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ABSTRACT

It is unfortunate that the field of organizational communication has neglected communication in political settings, because the bulk of students enrolled in social science curricula are likely to work in public or semipublic institutions. Problems unique to the political setting stem from the fact that most public agencies must tailor their external and internal messages to a variety of public audiences. A two-quarter graduate level course sequence offered at the University of Illinois (Chicago Circle) is structured to provide an introduction to the organizational communication field with an emphasis on political settings. The course begins with a general discussion of the nature, importance, and technical and ethical problems of organizational communication, with examples drawn largely from the field of politics. Next, the course focuses on the major roles of information gathering in the work of governmental and other political organizations. The third major focus of the course is formal and informal internal and external information flows, structures, and climates. Finally, the students spend considerable course time developing the research skills needed to carry out major research projects, including communication audits. Unfortunately, the literature available for teaching such a course is inadequate. If the field is to develop properly, several good texts are needed, as well as intellectual transposers who can restructure available data about organizational communication in political settings into appropriate formats. (HTH)

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Developing Research and Teaching Resources for
the Study of Organizational Communication in Political Settings

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**Developing Research and Teaching Resources for
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The Nature of the Problems

The field of organizational communication has grown vigorously in the past thirty years. But it has focussed largely on communications within business organizations and has neglected organizational communication in political settings. This neglect is unfortunate because organizational communication in political settings poses many unique problems. Moreover, the bulk of students enrolled in social science, rather than business curricula, are likely to work in public or semi-public institutions during much of their lives. If these institutions are to benefit from advanced knowledge in organizational communication, students must be trained in this subfield of the discipline in a way which makes their knowledge most relevant to public settings.

Let me first give some examples of the unique problems faced by communicators in political settings. Then I will turn to the type of course which needs to be designed and widely taught to deal with these problems. Finally, I will outline some areas of research and writing which must be covered if social scientists are to develop adequate resources to teach the kind of course that I have described.

Unique problems in political settings, for example, spring from the fact that most public agencies operate in the glare of publicity and must tailor their external and internal messages accordingly. The audiences for these messages are far more diverse, and often far more crucial to the welfare of the agency, than is true in the case of private organizations. The Department of Energy or the Environmental Protection Agency, for instance, must tailor their messages so that they do not offend important congressmen or arouse unnecessary wrath among diverse lobby groups. If they fail, they may be out of business.

Agency-client relations in the public sector also differ vastly from their counterparts in private business. A welfare client, for example, or a taxpayer, has a dependency relationship to the relevant government agency which creates unique problems which do not arise when clients have a choice among providers of services and pay money as a quid pro quo. Much of the existing organizational communication literature is not helpful at all for dealing with these and similar problems, and efforts to adapt it meet with only moderate success.

Course Elements

What sort of course will blend the existing organizational communication literature with the relevant political communication literature? The remarks which follow are based on my own experience in teaching a two-quarter graduate level sequence in this area as well as the experiences of two other political scientists. Professors Cliff Zukin at Rutgers and Kennette Benedict, now at the University of Illinois, taught the course for one semester for students in the public policy curriculum interested in careers in government and politics.

- My two-quarter sequence was structured to provide an introduction to the field and to relevant research techniques during the first quarter and then follow this with a major research project applying this knowledge during the second quarter. The course began with a general discussion of the nature, importance, and technical and ethical problems of organizational communication, with examples drawn largely from the field of politics. These are readily available in the political science literature dealing with Congress, in public administration studies covering particular agencies, or in the literature dealing with public relations activities of political parties or community organizations. Among organizational communication texts, Communication in Organizations by Everett M. Rogers and Rekha Agarwala-Rogers, New York: The Free Press, 1976, was helpful because it contains

many examples involving political situations. I chose it as one of my texts, as did Cliff Zukin and Kennette Benedict.

Next, the course focussed on the major roles of information-gathering in the work of governmental and non-governmental political organizations. The major emphasis was put on problems of gathering sufficient information to make well-rounded decisions without drowning in an excess of information. I also stressed the problem of "truth-finding" for regulatory agencies which commonly encounter horrendous problems in gathering the necessary data from reluctant and often obstreperous business sources. The political implications of developing particular information flows, the impact of structures on functions, and problems of publicity and secrecy in democratic societies were also fully discussed.

The literature on political decision-making is useful for studying information-gathering. So, too, is the literature dealing with intelligence gathering and its problems. Three books which I found very helpful were Harold L. Wilensky's Organizational Intelligence: Knowledge and Policy in Government and Industry, New York: Basic Books, 1967, which all of us used as a text; Alexander L. George, Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice, Boulder: Westview, 1980, and Charles E. Lindblom and David K. Cohen, Usable Knowledge: Social Science and Social Problem Solving, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1979. Several sections of Irving L. Janis' Victims of Groupthink, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972, also work well to illustrate the disastrous effects which decision-making pathologies can produce.

The general organizational communication literature works well for discussing the third major area of the course: formal and informal internal and external information flows, structures and climates. For public relations campaigns, principles of persuasion, and relations with the media, the organizational communica-

tion literature can be supplemented by the ample public relations literature. However, discussion of the influence of lobby groups as part of external flows is best met by the political science literature. I used a series of lobby case studies for that purpose. One that works well and is updated regularly is called The Washington Lobby. It is put out by Congressional Quarterly press. Here, and when using other sources outside the organizational communication literature, I asked the students to translate the work into organizational communications terms. In many cases, they could do so effectively through constructing information flow charts.

Finally, the students and I spent considerable time in the course on developing research skills needed to carry out research projects, including communication audits. We covered participant observation, interview design and interviewing, content analysis, and various qualitative and quantitative techniques useful for extracting information from communication data. I would have preferred to have the students learn these techniques in other courses so that course time could have been devoted to more specialized organizational communication topics. But the status of prior preparation of students entering this course made it advisable to build research methods into the course. I suspect that most other instructors will face the same situation.

Zukin's course uses a somewhat more practice-oriented approach than mine. Students are required to make oral presentations to the class and lead discussions and to participate in simulations of organizational communication situations. They are also required to write several persuasive proposals and memoranda summarizing the proposals. These exercises are designed to "gain skills in using information to advocate and successfully implement preferred policies." Benedict's course also involves a simulation. Unlike my course, which covers all types of political

organizations, Benedict largely excludes legislative and party organizations. This is the typical Hobson's choice of having to decide to skip materials to attain greater depth, or include them at the risk of skimming too lightly over topics which deserve more thorough exploration. In the best of all possible worlds, this should be a full year course so that one could do justice to all essential topics and still leave time for simulations, reports, and research papers.

Achievements and Problems

What are the joys and griefs of such a course? The joys lie mostly in teaching it. Obviously, organizational communication knowledge is essential for people who will be spending their lives in various executive positions in public and semi-public organizations. The students in my courses, including many people in mid-career in public organizations, realized this and were eager to participate in the course. Many chose to investigate communication patterns within their own organizations as their research project. Several were asked to make their findings available to their agencies and they apparently proved helpful to agency personnel. Clearly, this is a much-needed course with immediate practical pay-offs.

On the grief side: the literature available for teaching is inadequate. There have been relatively few major works in the subfield of organizational behavior which have focused on external and internal communication behaviors. There are none at all which concentrate on communication behaviors in political settings. Among the available organizational communication studies, many are little more than manuals which deal with technical aspects of business communication. They generally fail to analyze the nature of communication flows in organizations, the consequences of alterations in patterns, and the reasons for the multitude of problems which hamper effective communication. Such shortcomings make these studies unsuitable for serious study at the graduate or even the undergraduate university level.

The lack of suitable text material is compounded by the dearth of relevant journal articles. Those which are available are widely scattered and often appear in journals which are not available in the average library. Since, as far as I know, few people have taught a course of this nature, people venturing into this terrain have to do much of their own exploring for sources. This is time-consuming and often unproductive because many materials dealing with communication in organizations are structured in ways which obscure communications perspectives.

If the field is to develop properly, we sorely need several good texts as well as intellectual transposers who can restructure available data about organizational communication in political settings into appropriate formats. I hope to do some of this work in the future myself because I sense that it is urgently needed and that other instructors and students feel the same way. But it will take much hard work by a number of scholars to begin to make a dent into this huge task.

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