Promotion, monitoring and strategic advice: Professional communication in Australian local government

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Abstract

This survey study presents new knowledge about the identity and practices of communicators (n=330) in Australian local government (LGOV), a growing but under-researched area of communication specialisation. Respondents reported a strong sense that the intentions of their communication included making their organisations more accountable and participatory, and helping them achieve their mission with and on behalf of communities. The study found similarities with previous studies of communicators in US government and mainstream public relations. Activities were generally similar to, but less media-oriented than, US city and county government communicators (Horsley, Liu & Levenshus, 2010). When compared with de Bussy and Wolf's (2009) Australian public relations sample, LGOV communicators appeared more focused on internal communication, while the gender balance was the same (females outnumbered males by four-to-one). Two-thirds of LGOV communicators provided strategic advice daily or weekly to top managers, but only a minority considered themselves to be top management (McDonald and Hebbani, 2011). Although gender did not influence the nature of work, males were more often in the highest salary brackets, and more males considered themselves to be part of the top management team. The findings here indicate that Australian LGOV communicators are multi-skilled, strategic and technically oriented, and make a range of very important contributions to effective government.

Introduction

All governments need to communicate with their citizens and other stakeholders. Communication aids government mission in many ways, such as educating citizens about health and safety, persuading them about recycling and other civic-minded behaviours, and informing citizens about services, events and emergency arrangements. Further, voluntary compliance resulting from good communication is much less expensive than policing, surveillance and other alternatives (Neeley & Stewart, 2012). Communication is also vital to report to citizenry on resource allocation and public spending, plans, achievements and policy. Government communication further aids democracy by contributing to an informed public (Lee, Neeley & Stewart, 2012) and "disseminating information as a prelude to citizen participation in agency decision making, and listening to public opinion" (Neeley & Stewart, 2012, p2). Given the importance of communication in governments' interactions with their communities, there is a need to understand the way governments manage and execute communication in contemporary society.

According to the national president of the association for government communication professionals, *Government Communications Australia*, there has been steady growth in the communication orientation of Australian local government over the past 15 years as needs have changed (P. Fitz, personal communication, July 9, 2012). Professional communicators in government use their skills to develop strategies that enable information to be disseminated and understood, and also to help their colleagues recognise the importance

and benefits of transparency (Fairbanks, Plowman & Rawlins, 2007). The director of communications and campaigns with the *Local Government and Shires Association of NSW* says growth has occurred in LGOV communication positions and job advertisements, membership of LGOV professional communication associations, and attendance at conferences (M. Graham, personal communication, July 11, 2012).

> The initial push was to protect reputations, so councils and shires hired journalists to polish the messages. Then local government needed to change consumer behaviour, so they needed to convince residents to improve the separation of recyclables and reduce contamination. Then local government needed web masters as they got out of the printing business and into online communications. The last 5 years has seen resident activism using emerging social media take over the traditional space of local press and get councils and officials more accountable and proactive (P. Fitz, personal communication, July 9, 2012).

Most of the 562 local government bodies in Australia (Australian Local Government Association, 2010) employ at least one person dedicated to managing communication and relationships with certain publics, although their job titles differ widely. Some have just a single public or community relations officer; some larger urban authorities employ communication teams of 10 or more specialists in media communication, social media, E-government, database management, media relations, research, and cross-cultural communications (P. Fitz, personal communication, October 1, 2011).

Research in the public relations field has addressed numerous issues concerning the diversity of activities, intentions and contexts for professional communication work done on behalf of organisations, and the public relations literature is used in this paper as a frame for understanding and describing LGOV communication practice. To date there

has been little study or theorisation of the practice of LGOV public relations and communication in Australia, or elsewhere (Horsley, Liu & Levenshus, 2010). Given the industry leader perceptions mentioned above that LGOV is the setting for a growing communication specialisation, and the lack of previous studies in this field, research is overdue.

This study was designed to profile communicators working in Australian LGOV, to describe their practice, explore influences on their practice such as gender or qualifications, and thus address a gap in the literature on Australian LGOV communication. The overarching aim was to gather evidence and develop insights that improve understanding of the contribution of communicators to local government, and thus help this growing communication specialisation to plan succession, training and other support for the future.

Background

Public relations scholarship and communication practice
What do communicators do at work? A study of the corporate communication profession across Europe noted that its flexible nature "is what makes the work of the communication professional so appealing yet so hard to conceptualise" (Beurer-Zuellig, Fieseler & Meckel, 2009, p. 270). A recent study described 12 categories of public relations work that include: account/client management; strategic planning; public relations programme planning; project management; media relations; social media relations; stakeholder relations; issues management; crisis management; internal relations and employee communications; special events, conferences and meetings; community relations (Sha, 2011). That research found there were four factor groupings for categories of public relations work, *managerial and programming work; crisis/issues/stakeholder management; corporate events and internal; media/social relations* (Sha, 2011). Public relations work has also been categorised by purposes or roles for public relations practice that include *cause-*

related public relations, *persuasion*, *image/reputation management*, *advocacy*, *public information* and *relationship management*. Practitioners may perform all of these roles some of the time, but different roles dominate in different organisations and contexts (Hutton, 1999).

It has been argued that in the government context public relations serves important, and even essential, purposes. Public relations is essential because all governments need to communicate with their communities (Lee, 2012). Government public relations that communicates with the community as citizens, increasing accountability for public funds, and promoting participation in decision-making, is labelled *Mandatory* government communication. Public relations that communicates with the community as customers, promoting awareness of services and safer lifestyle choices is labelled *Optional* communication, and public relations that promotes support for elected officials is labelled *Dangerous* communication (Lee, 2012). To date there has been no research in Australia that categorises the intended purposes of communication efforts in LGOV. This study uses Lee's (2012) three labels to frame a description of the intentions of LGOV communication.

An influential distinction between different types of public relations practice concerns the extent to which the work done is managerial (strategic decision advice) or technical (production of communication) (Dozier, 1992). A strategic orientation is generally considered more desirable (McDonald & Hebbani, 2011). With the trust of key decision-makers, communicators can make more significant contributions to organisational behaviours and reputation through advice on policy, problem-solving, media and other strategy. It is also impossible for communicators to make important information available to stakeholders if the communicators have not been made aware themselves (Fairbanks et al., 2007). This study uses the notions of managerial and technical to guide an understanding of the type of activities done, and contributions made, by Australian LGOV communicators.

In a recent study of Australian public relations, de Bussy and Wolf (2009) proffered 'the working relationship with CEO', 'use of research', 'strategic planning', and 'ethics and professional development' as factors for determining 'professionalism'. McDonald and Hebbani (2011) used de Bussy and Wolf's (2009) professionalism factors to review a number of studies of public relations over the past decade and found that public relations is not always considered a member of the highest management team, but in most cases provides direct counsel and advice to that team. They argue that public relations is most appropriately and advantageously conceptualised as 'strategic management', oriented towards the organisation's most important goals. They assert the importance of continuing education that helps public relations contribute to better leadership decisions and more responsible organisational behaviour (McDonald & Hebbani, 2011). To improve understanding of the LGOV communication workforce and their needs it will be important to assess communicators' work and positions in relation to the senior management of LGOV.

The De Bussy and Wolf survey of Australian public relations practitioners across sectors (n=322) found that more than 90% of practitioners had tertiary qualifications, were well paid, and generally had positions of influence with CEOs (De Bussy & Wolf, 2009). The authors noted there were no accreditation or licensing barriers to practicing public relations in Australia. They found that women were earning significantly less than men in similar work categories (De Bussy & Wolf, 2009). Beurer-Zuellig et al. (2009) reported a study of corporate communicators across Europe. They said job satisfaction was high, 82.5% had a university degree, and that women were earning significantly less than men doing the same work. The dominance of female participants at industry events held for LGOV communicators suggest that a majority of Australian LGOV communicators will be female (M. Graham, personal communication, March 30, 2012), but little is known about

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salary levels, qualifications or relations with senior management among these public sector communicators.

Public sector contexts are different

Communication researchers have noted a shortage of research on government communication and that dominant conceptualisations of public relations – which better reflect practice in the private sector – have often been applied to the public sector (Liu & Levenshus, 2010). This perception has led to research focused on government communication and public relations in recent years, particularly in the US. Most notably, Liu and Horsley's (2007) 'Government Communication Wheel' model identified contextual factors that lead to differences between public and private sector public relations. Public sector communicators reported greater dissatisfaction with communication budgets, higher pressure from publics and politics, greater interaction with a range of external publics and partners, more media coverage and more legal constraints on communication. However, they found daily activities of communicators in the private and public sectors were generally similar, dominated day-to-day by media relations, but also frequently engaged in strategic planning, websites and networking (Liu, Horsley & Levenshus, 2010).

Horsley et al. (2010) compared daily activities in US government public relations at federal, state and the more local city and county levels. They measured the frequency of 23 activities across media relations, research, planning and tactics. They included blogs and contributing to websites among the list of tactics, but otherwise did not specify social media usage. They found that media-related activities dominated daily activities across the four government levels, but found some differences between levels of government on *use of blogs*, *media inquiries*, *websites* and other activities. In the city and county government levels the main daily activities were media-centric, including: "responding to media inquiries", "contribute/edit web site", "media release",

and "track media clips" (Horsley et al., 2010, p. 279). Their analysis focused on the most frequent activities, with less attention on the role of infrequent, but perhaps equally important, activities such as research and planning.

This paper addresses gaps in our knowledge of communication in Australian LGOV discussed above. It describes a sample of Australian LGOV communication practitioners and the work they do, and situates the findings in the context of previous studies of public relations practice conducted in Australia and elsewhere. The main research questions are:

1. What are the most frequent activities of LGOV communicators?
2. What do LGOV communicators perceive to be the purpose of their communication?
3. Do practitioner characteristics influence practitioner work and positions?

Method

To aid design of this study the authors obtained (with permission) the questionnaire Liu et al. (2010) used to examine US government communication practices. Semi-structured interviews were then held – with 10 experienced communicators from Australian LGAs, state LGOV coordinating bodies and professional communication associations (hereafter referred to as 'interviewees') – to discuss approaches to practice and identify issues they felt were important. Towards the end of the interviews they were shown some of the US survey questions and response options. Interviewee responses were used to refine a questionnaire appropriate for use with a nationwide sample in the Australian context. The interviews were conducted in person and on the telephone, and most ran for 60-90 minutes. Ethics approval was obtained for the interviews and subsequent survey.

Survey data were collected using a self-report online questionnaire 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

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communicators in state local government coordinating bodies (in NSW, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria, and Western Australia). The link was posted in local government public relations network newsletters, and emailed to each LGA 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. There were 406 responses, and after incomplete surveys were removed, the final sample was 330.

Measures

Activity
Respondents for this study were asked to state how often they engage in 38 activities on a 5-point scale from 'never' through 'less than monthly', "monthly", 'weekly' to 'daily'. Liu et al.'s (2010) original 23 items across media relations, research, planning and tactics were slightly amended for comprehension. Other activities were added, such as general communication liaison and advisory duties, events, and increased use of social media, including, 'Facebook', 'Twitter' and 'Online media monitoring'.

Work with external stakeholders
Liu et al.'s (2010) 'Federalism' scale was adapted to reflect the Australian LGOV context, and 'external stakeholders' and 'groups' replaced the term 'publics' to reflect local terminology. *Work with external stakeholders* included business, education, journalist/reporters, community, ratepayer, volunteer, residents, federal government agencies, state government agencies, local government agencies, regional authorities, other councils, non-profit associations, private corporations, and activists. Respondents for this study were asked to state how often they work with each group on a 5-point scale from 'never' through 'less than monthly', 'monthly', 'weekly' to 'daily'.

Purpose of communication
It became clear during interviews that communicators have different ideas and assumptions about their role. Some express a focus on 'reputation management' and promotion, while others were more concerned with media minding, 'boundary spanning' and listening dimensions to their work. Table 5 shows a set of statements extrapolated from Lee's (2012) three-part framework for describing respondent perceptions of the purpose of their council's communication; *Mandatory* communication (4 items); *Optional* communication (4 items); *Dangerous* communication (2 items). *Other* communication items were based on suggestions by interviewees. Respondents used a 5-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree for each statement.

Providing strategic advice to senior management
Most interviewees indicated that LGOV communicators should expect to work under the direction of the CEO or general manager (who is employed by the council). However two interviewees indicated that they worked more closely on a day-to-day basis with the mayor (an elected official). The question here asked, "In the past year, how often would you have provided advice on communication strategy directly to these levels of management?" Responses were given on a 5-point scale from 'never' through 'less than monthly', 'monthly', 'weekly' to 'daily'. The senior management positions used here for "Providing strategic advice to senior management" were listed as 'the mayor', 'the general manager' and 'the top management team'.

Respondent characteristics, experience and seniority
Respondents were also asked to indicate their gender, age bracket, salary bracket, and highest level of education (secondary; vocational; bachelor; or postgraduate). They reported their own perception of seniority by answering yes or no to the question "Do you consider yourself part of the organisation's top management team?" They were also asked the number of years they had worked in local government communication (see Table 1).

Table 1: Profile of respondents

(n =330)	LGOV communicators	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	71	21.5
	Female	259	78.5
Age	19-24	8	2.4
	25-34	111	33.6
	35-44	105	31.8
	45-54	78	23.6
	55 Plus	28	8.5
Years in local government communication	Less than one year	26	7.9
	1 – 2 years	78	23.6
	3 – 5 years	92	27.9
	6 – 10 years	77	23.3
	11 – 20 years	47	14.2
	21 or more years	10	3.0
Highest qualification	Secondary school	37	11.2
	Vocational or trade qualification	43	13.0
	Bachelor's degree	127	38.5
	Postgraduate (HONS, Grad. Cert/Dip, Master, Doctor)	123	37.3
Part of top management team?	Yes	101	30.6
	No	229	69.4
Salary	$40,000 or less	6	1.8
	$40,001 - $60,000	76	23.0
	$60,001 - $80,000	145	43.9
	$80,001 - $100,000	47	14.2
	$100,001 - $120,000	23	7.0
	$120,001 - $140,000	16	4.8
	$140,001 and above	6	1.8
	Prefer not to answer	11	3.3

Findings

Sample

The sample was primarily female (78.5%). This study found that females dominated every age category, and were more dominant in younger age groups. The majority of respondents (55%) were aged 35-54. There was a spread of experienced and inexperienced practitioners among the sample, but there were very few (2.4%) aged 24 or under. Fifty-nine percent of the sample had been employed in LGOV for five years or fewer, with 3% having worked in the industry for 21 or more years. Thirty-one percent of the sample perceived they were part of top management, and 69% said they were not. Thirty percent planned to leave local government in the next four years. In terms of qualifications, 75.8% had a bachelors' degree or higher.

Table 2 shows there was a spread across urban and rural and larger and smaller councils. Ten percent of LGOV employers had no full-time professional communicator, while 54% had between two and seven employed in communication. Eleven percent had more than eight communication employees. Just 17% of the sample worked in councils with 100 or fewer employees, 68% in councils of 500 or fewer employees, and 32% in councils with more than 500 employees.

RQ1. What are the most frequent activities of LGOV communicators?

Respondents were asked to indicate how often they engage in 38 different communication-related activities. Table 3 shows that LGOV communicators perform a range of daily activities, most commonly they provide general internal communication advice and support, monitor the traditional and the online media environments, update the website, and manage media requests. Overall the profile suggests work dominated by numerous daily activities, with less frequent but routine involvement in a range of production and dissemination-related tasks. Forty-two percent of the sample said they post on Facebook or either daily or weekly. Twenty-three percent of the sample post daily on Facebook and 20% post daily on Twitter.

Respondents were asked to indicate how often they provided advice on communication strategy direct to management. Table 4 shows that nearly one-fifth of the sample provided daily advice to the mayor, to the general manager, and to the top management team, and a similar number in each column answered 'never'. More than one-third of respondents answered that they provided strategic advice weekly, indicating that around 50% were providing strategic communication advice daily or weekly to each of those decision-makers. More than two-thirds provided strategic communication advice daily or weekly to one or more of the mayor, general manager or top management team.

Table 2: Respondents' employers

(n =330)	LGOV employer	Frequency	%
LGOV category	Rural agricultural	50	15.2
	Rural remote	23	7.0
	Rural significant growth	51	15.5
	Urban capital city	56	17.0
	Urban developed	63	19.1
	Urban fringe	31	9.4
	Urban regional	55	16.7
Number of full-time communication employees	0	34	10.3
	1	82	24.8
	2 - 4	141	42.7
	5 - 7	37	11.2
	8 - 10	19	5.8
	11 or more	17	5.2

Table 3: Activity profile for LGOV communicators*

Most common activities (n = 330)							
Daily		**Weekly**		**Monthly**		**Less than monthly**	
Work with council staff to promote positive activities	59%	Local media advertising	55%	Create newsletters	39%	Conduct primary research	52%
Monitor traditional media coverage on matters relevant to your organisation	52%	Print advertising	37%	Work on larger publications	28%	Mail outs	52%
Advise staff on communication-related matters	51%	Update website	31%	Signage	27%	Develop crisis communication plans	51%
Internal communication	48%	Create printed materials	30%	Mail outs	27%	Develop strategic communication plans	47%
Update website	43%	Pitch stories to the media	36%	Create printed materials	27%	Work on larger publications	46%
Monitor online media	40%	Liaise with stakeholders in relation to media coverage	32%	Network with others in profession	25%	Network with others in profession	42%
Respond to media inquiries	40%	Internal communication	30%	Develop strategic communication plans	23%	Hold community meetings	40%
Liaise with stakeholders in relation to media coverage	40%	Create printed materials	27%	Organise events with a community focus	22%	Hold news conferences	38%
Write for the media (e.g. news releases, alerts, fact sheets)	39%	Advise staff on communication-related matters	26%			Organise events with a business focus	36%
Manage intranet	25%	Write speeches for others	24%			Organise events with a community focus	34%

*On a scale from 'never' engage in activity to 'daily' engage in activity, please indicate how often you engage in the following communication activities.

Simmons, P. & Small, F. (2012). Promotion, monitoring and strategic advice: Professional communication in Australian local government. *PRism 9*(1): http://www.prismjournal.org/homepage.html

RQ2. What do LGOV communicators perceive to be the purpose of their communication?

When the Mandatory, Optional and Dangerous items are combined in scales, low Cronbach alphas indicate there are internal inconsistencies that limit their utility in regression analysis. Further scale development would be likely to separate items such as 'increase community support for the organisation' and 'increase community support for one or more elected officials'. However, the individual item means still provide useful attitude data. They suggest that the focus of LGOV communication is on mandatory functions that support accountability and participation in democracy, and help the organisation achieve its mission with the community (Lee, 2012). Respondents most strongly agreed that their communication was intended to increase community awareness of the organisation's facilities and services, and they showed strong concern for accountability, listening and community participation. Although scoring the lowest agreement overall, around 20% of respondents said they agreed or strongly agreed that their communication was intended to 'increase community support for one or more elected officials'.

Table 4: Provision of strategic advice to senior management*

(n=330)	Mayor %	General manager %	Top management team %
Never	18.2	16.4	14.8
Less than monthly	12.4	10.6	10.6
Monthly	17.9	15.2	17.3
Weekly	34.5	38.5	38.5
Daily	17.0	19.4	18.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

*In the past year, how often would you have provided advice on communication strategy directly to these levels of management?

Table 5: Purpose of communication*

(n=330)	Mean	Std.D
Mandatory – citizen communication		
Be accountable to the community through the media.	4.02	.894
Report to the community on the spending of ratepayer funds.	4.21	.728
Gauge community opinion through listening.	4.17	.723
Increase community participation in organisation decision-making.	4.11	.756
Optional – customer communication		
Increase community awareness of organisation facilities and services available for their use.	4.56	.549
Increase voluntary community compliance with regulations.	3.81	.800
Increase community feedback about the organisation (including complaints about services or policy).	3.94	.807
Raise community awareness of lifestyle choices (including health and safety).	3.92	.817
Dangerous – increase support		
Increase community support for the organisation.	4.24	.719
Increase community support for one or more elected officials.	2.38	1.212
Other		
Increase council employees' work satisfaction.	3.63	.956
Increase council employees' support for the organisation.	3.69	.944
To influence state/federal governments in relation to particular council objectives.	3.70	.865
To promote local business or the area as a tourism destination outside the council area.	3.84	.949

*Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following descriptions of your organisation's communication. The intention of our communication is to … (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)

RQ3. Do practitioner characteristics influence practitioner work and positions?

Chi-square tests were conducted to test for independence between categorical data; gender, qualifications, salary, years in local government communication, daily activities and perception of being part of top management. As shown in Table 6, there are a number of significant relationships between the variables.

Gender is significantly related to salary. The middle and modal salary band of $60,001 to $80,000 is almost the same between genders (44% female and 43% male), but at the high salary range of $120,001 to $140,000 there are proportionally more males and fewer females (3% female and 11% male). At the salary range of $ 40,001 to $60,000 there are proportionally more females and fewer males (25% female and 15% male).

Table 6: Test for significant relationships

Variables	X^2	df	Significance
Gender and perception of top management	4.465	1	0.035*
Gender and qualifications	3.620	3	0.306
Gender and salary	21.751	7	0.003*
Gender and crisis plans daily	3.940	1	0.047*
Perception of top management and salary	98.033	7	0.00*
Perception of top management and provision to top management team	24.01	1	0.00*
Perception of top management and Internal support daily	16.18	4	0.003*
Qualification and internal support daily	22.46	12	0.03*
Qualifications and monitoring environment daily	22.86	6	0.001*
Salary and qualification	51.703	21	0.00*
Perception of top management and years in LGOV communication	42.4	5	0.00*
Gender and provision to top management team	12.70	9	0.177
Years in LGOV communication and work with external stakeholders	48.8	45	0.349
Years in LGOV communication and planning events daily	26.45	15	0.034*
Years in LGOV communication and salary	69.27	35	0.00*

* Significant relationship at the 0.05   (n=330)

Gender and crisis plans have a significant relationship (males do more crisis planning), but otherwise there is no significant relationship between gender and communication activities (events, planning, publications, media interaction, internal support, monitoring environment, online media, strategic planning or other daily tactics). There is also no significant relationship between gender and working with external stakeholders, nor between gender and provision of strategic advice to senior management.

Salary is significantly related to qualifications and perception of being part of the top management team, thus people who are paid more tend to report higher qualifications and are more likely to feel part of top management. Gender is not significantly related to qualifications, but it is significantly related to of feeling part of the top management team. Forty percent of males and just 28% of females said they were part of the top management team.

Perception of being top management is significantly related to provision of strategic advice to senior management, and is significantly related to years in local government communication, but not to qualifications. There is a significant relationship between perception of top management and internal support on a daily basis, but otherwise there are no significant activity relationships for perception of top management.

There is a significant relationship between years in local government communication and salary and daily event organising. Otherwise there is no significant relationship between years in local government and work with external stakeholders or other daily activities.

Higher qualifications were significantly related to monitoring the environment and also internal support, but otherwise not for communication activities.

Discussion

Australian LGOV communicators reported they are using communication in accordance with the proper purposes of public relations in government (Lee, 2012). They said their organisation's communication was intended to make government more accountable and participatory, and to promote services and awareness in ways that help LGOV to achieve various missions for and on behalf of their communities. These findings are consistent with an interview study of a sample of US government communicators' that found they had strong beliefs in a range of benefits from openly sharing information (Fairbanks et al., 2007). The majority of respondents reported that communication was used to improve support for the organisation, but not to improve support for elected officials. Qualitative research would be useful in further developing understanding of attitudes to the proper uses and purposes of LGOV communication.

The sample for the current study was primarily female (78.5%) and almost identical to de Bussy and Wolf's (2009) sample of Australian public relations practitioners across sectors, which was 79% female. De Bussy and Wolf (2009) reported that Australian public relations had been feminised in the past decade, but that males dominated their 60-plus age category. The very small number (2.4%) aged 19-24 deserves exploration. It seems likely that in a political communication environment, employers prefer some maturity and organisational experience.

LGOV communicators are a highly educated (75% with degree or higher) professional group, and most need to be multi-skilled. Seventy-eight percent work in organisations with four or fewer full-time communication employees. One of the LGOV communicators interviewed during the design of this study said that their work involved constantly shifting focus from "politics to promotions to pavements". We found commonalities in the diversity of LGOV communication work across traditional and online media, internal communication strategy advice, publications and dissemination, community liaison and issues monitoring. The daily activity patterns appear similar to Horsley et al.'s (2010, p. 279) findings for US city and county government levels, with a focus on news media, media monitoring, and updates to the organisation's website. A slightly modified Likert response scale was used here. But a pattern of item mean differences suggests that communicators in US county and city governments are more frequently focused on news media and website communication than this Australian sample.

Internal communication roles are very important because communicators develop trusting relationships with staff. This helps communicators know who to turn to when they need information, and increases the likelihood that staff in the know will share their information (Fairbanks et al., 2007). This Australian study added internal communication activity response items that included 'advise staff on communication related matters' (Mean 4.13, SD 1.13), 'internal communication' (Mean 4.12, SD 1.08) and 'managing the intranet' (Mean 2.9,12 SD 1.63). It revealed a strong focus on internal communication, in addition to externally focused activities such as monitoring and media. De Bussy and Wolf (2009) included 'internal communication' (3.69, SD 1.26) when measuring daily activities of an Australian public relations sample. They used a different 5 point Likert scale measuring 'prominence' in daily activities, and we should take care making comparisons, but differences in the item means for 'internal communication' suggest that LGOV communicators are more focused on internal communication than the Australian public relations sector generally. This deserves further investigation.

Work online is a significant part of LGOV communication. The majority of daily work

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online involves updating websites and monitoring what is said about the organisation. Importantly, 42% also said they post on Facebook or Twitter at least weekly. Future studies should examine trends in online activity as it will influence communication strategy, resourcing and the skill sets expected of staff.

Although a minority of communicators (31%) regarded themselves as part of the top management team, the majority regularly provided strategic advice directly to one or more of the leading decision-makers (mayor, general manager or top management team). The nature of the matters on which they advise and the quality of their advice has not been explored here. Future researchers should consider exploring this important feature of LGOV communication in depth, both with practitioners and the recipients of their advice, to assess perceptions of the utility and consequences of the relationships.

We found that many LGOV communicators performed both managerial and technical work, and that more research is needed to determine the extent to which LGOV communication work is of a managerial/technical orientation. More than two-thirds of the sample reported providing strategic communication advice to the highest levels of decision makers in LGOV, but many of the activities involving publications for dissemination and other routine information updating suggest a technical orientation. Other factors influencing the range of duties such as the size of the organisation and the number of communicators have not been examined here.

LGOV respondents' modal salary was $60,001-$80,000 annually (43%). The modal salary (27% of the sample) for de Bussy and Wolf's (2009) cross-sectoral sample was $60-$79,000. There were more higher salary earners in de Bussy and Wolf's (2009) sample, 14% earned $80-$99,000, and 24% earned over $100,000 compared with this study of LGOV's $80,001-$100,000 (14%) and over $100,000 (14%). De Bussy and Wolf (2009) also noted that the highest earners were those in private corporations and consultancies, with more than 30% in each earning more than $100,000.

We found that more men than women hold higher-paying positions. This is consistent with findings from recent public relations industry studies (McDonald & Hebbani, 2011; de Bussy & Wolf, 2009). The modal (43% of total sample) salary bracket was $60,001-$80,000 annually. Modal salaries were much the same for males and females, but after adjusting for sample size, males were more prevalent among those in the higher salary brackets, and females were more prevalent among those in the lower salary brackets. Men were more likely to report they were part of the top management team, and that they do more crisis and strategic planning, but there was no significant relationship between gender and provision of strategic advice to senior management. Measures of work with external stakeholders and activities performed show that otherwise males and females are doing the same communication work. It is possible that there is a link between perception that one is on the top management team and salary, where salary is used as an indicator of one's perceived value to the organisation.

Local government is known to be a work environment where women are underrepresented in senior management. In 2010 females made up just 27% of elected officials, 20% of senior council managers, and 5% of chief executive officers and general managers (Lake, 2010). This study found that women make up nearly four-in-five of the LGOV communicators providing daily or weekly advice to the leadership, but that male communicators are more likely to be in higher salary brackets and to perceive themselves to be part of the top management team. The imbalances and dynamics that lead to gendered pay and status differences in LGOV communication should be studied further.

Conclusions

This study provides benchmarks for understanding Australian LGOV communicators and offers evidence indicating they are similar in many ways to counterparts in the wider public relations and corporate communication sector. Activities appear similar to government public relations activities in the

US (Horsley et al., 2010) and also to the broader Australian public relations sector (de Bussy and Wolf, 2009). A majority provide strategic advice directly to the top managers, but only a minority consider themselves a part of the top management team (McDonald and Hebbani, 2011). Females outnumber males by four-to-one, but males reported having higher paying positions, and more males consider themselves to be part of the top management team. It is not clear how this affects the operations of communication in local government, nor is the extent that gender determines or does not determine communicator capacity to influence important organisation decision-making and strategy. But given that LGOV management is known to be male-dominated (Lake, 2010), the findings raise questions about the possibility that some form of bias limits the potential for female communicators – the large majority – to participate in top management in local government.

There was a strong sense of the purpose of communication within the sample, suggesting that many practitioners have similar motivations towards accountability, participation and information sharing, and possibly an emerging professionalism and identity within LGOV communicators. Further, the purpose and intentions appear to be relatively similar despite situational differences of size and location. One implication of these commonalities is that the profession is more likely to benefit from the design and distribution of generic templates and guidelines to aid professional LGOV communication practice and development.

As Fairbanks et al. (2007) said, communication and transparency come at a cost of time, staffing and resources that might have been invested elsewhere. Importantly, communicators in this study indicated they perform a range of roles that are vital to government meeting democratic obligations, and community expectations concerning accountability, service provision and awareness. The President of *Government Communications Australia* says LGOV must live with the immediacy of social media,

resident activism, and community expectations of accountability and efficiency (P. Fitz, personal communication, July 9, 2012). The contribution communicators make to LGOV should not be underestimated.

Limitations

This study is a beginning. It provides insights into a previously under-studied sector of communication practice that some claim is growing apace alongside the public relations industry more generally. The data was self-reported anonymously online using a convenience sample. In the US a recent report of the representativeness of public relations industry research samples argued that males are likely to be underrepresented by around 4%, and practitioners with more experience may be "seriously" underrepresented in many survey samples (Hazelton & Sha, 2012, p. 443). We need to be cautious in extrapolating to the population of LGOV communicators in Australia, whose exact number and whereabouts remain unknown. However, care was taken to ensure all LGOV authorities in Australia were sent emails inviting communicators' participation in the study, in addition to repeated emails sent to communicators listed with state-based and national communicator networks.

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