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TRANSPARENCY IN THE GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION
PROCESS: THE PERSPECTIVE OF GOVERNMENT
COMMUNICATORS

by

Jenille Fairbanks

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Communications

Brigham Young University

December 2005

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Jenille Fairbanks

This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

Date

Kenneth D. Plowman, Chair

Date

Bradley R. Rawlins

Date

Kevin L. Stoker

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Jenille Fairbanks in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

Date

Kenneth Plowman
Chair, Graduate Committee

Accepted for the Department

Kenneth Plowman
Graduate Coordinator

Accepted for the College

Rory Scanlon, Associate Dean
College of Fine Arts & Communications

ABSTRACT

TRANSPARENCY IN THE GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION PROCESS: THE PERSPECTIVE OF GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATORS

Jenille Fairbanks

Department of Communications

Master of Arts

This study presents an understanding of the role of transparency in the communication processes of agencies of the United States Federal Government, as guided by principles of stakeholder management, models of public relations, and a model for government agency communication. These theories and models all suggest that increased openness in organizations will result in improved organizational functioning and in some instances, increases in organizational trust. The perspectives presented in this paper were collected through eighteen semi-structured in-depth interviews of professional communicators for various agencies in the United States Federal Government. The data shows that government communicators recognize the need for transparency in a democratic government, and also illustrates factors that both enhance and constrain transparency. Most of the limited research on government agency communication has focused on media relations and agency spokespersons. The value this exploratory study provides is that it illustrates government communicators

understand the value of transparency in communication practices and provides a model for transparency in government agency communication. The research also shows a need for future research to strengthen theory, expand models, and provide examples of how to effectively implement transparency enhancing practices in government communication.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The development of a democratic government in the United States was the objective of the American Revolution. When Thomas Jefferson penned the words of the Declaration of Independence he described the failures of George III to look after the “safety and happiness” of the people. The King’s actions caused the Colonies to lose trust in their leader, to declare their independence, and to establish a new government. The Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights were drafted and ratified in order to establish a government by the people and for the people. A critical element in the success or failure of such a democratic government is having a public that is informed well enough to make appropriate decisions about who to select as their leaders. This requires that the public have access to information about government actions and decision making processes, or in other words, that government actions are transparent.

For the past several decades, scholars have noted a decrease of trust in government, and have tied the decreases of trust to incidents such as Watergate, the secret escalation of the Vietnam War, and federal agencies catering to big industry (Frost, 2003). Scholars have also suggested that the decline of trust in government is an outgrowth of poor communication between government and its publics, where publics feel that they are not well informed about government actions (Heise, 1985). Heise pointed out that good communication and interaction with the public can increase trust. As a solution to poor communication, he proposed that a model of communication in

public administration be developed that relies on open and responsive communicative practices in government agencies, among other things.

Public relations scholars have looked closely at the role communication plays in restoring and building trust in organizations. That research has led to the development of several models and theories that emphasize the importance of open and responsive communication practices that include the public involvement in the decision making and communication processes. These include transparency, the two-way symmetrical model of communication, and stakeholder management.

Understanding of an organization is increased as transparency increases. Transparency is the open sharing of organizational information whether positive or negative, resulting in increased organizational accountability to stakeholders (Hatcher, 2003). While trust in corporations was diminishing before incidents such as Enron and Arthur Anderson, these incidents and others increased demands by stakeholders for more transparency in corporations (Goodman, 2002). Transparency plays a major role in an organization's ability to obtain and maintain public trust (Bunting, 2004). In the federal government, increases in transparency were brought about through the Freedom of Information Act, the Federal Advisory Committee Act, and the Government in the Sunshine Act (Frost, 2003). Demands by the news media to increase transparency show that this legislation cannot be the only solution to open government (Atler, 2005).

In addition to the open sharing of information, transparency requires organizations to understand and be responsive to the publics they serve. The two-way symmetrical model of communication as identified by Grunig and Hunt (1984) illustrates that organizations with the most effective communication practices seek to truly

understand and involve their publics in the decision making process and to help their publics to understand the organization. Stakeholder management theory outlines steps managers should take to increase awareness and responsiveness to stakeholders; including identifying groups and individuals that are impacted by or have an impact on the organization, understanding their various wants and needs, and involving them in the decision making process (Business Ethics Quarterly, 2002). Organizations that identify their stakeholders and recognize their needs are better equipped to take appropriate action in the decision making process which will result in increased organizational success (Freeman, 1984).

While the links between Heise's suggestion for increased openness and responsiveness in government communication and theories of public relations are clear, researchers should examine how well these private sector theories fit public sector practice. As public administration theory has looked to the private sector for ideas and ways to improve government functioning, a strong and serious debate has taken place over how well private sector theories work in the public sector (Boyne, 2002). Major differences between the public and private sectors include power structures, publics served, environment, interaction, legal mandates, and communication content (Lee, 2001; Viteriti, 1997). The differences between sectors have enough of an impact on communication behavior that scholars need to gain an understanding of how well the principles of transparency as supported by models of public relations and stakeholder management influence government agency communications.

While these theories and models propose that increased communication transparency will increase trust, there has been no research to date that evaluates if or

how Heise's (1985) public communication model functions in government agencies. At the same time, there has been no research looking specifically at whether government communicators perceive it as their responsibility to provide the general public access to information, and if they do, how they fulfill that responsibility.

Because an informed public is critical to a healthy democracy, it is important to understand what government agencies are doing in order to create an informed public. Transparency in government actions and decision making processes is critical to creating an informed public and includes tenets of the models of public relations and stakeholder management theory that advocate responsive communication that incorporates various publics in the communication process.

Scope of the Study

This study is a first step in understanding how well private sector public relations theories apply to public sector communication practices through an analysis of government communicators' perspective. This study provides an understanding of the role government communicators play in how open, honest, and responsive an agency is to its stakeholders. The scope of this study is limited to examining the perception of government communicators on the role of transparency specifically in federal agency communication processes. The study focuses exclusively on agencies in the executive branch of the United States Federal Government and does not attempt to generalize the perspective gained to communicators working in state and local governments. While trust is inseparably connected to transparency, this study does not make an effort to measure trust. Rather it explores whether communication practices incorporate elements of theories and models that impact trust.

Purpose Statement

This exploratory study will provide researchers with an understanding of how government communicators value and practice transparency in the communication process. Data for the study was collected during eighteen in-depth interviews, with communicators from various departments and agencies within the federal government. The main research question guiding the interviews was “How do communicators in public administration value and practice transparency?” Additional research questions also provide an understanding of what communicators perceive as both enhancing and limiting transparent communication practices. The data was then analyzed using constant comparative thematic analysis. Once themes were identified the researcher looked for patterns and meaning among the themes. The results provide a valuable perspective for understanding the function of government public affairs professionals. The data serve as an important stepping off point for adapting private sector public relations theories to government agencies, and for continued theory building on the role of public relations communications within the federal government.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing in most, if not all federal agencies is a structure for communicating with the public. This professional field has been largely ignored in academia due to historical controversy over the role of public relations within the federal government. At the same time, a healthy democracy requires an informed public and demands that governments provide information to the public about policies, decisions, and actions. This review of the literature looks at the history of public relations in public administration and shows the relationship between public trust and communication practices. It then explores the differences between public and private sectors, showing the need to understand theories developed in the private sector that address declines of public trust through open, responsive communication practices. Finally, it shows a need for research to explore what role transparency plays in government communication practices in order to develop theory to guide practitioners.

Communication in Public Administration

Public relations within administrative agencies has a long and varied history with advocates and detractors debating the role and ethical issues of using tax payer dollars to seek support for government agencies. In 1913 Congress passed a law prohibiting the use of appropriated funds to pay for “publicity experts.” The law was later expanded to cover campaigns aimed to arouse support for or the defeat of congressional bills (Lee, 2002). In 1948, funding for the Office of Government Reports was repealed, bringing an

end to ten years of government public relations agencies under the direction of the president (Lee, 2002).

While resistance to publicity experts and propagandists is closely tied to the history of public relations in government, there remains a recognized need for the profession. Avery et al. (1995) identified the main functions of public affairs practitioners, public information officers or government communicators in government agencies. These professionals are depended upon as a means for:

increasing public awareness, changing inimical personal behavior, keeping legislators informed, providing a 'window out' function for agency managers (and) facilitating the two-way communication between agencies and citizens that often results in modification of agency action as well as citizen behavior (p. 173).

Lee (1999) added that the use of public relations by public managers can assist the agency in accomplishing its goals. Additionally he suggests that public relations tools can be used to increase compliance and public support for new policies and laws as well as providing managers with insight relating to how publics will respond to agency decisions. In addition, Garnett (1992) suggested governments communicate with their publics in an effort to keep them informed about "policies, procedures, requirements and conditions" (p. 172). The big picture is that "communication often makes the difference between government success and failure" (p. 3).

Trust

In 1985, Heise suggested that one factor in declining trust in government was the way governments communicate with their publics. Garnett (1997) suggested that

government actions such as whitewashing issues, stonewalling and spinning issues have increased wariness of government. “Government use of communication to influence public opinion, whether it is considered propaganda or spin doctoring, has engendered distrust in many countries (p. 8).” While most communication for government is honest, the instances of dishonest or misleading communication have certainly impacted a willingness to trust government. In reviewing surveys conducted by the Roper Organization, Putnam (1995) noted that in 1992, 75% of Americans sometimes or rarely trusted government in Washington, up from 35% in 1966.

Another element impacting citizen trust in government is that administrative communication efforts have shifted from a focus on annual reports to a reliance on media to share agency information with the public (Lee, 1999). Yet studies show that media coverage of administrative agencies has been declining for several years, and that the coverage more frequently highlights errors of elected officials and government agencies than it highlights proper government functioning (Garnett, 1997; Heise, 1985; Koven & Kunselman, 2003). The 1998 Impeachment hearings of President Clinton are a perfect example of this where media coverage focused on what Bussy (as cited in Koven & Kunselman, 2003) called scandal politics rather than the serious legal issues being debated in the hearings. Sensational media coverage and political mud slinging are activities that reduce clarity and inhibit the public from becoming truly informed about social issues (Koven & Kunselman, 2003), inevitably impacting trust in government institutions.

Avery, et al. (1995) suggested that:

growing distrust of government at all levels presents a serious problem for public affairs practitioners who serve in government...It is the practitioner's job to serve as a facilitator in bridging the gap of credibility that is ominously eroding the public's belief in the government (p. 175).

Heise (1985) noted that when publics felt they had the information they needed about an agency decision, they were more trusting of the actions of the agency. In an effort to combat declining trust he suggested that a public communication model be developed to guide government public affairs practitioners and public managers in the communication process.

Public Communication Model

This public communication model identified five aspects of communication programs the model would need to address. The first is openness, where government officials “make available publicly all legally releasable information—whether they consider it positive or negative in nature—in a manner which is accurate, timely, balanced, and unequivocal” (Heise, 1985, p. 209). The second is that communicators use a variety of communication channels in their efforts to communicate to the public, not just the media. The third is that officials “seek to facilitate accurate, systematic, and timely feedback on policy issues from the entire community which they serve, rather than continue to rely on partial feedback from well-organized and politically active individuals and groups” (p. 209). The fourth element of this model is to avoid mixing public communication and politics. The fifth and final element of this model is for top managers to recognize their role and responsibility in creating a culture where each

employee recognizes their role in “the implementation of the agency’s duly established communication policy” (p. 209).

Garnett (1992) put it this way, “As public servants in our democracy, federal, state, regional and local governments have a fundamental obligation to inform their publics and to be informed by their publics. This two-way communication is vital to government legitimacy and effectiveness” (p. 165). The elements of Heise’s (1985) suggested communication model can be found in a variety of public relations theories and practices. These include the two-way symmetrical model of communication, stakeholder management, and transparency.

Public Involvement

In addition to public relations research, recent advances in the practice of public administration also advocate more citizen involvement in the government decision making process (Martin & Boaz, 2000). Citizen involvement in the governing process is a necessary part of democratic governments, and requires that government agencies strive to both increase and promote citizen involvement (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000; Lee, 2001). How much to involve the public in administrative decision and policy making process is a big debate in public administration. Movements such as New Public Service, advocate increases in public participation where managers seek to collaborate with citizens, increasing government responsiveness to citizens that will result in an increase of trust (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000). This movement is supported by trends that show increases in citizen demands for involvement with increases in the size of government, as technological changes impact governing processes, and as levels of satisfaction regarding policy and decision making processes decrease (Roberts, 2004). Clearly citizen

participation in government and access to government information are key elements to holding government accountable in a democracy (Frost, 2003; Lee, 1999; Roberts, 2004).

Further evidence of the need for public involvement is illustrated by Putnam's (1995) finding that in areas where social capital was greatest, or in other words citizen involvement, governments and organizations were more successful than similar organizations with less involvement. Public administrators can no longer rely on the media to keep the public informed about government actions, but must now develop tools and strategies to aid them in fulfilling their democratic responsibility to keep the public informed (Lee, 1999). Encouraging and facilitating effective communication practices within a government agency in a democracy can be seen as the responsibility of the public relations or communications staff. Exploring how elements of the models of public relations, transparency and stakeholder management apply to government communication practices will provide insight to public administrators as they work to develop more effective communication tools and strategies.

Differences Between the Public and Private Sectors

Most, if not all of the research that has been conducted on organizational communication with external publics has examined communication in the private sector. The differences between private and public sector organizations suggest that these theories may not fit the two sectors in the same way. Scholars who have examined public administration have determined it is more of an art than a science. This is because of the multitude of variables impacting and shaping public agencies at all levels of government, and the lack of rules for organizational design (Fukuyama, 2004). Presently, public administration is the management of bureaucracy within a democracy. These are strange

bedfellows indeed. Bureaucratic principles focus on hierarchical order, power structures, closed communication, resistance to innovation and formal structures. Democratic principles on the other hand focus on openness and the free flow of information, innovation, compromise, equitable distribution of power and negotiation (Vigoda, 2002). These diametrically opposed systems of operating within government provide unique challenges for public administrators who must simultaneously respond to demands for increased transparency and to the need for constant improvement in the bureaucracy of government functioning.

Scholars in public administration have looked to private sector business practices for guidance in creating changes in public administration. New public management is one movement that proposed public administrators shift their management practices from a focus on bureaucratic structures to a more open and transparent management model (Noordhoek & Saner, 2005), emphasizing increased accountability and efficiency (Doyle & Kleiner, 1994). While this notion was popular for some time, the effectiveness of this shift has been called into question (Noordhoek & Saner, 2005).

In a review of the literature on the differences between the public and private sectors, Nutt (1999) discussed factors that impact public sector agencies. These include the requirement of public access to information about agency actions, or transparency. One way this requirement is fulfilled is through legal requirements of agencies to provide a post hoc annual report, which is intended to keep the public informed about agency practices (Lee, 1999). While it can be argued that private sector organizations are morally obligated to communicate with their publics, and that such communication can impact organizational effectiveness, communication is still a choice (Viteritti, 1997).

Other factors Nutt (1999) identified include expectations by the public for responsiveness, honesty, integrity and accountability. These expectations by the stakeholders of public agencies are clearly related to the models of public relations, transparency, and stakeholder management that prescribe actions of effective organizations, theories which have been developed through the lenses of private sector management. While the literature illustrates similarities between expectations of the public sector and recommendations for effective performance in the private sector, researchers have not specifically examined these theories work in relation to public sector communication practices.

Positive Models of Public Relations

After studying the history of public relations practices, Grunig and Hunt (1984) proposed four positive models for public relations. They are press agency (one-way asymmetrical), public information (one-way symmetrical), two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical.

The press agent model aims to garner public support for the organization in whatever way possible. The information or output of this model can be characterized as propaganda. It is one way communication that focuses on the dissemination of information with the intent to persuade public opinion. When practiced, this model of communication only disseminates information that will achieve the goal of promoting the organization. Historical examples of this model can be found in the heroic tales of many settlers of the western frontier as well as the success enjoyed by P.T. Barnum through publication of debates about the credibility of his exhibitions and shows. Current use of

this model of public relations is often found in sports and celebrity news as well as in advertising and editorials (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Practitioners subscribing to the public information model also aim to disseminate information about the organization they represent. While similar to the press agent model in practicing one way communication, this model focuses on dissemination of truthful information and does not place an emphasis on persuasion. This model rose in response to the fanciful stories that had become commonplace during the era of press agency. Journalists had taken it upon them selves to begin finding the truth about what was happening in government and industry and these organizations needed a way to get their side of the story out. The champion of this new era was Ivy Lee who suggested that organizations be open and honest in communicating their activities and that they work to inform the public on issues of importance. This meant not only disclosing information beneficial to the organization, but also disclosing errors which required organizational behavior changes. Organizations practicing this model shifted their focus from publicity to public responsibility. Government agencies were forced to use the public information model because of legal injunctions prohibiting them from using publicity (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

The two-way asymmetrical model developed after the public information model during the rise of World War I when the United States government felt a need to gain public support for the war. This model is similar to the press agent model in attempting to persuade the public, the main difference being that this model relies on information such as psychographics and demographics to direct communication practices and construct effective messages. These practices focus on discovering the values, attitudes

and opinions of the publics and then presenting the organization in ways congruent with these beliefs. J.W. Hill, one of the founders of Hill and Knowlton described the two-way asymmetrical model when he stated that:

It functions in the dissemination of information and facts when non-controversial matters are involved. But when controversy exists, public relations may become the advocate before the bar of public opinion, seeking to win support through interpretation of facts and the power of persuasion (as cited in Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 41).

Essentially, the one-way asymmetrical model focuses on persuasion through understanding the public with whom the organization is communicating in order to craft the most persuasive message possible (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

The final model proposed by Grunig and Hunt (1984) was the two-way symmetrical model. J. Grunig and L. Grunig (1992) suggested that this communication model is characteristic of excellent organizations. The model makes use of interactive communication by seeking to make adjustments in the relationship between the organization and its publics. Interactions revolve around truthful exchanges of information and seeking to better understand various organizational publics and helping the public to better understand the organization. In this model, the public relations practitioner acts as a liaison between management and organizational publics in order to develop and maintain relationships. Through this relationship management, public relations professionals act as advisors to organizational managers in the decision making process. When appropriate and possible the publics are involved in organizational decision making. This model strongly advocates social responsibility and focuses on

understanding rather than persuasion (Grunig & Grunig, 1992; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Lhulier and Miller (2004) suggested that the use of this model is what makes organizations truly transparent.

Grunig and Hunt (1984) predicted that government agencies would most often practice the public information model and that the second most common model of communication used by agencies would be press agency. This prediction proved to be accurate with press agency following closely behind the public information model (Grunig & Hunt 1992). Grunig and Grunig (1992) suggested this was a result of the limitations placed on the practice of public relations within federal agencies. This finding is further illuminated when considered in context of other literature which shows that government agencies often rely on the news media to disseminate information about government activity (Heise, 1985; Lee, 2001). While the one-way approaches to communication were most common, government agencies did make use of all the communication models, using the two-way symmetrical model more frequently than the one-way symmetrical. Garnett (1997a) suggested that this is also the model that communicators in government agencies should practice. His review of the literature shows that government use of one way and asymmetrical models of communication have been unsuccessful in garnering public support and efforts to reach organizational goals. It is also likely that these practices have played a role in decreasing trust in government. Increasing access to government information through the opening of a dialogue between agencies and stakeholders is one way to address these decreases.

Public Participation and Stakeholder Management

Stakeholder Management Theory examines the relationship between an organization and its publics, providing direction for how organizations should interact with their various publics. Freeman (1984) defined stakeholders as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the firm’s objectives” (p. 25). Other definitions point out that stakeholders recognize their role in the practices of organizations (Sturdivant, 1979), that the organizations and stakeholders are “linked” to one another (Grünig, 1997) and that in public administration there is a need to distinguish between clients of an organization and their constituent publics (Garnett, 1992). The theory argues that stakeholders should be considered in the managerial decision making process (Phillips, 1997).

Some argue against stakeholder theory because they believe that paying attention to various stakeholders detracts from the ability of an organization to meet its primary objective of producing a profit and being accountable to shareholders (Gregg, 2001). Some of this resistance seems to stem from using the broad definition of stakeholder given by Freeman in his seminal work on stakeholder theory. Recent scholarship points out the need to narrow the definition and identify legitimate stakeholders (Friedman and Miles, 2002; Phillips, 1997, 2003). Scholars argue that Freeman’s broad definition allows almost anyone anywhere to qualify as a stakeholder.

As scholars have evaluated this broad definition, several clarifications have been suggested that assist organizations in categorizing stakeholders and understanding which groups or individuals truly deserve the attention of organizational resources in the decision making process. One way this is accomplished is through identification of

moral, contractual and power relationships between an organization and its publics. A moral obligation exists between an organization and stakeholder when the responsibilities extend beyond affording the stakeholder basic human rights (Phillips, 1997, 2003).

Phillips (2003) classified stakeholders into three categories: normative, derivative and non-stakeholders. Normative stakeholders are groups to which an organization has a moral obligation. Derivative stakeholders must be attended to because of the effect they can have on both the organization and its normative stakeholders. Non-stakeholders are groups that do not fit into either one of the earlier definitions.

Once an organization has identified its various stakeholders it must determine how to promote meaningful interaction between the stakeholder publics and the organization. Researchers with the Sloan Foundation recognize the importance of organizational openness or transparency when working with various publics. Their research led to the development of the Clarkson Principles of Stakeholder Management which emphasize that effective stakeholder management requires the development of healthy relationships with stakeholder publics that rely on responsiveness and openness of communication.

Szwajkowski (2000) boiled these down to three key principles: disclosure, disclosure, disclosure. This is only possible when organizations know what it is their stakeholders want and need to know. This knowledge is a result of both internal and external dialogue which leads to organizational actors performing in productive, fair, and trust building ways. “If you disclose, you neither hide your light, nor your trash under a bushel; you get to shine, but you have to clean up your act too” (Szwajkowski, 2000, p.

391). This is what publics of government organizations are looking for when they demand increased transparency and responsiveness.

Transparency

Bunting (2004) noted that in order to obtain and hold the trust they desired, professionals needed to open their practices to public scrutiny. Throughout the literature on businesses and government, these open practices are referred to as transparency. Miriam-Webster defines transparency as a state of being transparent. A transparent subject is “free from pretense or deceit” can be “easily detected or seen through” and is “readily understood” (Miriam-Webster, 2005). Cotterrell (1999) offered this definition: transparency is the availability of information on matters of public concern, the ability of citizens to participate in political decisions, and the accountability of government to public opinion or legal processes” (p. 414). In order to understand this concept, scholars in diverse fields have explored the role of transparency in various organizations. Major areas of study include business management, public relations and democratic governments. Those areas of inquiry all recognize the role of transparent organizational practices in increasing trust.

In business management, corporate scandals have led organizational stakeholders to require firms to practice accounting and information transparency in order to show responsible corporate governance (Chiang, 2005). Transparency in corporations has been viewed as a means of restoring the trust of a skeptical public (Gosschalk, 2005). It is believed that through the process of opening up corporate and government actions that organizations will act in more trustworthy ways. This is because stakeholders will be aware of corporate actions, and will hold the organizations accountable (Hatcher, 2003).

Public relations scholars have studied the role of communication practices in increasing organizational transparency. Scholars and practitioners both realize that “the act of clear and honest communication is essential to building, maintaining, or restoring relationships based on trust” (Goodman, 2002, p.205). The use of transparency as a communication practice has been advocated in public relations for decades. The idea of transparency can be traced back to 1890 and Henry Carter Adams who encouraged the use of publicity to curb corruption in corporations (Stoker & Rawlins, 2003). Ivy Lee, an early practitioner of the public information model of public relations, advised corporations to openly share information about their business practices with the public; if problems were found, then the organization should accept responsibility and correct the problem (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Current scholarship and practices in public relations emphasize the importance of corporate social responsibility which recognizes the benefits of openness in the disclosure of corporate information (Sykes, 2002). Public relations practitioners recognize transparency as a tool for reputation management and a way to “demonstrate trustworthiness” (Goodman, 2002, p. 205).

While transparency in business management and public relations have looked at opening organizational behavior, scholarship on transparency in government has looked at structural measures that create a climate that promotes transparency in government actions. Along this line of inquiry, transparency is defined as “legal, political and institutional structures that make information about the internal characteristics of government and society available to actors both inside and outside of the domestic political system” (Finel & Lord, 1999, p. 316). During her involvement in efforts to

reform democracy in Macedonia, Beaumont (1999) observed that “the importance of open administrative procedures cannot be minimized as part of achieving a democratic government and increasing citizen confidence in that government” (p. 49). Elements in democracies that play a role in the transparency of governments include a “free press, open government hearings, and the existence of nongovernmental organizations with an incentive to release objective information about the government” (Finel & Lord, 1999, p. 316).

In 1996, William J. Clinton, the 42nd president of the United States, signed into law the Electronic Freedom of Information Act (EFOIA). In his remarks at the bill signing, Clinton stated “our country was founded on principles of openness and accountability” (Clinton, 1996, ¶ 9), they are the principles upon which public access to government information were based. The EFOIA amended a law that had been implemented originally in 1966 not only to open up government and make it more accountable, but also as a means of addressing decreases of public trust in government (Frost, 2003). The law gave citizens public access to government information, with exception to information that fell in protected categories (Frost, 2003; Garnett, 1992). As access to information has increased in the United States Government, citizens have come to expect more of government communications (Garnett, 1992). Striton and Lodge (2001) articulated this idea when they proposed that a truly transparent public sector not only communicates with, but is responsive and accountable to the public. Florini (2004) put it this way: “Transparency can contribute to efficient and effective governance by providing feedback channels, enabling officials and citizens alike to evaluate policies and adjust them accordingly” (p. 18). These ideas suggest that the achievement of

transparency relies on the principles that are articulated in Heise's suggested model, as well as the models of public relations and stakeholder management theory which promote a better understanding of publics and better information sharing with them.

Research Questions

This study sought a better understanding of federal agency responses to demands for increased transparency by examining the role of transparency in the government communication process from the perspective of the government communicator. It also sought to understand the role of the models of public relations, stakeholder management and Heise's (1985) communication model in promoting transparency in government agency communication. The model suggested that governments communicate in more open, or transparent ways; that agencies needed to seek a variety of channels to disseminate information; that the communication processes needed to increase public participation in the decision making process, as advocated by stakeholder management and the two-way symmetrical model of communication; that politics should not play a role in the communication process; and that managers needed to take the lead in creating a culture of communication within their agencies. In order to understand this model in the context of current communication practices, and whether private sector theories fit with public sector practices, the following questions were asked.

RQ 1: How do communicators in public administration value transparency?

RQ 2: How do communicators in public administration incorporate transparency into their communication practices?

RQ 3: What elements constrain and enable communicators in public administration when collecting and sharing information with stakeholders?

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Research Design

Research in mass communication has deep empirical and quantitative roots that rely on knowing and generalizing information about phenomena to large populations. Quantitative research seeks to predict and control behavior through objective experimentation and data collection, the focus is on identifying and measuring casual relationships (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). While this positivist approach is the most common in mass media research, the role of qualitative, interpretative studies in understanding the natural setting of phenomena and events is also important (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Wimmer & Dominick, 2003).

While the debate has been unending about which type of methodology is preferable, qualitative research has gained acceptance in communication studies as advocates have emphasized the role individual experience and contextual relationships play in the creation of meaning. The argument has been made that in an effort to better understand phenomena, behavior needs to be observed and analyzed in its natural setting, and that the subjective nature of knowing should be embraced and multiple realities recognized (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Research on communication in public administration is sparse. Garnett (1997a) pointed out that relatively few scholars have studied public administrative communication. This is supported by Lee's (2001) finding that few studies have

examined the role of communication within public agencies and that most of the studies that exist have focused on the federal level. The majority of the research that has been conducted on public administrative communication focuses on the relationship between spokespersons and the media. Little research has been done on the theory, principles and practices of public administration communication and no research has been done to date that explores the role of transparency in government communication. This study was couched in the interpretative paradigm, using detailed interviews and qualitative analysis to assist the researcher in understanding the context, roles and behaviors of government communicators, and is a first step in filling the hole in the literature relating to government communications.

In-depth Interviewing

The use of semi-structured, in-depth topical interviews is ideal for exploratory research (Broom & Dozier, 1990) and focuses on gaining greater depth of information rather than breadth. Obtaining thick description through the experiences and perspectives of the interviewees provides future researchers a base of understanding on which to build (Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The use of topical interviewing provided specific information on the process and practice of transparency in government communications. The information collected can then be compared to established knowledge of models of public relations, transparency and trust providing theoretical understanding of how these areas of study interact (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Strengths

Longer descriptions and contextualized information resulting from in-depth interviews is one of the major strengths of this methodology. Whereas many research

methods only allow respondents to select among previously determined answers, or ask for short answers in response to questions, this methodology encourages interviewees to provide detailed information about their experiences that otherwise could not be collected. The personal nature of this research methodology and the establishment of a relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee can facilitate the disclosure of information that is not easily obtained through other research methods (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). For these reasons, the selection of in-depth interviews was ideal in understanding how government communicators interpret the role of transparency within the government communication process.

Weaknesses

While there are many reasons for selecting the qualitative research method of in-depth interviews to answer the research questions, it is recognized that there are distinct limitations associated with this design. Because the information was gathered from a small sample, it is impossible to generalize the findings to government communicators on the whole. While a definite limitation, it is also recognized that this exploratory study will provide direction to future research, providing information from which quantitative, representative and generalizable studies may be built.

Another limitation is the dependence of qualitative research on the interpretations of the researcher. In order to address this issue, findings will be compared to existing literature on the topics of transparency, trust and stakeholder management theories in order to contextualize the results.

Bias

Bias is inherent in qualitative research because of the central role the researcher plays in the collection and interpretation of data. One way researchers of the qualitative tradition can account for bias is to recognize and acknowledge the impact of personal perspectives and behavior in the interpretation of data (Olesen, 1994). At the same time, the researcher in this paradigm must acknowledge their relationship with the subjects in their study (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The researcher in this study will consistently reflect on the impact personal perspective has during the life of the study. Additionally, member checks and committee review will be incorporated into the analysis process to increase trustworthiness of the results (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003).

Delimitations

This study was de-limited to communicators in agencies of the United States Federal government. All communicators for the study, except one, were located in within the National Capital Region to reduce accessibility and travel issues. This locale was selected because of the density of federal agencies within a narrow geographic area. For the purpose of this study, the definition of an agency parallels that of an Executive Agency as defined in Title 5 of the US Code which reads “‘Executive Agency’ means an Executive department, a government corporation, and an independent establishment,” and expands the definition to include military departments.

Limitations

As with all research, the results of this study were impacted by several elements that are inherent in research generally and the specific research design of this study. A qualitative design was selected because of the exploratory nature of the topic, as well as

the logistical challenges associated with compiling and contacting the representative sample required by quantitative research. The use of a small convenience sample in this qualitative research design will prevent the results of this study from being generalized to federal government communicators on the whole; rather the results will be generalized to theory about government communication practices (Yin, 2003). Every effort was taken in the interview process to solicit authentic responses, but due to the personal nature of this methodology respondents knowledge of the interviewer, as well as the sensitivity of some of the questions may have lead them to answer questions in what they perceived to be socially desirable ways (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003).

Factors such as time, access to interview participants, and the lack of previous research on this exact topic all influenced the outcome of this study. The number of interviews was limited by the time required to conduct, transcribe, and analyze the data as well as the time frame of the study. Also, the busy schedule of government communicators limited the availability and amount of time interviewees were able to spend participating in the interview process.

Because the specific topic of the study has yet to be explored, the interview process was semi-structured and directed by the responses of the interviewee's. This structure required the interviewer to pick up on topics and ideas that had not yet been identified; therefore the weaknesses of the researcher may have inadvertently impacted the amount and quality of the data collected. While these limitations and delimitations played a role in the final outcome of the study, they by no means provided obstacles so great that the study should not have been undertaken. The knowledge this study provides

about how government communicators interact with their publics will serve as a foundation for future research and theory building.

Participants

For the purpose of this study, a federal government communicator is defined as an individual who is a full time employee of an agency of the federal government whose primary responsibility is to communicate with various government publics regarding agency actions, decisions and policies. Interviewees were selected based on a convenience sample obtained through personal networks and relationships with government communicators. Individuals who agreed to participate in the study were also asked to refer the researcher to others who may have been willing to participate. While a minimum of 20 interviews was identified as a goal, the researcher attempt to conduct as many interviews as possible until saturation and completeness are achieved. Saturation is defined as reaching the point where no new information is gained and completeness is defined as gaining an overall picture of the issue (Rubin & Rubin, 2003).

The interviewees were invited to participate though telephone and e-mail communication. The interviews were then scheduled for thirty minutes to an hour. Interviews began with a brief discussion about the purpose of the study as well as receiving signed consent by the interviewees to participate in the study. To increase openness in sharing their experiences, participants in the study were assured confidentiality in reporting the results of the study (see Appendix A for a copy of the participant consent form).

Procedure

Data were gathered through eighteen semi-structured in-depth interviews with federal government communicators. Interviews began with brief introductions and then a conversation about the research project, moving toward the research questions. Most interviews began by asking participants about the role of transparency in the government communication process. Beginning the interviews in this way allowed the researcher and interviewer to develop a rapport, to reduce anxiety about the research topic, enhance the openness of the interview, and improve the quality of information shared (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). Additional questions were then based on the responses of interviewees in order to capture the perspective of the interviewee and to keep the interviewer from directing the interview (Broom & Dozier, 1990; Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

A review of the information gathered and evaluation of the questions used in each interview provided direction and refinement to the interviews. Flexibility in research design is one of the benefits of in-depth interviews, as the researcher is able to modify the research process as data is collected so that unexpected themes and relationships can be explored (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). In order to increase the trustworthiness of the research, interviewees received a copy of the transcribed interview for review and clarification (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). Participants were encouraged to share additional thoughts and information via e-mail following the interview.

Analysis

All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed in order to assure completeness of the data and to enhance the reliability of analysis (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003).

Transcripts of the interviews were then analyzed using the four step constant comparative

method of thematic analysis. The data were also compared with the notes and observations of the researcher that were collected during the interviews. Each interview was analyzed to identify themes and relationships discussed by the interviewee. The transcripts were then compared against one another in order to glean and categorize all information into appropriate and comprehensive categories for analysis. The coding process incorporated an examination of metaphors, themes, case examples, and relationships mentioned in the interviews. The final goal of analysis was to provide a descriptive, theoretical understanding of the process and application of the role of transparency government communication practices (Morse, 1994; Wimmer & Dominick, 2003).

The research protocol questionnaire and the description of interviewees comprise Appendix B and Appendix C respectively.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

During the interview process, participants shared their perspective on the role of transparency in government communication as well as elements that enhance and constrain transparency. Communicators discussed the role of transparency as it fulfills the obligations of a democratic government to provide the public access to government information, as well as supporting the institution of press freedom. They also discussed the impact of transparency in terms of increasing public trust and public understanding. Analysis of the interviews also revealed factors and communication processes that influence how transparency is practiced within an organization. The factors include the need for honest, accurate, and timely information. Communication processes that were identified included how information was disseminated, how communicators responded to publics, and communicators role as gate-keeper. Finally, communicators identified factors that influence the level of transparency practiced within an organization. These factors were broken down into personal, organizational, and resource factors. Fear and ability were identified as personal factors impacting transparency. Organizational factors that were identified include administrators' impact; cultural influences including internal communication and the agency mission; power structures; and politics. Resource factors that influence the degree of transparency within an agency include time, staffing and money. This chapter provides details of the perspectives communicators shared as related to these themes.

The Need for Transparency

Transparency in the government communication process is viewed by communicators as an essential element of their job. “It is something that is of extreme importance” (Interview 2, April 28, 2005), remarked one interviewee. This sentiment was echoed by others who used terms such as “incredibly important” (Interview 1, April 27, 2005), “it’s at the heart of public affairs” (Interview 9, May 6, 2005), and “it’s essential to being in public affairs.” (Interview 8, May 6, 2005). Simply stated, government communicators on the whole believe that “what the government does, people have a right to know” (Interview 18, May 16, 2005), and it is their job to make that information available. The importance of transparency in government communications was attached to the greater role of transparency within a democratic society, was seen as a tool that increased trust in government, and was identified as essential to establishing public understanding of the workings of federal agencies.

Democratic Society

Communicators expressed that “the free flow of information between a government and it’s people is pivotal...to the workings of a democratic society” (Interview 9, May 6, 2005). “As a democracy, it’s government by the people. They can’t make the best decisions if they don’t have all the information. That’s my job here, to create as transparent a playing field for the American public as I possibly can” (Interview 10, May 6, 2005), to make it possible for the “public to be aware of what steps and actions are occurring” (Interview 12, May 11, 2005). Government communicators are the critical link between the voting public and those who are elected to office (Interview 8, May 6, 2005) by providing the information on which they base their decisions. For

this reason it is necessary that communications from government agencies honestly reflect the decisions and consequences of agency actions. “Transparency is critical to the ability of people to exercise free will and to have an open government that is responsive to the needs, and requirements, and desire of the publics” (Interview 6, May 5, 2005).

This understanding is what led one communicator to comment that:

If we’re going to say that we’re a democracy then we have to accept that this country is run by the people who live in it. If we want people to make the best decisions we need to give them the best possible information. I think transparency allows that (Interview 10, May 6, 2005).

Further light was shed on this issue as a greater number of participants talked about the responsibility they personally had to the American public who paid their salaries.

Communicators recognized that they “have a responsibility to provide [the American public], information that is available...Because it’s their information” (Interview 10, May 6, 2005).

We are an agent for the public. We work for the public and I think that’s why we work very hard and are very dedicated at trying to make sure that things are coming at it from the best interest of the public, otherwise we aren’t doing our job (Interview 12, May 11, 2005).

Press Freedom

Communicators, as public servants, recognize the vital role transparency plays in democratic governments. This understanding combined with their relationships with reporters strengthens the conviction that transparency in government communications is enhanced by the institution of press freedom. This first amendment right is one that

scholars branded as a measure for identifying democratic governments and is one that participants in this study agreed with. “One of the purposes [of a free press] is to find out what is going on in government” (Interview 8, May 6, 2005), without the information being controlled by the government (Interview 6, May 5, 2005). Therefore a free press is often referred to as “the fourth branch of government in the United States” (Interview 6, May 5, 2005). As news media perform this watchdog function, they look for and strive to relate information of which the public should be aware. This impacts communicators because “if someone is writing a story for public consumption and they call and ask a question and it’s public information our job is to give them that information” (Interview 10, May 6, 2005).

Transparency is also enhanced through a free press, because reporters are able to question government functioning. When they observe an error they are free to question the root causes, enhancing both public awareness of government functioning and public debate; benefits which do not escape the attention of government communicators. One participant put it this way: “As much as I hate to have to explain to a reporter if we’ve made a mistake, ultimately I think it’s for the good of the institution” (Interview 9, May 6, 2005). That good is materialized as government agencies begin to recognize the benefits of transparent processes and work to be more accountable to the public they serve.

In addition to serving as the watchdog of government, many communicators expressed their reliance upon the news media to get their stories out. “The only thing the average American knows about a federal agency is what they read, hear on the radio, or see on television” (Interview 6, May 5, 2005). Because they believe that “the public in

general is reached by the media,” communicators use the media to speak to the public (Interview 11, May 9, 2005).

Increased Public Trust

Another way transparency in government communications fills a need is through addressing issues of trust. Government communicators have observed that “the more people trust us, the more credibility we have. The more credibility we have, the more people trust us and the better job we can do” (Interview 9, May 6, 2005) Transparency increases trust because it brings government functioning to light as illustrated by the following case example.

One of the things that (our administrator) said when we began...building the rule was that he wanted that process to be transparent. That the principles on which we based that rule would be known to everyone. To press, to stakeholders, to regulators, to industry, to everyone involved. Doing that, everyone sees what we’re doing and why we’re doing it. They may not agree with us, and many didn’t and many still don’t, but at least we have made the process not something that is shrouded in mystery. We’ve done it in the open and we’ve made the decisions that we’ve made for reasons that people have known along the way (Interview 2, April 28, 2005).

Transparency in the decision making process, removing the shroud of mystery, quells the fear that decisions in government agencies have been made as a result of undue political or industry influence because the process is open to the public (Interview 2, April 28, 2005; Interview 3, April 28, 2005; Interview 11, May 9, 2005). This openness thereby promotes:

A better, smoother, more friction free society where you don't have everybody sitting around gnashing their teeth, thinking the worst of institutions... [The] sharing of information, being open about decision making and so forth, to the extent you can, tends to eliminate...distrust and cynicism (Interview 3, April 28, 2005).

It creates "a feeling of trust in your government and the ability to realize a comfort in understanding that you are being treated equally with others and that the government is working in your best interest" (Interview 6, May 5, 2005).

Building and maintaining this sense of trust is essential, because when people feel that the information they have received is credible they will be more willing to change their actions (Interview 2, April 28, 2005) and the agency will be able to operate and remain effective (Interview 3, April 28, 2005). Individuals who hear from credible sources about agency actions will be more willing to self enforce agency rules (Interview 10, May 6, 2005). On the other hand, when people don't trust government, it provides challenges for communicators because they must work with more hostile publics as they attempt to perform their various duties (Interview 18, May 16, 2005).

One way that communicators work to maintain the trust of publics through transparent actions is by making sure that they accurately share information. Communicators recognize that "you can over exaggerate...and then you lose the public trust" (Interview 2, April 28, 2005). This is especially important when agencies are discussing controversial issues or are relating information about agency errors.

I think if you have a problem or an issue that could be controversial, sometimes it's better to admit, 'yeah, we know about it and we're doing something.' It's just

better to be upfront and to admit it rather than to try and hide things...That makes the public not trust you (Interview 17, May 13, 2005).

When agencies “communicate openly, honestly, all the way along the process, even though sometimes those pieces are bad or have a lot of controversy connected with them, we have a better chance of getting better stories in the press, and of getting the public behind us” (Interview 2, April 28, 2005). Clearly communicators recognize that transparently communicating about agency actions increases public trust. As transparent processes are used to increase public understanding about agency actions “a greater trust in that particular institution of government [is brought about]...That’s very important because most people don’t trust government to some degree or another. They are very suspicious of it” (Interview 3, April 28, 2005).

Public Understanding

Communicators expressed the belief that most people start off trusting government and that trust is there for the agency and communicators to lose (Interview 12, May 11, 2005). One of the best tools communicators have found to building and maintaining public trust is to establish relationships with their publics, to “work closely with people and really provide them as much information as we have available, and keep it flowing to them” (Interview 18, May 16, 2005). This occurs as communicators work to educate the public about the processes that are taking place, helping them to understand what is and is not possible, and helping them to realize that “government doesn’t know everything” (Interview 3, April 28, 2005).

That is the hardest thing, to get people to hear and to figure out what we can really do. Sometimes we can’t do enough and people don’t want to hear that. And

that's a frustration. So the more we can work with people to understand the reality is there are resource limits, there are financial limits. Often there are scientific and technical limits. There are legal limits because we operate under various laws... the issue is just to help them and bring them along. To help them understand that we will do what we can, that's why we are here (Interview 18, May 16, 2005).

This is one way that communicators fill the role of "making the workings of government known to the public" (Interview 8, May 6, 2005).

One element of transparency is that information needs to be communicated in a way that the public can understand what is being communicated. Federal government agencies are huge organizations that monitor, fund, run, and create a variety of programs and initiatives. Often, these programs are run through small offices within the department. When talking with the communication specialists within these offices it was clear that many of them are simply working to get information out to the general public about the programs they are running. These programs often provide benefits to citizens that are underutilized. It is the goal of the communications professionals within these offices to do a better job of distributing the information they have to a wider audience. Communication professionals in these offices expressed their belief that most communicators in government are simply trying to get the word out (Interview 4, April 29, 2005). That they don't have anything to hide and that the more information they can make available and the more it spreads the more successful they are (Interview 5, May 4, 2005).

While communicators believe that public trust will be increased if “the public understands the information they are getting because something’s transparent” (Interview 7, May 6, 2005), they also recognize that the public must be active recipients of information. In short, increased transparency on the part of the government puts an additional responsibility on the public to seek to understand the context of the information they are receiving.

It is equally, I think part of an individual's responsibility to look at that information, balance it with everything else, and then to do some of their own homework as well. I think that is part of being an informed person (Interview 12, May 11, 2005).

Put another way:

If you only know a piece of information you can draw conclusions or have strong opinions or consider certain actions that if you knew more of the pieces you would think differently...Citizens have a big responsibility that if they seek information, or demand information, or think that they are entitled to information, they have a responsibility of doing a lot of homework. So that when they get that information they can put it in a big enough context (Interview 7, May 6, 2005).

When members of the public take the time to understand the context of a situation, it is believed by many communicators that this increased public understanding about agency decisions will result in increased trust which in turn increases an agency’s ability to perform its function, whether regulatory, advisory, enforcement, or otherwise (Interview 3, April 28, 2005). It is clear from these interviews that communicators recognize the necessity of transparency in government communications. Further discussion showed

that while the belief in transparency exists, there are several factors that impact how transparent is practiced within agencies.

Transparency and Communication Practices

There are several ways that agencies get their information out to the public in their efforts to make the workings of government known. Throughout the interviews, participants discussed honesty, accuracy, and timeliness in the release of information were critical to transparency in communication practices. They then discussed how being responsive to agency publics through assessing needs, seeking and incorporating feedback, and developing and using community relations programs and using a variety of tools to get information out to the public increase transparency within government agencies. Communicators also discussed the impacts elements of their role as gate-keeper had on transparency of communication practices

Truthful, Accurate and Timely Information

One of the ways that communicators assure that the information they release is in the best interest of the public is to assure that it is truthful, accurate, and timely. The belief that these traits are important in the communication process was emphasized through communicators' discussion of the phrase "maximum disclosure, minimum delay" (Interview 4, April 29, 2005; Interview 6, May 5, 2005; Interview 15, May 13, 2005). And by the statement that communicators "have a responsibility to get [information] out there quickly, efficiently, and as truthful as possible and as timely as possible." (Interview 1, April 27, 2005).

Truthful and Accurate Information

“Transparency is about honesty” (Interview 10, May 6, 2005). “You have to demonstrate that you’re being straight with people and you can show them what’s going on” (Interview 13, May 11, 2005). Several communicators shared their belief in the necessity of never lying, either to a reporter or to the public (Interview 9, May 6, 2005; Interview 10, May 6, 2005). The need for honesty in communications was discussed as a common ethical guideline adhered to by most communication professionals. “Certainly every public affairs officer I’ve dealt with comes to the table with the understanding that we have to tell the truth” (Interview 9, May 6, 2005). This common moral is seen as important among communicators because “the only thing we have in our lives is our integrity and our credibility. You don’t want that lost” (Interview 15, May 13, 2005).

While communicators value honesty and see it as a necessary tool for doing an effective job, they also recognize that a lack of honesty is detrimental.

It has been my experience that...even if you don’t philosophically, or morally believe that transparency is the correct policy,...on a practical level... transparency usually is the best course of action...If you tell one lie, you’ve got to tell a thousand. There have been people much wiser and more powerful than I that have tried to fool the people and it just doesn’t work...There is too much media scrutiny, there is too much politics and people interested, there are too many employees... not all of them have access to all the information, but enough of them do that it would be pretty hard to not be transparent. So I think between the morality, the policy, and the practicality,...even if you don’t believe it in your

heart, you might as well just tell the truth because you're going to get nailed if you don't (Interview 9, May 6, 2005).

Part of honest communication includes sharing all kinds of information with the public. "Our job is to get as much information as possible to the public" (Interview 13, May 11, 2005), to be informational "conduits between the institution and [it's] publics" (Interview 15, May 13, 2005). This includes both good and bad news. "The idea is for us to provide the information as is" (Interview 14, May 11, 2005). To remember that "in a government public affairs office, you have to stick to the facts. No spinning" (Interview 6, May 5, 2005). And to make sure "that we don't put colored glasses on [an issue]" (Interview 2, April 28, 2005). This openness and honesty in communication is refreshing to communicators and creates a "much more friendly environment" (Interview 11, May 9, 2005).

One of the ways communicators assure that information they share is honest and truthful is through their efforts to assure that the information they are releasing is accurate. This includes checking and re-checking information before it is released to assure that the public is not accidentally misinformed. This is especially important in the information age where information is passed along so quickly that it is difficult, if not impossible to completely retract false information (Interview 10, May 6, 2005).

The need for accuracy in government information was compared by one communicator with the Good Housekeeping seal of approval, she discussed the United States Federal government as being a brand and that communicators had to be very careful about what they say because it is identified with the brand of the United States Government. "If the government says it we have a duty to the people of America and

others internationally, we have to stand by what we say” (Interview 1, April 27, 2005). Depending on the work of the agency, lives may be at stake, so it is extremely necessary that government branded information be accurate. “I just think we have to get things out as soon as we can. We have to wait until we’re on firm ground... We don’t rush something out, but you make sure the science is right and then get it out” (Interview 13, May 11, 2005).

Timely Release of Information

Along with the importance of getting truthful, accurate information out to the public, the timing with which that is done is also critical. “You’ve got to be equally as quick in responding to the bad news stories as you are in pumping up the good news stories” (Interview 15, May 13, 2005). It is important for communicators to recognize that if something goes wrong they need to “get it out right away. Lay it out. Let it go...It’s extremely important to get bad news out right away” (Interview 6, May 5, 2005), because as the old adage goes, “bad news does not get better with time” (Interview 3, April 28, 2005; Interview 6, May 5, 2005).

Quickly releasing negative information allows the public to judge the situation (Interview 6, May 5, 2005). On the other hand, past situations where information has been held back have resulted in speculation about corruption and misuse of power. Because they recognize the benefits of timely release of information, some communicators have set it as their goal to get information out to stakeholders as quickly as possible. Even so, there is a recognition by some that “probably our greatest weakness is that we are not quick enough to get information out” with one of the challenges being

that “the information age today is so fast and so quick that you almost can’t keep up with it” (Interview 15, May 13, 2005).

One way this quick release of information takes place is through timely responses to media inquiries. This is a challenge because of increased demands that are inherent with the 24-hour news cycle.

The Internet and 24-hour news channels have brought in a lot of immediacy. It used to be with reporters that they had a deadline at the end of the day, maybe at the end of the week...Now even weekly magazines have daily deadlines (Interview 1, April 27, 2005).

While this increased demand is a challenge, communicators recognize that they must get back with reporters quickly in order for the agency to get a fair shot in the news media.

The media will not wait. [A reporter] may come to [us] and ask a question about [a topic]. We may not give him an answer. Yet at 6:30 eastern time when you go to turn on NBC and watch Brian Williams broadcast the news, he will cut probably to [that reporter] doing the lead story about [the topic]. If [we don’t get our] message out, while [the reporter] is a pretty sharp guy and he will say [we were] not available to comment, we have missed an opportunity to get that message out (Interview 15, May 13, 2005).

Communicators’ timely response to media inquiries impacts the amount of agency information that is distributed to the vast publics reached by news outlets, as well as the perspective with which that information is presented. Because of this powerful impact, communicators work to develop relationships with journalists and to earn their trust. They also recognize journalists’ role in making government actions more transparent.

Responsiveness

Part of transparency is being responsive to the publics an agency works with. This requires that an agency understand who it's publics are, seeks and incorporates feedback from those publics, and communicates information that is meaningful to those publics.

Understanding Agency Publics

One of the great challenges in the government communication process is the wide variety of audiences the agency must address (Interview 1, April 27, 2005; Interview 4, April 19, 2005). In general, government communicators recognize their responsibility to communicate with the general public, which includes tax payers and any individual or organizations impacted by the agency the communicators represent. In order to be effective, communicators must be able to see the “Web of people and organizations impacted by decisions” (Interview 8, May 6, 2005), and then devise messages that will be understood by that those audiences.

One professional shared his philosophy of how to understand and effectively communicate with audiences. He suggested that in order to effectively reach out to target audiences and get them to share government information you need to first speak their language, understanding how to effectively communicate the intended message to the intended audience. This is achieved in many ways, including using cultural and linguistically appropriate services, using words and phrases that are culturally appropriate and expressive. Understanding the culture of the audience increases the ability of government agencies to develop programs and information that will be used by the

population for which they are created and increases the likelihood that the audience is receiving the message communicators are sending.

The second step is involving audiences in the decision making and communication process. Ask for their experiences. Involve opinion leaders in learning about the needs of the community, then asking them how to effectively reach members of the community, how best to administer programs, and how to effectively disseminate information. Offer to do as much for them and by them as possible, making them an integral part of the program.

The final step is asking community members for feedback, allowing them to see the impact they can have on the way government programs function in their community. Doing these things build relationships with publics and increase the effectiveness of the program. They are related to transparency, because messages are clearly understood and communicated. People are able to give and receive the information they need and the information is not confused or distorted by third parties who are not specifically involved in the issue (Interview 5, May 4, 2005).

Others suggested that agencies are making a greater effort to assure the information being released is effective. This is achieved by evaluating how agencies “make sure that [they’ve] had a chance to... talk to consumers and get some feedback on what seems to be working and what’s not. What’s making sense and what’s not clear. Do they need more information” (Interview 12, May 11, 2005)? This is important because for communicators, “Our goal is to communicate the information and to explain the information...so that people can understand” (Interview 14, May 11, 2005).

In order to accomplish this goal communicators ask themselves several questions to assist them in the development of communication plans. “You really have to step back and define who your audience is” (Interview 12, May 11, 2005). In order to identify the appropriate audience, communicators must consider their communications objectives or identify what problem is being addressed. One communicator shared that the need to identify the problem is important because sometimes “you get people overreacting to something that isn’t worth overreacting to” (Interview 8, May 6, 2005). Once a clear understanding of the issue being communicated is reached, and the target audience is identified, communicators must then ascertain what information the public needs to know, how best to get that information out, how can access to the information can be assured, and what communication channels are available for information dissemination (Interview 12, May 11, 2005; Interview 14, May 11, 2005). As agencies apply tools of strategic management to the communication process they are better able to share information with the public that is clear, meaningful, and useful. The ability to effectively communicate with audiences is also increased as agencies seek and incorporate feedback from the audiences with which they interact.

Public Involvement and Feedback

While scholars debate the amount and ways in which the public should become more involved in government decision making processes, it is clear from this research that agencies that have made efforts to increase public involvement in agency actions have benefited. Communicators in this study expressed the opinion that transparency in government is a two way dialogue, both obtaining feedback and responding to it (Interview 19, May 6, 2005). It includes seeking input from the public and allowing them

to be involved in the decision or policy making process, as appropriate. With the ultimate benefit of public involvement being that the final product has been vetted through the public, increasing it's applicability and effectiveness (Interview 12, May 11, 2005).

Agencies seek feedback from their publics through a variety of channels, including the use of communication research prior to information release. This incorporates conducting focus groups to seek feedback prior to disseminating information to make sure that it will be understood by the target audience, and to make sure the information being shared is information that the audience wants or needs (Interview 12, May 11, 2005).

Another way publics provide feedback to agency communicators is through agency use of and public participation in developed feedback channels such as agency help lines and the federal registry. Communicators review reports of commonly asked questions submitted to help lines as a guide for knowing what information needs to be more clear or more accessible to the public (Interview 1, April 27, 2005).

Communicators also use the Federal Register to collect public comment and feedback. "The Federal Register is the official daily publication for rules, proposed rules, and notices of Federal agencies and organizations, as well as executive orders and other presidential documents" (National Archives and Records Administration, 2004). It is accessible to the public via the Internet as well as in libraries across the United States. It is here that citizens have the opportunity to review what is going on within the executive branch of government, as well as provide their input in decision making processes. When they use the Federal Register, agencies are required to respond to all comments made.

Communicators talked about their use of the Federal Register as a tool that helps them to open up agency processes and receive productive feedback (Interview 11, May 9, 2005).

Community relations

While community relations and public liaison offices function differently in each agency, participants in this study that worked in these offices shared information on the impact these offices have on transparent communication practices. These offices play an important role in reaching out to agency stakeholders as well as providing a variety of channels for information dissemination.

Reaching Out to Stakeholders

Community relations offices play a critical role in reaching out to agency stakeholders. This is accomplished through a variety of activities, including holding conferences with advocacy groups and community leaders to find out how the agency can best work with those groups, communities, and the public (Interview 5, May 4, 2005; Interview 15, May 13, 2005); developing, monitoring, and responding to public comments on interactive Web pages (Interview 19, May 6, 2005); and holding public meetings in communities effected by agency actions (Interview 3, April 28, 2005; Interview 18, May 16, 2005). These offices strive to develop relationships with various agency publics, so that they have source from which to solicit feedback in order to increase both the effectiveness and acceptance of agency decisions.

Information Dissemination

Another way community relations and public liaison offices impact transparent practices is through developing and using a variety off channels for disseminating agency information, rather than relying on the media to get agency messages out to the public.

There is a tendency to say that the media can get the message out there, that's not true. Anybody can get the message out. You need to find different ways to do that. Maybe you create a blog today on the Internet. And maybe you create your own dynamic, interactive Web pages to do those. But don't depend on NBC evening news to get your story out there. Go to a wide variety. It could be band concerts,... it could be in a public event,... [there are] all kinds of ways to get that [message] out (Interview 15, May 13, 2005).

Clearly many communicators realize that it is important for them to “not only get the message across to the media, but to get it across person to person” (Interview 16, May 13, 2005). This is accomplished through the use of community meetings, the federal registry, and other forums for discussion. It also incorporates community relations activities that create forums for interaction between the agency and groups or individuals. These activities provide opportunities to increase awareness of and knowledge about various agencies. Such events include special recognition and participation of agencies in major athletic competitions, community fairs, displays, and conferences.

Another way to share information on a personal level is through the relationships agencies build with advocacy groups. “I think the biggest thing is the relationships you build with organizations, to build third party speakers...talk to them and let them carry your messages on out. They should be the ones that carry your messages more, in my mind, than the media” (Interview 15, May 13, 2005). This is accomplished as members of the advocacy groups and other opinion leaders take agency information they receive through established relationships back to the publics with which they interact. In the public health agency mentioned earlier, selected advocates have first-hand experiences

that give them a better understanding of agency functions; an understanding which they turn around and share with other members of their communities. This sharing results in decreased distrust and increased confidence in the agency (Interview 7, May 6, 2005). This becomes a tool for transparency, because information about the agency is accessible to the public through more personal and trusted channels than mass media. In addition, the information that advocates share is more specific to the interests of their communities than is information disseminated to wider audiences.

Gate-keeping

While communicators are working to understand their audiences and disseminate as much information as possible, in the interviews they talked about elements of their role as gate-keeper in determining what and how information is released to the public. As with all positions, individual differences as well as differences in agency missions determine how this role is carried out. Communicators participating in this study identified ways that the gate-keeping role functions in government communication processes. First, at times it is employed as a means of controlling the message sent to the public. The second element is that communicators rely upon their knowledge of the publics they serve to determine which information generated by the agency would be of interest to the public.

Message control

The release of information from the government, depending on what that information is, may have an impact on a variety levels, ranging from individual lives to world events. When decisions have been made and information is going to be released it is up to communicators to get it out to the public in a way that will be understood. Often

the desire is to create a message that will restrict negative reactions as much as possible. In order to do that “it takes an incredible amount of research to make sure you’ve got your messages on track and you’re communicating those correctly to the audience” (Interview 15, May 13, 2005).

Another put it this way, “I think there are times when we don’t give every bit of information, but certainly we are honest with what we do give” (Interview 10, May 6, 2005). This control of the message occurs for a variety of reasons including national security, protection of proprietary information, investigation implications, information disparities, and political pressure.

Communicators’ Knowledge of the Public

The other element discussed by communicators that impacts information gate-keeping is the reliance on their personal knowledge about the public to guide the decisions they make about what information to share. This happens and communicators ask themselves what agency programs, policies, and actions their family and friends would be interested in hearing about (Interview 17, May 13, 2005). Because there is so much information that can be shared, and because resources are limited, communicators are left to decide where resource expenditure would best result in meeting the needs and interests of the public as well as promoting the use and knowledge about government programs.

Appropriate Information Channels

The choice of appropriate channels to disseminate agency information is critical to transparent communication practices. With a plethora of tools to choose from, agency communicators must determine how to best use those tools within their communication

plans. One communication manager discussed the three prongs of government communication that function in her office. They are media relations, government relations, and community relations. By working to communicate agency information through these three different approaches the office is able to “work in a coordinated way” in the information dissemination process.

We will often do community meetings. We’ll do what we call informal sessions in which we...send out a media advisory and we’ll set up some place in a local community where people can come and talk one on one and ask questions. We’ll do fact sheets. We’ll reach out to local elected officials. We’ll have briefings for them to try to get them to understand whatever the particular issue is. So we use a variety of techniques (Interview 18, May 16, 2005).

These various techniques can be categorized into two groups, techniques and channels over which the communicator has control, and channels over which the communicator does not have control.

Controlled Channels

There are several ways that communicators and agencies control the information that is made available to the public. Many of these are common public relations tools, such as press releases, press conferences, media interviews, pitching news stories, writing editorials, newsletters, brochures, call in radio shows, speeches, and presentations. In addition to these tools for getting information out to mass audiences, agencies make use of 1-800 telephone numbers where individuals may call in to get specific information about the agency and various issues that agency addresses.

Internet.

Of all the communication channels available to disseminate information and thereby increase transparency, the one communicators put the greatest emphasis on was the Internet. “The Web is the number one communicator” (Interview 2, April 28, 2005). This is because “in the era of Websites it’s a whole lot easier to be transparent than it used to be. You can put things on Websites” (Interview 7, May 6, 2005).

We want to make sure that the information is easily accessible. The phenomenon of the Internet, of Web pages, is a great, great tool that people didn’t have before. We used to have over 100 fact sheets about different programs and features of the department and we’d send these out to people and we’d hand them out if a question was asked, we’d give them a fact sheet. All of that’s now right there on the Web (Interview 9, May 6, 2005).

Information that was once only available to those who looked for it is now available to those who have access to the Internet and an interest in agency topics. In addition to fact sheets, agency Web pages provide links to archived information about public meetings and forums. Individuals who would not be able to attend public meetings due to travel and space limitations are now able to participate via the Internet. Agencies are also able to compile information and links to resources related to a variety of topics they cover. One agency even has “a Website specifically intended to communicate to members of the public and involve members of the public in all kinds of information activities that happen” (Interview 7, May 6, 2005).

As agencies redesign and update their Web pages, constituents have more access to agency information than at any other time in history. It truly is a tool that

communicators and agencies can and do use to open up agency processes and information to the public. It is a tool that reporters use to get information about stories they are writing. It is a tool that communicators use to research information in order to have a better understanding of the context of the situations they are working on. It is a tool that the public uses in order to become more informed about agency actions. For these reasons it is important that agencies develop Websites that can and are trusted by those who use them. One communicator expressed great satisfaction when sharing that a reporter recently provided a link to the agency Web page at the end of an article discussing problems the agency was working on. “When you get reporters referring people back to your Website because of information that is important, you’ve done it” (Interview 2, April 28, 2005). Clearly, this controlled communication channel is seen by communicators as an extremely valuable and critical tool for transparent communication practices.

Uncontrolled Channels

As is evident by the controlled channels communicators use to get information out to the public, it is clear that federal agencies rely a great deal on the media to get their messages out. This is because communicators believe that “The public in general is reached by the media, [and] that’s the way that we speak to the public” (Interview 11, May 9, 2005). For this reason communicators consider the information they have available and think of ways that they can pitch that information to journalists in order to get media coverage for the event, “my role is to try to get media coverage of the good things they are doing here” (Interview 17, May 13, 2005). This results in communicators “thinking in terms of the reporters we’re dealing with” (Interview 9, May 6, 2005).

This thought process becomes the major factor in determining what information to share and how much effort to put into the release of that information.

We decide in the office of communications whether that particular research is going to generate a lot of interest from the media, based on our experience. If we think that it's going to be something that we need to communicate, we post it on our Website; maybe have a press release (Interview 14, May 11, 2005).

This is a challenge because "The media is bombarded with so many groups and organizations and government agencies trying to push their agendas and trying to push their information. And there's not that much out there for coverage" (Interview 14, May 11, 2005).

As they rely on journalists to share information with the public, communicators must make sure that the information is communicated in a way that "is not only understood by the media, but also by the readers. [Because] our readership of the media is very diverse...Our goal is to communicate the information and to explain the information...so that people can understand" (Interview 14, May 11, 2005). One of the things that communicators do to make sure this happens is build positive working relationships with reporters so that when reporters have a question they will come to the agency to get their questions answered (Interview 3, April 28, 2005).

"I've built up good relationships with reporters, and when I say good relationships, I don't mean that we're friends, or that they'll cut me any slack. What I mean is that I have credibility with reporters. They've come to trust me; I've come to trust them" (Interview 9, May 6, 2005). Building a trusting relationship with reporters, being open and honest with them, makes it so that communicators can go to them and

“say this is the way it’s being done, ...proudly and without any hesitation or reservation” (Interview 11, May 9, 2005). The result is that “when [communicators] work with reporters and we’re open and honest with them, we get in general a more fair look” (Interview 18, May 16, 2005). Agency messages are less impeded by reporter bias and audiences receive more accurate information about the agency.

An example of this is the experience one communicator had in working with a reporter on his word choice in an upcoming article. The words he had chosen to discuss the issue were likely to make individuals perceive a much greater problem than the one that really existed. Because this communicator was able to have an open dialogue, and educate the reporter more about the situation he was willing to change the word choice to a phrase that would accurately discuss the issue without causing unnecessary concern (Interview 18, May 16, 2005). This relationship with the reporter made it so that government information was more transparent because it did not become clouded and distorted by word choice. While communicators do not have control over information distribution through extra-organizational channels, it is clear that clear organizational communication impacts information transparency.

Clearly, there are a variety of communication practices that contribute to organizational and informational transparency. While the factors and practices mentioned by communicators in this study may not be comprehensive, they clearly illustrate that communication practices are closely related to the transparency of an organization.

Factors that Influence the Level of Transparency

In addition to discussing the relationship between communication practices and transparency, communicators identified several factors that influence the degree to which transparency is practiced. These factors fell into three categories, personal factors, organizational factors, and resource factors. Understanding how these factors influence transparent practices is critical to developing a model to guide transparent practices in government agency communication.

Personal Factors that Influence Transparency

Personal factors that were identified by participants and through analysis of interview transcripts were personal convictions related to transparency and fear.

Personal Convictions

As discussed in earlier sections, communicators that participated in this study related their belief that transparency in government is essential to a democratic society. This personal conviction certainly impacts organizational transparency as evidenced by communicators discussion of their individual efforts to get information out to the publics they serve. Some of these efforts include working with reporters to expedite FOIA requests (Interview 10, May 6, 2005), working with agency staff to assist them in recognizing and understanding the benefits of transparency (Interview 2, April 28, 2005), and through communicators efforts to develop information tools that will be understood by their audiences (Interview 4, April 19, 2005; Interview 5, May 4, 2005).

Fear

Another personal factor that impacts transparency is fear. Communicators shared that at times fear influences the type and amount of information released because of what

may happen with the information once it is released. These include fears that information will be distorted to reflect poorly on an agency or that that people simply won't understand the information that is shared. In addition there is fear among some communicators that misused, misunderstood, and distorted information may have negative consequences on an individual's career. All of these fears tend to restrict the information that is made accessible (Interview 8, May 6, 2005). Discomfort about what will happen when information is released feeds the desire to restrict the amount and type of information that is released, "whether that information could be obtained easily otherwise, it just tends to be counter-intuitive" to be comfortable giving out a lot of information (Interview 3, April 28, 2005).

Fear that information will be used to make the agency look bad impacts the release of information in a variety of ways. The first way is that it causes spokespersons or others to be very cautious in the way they respond to questions, especially from reporters. "With the tough hard news, you make sure you get straight to the point with nothing around the outside that would give the reporter the opportunity to take your answers and craft his own answer with your words" (Interview 15, May 13, 2005). There are also times when agencies would rather not release information, because of the way others may view that information. At the same time, when this happens communicators have to make an extra effort to step up, especially when they view it as their "responsibility to make sure we communicate as effectively as we can...I think that there is always going to be a concern [about different viewpoints] and I think you have to hope that people operate using good judgment." (Interview 12, May 11, 2005)

Another way that fear inhibits open disclosure of information is the belief of some communicators, and even agency officials, that being quoted in the media could have negative ramifications on their career. “There’s a fear that when you deal with the media that you will make a mistake and you will give some mis-information out there and it will be a career ender” (Interview 15, May 13, 2005). One communicator observed the effects this fear had on former co-workers, whom he observed would invent “ways to avoid talking to (reporters) or giving them information,” because “you can get fired for what is said in the newspaper, because it becomes big. It changes institutions. It forces people to scramble, no matter how powerful they are” (Interview 8, May 6, 2005). In order to avoid this, some communicators and agency administrators practice self preservation by sharing as little as possible.

Organizational Factors that Influence Transparency

Organizational factors are another category of factors that identified that impact the degree to which organizations are transparent. The first of the organizational factors that will be discussed in this section is the impact of managers or administrators on transparency within and organization. The second and third factors discovered were agency mission and agency communication structure, respectively. Politics were identified as the fourth factor impacting the degree of transparency within an organization.

Administrators Impact on Transparency

Because managers and administrators set the tone for how an agency operates, the position they take in regard to transparency plays a huge role in how open and accessible information is to the public.

A lot of it depends on the signals you get from the top...If the head of an agency...is someone who is comfortable being more forthcoming than not, conducts himself in that way, conducts meetings in an organization that are wide open meetings so that everybody sees what is going on, is accessible to the press, does public meetings and so forth, then that attitude and that approach permeates an organization (Interview 3, April 28, 2005).

Another interviewee who has worked in communications in various federal agencies observed that “agencies that are more proactive have leaders who aren’t afraid of the press” and that when administrators are not comfortable with the press and their staff is not comfortable with the press “there is not as much flow of information” (Interview 17, May 13, 2005).

One agency administrator has identified two themes for his administration. They are transparency and building public trust. “He is firmly of the belief that transparency is one of the things that’s going to contribute to [public trust]” (Interview 7, May 6, 2005). In the organization he manages, several steps have been taken to open up agency processes as well as seeking and incorporating public feedback. Under his direction the agency Web site has been built up to provide public access to recordings of agency meetings, information about various projects in the agency, as well as places for individuals to sign up to get involved in what the agency is doing (Interview 7, May 6, 2005; Interview 19, May 6, 2005; Interview 20, May 6, 2005). One communicator within this agency observed that “More and more I think that scientists understand that reaching out to the public is part of their job...It’s not just work at the bench, it’s how you tell

people about it” (Interview 13, May 11, 2005). Clearly the efforts of this administrator have impacted agency culture.

While the administrator or manager sets the tone for how transparent an agency will be, communicators recognize that one of their roles is to assist managers in recognizing the value of transparency and then communicating that to agency staff. “The biggest thing in making transparency possible is having people who recognize the value of doing that...It is really critical that we instill in...staff and managers and people all the way up the line in seeing the value of transparency” (Interview 2, April 28, 2005).

Communicators must work with people in the organization to help them think about the ramifications of not communicating what is going on within the community. Non-communication professionals may not think about the entire context of a situation and may perform their duties in what is perceived by the public to be secrecy when in fact it is simply a matter of the professionals not realizing that the context of the situation was one in which transparent actions were required (Interview 18, May 16, 2005).

The challenge for communicators is getting people to realize that when people are looking for information, it is best to give them what they are looking for. One communicator explains it this way to the people he works with:

Hey, it’s either you or somebody else. They’re going to get that information, it’s like water. You block it here; it’s going to come around there. It’s going to go where the path of least resistance is. They’re going to get it one way or the other, so it’s your choice, you can either let them get it from your argument, or are you going to let them get it from somebody else’s argument (Interview 8, May 6, 2005)?

As agency leaders recognize the value of transparency it will be easier for communicators to educate others about the critical value of transparency.

Agency Mission

Another organizational factor found to enhance or hinder agency communication is the mission of the agency. While it must be remembered that interviews were not conducted with communicators from every federal agency, and most interviews were conducted with communicators from sub agencies, it was interesting as a researcher to note the different perspectives about the role of transparency in the communication process between agencies. As previously mentioned, participants in this study expressed their beliefs that agencies ought to communicate in transparent ways. Several communicators then qualified that statement by excluding information transparency about a variety of issues, including those related to national security, proprietary industrial information, and personal information protected under the privacy act.

When evaluating the transcripts to discover issues that impacted transparency within an agency it became clear that the agency mission plays a large role in determining the exact role of transparency. Communicators working in agencies whose missions relate to public health talked about the need to get information out to the public in order to keep them informed about health issues. These communicators saw their jobs in terms of “reporting on the science,” making the information they worked to share more cut and dry.

In agencies that provide resources and report on information based more on social sciences, the effort focused somewhat on working to inform the public about the resources available to them. On issues where the goal of information sharing was to

impact public perceptions of the agency, or actions that could be viewed as politically motivated, the role of transparency became more clouded. Communicators felt more pressure to pay attention to the ramifications of sharing certain information. This is not to say that they did not share the information, rather at times they found themselves directing reporters to make FOIA requests, or crafting messages so that agency messages were clear.

Discussion with communicators who worked in agencies that had a mission focused on national security talked about the need to get bad news out quickly, to release and move on, to avoid spinning the information. They talked about how communicators in those agencies feared being quoted in the press, that media coverage was viewed by many as “a career ender.” These communicators also observed that there tended to be greater distrust of the media, and that communicators had to be very careful about when crafting their messages, making sure that on hard news they did not give press any information that could be distorted when a story was put together. In other words, these communicators talked more about message control to external audiences than did their counterparts in other agencies.

Agency Communication Structure

The agency communication structure also has an impact on transparency, because a communicator is only able to share information that he or she has access to. If an agency does a poor job of making information available to communicators they cannot do a good job of getting information to external audiences. “The more information you have about a subject, the more thorough you can be, the more balanced you can be, and maybe not overlook important information” (Interview 4, April 29, 2005).

Communicators shared four ways that agency communication structure impacts the degree to which they are able to provide public access to agency information. The first structural element is whether communications is viewed as a management function by providing communicators a seat at the management table. The second element is an agency culture that promotes the development of interpersonal relationships among agency staff in various departments. The third is developing an expectation of an informed internal audience and the fourth element is restricted access to information.

A seat at the table.

When good internal communications exist within an agency, the transparency of that agency is increased. This is because communicators know about what is going on within the agency. They are then prepared to answer questions and develop plans for disseminating information that the public may want and need to know. One way that this can happen is by providing communicators a seat at the management table to provide input and feedback into agency decisions; to inform managers about the way that the public will react to information and decisions. This is not to say that agency decisions will be made in order to get the best public responses; rather it will assist the agency in developing a plan at the outset to communicate information to the public that will aid them in understanding why certain actions were taken (Interview 9, May 6, 2005). While communicators recognize this is important, it is something of which the agency leadership often has to be convinced (Interview 4, April 29, 2005; Interview 9, May 6, 2005).

Good internal communication and giving communicators a seat at the management table becomes extremely important at times when crises arise. It prevents

situations where communicators are “the last to know and first to go.” Meaning that the communicator is the last person to know about a situation but is the first person to talk with the public about what is occurring.

If you don't keep him in the loop and he doesn't know what is going on, then he can't relate the picture. He can't craft the message; he's dead in the water. That phone rings, you are dead meat. You are dead in the water. So the public affairs guy, whoever that is, whoever is the designated spokesman, has to be cozy with whoever is making the decisions. And has to be in on them and knowledgeable about them. Otherwise you are just not effective (Interview 4, April 29, 2005).

By keeping communicators up to speed about everything that is going on in the agency that they may be required to explain to the public, agency communication will be both clear and credible.

Interpersonal relationships.

In addition to having a seat at the management table, interpersonal internal communications play a role in increasing transparency, because communicators know who to turn to in order to get important information (Interview 4, April 29, 2005). For this internal communication to take place, communicators must make an effort to develop relationships with others in the department. “People tend to work with a mask on. If they would stop doing that with people, it is so disarming, to just be yourself” (Interview 10, May 6, 2005), an action that results in increased sharing of information. One communicator commented “if they know you, they're more willing to share information with you. They say, ‘Hey, I have an idea for this article.’ Or ‘we're going to have a synopsis released.’ We get a heads up more” (Interview 17, May 13, 2005).

Communicators are then able to communicate this information with external publics.

Another communicator talked of the “esprit décor” in his office and how that makes it comfortable to “go to virtually anybody on the staff with all kinds of technical questions, whether it be explaining something that is difficult and scientific or arcane... You can rely on the other people here” (Interview 11, May 9, 2005).

Informed internal public.

In addition to receiving information from individuals within the agency communicators increase transparency as they share the information they have prepared for external publics with internal publics before it is released.

Everybody is informed up and down the line, which is important too, because people above us in the hierarchy at the department... may have to answer questions about it also. So everybody gets informed during the process of getting everything cleared to go out (Interview 13, May 11, 2005).

In another agency this happens when communicators keep the leadership informed about media inquiries so that they are not caught off guard when they receive a request for comment (Interview 17, May 13, 2005).

Restricted access to information.

While involving communicators at the management table, developing interpersonal relationships, and discussing information before it is released to the public are all elements of internal communication that increase transparency, there are challenges communicators face in obtaining information. Some participants discussed the notion that at times information is withheld from them in order to prevent them from being put in a difficult position in relation to releasing information. “We may not get all

the facts and all the information...I may not be told that [information] because I'm not going to lie, as a spokesperson" (Interview 15, May 13, 2005). At other times, information is withheld from communicators because agency leadership does not trust them with the information. "When you're the public affairs guy, they're doing things they don't want you to know about. Because they think that even though you are on their staff, that you're going to go tell somebody, a reporter, about that" (Interview 4, April 29, 2005).

In other situations, it may appear that communicators are not acting in transparent ways, because the information the public is looking for simply does not exist as some questions have yet to be answered (Interview 18, May 16, 2005). Unfortunately, some see communicators' inability or perceived unwillingness to answer questions as being politically motivated.

Politics

Ideally, politics would not play a role in determining what and how public information is shared; practically, it is impossible to ignore the role politics play in determining what and how information is shared. At the outset of this discussion it is important to note that several participants in the study discussed the need for communicators to "stick to the facts" (Interview 6, May 5, 2005). That they recognize a distinction between the work of providing public information and the work of public relations professionals who work to spin information to the advantage of the organization (Interview 11, May 9, 2005; Interview 18, May 16, 2005). They even acknowledged that "certainly the vast majority of the time transparency wins out" (Interview 9, May 6,

2005), and that communication from government agencies is supposed to be above politics (Interview 1, April 27, 2005).

There was a good deal of discussion about how politics do in fact play a role in getting information out to the public. One of the ways this occurs is through the control of agency messages. “Frankly this is an administration that...certainly tries to control it’s message. Is very clear about it’s message. Sticks to it’s message, whatever the particular issue of the day may be” (Interview 18, May 16, 2005). The way this is accomplished is through the use of agency spokespersons who are politically appointed to their positions, rather than selected through the career service system. At the federal level it is the political appointee that makes official statements to the media about the agency (Interview 16, May 13, 2005). One communicator observed “if you are a political appointee..., if you don’t say what you’re supposed to, you’re fired” (Interview 8, May 6, 2005).

This political pressure and fear of lost employment has created great difficulty for journalists who attempt to get direct quotes from people in official positions to include in their reports. Instead of quotes, spokespersons often use the journalistic tool of a backgrounder to get information out. A “background” in journalism is non-attributable information provided to reporters. While the use of this tool gives a great deal of information about a situation it does not give the journalist a source to attribute information to. Recent problems with misreported information have increased journalists desire to get a source but that is a challenge because officials are so concerned about the way the message comes across. “It’s not because they’re lying, it’s because they are so concerned about how they present the information. Which is fine, but it makes it more

difficult to get information quickly to reporters, when “fast” is their stock in trade” (Interview 10, May 6, 2005).

Political and career service employees work together and at times they struggle over the message but generally are able to overcome the differences in the way they disseminate information (Interview 9, May 6, 2005). A major difference is that:

Career people are more willing to give out the information because we don’t have a dog fight. But political people have a double job. They want to get out the information, but they also want to protect the administration and present the information in the best possible light (Interview 10, May 6, 2005).

As career service employees work with political appointees they recognize that their role is to both support and balance the work of the “political.” One participant defined this role by describing the election process and then saying:

The people have said, yes, we want George Bush to be President...and he appoints these various people in the department...who will carry out [his] policies. So if I feel, as a career person, I couldn’t carry out those policies, I don’t belong in government (Interview 9, May 6, 2005).

When disparities exist in the information the official spokesperson releases and the information other communicators have access to they will look for ways to get reporters the information they need, even if that includes instructing them to file a Freedom of Information Act request (Interview 10, May 6, 2005).

Another way politics influences the way information is shared is through the timing of the message. When describing things that may constrain transparency, one communicator shared that there have been times that “the political leadership decides, we

have a big vote coming up in congress tomorrow, we really don't want this to go into print today, is there some way we can keep the lid on it" (Interview 9, May 6, 2005).

Instances such as these, although the information is made available to the public at a later time, indicate that at times politics keeps both the voting public and their representatives in the dark about certain aspects of an issue at times when unreleased information may have an undesired impact on legislation.

Resource Factors that Influence Transparency

While government communicators recognize both the responsibility they have to get information to the public and the benefits of openly sharing information, they also discussed the impact resources have on their ability to act in transparent ways.

"Transparency requires more expenditure of resources, more people, more time to aggressively and proactively go out and go after people and provide them with information" (Interview 3, April 28, 2005). When agencies and communicators consider opening up agency processes they have to balance the impact committing more resources in one area will have on another area (Interview 7, May 6, 2005). The resources they have to consider include time, staffing, and money.

Time

Because resources are so limited in federal agencies, communicators have a difficult time convincing other agency staff members to work in more transparent ways, especially because of the added time good communication takes.

Among...the more technical people I think there's more of a frustration with (transparency). There's no conceptual disagreement with it, but...it takes a lot of time to deal with reaching out to communities and doing everything under the

publics' eye. It pulls away from the time the technical, and scientific, and engineering people can do their work. I'm yanking them to a public meeting and they need to be dealing with their project. So I think there's more of a resistance on that level than there is a disagreement (Interview 18, May 16, 2005).

One communicator whose job is to communicate for three programs put it this way, "you have to set your priorities, because you could be doing ten things. I could have done ten things today, but I can only do three or four major things today. So you just have to prioritize" (Interview 17, May 13, 2005). Naturally those priorities determine that some information will be moved into the public eye, while other information will not.

Clearly, limited time limits the amount of information released, but it also impacts other factors and processes related to transparent practices. One of these factors is communicators' ability to seek and incorporate feedback. Public meetings, answering questions, conducting focus groups and other methods previously discussed as tools for seeking feedback, all take time. Because time is a limited resource, communicators find themselves neglecting time consuming best practices, practices that increase transparency, because they have to decide between finding out what the public wants and needs to know and actually taking time to create and package that information.

Staffing

In other situations, there are simply not enough people to spend the time transparency requires (Interview 5, May 4, 2005). Many government programs have less than one full-time communications staffer assigned to conduct all of the communication activities for that program. Because of the limited staff, a decision has to be made about

what information the public is going to want and need to know. One communicator put it simply when he said “I’m limited by the number of people I have” (Interview 4, April 29, 2005).

Part of this problem is because there is a need for communicators to be more valued, while culture change is beginning to take place and people are beginning to recognize what harm is done when agencies don’t communicate well (Interview 2, April 28, 2005), an historic devaluation has impacted the number of positions available for communication professionals.

This shortage in staffing effects transparency because a more open process within a bureaucracy requires more paperwork, and more time, and more people to complete the job. One participant put it this way, “I think sometimes...the very things that help facilitate making sure something is transparent at the same time take a tremendous effort to do” (Interview 12, May 11, 2005). In an era of government downsizing, departments are already feeling the squeeze in efforts to accomplish the same amount of work with fewer people. This reduction in staff has also resulted in a reduction of expertise which impacts how well a function is performed and managed.

While staffing poses a challenge, one communicator mentioned that:

The staff is very committed to the work that we do and when something needs to be done, we do it. We may not have the resources, but we try to get those, regardless. If something that needs to be done needs to be done, we have to figure out how to do it. Whether we have the staff or not, we have to do it. We bring in contractors, we have to be creative. But the ultimate goal is to do whatever needs to be done (Interview 14, May 11, 2005).

As communications staffs are stretching to accomplish the minimum, it may be extremely difficult if not impossible for agencies to increase the transparency with which they communicate. Not because communicators do not desire to increase transparency, or recognize it's benefits, but because increasing transparency in one area results in a decreased capacity to fulfill functions in another.

Money

In addition to using more time and staff, acting in transparent ways can also be very costly. Developing Web material, press releases, holding news conferences, manning information lines, and other tools for keeping the public informed all require funding (Interview 4, April 29, 2005; Interview 7, May 6, 2005). As one communicator put it "if we spend unusually more amounts of money on being transparent, that's less amount of money available to do research" (Interview 7, May 6, 2005). Agencies have to make a conscious choice related to how much funding will be allocated for opening up and communicating about agency processes. These funding decisions are related to staffing allocations as well as funding needed to create and disseminate informational materials.

Money equals being able to do a better job. It really does because it lets you buy those things necessary to put out a very good product... The net's one, that requires money. Radio and television require money. Newspapers require money...a press conference, sure, that costs money (Interview 4, April 29, 2005).

If agencies do not have the money they need to effectively disseminate information they will be prevented from communicating effectively with their publics.

Conclusion

This review of the research has shown that communicators recognize that openness in the communication process of federal agencies is one of the basic requirements of a democratic government. It is a practice that has the power to increase public trust in agency functioning through increased understanding and decreased speculation about motives and influencers. Yet even with these identified benefits, and many existing practices that enhance the transparency of agencies, there remain impediments that communicators must overcome to assist agencies in becoming truly transparent.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This study provides an understanding of the role of transparency in the government communication process and identifies processes and factors that impact the degree of transparency within an agency. Transparency is defined as open, honest, responsive communication practices that build relationships with various publics in order to seek and incorporate feedback. For this to happen effectively, communicators must become more valued, and managers must begin to see them as tools for building relationships that will result in an increased ability for agencies to perform their functions. The responses of study participants clearly show that they recognize the vital role of transparency in the government communication process, show how agencies act in transparent ways, and show structures that either enhance or hinder transparent processes. These findings provide a framework for the development of a model of transparency in government communication. This discussion will develop that model, illustrating where previous models and theories fit together with the findings of this study.

Model of Transparency for Government Communication

This research has established that government communicators strongly value the concept of transparency. Clearly many communicators recognize the positive benefits that result from transparent communication practices, including increased public support, increased understanding by the public of agency actions, increased trust, increased compliance with agency rules and regulations, an increased ability for the agency to accomplish its purpose, and a stronger democracy. With these recognized benefits,

communicators expressed a desire for increased direction and assistance in developing and promoting transparency within agency processes.

The analysis of participant responses in the interview process has identified critical elements of transparent government communication. Combined together, these elements constitute a model of transparency for government communication. This model consists of three key elements which are supported and achieved through a variety of concepts and processes. The first element of the transparency model is that communicators must employ practices that promote, enhance, and support transparency. The second element is that there must be organizational support for transparency; and the third element is that there must be a provision of the resources necessary for accomplishing transparency.

Communication Practices

In his development of the public communication model, Heise (1985) suggested that the most important part the model was that governments communicate in an open, honest, and timely way with their publics, without manipulating the information they share. In short, government agencies should seek to communicate in transparent ways. James Madison, a framer of the United States Constitution put it this way:

A popular government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives (as quoted in Florini, 2004, p. 19).

As communicators discussed their role in sharing information with the public so that the public could make informed decisions at the voting booth, and in other civic activities, it was clear that they understood this concept. “We have a responsibility to get it out there, quickly, efficiently, and as truthful as possible, and as timely as possible” (Interview 1, April 27, 2005).

As communicators disseminate agency information, their communication practices play a critical role in determining the degree of transparency within agency communications. Communication practices that are incorporated in the model of transparency in government communication include open information sharing, using a variety of channels to communicate with publics, seeking feedback, and appropriate use of stakeholder management and models of public relations.

Open Information sharing

The first element of the transparency model is that government agencies must employ communication practices that promote open information sharing. While the Freedom of Information Act, Government in the Sunshine Act, and the Federal Advisory Committee Act are part of the structure that create transparency in government, communicators recognize they cannot and should not be the only ways that transparency takes place in government. Lhulier and Miller (2004) suggested that while these legislated initiatives have begun to open up government, the public affairs offices should serve as the key tool as agencies open up their processes. This is a philosophy shared by several participants in this study who expressed their belief that reliance on the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) is a last resort, that government communication should be more open than that. One communicator expressed that the only time FOIA requests are

required in her office is when large amounts of material must be copied, and the request is simply required so that billing arrangements can be made (Interview 18, May 16, 2005). Another communicator expressed that while she did not like to use FOIA, if she felt restricted in her ability to provide what should be public information, she would assist reporters in filing and expediting an FOIA request (Interview 10, May 6, 2005). At the same time, one communicator mentioned that she was not aware of any recent FOIA requests in her office, because they work to get the information out as quickly as possible (Interview 13, May 11, 2005). Another put it this way:

It is very important, to as much as we can, make things transparent. I think we're learning that. Are we there yet in totality, no. That's why things like Freedom of Information requests come in to us, because that hasn't been transparent and people obviously must think there is something behind what we've done...So you see how that isn't a part of us being transparent up front (Interview 1, April 27, 2005).

It is quite clear that frequent FOIA requests show a need for increased transparency and efforts at quickly disseminating as much information as possible.

In addition to responding to public requests for information, communicators identified the Web as a critical tool in opening up information to the public. This includes Web casting (Interview 1, April 27, 2005; Interview 7, May 6, 2005), restructuring Web pages to make them more information dense (Interview 2, April 28, 2005), and more user friendly (Interview 14, May 11, 2005). It also requires that agencies do a better job of maintaining existing Web sites to assure the outdated and inaccurate information is removed from the public domain. One communicator

expressed that this is a challenge because of the speed at which Internet technology has advanced, and because of the proliferation of Web pages. In an effort to bring government sponsored Web pages back into control regulations have been put in place that require Office of Management and Budget approval for any new federal government Website (Interview 1, April 27, 2005).

Accuracy of information.

One issue that may impede the openness of information is the need to be accurate. Because it is so important for communicators to protect their credibility they are very cautious when releasing information to the public. “We may not be able to answer some questions as the government, because what the government says, we have to know that it’s right” (Interview 1, April 27, 2005). It is important to understand that this may impact public perception of how open an agencies communication is because communicators “have to wait until we’re on firm ground...We don’t rush something out...You can’t get something out too early and retract it. So we’re very careful, but we’re very fast too” (Interview 13, May 11, 2005). “Everything we give is honest and it’s double checked and triple checked because we don’t want to put in anything that’s going to come back and haunt us” (Interview 10, May 6, 2005).

Necessary restrictions on information.

While they understand the need for open communication, communicators also recognized that there are elements within government that restrict how openly information is shared. It is important to note that information related to “national security, internal agency rules, material specifically exempted by other statutes, confidential business information, internal government memoranda, personal privacy,

law enforcement investigations, regulation of financial institutions, and oil wells” are all protected forms of information that are legally exempt from public disclosure (Garnett, 1992). This impacts communicators because “you need to be calculated in what information you give out, depending on the business. There could be classifications; there could be impacts for investigations” (Interview 15, May 13, 2005). Communicators also know that when a situation is “under investigation in the federal government you don’t talk about it, you can’t. But as soon as you can you need to. And you take the hit” (Interview 6, May 5, 2005) because it appears as though the agency has been hiding information from the public. At the same time, communicators also admitted that at times they are not quick enough to release information once it does come out. “Leadership is sometimes afraid of bad news. Anybody’s afraid of bad news...so nobody wants to communicate the bad news” (Interview 15, May 13, 2005).

Fear of the consequences of information.

Florini (2004) suggested that one of the fears governments have in openly sharing information with the public is the fear that the information will be misused. While respondents mentioned this fear as it related to misrepresentations of agency positions on issues (Interview 1, April 27, 2005), this did not appear to be a major barrier in information dissemination. Participants in the study also shared the belief held by some that being quoted by a reporter can be a career ender, and that they had seen this fear result in restricted public access to information (Interview 8, May 6, 2005; Interview 15, May 13, 2005). These perspectives show that fear certainly effects transparency and show a need for future research. At the same time, communicators need to be aware of

any fears they have associated with information they work with so that those fears are addressed and are not allowed to prevent public access to public information.

A Variety of Channels

Use of the Internet to share agency information is one way that agencies have begun to open up information to the public. Through the development of this and other communication channels, communicators are able to decrease their dependence on the media for disseminating government information. From their responses it was clear that communicators were beginning to realize the need to share government information through a variety of channels. The need for making use of a variety of communication channels is also an element of Heise's (1985) public communication model.

While communicators and scholars alike recognize the vital role news media play in performing their role as watchdog of government, both groups recognize that news media cannot be the only way to release information about an agency. One communicator acknowledged this belief by declaring independence from the news media. He expressed that this did not mean the agency would not work with the news media, rather it meant that instead of relying solely on the media for getting information about the agency to the public, the agency had begun looking at ways they could communicate directly with their publics. Some of the tools the agency was developing included several features on the Web site, a variety of print materials for internal and external publics, a speaker's service, and involvement with advocacy groups (Veterans Service Organization Conference, May 2, 2005).

Communicators are becoming increasingly aware of the need to rely on sources other than mass media to get agency messages out. For decades scholars have been

observing a decline in media coverage of government affairs (Heise, 1985; Koven & Kunselman, 2003). By using a variety of channels in disseminating agency information, agency publics will have an increased ability to gain a contextualized understanding of the information they use in their valuations of government work, and will thereby benefit from agency efforts to increase open communication. Tools within government communication programs that make this possible include the effective use of community relations programs in seeking and incorporating feedback from publics served, and accurate identification and use of the principles of stakeholder management and models of public relations in information dissemination processes.

Seeking Feedback

One key to transparency in communication practices is seeking feedback from agency publics. In order to appropriately seek feedback from the public, and assure that the information being communicated is appropriate, communicators need to develop relationships with a variety of publics. Heise (1985) suggested that this required agencies to establish relationships with individuals and small groups in addition to powerful, well organized advocacy organizations, in order to seek feedback and respond to the needs of the publics they serve. The need for agencies to reach out to their publics is supported by the claim of Avery, et al (1995) that “No public agency can afford to communicate with the ‘general public’” (p. 176), and that one of the most important roles communicators can play is “that of establishing and rebuilding relationships with various government publics and regaining their trust and confidence” (Avery, et. al., 1995). Additionally, theorists in the new public management movement have suggested that increased responsiveness by governments to their publics should result in increases of public trust

(Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000). And Ulbig (2002) suggested that giving people a voice in the decision making process helps them feel better about the process outcome, an increased comfort that will result in greater public acceptance of agency policies and processes. The following examples illustrate how different agencies interact with and respond to their publics in ways that improve agency functioning.

Several years ago an agency was required to take regulatory action against the largest employer in a large city. The decision would determine whether or not the company could continue to operate. Because of the extensive impact the decision would have on the community at large, the management of the agency decided to send a team of experts into the area to share with the public all the information they had available to them, what they were required to do, and to answer questions. They also requested community members to inform them what they thought about the process. This was accomplished through extensive media coverage, working with community organizations, and holding several public meetings. The goal at the outset of this program was to increase public understanding of the decision making process and to gain greater public support of the decision being made. After sharing their information and asking for feedback, community members began to identify how the regulation could be enforced and the needs of the community met. Because information had been shared and dialogue had been established, the agency was able to come up with a satisfactory solution that was thoroughly understood by the community (Interview 3, April 28, 2005).

A second example comes from a public health agency that works closely with community advocates to receive their feedback regarding agency funded research and other agency programs. The program identifies participants from advocacy groups and

then trains them to participate in the peer review process for grant allocation. They are also invited to participate in a number of other activities including advising scientists about patient needs during clinical research, assist in the development of software, and providing feedback about agency communications. This program has begun to create a culture change as researchers have begun to experience first hand how public involvement in their research can improve their work. At the same time, the selected advocates have had first hand experiences that give them a better understanding about the agency, an understanding which they turn around and share with other members of their communities. As this shroud of mystery is removed, public distrust is decreased and confidence in the agency is increased (Interview 7, May 6, 2005). In addition, the program has begun to create a culture change as researchers experience first hand how public involvement in their research can improve their work.

One agency is especially effective in the use of the Web page as a tool for soliciting feedback and responding to the public. On the Website each month the agency identifies a topic for public comment and suggestion. After the time for commenting is passed the feedback is summarized and provided to the office within the agency to which it applies. That office is then responsible for responding to the questions raised in the discussion. As the process continues then the agency will post an official response to the discussion addressing how the suggestions will be implemented and what changes will be sought (Interview 19, May 6, 2005). This two-way dialogue with the public shows the public that their comments are important and can effect a change.

Stakeholder Management and Models of Public Relations

Because of the wide variety of job functions communicators participate in, it is impossible to categorize their interactions with agency stakeholders in one particular way. Because of the work they do, federal agency stakeholders, or publics, can be identified as anyone who is impacted by, or interested in the workings of that particular agency. This is similar to Freeman's (1984) definition of a stakeholder as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the firm's objectives" (p. 25). Because the broad impact of federal government agency decisions and actions it is difficult to pare down exactly who agency publics are. For this reason, one communicator expressed that in his efforts to create information about his agency he must "assume that everyone out there that is going to read what [we're] trying to put out there, doesn't know anything" (Interview 4, April 29, 2005). This type of information dissemination fits into the public information model of public relations. If an agency is simply trying to inform people of what they are doing, this approach can be adequate.

Two-way asymmetrical model.

In situations where the desired outcome is greater than simply informing the public, communicators would be at an advantage to evaluate the characteristics of their target audience in order to create messages that are more meaningful to those they are communicating with. Garnett (1992) suggested that communicators evaluate stakeholder groups according to goals, education level, occupational mix, and other traits. This understanding will allow communicators speak the language of those they are communicating with. This happens as information released to the public avoids the use of technical jargon, talks on the same level as the intended audience, or is translated into

languages other than English. By being aware of details and avoiding practices that may cloud agency information, communicators make information more accessible and open to the public.

Two-way symmetrical model.

Gaining a greater understanding of the audience in order to have more powerful messages is a practice that would fall in with the two-way asymmetrical model of communication. For communication practice to fall in the two-way symmetrical model, communicators need to assure that the feedback they receive from the audience is incorporated into the agency decision making process. This is a very time intensive practice, but nonetheless is one that occurs in federal agencies, as illustrated by the agency that incorporates advocate representatives in the decision making process, as well as agencies that hold public meeting, use the federal registry, and rely on the Internet as sources for receiving and responding to public feedback.

Garnett (1992) recognized this fact as he suggested ways that governments apply principles of strategic communication in their identification of and interaction with segmented government publics. This requires that communicators consider their communication objectives in determining who will be most interested in and most impacted by agency information. One participant shared that the principles of managing by objectives drives his work, first defining the problem, identifying the audience, determining the media, crafting appropriate messages for appropriate audiences, and building in a feedback loop (Interview 8, May 6, 2005). Participant responses in this study show that strategic communication management is happening at a variety of levels and degrees of intensity in federal agencies. Some agencies rely on the first hand

knowledge communicators develop through their interaction with stakeholders to identify communication needs and objectives (Interview 17, May 13, 2005). Other agencies have the resources to question stakeholders directly to discover whether their communication needs are being filled. Oftentimes communicators use public inquiries about topical information to determine whether to release a greater amount of information on a variety of subjects (Interview 1, April 27, 2005; Interview 4, April 29, 2005).

Organizational Support for Transparency

It is extremely difficult, if not impossible for government agency communicators to incorporate transparency in their communication practices without organizational structures and support of the principles of transparency. The factors this study identified as impacting transparent practices include the impact of managers or administrators on communication practices and organizational culture, the avoidance of mixing agency policy with political agendas, and defining the role of transparency within the scope of the agency mission.

Manager's Role

The manager of an organization has an incredible influence on the culture and climate of an organization. This is understood by scholars who have explained that “non-public affairs management must be persuaded that publicity alone is not the answer, but that a comprehensive program of two-way communication within a strategic framework is the foundation for improving public perception of government’s value” (Avery, et al., 1995, p. 176). There is a need for managers to understand the critical role communication plays in the success and failure of agency actions. Managers’ influence on agency communication can be seen in a variety of ways. First, managers must

themselves recognize the need for and value of transparency. Second, they must create a culture within the organization that places value on excellent communication by involving communicators in the policy and decision making processes. Finally they must promote open sharing of information between agency staff members.

A seat at the table.

The literature shows that one way managers can gain an understanding of the critical role communication plays in agency functioning is by providing communicators a seat at the management table (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). Throughout his years of experience as a government communicator, one study participant has developed a list of communication commandments. The first commandment is that public affairs is a management function. This means that:

The public affairs office should have a seat at the management table and should be a part of organization decisions and policy formulation. The head of the organization (ministry, agency, union, committee, etc.) must be committed to public affairs and must be ready to speak for the organization as needed, especially in times of crisis. If it cannot be the head of the organization, it should be a senior executive who can speak with authority and knowledge. Also, the head of the organization's public affairs office should be given enough authority to be considered credible (Interview 9, May 6, 2005).

When management provides communicators a seat at the management table it empowers the agency to prepare for and consider public response to decisions. It keeps the communicator informed so that when crises arise they are fully informed and capable of developing an appropriate communication plan. Keeping communicators informed about

what is going on in the agency also makes it possible for communicators to build their credibility and helps them know who the appropriate spokesperson is for a given issue. Communicators and spokespersons develop credibility when they are confident in themselves, are able to clearly articulate their message, know their audience, and always answer questions truthfully (Interview 15, May 13, 2005). This is important because “the only thing we have in our lives is our integrity and our credibility” (Interview 15, May 13, 2005). When included at the management table, communicators are able to determine who the most credible spokesperson is for given issues, and when called upon themselves they are prepared to appropriately represent the agency.

Internal communication.

Another element of manager’s role in the communication process is the responsibility for implementing the agency’s communication policy (Heise, 1985). This includes creating a culture within the organization that requires all staff members to assist in implementing the policy. Communicators play a vital role in helping agency staff implement the communication policy as they interact with various agency staffers, instructing them on the role of communication, seeking information about what is going on within the agency, and requesting their assistance in making agency communications more understandable.

Creating a culture of understanding, where the agency seeks to inform their internal audience about what is going on within the agency increases the clarity of agency messages to external publics. As communicators and other staff members are informed about agency actions, decisions, goals, and directions through internal communication tools such as newsletters, staff meetings, and other forums (Interview 4, April 29, 2005),

they are empowered with the tools necessary for answering public inquiries and clearly communicating agency messages.

Avoiding Politics

Another organizational factor that influences transparency in government agencies is the role politics play in the communication process. The avoidance of politics was the element of Heise's proposed model that seemed to be the most problematic. While communicators expressed a firm belief that politics should not play a role in the communication process, and that in government they need to be above politics (Interview 1, April 27, 2005), they acknowledged that in some instances politics certainly play a role. This is not to say that government communication was dishonest, rather that at times communicators often craft the message to make the party in power look as good as possible. This happens in instances where "there may be something politically important that (the political leadership) want to emphasize, so we want to get that paragraph in there about how many cases we've done over the past year, and how much money we've gotten from everybody" (Interview 10, May 6, 2005). In situations such as these, government communications get mixed up with electoral politics as they are used to highlight the success of the current political leader.

While it would be nice to assure that all reports of agency actions are purely motivated by a desire to inform the public, this is becoming increasingly difficult due to the increased political pressure. One interviewee expressed this point of view as he discussed the increasing number of politically appointed positions in federal agencies (Interview 8, May 6, 2005). Another interviewee expressed the opinion that elected officials have been put into office to carry out particular policies and it is the role of

career public servants to carry out those policies (Interview 9, May 6, 2005). This perspective justifies reporting on politically motivated policies because that is what the elected official has been charged with accomplishing. This perspective is supported by Heise (1985) who recognized that communication about policies is important, but that there is a fine line between communicating about policies and promoting a political agenda. Heise suggested that guidelines be established to assist communicators in determining when discussion and information sharing about policies is informative and when it becomes political advocacy. This research did not make an inroad in this area, but adds evidence that this is an area where further research needs to be conducted. It is also clear that defining this relationship and avoiding political advocacy is critical to the model for transparency in government communication.

Impact of Agency Mission

The final organizational factor identified by this study is the impact of the agency mission on transparency within the organization. Communicators from each type of agency that participated in this study acknowledged that there are some circumstances where government agencies cannot practice transparency. These exceptions are also protected by law and include information that may compromise national security, personal privacy, and proprietary information, along with other legally protected or restricted information. Because not all information can be released to the public, communicators and managers should join in consultation with agency lawyers to define the limitations associated with agency release of information. Once these limitations are defined, communicators should develop policies, practices, and processes that promote the highest degree of transparency possible.

Resources and Transparency

Participants in this study mentioned regularly that their ability to practice transparency is hindered by a lack of resources to accomplish the job. This final element in the model for transparency in government communication is the aspect which communicators have the least control over. Historic cynicism and distrust of government communication practices has resulted in limited spending on government communication, as well as limited staff; both are factors that impact the amount of time communicators have to spend communicating about various subjects.

This study did not explore the resources available to communicators, and so offers no solution to challenges related to restricted resources. It does however, point to the need for elected officials and the general public to become aware of the discrepancies between their desire to know about what is taking place within federal agencies and the resources provided agencies to accomplish this task. Increased resources necessary for increased transparency must be achieved through one of two methods. Increases in communication budgets and increased fiscal responsibility. Because this study did not explore the resources available to communicators it is impossible to determine how efficiently current budgets are used in accomplishing communication objectives. This study simply suggests that future research ought to examine communication spending to explore if there are ways that communication budgets can be stretched further, as well as determining what additional resources ought to be sought after.

Conclusion

In summary, the transparency model for government communication that has been discussed in this chapter can be used to guide communicators, agency

administrators, and scholars in understanding how to make the workings of government more transparent. This model contributes to the literature by building upon the public communication model suggested by Heise (1985). His model consisted of five elements: openness, using a variety of channels to disseminate information, seeking feedback from agency publics, avoiding mixing politics and communication, and making managers responsible for an agencies communication culture. The insights and philosophies shared by participants in this study showed that indeed, the communication processes Heise suggested, as well as principles of stakeholder management and models of public relations, are essential to transparent communication. Participants' insight went further than these models in explaining transparency by pointing to additional organizational factors that influence communication practices. They also addressed resource needs that are not discussed in the other theories and models. Therefore this exploratory study provides scholars and practitioners with a model for understanding transparency within government communications, and also invites further research to expound and clarify this model.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Transparency Model

The government communication process is complex and riddled with an interesting history. For decades both the American public as well as their representatives have fostered feelings of distrust related to communication that comes from agencies of the executive branch of the United States Federal government. This is a situation that has not gone unnoticed by government communicators, and is an issue that has caused some frustration. Many of the communicators who participated in this study mentioned that one of the reasons they were willing to participate is because their profession is so misunderstood by the public at large. Communicators get calls from reporters who assume that their job is to keep information from them, they deal with angry publics who on occasion assume the government has been hiding information from them. One of the frustrations communicators face is that “government public affairs people are seen as publicity agents instead of their true role in helping government agencies become more responsive to citizens” (Avery, et al., 1995, p. 176).

When talking with communicators it was abundantly clear that they recognize the value and need for transparency in government communications. This includes the understanding that while legislated structures for opening up agency actions are appropriate and sometimes necessary, they do not promote a culture of transparency, rather they act as a tool for the public when agencies have not acted in transparent ways. Communicators discussed their desire to have more direction and assistance in ways that

agencies can successfully practice transparency. One communicator suggested a book of case studies would be a helpful tool in educating communicators about tools that have worked in efforts to increase transparency. This study merely scratched the surface of issues surrounding transparency in government.

The opportunity to gain a better understanding of government communicators is a first step in addressing the confidence gap Heise (1985) discussed. This is an issue that has been addressed by the code of ethics for the National Association of Government Communicators (2005) which states “We believe that truth is inviolable and sacred; that providing public information is an essential civil service; and that the public-at-large and each citizen therein has a right to equal, full, understandable, and timely facts about their government.” The code goes on to explicate the role of communicators as stewards of public trust, that their communication practices must provide the public with “truth, accuracy, and fairness.” Communicators that participated in this study clearly expressed their desire to serve the American public. They expressed what appeared to the researcher to be genuine concern and acceptance of the responsibility for protecting the government brand, and more importantly protecting democracy through providing the public information they need to know.

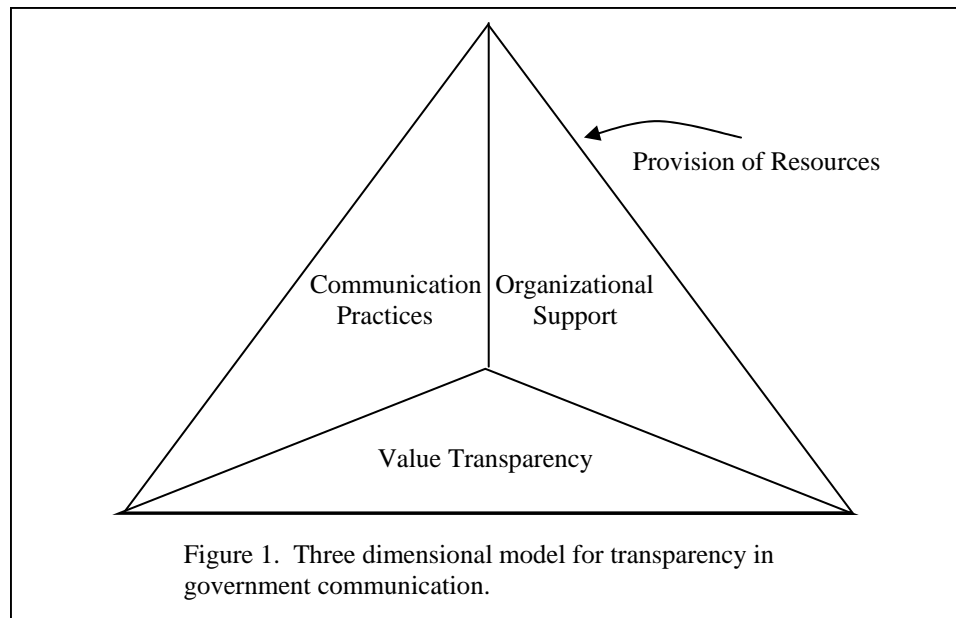
It is ironic that the very group of people who...are the foremost advocates of public participation, building relationships with affected publics, developing two-way communication, i.e., government public affairs specialists and officer, is the group targeted for criticism, elimination and downsizing. (Avery, et al., 1995, p. 176)

Government communication has been neglected as an area of study for long enough. While some attention has been paid to various parts of the government communication process, it is clear that the profession continues to suffer from the misconception that government communication is simply propaganda and an abuse of power. In an information age, government communicators serve as a vital connection between the public and its government. Communicators recognize this role and strive to continually provide the public access to their information. While their efforts may be hampered by political motivations, resource restrictions, or ignorance on the part of agency staff, communicators are dedicated to making available as much information as possible as quickly as possible.

In order to assist communicators in this objective, this study has identified a model for transparency in government communication that can be visualized as a three dimensional triangle, as illustrated in Figure 1. In this model, the base of the triangle is recognizing the value of transparency. Each of the three sides represents one of the critical elements to promoting transparency in government, these elements are communication practices, organizational support, and the provision of resources.

The findings of this study indicate that in order to achieve transparency, communicators must adopt communication practices that promote open information sharing. This includes practices that enhance agency relationships with the publics they serve through responding to public needs, seeking and incorporating feedback, getting information out to the public, and monitoring gate-keeping practices.

The model also illustrates that communicators must work with managers to create an organizational culture that supports transparency. Organizations can accomplish this



through providing communicators a seat at the management table, improving internal organizational communication, promoting improved interpersonal mingling and relationship building between departments within an agency, and understanding the relationship between the agency mission and transparency.

The final element of the model, provision of resources, suggests that communicators must have access to the time, staff, and money needed to communicate in transparent ways. This is a special challenge due to the historic mistrust of government communication practices that have resulted in decreased access to the resources necessary to overcome this misunderstanding.

Future Research

While this research provides knowledge about the government communication process, and provides support for a model of government communication, it simply provides a starting point for future research. Several participants in this study expressed appreciation at being involved in a project that would help shed light on the profession of

government communications. They expressed the challenge it is to communicate information about their agency when dealing with a skeptical public that questions whether the information they share has some underlying meaning. There is a need for theory and practice to develop that guides communicators in overcoming the lack of confidence and trust they run into while dealing with both reporters and the public.

Most of the research and tools available to communicators in the federal government are nearly a decade old. Fortunately it appears from this study that communicators within government agencies are finding it possible to adapt private sector theories to guide their practice. Further research about transparency in government communications, as well as other issues would only work to strengthen and preserve the profession. While minimal amounts of research has specifically explored the various models of public relations used in government communication, more specific theory outlining appropriate use of various models given specific communication goals would be helpful to practitioners as they work to balance legislative requirements with the public's need to know. Because it is impossible to make all government practices transparent due to resource constraints, researchers should determine areas where the public are most interested in government information in order to provide practitioners with tools for determining what information to share. Quantitative studies measuring transparency in government communication practices would provide valuable information on very specific areas where practice can be improved. It would also be interesting to conduct research evaluating the public's perception of agency transparency. Once both perspectives are understood, scholars can begin to develop guides for

overcoming any differences in perceptions, and develop tools for overcoming the communication gap.

This study has provided a limited look into government the government communication process and provides a new perspective in scholarship by examining communicators perspective on the role of transparency plays in that process. Due to limited access it was impossible to interview communicators from all federal level agencies. Clearly the results cannot be applied to all communicators, but they do show that there is support for the use of private sector theories in public sector communication practices.

It is hoped that this research will serve as a stepping off point for future researchers to do case studies on processes within a variety of federal agencies that identify case examples of what has and has not worked in transparent government processes. Communicators could then use this tool as they work to illustrate the value transparency adds to government functioning.

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Appendix A

Research Subject Consent to Participate

Introduction: This research is being conducted by Jenille Fairbanks in partial fulfillment for the Masters of Arts program in Mass Communication at Brigham Young University. The aim of this study is to gain an understanding of practices in government communication through the experiences of those whose professional responsibility it is to communicate with various government publics. You were selected to participate in this study because you are currently working as a government communicator.

Procedures: For this study you will be asked to participate in an interview with the researcher regarding your role in and perspective on communication with the publics of a federal government agency. Questions will include information about your time in service, your professional responsibilities and your feelings and experiences in designing and conveying messages. Researchers will contact those who agree to participate to schedule an appointment for the interview. Interviews will last approximately 30 minutes to one hour.

Risks: There are minimal risks for participation in this study. However, you may feel emotional discomfort when answering questions about personal beliefs. The researcher will try to be sensitive to this.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits to those who participate in this study. It is hoped that this research will result in a better understanding of practices in government communication and improved resources for government communicators.

Confidentiality: All information provided in the research process will remain confidential and will only be reported as group data without identifying information. All data, including tapes and transcriptions from the interviews will be kept in a secured storage and only those directly involved with the research will have access to them. After the research is completed, the questionnaires and tapes will be destroyed.

Participation: Participation in this research study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at anytime or refuse to participate entirely without jeopardy to you or the agency for which you work.

Questions about the Research: If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Jenille Fairbanks at jenille_fairbanks@yahoo.com or by phone at (801) 427-2502, or Dr. Ken Plowman at plowman@byu.edu or by phone at (801)422-6943.

Questions about your Rights as Research Participants: If you have questions you do not feel comfortable asking the researcher, you may contact Dr. Steven R. Thomsen, chair of the Department of Communication's Human Subjects Subcommittee, Brigham Young University, 318 BRMB, Provo, UT 84602, steven_thomsen@byu.edu, (801) 422-2078.

I have read, understood, and received a copy of the above consent and desire of my own free will and volition to participate in this study.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix B

Research Protocol

Interviewees will be first contacted by telephone or e-mail to inquire about willingness to participate in this research study. They will be informed that:

- The purpose of the study is to understand the relationship between communicators in public administration and the publics they serve.
- Interviews will last from 30-45 minutes.
- All information shared during as part of the research process will be confidential and that only the interviewer will have the names of interview participants.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed and that they will receive a copy of the transcription to review for accuracy and clarification.
- If they are willing to participate they will be asked to sign an informed consent form.
- They can withdraw from participation in the study at any time without any negative consequences to themselves or their agency.
- A copy of the final report will be supplied them, if they so request.

Interview dates, times and locations will be arranged for all individuals who willingly agree to participate in the research project. Participants will then be asked to provide names and contact information of others who may be willing to participate.

Interview Questions:

RQ 1: How do communicators in public administration value transparency?

1. There is a lot of talk about transparency, or the role of openness in communication practices. What place does transparency have in government communication practices?
2. For you as a practitioner, what issues surround varying degrees of openness of government agencies?
3. What value do you personally place on transparency?

RQ 2: How do communicators in public administration incorporate transparency into their communication practices?

1. How does the concept of open communication impact the way you communicate with agency publics?
2. What role does earning or maintaining public trust play in your professional practice?
3. In what ways does your audience influence how much and what type of information you share?
4. How would you describe the agencies relationship with its publics?

5. Is there information about the agency that the public does not understand? How is this information handled?
6. In what ways do you as a practitioner, or does your agency on the whole respond to stakeholder input?
7. How is feedback from stakeholders used in creating and disseminating agency information?

RQ 3: What elements constrain and enable communicators in public administration when collecting and sharing information with stakeholders?

1. What organizational structures within the agency are most helpful as you communicate with agency publics?
2. What organizational structures are most limiting?
3. Is there a difference between your actual practice and how you would like to practice communication? If so, how do you work through the differences?

APPENDIX C

Interview Participants

Interview #	Interviewee Position	Agency Type	Sex
Interview 1	Agency spokesperson, political appointee	Public Health/Social Science	F
Interview 2	Communications manager, career service	Social Science	F
Interview 3	Agency communication consultant/ Communication staff member, career service	Social Science	M
Interview 4	Communications staff member, career service	Public Health/ Background in National Security	M
Interview 5	Small sub agency program director and communicator	Public Health	M
Interview 6	Agency spokesperson and communications manager, career service	National Security	M
Interview 7	Public liaison, career service	Public Health	F
Interview 8	Communication staff member, career service	Social Science/ Background in National Security	M
Interview 9	Manager communication office, career service	Social Science	M
Interview 10	Communication staff member, career service	Social Science	F
Interview 11	Small sub agency communication staff, career service	Public Health	M
Interview 12	Small sub agency communication staff member, career service	Public Health	F
Interview 13	Communication staff member (media relations), career service	Public Health	F
Interview 14	Manager communication office, career service	Public Health	F
Interview 15	Manager communications office (community relations), career service	National Security	M
Interview 16	Communication staff member, career service	Public Health/Social Science	F
Interview 17	Communication staff member, career service	Social Science	F
Interview 18	Manager communication office (regional), career service	Social Science	F
Interview 19*	Public liaison, career service	Public Health	F
Interview 20*	Manager public liaison office, career service	Public Health	F

* These interviews are not classified as in-depth interviews. Rather they were short interviews with co-workers of another participant who were interested in providing their insight and feedback.