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# Public relations professionals' perspectives on the communication challenges and opportunities they face in the U.S. public sector

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## Abstract

*This study reports common challenges and opportunities 49 government public relations professionals face in the United States of America (U.S.) when communicating internally and externally. Following on from the primary public sector attributes proposed by Liu and Horsley (2007), the in-depth interviews revealed 13 common attributes that affected government communication practices. The study's findings are useful for practitioners entering the government communication field in the U.S. and elsewhere, practitioners in other sectors who collaborate with government communicators, and academics developing communication theory for the under-researched public sector.*

## Introduction

In the first year of his presidency, Richard Nixon stated that public relations efforts “represent a questionable use of the taxpayers’ money for the purpose of promoting and soliciting support for various agency activities” (Lee, 1997, p. 318). Forty years later, the role of government public relations is often still feared, shunned, or downplayed. Many government communicators avoid using the term public relations. With government communication management largely unstudied (Gelders, Bouckaert, & van Ruler, 2007; Lee, 2008), private sector communication models are often applied to the public sector despite their differences.

In 2007, Liu and Horsley proposed a new public relations model that identified eight primary challenges and opportunities that influenced government public relations

practices. In this study, we evaluate that model. Specifically, through 49 in-depth interviews with U.S. government communicators, this study gauges whether and how these attributes affect government public relations practices and whether additional attributes should be considered.

Gathering insights from government communicators with a combined 762 years of experience, this study’s findings provide insights into the common challenges and opportunities government public relations professionals face in the U.S. These findings have both practice and theory-building applications in a field where research-informed guidelines are rare. They complement existing literature examining government communication roles in other cultures and political systems, and may therefore in future contribute to building understanding of those aspects of the role that are globally consistent and those that are culturally unique, particularly if this study were replicated elsewhere for comparison.

## Literature on the public sector environment

Currently, the communication management field largely treats the public and private sectors as identical despite a recent survey of 976 practitioners that identified far more differences than similarities in how the two sectors shape communication practices (Liu, Horsley, & Levenshus, 2010). In contrast, political scientists began documenting differences in the 1970s (e.g., Appleby, 1973; Wamsley & Zald, 1973). The limited specialist communication management literature that does examine government communication generally does not explore nuances among government communicators, but rather focuses on broader

government communication trends. There has also tended to be a focus on initiatives largely outside the U.S. (e.g. Glenny, 2008; Gregory, 2006; Vos, 2006; Vos & Westerhoudt, 2008). One notable exception to this trend is research testing and applying the government communication decision wheel (e.g. Connolly-Ahern, Grantham, & Cabrera-Baukus, 2010; Liu & Horsley, 2007; Liu et al., 2010; Lee, 2008).

Acknowledging that the public sector is complex and vast, Liu and Horsley (2007) proposed the government communication decision wheel after identifying eight primary communication challenges and opportunities government public relations practitioners face in the U.S.: politics, public good, legal frameworks, media scrutiny, poor public perception, federalism, limited professional development opportunities, and lack of management support for communication.

### *Politics*

This paper adopts Tansey and Jackson's (2008) conceptualisation of politics as two-fold and relevant to individuals' everyday experiences: "In the narrowest conventional (dictionary) usage—what governments do—politics is affecting us intimately, day by day, and hour by hour. In the wider sense—people exercising power over others—it is part of all sorts of social relationships, be they kinship, occupational, religious or cultural" (Tansey & Jackson, 2008, p. 3). As such politics includes both external and internal influences that affect government communicators' daily activities. Although corporations face internal and external politics, government organisations are defined by them (Appleby, 1973). In the public sector, politics can restrict communication creativity and innovation (Horsley & Barker, 2002) by creating a more complicated and unstable environment (Gelders, et al., 2007). Politics also increases external influences like public interest groups and boosts the need for public support (Allison, 2004; Graber, 2003). Finally, politics plays an undeniable role in deciding what government information is

shared and how (Fairbanks, Plowman, & Rawlins, 2007).

### *Public good and poor public perception*

Public good describes the government's primary concern of meeting publics' information needs rather than responding to market pressures (Avery, Brucchi, & Keane, 1996). Government agencies generally serve citizens while corporations are primarily designed to make profits (Lee, 1998, 2008; Viteritti, 1997). As Peruzzo (2009) notes, public relations is not "simply about listening to the publics to better adapt to their interests in the way that companies do, but it focuses on meeting the publics' needs" (p. 665). Thus, government agencies generally concern themselves with the social purpose of their work rather than market pressures (Avery et al., 1996; Rainey, 2003). Of course, focusing on the public good does not preclude government organisations from seeking profit-maximisation (Andreasen, 2001; Liu & Weinberg, 2004).

Focusing on the public good by meeting the publics' information needs can be challenging for government communicators who operate in large heterogeneous markets (Rothschild, 1979; Viteritti, 1997). In addition, the negative connotations of 'propaganda' and derogatory use of 'spin' make publics cynical about government communication. In turn, publics' lack of trust hinders the success of government communication (National Association of Government Communicators, 2008; Vos, 2006). For example, government communicators report that one of the biggest challenges of their jobs is overcoming public cynicism (National Association of Government Communicators, 2008).

### *Legal constraints*

Legal constraints often limit governments' ability to communicate fully and openly (Gelders et al., 2007). U.S. federal agencies must comply with the Freedom of Information Act, though Congress is exempt from this law (Relyea, 2009). State and local governments have their own access-to-information laws. Federal law prohibits lobbying by government

officials and using public funds for advertising (Kosar, 2008; Piotrowski, 2008). These laws often create tension over how government communicators can disseminate information to publics and the media (Graber, 2003).

### *Media scrutiny*

Public sector organisations face greater media scrutiny than private sector ones. Allison (2004) argued that the media cover government decision-making more often than the actions of private companies and the media can influence the timing of government decisions. Lee (2001) used the term “public reporting” to state that a basic government duty is to inform citizens by constantly reporting decisions and actions via the media (p. 33). Media scrutiny produces a symbiotic relationship in which the government depends on the media to release information and the media depend on the government as an important source of information (Hiebert, 1981). To avoid negative media coverage, government employees tend to follow the status quo and improvise less (Garnett, 1997; Graber, 2003; Pounsford & Meara, 2004).

### *Federalism*

U.S. government communicators work within a system of federalism. Federalism is a complex system of organisation in which the federal government oversees and creates policy for programmes that are actually implemented by state, county, and city agencies (Heffron, 1988). Consequently, local, state, and federal agencies communicate on issues that sometimes overlap jurisdictionally (Schneider, 1995). Thus, federalism requires that multiple levels of government coordinate on most policy issues so that no single level can act unilaterally (Schneider). Wright (1990) observed that the inextricable links among the levels of government present a challenge for each level to maintain its independence. The end result of this interorganisational collaboration is that the government often speaks with multiple, sometimes

contradictory, voices on issues (Graber, 2003).

### *Professional development opportunities*

The Public Relations Society of America (2007) defines professional development as anything that gives a practitioner more insight and the ability to be more effective as well as any experience or knowledge that improves the practitioner’s capabilities or grows his or her professionalism. This includes seminars, conferences, access to research, and continued education. Government communicators need to have technical training, as well as strategic management skills, to address large and complex public issues and provide reliable information to publics. Recent survey research found government communicators desire more professional development opportunities (National Association of Government Communicators, 2008) and moderately evaluated their professional development opportunities (Liu et al., 2010).

### *Limited leadership opportunities*

Related to professional development are leadership opportunities. Leadership is a “process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2007, p. 3). Though not originally identified by Liu and Horsley (2007) as a unique challenge for government communicators, it is reasonable to expect that they have limited leadership opportunities because government communicators have limited advancement opportunities and limited financial support (Lee, 1997; National Association of Government Communicators, 2008). Without leadership opportunities, communicators largely will be relegated to technical rather than management roles (Gower, 2006).

### *Devaluation of communication*

Historically management tends to devalue government communication’s importance. Repercussions include the early elimination of communication positions during agency budget cuts, leaving unskilled communicators to fill the void (Garnett, 1997; Sweetland, 2008).

Many qualified communicators leave government service for organisations that demonstrate more respect for their work and offer better salaries (Garnett, 1997). In contrast, recent survey data found that government communicators have a seat at the management table, but largely do not have management titles (National Association of Government Communicators, 2008).

### Method

We conducted 49 in-depth interviews with federal ( $n = 19$ ), state ( $n = 11$ ), and local ( $n = 19$ ) (i.e., city and county) government communicators from across the U.S. between May and August 2007 to determine whether the environmental attributes identified by Liu and Horsley (2007) accurately reflect government communicators' daily experiences. We define a government communicator as a current or former government employee at the local, state, or federal level whose primary responsibilities are or were communicating internally or externally to various publics regarding agency/department/office policies, decisions, or actions.

To recruit participants, we used a snowball sampling approach. First, we contacted two prominent professional associations (the National Association of Government Communicators and City-County Communications and Marketing Association) and personal contacts. Then we used these initial participants to help recruit additional participants. We stopped recruiting when we reached data saturation and had a sample that adequately represented all levels of government and regions of the country. Thirty-three percent of the interviews were conducted in-person and 67 percent were conducted over the phone. On average the interviews lasted 47 minutes (range = 25 to 117,  $SD = 20$ ). All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews addressed the following research questions primarily derived from the primary government sector attributes that affect communication practices (Liu & Horsley, 2007).

### *Factors that influence government communicators' daily activities*

RQ1: How, if at all, do politics affect government communicators' roles?

RQ2: How, if at all, do government communicators find it challenging to meet the publics' information needs and expectations?

RQ3: How, if at all, do legal frameworks affect government communicators' roles?

RQ4: How, if at all, does media scrutiny affect government communicators?

RQ5: How do government communicators evaluate their primary publics' trust in their communication?

RQ6: How, if at all, does federalism affect government communicators' roles?

### *Factors that influence professional development*

RQ7: How do government communicators evaluate their professional development opportunities?

RQ8: How do government communicators evaluate the support they receive from management?

RQ9: How do government communicators evaluate their leadership opportunities?

To analyse the interview data, we applied Miles and Huberman's (1994) data analysis procedures: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. During data reduction, we coded the interview transcripts for evidence that answered our primary research questions. We also looked for data that did not fit into the research questions and developed new codes for this data (i.e., outliers). During data display, we created Excel spreadsheets, called checklist matrices, to summarise the codes that emerged from data reduction. Finally, during conclusion drawing/verification, we reviewed our matrices to identify the meanings that emerged from the data. During this phase, we also shared our initial conclusions with interview participants to obtain feedback, which we incorporated into our final interpretations of the data.



## Results

### *Demographics*

On average, the participants had 12 years of government communication experience (range = 1 to 40, *SD* = 9). Also, 23 of the participants had on average seven years of corporate communication experience (range = 1 to 21, *SD* = 5).

### *Factors that influence government communicators' daily activities*

**Politics.** The majority of communicators ( $n = 32$ ) reported that politics had a strong effect on their jobs. While three state, seven city, and four county communicators also felt politics had a strong effect, more than half ( $n = 18$ ) of those who report a strong impact work at the federal level. For example, a federal communicator explained: "You've got interoffice internal politics. You've got intercongressional internal politics, and then you've got, of course, this job is politics. I've always made the distinction: You've got politics and policy, and communications is where the two collide."

For most of these participants it was hard to distinguish politics from their jobs with many of them stating their job equals politics. However, seven participants specifically mentioned trying to separate themselves from the political environment. For example, a city communicator said: "What I do should not be directly affected by the politics of it, and I do work very hard to keep that out of it – sometimes it does creep in." The primary benefits of trying to separate themselves from politics was maintaining influence with senior leadership, both during management turnovers and when working with multiple leaders at once. Several participants also mentioned being nonpartisan is essential for survival. For example, a county communicator stated: "You certainly don't want to align yourself with somebody who's going to be replaced. Because the other person comes in mad at you." A city communicator said: "So, I suppose one way to remain, to survive in a position like mine,

is to remain nonpartisan totally. And so that is how I look at my job. It's what's best for the city to not get involved in politics." Only four communicators (two city and two state) said politics did not affect their jobs. For example, one state communicator expressed appreciation for the insular nature of his agency that allowed him to avoid politics.

**Publics' information needs.** Slightly more than a third of communicators ( $n = 17$ ) stated that they felt a high demand for information from the public or that they were highly sensitive to their publics' information needs. For example, a county communicator described the pressure he felt: "People are watching because stuff that the government does affects their daily lives." Related to this point, nine participants mentioned that they were challenged by disseminating information in a timely manner to meet their publics' requests. For example, a federal communicator stated: "The speed of information is really the biggest challenge." About a third of the communicators ( $n = 14$ ) stated that the size and diversity of their audiences and services posed a significant challenge in meeting publics' information needs. For example, a city communicator stated: "So, you have a broader target audience in the public sector. I think public sector is much broader than private sector because you are talking about 3,000 products and services that your company offers to residents, potential residents, businesses, potential businesses, tourists, employees, potential employees."

Communicators listed additional challenges they faced in meeting publics' needs including unrealistic expectations ( $n = 1$ ), the government's need to be accurate and avoid speculation ( $n = 1$ ), and a disinterested public ( $n = 5$ ). Five communicators said they balanced providing information their publics requested with getting out the government's message. For example, a state communicator noted: "But I think it's equally important to provide the public with what they expect out of a government agency that they're paying for and that we are holding ourselves up to that higher standard that's expected by the public. And at the same time we're providing information that

we think is beneficial and hoping that it passes through the filter in a manner in which it does get to the public.” Only two communicators, both federal, said their publics had little or no information expectations. Another federal communicator said she focused more on providing facts to reporters than giving her publics what they wanted.

**Legal frameworks.** Public information laws are the most frequently cited ( $n = 27$ ) legal frameworks impacting government communicators. A majority of communicators ( $n = 26$ ) said that legal frameworks highly impacted them. For example, a city communicator said: “I’m definitely aware of them and thinking of them all the time.” Nine communicators said legal frameworks had a moderate impact on their jobs. Only four communicators (three federal and one city) said legal frameworks had a limited impact on their jobs. Three communicators, two city and one state, said they had found ways to manage the impact. For example, a city communicator said: “We just generally know where the boundaries are and if there is a rub and we are not quite sure, we will err on the side of being conservative.”

In terms of how legal frameworks affected their jobs, communicators frequently mentioned three specific impacts: (1) being careful about what information goes on public record, (2) being proactive rather than reactive in following laws, and (3) separating their public information roles from political campaigning. For example, discussing the public record, a federal communicator noted: “Anything I do is considered public domain. So, you have to be careful about what you reveal whether in emails or meetings.” Talking about being proactive, a city communicator observed: “Our policy here is that if it is a public document we give it immediately when it is requested without making someone file a FOIA request because we just think that is putting a needless filter between the citizen or the media and the government.” Finally, talking about separating roles, a federal communicator

noted: “The biggest legal area that really impacts us is the blurry line between where campaigning stops and government starts, and those can be difficult sometimes in terms of what we can say where.”

**Media scrutiny.** Slightly less than a third ( $n = 13$ ) of the communicators reported being highly sensitive to media pressure. For example, a state communicator said: “There are a lot of Woodward wannabes, and they get down to Washington, and by gosh everything is Watergate.” One state communicator reported experiencing limited media pressure, and eight communicators said they felt no media pressure, though two said scrutiny increased during a crisis.

To manage media scrutiny, 10 communicators stressed the importance of proactively building relationships with the media. For example, a federal communicator said: “We started a group with reporters to get to know each other better. So, once a month we get together and it’s evolved and we now call it Hacks and Flaks... You get to know the people better, and when you’re dealing with reporters, you need this one-on-one to be really good at your job.” Nearly a quarter of communicators ( $n = 12$ ) noted that media scrutiny could have a positive impact on their jobs because it kept them on their toes and could lead to a more informed electorate. For example, a federal communicator noted: “When you work for the government, you work for the American tax payer and so there is a lot more scrutiny, which is a good thing of how you do your job.”

**Publics’ trust.** All of the communicators concurred that publics’ trust in government communication is important because trust is necessary to effectively communicate messages. For example, a county communicator noted: “I think you have an advantage when people trust you because they will take you seriously right off the bat when you are out in the public and they will be more interested in what you have to say.” However, the communicators differed in how much trust they thought publics had in their communication and how much publics pay attention to their

communication. The majority of the communicators ( $n = 25$ ) believed that publics trust government communication. For example, a city communicator said: "We're the voice of the city. So I do think that people listen and trust when we put out information." Seven of these communicators, however, noted that this trust is tenuous. For example, a city communicator said: "Typically what we find at least in our community is that people do trust what we give them, but that's something you build up and it's something very fragile." Also, five of these communicators said that the level of trust varied among publics, noting that seniors and activists tended to distrust the government more than other publics.

A sizeable minority ( $n = 15$ ) of communicators stated that publics distrust government communication. However, 11 of these communicators noted that publics were more likely to distrust communication from federal and state governments compared with the local government and more likely to distrust communication from politicians compared with bureaucrats. A smaller minority ( $n = 9$ ) believed that publics do not pay attention to government communication, making the question of trust irrelevant.

**Federalism.** The majority of the communicators ( $n = 34$ ) reported interacting frequently with other governmental organisations. Communicators stated that these interactions helped them more effectively communicate and made their jobs more interesting. Eight communicators noted that these interactions are mostly self-generated. For example, a federal communicator said: "I think most of it though is self-generated. I could just be in my agency without reaching out to anyone." Only 10 communicators interact infrequently with other governmental organisations. Also, only five communicators reported moderate interactions with other governmental organisations.

Finally, only seven communicators interacted frequently with non-governmental organisations such as non-profits and

corporations. Six of these seven communicators stated that working with non-profits and corporations is helpful, but one city communicator noted that sometimes non-governmental groups want to take full credit for work that the government funded or supported.

#### *Factors that affect professional development*

**Professional development opportunities.** The professional development opportunities that the communicators identified are government sponsored seminars ( $n = 17$ ), professional association memberships ( $n = 14$ ), receiving financial support for continuing education ( $n = 3$ ), and mentoring ( $n = 2$ ). Twenty-three of the communicators positively evaluated, 10 negatively evaluated, and 14 moderately evaluated their professional development opportunities. For example, providing a moderate evaluation, a city communicator noted: "There is a growing number of opportunities out there for professional development. But I do have to be very selective because the dollars are limited." Almost all of the communicators concurred that these opportunities help them move up the career ladder. Thus, communicators who reported having fewer professional development opportunities frequently discussed having to change their jobs if they wanted to advance their careers. For example, a city communicator noted: "So you can advance if you want to leave the communication field and be more city administration type. But if you want to stay and focus exclusively on communication, then where I am now is as high as it'll go."

Interestingly, the state and local communicators varied widely in how they evaluated professional development opportunities, but the federal communicators displayed a clear pattern. Nine of the 10 federal communicators who work for elected officials stated that they do not have opportunities for professional development. Conversely, eight of the nine federal communicators who work for bureaucrats positively or moderately evaluated their professional development opportunities.

**Management support.** The majority ( $n = 42$ ) of the communicators stated that they receive

strong support from management. In most cases, this support enabled communicators to work more independently and efficiently. For example, a state communicator noted: "I am pretty much allowed to run my own operation here. I don't get much interference at all that way. Generally I don't have to run stuff by anyone because everyone trusts me." Twenty-one percent of these communicators ( $n = 9$ ), however, noted that they had to earn management support by demonstrating the value of communication. For example, a city communicator said: "People might have to go through some bad situations before they see the value of communication and how you are able to position them." Also, six communicators noted that they do not receive the same level of support from their peers because these peers often do not understand the value of communication. For example, a city communicator noted: "I would say that some my colleagues around the city look at public information as somewhat fluff and so they say our streets are more important than your public information."

Regardless of the level of support each communicator receives, the majority ( $n = 31$ ) stated that the level of management support for communication increased during a crisis. One communicator also noted that management support for communication increased when she launches a new programme.

**Leadership opportunities.** The majority of the communicators negatively evaluated their leadership opportunities ( $n = 30$ ), though a sizeable minority reported being satisfied with their professional development opportunities ( $n = 19$ ). Almost all of the communicators ( $n = 45$ ) equated leadership opportunities with career advancement. However, two communicators noted that government communicators naturally play leadership roles due to the nature of their jobs. For example, a federal communicator said: "I think you have to be a leader to be a communicator, I mean to be a successful one." Another two communicators noted that they had opportunities for leadership because

of the close relationship they had with management. The communicators who negatively evaluated leadership opportunities identified two ways government communicators could enhance their leadership opportunities: leave their current position for another government position ( $n = 13$ ) or expand the responsibilities within their current position ( $n = 6$ ). These findings relate to the communicators' comments about limited professional development opportunities often impeding their career advancement opportunities.

Nine of the communicators who positively evaluated leadership opportunities provided some caveats. Five communicators noted that you had to fight for advancement opportunities.

Two communicators noted that there was no set path for promotion. Four communicators observed that leadership opportunities varied by government organisation and depended upon the skills of the communicator. Finally, three communicators stated that the opportunities for advancement were greater on the political side compared with the official or agency side.

### Outliers

Several noteworthy findings that had not been covered in our research questions emerged from the interviews.

#### *Internal vs. external communication*

Twenty-six communicators discussed the value their organisations placed on internal communication versus external communication. Eight of these communicators said that their organisations equally valued the two. One communicator said that her organisation values internal communication more. Seventeen communicators said that their organisations valued external more than internal communication. For example, a county communicator said: "Internal communications may be more important to help the organisation, but external communications gets on the front page of the newspaper or on the TV station... So, external communications really gets the top shelf."



### *Limited financial resources*

Twenty communicators mentioned that limited financial resources hindered the effectiveness of their work. Two communicators, however, stated that this limitation encouraged government communicators to be more creative. For example a federal communicator said:

We can't go out and spend money to drive communications outside of a very limited amount of resources. We can't do paid media, so I think both that and the multiple types of audience you have put a premium on creativity that you may not have in a corporate PR department.

Only one communicator mentioned not being constrained by financial resources.

### *Evaluation of communication*

Eight communicators mentioned that their budgets do not support formal evaluation of their communication. Three communicators, however, said that they place a priority on evaluation. One communicator mentioned that people ask him to evaluate communication programmes, but he is not trained to conduct evaluation and does not have the funding to support evaluation.

### *Wide variety of responsibilities*

Thirteen communicators mentioned that they wear many hats within their organisations. The other 36 communicators who did not specifically mention wearing different hats indicated their wide variety of responsibilities when they summarised their primary duties. These responsibilities included employee communication, media relations, event planning, graphic design, crisis management, technology support, website management, customer service, community relations, mail services, cable television management, speech writing, lobbying, records management, marketing, and evaluation as well as non-communication responsibilities such as law enforcement.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

Most public relations scholars concur that theory should reflect industry practices (e.g. Broom, 2006; Cornelissen, 2000; Toth, 2006; Vasquez & Taylor, 2001). However, recent research suggests that both public relations professionals and academics believe the theories that academics research do not adequately reflect the principles professionals practice (e.g. Cheng & de Gregario, 2008; Okay & Okay, 2008). Therefore, as public relations academics continue to refine existing theories and develop new theories, they should be mindful of closing the gap between theory and practice.

Following this perspective, the findings from this study can help to build public relations theory that better reflects government communicators' experiences. Liu and Horsley (2007) identified opportunities and challenges U.S. government communicators are more likely to face than their corporate counterparts. This study's findings from interviews with 49 U.S. government communicators largely support Liu and Horsley's (2007) propositions. First, government communicators reported that politics had a high impact on their daily activities, potentially constricting their influence and posing a liability when management turns over. Second, the majority of communicators reported that legal frameworks highly or moderately affected their abilities to communicate freely and openly, often constricting their communication options. Third, participants agreed that public trust is necessary for successful government communication, but noted that this trust often is tenuous and difficult to maintain. Fourth, the majority of communicators reported frequently interacting with government partners, which provided opportunities for collaborations. Interesting, the communicators reported infrequently collaborating with non-governmental partners.

Contrary to what Liu and Horsley (2007) proposed, the vast majority of the communicators positively, rather than negatively, evaluated their professional development opportunities, with the exception

of the communicators working for elected officials at the federal level. A lack of adequate professional development opportunities seemed to be related to leadership opportunities, indicating that without professional development, communicators are less likely to move up the leadership ladder. Also, contrary to what Liu and Horsley predicted, the minority of communicators reported a high demand for information from their primary publics, indicating that the real challenge may be engaging frequently fractured, disinterested, and diverse publics. In addition, also contrary to Liu and Horsley's prediction, the majority of the communicators reported having high management support, which often enabled them to work independently and efficiently. Interestingly, though, peer support was not rated as highly, indicating that communicators may need to educate their colleagues about the value of their roles. Finally, again contrary to what Liu and Horsley predicted, the participants reported that media scrutiny is a positive opportunity rather than a constraint because it keeps communicators on their toes and leads to a more informed electorate. Thus, many communicators emphasised proactive relationship building with reporters to encourage fair and balanced media coverage.

Adding new factors that affect communication practices in the U.S. public sector, communicators reported that their employers value external communication over internal communication, their budgets do not adequately support communication, they rarely evaluate the success of their communication, and they have multiple responsibilities beyond communication. All of these factors point to challenges government communicators in our study face in managing integrated communication in an often under-resourced and under-staffed environment.

Taken as a whole, the interviews' findings are useful for practitioners just entering the government communication field as well as those in other sectors who collaborate with government communicators. The findings

point to common opportunities and obstacles that can facilitate as well as provide roadblocks to effective external and internal communication.

The findings also point toward potential differences among bureaucratic levels and between communicators representing elected officials versus those representing bureaucrats. For example, politics appears to have a stronger effect on communicators' daily activities at the federal level than at the state and local levels, indicating that communicators may not be able to as easily separate themselves from politics at the federal level. Likewise, fewer professional development opportunities seem to be available at the federal level, especially for communicators representing elected officials. For these communicators, the ability to learn on the job without formal professional development may be especially important for career advancement. Another explanation might be that these opportunities are available but federal communicators working for politicians are not as aware of them either due to time constraints, budget constraints, or an organisational culture with high turnover that does not place much value on formal training opportunities. More research is needed to tease out potential unique opportunities and challenges within the U.S. government sector.

The findings also are insightful for academics as they increasingly study the under-researched government sector, providing insights for theory development. In terms of public relations theory advancement, the findings could be incorporated into existing theories such as adding additional internal and external variables to the contingency theory (Cameron, Pang, & Jin, 2008; Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997). In addition, the findings could lay the foundation for the development of a theory that predicts effective government public relations practices in the unique public sector environment, building on Liu and Horsley's (2007) government communication decision wheel as well as other models developed by Fairbanks, Plowman, and Rawlings (2007) and Hiebert (1981), among others.

While this study provides both practical and theoretical implications, like all research it is limited. First, because the study was exploratory, we selected a qualitative method to answer our research questions. Therefore, the findings are not generalisable. Also, the findings are only applicable to U.S. government communicators. Future research should test the challenges and opportunities identified in this study quantitatively as well as investigate which, if any, apply to non-U.S. government communicators.

By providing the first empirical evaluation of the unique U.S. public sector attributes that affect communication practices (Liu & Horsley, 2007) this study confirmed that U.S. government communicators face many common constraints and opportunities. However, government communicators are not a uniform group (Rainey, 2003). By grouping communicators by levels of government, we identified how some of the attributes differently affect communicators at different levels of the government. To better tease out how the public sector's unique attributes affect government communicators, future research could explore additional methods of grouping communicators (e.g., employed by an elected official versus a bureaucrat). Future research also could explore which, if any, of the attributes also apply to the U.S. private and non-profit sectors. Other scholars have noted that environmental attributes exist on a continuum with some applying solely to the public sector and others at least partially applying to all three sectors (e.g. Liu et al., 2010; Rainey, 2003).

Drawing from more than 700 years of combined public sector communication experience, this study helps scholars and practitioners better understand the complex world of U.S. government public relations. With government communication management largely unstudied (Gelders, et al., 2007; Lee, 2008), this study lays the foundation for additional theory-building research on public sector communication management.

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