





Effective listening, explains David Karpf, is far more complicated than simply monitoring one's analytic reports, and digital listening can never replace the "messy, slow, deliberative work [that] fosters a culture of commitment and deepens organizational identity." But, as he points out, "if ever there was a time to listen harder and listen better, it is now. The organizations that distinguish themselves will be the ones that listen best and that know how to interpret what they are hearing."

# Step 1 *for* Effective Advocacy *in the* Age of Trump: *Learn to Listen Better*

by David Karpf

**Editors' note:** *This article was adapted from David Karpf's new book, Analytic Activism: Digital Listening and the New Political Strategy (Oxford University Press, 2016).*

**T**HE INCOMING TRUMP ADMINISTRATION IS BOUND TO offer a multitude of surprises and challenges for nonprofit professionals. Many of us have been pondering big-picture strategy questions, asking ourselves how best to adjust to the new advocacy landscape. At the moment, the only thing we can predict with certainty is that there will be scenarios no one *can* predict. But I can guarantee with reasonable confidence what the first step will need to be: the most effective nonprofits will be the ones that *listen* best.

We often look to digital media and marvel at the new ways that citizens can now speak online. But the Internet is not solely a platform for speech; it is

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also used for listening. Journalists, governments, corporations, and nonprofits are all learning to incorporate digital listening routines into their work processes. Viral hashtags and most-read lists help news organizations pick up new trends in reader interest. Government agencies monitor website analytics to identify where citizens get confused by red tape and stop filling out request forms. Corporations use social media analytics to monitor their brand and reputation. And nonprofits are increasingly using these same tools and technologies to develop new advocacy techniques—a new “analytic activism” that carries both great promise and real risk. It can unlock the advocacy potential of your organization, or it can lead you astray.

Digital listening takes many forms. Some are active interventions—discussion forums where members and supporters weigh in on a proposed course of action, or weekly surveys that ask for comments and suggestions from a variety of stakeholders. Other forms take advantage of more passive monitoring tools—A/B tests and social media analytics can signal the issues, messages, and calls to action that have the greatest resonance with a supporter base. Advocacy organizations can harvest the trace data left behind by all sorts of online activity. When these data are packaged into a format that can actually help managers, executive directors, and boards make better decisions, they become a powerful source of learning and organizational change.

Effective listening is far more complicated than simply monitoring one’s weekly Google Analytics report, of course. The leading nonprofits meld a wide range of digital signals into a broader culture of testing, in which they repeatedly measure the impacts of their engagement tactics, creating small experiments that help them to adapt and learn in a changing media and political environment. Their weekly leadership meetings feature multiple signals from analytics programs, as well as the results and lessons gleaned from recent tactical experiments. This helps nonprofits to develop agile feedback loops, allowing them to tinker with new tactics and strategies.

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particularly vital during periods of rapid, unexpected change. Just as advocacy leaders of generations past developed tactics whose impact was amplified through the industrial broadcast media system (where you could grab the entire nation’s attention through three television networks), today’s most effective advocates are leveraging their message through viral sharing on social media. And the most effective and timely messages during the Obama administration will surely lose some of their force as we enter the Trump era. Obama and his officials respond to different pressures and appeals than Trump’s officials surely will. The social tenor of the country and the topics that dominate mainstream media coverage will move apace with these shifts. Indeed, the best social movement strategies have always been rooted in an insightful reading of the media system and the political situation.

Prioritizing digital listening doesn’t mean abandoning your own instincts and insights—there is both an art and a science to the craft of analytic activism. Rather, it means opening your strategic processes to new inputs, and using those inputs to question long-standing assumptions. The tactics that thrive in the coming years will necessarily be nimble and responsive. No longer can we afford to select tactics because they are the ones we’ve always used or because we recall that one time when they appeared to work so well. When faced with a strategic dilemma, the appropriate and available answer must now be, “Well, we’ll test it.”

To be clear, investing in analytics, experimentation, and measurement is no guarantee of advocacy success. It is not enough simply to listen *more* through digital media. The real goal is to harness analytics to listen *better*. And that requires organizations to pay real attention to the biases and limitations of the data they gather, and to think through the processes that will help them harness that data effectively.

And that can be a hefty task, because we have to remember what digital trace data *can’t* tell us.

Analytics can often automate value judgments. As behavioral economist Dan Ariely puts it, “You are what you measure.”<sup>1</sup> If you focus on measuring supporter responsiveness and impact through page views or new e-mail list sign-ups, you will

inevitably come to prioritize very different issues and practices than if you focus on repeat member interactions or offline event participation. And there can be a creeping accessibility bias inherent in digital listening, because some metrics are much easier to track than others. The campaign tactics, issue topics, and message frames that are the most *popular* are not necessarily the ones that are the most *powerful*. Analytics render an incomplete portrait of public sentiment. Organizations should approach digital listening with a healthy dose of skepticism, investigating where the activity that they can most easily measure departs from the activity that they most deeply value.

The general rule for incorporating digital listening into your organizational workflow is to *always be blending*. All the advocacy organizations that have pioneered the use of digital listening and testing have adopted a blended approach to analytics signals. Rather than blindly chasing the latest digital trends, they maintain a colorful mix of listening signals: they conduct weekly member surveys; they make phone calls, and

talk with their active volunteers; they ask hard questions of their coalition partners; and they don't assume that the analytics and experimental results are either objective or infallible—they listen within their own networks and also keep an eye out for lateral trends appearing outside of their networks. The goal of digital listening and experimentation is to create valuable additional input for their strategic judgment, not to use analytics to replace their judgment entirely.

There is one other limitation to digital listening that nonprofits should keep in mind: all these digital traces of supporter sentiment and social media engagement represent *listening without conversation*. It used to be hard to find out what ten thousand supporters thought of your organization's work. Hearing from them required two-way conversations. Now, many large advocacy organizations run daily A/B tests of this size before lunch. This can be a real boon; more listening is certainly preferable to less. But there was a beneficial inefficiency in the old way of conducting conversations. Conversations, particularly when

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conducted among large groups, constitute shared work. They require the minutes and hours from everyone. And that messy, slow, deliberative work fosters a culture of commitment and deepens organizational identity. It builds organizational bonds and richer civic skills. Conversation and ongoing participation change people. Digital listening merely records them as they already are.

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The work of digital listening falls primarily upon the analysts, technologists, and strategists who are gathering the data and rendering them accessible. It is (to borrow a concept from Personal Democracy Media's Micah Sifry) an atomistic form of engagement: we watch alone, we take action alone, we even share inspirational stories alone, clicking away at a laptop screen or mobile interface.<sup>2</sup> Atomistic engagement can move fast and can be harnessed by smart, nimble nonprofits. But a deep, committed supporter base provides heft and force. The mightiest organizations in the years to come will harness both.

To be sure, listening without conversation is preferable to barely listening at all. And that's where most nonprofits find themselves today:

barely listening to their members and supporters, leaning on the same approaches that have seemed to work well enough before. But if ever there was a time to listen harder and listen better, it is now. The years to come will require *more* from civil society organizations. These are uncertain times. The rules of political engagement are being hastily rewritten, and the old routines that governed media behavior are changing alongside them. This is a moment when we should leave no old assumption untested. It is time to tinker, experiment, fail, learn, and tinker some more.

The organizations that distinguish themselves will be the ones that listen best and that know how to interpret what they are hearing.

#### NOTES

1. Dan Ariely, "You Are What You Measure," *Harvard Business Review*, June 2010, [hbr.org/2010/06/column-you-are-what-you-measure](http://hbr.org/2010/06/column-you-are-what-you-measure).
2. Micah L. Sifry, *The Big Disconnect: Why the Internet Hasn't Transformed Politics (Yet)* (New York and London: OR Books, 2014).

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## In a Nutshell

**Nonprofit users of social media must rethink the meaning of listening in a social media setting.** Listening in a social media setting is iterative, and includes a repetition of what one has heard with steadily advancing meaning.

**The rules of public engagement are adjusting, due to changing politics and a rapidly evolving media landscape.** Reacting to continuing change by scrambling to keep up is not an effective strategy. Careful "listening" on social media, curation of channels that surface information about coming changes, and engagement with information to extract meaning can help nonprofits to stay a step ahead of changing norms. Nonprofits that anticipate change and position themselves as a resource in a changing climate will have an advantage, and this is where digital listening can be of significant use.

**Given the relatively easy availability of analytics and other data, nonprofits should ramp up their testing of strategies for engagement through social media.** Is your circle getting bigger? Are your stakeholders responding to you? Are they taking you up on invitations for other types of engagement?

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