

# Listen, involve and represent: Identifying priorities for local government communicators

Peter Simmons

Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, Australia

## Abstract

*Studies have indicated that media relations often dominate local government (LGOV) communication activity, but little is known about influences on, or outcomes of, different activities and approaches. This study explored consequences of different approaches to communication in Australian LGOV, and thus contributes evidence for practice and theory development.*

*A total of 330 Australian LGOV communicators completed online surveys. Exploratory factor analysis identified underlying communication-related differences between organisations including: organisational support for communication; procedural fairness; media management activity; access to top management; customer and accountability communication; internal communication, and attitude of media to organisation. Factors were used as independent variables. Correlation helped to identify relationships among independent variables and three dependent variables, community approval, staff turnover and media coverage. Regression was used to identify predictors of the dependent variables.*

*The findings here challenge the dominance of media management and promotion in LGOV communication. An emphasis on managing media and promoting the organisation was not significantly associated with the desired outcomes. Important goals such as high community approval, favourable media coverage, and low staff turnover were more likely to be realised where LGOV valued communication planning and evaluation, and communication focused on fairness principles such as listening, transparency and broad participation in decision making.*

## Introduction

Over the past century local government (LGOV) responsibilities have grown beyond roads, public buildings and infrastructure to include strategic development planning, environmental management, regional development and approximately 150 human and other services (ALGA, 2012). The close relationship between LGOV and communities enables councils to respond to local issues, to build resilience in communities, and makes local councils best placed to make decisions on behalf of communities (ALGA, 2012). The proximity of this relationship also demands that councils respond quickly, listen when communities want to be heard, and show value for taxes and charges paid to them.

Around 90% of Australian LGOVs have at least one full-time communication employee. There are many commonalities in their work “across traditional and online media, internal communication strategy advice, publications and dissemination, community liaison and issues monitoring” (Simmons & Small, 2012, p. 12), however LGOV organisations also differ considerably in their practices and attitudes to communication. So what should LGOV organisations expect of their communication and communicators? Should LGOV communication focus on getting messages out, on listening, facilitating, relationships, service awareness, helping colleagues to understand the importance of transparency (Fairbanks, Plowman, & Rawlins, 2007), or some combination of roles and goals?

Studies have indicated that media relations often dominate LGOV communication (Simmons & Small, 2012; Liu, Horsley, & Levenshus, 2010), but little is known about influences on, or outcomes of, different communication activities and attitudes. This study explores the relationship between

approach to communication and just a few organisational outcomes, through the eyes of the communicators. It does not address the complex aspirational, structural, cultural and political influences on ways that communication is practised, nor does it examine economic, infrastructure, equity or other factors that might drive approval or perceptions of acceptable LGOV performance. It uses statistical techniques to identify significant relationships across a range of variables. Further studies will be required to explore in depth the complexities of LGOV communication.

The paper contemplates and connects several ideas pertinent to the conceptualisation and planning of LGOV communication. First is that democracy demands highly skilled communication. The State and Territory Acts that establish LGOV in Australia require LGOV to communicate – to involve, listen, represent and be accountable to their communities. Second is that these democratic requirements in the Acts closely resemble values intrinsic to procedural fairness (voice, consistency, and accuracy of information used to inform decisions [Leventhal, 1980]). Procedural fairness is known to positively influence important outcomes such as satisfaction, acceptance and cooperation. Third is that democratic and procedural fairness values closely align with contemporary conceptualisations of better practice in government public relations (Lee, 2012), and public relations more generally that emphasise reflection (Marsh, 2010) and symmetry (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002) as the best ways for public relations to contribute to organisational effectiveness (Grunig, Grunig, Sriramesh, Huang, & Lyra, 1995). It has been argued that public relations can learn from the large body of research conducted on the ways that people perceive fairness (Nel, 2001; Simmons & Walsh, 2012). Together these ideas suggest that public relations communication, framed or guided by procedural fairness principles, should contribute to democratic processes required by the LGOV acts, and also positive outcomes for the organisation such as acceptance of and cooperation with decisions.

The aim of this paper is to explore outcomes associated with different approaches to communication in Australian LGOV, and thus gather evidence for planning practice and developing theory. Data was gathered from 330 Australian LGOV communication practitioners. Factor analysis is used to identify the underlying variations in communication-related features of LGOV organisations (the independent variables). Correlation is used to identify associations among six independent variables and three important organisational outcomes, staff turnover, community approval, and media coverage (the dependent variables). Regression is used to identify the significant predictors of the dependent variables.

#### *Public relations communication and media in local government*

Much of the limited available scholarly literature on government and LGOV communication has come from the field of public relations (Canel & Sanders, 2013; Simmons & Small, 2012). For three decades the ‘excellence’ conceptualisation of public relations that dominates public relations has preferred a quantitative and ‘scientific’ approach to communication management, lauded symmetry in communication between organisations and their publics, and assumed that corporate communication makes an important social contribution. In 2014 the eighth Annenberg study of Communication and Public Relations Generally Accepted Practices reported that valuing public relations communication contributions to organisation strategy is associated with organisational success, and that excellence today involves embracing a two-way engagement approach to communication and not over prioritising the traditional media (GAP, 2014).

Sanders and Canel (2013) analysed different approaches to government communication in 15 countries and argued that a strategic (as opposed to tactical) orientation was linked to a focus on citizen (as opposed to partisan political) interests. The implication is that where governments reflect deliberately on the appropriate purpose and practice of communication they tend towards a focus on citizen interests. Although still dominant today, for two decades the excellence concepts used to

describe and label instances and approaches to communication have frequently been criticised because they fail to account for the role of political and institutional power that determine communication practices, and because excellence places “organizations rather than society at its heart” (Fawkes, 2015, p. 16). A close analysis of paradigms of public relations and the needs and imperatives of LGOV communication is beyond the intent and scope of this paper. However it is important to remember that while seeking to identify patterns and relationships among communication and other variables pertinent to democratic processes, this paper does not seek to account for the very important interpersonal, aspirational and interactional power dynamics behind LGOV communication practices.

Public relations scholars have increasingly turned their attentions to government communication in the past decade. They remind us that communication is integral to governing (Simmons & Small, 2012), that good communication is a tool for governing better (Lee, 2012), and that relationships are central to government communication (Canel & Sanders, 2013). Lee (2012) used the label *mandatory* to describe government communication that aims to increase accountability for public funds and promote participation in decision making, and has a focus on democracy and communicating with the community as citizens. *Optional* government communication relates to the community as customers, promoting awareness of services, regulations and safer lifestyle choices. Finally, he said *dangerous* government communication is improper promotion of support for elected officials, communicating with communities as ‘voters’ (Lee, 2012). An Australian study of LGOV communicator activities and attitudes to communication found a strong focus on *mandatory* communication, making organisations more accountable and participatory, and *optional* communication, making communities more aware of facilities and services (Simmons & Small, 2012). That study also suggested that LGOV communicators were more focused on internal communication than de Bussy and Wolf’s (2009) sample of mainstream Australian public relations practitioners.

It has been suggested that government communicators perform wider-ranging duties than private sector communicators, and that this could restrict their ability to practice communication as strategic management (Liu et al., 2010). One study found that, compared with the private sector, Australian government communicators were less likely to evaluate outcomes than outputs (Simmons and Watson, 2006). Another Australian study reported that two thirds of LGOV communicators provided strategic communication advice “daily or weekly to top managers, but only a minority considered themselves to be top management” (Simmons & Small, 2012, p. 1). It found that 42% of LGOV communicators post in Twitter or Facebook for their organisations at least weekly but that the traditional media consume much of the work activity of LGOV communicators (Simmons & Small, 2012).

Previous studies have reported that media relations dominates LGOV communication in Australia (Simmons & Small, 2012) and the US (Liu et al., 2010). Fifty-two per cent of Australian LGOV communicators monitor traditional media coverage of their organisation daily, 40% respond to media enquiries daily, and 39% write for the media daily (Simmons & Small, 2012). A US survey reported similarly that media relations dominates activity among both public and private sector communicators, and that public sector communicators perceive media coverage to be more negative than private sector communicators (Liu et al., 2010).

Traditional mass media have long been the main means by which governments disseminate public information (Graham, 2014), and most people in western democracies still rely on news media for information about their society (Laursen & Valenti, 2014). The media are important in several ways to local government. Public sector organisations can be a major source of conflict-oriented and other news (Hess & Waller, 2008), and media tend to scrutinise their decisions more closely than private (Liu & Horsley, 2007; Liu et al., 2010). Elected and other officials often perceive that the media keep LGOV accountable and help LGOV communicate effectively with communities (Hess & Waller, 2008), and that they are highly influential in attitude formation,

setting agendas, and voting patterns. Hess and Waller (2008) said that regional Australian LGOV and the media are mutually dependent, and that LGOV has most influence over media coverage when the communicators have experience in packaging information for the media and positive relationships with journalists. Literature from the USA suggests diversity in attitude and approach to government media relations. Lee (2012) presents media relations as a rather noble democratic obligation to be, and appear to be, accountable. “No comment” is not an acceptable answer from a civil servant whose salary is being paid by taxpayers’ (Lee, 2012, p. 14). In contrast, Sadow (2012) provides a view of government media relations as a high stakes game played in an urban jungle. Although the work of government public affairs and media are entwined, he says the relationship is naturally adversarial due to the different imperatives of the government and the media (which need to sell advertising or increase ratings, and are thus prone to sensationalise and distort) He says that communication success requires planned and agreed approaches to media opportunities and unforeseen crises, while adapting to each unique context. (Sadow, 2012).

*Democracy demands skilled and sensitive communication*

Democratic ideals concerning the involvement of an informed and representative citizenry in decision making (Kamnuansilpa, 2012) provide constant communication challenges for individual councillors and LGOV organisations alike. LGOV is at once an agency for administration and change, and the site of contest for influence over that agency. Within, LGOV is generally structured hierarchically to promote goals determined by political heads, informed and filtered through management aspirations and the preferences and interests of professions such as engineers, health and other scientists, planners and financiers. Externally, each LGOV serves a range of competing and often vocal interests in communities that are much larger and more complex than the ancient Greek communities where democracy developed and “communication was relatively easy” (Held, 2006, p. 12). Jun (2012) argues

that the powerful influences of hierarchy and managerialism, and the “narrow focus of most professionals in public service” (p. 5), drive a focus on placating rather than involving and “taking citizens’ ideas seriously” (2012, p. 8).

The 560 LGOVs across Australia (ALGA, 2013) are established by state and territory acts and they differ in terms of structure, services (ALGA, 2012) and approach to managing communication (Simmons & Small, 2012). Although the state and territory local government acts do not specify the need for communication departments or specialists, the requirement to communicate well is embedded in the principles, preambles and charters intended to guide the execution of government. Each act refers to one or more principles such as encouraging participation in civic life, representing and responding to the needs and aspirations of individuals and different groups, social inclusion and meaningful community engagement. Most also call for processes to be effective, efficient, transparent, and accountable to the community (LGOV Act Tasmania, 1993, Section 20). Governments often cannot simultaneously represent the interests of all of their publics (Waymer, 2013). In the cauldrons of competing community demands, the requirements for transparency, participation and responsiveness demand mechanisms and skills for listening to communities and interpreting viewpoints and needs. Councils need to manage processes that facilitate voice and promote service use, but ultimately lead to sound decisions that are acceptably balanced in the community’s interest. Often this requires communicating on behalf of a ‘greater good’, explaining links between various costs and inconveniences, and benefits to the community in the long term.

*Procedural fairness encourages cooperation*

The values embedded in the LGOV acts align well with principles that Leventhal (1980) proffered as ‘rules’ for fairness in procedures used to make decisions and allocations, they include: representativeness or voice for those affected by decisions, the need for consistency in implementation, impartiality, accuracy in information used to inform decisions, the ability to appeal a decision, and ethical standards such as the absence of corruption

(adapted from Colquitt, Greenberg & Zapata-Phelan, 2005; Jordan, Gillentine & Hunt, 2004; Leventhal, Karuza, & Fry, 1980; and Leventhal, 1980). The well-tested 'fair process effect' says that people accept decisions more readily and react more positively when they perceive that they have experienced fair treatment, and more negatively when they perceive they have experienced unfair treatment (van den Bos, 2005).

Alongside intrinsic benefits of fairness (Tankebe, 2009), governments have an interest in fairness and community acceptance because acceptance improves cooperation. Cooperation reduces resources required to implement decisions, and improves community satisfaction and organisational efficiency. Procedural fairness is an especially important concept for LGOV communicators and decision makers to understand because organisations generally have control over their decision-making processes (Dai, Frank, & Sun, 2011) and the way that those affected by decisions are treated (Simmons & Walsh, 2012). The values integral to procedural fairness and the LGOV acts also accord well with contemporary conceptualisations of public relations practice that emphasise the importance of external influences on organisation decision making (Simmons & Walsh, 2012), such as Marsh's (2010) precepts of reflective public relations practice, dialogue (Kent & Taylor, 2002) and symmetry in external communication (Grunig et al., 2002).

Although PR practitioners might not use the language of 'fairness', they frequently exhibit awareness of its importance, for example when they recommend consultation in organisational processes, advise that management listen to stakeholder concerns or inform staff of organisational decisions before external publics (Simmons & Walsh, 2012, p. 5).

It is preferable for people to defer to a decision because they perceive the authority to be legitimate or the decision to be just. However the use of fairness to obtain cooperation "when decisions do not give the parties what they want is always a challenge" (Tyler, 201, p. 367), and on some matters, such

as disputes between environmentalists and mining industries, it may be impossible to achieve common ground (Vainio, 2011). Those involved in government communication processes require a special balance of skills or qualities. According to Tyler (2012), government representatives should "recognize the need to balance between expertise/competence/impartiality/objectivity and particularity/sensitivity to individual needs, concerns and conditions/responsiveness" (p. 368). Similarly, a UK local government communication report said communication leaders need to work effectively with empirical evidence, display both integrity and gravitas, and have a deep understanding of organisation goals and the operating environment. The UK report stressed the importance of developing relationships with diverse stakeholders, who often have competing interests (LG Communications UK, 2009).

*Guidelines or principles for LGOV communication?*

LGOV communication leaders feel that communication should be broader than media relations, but in Australia there are few guides available – beyond individual LGOV communication plans – to frame the role and responsibilities of communicators. According to the national president of Government Communications Australia:

Local government communication goes by many names including community relations, media relations and community engagement. It is no longer enough to just be the voice of the council. A communicator who reports to a director can get good news out about the council, but to really influence decision-making and increase community participation communicators need to bring the voice of the community to the table ... Some more advanced council organisations have recognized this and are benefiting, but there is a long way to go (Deb Ganderton, 2013, personal communication).

In the UK as well, the Local Government Association (LGA UK) argues that "councils no longer look to communications to simply

react to press coverage”, emphasising the need to be more proactive in a broader role as “[s]trategic planner of council reputation” (p. 19), driving media coverage, and influencing change, culture, strategy and policy (LGA UK, 2013). Reputation management has been advanced as a model for LGOV communication management in Australia (Ryan, 2007) but despite increasing professional networking activity among Australian LGOV communicators (Megan Graham, 2013, personal communication) there is limited empirical evidence to aid comparison of the consequences of different approaches to managing LGOV communication.

### **Research questions**

The main aims for this study were to identify differences in LGOV approaches to communication (activity emphasis, intentions, organisational support for communication, procedural fairness) and then explore relationships between these differences and three important organisation outcomes, approval of communities, staff turnover, and media coverage. The research questions were:

1. What factors differentiate LGOV approaches to communication?
2. How do different approaches to LGOV communication correlate with and predict approval of communities, staff turnover, and media coverage?

### **Method**

#### *Procedure*

A self-report online questionnaire was used to collect data between June 1 and June 26, 2012. The sample was a convenience sample of LGOV communicators Australia-wide. A link to the survey was repeatedly distributed to email lists held by *Government Communications Australia* and by senior communicators in state LGOV coordinating bodies (in NSW, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria, and Western Australia). The link was posted in LGOV public relations network newsletters, and emailed to each LGOV three times marked ‘Attention: Communication and media staff’. Using email

this way means that we do not know how many emails were received by our target, or blocked by spam or other filters.

Exploratory factor analysis was used to identify the latent dimensions among 35 independent variable items. Correlation and regression were then used to explore and compare the interrelationships between the independent and the dependent variables. SPSS 20 was used to analyse the data.

#### *Sample*

There were 330 completed surveys. Just 10.3% of the sample reported they had no full-time professional communicator. Assuming the sample is representative, and using mid point scale estimates (and 15 as the value for ‘11 or more’), the findings indicate there are just under 2000 full-time LGOV communication employees in Australia. The 330 completed responses would represent 17% of all full-time LGOV communicators. Females comprised 78.5%, almost identical to de Bussy and Wolf’s (2009) sample of all Australian public relations practitioners. There was a spread of rural, urban, larger and smaller councils, a spread of age groups, and a mix of experienced and inexperienced practitioners.

#### *Measures*

Respondents were not asked at any time to associate the dependent and independent variables reported and connected through statistical analysis below. Unless otherwise stated, respondents answered a five point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

#### *Dependent variables*

##### *Staff turnover*

High staff turnover is often used as a negative indicator of the health of organisation climate and human resource practices, including local government (Gould-Williams & Mohamed, 2010). This study used a single item measure of respondent perception of staff turnover. (My organisation ... has a high turnover of staff generally).

##### *Approval of the community*

A single item measure of the perception of community approval was used. (My organisation ... has the approval of most of the communities we serve.)

### *Media coverage*

A seven-item scale was developed to measure attitudes to media coverage. (My organisation gets its views heard in news media coverage; News coverage of my organisation is accurate; I am generally satisfied with the way our local media organisations deal with complaints; The news media coverage of my organisation is positive; News coverage of my organisation gives a balance of views; The coverage of my organisation is fair).

### *Independent variables (see Table 1)*

Independent variables were developed to measure different approaches to communication activity, intent, and support, and the context for communication.

### *Media attitude*

The wording of two items was influenced by Sadow's (2012) picture of the media as very adversarial to government.

### *Communication commitment*

Interviews conducted with LGOV communicators during the development of the survey revealed that some managers view communication as integral to governing, while others see it as a 'necessary evil' at best. A three-item scale was created to measure organisational commitment to communication.

### *Procedural fairness*

Respondent perceptions of the procedural fairness of their employer organisations were measured using a six-item scale adapted from Vainio's (2011) study, which in turn was based on Leventhal et al., (1980).

### *Purposes of communication*

Ten statements were extrapolated from Lee's (2012) *mandatory* and *optional* frames for describing the purpose of public sector communication.

The remaining items relating to *work activity* and *advice to top management* were answered using a five point Likert style scale (1= never; 2 = less than monthly; 3 = monthly; 4 = weekly; 5 = daily).

### *Communication work activity*

Thirteen items were included to represent different types of communication activities and thus reveal different emphases across internal communication, traditional media response and management, social media and traditional messaging vehicles, some were adapted from

Liu et al., (2010). Respondents answered and were scored using a five point Likert style scale (1= never; 2 = less than monthly; 3 = monthly; 4 = weekly; 5 = daily).

### *Strategic communication advice to top management*

A single item was used to measure frequency of the provision of strategic communication advice to top management.

## **Results**

### *RQ1. What factors differentiate local government approaches to communication?*

Exploratory factor analysis using principal component extraction and varimax rotation was used to identify the underlying factor structure of responses. Factorability of the items was considered and found to be generally acceptable, but nine (mostly activity) items were removed for low correlations or for not loading on to factor solutions. Thirty-one of the initial 35 items correlated at least .3 with at least one other item. 'Internal communication' (with just two correlations above .22) was retained because it had a communality of .498 and because Simmons & Small (2012) suggested that a stronger emphasis on internal communication, relative to mainstream communicators, may be a characteristic of Australian LGOV communicators.

A six-factor solution for 26 items was finally preferred with 61.42% of variance explained. **Table 1** (below) shows the six factors and the individual items they comprise. At .35 there were three items cross loading on factors, at .45 all items loaded onto factors with no cross loading. There was intuitive and theoretical support for the six-factor solution, and a scree plot graph levelled off after six factors. The extracted communality for all items was above .41.

There were some surprises in the factor loadings. Procedural fairness and communication commitment items loaded together as a single factor in all solutions examined (labelled here as 'EqualVoice'). Similarly, in all solutions examined the traditional media management and promotion-related activity items, and frequency of advice to top management, loaded together as a single factor (labelled here as 'ManagePromote').

**Table 1: Factor loadings and communalities based on a principal components analysis with varimax rotation for 26 items**

	EqualVoice	ManagePromote	CitizenCustomers	Accountable	Internal	MediaAlert	Eigenvalue
<i>N</i> = 330	1	2	3	4	5	6	
My organisation ensures all interests are represented in decision making.	.836						
My organisation treats all parties equally in decision making.	.821						
My organisation is committed to communication planning.	.773						
My organisation bases decisions on all the up-to-date knowledge.	.759						5.95
My organisation evaluates its communication well.	.709						
My organisation upholds high ethical and moral standards in its processes.	.661						
My organisation values good communication.	.645						
My organisation encourages everyone to participate in decision making.	.618						
My organisation ensures that people who are dissatisfied with decisions can appeal them.	.548						
Respond to media inquiries.		.879					
Write for the media (e.g. news releases, alerts, fact sheets).		.853					
Liaise with stakeholders in relation to media coverage.		.824					4.087
Prepare staff for media interviews.		.789					
Advise staff on communication-related matters.		.687					
Frequently give strategic communication advice to ... The top management team		.673					
Work with council staff to promote positive activities.		.608					
The intention of our organisation's communication is to ... increase community participation in organisation decision making.			.714				
The intention of our organisation's communication is to ... increase community awareness of organisation facilities and services available for their use.			.713				2.521
The intention of our organisation's communication is to ... raise community awareness of lifestyle choices (including health and safety).			.703				
The intention of our organisation's communication is to ... increase community feedback about the organisation (including complaints about services / policy).			.652				
The intention of our organisation's communication is to ... increase voluntary community compliance with regulations.			.615				
The intention of our organisation's communication is to ... gauge community opinion through listening.			.605				
The intention of our organisation's communication is to ... be accountable to the community through the media.				.728			
The intention of our organisation's communication is to ... report to the community on the spending of ratepayer funds.				.658			1.279
Internal communication.					.735		1.129
My organisation has to be very careful with the media because they would love to catch us out.						.945	1.003

Notes. 1. Factor loadings <.45 are suppressed 2. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.872 with a significant Bartlett's sphericity.



The items extrapolated from Lee's (2012) Mandatory and Optional purposes of public sector public relations separated, with the accountability-related items emerging as a single factor. They have been labelled 'CitizenCustomer' and 'Accountable'. There were two single-item factors that emerged, 'Internal Communication' and 'MediaAlert'.

**Appendix 1** shows the descriptive statistics for the independent and dependent factor variables, and internal consistency (using Cronbach's alpha) for multiple item factor variables. Internal consistency for the scale variables ranges from adequate to high. Removal of any items would not have a substantial effect on alpha scores. Composite scores were created for each of the factors.

**Table 2: Correlations among communication approaches and organisation outcomes**

N = 330		2	3	4	5	6	Community Approval	Media Coverage	Staff Turnover
1. EqualVoice		.091	.334**	.194**	.074	-.155**	.416**	.254**	-.427**
2. ManagePromote			.148**	.251**	.129*	.076	-.065	.084	-.046
3. CitizenCustomer				.461**	.089	-.062	.239**	.149**	-.142*
4. Accountable					.036	.012	.101	.112*	-.078
5. Internal Communication						-.021	.070	-.035	-.095
6. MediaAlert							-.268**	-.563**	.111*
7. Community Approval								.377**	-.180**
8. MediaCoverage									-.144**
9. Staff Turnover									

\*p < 0.05 (2 tailed) \*\*p<0.01 (2 tailed)

*RQ2. How do different approaches to local government communication correlate with and predict approval of communities, staff turnover, and media coverage?*

The analysis aimed to explore relationships between communication related variables and organisation outcome variables. Bivariate relationships were examined for the independent and dependent variables using Pearson's correlation. Correlation does not demonstrate causation, but it is useful for identifying relationships, developing theory before further research, and as a precursor to methods that do test for causation. **Table 2** shows one large and numerous small and medium significant relationships (Cohen, 1988).

Starting with correlations between dependent and independent variables of main interest, EqualVoice, MediaAlert and

CitizenCustomer each had significant correlations with all three of the dependent variables. ManagePromote and Internal Communication had no significant correlations with any of the dependent variables.

*Community Approval* significantly correlated with EqualVoice (r = .416, p<0.01), CitizenCustomer (r = .239, p<0.01) and MediaAlert (r = -.268, p<0.01). *Media Coverage* significantly correlated with EqualVoice (r = .254, p<0.01), CitizenCustomer (r = .149, p<0.01), MediaAlert (r = -.563, p<0.01) and Accountable (r = .112, p<0.05). *Staff Turnover* significantly and negatively correlated with EqualVoice (r = -.427, p<0.01) and CitizenCustomer (r = -.142, p<0.05). MediaAlert (r = .111, p<0.05) correlated positively with *Staff Turnover*. The largest correlation was negative (-.563, p<0.01)

between MediaAlert ('My organisation has to be very careful with the media because they would love to catch us out') and Media Coverage. Otherwise EqualVoice had the strongest relationships with *Community Approval*, *Media Coverage* and *Staff Turnover*. The dependent variables were all interrelated insofar as they each correlated significantly with the others, and the direction of the correlations made intuitive sense. For example *Community Approval* correlated positively with *Media Coverage* ( $r = .377, p < 0.01$ ) and negatively with *Staff Turnover* ( $r = -.180, p < 0.01$ ). *Media Coverage* correlated negatively with *Staff Turnover* ( $r = -.144, p < 0.01$ ). Among

the independent variables the largest correlations were between CitizenCustomer and Accountable ( $r = .461, p < 0.01$ ), CitizenCustomer and EqualVoice ( $r = .334, p < 0.01$ ), and Accountable and ManagePromote ( $r = .251, p < 0.01$ ). ManagePromote also correlated significantly with CitizenCustomer ( $r = .148, p < 0.01$ ) and Internal Communication ( $r = .129, p < 0.05$ ).

Multiple linear regressions were run to identify variables that predicted each of the dependent variables, *Community Approval*, *Media Coverage* and *Staff Turnover*, see **Table 3**.

**Table 3: Multiple linear regressions for *Community Approval*, *Media Coverage* and *Staff Turnover***

	Community Approval		Media Coverage		Staff Turnover	
	$R^2 = .242$		$R^2 = .368$		$R^2 = .187$	
	Std. $\square$	SE	Std. $\square$	SE	Std. $\square$	SE
<b>1. EqualVoice</b>	.354**	.008	.147**	.039	-.416**	.010
<b>2. ManagePromote</b>	-.106*	.007	.105*	.034	-.010	.008
<b>3. CitizenCustomer</b>	.120*	.016	.035	.083	.004	.021
<b>4. Accountable</b>	.004	.035	.051	.181	.004	.045
<b>5. Internal</b>	.028	.040	-.079	.209	-.055	.052
<b>6. MediaAlert</b>	-.204**	.041	-.548**	.211	.047	.053

\* $p < 0.05$  \*\* $p < 0.01$

The factor variables statistically significantly predicted *Community Approval*,  $F(6,317) = 16.912, p < .001, R^2 = .242$ . EqualVoice, ManagePromote, CitizenCustomer and MediaAlert all contributed statistically significantly to the prediction,  $p < .05$ . EqualVoice and CitizenCustomer contributed positively, ManagePromote and MediaAlert contributed negatively. The factor variables statistically significantly predicted *Media Coverage*,  $F(6, 319) = 31.001, p < .0001, R^2 = .368$ . EqualVoice and ManagePromote contributed positively, and MediaAlert negatively to the prediction,  $p \geq .05$ . Only EqualVoice helped statistically significantly predict *Staff Turnover*,  $F(6,319) = 12.233,$

$p < .001, R^2 = .187$ . The relationship was negative.

The data indicate that EqualVoice had a desired influence on each of the dependent variables – contributing significantly and positively to *Community Approval* and *Media Coverage*, and significantly and negatively to *Staff Turnover*.

### Limitations

The instrument was developed with advice on comprehensibility and item clarity from representatives of the target respondents, then pilot tested. It was administered online and anonymously, thus minimising method bias concerns from consistency motif, and from

socially desirable responding (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). We need to be careful generalising the findings to the Australian LGOV population as the population is not known, but the spread of respondents across states, urban and regional locations, and organisation sizes, and the similarity of the gender balance with de Bussy and Wolf's (2009) sample, indicate a good cross-section of LGOV communication. Perhaps the main limitation of the method is that the measures of the dependent and independent variables were obtained from the same source within the same exposure to the instrument (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

The item formats within the factors with the largest number of items are generally similar, and thus suggestive of a form of common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003), but there is mixed evidence for this. On one hand, two apparently similar items ('My organisation encourages everyone to participate in decision making' and 'The intention of our organisation's communication is to ... increase community participation in organisation decision making') loaded onto different factors (Cronbach's alpha .417) alongside scale item statements with similar format, but with different content concerning organisation actuality (i.e. 'my organisation ensures' in one scale and communication intention in the other. Also, two scales (procedural fairness and commitment to communication) with the same statement format ('My organisation ...') loaded together. Were respondents responding to format or content? If item format was an influence it was limited. Some scale items beginning with 'The intention of our organisation's communication is to ...' loaded separately but logically as the Accountable and CitizenCustomer factors.

### **Discussion**

This study helps local government to plan communication because it links organisations and their communication practice with important outcomes. The findings challenge the common LGOV practice of focusing communication on media and promotion activities. They indicate that LGOV organisations using communication to advance

community voice and participation in decision making – principles embedded in the state and territory LGOV acts – are more likely to benefit from approval of their communities, favourable media coverage and low staff turnover. Previous studies of local government (Simmons & Small, 2012) and public sector (Liu et al., 2010) communication have reported activity emphasising traditional media and promotion activities. These activities were not associated with approval of communities, favourable media coverage or lower staff turnover. The findings here support calls for organisations – in this case LGOV organisations – to use justice principles to conceptualise and plan their communication efforts (Simmons & Walsh, 2012; Nel, 2001).

Another important finding is that organisation commitment to good communication (including planning and evaluation) and procedural fairness are closely related, and loaded as a single factor, EqualVoice. EqualVoice explained the largest variance and correlated significantly with each dependent variable outcome – community approval, favourability of media coverage and lower staff turnover. Regression analysis found EqualVoice was the only factor that significantly predicted all of the dependent variable outcomes. It will require further research to untangle and improve understanding of the relationship between the variables, but these findings tend to support the claims of the Annenberg Communication and Public Relations Generally Accepted Practices studies that commitment to strategic communication is associated with organisational success, and that traditional media should no longer be the overriding priority (GAP 2014). The factor that produced the next greatest variance, ManagePromote, indicated communicator emphasis on working with council leaders to focus on traditional media and promotion of council news and views. ManagePromote did not correlate significantly with any of the dependent variable outcomes. Regression showed that it made a small but significant positive contribution to favourability of media coverage, but contributed negatively to community approval.

CitizenCustomer communication, deriving from Lee (2012), emphasising intent to increase participation in decision making, raise awareness of services, and gather community feedback, was more influential than his Accountable communication emphasising intent to be accountable for funding and decisions.

The findings suggest that the closer an organisation is to achieving justice outcomes, the more likely it is to achieve community approval, favourable media and low staff turnover. The factors reflecting communication intent generally had weaker associations with *Community Approval*, *Media Coverage* and *Staff Turnover* outcomes than the EqualVoice factor reflecting organisational actualities ('my organisation ensures ...'; 'my organisation evaluates ...'), but were generally stronger than those based on activity such as ManagePromote and Internal Communication. Over recent decades numerous public relations scholars and industry leaders have urged communicators to focus on communication outcomes not activity or outputs (Simmons & Watson, 2006; Macnamara, 1999). A justice outcomes-oriented approach to communication planning is supported by the findings here, and deserves further research, especially in the context of LGOV and other public sector communication.

The direction and significance of correlations among the dependent variables are suggestive of a pattern of interrelationship. Organisations with higher community approval might be expected to enjoy more favourable media coverage and lower staff turnover. Conversely, we might expect that organisations with lower approval would receive less favourable coverage and have higher staff turnover. Each of these variables is complex, but the intuitively logical pattern in their interrelationship adds credibility to the findings.

As indicated above, the findings here challenge the wisdom of overly focusing communication resources on the media, but they can also be interpreted as attesting to the importance of traditional media to LGOV and communicators. The correlations indicate that where organisations most strongly perceive that the media 'would love to catch us out'

(MediaAlert) they experience lower community approval, less favourable media coverage and higher staff turnover. In regression analysis MediaAlert significantly and negatively predicted *Community Approval* and *Media Coverage*. Laursen and Valenti (2014) have argued that the mediatisation of society demands that government communicators be sophisticated media managers, carefully balancing the requirements to maintain credibility and impartiality, while promoting their organisations and their "own attractiveness as news sources" (p. 13). Simultaneously, there is a greater expectation that governments take advantage of social media to engage and be transparent with their communities (Graham, 2014). Each LGOV organisation operates in unique circumstances with different personalities and political imperatives. Doubtless some LGOV leaders and communicators must survive as best they can in Sadow's (2012) media jungle, and these findings concerning the media may be interpreted by some as indicative of a need to focus more on the media. In the short term it can be tempting to be driven by bad publicity and unfavourable review, but in the long term the best public relations may come down to listening, engaging and informing.

Public relations should aid the fair distribution of resources and adversity (Nel, 2001) and it is important to capture different definitions and perspectives of distributions and processes. Future studies of LGOV communicator roles should examine perspectives and consequences for communities outside the organisation, and from different viewpoints within the organisation, especially senior management who are empowered to make strategic changes. The single item measure of community approval is a broad indicator. Future studies should focus on capturing different dimensions concerning 'approval', and the perspectives of a range of sub groups including those who may have special needs.

Governments are being called on to solve difficult cultural, social and economic problems at a time when there is increased demand for democracy and community participation in the solution of these problems (Jun, 2012). The

findings here so strongly indicate that listening, inclusion and procedural fairness are associated with better outcomes – while managing media and promotion are not – that LGOV communicators, managers and scholars should reflect on current approaches and practices. Democracy requires skilled and often difficult communication, these findings suggest LGOV and their communicators should avoid being distracted from higher purposes to listen, include and represent.

### References

- ALGA. (2012). *The case for change: Why local government needs to be in the Australian constitution*. Australian Local Government Association. Retrieved from [http://www.councilreferendum.com.au/site/misc/alga/downloads/COUNCIL\\_RESOURCES/A\\_LGA\\_CaseForChange\\_WEB%20VERSION.pdf](http://www.councilreferendum.com.au/site/misc/alga/downloads/COUNCIL_RESOURCES/A_LGA_CaseForChange_WEB%20VERSION.pdf)
- ALGA. (2013). *Local Government fact sheet*. Australian Local Government Association. Retrieved from <http://www.alga.asn.au/?ID=42&Menu=41,81>
- Canel, M. J. & Sanders, K. (2013). Introduction: Mapping the field of government communication. In K. Sanders & M. J. Canel (Eds.), *Government communication: Cases and challenges* (pp.1–26). New York: Bloomsbury.
- Cohen, J. (1988). *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Colquitt J, Greenberg J, & Zapata-Phelan, C. (2005). What is organizational justice? A historical overview. In J. Greenberg & J. Colquitt (Eds.), *Handbook of organizational justice* (pp. 3–56). New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Dai, M, Frank, J, & Sun, I. (2011). Procedural justice during police-citizen encounters: The effects of process-based policing on citizen compliance and demeanor. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 39, 159–168.
- De Bussy, N. & Wolf, K. (2009). The state of Australian public relations: Professionalisation and paradox. *Public Relations Review*, 35(4), 376–381.
- Fairbanks, J., Plowman, J. D. & Rawlins, B. L. (2007). Transparency in government communication. *Journal of Public Affairs*, 7, 23–37.
- Fawkes, J. (2015). *Public relations ethics and professionalism: The shadow of excellence*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- GAP (2014). USC Annenberg Strategic Communication and Public Relations Center. *Eighth communication and public relations generally accepted practices study*. Retrieved from <http://ascjweb.org/gapstudy/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/GAP-VIII-Presentation-Final-6.12.2014.pdf>
- Gould-Williams, J., & Mohamed, R. (2010). A comparative study of the effects of ‘best practice’ HRM on worker outcomes in Malaysia and England local government. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 21(5), 653–675.
- Graham, M. (2014). Government communication in the digital age: Social media’s effect on local government public relations. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 3, 361.
- Grunig, L, Grunig, J, & Dozier, D. (2002). *Excellent public relations and effective organisations*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Grunig, J, Grunig, L, Sriramesh, K, Huang, Y. & Lyra, A. (1995). Models of public relations in an international setting. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 7(30), 163–186.
- Held, D. (2006). *Models of democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hess, K, & Waller, L. (2008). An exploratory study of relationships between local government media officers and journalists in regional australia. *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal*, 9, 151–160.
- Jordan J, Gillentine J, & Hunt B. (2004). The influence of fairness: The application of organizational justice in a team sport setting. *International Sports Journal*, 8(1), 139–149.
- Jun, S. (2012). *The social construction of public administration: Interpretive and critical perspectives*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Kamnuansilpa, P. (2012). Contextual overview. In P. Kamnuansilpa & B. P. Brereton (Eds.),
- Simmons, P. (2016). Listen, involve and represent: Identifying focus for local government communicators. *PRism* 11(1): <http://www.prismjournal.org/homepage.html>

- Local governments in global context* (pp.199–220). Khon Kaen, Thailand: College of Local Administration, Khon Kaen University.
- Kent, M. & Taylor, M. (2002). Toward a dialogic theory of public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 28(1), 21–37.
- Laursen, B. & Valentini, C. (2014). Mediatization and government communication: Press work in the European Parliament. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, November, 1–19. <http://hij.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/11/06/1940161214556513>
- Lee, M. (2012). Government public relations: What is it good for? In M. Lee, G. Neeley, & K. Stewart (Eds.), *The practice of government public relations* (pp. 9–25). Boca Raton: Taylor and Francis.
- Leventhal, G. (1980). What should be done with equity theory? New approaches to the fairness in social relationships. In K. Gergen, M. Greenberg & R. Willis (Eds.), *Social exchange theory* (pp. 27–55). New York: Plenum.
- Leventhal, G., Karuza, J., & Fry, W. (1980). Beyond fairness: A theory of allocation preferences. In G. Mikula (Ed), *Justice and social interaction* (pp. 167–218). New York: Springer.
- LGA UK (2013). *New reputation guide*. Local Government Association. Retrieved from <http://reputation.lga.gov.uk/lga/core/page.do?pageId=11430566>
- LG Communications UK (2009). *Report of the commission on competencies for senior communication roles*. Local Government Communications. Retrieved from <http://www.lgcomms.org.uk/asset/75/CmsionOnCmptncsFrSeniorCommsRoles.pdf>
- LGOV Act Tasmania. (1993). *Tasmanian Local Government Act 1993*. Australasian Legal Information Institute. Retrieved from [http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/tas/consol\\_act/lga1993182/s20.html](http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/tas/consol_act/lga1993182/s20.html)
- Liu, B. F., & Horsley, J. S. (2007). The government communication wheel: Toward a public relations model for the public sector. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 19(4), 377–393.
- Liu, B. F., Horsley, J. S., & Levenshus, A. B. (2010). Government and corporate communication practices: Do the differences matter? *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 38(2), 189–213.
- Macnamara, J. (1999). Research in public relations: A review of the use of evaluation and formative research. *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal*, 1(2), 107–134.
- Marsh, C. (2010). Precepts of reflective public relations: An Isocratean model. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 22(4), 359–377.
- Nel, P. (2001). A justice philosophy of public relations management. *Comunicatio*, 27(1), 28–35.
- Podsakoff, P., MacKenzie, S, Lee, J, & Podsakoff, N. (2003). Common method biases in behavioral research: A critical review of the literature and recommended remedies. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 88(5), 879–903.
- Ryan, B. (2007). How can the corporate sector concepts of ‘reputation’ and ‘trust’ be used by local government? A study to establish a model of reputation management for local government. *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal*, 8, 37–75.
- Sadow, J. (2012). Media relations. In M. Lee, G. Neeley, & K. Stewart (Eds.), *The practice of government public relations* (pp. 29–50). Boca Raton: Taylor and Francis.
- Sanders, K. & Canel, M. J. (2013). Government communication in 15 countries: Themes and challenges. In K. Sanders & M. J. Canel (Eds.), *Government communication: Cases and challenges* (pp. 277–313). New York: Bloomsbury.
- Simmons, P., & Small, F. (2012). Promotion, monitoring and strategic advice: Professional communication in Australian local government, *PRism*, 9(1). Retrieved from [http://www.prismjournal.org/fileadmin/9\\_1/Simmons\\_Small.pdf](http://www.prismjournal.org/fileadmin/9_1/Simmons_Small.pdf)
- Simmons, P. & Walsh, B. (2012). Public relations and organizational justice: More fairness or just more cooperation? *Public Relations Inquiry*, 1(2), 141–158.

Simmons, P. & Watson, T. (2006). Public relations evaluation in Australia – practices and attitudes across sectors and employment status. *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal*, 6.2, 1–14).

Tankebe, J. (2009). Policing, procedural fairness and public behavior: a review and critique. *International Journal of Police Science and Management*, 11(1), 8–19.

Tyler, T. (2012). Justice and effective cooperation. *Social Justice Research*, 25(4), 355–375.

Vainio, A. (2011). Why are forest owners satisfied with forest policy decisions? Legitimacy, procedural justice, and perceived uncertainty. *Social Justice Research*, 24(3), 239–254.

van den Bos, K. (2005). What is responsible for the fair process effect? In: J. Greenberg and J.A. Colquitt (Eds.), *Handbook of organizational justice* (pp. 273–300). New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Waymer, D. (2013). Democracy and government public relations: Expanding the scope of ‘relationship’ in public relations research. *Public Relations Review*, 39(4), 320–331.

**Author contact details:**

Dr Peter Simmons  
 Associate Professor of Communication  
 School of Communication and Creative Industries  
 Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, Australia.  
  
 psimmons@csu.edu.au

**Copyright statement:**

The author of this article has elected, in the interests of open dissemination of scholarly work, to provide this article to you in open access format. This means that, in accordance with the principles of the Budapest Open Access Initiative (<http://www.soros.org/openaccess/>), you may freely copy and redistribute this article provided you correctly acknowledge its authors and source, and do not alter its contents.

**Appendix 1: Descriptive statistics and internal consistency for variables**

	No. items	Mean	SD	Cronbach's alpha
1. EqualVoice	9	30.35	6.04	.884
2. ManagePromote	7	25.49	6.82	.885
3. CitizenCustomer	6	24.51	3.23	.787
4. Accountable	2	8.22	1.40	.648
5. Internal	1	4.12	1.07	-
6. MediaAlert	1	3.45	1.06	-
7. Community Approval	1	3.28	.875	-
8. Media Coverage	7	23.1	4.95	.904
9. Staff Turnover	1	2.93	1.09	-