Perspectives of communication in the Australian public sector

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to seek an understanding of the role of government communication in Australia by examining perspectives on the extent to which public servant communicators persuade or engage the Australian public.

Design/methodology/approach – Themes from the public relations literature into the role and function of public relations are used in a qualitative analysis of key government documents and in-depth interviews conducted with public servants, political staffers, journalists and interest group representatives.

Findings – This research found a diversity of views regarding the role communication does and should play within government. Participants without formal experience or education in communication generally viewed the function as one of persuasion and dissemination of information whereas the more experienced argued for more of an engagement with the public. A lack of detailed knowledge and/or use of public relations principles appears to be limiting the understanding of the role and purpose of government communication in Australia.

Research limitations/implications – The research is conducted in an Australian context only and uses a qualitative approach that should not be generalised without further research.

Practical implications – Continued cynicism about the role of public relations in government does little to improve the quality of communication between a government and its public. This paper provides an opportunity for reflection on the purpose of government communication and the role of the public servant.

Originality/value – Previous studies in this area have generally focused on political communication in the sense of partisan or party-political messages of government. This paper explores the concept from a bureaucratic perspective.

Keywords Public relations, Government, Communication, Australia, Information transfer

Paper type Research paper

> It is not a PR campaign. It is designed to provide necessary information to the Australian public. No objective observer examining the campaign would see it as other than providing genuine information (Prime Minister John Howard, 21 May 2007).

Public relations suffers from a poor reputation in many fields, and the Australian public sector is no exception. Criticisms of misdirected expenditure on government advertising, spin and obfuscation have resulted in perceptions of public relations as a tool for hiding the truth and misleading the public for the purpose of achieving a particular political agenda. Prime Minister John Howard's comment (Howard, 2007) following parliamentary scrutiny over efforts to communicate to the Australian people

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about workplace relations reform sums up an often touted perception about the role of public relations in a government setting. The same negative sense is demonstrated in Orr's description of a "seeping of sophisticated public relations techniques into public service values" (Orr, 2007, p. 20).

Yet this paper contends that public relations can provide a framework to explore the role of government communication in Australia. In particular, it examines how the Australian public service communicator operates within this environment of distrust and cynicism. Perspectives of the role of the public service in informing, persuading and engaging the Australian public are uncovered in order to contribute to ongoing research into government communication and the improvement of practice. Reflecting on both government documents and interviews with those involved in government communication, this paper argues that the role of public service communicators is ill-defined and that further research into the barriers and challenges they face could improve the practice and standing of government communication.

Public relations, public servants and politics

While there has been considerable focus on the subjects of political communication and propaganda (L'Etang, 2006; Moloney, 2006; Weaver *et al.*, 2006; Tilley, 2004; Terrill, 2000; Grattan, 1998), there has been less focus on the apolitical function of communication undertaken by governments and the public servant's role within it. The term "government communication" is used in this paper to describe the apolitical or non-partisan communication activities of the executive arm of government concerning policy and operations. The adoption of this term is designed to delineate the communication activities that serve the purpose of promoting a political party and/or politician in order to win electoral support, from the communication activities that serve the purpose of the governing of the nation. Although recognising that this second function also involves political players, the focus here is primarily on the role of the public servant communicator within that process.

While using the term government communication in an apolitical sense, this paper recognises that communication cannot and does not operate outside a political environment. Roberts argues that politics and administration are so entwined that their separation has little practical purpose and is only done for "theoretical convenience" (Roberts, 1971, pp. 178-179 cited in Jaensch, 1997, p. 174). However, there could be times when it would be useful for those involved to be able to distinguish between the partisan and non-partisan communication activities within government. A number of submissions to the 2003 Government Communication review in the United Kingdom (see, for example BBC, 2003; Boulton, 2003; DEMOS, 2003) highlighted the need for a clear distinction to be made, "not just for the specialists, but also in part to manage the expectations of Ministers and policy officials" (Government Information and Communication Service, 2003, Annex A). Perhaps the media and the public could be added to this list considering their roles as external accountability mechanisms (Halligan, 2001). Recent publication of arguments regarding the Howard Government's "silencing of dissent" in the Australian political environment (Hamilton and Maddison, 2007; Marr, 2007) demonstrates the importance of looking at this distinction. Young also argues for further study into government communication outside the focus of elections (Young, 2007, p. xxiv)

The unique system of government in Australia has roots in both Westminster and US models of government. Further differences and adaptations have occurred over recent years, particularly through the management reform agenda of the 1980s and 1990s (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2000, p. 202; Airo-Farulla, 2004). These reforms have altered a number of structural and accountability frameworks, impacting on the Westminster models of ministerial responsibility and neutrality in particular, and have seen a shift from administration to a management approach based on the private sector (Uhr, 1997, p. 81; Aulich *et al.*, 2001, pp. 14-15). At the same time, there has been a formalisation of the position of ministerial staff, now known as political and media advisers, working under a separate legislative framework to that of the public servant (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2000, p. 202). These changes, in conjunction with the public servant's legislated Code of Conduct and statement of Values which dictates the need to be "apolitical", reinforces the need to distinguish between the partisan and non-partisan communication activities of government.

Entering into the continuing debate over a common definition of public relations is beyond the scope of this paper, however two definitions are used to guide this discussion. The Australian industry body, the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA), defines public relations as:

> ... the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation (or individual) and its (or their) publics. (Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2007)

This, along with Hutton's definition of public relations as "managing strategic relationships" (Hutton, 1999), emphasises a common focus on the discipline's characteristics as a management function, providing a constructive framework to examine the role communication plays in the public sector. Davis states that "public relations clearly has become a, possibly the, most important component of modern politics" (Davis, 2004, p. 131). This claim and the use of a public relations framework may be contentious, as some Australian government communicators would challenge the description of their work as public relations. This challenge could be due in part to a lack of understanding of the breadth of the discipline, inconsistent applications in practice, as well as limited reflection on the complexity and potential of the broader government communication function. At the same time, it could be due to what Heise describes as " ... the persistent notion that government public relations is not an entirely proper or legitimate activity, that is constitutes a form of propaganda" (Heise, 1985, p. 205).

The literature on government communication

While it could be expected that government communication would be covered in both the public administration and communication fields, there is limited discussion in the former. Coverage of the topic is primarily within communication or public relations literature, although it can be very general in nature. More specific discussion of government communication can be found in an international context by scholars such as Rosenthal (1997) and Garnett and Kouzmin (1997); in a US context by Wilcox and Cameron (2006), Cutlip *et al.* (2006), Lattimore *et al.* (2004) and Heise (1985); in a UK context by Gregory (2003a; 2003b; 2004; 2006) and Davis (2004); and in an Australian context by Young (2007), Stockwell (2004), Terrill (2000) and Smyth (1999). The term

"government communication" is not always adopted in these discussions, with some referring to public information, public or administrative communication or government public relations.

In many discussions, government communication is portrayed as a one-way flow of information with a strong focus on mass media (Errington and van Onselen, 2005; Terrill, 2000; Ward, 2003). In a similar manner, Young categorises those involved in government communication as "spin doctors, speech writers and PR consultants" describing their work as "influenc[ing] media reporting and public opinion" (Young, 2007, pp. xxxiii-xxxiv). This paper argues that considered from a public relations perspective, government communication can be seen to involve much more than this, possibly providing a specialisation or professional focus that is otherwise missing from the field.

Despite research showing that much government communication can be categorised as one-way (Grunig and Dozier, 1992; Garnett, 1997, p. 5), Smyth argues that Australian government communication has moved beyond mere information dissemination and has a strategic role to play in "the policy and decision making process" rather than being bolted on after the fact (Smyth, 1999, p. 62). Support for a more strategic view of government communications also comes from practice in Australia and the United Kingdom (Podger, 2002, p. 1; Phillis, 2004, p. 31). Generic models for ethical public relations have also moved towards the theorisation of collaboration and dialogue rather than control of one-way messages (Daymon and Holloway, 2002, p. 10; Gower, 2006, pp. 178-179), although much of the research into these concepts is conducted within the field of corporate communication with little attention given to the government context.

In his historical coverage of information units, Terrill refers to "the ubiquity and permeability of "information"-related tasks into almost all departmental work" (Terrill, 2000, p. 130) and the trend for consultation to be conducted outside information units (Terrill, 2000, p. 159). While Terrill's (2000) comprehensive study of the "decline of secrecy and rise of openness" in the Australian Government also adopts the view of public relations as merely publicity, it does recognise the complexity of attempts:

> ... to evaluate the activities of information units; they do not mesh neatly with the usual understandings of "government information", "propaganda", "secrecy", or "policy". Nor do they usually leave tracks that can readily be retraced (Terrill, 2000, p. 160).

Ward (2003, 2007) explores the institutionalisation of public relations within the Australian Government, building on the work of Deacon and Golding (1994) in the United Kingdom, suggesting a need to fully explore the concept of the "Australian PR state". Used to criticise what he sees as a growing use of resources to present a whole-of-government approach to communication, Ward's discussion provides a detailed view of practice but discusses political and public information interchangeably and public relations in the confined construct of media relations. He categorises the Australian "PR State" into four components: the media advisers, media units, departmental public affairs units and a whole-of-government coordination element (Ward, 2007). This is a valid approach to the exploration of government communication which covers both political and apolitical streams, but taking a structural approach does not capture the increasing number of non-communication specialist public servants involved in consultative processes and promotion of policy.

Turnbull presents an overview of government communication public relations, arguing for a functional, rather than an administrative categorisation of the task (Turnbull, 2007, p. 120). His proposed framework includes:

- propaganda and political marketing;
- economic promotion;
- information programs around rights, entitlements and obligations;
- behavioural persuasion; and
- consent (through community consultation) (Turnbull, 2007, pp. 120-1).

While his discussion then focuses on the work of public servants in delivering information campaigns only, he highlights the need for further research into government communication. The role the public servant plays within Turnbull's functional categorisations is yet to be explored.

Applying a broader strategic view of public relations, as described in the definitions given, would extend this functional approach to include public servants in a wide variety of roles including strategic communication planning and implementation (both proactive and reactive), communication research and advice, counselling of senior management and relationship building, providing the strategic positioning that was identified earlier (Smyth, 1999; Podger, 2002; Phillis, 2004). Head (2007) focuses on the "pressures and dilemmas" public servants face in relation to issues such as changes in communication channels and methods, public trust and politicisation, and the debate about regulation in government communication, however the there is room for a more considered study of the role they play in communicating the government's messages using a public relations approach.

Turnbull's functional categorisation of government communication is reflected within the "situational roles" proffered by Hutton in his hierarchical definition of public relations (Hutton, 1999). Hutton argues that the purpose of public relations will vary according to its situational context, suggesting six "situational roles" of persuader, advocate, educator, crusader, information provider and reputation manager (Hutton, 1999, p. 211). Each role is determined by the apparent levels of initiative, (proactive or reactive), interest (supporting public or private interests), and image (focused on perceptions or reality) (Hutton, 1999, p. 204). As this paper is interested in exploring the application of public relations in a particular situational context, the government, these roles provide a framework for an initial examination of the role of the public servant.

Providing information and educating the public about services and policies are generally accepted roles for government communicators, but Hutton's framework and Turnbull's categorisation suggest further roles and responsibilities. For example, persuasion underpins many government promotional programs such as encouraging citizens to vote or to report abuse. The extent to which it is the public servant's role to "think or act in ways that benefit the client-organization"(Hutton, 1999, p. 205) on more contested issues such as the debate on gene technology, however, raises questions on whether this is appropriate or legitimate in a bureaucracy. The public servant's responsibilities to the government and to the public raise the dilemma of whether, as communicators, they should be an advocate for the government or a crusader for the "general welfare of a citizenry, rather than a client-organization per se" (Hutton, 1999, p. 207). Or indeed, a measure of both, as the facilitator of an engagement process

between government and the public. This paper reflects on some of the distinctions in the role of the public servant communicator in informing, persuading and engaging.

This short review of the literature shows that there are many avenues and approaches for investigating government communication, but a more detailed exploration of the role and purpose of government communication, and the role of the public servant, is a necessary beginning. A number of specific areas of interest have emerged, such as the persuasive role of government communicators and the level in which they participate in dialogue with the Australian public. While this could be discussed under the noble ideals of democracy to determine what it "should be", the views of those involved on a day-to-day basis can also contribute some insight into the situation as it is.

Method

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the role of government communication, this research compared official documentation and perceptions of various government communication participants to theoretical notions and definitions within the discipline of public relations. Government documents were briefly examined for references to communication processes in order to understand the environment within the Australian Public Service at the time of the research. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with current and former public servants, as well as political staff, journalists and interest group representatives, recognising that the communication process involves all of these groups as participants in a process rather than simply as senders and receivers of information.

In order to provide a "thick description" that leads to an understanding of how people interpret their actions within their social context (Gomm *et al.*, 2000), a qualitative, thematic analysis of 20 in-depth interviews was undertaken. Data was collected towards the end of the Howard-led conservative government which held office from 1996-2007. The analysis for this paper drew on the major themes emerging from the review of the literature: that is, the extent to which public servants persuade the public or participate in an engagement with them in the development and delivery of policy.

This method provides an opportunity to contemplate descriptions of government communication in order to understand the lived experience, generating understandings and approaches that reflect the perspectives of those directly involved. This approach adopts the position of Gower who argues for self-examination underpinned by an understanding of practice in the study of public relations.

> Understanding the reality of the practice today would help us deal with the apparent disconnect that exists between the public relations research literature and the practice (Gower, 2006, p. 185).

In doing so, practice and theory can be informed by each other.

Discussion of findings

This research uncovered three major findings about the role of government communication. First, the documents and interviews revealed a variety of perceptions regarding the function or role of government communication with views extending beyond the limited scope outlined in official documentation. From that, a second

finding revealed levels of ambiguity concerning the public servant's position in the persuasion process. Finally, the extent to which the public servant communicator is a participant in the communication between the Australian public and the government appears limited. Confusion and perhaps disagreement as to what engagement means and who within government should perform that function is evident.

Attempts to define and describe the function of government communication

Confusion surrounding the application of public relations within government may stem from the lack of agreement and different interpretations of both "government communication" and "public relations". More than 20 years ago, Heise argued that the "dearth of exact information about the scope of government public relations appears to be due to the difficulty of designating clearly what falls under the rubric of PR" (Heise, 1985, p. 204). The various responses given in this research show that not much has changed since then. Some of the disparity in definition can be seen in the various labels applied to the function, such as marketing, communication, public relations or public affairs, demonstrating what one respondent described as a mix of "confusion of what they actually want to do" and a sense of "keeping up with the trends" (current public servant).

Official reference to the terms is limited within the Australian public sector. The principle document in terms of Australian Government communication activities is the 1995 Guidelines for Australian Government Information Activities: Principles and Procedures (Ministerial Committee on Government Communications, 1995). Within that text, the more limited term information activities, is used and defined as:

> ... those activities involved in the production and dissemination of material to the public about Government programs, policies and matters which affect their benefits, rights and obligations. (Ministerial Committee on Government Communications, 1995, p. 2)

Apart from one mention that information activities should involve research, feedback and evaluation, this description postures government communication as a one-way flow of information focused on the production of a tangible product, rather than the engagement of two or more parties in a meaningful relationship in which information is shared. More recently, this approach has been reinforced by a government circular that provides an "ethical framework" for public servants in their involvement in "public information and awareness initiatives" (Australian Public Service Commission, 2007). Public relations theories have moved beyond this narrow construct, and present governments with an alternative perspective for consideration.

This has been recognised in the UK where it has been acknowledged that "Government communications must be viewed as part of a dialogue – the system must engage with individuals at all levels and let them voice their views and opinions" (Phillis, 2004, p. 33). Within Australia, engagement with the public is considered in other government documents such as "The Australian experience of public sector reform" (Australian Public Service Commission, 2003) in which increasing levels of consultation between the government and the public are emphasised as important in both policy development and service delivery. This document claims the government is working towards a more "open and responsive" culture which embraces a "participatory, two-way process" by using techniques such as "focus groups, consultative committees, open inquiries, ad hoc panels and negotiation processes". Yet

there is no mention in this discussion about the need for communication specialists in this environment. And there is no mention of these functions in the key guiding document for communication specialists, or the ethical framework for public information activities.

The Government Communications Unit (GCU), which served as a centralising organisation for information activities at the federal level during the Howard years, does not appear to have had any involvement in this broader function of government communication either[1]. Situated within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, its role was:

> ... to provide advice and support on communication issues to the Australian Government and the Ministerial Committee on Government Communications and to manage the Central Advertising System (Government Communications Unit, 2004a).

Its role was primarily one of a procedural clearance house for major and sensitive government communication activities. Although it also provided advice for communication specialists within government departments, typically on procedures and protocol, the GCU had no day-to-day control over their activities, professional development or career progression. This unit was disbanded within the first month of the new Rudd Labor government in 2007, and at the time of publication had not been replaced with any other organisation[2].

Just as there is no single approach to the function of communication in the Australian government, there is no single approach to the role, tasks and positioning of communication staff within each of the government departments and agencies. A review of the GCU's Communications Officers Directory, a voluntary contact list for departments and agencies, demonstrates the variety of roles within the titles given to the specialist staff. Position titles include words such as Communications, Corporate Communications, Media Liaison, Media operations, Public Communications, Public Affairs, Public Relations, Information, Publications and Public Diplomacy. Levels vary from General Manager to Director, Manager, Officer and Adviser (Government Communications Unit, 2004b). Some positions require the appointment of specialist Public Affairs Officers (PAO), but others are filled by generalist public servants.

During the interviews, perspectives of the scope of government communication fell into four main areas, yet none had the political dimension that is so dominant in the literature. A number of respondents described it in terms of a distinction between major communications campaigns and the "business-as-usual" communication of the public service departments and agencies. While the former is primarily constructed about advertising campaigns, and was centralised to a certain extent through the GCU, the latter consists of below-the-line communication products such as brochures, letters and fact sheets and is left predominantly to the individual departments. In this sense, public relations is relegated to a sub-set of government communication and viewed as separate from other communication tasks, such as advertising. A third, but less prominent response included communication responsibilities to parliamentary fora, such as Senate enquiries.

The fourth perspective, coming mainly from journalists and public servants in non-communication roles, focused on information flows to the media, mirroring the narrow perspective evident, to a certain extent, in the literature. Considering that the growth of Australian government communication depended greatly on journalists

working within the public service (Turnbull, 2007), this view could be expected. However, the specialist communicators within the public service, interviewed in this research, generally rejected the view of government communication as purely media handling, with some expressing frustration at the media myopia of other senior staff within their departments and agencies. This reflects Turnbull's assertion that "[c]hanges in the background of government information officers, with more having formal academic training in PR, signal the emergence of modern Australian government PR" (Turnbull, 2007, p. 119).

Perceptions on persuasion

When asked about the role or purpose of government communication, initial responses highlighted a one-way flow of communication for the purposes of informing the Australian community. The view of providing "timely", "accurate" and "accessible" information in a "balanced" manner that allows members of the public to "participate as part of society" was the dominant response given in initial reactions to questioning. Others stressed the accountability aspect, considering the government's obligation to inform the public of how it spends taxpayer funds, while a more cynical perspective also included "hid[ing] what the government wants *not* to be communicated" (political advisor) as a purpose also.

One political staffer, recognising a step beyond the provision of information stated "it has also been to get a behaviour change – a call to action – to apply – to meet their obligations . . . ". And yet this same informant appeared to feel uncomfortable with the concept of persuasion. When it was suggested that the government had a role to persuade the Australian public, she talked about a specific task, stating:

> I don't think we're persuading the public. Those who are not customers, we're not persuading them. We're *informing* them and demonstrating that we are managing the system efficiently. For the customers, we're persuading, but I would hope that it's more than persuading. We're really giving them a greater call to action to do the right thing (political advisor).

Notions of persuasion were not top of mind when initially asked about the role of government communication. Yet most informants agreed that the public service has a legitimate role in using persuasion in many cases. Examples given included immunisation and drug rehabilitation programs, safety issues, armed forces recruitment, and superannuation investment. And yet there are times in which the persuasive role is contentious. While there was little controversy over a campaign designed to persuade people to keep the welfare agency informed of changes that may impact on their payments, some public servants recognised a need to be particularly sensitive about impending campaigns encouraging the disabled to return to work and informing the public about workplace reform. Both policy changes had received significant opposition, and the legitimacy of persuasive communication was challenged by various bodies.

There were various perceptions about how this should be handled. While one public servant stated that public servants clearly have no role in "selling" government policy another had the view that "there needs to be, or can be, a requirement to persuade them [the public] of the benefits of a particular policy initiative". A number of informants highlighted the perceived difficulties by speaking about a "line" that separates appropriate and inappropriate persuasion. While generally accepting persuasion as a legitimate form of government communication, communication that said a policy was

"fantastic"(former public servant), that promoted one party's view as "better than the other" (current public servant) or that "attempts to persuade people, or move their behaviour in a political sense" (political advisor) were all viewed as overstepping the line. The difficulty, however, lies in making the distinction between appropriate and inappropriate persuasion with most respondents describing it as a very fine, or grey line.

The interest group representatives interviewed about the public servant's role in persuasion, had different views. Reflecting on what one informant considered to be a government bias in favour of genetically modified foods, he believed that the persuasion element was "an outrageous breach of trust of the public, and ... outrageously unethical". Another felt that it was the politician's responsibility to persuade, not the public servant's. These responses were very much focused on their areas of interest, rather than the broader issue of government communication and may have been influenced by their anti-government position on these policy issues. However, what their comments support is the contention that there is a connection between the acceptance of persuasion as a tool of the public servant and the level of support for the policy being promoted.

The criticisms above concerning the appropriateness of the public service communicator's role in persuasion brings to light the question of how much of an advocacy role the public servant does and should play. There were varying perceptions regarding this depending again on the issue involved and the level of support for the policy being promulgated. For example, one public servant supported the advocacy role, believing it was a responsibility of the public service to take an unpopular policy and "find a way to make it more understood or more appeasing to the population". In contrast, an interest group representative felt that public servants should not have to publicly support the government's position. He suggested that it is perfectly legitimate for them to speak out, although he also recognised that this could result in a need to resign.

Some hesitancy was also evident in response to the term advocate, with some aligning it with the adoption of a political stance. Asked if they considered themselves advocates for government, a public servant in a central communication function, stated firmly that "No, we certainly don't do anything of a political nature – that's not what we do". And yet she then went on to say how:

> ... as public servants, it's our role to facilitate the government of the day in achieving its objective. I mean that's what we're here for. So we'll serve whichever government happens to be in to achieve their policy objectives.

This could be could still be considered as advocacy in Hutton's definition; however the term does appear to have negative, political connotations attached to it. One former public servant attempted to explain the difficulty that arises in trying to be an advocate but remain political neutral, claiming that in the promotion of one particular course of action, the public servant may need to "denigrate the opposite course of action", which could be the view of the Opposition party, hence crossing the line into the political, rather than non-partisan, realm.

Only two respondents argued for being an advocate for the public – what Hutton refers to as a "crusader" (Hutton, 1999). While most informants did not mention this as a role, one public servant in the social welfare area considered it an important

responsibility of the communication function, in providing advice to senior management and being "champions of the customer" due to the in-depth knowledge of their publics gained through research and day-to-day customer contact. The use of the term customer in this context perhaps reflects a growing adoption of marketing principles within government (Head, 2007, pp. 36-37); a related issue beyond the scope of this paper.

Participating in dialogue

In arguing for an alternative to the adoption of a corporate public relations model for government, Heise highlights the need "to acknowledge openly that advocacy and persuasion are facts of political administrative life and to cope with the implications of that situation" (Heise, 1985, p. 211). The emphasis on information dissemination is common in practice and in many of the studies of government communication. However research in the field of public relations highlights the need for a two-way process of communication and this is beginning to be echoed in the field of government communication also (see for example, Head, 2007, p. 50). As Gregory states, "Information is not communication" stressing that "the availability of facts does not enfranchise those without the facilities to collate, interpret and use them" (Gregory, 2004).

Much of the reluctance for engagement with the Australian public was attributed to the politicians rather than the public servants, with perceptions that the political leadership lacks interest in feedback when it does not suit its purposes and is intolerant of different views, denigrating those who express them. One journalist believed that the public service is consequently seen in the same light.

The need for a two-way flow of information was recognised by all the public service communicators interviewed. Those with a long background or formal education in communication were conscious of its implications and challenges and very accepting of its importance. One informant, emphasising that promotion was not enough, pointed out that there was no use in selling the benefits of something to the public if they were rejecting the product or idea. He felt that feedback to those responsible for the development of the idea, providing them with an opportunity to make changes, was essential.

These informants also reported a lack of understanding of this issue amongst the non-communications leadership within the public service, who continue to focus on one-way flows of communication in order to sell a policy rather than engaging with the community. Claims of superficial attempts to understand the public and monopolisation of public servants by those with "an axe to grind" (former public servant), discourage two-way forms of communication.

The acceptance of the public servant as a participant in a process of engagement varied again from department to department and issue to issue. One former public servant considered that his department did not understand the public with which they were communicating due to a lack of "interface with the public". Yet on the other hand, some public servants nominated areas such as the Tax Office and the welfare agency as having focused efforts in understanding specific publics, such as youth, Indigenous communities and those from a non-English speaking background. While those reporting on this situation described this as engagement and two-way communication,

their follow up remarks hinted that this was perhaps little more than the use of research about audiences to inform one-way communication.

One of the interest group representatives was particularly cynical about the government's attempts to consult. Recognising that there were a number of "consultation" processes, he was of the belief that these were often ineffectual and more for image rather than substance. He claimed that there was a need for greater participation, a true engagement with the public about policy, rather than the superficial consultation mechanism.

Despite all of these challenges and barriers, one senior public servant stated that:

> Serious consultation with the public is occurring and the public service is genuine about change to make the product better.

Effective engagement with the public could therefore be expected to involve the communication function within policy formation. The UK Government Communication Review group argued for a public service culture that accepts communication as equal in value to policy-making and service delivery (Phillis, 2004, p. 31), requiring an attitude change within the Civil Service (Phillis, 2004, p. 15). This need for change is probably similar in the Australian context, as demonstrated by the views of a journalist interviewed who believed there is currently little communications input into policy:

> ... putting it indiscreetly, very often the public affairs section gets given a s*** sandwich and told to go and sell it. Whereas if they'd had a bit of a role in creating the sandwich, they might have been able to at least, you know, change the label.

While there were numerous opinions generally supporting a greater communication input to policy, one particular view stood apart from the others. Recognising the consultative process that often occurs before a policy outcome is decided, a particular organisation's view of communication, primarily involving mass media campaigns, did not equate this consultation with the communication function. For them, the role for communication was limited to media advertisements calling for contributions. What makes these comments so significant is that they were the perceptions of a couple of senior public servants who held central positions within the communication field in the public service.

Despite this, other public servants noted a change in the culture that was starting to be more accepting of the importance of communication to policy making in addition to policy delivery. A senior public servant referred to a change in public sector communication in that it is not just the people in the communication section that deal with these issues, as it was in the past. She commented on how everyone involved in policy is now involved in the communication effort, viewing this as a positive move. One political staffer was very encouraging of this shift, stating:

> ... it certainly should be part of the entire process. If you develop a policy which cannot be sold, it's a dud policy, no matter what apparent outcomes it's meant to achieve.

Two potential issues emerge from this position. One was raised by a political staffer who held the view of communication as sometimes taking too much of a driving role in the policy formation – "too much driven by how it would look, and whether it fits political parameters". The other relates to the view of the public servant quoted above, in that it is not necessarily communication specialists becoming involved in policy

formation, but policy-makers becoming communicators. Her view was of communication and policy staff working together in a traditional, media-focused, one-way communication model and did not include any engagement role for the communicator. As another political staffer points out, the use of the media is "managing issues after the fact". It is not contributing to the policy development.

Public relations paradigms

These findings on the roles of informing, persuading and engaging are reflected in various public relations paradigms, which could inform further research. The promotion of notions of dialogue (Kent and Taylor, 2002) and symmetry (Grunig, 2006) in some of the more traditional, systems-based approaches to public relations, would support the desire of some of the research participants to see a movement of government communication from an information dissemination model to an engagement model. Rhetorical approaches provide a framework for embracing the persuasive elements of government communication, potentially guiding the discipline through the "fog" that surrounds this aspect of practice (Heath, 2006). Examining government communication within these paradigms draws particular attention to questions about what constitutes ethical practice.

However, Weaver *et al.* highlight the difficulty in applying such idealistic models, suggesting that:

> . . . predominantly insurmountable tensions exist in balancing the needs of public interest and self- or private interest within public relations practice. (Weaver *et al.*, 2006, p. 15)

Issues of public interest were evident within this research in the conflict and confusion that some participants felt regarding whether the public servants were advocates for government or crusaders for the public, or elements of both. Messina discusses the difficulties in using the measure of public interest to guide ethical public relations practice, suggesting that it is too "elusive" and arguing for other standards to be used in assessing ethical persuasion (Messina, 2007). The implications of this for government communication need further exploration.

Critical approaches to public relations could focus research on concepts of power within government communication. Within this paradigm, public relations is often viewed as a tool used for hegemonic dominance. How the public servant communicator is situated within the power structures and struggles in government is another area for further research.

Conclusion

Considering government communication from a public relations perspective reveals some of the challenges and barriers to delivering communication that is valued by both the Australian government and the Australian public. This research revealed confusion and contradiction about the role of the public servant communicator in particular. Differences of opinions were largely based on the level of communication education and experience of the participants, regardless of their position in the process.

Government documentation implied a role for the communicator which was limited to the delivery of one-way information activities; however this was a contentious point amongst those involved in the process. Roles in persuading and engaging the Australian public were also identified however there was no agreed position on their

place in government communication. The challenge that public servants have in delineating between appropriate and inappropriate persuasion was exacerbated by negative perceptions and differing expectations within and outside the public service. And perspectives about the motivations behind the engagement process and the public servant communicator's role in it, varied considerably. Experienced communicators expressed comparable views to those reported in the UK review, which reflected the opinion that:

> There are patches of excellence within the service, but there seems to be no capability to share good practice and no requirement for consistency of approach within the various departments (Centre for Public Relations Studies, cited in Phillis, 2004, p. 9).

This paper highlights a need for a deeper understanding of the role and purpose of government communication in Australia. The research found that some participants in the process see possibilities for a more strategic role for government communication that extends beyond the limited information-dissemination model. Lack of attention to this issue, lack of detailed knowledge and/or use of communication principles and a lack of preparedness to use this knowledge when held, are all impediments to achieving this understanding. Increasing the knowledge base of the practice and theories of government communication could provide opportunities for a professionalisation of the specialisation and an increase in the public's engagement and participation in government.

Rather than dismissing public relations as something which fails to provide "necessary" and "genuine" information to the public (Howard, 2007), it could be beneficial for Australian's political and public service leaders to develop a common understanding and respect for the function and a broader recognition that government communication is about the public, not the minister or the public servant. Further research into the purpose of government communication within the Australian public service environment, would assist in this process. A clearer understanding and articulation of the role of the public service communicator is just a first step in overcoming some of the negative perceptions surrounding the function.

This research has been conducted within a broader study that uses public relations paradigms to examine the ethical environment of the public service communicator. Continued research into other aspects and other participants within government communications, from various public relations perspectives, has the potential to inform professional and ethical practice as well as the building of public relations theory in the field of government.

Notes

1. For a very detailed and through overview of the history of government communication organisations in the national government, see Terrill (2000), *Secrecy and Openness: The Federal Government from Menzies to Whitlam and beyond*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.
2. Management of the advertising process moved into the department of Finance and Deregulation.

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