webpage), user-generated content (UGC- messages that participatory websites encourage, capture, and exhibit from non-proprietary visitors), deliberate aggregate user representations, and incidental aggregate user representations (Walther & Jang, 2012). This investigation primarily revolves around the first two elements concerning organizational listening tools and the potential for interaction between organizations and their website visitors. Proprietors often wield editorial control over subsequent user contributions. They may determine whether users can contribute content at all, and once posted, proprietors retain the authority to delete others' submissions, thus implying acceptance or rejection of users' contributions. The hallmark of participatory websites lies in the capability for users to slot in their own inputs and have them displayed within the webpage. User-generated content encompasses readers' reactions to either proprietor content or other user-generated messages. Typically, websites provide a form or pop-up box where users can input their comments, which are then visually juxtaposed with proprietor content. These comments often appear sequentially or in conversational threads on the same page as the proprietor's content or are accessible via hyperlinks.

A significant contribution to the measurement of website interactivity is the framework suggested by Dholakia (cited in Sande et al., 2017) with their 6-item set consisting of user control (possibility to choose timing, sequence, content and even language during navigation) personalization (audience-specific pages or sections), responsiveness “the ability to influence and contribute to the content of the exchange” (Meikle, 2014, p. 31) whereby visitors express a

need or concern and the website 'owner' adjusts a particular content); connectedness (visitors have access to other visitors' responses), real-time interaction (enabled through chatrooms which allow fast responses and 'dialogue between people and the website) speed and playfulness (gamification and animation). Gustavsen and Tilley (cited in Sande et al., 2017) concluded that the vast majority of websites display user control and responsiveness, most of them include some personalization features while they score much lower in the other 3 criteria. Building further on these theoretical and empirical contributions, the current study draws attention to the conversational dimension of interactivity (Meikle, 2014) and explores this communication practice as implemented on websites of top universities through the prism of organizational listening, or in other words, digital organizational listening via website.

1.1.4. Interactive Features and Digital organizational Listening Tools on Institutional Websites

Two unstoppable forces are profoundly influencing the current transformation of higher education: the rise of Web 2.0 and the increasing presence of tech-savvy Millennials on campuses. Roger McHaney (2023) referred to this phenomenon as "The New Digital Shoreline", emphasizing its pivotal role in reshaping the educational landscape. Neglecting to understand and adjust to these changes poses a significant risk to the traditional structure of higher education and it calls for creative solutions in the ways HEIs interact with their tech-savvy publics.

A critical aspect of organizational listening via institutional websites lies in the implementation of conversational (speaking and listening) tools. These components enable stakeholders to actively engage with the institution, contributing to dialogue, providing feedback, and sharing perspectives. Similarly, to listening in social media, organizations can also accomplish this vital task by including technology-mediated tools in their websites. This way conversational interactivity of websites operationalizes dialogue between visitors/users and the institution whose websites they are navigating through.

Unarguably, "social media are viewed with great enthusiasm in most communication orientated functions within organizations and appear to be rapidly closing in on customer relations as the primary form of organization-public interaction" (Macnamara, 2016, p. 28). Yet, institutional websites and their potential reach should not be underestimated and could legitimately be listed amongst the technologies of hearing (Macnamara, 2016).

In the words of Macnamara: "for organizational listening to be effectively applied at scale to large numbers of stakeholders, such as customers, employees and communities as part of digital corporate communication, advanced software applications and internal systems and processes for acknowledging, giving attention, interpreting and responding are required" (Macnamara, 2023, p. 362).

Yeon et al. (2007) suggest that the level of interactivity on institutional websites can be gauged by the presence and functionality of receiver-controlled and bidirectional communication items. Organizations are already making use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools (like chatbots, live chat support, virtual agents) to implement 'digital listening' of their webpage visitors (Macnamara, 2023). Other examples of asynchronous interactivity and digital listening include, "contact us" options, email forms, and feedback mechanisms.

Out of the 8 elements of the 'architecture of listening' in an organization suggested by Macnamara (2023), systems, resources and articulation are paramount to operationalize the culture, politics and policies of listening, as long as the organization is willing and committed to ensure engagement and transparency as values underlying its digital communication strategy. Websites systems need to ensure openness and interactivity to allow visitors to post comments and questions.

To examine this, the author puts forward Research Question (RQ) 1: What interactive features and listening tools are implemented by top global universities on their institutional websites?

Exploring the interactive features and listening tools deployed by leading universities offers insights into how these institutions facilitate engagement and dialogue with their stakeholders. The effectiveness of these tools in fostering two-way communication and relationship-building can be assessed through their design, functionality, and integration within the broader communication strategy of the institution. Once the presence of interactive features and listening tools has been assessed, it is time to explore their visibility, prominence, ease of access, etc.

The presentation and integration of interactive features and listening tools within institutional websites reflect the institution's approach to stakeholder engagement and communication. Examining the placement, accessibility, and functionality of these tools provides insights into their role in facilitating dialogue, gathering feedback, and enhancing stakeholder satisfaction. Due to its high capacity for interaction, the internet could be the perfect platform for public relations activities. This is because it enhances the audience's ability to engage in meaningful two-way communication and fosters the development of relationships. (Yeon et al., 2007). Interactivity features on websites are considered as digital listening tools because they imply a system to actualize an open attitude and the organizational will to establish real stakeholder-oriented dialogue with webpage visitors (Macnamara, 2023).

Out of the six interactivity criteria suggested by Dholakia (cited in Sande et al., 2017), user control, personalization and real-time interaction are paramount for digital organizational listening taking place through institutional websites. User control requires the possibility to navigate with certain ease along the pages to find and access relevant audience-specific contents, which illustrates the criterion of personalization. Having dedicated sections or pages to specific stakeholders denotes care, dedication and attention from the organization who tailors contents, formats and tools matching the needs and interests of the users. This of course implies continuous monitoring to evaluate users' behaviour and responsiveness, which in its turn is facilitated by real-time interaction whereby visitors express their views and sentiment, ask questions, request data, etc. If there is no technical possibility to contact the organisation and put forward users' concerns, preferences or needs, the organisation loses priceless information and the opportunity to adjust, modify forms, or add content and features. Ensured conversational interactivity and listening demonstrate a two-way communication strategy that collects feedback and is then ready to deliver feedforward by delivering stakeholder feedback-based solutions (Harro-Loit, 2019).

1.1.5. Implementation and Visibility of the Communication Management Function

Beyond interactive features, the visibility and integration of communication management functions within institutional websites are critical indicators of an organization's commitment to stakeholder engagement and transparency. These functions encompass the strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation of communication initiatives aimed at fostering positive relationships with stakeholders (Fernandez, 2024). Effective communication practices contribute to institutional reputation, credibility, and competitiveness within the higher education landscape.

As stated by Macnamara (2016), responding to every comment or post of stakeholders is not mandatory for the organization to prove its commitment to dialogic and ethical listening. What really matters is that institutions take into consideration the voice of their stakeholders through proper feedback management and eventually liaise collected intelligence with policymaking and decision-making.

Thus, human resources allocated to doing the 'work of listening' are also vital: there must be employees capable of implementing and monitoring real-time and asynchronous consultations, forums, genuinely encouraging comments from stakeholders answering their questions, engaging in constructive dialogue. Articulation, another key component of 'architecture of listening' designed by Macnamara (2023) entails a salient communication team or senior communicator with advisory and executive influence together with proven quality and capability performance, characteristics displayed by excellent communication departments (Vercic & Zerfass, 2016). Communication management can exert advisory and consulting influence on overall corporate matters (Sueldo, 2019) and digital organizational listening is becoming (or should) an urgent item of the institutional agenda. Hence the relevance of analysing the status of the communication function or in other words, the significance attributed to the management of stakeholder relations and whether there are visible signs of such strategic decisions in the institutional website of the examined organizations.

Communication plays an essential role in organizations. As Fernandez (2024) argues, communication is the cornerstone on which to build the relational edifice of our organizations. It generates environments of trust, subtracts uncertainty, is adaptive, knows how to listen, seeks to be all-embracing. Communication is the lifeblood that nourishes the inspirational, relational and contextual intelligence of managers. Everyone should appreciate it in their work because it is a constituent element of strategic management at all levels. Communication departments or teams must adopt new capabilities and functions to qualify managerial action and build brands with integrity and congruent with their identity, recognized and admired by their audiences, differentiated in the market and at the service of the common good.

Strategic communication is defined as "the purposeful use of communication by an entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals" (Verhoeven et al., 2020, p. 2). If organizations care for their stakeholders and conversations with them are valued, this should be reflected in the available means and resources allocated to ensure dialogue. In most cases, this task is entrusted to a functional department or team, or at the very least, to a communication specialist capable of coordinating institutional relations, enacting strategies, advising colleagues, evaluating, measuring and planning data-driven future actions.

Therefore, it deems relevant to look more attentively into the importance granted to communication and its irreplaceable contribution in matters of unarguable significance for the organization. For that purpose, research question (RQ) 2 is raised: *How prominent and visible is the status of the communication function as per the information provided on the institutional website of top universities?*

Institutional websites are therefore examined to find elements revealing the kind and scope of communication activity conducted by the organization. For instance, information available about the communication team or specialized department or a person responsible for communication, whether contact details are provided, which communication areas are covered and distributed, resources such as media room, press kit, downloadable institutional documents, and the place granted to the communication function within the organizational chart, reporting line, etc. All these items can provide valuable insights into the importance given to communication as strategically significant (Zerfass et al., 2020).

1.1.6. Which publics matter to universities and how are they addressed

We may ask whether it is worthwhile to listen to certain stakeholders, who should be prioritized, and which are the benefits. “As well as being necessary from an ethical perspective, there is evidence that there are significant benefits available to organizations from effective ethical listening” (Macnamara, 2022, p. 6). Besides, “a significant positive association existed between the perceived quality of dialogic communication and the level of trust” (Yang et al., 2015, p. 187). And as Macnamara (2018) claims, listening leading to true dialogue and engagement can result in increased customer loyalty, improved customer service, reduced crises and conflicts affecting organizations.

According to Fernandez (2024), stakeholders make up the value chain of the university institution and even if they do not think about it, the governance team enters into a process of relationship with its stakeholders, whose success will depend on how they address the following four phases: self-knowledge of their own institutional identity, organizational listening, evaluation of listening and integration of listening in the university governance's decision making.

As mentioned above, listening is the process by which an organization recognizes, understands, interprets, considers, and responds to its stakeholders and publics (Macnamara, 2016, pp. 52-56). Evaluation is the analysis of listening within institutional governance. Finally, its integration implies the prudential act of incorporating into governance those considerations previously evaluated with origin in the listening process.

Stakeholders are not, therefore, groups outside the life and governance of the university. They represent groups that help the organization to know its relational identity and to make decisions that will help it to and make decisions that address the reality in a harmonious and integrative manner. In this way, the university enters a process of relational growth that could lead to social consent without which it would be difficult to achieve legitimacy to operate in its context. It is therefore vital to strategically identify stakeholders and build bridges of communication with them in different formats and platforms, including digital ones, and even more so the organization's own channels where it manages its content, shapes its identity and creates long-term institutional relationships.

Who are the HEIs stakeholders? Higher education institutions typically prioritize and address students, prospective students, academic and administrative staff, alumni (Benneworth & Jongbloed, 2010). Some universities also include families or parents of future students, visitors,

partners, neighbours, governmental agencies and others. That is why this study examines the stakeholders prioritized by the selected universities and what communication paths are paved for them in the explored university websites. These platforms typically encompass sections such as university information ('about us' section), academic programs, admissions details, student activities, news updates, athletics, and more. These sections cater to various stakeholders including prospective and current students, faculty, staff, parents, visitors, community members, businesses, and alumni, each finding relevant information according to their specific interests (Yang et al., 2015). Hence *research question (RQ) 3 is raised: Which are the clearly identified stakeholders addressed by the examined university websites and how much prominence is given to these different publics?*

Prominence can be measured by the place where dedicated pages or sections appear front page, subpage, scroll-down menu which requires further clicks and so on. Finally, research question (RQ) 4 integrates both stakeholder identification and prioritization on the website and the organizational efforts to ensure two-way communication and listening to their voice, by asking: *Which sections or pages dedicated to specific stakeholders within the institutional websites of top universities display more interactivity and listening tools?*

The addressed audiences' list may include (academic offer for) prospective students; (currently enrolled) students; Alumni; staff (academics and support or administrative), and less frequently parents, families, visitors, media, partners, society in general

2. Methodology

The main aims of this study were (1) to examine the extent to which the best universities in the world apply organizational listening methods and tools to interact with specific Higher Education stakeholders and (2) to examine the status of the communication function as portrayed in the Websites (owned digital medium). These objectives were achieved by conducting a content analysis of the websites of the best universities of the world selected according to the widely known world university rankings QS (Quacquarelli Symonds) and THE (Times Higher Education) for 2024.

For this study, the research sample consisted of the institutional general websites of the top 3 public universities and 1 best ranked private university of 6 continents, namely: North America, Latin America, Africa, Asia, Europe and Oceania.

The concept of continents can vary depending on geographical, cultural, and historical perspectives and scholar have argued for decades to set the number 'right'. The Britannica explains the earth is geographically divided into 7 continents, adding Antarctica to the six abovementioned. However, no university has been established on this continent where other organizations do operate. The inclusion of 6 continents (instead of the 5 traditional ones) also responds to the regional classification used in the widely known world university rankings and captures the nuances, complexities and dynamics of contemporary global educational and organizational frameworks.

Websites were found through a simple web search using google.com or the embedded link in the abovementioned world university ranking sites. This led to a total of 27 institutional websites as units of analysis (see table 1): 4 per continent, plus the 3 best Lithuanian public universities (the latter added for organizational learning purposes in the country represented by the author's institutional affiliation). No private university from Lithuania has been included because they do not appear in the widely known world rankings.

Table 1

Selected top universities from all over the world

Name of institution	Ranking /status
University of Michigan (USA)	Top 3 public
University of California Los Angeles (USA)	
University of California, Berkeley (UCB)	
Massachusetts Institute of Technology (USA)	Top private
Universidade de Sao Paulo (Brazil)	Top 3 public
Universidad Autonoma de Mexico	
Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA, Argentina)	
Universidad Pontificia de Chile	Top private
Tsinghua University (China)	Top 3 public
Peking University (China)	
National University of Singapore	
University of Hong Kong	Top private
University of Cape Town (Republic of South Africa)	Top 3 public
University of Witwatersrand (South Africa)	
Stellenbosch University (Republic South Africa)	
American University of Cairo (Egypt)	Top private
University of Cambridge (UK)	Top public
University of Oxford (UK)	
Imperial College London (UK)	
KU Leuven (The Netherlands)	Top private
University of Melbourne (Australia)	Top public
University of South Wales Sydney (Australia)	
University of Queensland (Australia)	
Bond University (Australia)	Top private
Vilnius University (Lithuania)	Top public
Kaunas University of Technology (Lithuania)	
Lithuanian University of Health Sciences (Lithuania)	

Source: Own elaboration (2024)

Qualitative content analysis has been applied by using predetermined categories as well as emerging ones, whenever relevant items encountered during the data collection were not previously included. To analyse the implementation of interactivity and organizational listening tools as well as the status conferred to the communication function, each site was coded for:

- presence, prominence and available details about a responsible person or department of communication;
- inclusion, prominence and pages or sections dedicated to specific stakeholders.
- availability of interactivity and listening tools which facilitate asynchronous, real-time, symmetric communication with and feedback from specific groups of stakeholders: live chat, pop-up chatbots, virtual agents or other AI-powered support tools, email box, interactive event calendar, feedback forms, integrated social media (links), blogs, search function, discussion forum, interactive Q&A or FAQ section.

An analysis of the interactive features for the whole website was completed on the home page as well as on stakeholder-dedicated pages. Additionally, this study measured the level of prominence for each area by searching links or dedicated pages or sections not more than 3 layers deep: 1 = front page, 2 = 2 layers deep from the front page, and 3 = 3 layers deep from the front page. Level 4 meant it required more than 3 clicks to get to the desired place.

3. Results

RQ 1 asked *“What interactive features and listening tools are implemented by top global universities on their institutional websites?”*

Real-time interactivity and digital listening through live chat, pop-up chatbots, virtual agents or other AI-powered support tools was practically non-existent in any of the examined universities, except for the University of Cape Town in South Africa, which had a pop-up chatbot appearing as soon as the visitor starts clicking on any tab or page. The only other case is Vilnius University, with both live chats and chatbots popping up on the websites from 5 of the 15 faculties (or academic units), but not used in the institutional webpage of the university.

Discussion, forum, blogs, interactive Q&A or FAQs are not available in any of the 27.

A few asynchronous symmetric communication features can be found in some of the examined websites. Only 2 of the 27 institutional websites offer a direct messaging option beyond the generic ‘contact us’ email and phone details. The website of the University of Sao Paulo displays a messaging option: “Talk to USP” in the Portuguese version. It is the very first tab on the horizontal navbar and it also appears in the ‘Communication’ tab (the last item on this frontpage horizontal menu navbar), which offers a bootstrap drop-down list with again ‘Talk to USP’ as the last item on the vertical menu. Oxford university offers the opportunity to ‘ask a question’ with an icon that leads to a support homepage, where the visitor can fill in a form, provide email address and name, then choose from a ready-made list of areas, topics and then write the subject and the text in a box.

As it was expected, all the sampled institutions have integrated social media links on their websites. However, there are differences in the prominence and visibility of the icons as well as the types and numbers of media they portray. Most of them include Facebook, YouTube, X, Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn. Some add podcasts or other regional social media (Weibo, space.bilibili and Weixin in Chinese institutions). In most cases, the icons are shown at the bottom of the page and visitors must scroll down to find them. Only on the website of the University of South Wales Sydney, social media icons appear on the very frontpage, which is in fact rather minimalistic in terms of other information and visuals. Interactive features such as information request forms or other contact tools are available mostly for prospective students, which demonstrates a clear marketing-oriented approach to promote the academic offer and boost enrolment. Also, alumni, ‘giving’ and media or press tabs include these options to engage potential donors and media attention. The search function is present in all websites, however once the visitor clicks the search icon, there is a wide variety of new sidebar menus or navbar options. In some cases, the only way to get some information is precisely by typing the keyword on the search line, as it will be discussed later.

RQ 2 intended to find out how the degree of significance granted to the communication function as per the information provided on the institutional website of top universities could tell. Several steps were taken in this regard, starting with checking the presence of a tab or item on the front page horizontal navbars with scrollable menus. If nothing related to communication department or team was found here, then the ‘about us’ tab was another

option to see whether there was an organizational structure tab that could lead to a communication unit or a similar office. Again, when nothing could be found, the word ‘communication’ was typed in after clicking the search button. In some cases, not even this option worked out. Then, the search continued by clicking on the tabs or links to media, media relations, the press or the like to find out whether the communication activity was run together with or simply as media relations management.

Regarding the level of prominence (see table 2), there was only 1 university website with a dedicated tab for communication on the front page horizontal navbar: the university of Sao Paulo. In this case, the drop-down menu displays 8 options for diverse communication channels: pressroom, newsletter, radio, tv, university magazine, photo gallery, and ‘talk to USP’ link. Eight universities display information about their communication management or responsible specialist/team at second level of prominence, either within the ‘about’ bootstrap menu where a sidebar drop-down menu offers different denominations for the department or person in charge. The status or hierarchical position of the communication team will be discussed later. One university in this category displayed a ‘news & media’ tab (not communications) on the frontpage horizontal bar, but the dropdown menu included campus communications as well. Yet, no other communication areas seem to be covered.

Table 2

Prominence levels of the communication function on university websites

Prominence	Number of university websites
Level 1- FrontPage	1
Level 2- Second layer/page	8
Level 3- Third layer/page	11
Level 4-(> 3 clicks)	4
No clear data	3
Total	27

Source: Own elaboration (2024)

Eleven are the cases when information about communication management or responsible specialist/team came at third level of prominence, which means that it took three clicks to get to a third layer of pages and usually a long list of departments or people came before the contact name or the position of the senior communicator, in some cases even if there is a Vice-president for communications, it took several steps to find and no contact details such as email or phone number were provided. One university in this category had a full-fledged media team, but the link was placed at the very bottom of the front page, and it did not include any details about other than media relations, therefore it was measured as third level of prominence.

Four universities provided either very little information on their communication management structure or it was hard to find, even though the search button or scrolling menus with organizational structures, departments, leadership positions, etc. In some cases, there was only a tab for press or media with an email address and a phone number. Even though media appeared on the frontpage, when this was the only item related to institutional relations, it was measured as level 4.

Finally, three websites had no information at all related to communication management. Having an accessible and easy-to-find contact person or contact detail from the communication management unit can as well be considered a sign of care and attention to stakeholders and it demonstrates the enactment of the personalization, and the user-control criteria set to measure conversational interactivity of websites.

Due to the different terminology used to refer to the communication function in studied the institutions (see table 3), categorising its level of prominence on the websites has been an arduous task. In some universities, there is only a press office or media team, others have full-fledged communication departments with several divisions covering a wide range of functions.

Table 3

Different terminology used to refer to institutional communication unit

Different terms to refer to institutional communication	Number	of
		university websites
Media/Press office	4	
Communication	11	
Communication and Public Affairs	2	
Communications and Marketing	4	
Strategic Communications	1	
Engagement, External Engagement	2	
Public Affairs, External Affairs	2	
No data	1	
Total	27	

Source: Own elaboration (2024)

Classifying the prominence of communication functions on university websites has proven challenging due to varying terminology. Some institutions feature only a press office or media team, while others boast comprehensive communication departments with multiple divisions. Data collection focused on identifying and evaluating the visibility of any communication-related units on these websites. Units were categorized based on their accessibility from the homepage: those featuring solely media or press were rated as level 2, indicating a singular focus. Among the institutions studied, the term 'communication' appeared in 17 out of 27 cases, occasionally linked with 'marketing' or 'public affairs'. Five universities institutionalized media relations, with two also encompassing campus communications. 'Public affairs' and 'engagement' were also used independently to denote units handling institutional communication needs.

The roles and hierarchy of senior communicators vary significantly across the 27 institutions examined. Titles range from vice-president (6), vice-rector (1), to vice-chancellor (2), all holding top-level executive positions within their respective universities. Second-tier executives (9) assume roles like deputy secretary for communications, associate provost for communication, chief communication officer, senior communication officer, and others managing internal and external communications. However, they do not belong to the top executive team or rectorate. Department heads and press officers (3) constitute a third rank in this structure, as detailed in Table 4.

Among the institutions studied, 21 provide specific information about their communication management personnel, including their roles within the organizational structure. In contrast, five institutions only list contact details without naming specific individuals, and one university lacks accessible data altogether. Analysis reveals that in 18 out of 27 universities (70%), the communication function is recognized as a strategic managerial role. However, only 9 of these universities (33%) integrate senior communicators into their rectorate or highest governance body. Considering the sample includes the top 4 universities from each continent based on global rankings, there remains significant potential for the communication function to evolve strategically and for senior communicators to gain more influence among decision-makers and executive leaders in leading global universities.

Table 4

Different titles, positions and seniority level of senior communicators in the explored universities

Title or position of senior communicator	Cases	Level of seniority (1 being the highest)
Vice-rector for communication	1	1
Vice-president for Communication (or for Engagement)	6	1
Vice-chancellor of Communication	2	1
Director of Communication (and marketing or public affairs)	4	2
Secretary deputy for Communication	1	2
Associate provost for communication	1	2
Chief or Senior communication officer	3	2
Head Internal and External communications	1	3
Head of Communication and Marketing	1	3
Press officer (spokesperson)	1	3
No clear title or position provided	5	n/a
No department/unit	1	n/a
Total	27	

Source: Own elaboration (2024).

By looking into RQ 3, we examined the specific stakeholders addressed by sampled university websites and the degree of prominence given to these groups.

As expected, prospective students, students and staff (often academics having a separate tab) are the most frequently encountered stakeholders (in 24 institutional websites) with dedicated pages or sections with links or tabs on the front-page menu or within a sidebar drop-down menu accessible with a click on a tab on the front-page. Alumni followed the most mentioned stakeholders, being included in 23 websites in a prominent place, sometimes even mentioned as the only public on the front page, together with the word 'give' or 'giving'. Parents (8 cases) and families (2 cases) also had a dedicated section as well as media or press (7 cases). Less frequently included amongst addressed stakeholders on websites were visitors (4), business (3), partners (2), donors (2), and then researchers, neighbours, conference organizers and society in general (1 respectively). Schools were also addressed in 3 websites of universities who target prospective students.

With respect to the level of prominence, 15 universities have dedicated tabs or links for at least 3 stakeholder groups on the front-page top horizontal bar, and as already said most frequently for prospective students, current students and staff. These cases are categorized as level 1

(most prominent or best visibility). At the second level of prominence there are 8 cases. This means that to get audience-specific information, visitors need to click a tab on the frontpage menu to open another tab or click on the hamburger button on the frontpage and only then they get to see a sidebar or bootstrap menu. At this second level of navigation, visitors see choices such as 'information for', 'community', 'more' and then a list of stakeholders (students, alumni, staff, etc). with dedicated links to subpages. In a few cases, the frontpage had a menu list of stakeholders at the very bottom of the landing page, which makes it less evident and less prominent, so visitors may get the impression that there are no dedicated sections for publics. Sadly, there are 4 websites of universities who only had a tab or quick links for alumni, giving or app for prospective students. Again, there is plenty of room for improvement in identifying and addressing stakeholders properly as a sign of attention and institutional willingness to establish dialogue with them, getting to know their concerns and creating opportunities for symmetric communication. Finally, RQ 4 drew attention to the level of interactivity and listening tools in audience-specific sections, as it can be seen on table 5.

Table 5.

Interactivity and listening tools implemented in Websites

Item	University
Live chat/pop-up chat (Available real-time chat box)	University of Cape Town on front-page KU Leuven (only in students' section: 'chat with our students')
Discussion forum	None
Social media integration (visible icons/links on the frontpage or navbar menus)	In all websites, usually bottom of landing page. University of South Wales: very prominent on the front-page main menu.
Contact information/Info-request form ('Contact us'; fill-in forms or links with specific topics with or without contact person)	8 universities: no data. 8 universities: only generic 'contact us' tab, usually at the bottom of landing page. 11 universities: options (links, items) and contact persons' names, or a fill-in form to request feedback.
Blog	None
Interactive Q&A or FAQs	None
Chatbot or virtual agent	University of Cape Town: pop-up upon landing on the front-page. Vilnius university: only on websites of 5 out of 15 academic units, not on the general institutional website.
Interactive calendar	University of California Los Angeles: only 'add your event' option.
Interactive News	Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT): only 'submit your news' option.
Messaging/asking questions	University of Sao Paulo: 'talk to USP' option on front-page horizontal navbar. University of Oxford: 'ask a question' tab leading to support homepage; 'any questions?' quick link

Source: Own elaboration (2024).

The level of 'complete interactivity' as posed by Hansen (cited in Naval et al., 2012) is quite low in practically all the examined institutional websites, except for the University of Cape Town and partially also in the University of Sao Paulo. The possibilities of real-time conversations for stakeholders to be listened through digital tools implemented in the websites

are almost null, even though these technical solutions are so easy to adopt and so useful and relevant for the current technology-savvy users. Conversational interactivity is partially achieved if measured by the criteria of user control and personalization, while real-time interactivity scores the lowest.

4. Discussion

Gustavsen and Tilley (cited in Sande et al., 2017) examined interactivity in corporate websites with the 6 criteria set by Dholakia (cited in Sande et al., 2017) and applying them to the top-10 most visited websites. Their results show that most websites display user control and responsiveness, most of them include some personalization features while they score much lower in the other 3 criteria and only 1 corporate website (out of the 16 examined) met the 6 interactivity criteria, even though the corporate giants had all the technical and financial means to perform much better. After 20 years, these empirical insights have been partially corroborated in the present study with a larger sample, a wider geographical spectrum and in the context of higher education institutions. Luckily, university websites perform much better in personalization with the inclusion of audience-specific pages or sections as well as making their communication management more evident and accessible.

Previous research on websites of higher education and scientific institutions has certainly been conducted, though with a regional approach and ranging from the accessibility of HEIs websites to the use of websites to communicate about knowledge initiatives (Miklosik et al., 2023). Other scholars explored a few Latin American university websites in relation to their social responsibility (Canelón, 2013). The usability and content of corporate websites have also been examined as tools of online communication (García et al., 2017), but neither in the Higher Education nor in relation to their interactivity and listening capability. Online communication of world universities has been the object of a few outstanding studies; however, websites were not included. Instead, authors analysed social media use and strategies (Capriotti & Zeler, 2023) and emphasize that interactivity often revolves around one-sided conversations, despite institutions' efforts to incorporate diverse communication tools aimed at enhancing stakeholder engagement.

There is no previous research on university websites with a broader and comparative approach beyond one country or region and specifically related to interactivity tools and organizational listening in fully owned digital platforms like institutional websites.

Already a decade ago scholars claimed there was a growing concern about the quality of content delivered on the web, particularly within the competitive environment of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Like other organizations, HEIs should utilize their websites as effective marketing tools. As Carlos and Rodrigues (2012) assert, HEIs were not fully leveraging their websites for effective marketing, indicating a need for substantial improvement. They underscored the role of academics who could contribute by advancing knowledge to upgrade the website quality and thus gain competitive advantage in the turbulent and information-saturated higher education environment.

There are no significant findings related to disparity between private and public universities in terms of the former being better 'digital listeners' than the latter. Private universities might have been expected to invest more in enhancing their institutional websites with advanced technological features. Surprisingly, the lack of significant differences highlights the need for

a strong political commitment of university leadership. This commitment involves agreeing on policies, allocating resources, and integrating expert communication insights into decision-making processes. This underscores the adage that where there's a will, there's a way.

Marzena's findings on Polish websites of scientific institutions (including private and public universities) seem to prove just the opposite, as the author claims that public higher education institutions demonstrated the most professional communication activity and she added that "relatively few scientific institutions fully exploit the potential of websites in public relations activities" (Marzena, 2015, p. 28).

Similarly, results of the Organizational Listening Project led by Macnamara (2016) show that

both the public and private sector, the function of public relations is principally involved in creating an architecture of speaking for organizations comprised of structures, systems, resources, tools, and technologies such as Web sites, databases, mailing lists, events, presentations, videos, media campaigns, speeches, reports, newsletters, brochures, and so on. (p. 19)

Yet, few dedicate such efforts and resources to creating an architecture of listening. This and other studies on organizational listening provide insights about other sectors, for instance the retail sectors in Chile (Claro, 2021); yet they do not explore digital listening solutions in websites nor in universities.

While technologies undoubtedly contribute to an architecture of listening, achieving organizational listening goes beyond merely adding technological solutions (Macnamara, 2016). Machines excel in collecting and processing vast amounts of information; technologies can 'hear' by parsing texts, sounds, and visual data (Coleman, 2013). However, the critical aspect lies in human judgment. Only humans can assess the meaning behind the data, applying empathy, ethical considerations, and social insights. It is humans who ultimately decide whether to acknowledge or disregard, act upon or dismiss, the input received. The determination of whether voices are valued and influential rests solely with humans.

The present study is not free from limitations, the main being the fact that only websites of around 30 of the best ranked universities have been examined and from the perspective of digital listening and interactivity, presence and status of the communication function, leaving aside other content-related questions. Further research avenues could lead to the analysis of the digital communication strategies to better appreciate why the conversational interactivity and listening capability of websites are paid less attention in comparison to social media accounts. This, however, would require openness and willingness of the sampled institutions to disclose strategic information, which may be an obstacle for researchers and open science endeavours.

5. Conclusions

This research extends beyond single-country or regional studies, offering a global perspective through comparative analysis of top-ranked universities worldwide. It focuses on interactivity and organizational listening solutions implemented on institutional websites.

Organizations embracing effective digital organizational listening, as outlined by Macnamara (2023), face the critical challenge of resource allocation. They must cultivate a culture of openness, enact proactive engagement policies, navigate listening complexities, and establish robust engagement frameworks. A comprehensive digital listening framework also demands

structured reporting and clear accountability to ensure insights inform organizational decisions.

With these foundational elements, organizations can undertake the demanding task of digital listening. However, implementing a listening policy and soliciting feedback are just initial steps. True effectiveness requires deliberate efforts in reception, acknowledgment, interpretation, consideration, and articulation of stakeholder perspectives – acquired through rigorous analysis and monitoring of traditional and social media.

Despite social media's current attention in data analytics for social listening, institutional websites are undervalued as potent tools for digital listening. Their potential for real-time, two-way communication remains largely unexplored. While communication holds strategic importance in examined institutions, there's ample room for enhancing digital listening strategies, highlighting a focus shift from speaking to listening.

Future research may employ Delphi and interview methods to delve deeper into universities' strategic decisions, challenges, and digital listening capabilities. Collaboration with communication specialists and leaders from diverse universities aims to provide actionable insights and operational recommendations for advancing digital communications.

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