ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:	PUBLIC MEETINGS AND COMMUNICATION EXCELLENCE: EXPLORING THE INTERSECTION OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT
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This study explores how public meetings are currently used by government agencies and examines the meetings' effects on agency-public relationship outcomes (Hon and Grunig, 1999). The data consisted of 20 in-depth telephone interviews with public affairs practitioners in government agencies. The results suggest that practitioners perceive a fundamental incongruence in public affairs and public involvement efforts which extends to their frequent non-involvement in public meetings. The data suggests that this relates to contending responsibilities to both specific and general audiences. The discussion seeks to link these perceptions of publics and communication responsibilities to the relevant contextual factors of the public sector in order to examine theoretical prescriptions. The relevant theory suggests that the segregation of public affairs and the vehicles for public engagement limits the informational value of public input and relegates agency-public relationships to the role of process measures rather than communication goals.

PUBLIC MEETINGS AND COMMUNICATION EXCELLENCE:

EXPLORING THE INTERSECTION OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS AND PUBLIC

INVOLVEMENT

By

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Public meetings are frequently viewed as a formalistic nod to democratic rhetoric rather than a hallmark of participatory government. This negative perception of public meetings is a testament to their misuse and misunderstanding within the management of government agencies. McComas (2001) notes "public agencies use meetings to meet minimum legal requirements for public participation without ever giving much weight to the public's input" (p. 38). Government agencies balance the statutory requirements for public participation with the efficient execution of their regulatory responsibilities. This balance is frequently seen as a tension between bureaucratic procedural requirements and efficiency (Heberlein, 1976, p. 197; King, Feltey, & Susel, 1998; McComas, 2001 & 2001b). Given this perception, it is not surprising that agencies may view statutorily required public meetings as an obstacle rather than as an opportunity.

This perception directly contends with the broad recognition of the potential benefits of greater public involvement in the decision making processes of government agencies (Carson, 2009; Heberlein, 1976; King, Feltey, & Susel, 1998; McMaster, 2002; Motion, 2005; Thomas, 1990). This recognition is not limited to the observations of academia. Already the new administration under U.S. President Barak Obama has called for greater transparency and information sharing in government (Steamboat, 2009). At an award presentation at the U.S. Capitol, Paul McMaster captured the theory of

democracy which undergirds this emphasis on openness, "Democracy depends above all on public trust. Public trust depends on the sharing of power. And the sharing of power depends on the sharing of information" (McMaster, 2002). Political scholars make arguments for public involvement for a number of different perspectives such as on the basis of political cost-benefit analysis (Thomas, 1990) and for improved consideration of facts and values (Simon, 1997). This combined call for openness and participation is ultimately supported with explicit legal requirements to make the decision making processes of government agencies open to the public (Cornell, 2008). This legislation generally prohibits a contingency approach to public involvement such as that developed by Thomas (1990, p. 442). This leaves scholarship to examine if and how government agencies embrace public participation and benefit from its effects on decisional processes.

Communication scholars have, in many ways, already recognized a potential synergy between the requirements of democratic process and the organizational goals of government agencies. This linkage is most readily associated with the value of informing agency decision making. Dozier, L. Grunig and J. Grunig (1995) emphasize the importance of informed, strategic decision making and of using the "environmental scanning" capabilities of the public relations/public affairs function to achieve this end (p. 199). Public participation not only offers an opportunity for environmental scanning, but L. Grunig, J. Grunig and Dozier (2002) also note that such participation and "sharing of tasks" has particular benefit in the maintenance of relationships between publics and organizations (p. 551). Still, the logic of inclusive decisional processes contends with the perception that the non-expert nature of publics' input renders it valueless and is grounds

for its dismissal and exclusion from such processes. Roberts (2004) describes this contending perspective in which "direct public participation is viewed with skepticism, even wariness" (p. 316).

This negative perception of participatory processes, as an obtrusive requirement, undermines the potential value of public meetings in decisional processes and as public affairs activities. Public meetings offer a way to strengthen agency-public relationships (APR) (Dozier, L. Grunig, & J. Grunig, 2002) and inform agency strategic decision making processes (Motion, 2005, p. 505). J. Grunig, L. Grunig and Dozier (2002) recognize that public participation in organizational processes is a means of strengthening and maintaining organizational public relationships (p. 551). The participatory nature of public meetings presents an opportunity to positively impact relationships: an impact which can be evaluated in the exploration of its effects on the relationship outcomes of trust, commitment, control mutuality and satisfaction described by Hon and J. Grunig (1999, p. 3).

Karlberg (1996) has also remarked on the need for a more complete application of the inclusive aspects of symmetrical communication to "forums for public consultation" (p. 275).

> The symmetrical ideals of holism, interdependence, equality, responsibility and
> understanding need to be incorporated not just into the design of these forums [for
> public consultation], but also into the representational strategies and relational
> postures that diverse stakeholders and interest groups bring to these forums.
> (Karlberg, 1996, p. 275)

This identifies a need to examine public participation processes within a framework of symmetrical communication and examine potential benefits from the coorientational perspective described by J. Grunig and Huang (2000, p. 28; Seltzer, 2006).

Purpose

The societal significance of government agencies' decisions elevates the importance of public meetings. Greater attention on public meetings as a communication activity may offer an opportunity to ensure that the spirit of public meeting regulation is upheld and not merely the letter of the law. Simon (1997) provides a summary of this concept: "since the administrative agency must of necessity make many value judgments, it must be responsive to community values, far beyond those that are explicitly enacted into law" (p. 66). The purpose of this study is to substantiate the proposition that existing public affairs structures within government agencies offer an appropriate vehicle for elevating the use of public meetings. This study explores how public meetings are currently used by government agencies and examines the meetings' effects on agency-public relationship outcomes (Hon & J. Grunig, 1999). These findings are related to relationship management theory in public relations literature in order to highlight the common goals of public meetings and public relations.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Public Sector Context

The authors of the excellence theory state that "communication excellence is universal… it is the same for corporations, not-for-profit organizations, government agencies, and trade or professional associations" (Dozier, L. Grunig, & J. Grunig, 1995, p. 4). The basic assumption is that the differences of the public sector do not prohibit communication excellence. Dozier et al. (1995) maintain that the principles of strategic communication management, symmetrical communication and dominant coalition support, are just as applicable to private organizations as government agencies.

Not all communication scholars share the assumption that the differences between the public and private sectors are negligible to the application of theory. For example, Liu and Horsley (2007) developed the government decision wheel model of communication because, as Liu (2008) notes, "public relations models… and theories… do not adequately fit the unique attributes of the public sector" (p. 5). These public sector attributes frame the concept of a contingent application of normative theory (Cameron, Cropp, & Reber, 2000). A discussion of the differences and similarities of the two sectors provides a better context for the application of theoretical principles.

The reduction of organizations by "legal type" into dichotomous sectors represents what Bozeman and Bretschneider (1995) refer to as the "core approach" to

organizational differentiation (p. 200).   Horsley, Liu, and Levenshus (2009) point out

that "the comparison may be more complex than a public-versus-private distinction and

may also include size, mission, and use of technology" (p. 3). Allison (1984) also notes

that there is a wide variation of organizational structures and missions within each sector

(p. 22), further implying the shortcomings of a core approach. The advantage of a

bipolar, core approach is that it will sufficiently highlight the differences between

government agencies and private organizations, which will provide the context necessary

for discussing the application of theories across sectors.

Liu (2008) traces the discussion of sector differences to the 1970's and Euske

(2003) corroborates this saying the discussion "has been going on in literature for

decades" (p. 1). A brief analysis of the described differences yields some immediate

observations on the basic ways the sectors differ. Wilson (1989) specifically addresses

the constraints of the public sector, suggesting that there are "key constraints" (p. 115).

The constraints are that: agencies' cannot manage and retain funds, cannot "allocate

factors of production" and serve externally determined goals (Wilson, 1989, p. 115).

Allison (1984) reviews the public sector characteristics observed by Dunlop (1979) and

Neustadt (1979). Allison summarizes that the public sector differs from the private sector

in these areas: time perspective, duration, measurement of performance, personnel

constraints, equity and efficiency, public processes versus private processes, role of press

and media, persuasion and direction, legislative and judicial impact, bottom line, time

horizon, authority over enterprise, career system, media relations, performance measures,

and implementation (Allision, 1984, p. 19-21). Euske (2003) also provides a summary of

observed differences including: environmental markets, revenues, constraints and

political influences, transactional coerciveness, scope of impact, public scrutiny, ownership, organizational process goals, authority limits, performance expectations, and incentives (p. 4). Liu (2008) provides a more parsimonious summary of how the public sector is different from the private sector. Her list includes: devaluation of communication, federalism, leadership opportunities, media scrutiny, legal constraints, politics, poor public perception, professional development and public good (p. 2).

It is not necessary to re-package these differences into another list, but it is worth noting that the cumulative research reflects basic differences in organizational autonomy and public expectation. This simplification highlights the "constitutional difference" between the private sector's standard of "authority commensurate with responsibility" and the public sector's model of "management… spread among competing institutions" (Allison, 1984, p. 21). In other words, public responsibility fundamentally shapes organizational structures in the public sector, which have "built-in inefficiency" as a safeguard of the public interest (Euske, 2003, p. 5). The resulting contention between structural process inhibitions and public service may give rise to some of the more nuanced observations of sector differences, such as Liu's (2008) mention of "poor public perception" in the public sector (p. 4).

Highlighting the basic differences between government and private organizations provides a framework for discussing the processes by which informational products are produced, used, received and/or disseminated within the unique context of the public sector. The lists of differences provides context for the observations of the interviewees. For instance, saying that something results from lack of access to a dominant coalition

can be made more meaningful by considering the contextual factors which may limit that access.

Public Meetings and Public Affairs

The review of literature in this section first examines existing definitions of publics in existing public relations theory. This understanding of publics frames observations of how agencies understand and identify their publics. The literature review then discusses public meetings and the letter and logic of the associated legislation. A review of the excellence theory of public relations provides a lens for evaluating the traditional goals and processes of public meetings. This cumulative understanding of public relations and public meetings provides the context for understanding the potential synergy of public relations goals and public meeting requirements. Finally, this review examines literature on relationship management theory to allow for a discussion of the potential effects of public meetings on agency-public relationships. This structure allows for the examination of how public meetings offer a space for relationship building between government agencies and their key publics.

Situational Publics: One reason why an agency is likely to devalue the worth of public meetings is the misconception of the ideal recipients of the associated effort. In other words, agencies are likely to assume that they must communicate and incorporate a representative body's opinion based on the assumption that they need to be communicating with the general public, not publics. The rationale of segmenting publics, rather than developing campaigns for the general public, is that communication efforts should be prioritized to reach those who "have consequences on organizations or on

whom organizations have consequences" (L. Grunig, J. Grunig & Dozier, 2002, p. 324).

L. Grunig, J. Grunig and Dozier (2002) note that it is the specific role of the public

relations function to help agency decision makers "determine which elements of their

domain are most important to reach" or in other words, identify "strategic publics" (p.

95). J. Grunig's (1994) situational theory of publics (STP) provides a means of

segmenting publics based on their activity in relation to a specific issue. This recognizes

that the activity of the public determines its potential affect on the organization (Dozier,

L. Grunig & J. Grunig, 1995, p. 31).

J. Grunig (1994) defines situational publics as groups that "organize around

issues" for communication purposes (p. 128). This provides an understanding of a public

as of a group of people who coalesce through the discussion of particular issue. This

definition is based partly on principles similar to John Dewey's earlier conceptualization

of publics as problem oriented and socially constructed (Russill, 2008). Vasquez (2001)

also recognizes the social construction of publics and defines them as a

"communicatively constructed social phenomenon" (p. 140). The importance of the STP

is that it lends an understanding of publics as discrete and durable populations whose

relationship with an organization gravitates around specific issues.

The STP was meant to segment those publics most likely to engage an

organization, and most likely to be attentive to the organization's communication efforts.

Dozier, L. Grunig and J. Grunig (1995) explain this is "because active publics are the

only ones that generate consequences for organizations" (p. 31). This same segment is

likely to attend public meetings: information seeking individuals forming around a

particular issue for communicative purposes. This means that the self selection and the

lack of representation of a larger demographic are not necessarily mitigating factors in

assigning value to the communication inputs of these groups of attendees. It can instead

be assumed that the interest groups attending public meetings are exactly those situational

publics that warrant the agency's attention.

The concept of a situational public recognizes that the organization does not

unilaterally determine the conditions of communicative engagement. As J. Grunig

(1994) points out, "people cannot be affected by messages that they do not seek or even

process" (p. 28). This is a critical aspect of J. Grunig's definition of publics; that the

publics essentially choose the organization (Rawlins, 2006, p. 2; J. Grunig & Repper,

1992, p. 128). This effectively defines publics in terms of their potential consequence for

the organization (J. Grunig, 1997; L. Grunig, J. Grunig, and Dozier, 2002). Alternatively,

Rawlins (2006) suggests that "stakeholder" is a more appropriate term (p. 1). This

maintains a focus on a public's effect on an organization but is consistent with

relationship management in which relationship participation is based on *mutual* interest

(rather than the sole effect of a public's involvement). Rawlin's (2006) observes that this

mutual determination of participation is what differentiates stakeholders from publics. In

the STP, publics choose the organization without the organization necessarily

reciprocating. Rawlins' (2006) assumption is that mutual effect is requisite for

participation in a relationship between the agency and the public.

This selection of public relations theory illustrates that there are multiple ways in

which an agency can define its publics. Understanding how the agencies' public affairs

officers identify their publics provides the foundation for exploring whether an agency

considers publics as relational partners or audience segments with varying levels of

interest. The first research question compares practitioners' understanding and identification of their publics with the theoretical definitions of publics and stakeholders.

RQ1: How are publics defined by public affairs officers in government agencies?

In order for a government agency to want to address the use of public meetings and public participation, there must be a motivation based on the recognition of some value to the agency. The literature on public relations provides a discussion on how informational and relational value can be interpreted as effecting the business "bottom line" (L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002, p. 102). The next section reviews the excellence theory and the relationship management theory of public relations. An understanding of these theories and their concepts lays the groundwork for discussing how public meetings may be in use to improve public affairs and visa versa.

Public Meeting Definition: In constructing an operational definition of public meeting for this study, I first consider the legal definition of the term provided in title 5 of the U.S. Code (Cornell, 2008) and the common definitions that emerge from literature and non-federal levels of government. The definition of "meeting" provided by the U.S. Code is as follows:

> The term meeting means the deliberations of at least the number of individual agency members required to take action on behalf of the agency where such deliberations determine or result in the joint conduct or disposition of official agency business. (Cornell, 2008)

> Individual states and municipalities normally provide a variation of this definition, which most frequently includes the qualifications of having a quorum of board

members and the board's conduct of public business (Schwing, 2008). Some states make a differentiation between public meetings and public hearings. The New York State Department of State (2008) provides an example of this type of differentiation in their local technical government series:

> Unlike public meetings at which the citizenry may only observe the members of the municipal body as they conduct business, at a public hearing the citizens are encouraged to speak and comment on the specific subjects addressed at the hearing. (p. 2)

In order to apply a more inclusive definition, but still fit within the legal framework provided by the U.S. Code, I consider the following definition from Meinig (1998):

> Although a public hearing is also a public meeting, the main purpose of most public hearings is to obtain public testimony or comment. A public hearing may occur as part of a regular or special meeting, or it may be the sole purpose of a special meeting, with no other matters addressed. (Meinig, 1998, p. 1)

For the purpose of discussing and addressing issues of participatory decisional processes I also apply the qualification of seeking "input" suggested in McComas's (2001) definition. In consideration of these qualifications, I use the following operational definition in the subsequent discussion and in the description of methods and sampling: "A meeting is the public and participatory deliberation of agency business that is legally required for the conduct of such business." The terms of this definition ensure that the discussion and data focus on those participatory processes which are required by law.

This definition clearly excludes at least two critical types of meetings: those that do not seek public involvement and those that are not required by law. This exclusion is intentional and based on the strength of two reasons. First, I do not discuss meetings that do not seek public involvement because I want to focus on meetings which contribute to a participatory decision-making processes, so there needs to be an interactive feature (e.g. a vote, workshop, scoping session, dialogue, or citizen advisory committee) to warrant examination (Chess & Purcell, 1999; Heberlein, 1976; Young, Williams & Goldberg, 1993) . Second, I focus on the legally required meetings in order to provide a point of consistency in the definition and exclude situations where participation is contingent on an agency's determination of its value.

Requirements for transparency: There are two bodies of law which apply to opening the conduct of government business to public scrutiny and participation. These are commonly referred to as sunshine laws and open meeting laws. Sunshine laws offer a more general address of transparency issues, such as open record laws, while open meeting laws are a specific subset of these laws which address the meetings of decision making bodies in government agencies (Colorado, 2003; Cornell, 2008; RCFP, 2003 & 2009; Hudson, 2008; Nadler & Shulman, 2006). The Reporters' Committee for Freedom of the Press (RCFP, 2003) gives this description of how sunshine laws relate to open meeting laws: "Generally, sunshine laws guarantee public access to meetings only when a quorum of a group meets to discuss public business."

In the U.S. Court of Appeals case of Soucie vs David, Judge Wilkey references the ideology which led towards legislation for greater transparency in the sunshine laws: "It is the purpose of this [Act] to establish a general philosophy of full agency disclosure

unless information is exempted under clearly delineated statutory language" (West Law, 2009, 448 F.2d 1067, 145 U.S.App.D.C. 144). First amendment scholar David Hudson (2008) explains that sunshine laws "exist to shine light on the actions of government officials" (p. 2) and avoid what Nadler and Shulman (2006) describe as a government that is "prone to corruption and undue influence because there is no public oversight of decision making" (p. 1). While Hudson (2008) notes that there is no first amendment requirement for open meetings, the use and transparency of public meetings appears to be an increasingly inviolable fact of life for government agencies (Carlstrom, 2008; Haskell, 2001; Roberts, 2004). Roberts (2004) notes, "Direct citizen participation is no longer hypothetical. It is very real and public administrators are central to the evolving story" (p. 316). Haskell (2001) further testifies to scope and durability of this concept by asserting that "participatory democracy is here to stay at all levels of government" (p. 62).

This is not to suggest that laws and external requirement only facilitate public interaction. Communication processes in the public sector are constrained by a myriad of statutes and structures which attempts to regulate the efficiency and fairness of government-public interactions. Some of these are the Gillette amendment, the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA), the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA), the Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA), and the Office of Management and Budget (Toth, 2006; Wilson, 1989; EPA, 2009). Collectively, these laws and oversight structures delimit the processes by which agencies can interact and seek information from their publics. In this sense, there is a contention between these external requirements and the satisfaction of other requirements related to communication best practice and transparency.

This review of the legal requirements for public meetings and transparency serves two purposes. First, it establishes that, within the U.S. legal system, the public nature of certain government meetings is not discretionary. There are explicit and enforceable laws which are not only established, but likely to expand the definition of "meeting" to include electronic correspondence (Carlstrom, 2008; Hudson, 2008; Steamboat, 2009). These meetings, which are required by law, are going to require an expenditure of resources regardless of their utility. As a result, it is in the best interest of the agency to maximize the utility of public meetings in order to maximize the return on the expended resources.

The second purpose is to differentiate between a legalistic fulfillment of requirements for transparency and a full address of the public's participation in government decisions which is the underlying purpose of this legislation. It is the difference of these intentions that is attributable to participant dissatisfaction with public meetings (Carson, 2008; McComas, 2001; McComas, 2001b; McComas, 2003; Sharp, Smith, & Patton, 2002).

Satisfying only the legal requirement of these meetings will potentially cost the agency both resources and what Post, Preston, and Sachs (2002) refer to as a "license to operate" (p. 20). License to operate, in this case, refers to that public support which is necessarily granted for the execution of an organization's [agency's] business. These points may encourage an agency to embrace concepts of transparency, but extending this argument to their support of public participation in decision making rests on first establishing the value of such participation. McComas (2003) recognizes such a value and suggests that "in addition to satisfying democratic principles, citizen involvement

may also improve decision making and help to legitimate ensuing decisions" (p. 164).

The next section reviews an argument for coupling transparency with participation in

decisional processes.

A Need for Participation: Before addressing the role of public meetings specifically, I

consider the general value of participatory democracy in agency decision making. I

review some foundational concepts regarding participatory processes and their use in

systems of governance. The 1970s were a time of significant expansion in the

application of direct democratic ideals (Haskell, 2001, p. 58; Roberts, 2004, p. 321;

Thomas, 1990, p. 435). This period represented a move towards a more egalitarian form

of government: a movement which was precursory to the contemporary emphasis on

transparency in governance. As Roberts (2004) explains, this is somewhat of a departure

from the foundational concepts of representative democracy which framed U.S.

democracy in its early stages. The argument of representative versus direct democracy is

largely based on the question of whether or not group decisions are better than individual,

expert decisions.

Condorcet provided an early (1785) statistical argument for decision making by

majority rule (Boland, 1989, p. 181-182). Essentially, he states, "that the accuracy of a

majority increases with the number of voters" (Reimer & Katsikopolous, 2004, p. 1026).

Boland (1989) describes this in more detail: "If n=2m+1 jurists act independently, each

with a probably p>1/2 of making the correct decision, then the probability $h_{2m+1}(p)$ that

the jury (deciding by majority rule) makes the correct decision increases monotonically to

1 as m increases to infinity" (p. 181). A critical point is that this theorem relies on the

uniformity of the general population for its application, including the uniformity of a

positive outcome determination (Boland, 1989). Application of this theorem also assumes that a voting majority represents the true majority. Despite the conditions for the theorem's application, it is significant because it provides evidence supporting the decisional efficacy of a non-expert population within a democratic system. The significance of Condorcet's argument is not to categorically assert that agency decisions should be made solely by direct participation, but it does illustrate that plurality is not universally detrimental to decisional processes. This is important because it denies the assumption that an elite decision making body is always the most effective option.

This assertion lends itself to Roberts' (2004) recount of the opinion that participation in democracy is necessary to ensure public interests are served.

> The people themselves are the best guarantors of their rights… Direct citizen involvement also fosters more responsive policy and administrative systems that are more in concert with what citizens desire, especially in the early stages of the policy process when the agenda is set. (Roberts, 2004, p. 324)

This suggests that public participation in decisional processes also acts as a check and balance on a potentially unrepresentative decisional body. Public participation potentially acts as a safeguard on the decisional outcomes of an agency that is ultimately responsible to the various publics, as per the designs of democracy. Representative democracy recognizes that there are instances where the expert opinion does not better serve publics' interests and there is a need for participatory influences to safe guard agency decisions.

Criticisms of Public Meetings: Any value assigned to participatory decisional

processes must also be weighed against the costs of their conduct.   These costs are represented in the numerous criticisms of public meetings. Public meetings are frequently regarded as unsatisfactory vehicles for public participation (Carson, 2008; McComas, 2001; McComas, 2001b; McComas, 2003; Sharp, Smith & Patton, 2002) despite their prevalence and legal requirement (Cornell, 2008; RCFP, 2003 & 2009). While legislation may negate the need to weigh meetings' criticisms, I examine them as detriments in relation to their value in decisional processes. Generally, the criticism of public meetings can be broken down into two perspectives: that of the agency and that of the participants.

From the agency perspective, public meetings are: required (whether input is wanted or not), not representative of the general population, frequently contentious, burdensome and only provide non-expert opinions, not valuable and constructive input (Roberts, 2004).   McComas (2003) describes the skepticism agencies feel towards public meetings as a forum for public participation. "Rather than establishing two-way communication, some critics argue that holding a public meeting is the surest way for government agencies to minimize citizen input into decision making" (p. 165). Even if some degree of value is assigned to the information inputs gained from participatory processes, there is still the argument that any improvement in decisional outcomes is not enough to validate the inefficiency introduced into the decisional process. Part of this assumption is based on the difficulty of measuring certain quality improvements (Thomas, 1990). Thomas (1990) recognizes that it is difficult to assign a value to the greater consideration of quality-of-life concerns (p. 438). This means that the participant may perceive a significant increase in the outcome quality while the agency does not.

This contributes to a more general disparity in the goal determination between agencies and participants. Thomas (1990) points out that there is a tendency for publics to perceive a negotiated outcome as positive while the agency is measuring outcomes against "programmatic goals" (p. 438). This point is further complicated if it is assumed that these programmatic goals were developed for the better service of the public to begin with. Another criticism is that public meetings have non-representative participants.

Carson (2009) cites evidence that public meeting attendees are not representative of their larger demographic. Roberts (2004) also notes that there is a need to make public meetings representative of more than just a "subset" of the population. There is evidence to suggest that although the attendees of public meetings are not representative of the larger demographic (Berstein & Norwood, 2008; Carson, 2009) they may still be representative of the interests and concerns of the larger population (Chess & Purcell, 1999). However, this value does not mitigate the concerns of effectively representing all effected interests or the concerns of addressing disparities between levels of governance. This is a particular concern on the federal level, because a programmatic goal designed for the service of a national public may conflict with public interests on a lower (state or municipal) level and results in prioritization of interests (Liu & Horsley, 2007).

In summary of the agency perspective, public meetings are likely to be seen as inefficient, not representative and potentially contentious. These criticisms suggest that the summed value of a meeting's informational products and the relational gains do not validate a significant expenditure of resources. In essence, agencies have critical evaluations of both the processes and outcomes of public meetings, mostly from a resource expenditure standpoint and based on a cost/benefit analysis (Roberts, 2004;

Jacobs, 1997).

From the perspective of the publics, public meetings: are time consuming, do not actually influence decision making processes, and are only used to legitimate predetermined actions. Put in comparable cost benefit terms, the small likelihood of their actual effect on the agency's processes does not warrant the expenditure of resources, particularly with regards to time. What is noteworthy in reviewing the literature which describes public dissatisfaction in public meetings (Carson, 2008; McComas, 2001; McComas, 2001b; McComas, 2003; Sharp, Smith, & Patton, 2002) is that the dissatisfaction is targeted at the agencies' utilization of the information and not necessarily the information-gathering mechanism. In other words, the public meeting may not be broken as a vehicle, but the process to which it contributes may be in need of redress.

A similar conclusion can be arrived at in examination of the agency criticisms of public meetings. These criticisms center upon a cost benefit analysis, specifically, one in which the informational quality of outcomes does not warrant the expenditure of resources to conduct the meeting. This gives rise to the minimalist execution of public meetings by an agency. However, it stands to reason that if the benefit were higher, it would warrant the cost. Pursuant to this logic, there are two ways in which the benefit can be increased, that is, that the informational value of the public participation can be increased. Either the quality of the information produced can be increased, or the processes by which the information is incorporated within the agency can be improved to gain more value from the information. Existing public relations literature would suggest that both of these aspects may be improved through the application of strategic public

relations principles (L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; Ledingham, 2006). The

publics' criticism of public meetings can also be addressed in applying the principles of

this literature to the legally required public meeting format.

Excellence Theory: The International Association of Business Communicators (IABC)

funded the Excellence study to codify the most effective practices of public relations and

quantify how these practices contributed to the business bottom line (Dozier, L. Grunig,

& J. Grunig, 1995). The paradigm model identified "situational publics," "symmetrical

communication," "environmental scanning," and access to the "dominant coalition" as

several of the defining aspects of excellent public relations programs (Dozier, L. Grunig,

& J. Grunig, 1995; L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; J. Grunig & Jaatinen, 1999; J.

Grunig, 1997; J. Grunig & Repper, 1992).

Symmetrical Communication: L. Grunig, J. Grunig and Dozier (2002) provide the

following definition of symmetrical public relations:

> Two-way symmetrical public relations attempts to balance the interests of the
>
> organization and its publics, is based on research, and uses communication to
>
> manage conflict with strategic publics. As a result, two-way symmetrical
>
> communication produces better long-term relationships with publics. (p. 15)

Conversely, asymmetrical public relations represent "a zero sum game" in which the

organization wins only if the public or publics lose (Dozier, L. Grunig & J. Grunig, 1995,

p. 12). It is important to note that within the most developed, new model of symmetry,

both forms of public relations, symmetrical and asymmetrical, are employed in order to

achieve a mutually advantageous and balanced relationship between an organization and

its publics in the long term. This application of game theory emphasizes "reconciling the

organization's and the public's interest" (L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002, p. 309)

but flexibility in communication tactics suggested in the new model does not equate the

continuum of outcomes described by Cameron and associates in contingency theory

(Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997; Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999).

Essentially, symmetry is not contingent. This agency emphasis on collaboration and

consensus in symmetrical communication dovetails with the "criteria of consensus and

compromise" by which publics weigh outcomes of public meetings. (Murray, 1983, p. 61

cited in Thomas, 1990, p. 438).

The primary point is that symmetrical communication seeks a relationship which

is mutually beneficial to both the organization and its publics (L. Grunig, J. Grunig &

Dozier, 2002). The underlying concept is that balanced relationships with key publics

improves the operating environment of the organization and thus contributes to goal

attainment (L. Grunig, J. J. Grunig & Dozier, 2002, p.123)

Excellence and Government Agencies: J. Grunig (2006) argues that the lack of

symmetrical communication, which typifies government agencies in the excellence study,

does not preclude the application of excellence principles. On the contrary, Dozier, L.

Grunig, and J. Grunig (1995) note that the public affairs function in government agencies

typically has access to the dominant coalition, which allows for such application.

Research conducted by Grunig and Jaatinen (1999) also suggests that symmetrical

communication and excellence principles are applicable to government agencies. If no

feature of government agencies is exclusive to the application of symmetrical

communication than agencies would benefit from such application, and those vehicles

which facilitate symmetrical dialogue.

According to the excellence study, government agencies have the least excellent public relations practices when compared to non-profit organizations, corporations and non-governmental organizations (Dozier, L. Grunig, & J. Grunig, 1995). Government agencies are least likely to employ symmetrical communication practices and favor asymmetrical communications the most (Dozier, L. Grunig, & J. Grunig, 1995; L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). This lack of symmetry seems contrary to the public service responsibilities of government agencies (Liu & Horsley, 2007). Rainey and Steinbauer substantiate this assumption: "A form of public service motivation has been a part of discourse in public administration for a long time" (1999, p. 23). J. Grunig (1997) also notes that the responsiveness offered by symmetrical communication is not a condition contingent upon the interests of the agency: "If the agency does not communicate with the publics it affects, these publics will demand the agency's attention" (p. 247). These representative quotations illustrate that government agencies have a particularly strong motivation to communicate openly with publics and strive for long term relationships which are mutually beneficial (Dozier, L. Grunig, & J. Grunig, 1995; J. Grunig & Jaatinen, 1999; Rainey & Steinbauer, 1999; Liu & Horsley, 2007).

Another particularly telling example of the need for public involvement in agencies of the government is in a report of a National Research Council (NRC) committee evaluating the U.S. Army's chemical stockpile disposal program (NRC, 2000). The U.S. Army represents an institution whose missions represent a delicate balance of civil and organizational control (Gibson & Snider, 1999) in which undue civilian influence in decisional processes represents a threat to this balance. As such, it is particularly telling that even the U.S. Army has been advised to "develop a program of

increased scope aimed at improving communication with the public" and to "identify relevant stakeholders and… solicit input from them" (p. 1). A third recommendation more specifically references aspects of public participation: "The Army and the Chemical Stockpile Disposal Program management at all levels must make an increased commitment to public involvement throughout the entire program" (p. 1). This example further illustrates that government agencies should seek to incorporate public participation within their decision making processes.

Environmental Scanning: Environmental scanning is defined as a public relations function by which practitioners gather information from sources external to the organization to provide context for strategic decision making (Dozier, L. Grunig & J. Grunig, 1995; L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). The excellence theory of public relations is based, in part, upon systems theory and aspects of organizational effectiveness (Eisenberg, Goodall Jr., & Trethewey, 2007). The "systems perspective" recognizes that "changes in the environment affect the organization" (L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002, p.93). The environment consists of those external systems and publics that may affect the organization and its processes. Consistent with the biological metaphor, a system which is affected by its environment must achieve homeostasis with external pressures in order to exist and function. In order to remain sensitive to this environment the public relations function acts as "the eyes and ears of the organization (L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002, p. 93). This means that public relations should gather information on external actors in order to predict both the effect of an organization's decisions on its environment and the effects of the environment on the organization.

Public meetings offer an opportunity for the public relations function to gather environmental information. The previous discussion on situational public suggests that meeting participants are most likely to represent active publics. Active public are the most likely to have a direct effect on an organization (Dozier, L. Grunig, & J. Grunig, 1995, p. 31). It is the role of public relations to act as environmental scanner and identify aspects of the environment that will potentially affect the organization (L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002, p. 93). Considering these points, it is to the advantage of the organization to engage in a real dialogue with participants during public meetings. It is also important that the public relations function gather information from publics for input in organizational decisions. The rationale for this particular role is subsequently discussed in terms of internal activism.

Internal Activism: Environmental scanning is meant "to provide valuable information to strategic decision-makers about the consequences of organizational decisions and the consequences sought by stakeholders" (J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 2001, p. 15). This description indicates the role the public relations function has in advocating the interests of publics in internal agency decisional processes. L. Grunig (2008) has also described this role as that of the "thinking heart" within the organization (p. 120) This conceptualization of public relations emphasizes the ethical and logical inputs in organizational decisions. Holtzhausen (2007) describes this role differently suggesting that it should be closer to that of an activist within the organization. This role suggests public relations acts as a counterpoint to organizational interests in decisional processes. This creates a tension of interests that may be otherwise absent if there was not an internal actor actively advocating for the interests of the key publics. The constructive

criticism of organizational interests ensures that decisions are made with consideration of environmental consequences. This improves the effectiveness of decisional outcomes and the greater consideration of public interests allows for more symmetrical relationships with publics.

This concept of using the public relations function as an internal advocate of publics' interests has particular application to the topic of public meetings. Carson (2009) notes that public involvement offers a means of increasing a sense of agency in participants (towards decisional outcomes) (p. 1643); this is conditional on at least two points. First, it implies that public input is in fact taken for action, such that the final outcome is recognizably related to the original input. Secondly, the input of the participants must not be perceived as legitimization of a predetermined decision (Motion, 2005). Internal representation of publics' interests would reduce the prevalence of formalistic meetings and the segregation of participatory processes and decisional processes. A major criticism of public meetings is that they are only used to legitimate preexisting decisions (Motion, 2005) and that the meeting itself is effectively pageantry and merely appeasement of legal requirements. In order to facilitate a long term relationship with participating publics, there is a need for agencies to avoid use of what Roberts (2004) describes as "legitimating" or "instrumental" meetings (p. 324). In order to give value to publics' participation, the incorporation of the input must not appear to be contingent upon its synchrony with agency objectives. Instead, this input should be an influence in the codetermination of these objectives. This codetermination could be achieved with a public relations function that acted as an internal activist on the behalf of publics (Holtzhausen, 2002 & 2007).

Dominant Coalition: J. Grunig and L. Grunig (2001) note that environmental scanning "provides essential information for the public affairs staff to participate in the strategic planning and decision-making processes of the organization" (p. 22). In order for this information to have value, access to those people that influence organizational decisions, or the dominant coalition, is necessary to empower the public relations function and apply this information to the organization's management functions. Dozier, L. Grunig and J. Grunig (1995) define the dominant coalition as "the group of individuals within an organization with the power to affect the structure of the organization, define its missions, and set its course through strategic choices the coalition makes" (p. 15). They go on to explain that this coalition does not need to be formally defined within the organizational hierarchy, but can instead be those who informally influence decisions as an effect of their control of resources (Dozier, L. Grunig, & J. Grunig, 1995, p. 15).

Recognizing that informal influencers affect decisional processes has two implications. The first is that the public relations function does not need to have direct and formal influence in order to provide input into decisional processes. This can be done through informal counseling or by other, indirect means (Berger, 2007). As suggested earlier (J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 2001), being in control of the informational resources gathered through environmental scanning may be a means for increasing the influence the public relations function has in or on the dominant coalition.

A second implication of informal influence processes is that the formally defined structures that frame participatory processes may not adequately provide for the information products to input into decisional processes. For example, if public meetings are handled on a "functional level," the inputs may never effect strategic decisions (J.

Grunig, L. Grunig & Dozier, 2002, p. 91; Steyn, 2007). This not only frustrates the publics' goal of influence through participation, but it also fails to utilize potentially valuable information regarding the organization's environment. It is necessary that the public relations function be empowered to effect strategic decisions in order for its informational resources to lend value to such decisions.

Continuing the Dialogue: Even after environmental information has been received by the dominant coalition, there is still a need to follow up on public involvement with continued dialogue. Chess and Purcell (1999) highlight this need when they observed, "the majority of the studies found that meetings influenced government decisions" (p. 2686). This finding is contrary to the perception of public participation processes as tokenism, and illustrates the added responsibility the agency bears in illustrating the effects of public involvement even after the fact. This illustrates the potential for a public to be dissatisfied with the effects of their participation, despite its incorporation within agency decisional processes. It is both within the spirit of disclosure and to the agency's best interest to highlight the specific effects that participatory processes had in decision outcomes. It is also necessary to attend to the, often neglected, converse and explain where and why participatory inputs had no effect in such outcomes.

Public Affairs and Public Meetings: Application of these theoretical principles in public relations literature offers an opportunity to address the criticisms of public meetings. Vigoda (2002) suggests that failing to address these criticisms and the resultant "administrative-democratic turmoil" will lead to further skepticism in public participants (p. 538). The previous review of literature has established that there is a tension between the legal and theoretical need for participatory processes and the detriments of these

processes. The previous review has also suggested that public meetings may provide an appropriate and convenient vehicle for participation. What is left to be explored is how agencies use public meetings to meet the needs for participation while reducing the costs and barriers to themselves and their publics. The second research question examines how practitioners understand and execute public meetings.

RQ2: How do public affairs officers in government agencies make meaning of public meetings?

The second research questions seeks to explore how public affairs officers make meaning of public meetings. Specifically, the question explores how the participants perceive the purpose and value of public meetings and how they perceive their role in meeting efforts. The concept of making meaning rests on the assumption of a co-created reality in which meaning is "imposed on objects, events, and the like by people" rather than "intrinsically attached" (Berg, 2009, p. 10). Understanding the practitioners' perspectives of public meetings provides a starting point for discussing the application of theoretical prescriptions. The reconciliation of practical and theoretical perspectives is the basis of the collaborative determination of a co-created reality.

The exploration of meaning making highlights the factors that contribute to the cultivation of the practitioners' perspectives. This will speak to whether government agencies are maximizing upon their requirements for using public meetings or whether their meeting efforts represent a "minimalist" (McComas, 2001, p. 38) or "ritualistic" (Heberlein, 1976, p. 200; McComas, 2001, p. 38) approach to their execution. This will examine the practitioner's perspective of the informational value public meetings lend to

agency decision making. These findings are discussed in terms of the purposes and goals (e.g. Informing strategic decisions) of public relations suggested by the excellence theory.

Relationship Management: Emphasizing aspects of co-determination and mutual effect is consistent with the systems perspective and has spurred a growing consensus among public relations scholars that relationships are, or should be, the focal element of public relations (Hon & J. Grunig, 1999; L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; Ledingham, 2006; Yang, 2005; Yang & J. Grunig, 2005). The systems perspective and other influences of the excellence theory suggest that interdependent relationships exist between an organization and other external actors (L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 1995). Hung (2005) also recognizes that interdependent relationships are an inherent feature of the systems perspective and suggest that "public relations and public affairs are the management of interdependence" (p. 395). The significance of these interdependent relationships to the organization is the fundamental premise for relationship management theory in public relations. Recognizing this significance, Bruning, Dials, and Shirka (2007) quantitatively supported the concept that a public's perception of its relationship with an organization affects "the level of support that a public may provide to an organization" (p. 29). This offers empirical evidence to the primary proposition of relationship management, that a positively perceived organization-public relationship (OPR) is beneficial to the organization. This also substantiates the "intuited benefits" of establishing and developing long term relationships with strategic publics (Bruning, DeMiglio, & Embry, 2006, p. 34; Dozier, L. Grunig, & J. Grunig, 1995).

J. Grunig (2006) has suggested that future public relations research should focus on cultivating and maintaining relationship between an organization and its publics. L.

Grunig, J. Grunig and Dozier (2002) had previously advocated scholarship's focus on relationships by stating, "the central concept of public relations should be the relationship between an organization and its publics" (p. 548). Even practitioners are supporting the growth of this research area, calling for the further development and application of relationship management and its measures (Bronn, 2008; Penning, 2007). Collectively, there is a growing unaminity that relationships are the focal element of public relations (for examples see Bronn, 2008; Bruning, Castle & Schrepfer, 2004; Bruning, DeMiglio, Embry, 2006; Ki & Hon 2007; Ledingham, 2001; Ledingham, 2003).

Public relations scholarship has already studied applications of relationship management theory in a variety of contexts including a utility company, universities, media, and multinational corporations (Bruning, Dials, & Shirka, 2008; Christen, 2004; Hung, 2005; Ledingham & Bruning, 2007; Sung & Yang, 2008; Vorvoreanu, 2006; Wilson, Stavros, & Westberg, 2008; Yang & Grunig, 2005). Those relationships studied have been discussed in terms of an extensive list of variables and attributes including: reciprocity, trust, credibility, mutuality, mutual legitimacy, mutual goals, mutual satisfaction, mutual understanding, control mutuality, openness, satisfaction, relational commitment, personal commitment, involvement, investment, interdependence, communal relationship, community involvement, community improvement, affective intimacy, relationship termination cost, non-retrievable investment, reputation, anthropomorphism, adaptation, professional benefit/expectation, the comparison of alternatives, comparison of level of alternatives, communication linkage attributes, immediacy and dominance-submission, comfort with relational dialectics, faction, summate constructs, structural bonds, social bonds, passion, emotion, intimacy, intimacy

and similarity, and shared technology (Bruning, DeMiglio, & Embry, 2005; Yang & J. Grunig, 2005; Bruning, Castle, & Schrepfer, 2004; Toth, 2000; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998).

Hon and J. Grunig (1999) developed a parsimonious and reliable set of outcome measures for determining the relative quality of a relationship based on the perceptions of the involved public. These relationship outcomes included commitment, control mutuality, trust, and satisfaction, and originally included two relationship types, communal and exchange in the discussion of these outcomes (Hon & J. Grunig, 1999, p. 3). Hon and J. Grunig (1999) used "outcomes" rather than "outputs" in order to measure communication process *effects* and not the "short term" *products* of communication activities (p. 2). Measuring these outcomes provides a snapshot of an individual relationship's health, in order to better strategically manage communication resources in maintaining numerous relationships. J. Grunig (2002) also developed qualitative measures of these same outcomes. This provides a set of qualitative relationship measures that can be directly referenced to quantitatively supported outcomes. The parsimony, reliability, and qualitative adaptation of these outcomes were significant in the decision to use these measures in this study. Ultimately, I chose to measure only the four relationship outcomes in order to focus on the quality of the relationship without discussing a specific typology.

Hon and J. Grunig (1999) provided specific definitions for the four relationship outcomes. Control mutuality is defined as "the degree to which parties agree on who has the rightful power to influence one another" (p. 3). Trust is measured based on perceptions of "integrity," "dependability," and "competence" (p. 3). This indicates that

trust is measured as an effect of a relational partner's perception of the other's ability to accurately say what they will do, and effectively reliably do what they say they will do. Commitment measures the degree to which a relational partner is willing to maintain the relationship. Hon and J. Grunig (1999) differentiate between emotion and action related dimensions of commitment and describe these dimensions as affective and continuance commitment, respectively (p. 3). Finally, satisfaction measures both the cost/benefit and goal fulfillment perceptions of a relationship.

Collectively, measuring these relationship outcomes provide a means of evaluating relationship quality. This evaluation allows the public relations manager to determine which relationships are in need of further maintenance and the effects of maintenance efforts. In this study, I use qualitative measures of these outcomes to frame the investigation of how public meetings potentially affect relationships. Each of these outcomes has the potential to be affected by the participatory processes of public meetings. Control mutuality can be directly related to the degree that participation affects decisional outcomes. Trust is likely to be affected based on perceptions of whether the agency is only conducting the meeting to legitimate prior decisions and to meet legal requirements. Perceptions of trust and control mutuality can affect the effort a public is willing to put into maintaining a relationship. Considering this, commitment is also likely to be affected depending on whether their interests are likely to be fairly and transparently considered. Satisfaction also has the potential to be affected by the public meeting experience. More facilitative participation processes can decrease the cost perceptions of the participating public. The more thorough consideration of the publics' interests may also increase their appraisal of benefits.

Considering the growing emphasis in observing relationships in public relations, and the multiplicity of metrics and points of measure, there is a need to examine how agency practitioners perceive public meetings as affecting their relationships. This is the purpose of the third research question.

RQ3: How do public affairs officers perceive the effect of public meetings on agency-public relationships?

This question explores whether practitioners perceive a relationship between their public meeting efforts and their relationships with the involved publics. This also explores if and how metrics are used to substantiate this link between public meetings and relationships. Finally, this question implicitly addresses the more general question of whether the practitioners even perceive a relationship as existing between an agency and meeting participants, and if so, in which cases.

Synthesis: This review of literature has discussed perceptions of publics, the ideals of participatory processes in governance, public meetings, and the public relations theories of excellence and relationship management. The discussion of these topics should have yielded five main points: (1) public participation in the decisional processes of government agencies is required both by law and to ensure responsible governance; (2) public participation has potential value in decisional processes of government agencies; (3) public meetings may offer an opportunity for participation and information sharing; (4) theory suggests that the public affairs function should seek to identify external actors and gather environmental information to determine potential effects on the agency; (5) existing theory also suggests the public relations function should seek to establish and develop positive relationships where interdependencies exist with these external actors.

These theoretical propositions collectively warrant the exploration of how agencies understand and associate the concepts of publics, public meetings and relationships.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Research Design: The study employs a descriptive research strategy (Forzano &

Gravetter, 2009, p. 149) to examine how public affairs officers in government agencies

use and understand public meetings. This provides an examination of the application of

the focal concepts of publics, public meetings and relationships within government

agencies. The data consist of the results from 20 interviews with public affairs officers or

communication practitioners in different agencies of federal and state government. These

responses reflect an outreach effort which consisted of hundreds of emails and phone

calls to over 60 state and federal agencies over several months. The level of analysis is

the public affairs function and the individual interview is the unit of this analysis. This

data is analyzed using the theoretical frameworks of excellence theory and relationship

management theory as the analytical framework. The subsequent discussion reviews the

sampling process and the development of the interview instrument or protocol.

 Interviewees: The data were based on 20 interviews with communication practitioners in

state and federal government agencies. The practitioners' offices and position titles

either included "public affairs" or indicated an external communication function (e.g.

public information, outreach, external communication). All practitioners were able to

provide insight on their respective agencies' communication practices. The interviewees

were from nine regulatory federal agencies, five non-regulatory federal agencies, four

regulatory state agencies, and two non-regulatory state agencies. The federal agencies

came from a variety of departments including: Department of Agriculture, Department of Justice, Department of Commerce, Department of Interior, Department of Transportation, Department of Homeland Security, and Department of Defense. The state agencies came from Virginia, Maryland and Missouri.

The interviewees were selected using both "purposive" (or "judgmental") and convenience sampling (Berg, 2009, p. 50). The sampling is purposive because it maintained the function level of analysis and sought to represent the broadest possible variety of government agencies. The sample initially drew from federal agencies listed in the federal register as having conducted or intending to conduct a public meeting. Due to the lack of response to my interview invitations, I expanded the sample source to all federal agencies. I also employed snow ball sampling based on the recommendations of interviewees and government communicator networks. This adaptation in sampling should not significantly mitigate the findings because the purpose of the study is the examination of the use and understanding of concepts in government agencies, but does not suggest that it is a survey of all practices in all agencies and agency types.

Responsive Interviews: The primary vehicle for data collection in this study is responsive interviewing. The purpose of qualitative interviewing is "to hear the meaning of what interviewees are telling [us]" (H. Rubin and I. Rubin, 2005, p. 14). H. Rubin and I. Rubin (2005) describe responsive interviewing as self-reflective, in-depth and flexible (p. 30). H. Rubin and I. Rubin (2005) stress the interviewer's role as the instrument of measure and the resulting importance of identifying subjectivities in interpretations through the interviewer's self reflection. The protocol maintains the flexibility suggested by H. Rubin and I. Rubin (2005) by using the protocol as a "conversational guide" (p.

147) in what Berg (2009) describes as a "semistandardized" interview format (p. 105).

The use of open-ended questions that are not leading towards a particular response allows

for greater depth and accuracy. The resulting data focus on a rich description of the

practitioners' perceptions of publics and public meetings and their perceived affect on

agency-public relationships.   My protocol adapted an existing protocol developed by J.

Grunig (2002) in order to frame the discussion of relationship effects.

The previously described principles of qualitative interviewing were applied to

the established qualitative instrument provided by J. Grunig (2002) which examines

relationship quality based on the relationship outcomes previously developed by Hon and

Grunig (1999). J. Grunig (2002) suggests that the indicators targeted in his protocol

"provide a good measure for evaluating relationships" (p. 1). The section of my protocol

adapted from this set of questions used the "grand-tour questions" and probes suggested

in J. Grunig (2002) for exploring how practitioners perceive an effect on relationships, in

terms of these relationship outcomes. Grunig's suggested protocol addresses relationship

typologies as well, but I focus on relationship outcomes and not the distinction of

communal/exchange relationships. In other words, I wanted to discuss the quality of the

relationship with the greater validity that is borrowed from using an established method,

but I do not wish to suggest that the relationship falls within a particular typology. The

questions instead explore only the interviewees' perceptions of how the public meeting

affected the practitioners' perceptions of their relationships with their publics. The

protocol is included as Appendix 1.

Protocol: The protocol can be broken up into the following sections: "rapport

building" questions (Berg, 2009, p. 130), "tough" questions (H. Rubin & I. Rubin, 2005,

p. 118), and follow-ups. As Berg (2009) suggests, the first set of questions focuses on building a sense of rapport with the interviewee. This gets the interviewee comfortable speaking and more likely to provide depth or detail to their responses. Given the broad nature of these interviews and the likely time constraints, the rapport building battery is necessarily brief. Rapport questions address the interviewee's role within the organization and a description of duties.

The majority of the questions were broken up by the research question they address, with questions three through six addressing the first research question, seven through nine addressing the second, and ten through fifteen addressing the third. The apparent lack of balance in research question/protocol question distribution was due to the nature of the protocol questions. Question nine was a particularly broad question with multiple probes. This question provided a substantial exploration of the second research question.

The third research question addressed multiple outcomes, so the protocol uses both broad questions and a series of narrower questions addressing public meetings' effects on specific relationship outcomes. Specifically, questions 10 and 11 are "grand tour" questions that provide a general address of agency-public relationships to provide context for the discussion of individual relationship outcomes (J. Grunig, 2002, p. 4). The "Grand Tour" questions are adapted from J. Grunig's (2002) questions developed for using qualitative research to describe relationship outcomes in organizational-public relations. The focal subject has been changed from a broad discussion of relationships to a broad description of the public meeting's affect on relationships. Questions 12-15 offer a narrower address of how public meetings specifically affect perceptions of control

mutuality, trust, commitment and satisfaction. These protocol questions related to the third research question, which received the most significant adaptation during the actual interviews. This was because relationship building efforts were frequently considered outside the purview of public affairs. Follow-up questions were situational, and sought to develop why relationship building was not associated with the interviewees' communication efforts.

The final questions provided an opportunity for interviewees to give contact information for follow up, suggest questions for future use, and ask any questions they had regarding my research. This provided the opportunity for snowball sampling by referral (Berg, 2009). This also provided an opportunity to adapt the protocol to better address the apparent segregation of public affairs and public involvement.

Consent and Confidentiality: This portion of the study involved human participants and required that an application be submitted to the University of Maryland institutional research board (IRB). Consent form were presented to interviewees, reviewed, signed, and returned. Consent for audio taping was also confirmed in the recording of the interviews. Interviews were recorded via digital voice recorder for transcription purposes. Only agency abbreviations, designating whether the interviewee was in a state/federal and non-regulatory/regulatory agency, were used on the transcripts in order to maintain confidentiality. Names were recorded on the consent forms so consent forms were secured and stored separately from interview transcripts. Transcriptions and consent forms will be maintained in separate locked locations with the primary student investigator. The IRB approval and consent form are included as Appendix 2.

Reflexivity: Reflexivity has important implications to the validity of the qualitative

findings (Berg 2009, p. 198). H. Rubin and I. Rubin (2005) suggest, "you have to sensitize yourself to these biases and learn to compensate for your own slant" (p. 32). There are several aspects of my specific demographic which may have particular import on my interpretation of the qualitative findings. These aspects include my race, gender, age, vocation and education. I am a white male in my late 20's studying at the University of Maryland, College Park while serving active duty with the United States Coast Guard. White and male are demographics generally associated with the majority of hegemonic structures (McIntosh, 2008; Bagilhole, 2002). My familiarity with this demographic requires me to be more sensitive to marginalized perspectives in conducting my research in order to ensure the inclusiveness of the data. Where possible, I report qualitative findings in the interviewees' own voices in order to ensure the findings reported are representative of the participants.

My professional and academic affiliations also have the potential to introduce subjectivity into the interpretation of qualitative findings. I am a member of a government agency (U.S. Coast Guard) and I am studying the practices of government agencies. This may introduce a positivity bias in my reflections on the conduct and processes of such agencies. As such, I have sought to use the maximum sample sizes that were logistically feasible in order to provide corroboration of the findings. I do not feel that my academic affiliation invites any such positivity bias; however, I acknowledge its potential. Dr. Elizabeth Toth and Dr. Linda Aldoory are currently faculty in the University of Maryland communication department and the authors of Excellence theory, Drs. James and Larissa Grunig, are also retired faculty. I feel that my review of literature substantiates any evaluations of these authors' work in this thesis.

Validity:　　　The use of multiple interviewees provides what Denzin (1978, p. 295) refers to as triangulation of "person" (Denzin cited in Berg, 2009, p. 7; Thurmond, 2001, p. 254). This triangulation of data strengthens the "internal validity" of the study (Berg, 2009, p.6; Forzano & Gravetter, 2009, p. 157) and will "add rigor, breadth, complexity, richness and depth to any inquiry" (Denzin, 2005, p. 5). The study will also review multiple sources of data. The number and variety of participants helps ensure the rigor of the examination and ensures a fuller description of the findings. Additionally, the use of interviewees from multiple government agencies may broaden the applicable context of the findings and thus increase the transferability of the conclusions.

It is important to note that there are different definitions for validity associated with quantitative and qualitative methods. Kvale (1995) highlights the incongruence of qualitative data with modern definitions of validity, particularly with regards to external validity and reliability (Forzano & Gravetter, 2009). Kvale (1995) suggests validity of qualitative research can be considered in the form of craftsmanship validity, communicative validity and pragmatic validity. Qualitative data adds richness and depth, but is inherently subjective. As such, the craftsmanship validity described by Kvale (1995) is particularly important to the observation and association of interview data. Essentially, the researcher is the primary instrument in the collection and interpretation of qualitative findings, so the validity of such findings are a function of the researcher's conduct, ethics and background. This requires that I be reflexive in the interpretation of my qualitative data, the processes of its collection and its ultimate presentation.

Reliability:　For this research, rigor, reflexivity, and design description will increase the likelihood that another researcher could conduct the same experiment, under the same

conditions, and yield similar results. However, the implicitly contextual nature of the qualitative findings limits the concern for their complete replicability (Kvale, 1995). This aspect of reliability could have been increased with a second coder reviewing the themes, but one was not used in this research.

Data Analysis: The data were aggregated and categorized based on the research question they answered. The following steps summarize the process of data aggregation and analysis:

1. All interviews were transcribed and reviewed for discussions of publics, public meetings and agency-public relationships.

2. The discussions of publics were aggregated and reviewed. This aggregated data were discussed in terms of how the data suggests publics are identified and understood by practitioners.

3.   The practitioners' understanding of publics was compared to the theories of publics to examine the consistencies and differences.

4. The discussions of public meetings were aggregated and reviewed. This aggregated data were discussed in terms of how the data suggests practitioner's make meaning of public meetings.

5. The practitioner's aggregated perceptions of public meetings and their value were compared to the theoretical propositions of excellence theory to examine the consistencies and differences.

6.   The discussions of public meetings' effects on agency-public relationships was

        aggregated and reviewed. This aggregated data were discussed in terms of what

        aspects of public meetings effect which relationship outcomes.

7.   The practitioner's perception of the effects on agency-public relationships were

        considered with regards to its application to Hon and J. Grunig's (1999)

        relationship outcomes.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The similar and reoccurring responses in the interview data were categorized into themes. The themes were then broken up based on their relevance to the three research questions. These themes are then discussed in terms of the relevant theory in order to answer the research questions. This section will provide the list of themes which emerged from the data, categorized by research question.

The themes for each research question of first listed as they emerged from the data in the voice of the interviewees, that is, maintaining their language in the themes. The themes are then interpreted and aggregated to facilitate a discussion of their significance in terms of the relevant theory. The explicit transitions from an "emic" to an "etic" expression of the themes indicates my ownership of the descriptions and categories as my interpretations of the data (Potter, 1996, p. 85).

Research Question 1: How are publics defined by public affairs officers in government agencies?

Agency Publics: The first research question sought to explore how government agencies identify and define their publics. The protocol asked questions to elicit the practitioners' descriptions of who their publics were, how they were determined, and what their relationship was to their respective agencies. Accordingly, the publics-related themes that emerged from the interview data related to types of publics and the criteria by which practitioners identified them. These themes included: the general public, specific

publics, legislative publics, internal publics, agency partners, media, issue specific

publics, affect oriented determination, diverse publics, sense of service, policy, external

requirement, agency-culture, personality effects, and relationship partners. These themes

generally address who the agency's publics are and how the agency determines its

publics. These themes are aggregated based on their commonalities in order to reference

the interviewees' collective perceptions through the discussion.

Perceptions of the General Public: The general public is described by the interviewees

as a mass audience of their communication efforts. A team leader in a non-regulatory

federal agency describes why she perceives this mass audience is significant to public

affairs. She says, "it's one of those dilemmas I think every public affairs person gets into

is – you know, it goes back to that, "Are we reaching everybody?"" The interviewees'

efforts to reach everyone accompany a thematic emphasis on a general public.

Practitioners ranged in their usage of this term, using it both as an umbrella term for all of

their publics and as a specific designation of a passive, amorphous audience that is listed

separately from the agency's discrete publics. In essence, the term "general public"

either describes "everyone" or "everyone else" in the interviewees' descriptions of their

publics. The interviewees' descriptions of a general public are significant because they

collectively suggest the perceived significance of mass audiences. This theme carries

through to their broader descriptions of their communication efforts and their perceived

communication responsibilities.

An Inclusive General Public: The interview data suggested that one interpretation of the

general public is as an inclusive term describing all potential audiences. A public affairs

officer in a regulatory state agency describes this perception of a general public as

inclusive and "quite broad." One interviewee refers to this broad audience as "the

general public at large" another as "the public across the board."   A senior practitioner in

a non-regulatory, federal agency further illustrated this broad use of the term, describing

his audience only as "The public... The average citizen and the media." These

descriptions of a general audience did not necessarily preclude audience segmentation. A

public affairs officer in a non-regulatory state agency gives an example. He explains,

"While we reach the general public there are times when we also reach out to special

segments of the population. Seniors, disabled, families, pet owners, various different

segments that may have somewhat different needs." A practitioner in a non-regulatory

federal agency further describes the inclusive, umbrella concept of a general public in

relation to specific segments. She says, "public is everybody out there, and then you

have different stakeholders within that public."

A Separate General Public: The other interpretation of the general public that is

represented in the interview data is the view that the general public is a separate and

additional public requiring a separate communication effort. For example, a public

affairs director in a non-regulatory federal agency ends his list of publics with the catch-

all term, "…news media, interest groups, like Brookings and Heritage, the general

public." This practitioner uses the term "general public" as a more defined addition to his

list of publics, rather than a term indicating the inclusion of their other publics. In this

sense, this interpretation of the general public is as a public different and distinct from

segmented publics, rather than their sum. Of these two interpretations of "general

public" the interviewed practitioners frequently used the term to describe this otherwise

non-differentiated, passive audience, but it is occasionally used as the unsegmented, and inclusive umbrella term.

Requirement: The primary determinant of the interviewees' perceived responsibility to a general public was expressed in the theme of requirement. The descriptions of requirements included perceptions of both inferred and explicit requirements. These requirements were described in terms of explicit legal requirement, requirements of agency policy, cultural requirements, and practical requirements. The explicit requirements included themes like external requirements, or laws, and agency policy. External requirements referred to descriptions of executive orders and legislation that was imposed upon the agency rather than internally generated; agency policy addressed internally generated requirements. The inferred requirements included themes like agency culture, director personality, an individualized sense of service, and the requirements of best communication practice.

Laws and Policy as Explicit Requirements: Legal requirement is often mentioned by interviewees as a primary determinant of their communication publics. An interviewee in a regulatory federal agency provides one example: "We are also required by law to answer each of the formal comments that we receive." Another interviewee in a regulatory federal agency corroborates that, "it's guided certainly by various laws in terms of… how the public should be engaged." Policy requirements were similarly described as a de facto determinants of communication efforts. An interviewee in a regulatory federal agency describes that, "We have a community involvement policy and that outlines in more general terms that we are continuing to provide opportunities for meaningful community involvement." Another interviewee in a non-regulatory federal

agency substantiates his determinations by saying, "It's a policy of the agency." Both

laws and policy, as explicit requirements, are described as at least partial determinants of

who agencies communicate with.

Sense of Service and Personality as Cultural Components: An interviewee in a non-

regulatory state agency alludes to the effects of informal requirements in his

determination of publics by saying, "sometimes it's a policy requirement and sometimes

it's just a sense of the mission of the agency." He further explains the sense of cultural

requirement by saying, "there's a sense of mission that is internalized by many of the

people at our department." This sense of mission, or sense of service is described by

other interviewees as well. Internalized sense of service is mentioned frequently by

interviewees and is referenced through the discussion of the three research questions as a

theme describing the public sector communication context.

This sense of public service has been considered implicitly in previous

discussions of the public sector. For instance, Liu and Horsley (2007) cite Viteritti

(1997) who describes this moral obligation as accompanying the political mandate of

public service (Viteritti in Liu & Horsley, 2007, p. 379). However, Liu and Horsley's

subsequent discussion of "public good" (p. 379) and the observations of other authors

(e.g. Euske, 2003; Allison, 1982) focus more on the structural effects of the lack of

"economic markets" in the public sector (Rainey, Pandey, & Bozeman, 1995, p. 568).

The interviewees instead emphasize an internalization of the "moral obligation"

described by Viteritti (Viteritti in Liu & Horsley, 2007, p. 379). The frequency with

which the interviewees cite this "sense of service" as their impetus for their efforts

suggests that it is at least as significant as the legislative and policy requirements. For

instance, one interviewee in a non-regulatory state agency recognizes both influences by saying, "sometimes it's a policy requirement and sometimes it's just a sense of the mission of the agency" and specifically saying, "there's a sense of mission that is internalized by many of the people at our department." Another interviewee in a non-regulatory federal agency also suggests that this internalized service impetus exists outside of policy, saying "I think it's just part of our culture."

The interviewees also mention the effects individual personalities have on communication practices and the determination of publics. They most frequently cite the personality of a senior manager or the director when describing how certain aspects of a communication program are personality driven. An interviewee in a regulatory federal agency describes how personalities contribute to a sense of shared beliefs by saying, "it's just the philosophy of our director and the philosophy of a lot of the people who work here." Another interviewee in a regulatory federal agency explains, "it's all personality driven."

The descriptions of an internalized sense of service, effects of individual personalities, and shared perceptions were folded into the theme of cultural requirements. These descriptions portrayed a sense of obligation that was not found in explicit requirement or policy, and extended beyond the requirements of best practices. As one public affairs officer in a non-regulatory federal agency describes, "I think it's just part of our culture in terms of public affairs."

Cultural Requirement: Agency culture effectively refers to unwritten or informal policy. The term culture is used to reference the interviewees' descriptions of an influential system of shared beliefs. This is consistent with Eisenberg, Goodall and

Trethewey's (2007) discussion of organizational culture as "as set of common beliefs and values that prescribes a general view of order" (p. 127). This theme does not appear to be an isolated environmental characteristic in academic discussions of the public sector (Liu & Horsley, 2007; Allison, 1982; Ring & Perry, 1985, Euske, 2003).

Practical Requirements: The interviewees also describe practical requirements for interacting with a general public. These requirements relate to perceptions of best communication practice. For example, an interviewee in a non-regulatory federal agency provides an explanation of why her agency interacts with "a pretty diverse group" of publics, which includes "the general American public." She explains, "You know, we really can't be effective as an agency and meet our mission… unless we know what their needs are."

The General Public and Requirement: These themes of requirement describe the contextual factors which interviewees' feel influence their determination of their publics, specifically their perceived responsibility to a general public. However, the terms general public and publics were not exclusive; interviewees frequently described both a general public and segmented publics as their target audiences. As mentioned earlier, interviewees either saw their primary audience as the general public, or they saw the general public as one of their audiences, among (and distinct from) other publics. While communication with a general public was frequently substantiated by explicit or inferred requirements, the communication with specific publics was described as having a more situational determination.

The recognition of cultural influences is subordinated to structural influences in literature describing the public sector (e.g. Liu & Horsley, 2007; Liu, Horsley, &

Levenshus, In press; Euske, 2003; Allison, 1982; Rainey, Pandey, & Bozeman, 1995; Ring & Perry, 1985). This sense of mission, or perceived responsibility to the public is still a consistent theme in the interview data. While this may reflect a positivity bias on the part of the interviewees, it still appears to be a factor which shapes the practitioner's motivation and perceptions of communication goals.

Specific Publics: In addition to describing a general public, the interviewees also described a variety of discrete, segmented publics. The interviewees include industries, communities, consumer groups, interest groups, other agencies, and specific demographics on their lists of publics.   The interviewed practitioners use the terms stakeholder, constituency and public, sometimes interchangeably, but it seems obvious that the underlying philosophy is best represented in the situational theory of publics and less by the stakeholder theory. This is made apparent in the interviewees' predominantly effect-oriented determination of their communication counterparts.

The descriptions of segmented audiences differed from descriptions of a general public in their characteristics and determination. The segmented publics were described as discrete and situational groups which the agencies communicated with.   The specific groups that an agency communicated with were, overall, very different, but there were similarities in how communication efforts were distributed and how publics were determined. The interviewees' described that their responsibility to a general public was primarily a function of various requirements. The segmented publics were determined situationally, and prioritized based on the agencies potential effect on the publics. These themes of effect-orientation and situation-specificity describe a general difference in interviewees' determination of their general public audience and their segmented publics.

Effect-Oriented and Situational Determination: Effect-orientation references the interviewees' descriptions of their determination as being based on an assessment of those publics most affected by the agency. Note that this does not specifically reference the publics' effect on the agency, as this received little mention in the interview data, and then, primarily in reference to intra-governmental publics. Issue specificity addresses the interviewees' descriptions of how the determination of publics "depends on the issue being discussed."

The different agency practitioners individually described very different sets of publics, but the publics were always related to the agency's area of governance. The interview data associated the determination of publics with several factors, including: agency mission, regulatory responsibility, and the particular issue. One practitioner in a federal regulatory agency said, "It truly depends on the issues being discussed," suggesting that both the public and the public's activity are variable depending on the agency's mission. The interview data also suggests that the agency's regulatory function may be a determinant of audience segmentation. This is implicitly supported by the apparent connection between interviewees in non-regulatory agencies and placing less emphasis on segmenting the general public. The data supports the intuitive association between an agency's mission and its audiences. For example, a practitioner in a federal regulatory agency which administers motor vehicle safety describes some of his publics as,

> Trucking companies and bus companies... basically anybody that owns a truck or bus that
> operates on a public highway could be our public. We also have of course, the safety

advocacy groups that want to make sure that the highways are safe. Driver unions, mechanic unions.

While these may be obvious determinants of audiences, the commonality in these determinations of publics is how the agency affects its publics.

The determinants of mission, regulatory responsibility and issue also lend themselves to the situational theory of publics, in which publics can be either active or passive depending on the issue (L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002, p. 324). The interviewees' describe conditionally active and issue oriented publics, which directly ties to the situational theory of publics. An interviewee in a regulatory federal agency gives a general example of how publics' activity relates to the issue, "When we make changes to policy that restricts access, that changes a management strategy, then we see a lot more public engagement from a lot of different groups." The conclusion is that the practitioners both segment situational publics and recognize an undifferentiated general public.

Diversity of Publics: The diversity of publics is a characteristic that frequently is mentioned in academic literature (e.g. Euske, 2003, p. 5). This diversity of publics was also suggested in the interview data. A public affairs officer in a regulatory federal agency explains that the diversity of her agency's publics relates to the broad scope of its mission. She says, "our mission is just so large that we have marine mammal audiences, we have seafood industry audiences, the list is never ending." The diversity in publics was frequently described by the interviewees in terms of regional differences in publics as well as the overall expanse or number of publics. The interviewees note that their agencies' publics vary regionally, which poses a significant challenge, particularly for

federal agencies which have a national scope. An interviewee in a regulatory federal agency describes that different offices, "have different constituents, they have different publics that they're addressing as well and there's different cultures." The interviewees' descriptions of their publics' regional diversity suggests a distributed ownership of agency-public relationships. An interviewee in a regulatory state agency describes that determination of publics is localized due to regional differences. She says, "those offices have direct contact and develop relationships and identify the audiences for their particular region." The interviewees' descriptions of their publics' diversity highlights that interactions with specific publics and the subsequent agency-public relationships are differentiated geographically as well as situationally.

Publics at Public Meetings: The publics that attend the agencies' public meetings are issue specific and affect oriented. These are the situational publics that the interviewees described as the active, effect-oriented, and discrete subsections of the general public that they communicate with. As one interviewee in a regulatory federal agency explained, "It really depends on the subject of the meeting." The attendance of an agency's publics at a public meeting is situational to a large degree, but there are instances where publics serve with greater consistency because of their participation in either an informal or formal advisory capacity. While these still offer informational inputs to the agency, the advisory meetings do not generally allow open attendance, and therefore, do not fit the strict definition of a public meeting used in this research. In the meetings with open attendance, the interviewees explain that there are publics which are frequently in attendance are there because either their personal well being, or that of their community, interest group or industry, is potentially affected by the agency's regulation. Examples of

these audiences included safety advocacy groups being in attendance at agency meetings regulating motor carriers and commercial fishing interests being represented at meetings regulating fisheries. These groups tend to be discrete and durable publics, with whom a sustained agency-public relationship is theoretically feasible.

The interviewees also describe instances where there is a less discrete, general public response. This can be seen in public meeting transcripts where the participants are mostly representing themselves rather than a particular group or interest (e.g. ATDSR, 2009). An interviewee at a regulatory federal agency describes that these situational responses can stem from "visceral emotion." He gives the example of how certain issues receive a broader reaction from the public: "When we make changes to policy that restricts access, that changes a management strategy, then we see a lot more public engagement from a lot of different groups." These situational publics are the impermanent aggregations of the non-differentiated general public described by practitioners. This can be roughly related to J. Grunig and Repper's (1992) conceptualization of "hot issue publics" (p. 139). The distinction between these publics and the more durable and defined publics is important in the later discussion of situational meeting efforts because the input of these less defined and temporally transient publics is rarely considered beyond its situational application.

Media, legislative audiences, and individuals from the general public are also described as attending public meetings, but their role is described as more ancillary and passive. For example, a public affairs officer in a regulatory state agency describes, "we will have representatives often from congressmen or the local Congressman's office and then also [the Senator's] office attend these public meetings just as observers of the

process, and then we'll also have, every once in a while, a member of the media." Public meetings are described as targeted outreach vehicles in the sense that they seek information exchange with specific, affected publics. The practitioners' description of publics attending meetings suggests that public meetings are a participatory vehicle engaging key publics in a dialogue. A public affairs specialist in a non-regulatory state agency explains that the purpose of meetings is to "allow the public to have more of that dialogue."

Relational Partners: One of the protocol questions asked the interviewees whether they perceive a relationship with the different publics they described. The responses indicated that all of the publics described, including the general public, could be considered relational partners. The interviewees' descriptions of their relationship with the general public was again explained in terms of explicit and inferred requirements. One practitioner in a regulatory federal agency says that the relationship with the general public exists because, "everything we do, of course, involves taxpayer money, and they have a right to know what we're doing." A public affairs officer in a regulatory federal agency explains, "Pretty much all aspects of our job are so closely tied with the public and the community, that relationship is very tight and always has been." Another interviewee in a regulatory federal agency describes the pervasive sense of his agency's relationship with the general public: "it's never lost on us that relationship... we have a connection with our public."

The practitioners also describe relationships between specific publics, rather than a general sense of public responsibility. A practitioner in a regulatory state agency describes that it is a departmental goal to "build as good a relationship with

them." Sometimes these relationships are described as working relationships, particularly with intra-governmental publics. For instance, one practitioner in a non-regulatory state agency describes that his agency has a "very close working relationship" with other government offices. Another public affairs officer in a regulatory federal agency describes his agencies' relationship with legislative audiences. He says, "we have a very good working relationship with the Senator and his staff, and all the elected officials in the area."

The interviewees describe relationships existing between all of the publics that they describe: the general public, specific publics, media and intra-governmental publics. The explanation of why the relationship exists is largely redundant with their discussion of why they determine their publics to be their audiences. However, the development of these relationships is not always perceived as the responsibility of the communication function. For instance, a practitioner in a non-regulatory federal agency describes that relationship management can fall to the program level, where the exchange is taking place. She says,

> A lot of times, the particular groups that are responding back to, like, to these open calls for information through the *Federal Register*, they're constituencies that the bureau or office has already been involved with… And so, they have that established relationship, so they really don't need us in that loop.

In other instances, this division of relationship ownership is not situational, but structural. The best example is the interviewees' descriptions of congressional affairs offices. An interviewee in a regulatory federal agency describes that these

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communication efforts are structurally and procedurally divided. He observes that his agency has "many avenues [of communication] and many different audiences." Relational responsibilities generally appear to be distributed along these perceived divisions.

Intra-Governmental Publics: The intra-governmental category represents two audience groups suggested by the interview themes: legislative audiences and inter-agency audiences. Legislative audiences include audiences in both the executive and legislative branches. Inter-agency audiences are other agencies and governmental entities in the different levels of government. The inter-agency audience group effectively includes government audiences both internal and external to the agency. Both inter-agency and legislative audiences are similar in that they are determined by their effect on the agency, rather than by the agency's effect on them. In this sense they differ from the effect-orientation of the general and segmented publics and utility determination of media.

Legislative Audiences: The legislative audiences described in the interview data include congressional committees, audiences at congressional hearings, and the office of the executive. The categorical differentiation of these audiences seems to be mirrored in the structure of agencies' communication function, particularly for congressional audiences. The best example of this is the frequent use of congressional affairs teams or offices in government agencies. As one practitioner in a non-regulatory federal agency illustrates, "we have a congressional affairs team, because one of our requirements, and of course, you know, I'm sure you can appreciate, it's important that Congress understands what we're doing. So we have a - there's a team that works strictly with

them as their constituents." Another interviewee in a federal agency explains, "we're so heavily regulated by Congress and the requirements that we need to follow."

The dedication of audiences to congressional affairs directly reflects the affect that Congress has on the agency as a legislative authority. This influence extends to the communication and participatory practices of the agency, particularly public meetings. One of the major reasons for this is that the regulatory process is frequently initiated in Congress (Kerwin, 2003). At this point the rule making process is working with a deadline, and this deadline logistically limits the agencies' outreach activities in a rule making process. An interviewee in a regulatory federal agency describes this effect, "I think it's more transparent than people think but I think the problem is that because the amendment process, once it begins, it becomes tied to timelines and deadlines for certain things that have to happen."

The interaction with the legislative audiences occurs at the intersection between elected and professional government. This intersection introduces many of the political influences described by the interviewees. The effects are described frequently by the interviewees. One interviewee in a regulatory federal agency provides an example of these effects noting,

> The political reality is if the Senate majority leader sends a letter to our superintendent or the director saying, "I do not support a fee increase at this time," that is going to weigh very heavily in the decision to move forward.

He goes on to describe that Congress's effect on the agency is "because of that control over our purse strings... they can directly affect [the agency's] operations through budget increases or budget decreases." Another practitioner in a regulatory federal

agency explains the effects of Congress's legislation saying, "There's a huge chain reaction that happens based upon regulations that we in essence have to make because of the way laws have been set up through Congress." She also explains that the advisory council that her agency works with is also "set up by Congress." These responsibilities, in part, help ensure the agencies' responsibility to the general public, and to this end the elected audiences can also be used as a weathervane for public support. An interviewee in a federal regulatory agency again explains, "we're using the Congressional Delegation... as our market research before we actually go out to the public."

The legislative audiences of agencies are segmented for a directed communication effort because of the significance of their effect on the agency. The involvement is described by the interviewees as a source of the politics and legislation which are characteristics of the public sector (Liu, Horsley, & Levenshus, In press). The exchange with these audiences is different from the exchange with inter-agency audiences, primarily because interviewees emphasize that legislative audiences actively affect them, where as the effects of inter-agency publics are described as more passive. An interviewee in a regulatory federal agency explains that the inhibiting effects of inter-agency publics arise more from their lack of involvement than their involvement. She says, "Collaboration doesn't come naturally when one agency has the responsibility to mandate and is measured on it while somebody else only has a piece of the action. So collaboration between non-equals can be a little awkward."

Internal and Inter-Agency Publics: This category of publics addresses the themes of internal publics and other government entities with which the interviewees interact. The specific examples include descriptions of working relationships and shared

responsibilities. Internal publics are included in this category because the interviewees seemed to associate them with their working partners rather than specific communication audiences. A public affairs director in a non-regulatory federal agency provides an example of this association in his list of publics. He ends his list with, "…the State Department, the White House, a number of other agencies, including like EPA and others that are – they're primarily in – we're calling internal publics." This description of internal publics absorbs the completely external focus of agency communication in public affairs. In other words, the interviewees' descriptions of internal publics described publics that were internal to the government, but still external to the agency. Publics internal to the agency were not mentioned in the interview data. The closest example is of an interviewee producing informational products for the director.

The interagency category primarily relates to the interviewees' descriptions of the other government agencies and entities that they work with in achieving their communication goals. The interviewees described joint agency meetings and outreach activities used to facilitate their efforts. One public affairs officer in a federal regulatory agency explains, "we do like to partner out with folks… that way makes everything quicker when we're working jointly together." The term "partner" is used by other interviewees to describe these inter-agency audiences. For example, a public affairs practitioner in a regulatory federal agency describes the presence of agency partners at public forums. She says, "we invited anybody who wanted to come to this forum and all of our partners who were involved." This sense of partnership perceived by the interviewees speaks to a mutuality in dealing with inter-agency publics that is not present in their descriptions of legislative publics.

Media:　　　The interviewees' described media with sufficient frequency and detail to suggest that this was a third major division of the agencies' publics. Even with this very general segmentation into the general public, media and governmental audiences, the interviewees' subsequent discussion of these publics illustrates that media commands the greatest attention. Media, in the subsequent discussion, is described as professional journalism or commercial media. The proportionality of agencies' distribution of communication resources seems to reflect the importance of media. This is evidenced in the interview data, not only in the descriptions of media's importance, but also in the number of instances where "media relations" is built into the office or position titles of the communication practitioners.

A practitioner in a large, regulatory federal agency illustrates the importance of media in saying, "90 percent of my actions are either media requests or media initiatives on our end." Another practitioner in a regulatory federal agency also says that her responsibilities are "mostly talking with media." This is not surprising as the media-centrism in agency communication efforts is frequently cited as a defining characteristic of the term "public affairs" (e.g. Lee, 2008, p. 8; Creighton, 2005, p. 9). What is interesting is that the media focus seemed to extend to most of the interviewees, even when their office was titled something other than public affairs (i.e. regulatory affairs or public information). The interviewees' responses help to describe how media centrism of the public sector is married to its public service orientation and its unique perception of the general public.

Determination of Media:　　　An interviewee in a non-regulatory federal agency describes the perceived significance of media as a public affairs public. She says, "So the

media is important. From this office's perspective it's probably the most important.

"The media is described as the primary public for agencies' dedicated communicators

because of agencies' responsibility to a general public. A practitioner in a non-regulatory

federal agency describes this relationship:

> The media is important because it disseminates information to the public. It is a
>
> conduit through which we communicate to the public, as well as to other
>
> audiences such as members of Congress or the administration.

This determination of media suggests that it is identified based on its utility in

facilitating the communication between an agency and its other publics. This

determination differs from the effect-oriented and situational determination of other

segmented publics and the constraint related determination of intra-governmental publics.

Changing Media Relationship: The interview data suggests that new media are

getting increased attention, and may be replacing professional media as a communication

conduit. A practitioner describes that her regulatory state agency has already made

changes: "We have more dedicated staff now to focus primarily on social media." The

interviewees generally describe an increase in their agencies' use of social media, and it

is frequently cited as a communication vehicle. An interviewee in a regulatory federal

agency has observed "a tremendous increase in electronic media." Another practitioner

in a regulatory federal agency describes the media his agency uses by saying, "We also

maintain a Facebook fan site, our own government website, and then also we have a

Twitter site." Another practitioner explains that her regulatory state agency is "slowly

creeping towards that way because the budget situation has forced us to stop printing as

much as we used to be able to."

Barriers to Change: There still appear to be factors limiting the use of social media in the government context. Staffing, red tape, and training are all mentioned as barriers to the use of social media. A member of a non-regulatory federal agency describes a general sense of structural constraint in the use of social media, saying, "we don't do any blogging. We don't do any tweeting or anything like that just because the [department] is not yet set up for that." Ease of use may also be a factor, as training is not always available for the use of newer media. An interviewee in a non-regulatory state agency specifically describes the lack of training, saying, "Although I have no training as a web person, I maintain the site that we have." A practitioner in a state agency also provides a description of how access requirements provide an impediment to the use of social media:

> We are looking at posting some instructional videos to the public on what they can do to be prepared on YouTube. The thing we have to overcome with that is accessibility for visually impaired and hearing impaired people so we're kind of figuring our way around that.

There are instances where effects of "federalism" and "politics" (Liu, Horsley, & Levenshus, In press, p. 2) potentially inhibit the development of new media and communication in general. One example, brought up by an interviewee, is the inhibiting effect of Virginia's attempt to create and external agency to manage the state's information technology. As a result of creating a private Virginia Information Technologies Agency (VITA) "The problems have affected almost every state agency that uses a computer -- a prison was left without inbound phone service for hours, the Virginia State Police in Newport News lost Internet access for more than three days and

computers in DMV offices crashed" (Kumar & Helderman, 2009). This type of event

exemplifies the operating environment of government practitioners which poses a

potential barrier to government's effective use of new media.

New Media, Same Publics: Despite these factors the use of social media appears to be a

trend. One question is whether the new media will be used to reach a general audience or

specific segments of the public. There are several indications that the new media are

being adapted primarily for one way, public information targeted at a general audience.

For example, of the different social media mentioned by interviewees, Twitter is most

prominently mentioned. An interviewee in a non-regulatory state agency describes the

attraction to such non-interactive media are preferred because of the relatively small

investment of time and staff that is involved, and the large audience reached. He says,

> Even though everything is free in that you don't have to pay for YouTube, you
>
> don't have to pay for Facebook, you don't have to pay for Twitter, there is a huge
>
> cost depending on how you use them in human capital, in time... For example, we
>
> have a Twitter account and our Twitter account merely pushes Twitter messages
>
> out telling people when something is happening in the state or directing them to
>
> our website about a press release or something on our website. We don't monitor
>
> Twitter accounts. We don't receive tweets. We merely push them out and
>
> encourage people who want to re-tweet them. We do not in any way, shape or
>
> form monitor it or do any incoming tweets.

 The similarity in the use of traditional, professional media and new media used in

one-way formats suggests that agencies have a propensity (structural or philosophical) to

use new media in old ways. This suggests that new media use by government agencies is likely to only fill an informational gap left by the recession of professional journalism. *Potential Use and Potential Growth*: The terminology alone, social media, implies two way communication, so it is reasonable to assume that improvements to vehicles of exchange will serve those audiences which are currently involved in two way communication with agencies. One recent example of new media applied to old forums is in the improvements to the electronic docket system on regulations.gov. As one interviewee in a regulatory federal agency explains, "Now the regulations.gov site actually will take WAV files or any type of electronic file... as a submission." Although this potentially improves access to a traditional forum, old arguments are still being revisited.

The changes in the areas of electronic and social media seem to improve public information more significantly than public interaction. The interview data suggests that electronic media may offer limited improvement to some informational products (like the e-docket example). However, there are currently barriers to the adoption of more interactive media. One of the primary barriers is the fact that the universally lean communication staffs are not equipped with enough personnel to take on an increased volume of input that would be introduced by new vehicles of exchange. An interviewee in a regulatory federal agency gives a small example of the potential increase; she says, "the last administration had a blog, the staff time that was taken in reviewing every comment was quite extensive and they did review every comment... one topic... garnered them about 30,000 responses." This is also empirically evidenced by the day to day examples of the Departments of Motor Vehicles that does not list agency phone numbers

for the general public and government practitioners who do not list their email addresses and contact information.

Research Question 2: How do public affairs officers in government agencies make meaning of public meetings?

Themes: The second research question sought to explore how public affairs practitioners perceived public meetings in relation to their broader communication responsibilities. The specific protocol questions asked the interviewees when and why they conduct public meetings and what role they play in the effort. The resultant interview data suggested the following themes relating to the practitioners' perceptions of public meetings: separate from communication, minimal responsibility, program level direction, difference in regulatory responsibilities, non-required meetings, limited decisional input, procedural value, situational value, barriers, and multiple formats. These themes relate to the practitioners' perceptions of public meetings' value, their purpose, and what role the practitioners play in them. This list of themes is presented as "emic" evidence in that it represents the "categories and meanings of the… person[s] being studied" (Potter, 1996, p. 85). What follows is my interpretation and organization of the interviewees' themes.

Most of the themes which related to the second research question dealt with practitioners' perceptions of public meetings' value. Two of these themes addressed the value of the meetings' information output, specifically public comment. These themes were descriptions of the public comments' conditional value as a decisional input and limited use outside of outside of specific meeting efforts. The two themes collectively suggested that this information had value and effect in agency decisions, but that this

value and effect was situational. Two themes relating to meeting format also conditioned the practitioners' perceptions of the value of public meetings. The interview data suggested that there are many different meeting formats differing in the degree of formality and the amount of dialogue. The themes of "multiple formats" and "value relative to format" discuss these differences and associations the practitioners make between these differences and the respective effort's value. Finally, the interviewees described that the meeting process itself had value outside of its informational products. Interviewees described that meetings increased the appearance of access and involvement, which had effects on agency-public relationships. The practitioners' discussions of these effects were reduced to the common theme of the public meetings' procedural value.

The Relationship of Public Affairs and Public Involvement:　　　　The interviewees described different interpretations of how public meetings fit within the responsibilities of the communication function. The protocol asked whether the public affairs function was involved in public meetings, and the responses ranged from "No. Typically not" to descriptions of limited involvement. A public involvement practitioner in a regulatory federal agency says that public involvement "isn't public affairs. It simply isn't." These responses illustrate the interviewees' interpretations of the intersection of public involvement and public affairs. As the same public involvement practitioner summarizes, "There may be some overlap, but the purpose is different." She goes on to explains this difference in purposes:

　　　　Communication was more or less a one-way thing where the biggest point was getting across your information. And with public involvement it's at least a two-way

street... you may not have at the end what you thought you would have, but it might even be better because of the involvement and the collaborative nature of problem solving.

The separation of these terms is mirrored by a differentiation in responsibilities. The evidence given by interviewees is that the use of public meetings is a public involvement activity that frequently falls to the subject matter experts. The role of public affairs is related to public involvement only in its public information capacity. An interviewee in a non-regulatory state agency describes,

> We publicize the meeting so the people know where to go and they can attend. And then also make sure that we do have the subject matter experts on hand so that they can answer any questions or discuss whatever the issue might be.

Overall, the interview data suggests that an agency's public participation activities are frequently divorced from their public affairs efforts. This seems to be particularly true in the case of the statutorily required meetings involved in the regulatory process. Even outside of the interview data, there are indications of this. Consider the diversity in the titles of agency contacts listed in the Federal Register under public meeting or public comment notifications. These include the general counsels, program coordinators, regional offices, policy divisions, or specific docket administrators. The conduct and management of meetings and participative activities can be the responsibility of the legal department, a division dedicated to regulatory support, or whoever is the specialist on the subject. It is obvious that managing public participation is not the universally accepted province of a communication department within government agencies.

Minimal Responsibility: The limited involvement of public affairs in public meetings was an evident and reoccurring theme in the interview. As one interviewee in a non-

regulatory state agency summarized, "Our role in public meetings is very limited." The

theme is termed "minimal responsibility" because some practitioners played a role in

publicizing or logistically supporting the meetings while few actually attended the

meetings or systematically used or reviewed the public comment. A public affairs

practitioner in a regulatory federal agency describes this limited involvement: "Public

affairs… they kind of coordinate those sessions." Another interviewee further describes

that, "we publicize the meeting so the people know where to go and they can attend."

The interviewees' involvement is frequently limited to meeting publicity; as an

interviewee from a regulatory state agency describes, "We support them by writing and

promoting the public involvement opportunities." The practitioners did not typically

have a responsibility for conducting the meeting or for compiling and assimilating the

informational products. The publicity effort and response to public comments was

described by the interviewees, but the theme seeks to separate that topical effort from

actual interaction in the public participation and ownership of the informational products.

This theme addresses the broader impression of the interview data which suggests a

divorce between public affairs and public meetings.

Program Level Direction: The lack of involvement on the part of the communication

professionals was addressed in part with the subsequent theme of program level direction.

This stemmed from follow up questions which sought to answer the question, "If you are

not managing public meeting efforts, who is?" The interview data suggested that public

meetings were typically a program specific effort. In other words, subject matter experts

were conducting the meetings and assimilating the public comment with their data. As

an interviewee in a regulatory federal agency describes, "generally we would require a

subject matter expert to be involved with [the] meeting... to be able to intelligently speak to the public about an issue or the problem." A public affairs practitioner in regulatory federal agency describes that this is, in part, a matter of practicality: "No one person could physically go to all the public engagements and do everything at every center. So you do have to divide and conquer and share that responsibility to those that are closest to the issues." Another interviewee in a non-regulatory federal agency describes that this is also an effort to improve access:

> The decision is decentralized communications, because our experts are the people who lead the teams who actually do the work and write the reports. So we, in the interest of transparency, make those experts available so they can speak to the public about the work they have done.

The overall impression of the interviewees' descriptions is of a system in which the public meeting effort is owned by the subject matter experts who are developing the regulation and the communication function serves a support role. A public affairs officer in a federal regulatory agency describes this relationship: "So there's assistance from us, but most of the time those big programmatic type of issues are handled by the reps themselves, as far as conducting and running the meetings."

Effects of Diffused Communication Responsibilities: The diffusion of public meeting responsibilities does not necessarily reflect a lack of strategic management, because the diffusion of responsibilities appears to reflect the perceived merits of such organization. A practitioner in a regulatory federal agency analogizes this distribution of communication responsibilities to that of fire departments: "Public affairs specialists are sort of like a full-time fire department and then everybody else, basically [is] a different

72

degree of volunteer firemen." The delegation of meeting responsibilities to the subject

matter experts compliments the limitations of small, media oriented public affairs staffs;

characteristics that many interviewees say exist in their agencies. Interviewees describe

that public meeting efforts are initiated and managed by individual programs, and the

public affairs office becomes involved in a process, at the request of the initiating office,

to help with specific communication activities. The obvious result is that the

involvement of public affairs staff is determined by the initiating office, not by the

communication specialists.

An interviewee in a regulatory federal agency describes a negative effect

of the communication functions' lack of involvement in public meeting efforts:

> Most of us in this organization we're scientists and whether we're working on the
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> regulatory side or the research side, mostly everybody has at minimum a
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> bachelor's degree but I would say a master's and even higher. The public doesn't
>
> understand that and so that's where their frustration comes from because they
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> think that we're talking at that level deliberately so they don't understand it and so
>
> we're kind of keeping them in the dark. And that's one of the things where we
>
> really tried to bring those presentations and the terminology we use in them down
>
> to a level that's a lot more respectful to them so they do understand what's
>
> happening.

This observation refers to the fact that the subject matter experts are not the

communication experts and yet public meetings are, in the words of the interviewees, "a

forum for the people to communicate." The interviewees recognize both benefits and

detriments in the subject-matter experts' ownership of public meetings. On the one hand

it improves access to the experts and shares the workload, but on the other hand, greater involvement of communication specialists may improve the meetings' effectiveness. This may be an effect of the perception that effective communication is not a specialty in comparison to things like subject matter expertise or a media relations specialty. This is suggested in the interview data in the frequency with which the interviewees describe their communication responsibilities being delegated elsewhere. For example, a public affairs practitioner in a state agency describes that some inquiry response functions are assigned to whoever is available. She says, "Well, they might not necessarily be the subject matter expert or communication expert because unfortunately now with budget and things like that we pull resources from where we can get them." This is consistent with Liu and Horsley's (2007) observation that communications is undervalued in the public sector.

Decisional Effect: One of the primary criticisms of public meetings' collection of public comment is that it is only the appearance of participation, and that the comment has no real effect; however, the interview data sheds some light on this subject. The interviewees do give examples of public comment effecting their agencies' decisions. One practitioner in a regulatory federal agency generally describes how the regulatory process is affected by public comment, saying, "there are times where we have not implemented rules and regulations because of public input."

The interviewees described the actual decision making process in rule-making as an impartial weighing of effects. There are several quotes throughout the interview data which describe how public comment is weighed in agency decisions. One interviewee in a regulatory federal agency says,

I think in some cases public comments is weighed – in the cases where they really

don't have enough information to judge what the impacts are gonna be 'cause the

data is just not there - I think that public comments may be considered more. Not

more than the science but it may take place where you can't get enough.

The same practitioner goes on to explain that public comment and other inputs are

weighed according to their relative strengths, not by a concrete matrix.

They look at public comment and they look at the science and they make that

decision... but I don't think that one's gonna outweigh the other. I think it's just

one of the decision points that they have to take into consideration.

Another interviewee in a regulatory federal agency gives an example of how

public comment can be subordinated to other inputs based on its informational quality.

She says, "their input is used a lot in this agency and sometimes we can't use it because

it's not, you know, it's like your data stinks... our data has been peer reviewed and etc.,

etc." The decisional process described by the interviewees is one where the public

comment does have an effect on agency decisions, but only as one of the inputs in a

complex assessment. A public affairs practitioner in a regulatory state agency describes

an effect of this decisional process when she says, "Sometimes public involvement

doesn't necessarily mean we're asking an opinion… Sometimes it's just sharing of

information." Her example illustrates that involvement does not always equate to

decisional effect.

Public Meeting Value: A consistent theme in the interview data is the

interviewees' recognition of the value of public meetings, in both the product and

process. A practitioner in a regulatory federal agency explains the fundamental

importance of public input in government agencies. He says, "I think government at all levels has seen the merits of public forums and values the input of our citizens. It's the basic precept of what sets the United States government apart from any other government in the world." Overall, the interview data suggests that the value of public comment and public interaction as an informational input would warrant the use of public meetings even without explicit requirement. As one practitioner in a non-regulatory state agency explains, "Although many of these public hearings and things of that sort are required by law, they - I think we would want to do them anyway... because they serve the long term mission of the agency." Quotes like these indicate that the interviewees recognize that public interaction facilitates agencies' public service missions in addition to informing their decisions.

Decisional Value: The public meeting is a vehicle for soliciting public comment for consideration in agencies' rule-making process (Kerwin, 2003). The interview data suggests that this purpose of public meetings, as a situation-specific decision aid, results in the emphasis on subject matter expertise rather than communication expertise. This is evidenced by interviewees descriptions of subject matter experts being in charge of public meeting efforts. A public affairs practitioner in a state agency explains is the responsibility of the subject experts: "That's not something that a PA would – that's something that would be referred to the [subject] experts." A practitioner in a regulatory federal agency describes that the scientific data or subject knowledge gathered by the experts is weighed against information generated from public comment only where it exposes a blind spot. He says, "I think the public comment can kind of fill that gap. But I think they have to weight both." Another interviewee in a non-regulatory federal agency

describes that comments are applied at the discretion of the experts: "They're all reviewed and the ones that are appropriate are incorporated." This indicates that the public comment information is only conditionally applied to the experts' knowledge, so its decisional value is limited.

Informational Value: After exploring the use of public comment in agency decisions, the follow up questions sought to explore any remaining value that the public comment may have to the agency. The interview data suggests that the informational value of public comment may exceeds its use as a situational, decisional input. A public affairs practitioner in a regulatory state agency specifically describes the informational value of the public comment that comes out of public meetings. She says, "It's completely valuable because you're getting... very different points of view and it's incredibly valuable." An interviewee in a non-regulatory state agency also provides an example of the value of public input. He says, "those organizations [preservation organizations] keep us in the loop about things happening on the ground that we might not otherwise be aware of." The interview data illustrates that the practitioners perceive the value of public meetings as an environmental scanning opportunity.

The interview data also suggests that the interviewees recognize public meetings to be an opportunity for conflict avoidance. As an interviewee in a regulatory federal agency explains, "A lot of times, we choose to go ahead and do that public engagement to save us the trouble of having controversy blown out of proportion later by not doing that public engagement." The interviewees recognize that their public can affect their operating environment. A public affairs officer in a regulatory federal agency explains, "If you have the public against the [agency] and writing to their elected officials, that can

affect that [agency's] budget, or it can affect other operations in the [agency]. So, we're very sensitive to how the public sees our operations and interprets our decisions."

Procedural Value: Aside from the informational product value of the public comment, there is also a procedural value in simply having forums for public participation. An interviewee in a non-regulatory state agency explains that even adversarial meetings have benefit in this regard.

> Even as we sometimes have contentious public hearings... I still think in the end the agency is better served because you're trying to get the word out, as I've said, preservation is meaningless if it's not supported at a grassroots level.

> Another interviewee in regulatory federal agency explains, "it is important that we have positive interactions with the public so that they maintain that advocacy for the [agency]." This "advocacy" translates to public support for the agency and its missions, again suggesting an improvement to the organizations operating environment and agency-public relationships. This procedural value of meetings exists outside of the decisional value of the meetings' decisional or informational products. The procedural effects of public meetings present one area where greater communication involvement may have a positive effect.

Barriers: The fact that practitioners recognize the value of the informational products, contrasts with their limited participation in required meetings. The practitioners primarily cite time, funding, and staffing as a limiting factor for their involvement, but not necessarily the availability of the information. An interviewee in a regulatory federal agency describes these barriers as "the lack of kind of time, talent and treasure." An interviewee in a regulatory state agency explains that, "I would love to see

the actual written comments that came in but I just haven't had time to look at them."

Another practitioner in a non-regulatory federal agency also describes the barriers to

using the public comment as a source of incoming communication,

> You know, I haven't really jumped into that whole process and asked too much
>
> about it, because I have so much other stuff to focus on... And we get too much
>
> other information in... I think if we had the manpower and we had the time, we
>
> would... I think it would be a valuable piece of information to have.

Public affairs practitioners indicate that they have access to the public comment

received at public meetings, but they do not seem to prioritize the effort of reviewing it

above their other communication responsibilities. One public affairs practitioner

describes how her state agency even makes the public comment available online, further

indicating that the information is there if the communicators want it.

In summary of these observations, interviewees describe public comment as being

one input among many considered in agency decision making. Overall, the interview

data suggests that the public comment is available to public affairs practitioners, and that

they recognize its value, but certain barriers inhibit their further consideration of this

information. The result is public comment is received, but in instances where it is not

applicable to a specific decision, it frequently is perceived as having no further value to

the agency.

Differences in Meeting Format: Responsibility for the management and execution of

public meetings is partially determined by the type of meeting. The regulatory meetings,

such as statutorily required public hearings, offer a greater level of effect, but the

interviewees describe the formality of the meeting format to be a barrier to two way

communication. The interviewees also suggest these regulatory meetings tend to be managed by subject matter experts. However, the interviewees describe greater participation in informal, non-required meetings. A public affairs practitioner in a regulatory federal agency explains that the public affairs function is not even involved with these formal, regulatory meetings, but is involved with other, non-required public meetings: "They're kind of like a requirement so… that's not even in the purview of our [office] to do that. When we go out and have like these informal meetings then I am very instrumental in working with those."

Some agencies, that are not bound by statute to conduct formal hearings, fulfill their public comment requirements in different formats. As one practitioner in a federal regulatory agency explains, "our requirements are to provide a way for the public to give their feedback, and we can do it in several ways." This frees some agencies to chose more engaging or interactive formats for receiving their statutorily required public comment in rule-making processes. Where statue requires a formal hearing, some agencies have additional, informal meetings in order to address the communication barriers presented by the one-way, formal hearing format. Another interviewee in a regulatory federal agency describes how his agency, "holds more informal meetings just to discuss a variety of topics and get away from the more strict public hearing format that's usually done."

This description of the variations in public meeting formats represents a continuum of formality ranging from formal, required meetings to informal, elective meetings. This continuum of format rigidity is mirrored by an increase in the interviewees' involvement. As the meeting format is relaxed, the communicators

frequently describe greater involvement. This is illustrated in agencies which have redundant meeting efforts (formal hearings and informal meetings) in the same regulatory effort. In this instance, communicators appear to be more involved in the informal meeting, despite the fact that the publics and the topic are likely to be the same for formal hearing.

Regulatory Role and Outreach Efforts: There also appears to be a relationship between the use of informal meetings and whether the agency is regulatory or non-regulatory. As one practitioner in a non-regulatory federal agency describes, "we don't hold any public meetings unless... we have to do so." He goes on to say, "we don't get much information from our publics." While agency type implicitly determines its use of required, regulatory meetings, it is not the sole determinant of whether meetings are required. A practitioner in a non-regulatory agency explains that sometimes, even though his agency is non-regulatory, "it's a statutory requirement that there be public hearings." In other words, the interviewees describe that there are statutorily required meetings that are not associated with a rule-making effort.

The effect-orientation of the agencies' publics is again suggested in the interviewees association of their agencies' scope of effect with the extent of their outreach efforts. For example, a policy practitioner in a regulatory federal agency explains that the broad scope of her agency's mission areas determine their involvement efforts. She says, "People all breathe. They drink water. They like the earth, you know. What we do affects them." If an agency is non-regulatory, it makes sense that it has less direct public-effect because it is not making rules that are binding on the public. Interviewees describe a degree of separation between the public and non-regulatory

agencies, which is described as resulting in a focus on legislative and inter-agency audiences in these agencies.

A correlation between regulatory function and public responsibility may be implicit, but this may be perceived by participants as a broader correlation between legal requirement and public involvement. Essentially, it is this perceived correlation which provides the foundation for criticisms that government agencies only do the minimum required by law. However, the interviewees' frequently mention instances where they exceed the legal requirements in their efforts to increase public involvement and improve informational products. This suggests that the regulatory function of an agency moderates practitioners' perceptions of public responsibility, but only in so far as it increases the effect the organization has on its publics. The relationship of effect and regulatory capacity is intuitive, but recognizing this relationship is essential in understanding the relationship of regulatory capacity and public involvement efforts. It may not be necessary to routinely make an equivalent effort for public involvement where the public is not directly affected, but the risk is that the non-routine nature of public interactions will make such efforts less effective when they become necessary. In other words, lack of a regulatory role should not negate the need for agency-public interaction.

Research Question 3: How do public affairs officers perceive the effect of public

meetings on agency-public relationships?

The interviewees' descriptions of agency-public relationships were generally

limited, suggesting that relationship building efforts were not a primary focus in their

public affairs efforts. However, several themes emerged from the interview data which

described how practitioners perceived public meetings as affecting agency-public

relationships. These themes included contributing factors, mutual benefit, and limited

relationship building. In addition to examining emergent themes, I looked for Hon and

Grunig's relationship dimensions. Specifically, I examined whether trust, control

mutuality, commitment and satisfaction were supported in the interview data. While the

support varied, with trust receiving the most frequent mention, all of these dimensions

were referenced to some degree. Collectively, the interviewees' descriptions conveyed

that public meetings had an effect on agency-public relationship, but this effect was

considered ancillary to their purpose of providing a decisional input.

Contributing Factors: The interviewees describe several aspects of public

meetings which affected agency public relationships. Dialogue, access, and transparency

were all mentioned as aspects of agencies' communication efforts which contributed to

these relationship effects. A public affairs officer in a state agency describes that

meetings are "more productive" when they have more dialogue. A social scientist in a

regulatory federal agency also describes the relationship of public meetings, dialogue and

relationship effects. He says,

> There was a lot of tension that was gonna come with this amendment. So we held
>
> the informal meeting and it seemed to diffuse a lot of it. And then they set up a

better working relationship with the industry. And then I think that amendment

proceeded a lot further- a lot more smoothly. And since that time I think that the

agency and the councils have begun to try and utilize an informal meeting in a

general sense to kind of allow the public – to have more of that dialogue.

He similarly associates access with positive agency-public relationship effects.

He says, "I think that's been one of the benefits of it … It's given a little bit more access;

I think a better feeling from the public with that access."

Transparency is also positively associated with relationship effects, but one

interviewee notes that transparency can potentially have positive and negative effects on

agency-public relationships. He explains that, "The key is, is how do we put that – how

do we manage transparency in a way that doesn't end up – where that information

doesn't end up being misinterpreted, or misconstrued, and causing a larger problem in the

end?" The interviewees' descriptions of factors contributing to agency-public

relationships indicates that public meetings, as vehicles for public involvement, are

perceived as having the ability to affect relationships. The subsequent interview

questions were probes which sought to explore how and if the practitioners made

assessments of this effect.

Limited Relationship Building: The theme of limited relationship building reflected

the practitioners' perceptions of differentiated responsibilities to both a general public

and their agencies' key stakeholders: a perception which carried through the discussions

of all three of the research questions. The interviewees frequently described a difference

between communication efforts which sought to build sustained relationships, and those

that only sought one way communication. The interviewees described this in terms of

their agencies' responsibilities, the issue being discussed, and the nature of the publics. Overall, the perception was one where relationship building efforts were contingent. This contingency did not merely reflect agencies prioritizing key constituencies for greater outreach effectiveness; this extended to a basic segregation of communication efforts between public affairs and public involvement. The overall impression is one where the informational products from both the public information efforts and public involvement efforts of the agency are used in different capacities.

The relationship building effects offered by the interactive aspects of public meetings are perceived as ancillary to its role in providing the best decisional information for the agency. One public involvement practitioner in a regulatory federal agency describes: "The object is in some ways relationship building as well as a good science outcome." This interviewee described a relationship building role in public involvement but suggested it was "different" from the relationship building that is done in public affairs. She describes relationship building in public affairs: "It's not for the sake of the relationship to get an issue dealt with for that community. It's to get good coverage to ensure that whatever is being talked about at that meeting or that press conference or whatever it is gets the right coverage so that you get your point across." This suggests relationship building in public affairs is a more asymmetrical effort focusing on agency advocacy. Some of the interviewees seem to support this assumption in their perceptions of agency-public relationships. For instance, a public affairs practitioner in a state agency says, "my view is that any time you're dealing with the public you're getting the word out, you're serving, in the long run, your agency."

The interviewees seem to recognize the potential relationship effects of public involvement, but the same interviewees are not involved in the meeting efforts. For instance, a public affairs practitioner in a state agency describes the relationship effects of public involvement in public meetings,

I think it improves the relationship because we're making a strong effort to involve the public early and throughout a project. We're directly asking them for input to provide information to us and opinions and coming back full circle and saying, "We've heard you. Here's how we've updated our document and our plan and here it is available."

When this practitioner was asked whether public affairs was involved in the meeting efforts, the response was, "typically not." This implies that positive relationship effects are viewed as a measure of a successful public information effort, but not as a broader communication goal.

One point noted by the interviewees is that it is difficult to get past the general public orientation in public affairs to involve specific publics in relationship building. A public affairs practitioner in a state agency explains, "I'm not really sure that you can get the general public more involved because I think a lot of efforts are made to broadcast this information but it's just not something of interest until they are somehow affected, and often times that's only after the amendment is done." This explanation also illustrates the rationale of the agencies' effect-oriented segmentation of publics because it indicates that the affected publics are likely to become active if they are not determined as specific outreach targets before the regulatory effort.

Relationship Outcomes: The interview data does indicate that practitioners recognize the value of Hon and Grunig's (1999) relationship outcomes as evaluative dimensions, and have a limited use of these in evaluations of their communication, but not necessarily with relationship building in mind. This seems to reflect the observation that the public meetings are frequently situation-specific communication efforts. This pattern in the data suggests that the dimensions are used as process measures rather than outcome measures.

Trust and Satisfaction: The interviewees most frequently evaluate agency-public relationships based on their perceptions of their publics' satisfaction. One public involvement practitioner in a federal agency describes that these are frequently informal evaluations. She says: "You do see quite a bit of repeat participation from folks who have had a positive experience and then they bring others." She goes on to say, "Sometimes there are thank you emails… We don't typically have a survey, a quantitative survey that we send out but informally we do hear back from folks." The interviewees frequently describe binary assessments of their relationships valence or positivity based on satisfaction, rather than a multidimensional assessment of different relationship outcomes. For example, one public affairs officer in a regulatory state agency describes, "it is important that we have positive interactions with the public."

The interview data suggests that public affairs practitioners realize perceptions of trust affect agency-public relationships. An interviewee in a regulatory federal agency describes the effectiveness of a public interaction in terms of participants' trust. She says, "I think it builds a lot of trust and respect with these constituents because a lot of times the feedback that we hear from them is, "I have a lot of respect for you for getting

up there and just taking questions thrown at you from any angle.”” A public affairs

practitioner in a non-regulatory state agency describes the association between public

interaction in meetings and trust: “The more that they interact with us and the more that

we’re able to interact with them then they understand that we are a trusted resource and if

there is confusion about things… that they can come to us and they’ll get accurate and

timely information.” These comments suggest that trust is recognized as an important

relational element of effective communication, but the data does not indicate that it is

something that is considered outside of the evaluation of that particular meeting.

A practitioner in a regulatory state agency illustrates that agencies distinguish

satisfaction from understanding and trust. As she describes, “one of the questions that

[is] asked of our customers when we do our customer satisfaction survey is, "Do you feel

like the [agency] listens to your concerns?" And 83 percent said, "Yes, we do think they

listen to our concerns." Are they always happy with the outcome? No.” The trust and

satisfaction of public meeting participants were described by the practitioners as

benchmarks of a successful communication effort, but there is little in the data to suggest

that there is a continued effort to measure change in these dimensions.

Control Mutuality: The interviewees indicate an understanding of control mutuality’s

value in determining the effectiveness of communication. For example, an interviewee in

a regulatory federal agency relates the concept of involvement to effective

communication, saying, “To be effective community relations, you’ve got to be an active

member inside your community.” Another interviewee in a regulatory federal agency

says, “We rely on the public – we have a great working relationship.” Quotes like these

indicate practitioners are aware that control mutuality has an effect on agency-public

relationships. The interviewees' references to control mutuality are usual associated with the public involvement that occurs at public meetings. This indicates that the practitioners implicitly realize the relationship effect of public meetings.

The interviewees describe more mutuality of effect in inter-agency relationships rather than in agencies' relationships with legislative audiences. The sense is that it is communication between partners rather than with managers. Interestingly, this seemed to apply even to agencies which had an oversight function over other agencies. The mutual effect between agencies and levels of government is largely an effect of the distribution of functions. Some examples mentioned in the interviews included contracted technology management agencies, the Government Printing Office (GPO), and descriptions of specific interactions, such as "we administer federal grants... on behalf of or to the local jurisdictions and other state agencies." This diffusion of functions is a contributing factor to the effects of federalism described by Liu and Horsley (2007). Liu, Horsley, and Levenshus (In press) describe the effects of federalism in terms of the disassociation that occurs between layers of government (p. 2). The authors describe that, as a result of federalism, "local, state, and federal agencies frequently speak with multiple, sometimes contradictory voices on issues" (p. 2).

Federalism is not without its positive effects; resource sharing is cited by the interviewees as one benefit of working with different agencies and different levels of government. An interviewee with a non-regulatory state agency provides this example of how federalism allows them to overcome their barriers. "We don't have the financial ability to do [research]. There are two public affairs groups in this area that have done some research. ... So although we don't do any research on our own we do have a little bit

of a body of research." These interdependencies seem to strengthen the relationships and improve the rapport in inter-agency relationships when compared to legislative relationships.

Commitment: The interview data regarding perceptions of agency-public commitment also speaks to the limited application of long term relationship management principles to government agencies. Commitment seemed to receive little support in the interview data, which is consistent with the interview data's emphasis of short term goals over long term relationships. Agencies' meeting efforts are frequently individualized, addressing only a specific issue. This means that there is little perceived value in developing relationships around a short term issue. The short sighted approach to agency-public relationships seems to ignore several of the other aspects of public meetings brought up by the practitioners. This leaves an unexplained gap between practitioners' recognition of the importance of trust, control mutuality, satisfaction and commitment and their limited involvement in long term relationship building.

All of the elements appear to be present in agencies' public meetings for relationship building. The publics in attendance are the agencies' strategic publics considering the public sectors definition of the bottom line. They also describe the relationship effects of public meetings, such as the observation that public interaction seems to have a positive, procedural effect on the audiences. The practitioners also describe that evaluations of trust, control mutuality and satisfaction are applicable to their assessments of successful communication efforts. Collectively, this gives the impression that relationship building is occurring during public meetings, but is considered an ancillary benefit by the practitioners, and not an area of sustained communication effort.

This lack of relationship maintenance seems to overlook the fact that many of these stakeholders will continue to interact with the agency outside of a particular, issue-specific public meeting.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The interview data provides the practitioners' perspectives of their organizational context and how it effects their communication efforts. The discussion of this data seeks to relate these perceptions to communication theory, particularly theories of publics, excellence theory and the academic observations of the public sector's communication context. In essence, the purpose is to consider the application of the normative theory of communication to the operating realities of government agencies' communication.

In the discussion of agency publics, public meetings, and agency-public relationships, it is apparent that the discussion repeatedly crosses over a dividing line described by the interviewees. There appeared to be an incongruence in the theory and the practice that did not seem to stem directly from structural or environmental factors. This played out as the interviewer attempting to explore the intersection of public affairs, public meetings, with the interviewees seeing the two as completely different efforts with no real common ground. The data seemed to trace this back to practitioners' perceived responsibility to both general and specific audiences which revealed a contention between democratic ideals and communication best practice. This perception was mirrored in structural divisions within the agencies and in the goal differentiation on the part of the practitioners. In other words, public meetings and relationship management were either the responsibilities of different personnel or were perceived as serving completely different purposes.

This discussion seeks to link the practitioners' perceptions of both general and segmented publics to the broader separation of public affairs and public participation. The discussion will also address how this relegates relationship building to the role of a process measure in public affairs. Finally, the discussion addresses how this reflects the fundamental structures of bureaucracy and its increasing environmental incompatibilities.

Segmentation Perspectives and Segregated Communications: The interviewees describe their perceptions of a responsibility to a broad and inclusive, general public. This responsibility to the American public interest is a frequently cited factor differentiating the public and private sector (Allison, 1982; Euske, 2003; Liu, Horsley, & Levenshus, In press). The interviewees' usage of the term "general public" in part recognizes the public sector's societal responsibility which relates to contextual factors, such as mission, scope of effect, and legal requirement (Allison, 1982; Euske, 2003; Horsley, Liu & Levenshus, 2009, Liu, Horsley, & Levenshus, In press). One interviewee describes the resulting responsibility as one to "everyone and no one." This alludes to publics which are not spatially and temporally discrete, and this concept is not easily placed in public relations theories which generally assume durable and discrete publics, with whom relationships can be strategically managed (e.g. L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002, p. 95). Creighton (1999) provides a description which illustrates why relational segmentation may not always be feasible in the public sector context,

There are numerous parties and some of them are highly informal and quite unable to commit their members. As a result, agreements reached are often disowned the next day by new groups that weren't involved or that consisted of dissident members from the old group (p. 251).

The practitioners' perceptions of the general public reflect a multi-dimensional interpretation of segmentation that is not immediately related to one of the major theories of publics. The practitioners' description of a general public as one public among other, more specific publics differs from the definitional requirement of exclusivity which is frequently found in academic literature on publics (e.g. J. Grunig, 1997). Yet the practitioners still provide examples of how they prioritize their strategic publics and tailor their communication to certain audiences. A practitioner in a state, regulatory agency describes her efforts to tailor communications to her various publics, "I call it a diversified communication portfolio... you have to... make sure it's those tools that your audiences really are reacting to and paying attention to." This represents the practitioners' understanding of the value of segmentation but suggests that meeting their responsibility to a "general public" never consists solely of the sum of their efforts to reach these segments.

The situation described by the interviewed practitioners is one where the general public is treated as one audience among others rather than the sum of them. This perception is summarized by U.S. Office of Personnel Management, which describes agencies' publics:

In addition to the general public, federal agencies communicate with many specialized segments of the population, e.g., farmers, taxpayers, military personnel, educators, state and local government officials, manufacturers, and so on. Federal agencies communicate with the general public and these other pertinent publics in a variety of ways. (OPM, 2008, p. 66)

The fact that reaching the general public is considered additive, rather than ancillary, clearly illustrates the perceived relationship of the general public and its segments in the public sector. Instead of the image of nesting boxes (J. Grunig & Repper, 1992, p. 132), the image is frequently that of a divided box representing the general public and strategic publics.

Public Service and Bottom Line: Many of the agency representatives interviewed referenced a responsibility to democratic principles as being a motivation for the agency's attention to a general public. The most frequently reoccurring themes were similar to Post, Preston and Sachs (2002) concept of "license to operate." These authors suggest that the relationship with an organization's stakeholders is a primary determinant of that organization's operating environment; hence it is important that an organization be responsive to the interests of its stakeholders. Interestingly, this provides an explanation as to why non-regulatory agencies have less developed public involvement efforts. Explaining this aspect of public effect, a public information officer in a large government agency referenced Clausewitz, who theorized "that martial success requires the "remarkable trinity" of government, military and the people" (Roth-Douquet, 2007, p. 11a). The PIO felt that it was equally crucial to consider the "will of the people" in order to successfully conduct business in a government agency.

Post, Preston, and Sachs (2002) allude to the practical significance of public support, but this takes on greater significance in government agencies considering that the existence of a bureaucracy is predicated upon its service of the public. This difference between practical and ethical considerations of public responsibility sheds further light on the apparent moderating effect of an agencies' regulatory responsibilities.

In other words, it may be that the ethical component of public service is universal and only the practical concern for public service varies depending on the regulatory role of the agency. The significance of this observation is that it indicates that a sense of public service exists outside of the description of "public good" (Liu, Horsley, & Levenshus, In press, p. 5) which primarily indicates a lack of an economic market. The interview data suggests that this sense of service would exist even if the regulatory role of the agency was controlled. This potentially isolates a sense of public service as a factor shaping public sector communication context.

Audience Equality and Segmentation: Another reason for the segregation of a general public from its component segments is the incompatibility of segmentation and the equality of access required in democratic participation. L. Grunig, J. Grunig and Dozier (2002) describe these conflicting philosophies as they apply to the perceptual differences of public relations theorists and the public sector practitioners (p. 324-325). The implied power relationship of "strategic constituencies" (L. Grunig, J. Grunig & Dozier, 2002, p.95) is seen by some scholars to be undemocratic (p. 324) because the organization-centric perspective does not consider the larger, societal context. This argument for an egalitarian consideration of audiences reflects an application of democratic ideals: ideals which are the foundation of the external requirements imposed on the communication practices of agencies. These requirements have a direct effect on communication practice. A practitioner in a non-regulatory state agency describes how the resulting "often well intended legal requirements" can frustrate communication efforts by creating process and adding redundancy. However, the suggestion that

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segmentation is undemocratic fails to recognize the theoretical mechanisms that ensure the consideration of publics does not reflect a relative power differential.

The authors of excellence theory point out "J. Grunig has defined publics as groups of people that have consequences on organizations or on whom organizations have consequences" (L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002, p. 324.) While this recognizes the powerless, affected publics, it rests upon the communication manager's sense of responsibility and the sufficiency of the manager's autonomy. The authors summarize, "The answer to the dilemma of how to practice symmetrical public relations in a situation of unequal power lies in the power of professionalism" (L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002, p. 326). This reliance on professionalism is sometimes criticized as idealism (Holtzhausen, 2007, p. 363), but it has an increased application in the public sector, where the inclusion of powerless publics rests, instead, on external requirements.

Contextual Motivations for Audience Equality: Two essential criticisms are brought up in L. Grunig, J. Grunig, and Dozier's (2002) discussion of strategic publics. One criticism is that strategically managing publics is essentially prioritizing, and potentially privileging one constituency over another. The second, is that the only way this would not happen is if the organization suspended the consideration of its own interests for the consideration of its publics, which makes such consideration discretionary. The requirements of the public sector would seem to address both of these criticisms in that there are legal requirements for the equality of access and information. One example is the Freedom of Information Act, which requires that information be available to "the public" (U.S. Dept. of Justice, 1996, p. 1). There are also structures and legislation for

ensuring the agencies' general responsibility to the public. These can be explicit

requirements, such as the Government Performance Results Act of 1993, or agencies with

oversight responsibilities, such as the Office of Management and Budget and the

Government Accountability Office.

The theoretical criticisms and the external requirements both serve to illustrate

some of the potential influences which cause practitioners to concentrate efforts on a

general public. However, as noted earlier, the interviewees still describe their efforts to

segment audiences and tailor communications. This suggests that legal requirements are

not the only impetus for communication. It also implies that there is another impetus for

the segmentation of audiences outside of the legal requirement for information exchange

with the general public. The differences in interviewees' use of segmentation and their

reasons for using it, may reflect that it is in fact the "power of professionalism" which

determines how the best communication practices are integrated with the agencies'

external requirements for transparency and access. The supposed role of the practitioners

in determining the use of best practice is one of the tenets of the excellence theory, which

highlights the department manager's role in effecting excellent communications.

However, it still speaks to the fact that the perceptions of responsibility to a general

public seem to inhibit the application of best practice: an inhibition which is only

sometimes overcome by the practitioners.

Structural Effects of General Public Perceptions: The practitioners' descriptions of a

general public serve to illustrate how public sector perceptions of publics fits within a

theoretical understanding of publics. The legislated public information requirements are

standard in all of the agencies; however, the regulatory agencies with greater public effect

also segment critical constituencies for more effective information exchange. While this effort is not always explicitly required by statute or policy, practitioners indicate that it is a matter of most effectively fulfilling their perceived responsibilities. As one practitioner in a non-regulatory federal agency says, "We would not be meeting our responsibility if we just published our material and walked away." This redresses one of the frequent criticisms of bureaucracy: that agency efforts meets only the minimum legal requirement. It also illustrates that practitioners meet their public information requirements to a general audience, and then continue to follow up with communication with specific audience segments.

The structural effect of the practitioners' perceptions of general and specific publics is both an active and passive communication effort within an agency, to serve its specific and general communication efforts respectively. Specifically, the public affairs function becomes a one-way information engine which gives information to the public through external, media professionals. The two-way communication and public involvement occurs on an issue-specific basis, most frequently on a program level. These efforts seem to be meant to address all of the agency's communication responsibilities; however, the resulting multiple efforts also introduce a level of redundancy and variation in the agencies' communication efforts. These structural effects of the diffused communication responsibilities contribute to the media relations emphasis of the public affairs function.

The understanding of the practitioner's responsibility to the general public, in relation to its individual segments, provides the foundation for understanding the role of media and governmental publics. There is an obvious synergy between the agencies'

need to communicate to its audiences and the media's need to provide their audiences with information on issues that affect them. The linchpin in this relationship is the fact that government issues affect such a broad audience. The relationship of "scope of impact" (Euske, 2003, p. 4) and "media scrutiny" (Liu, Horsley, & Levenshus, In press, p. 3) suggest the mutuality of media and agency interests. This goal mutuality allows agencies to pass some of the initiative of public information to professional media, which has a financial interest in reaching the broadest possible audience. This does not alleviate the entire public information responsibilities of the agency, but it acts as a force multiplier for agency communication. The perceived improvement on the investment of communication resources offered by media makes them a focal audience. The resultant dedication of resources to media compounds the structural division between public information and public involvement.

The perceived dual mandate of public sector communication requires attention to general and specific audiences. This contributes to the interviewees' descriptions of public affairs' ill-defined role in relationship building. The inhibiting effect of this lack of definition is explained by Rainey, Pandey and Bozeman's (1995) correlation of "goal ambiguity" to perceptions of "red tape" (p. 568). In summary, the un-reconciled contention between the practitioners perceived responsibilities inhibits effective audience determination and communication. This goal ambiguity hypothesis explains, in part, the public sector communicators' frustration at having communication requirements outside those suggested by theory and best practice, such as the requirement to address general audiences when segmenting audiences contributes to more specific and effective communication.

The duality of practitioners' perceptions of publics also introduces inefficiency to agency communication practices. The practical prescriptions of segmentation theory are limited by the perception of the general public as an audience removed from its segments. The primary purpose of "strategic constituencies" is that its implementation improves the return on the communication effort (L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002, p. 95). A significant part of that improvement is efficiency related; it has to do with more accurately reaching the most important audiences. The efficiency is at least partially negated when there is a perception that separate efforts are required for general and specific audiences. This suggests a fundamental contention between best practice and the perceived responsibilities of the public sector practitioners; this is a balance that seems to be at the core of understanding the persistence of the one-way, public information orientation to government communication.

Theory of Differentiated Communication: Public relations, public affairs, public information, public policy and public administration are all terms that are interpreted in literature as having varying degrees of commonality (e.g. Toth, 2006; J. Grunig, 1992, p. 4; Creighton, 2005, p. 9; Henry, 2009, p. 3; Lee, 2008, XVI). Lee (2008) and Toth (2006) provide the most elegant theoretical association of these terms in suggesting that each of the other terms is a subsection of government public relations. The remaining terms (public information, public affairs, public policy, public administration) thus represent different points on a spectrum ranging from communication oriented to management oriented efforts. This continuum would reflect varying degrees of involvement in the implementation of agency policy ranging from communication information about policy, to its administration and development. The perceptions of the

interviewees seem to suggest that public affairs varies from agency to agency in its placement on this spectrum.

The first indication of this is that offices responsible for the same communication functions use these titles interchangeably, and conversely, offices with very different interpretations of their responsibilities have the same title. The interview data shows that what is public information in one government agency, may be public affairs, public policy, or even public involvement in another. Variation on this spectrum would also account for the interviewees' varying interpretations of how the informational value of public comment relates to its value as a decisional input in that a management (versus communication) interpretation of public affairs would emphasize its decisional input. Ultimately, this variation accounts for the different interpretations of public affairs involvement in public meetings. The communication end of the spectrum is reflected in those agencies which are only involved in publicizing meetings while the public administration end of the spectrum is represented by the interviewee in a federal regulatory agency who uses public meetings and communication instrumentally in the development of broad (versus situational) policy development and implementation.

This point may be reflected in the fact that practitioners view information collection as an additive process, in which the information value of public comment is solely as a decisional input. In other words, the agency communicators seem to feel that the primary issue is that public comment reaches the agency decision makers, and not that the communicators themselves process all communication inputs. This is also consistent with the moderate decisional contributions of government communication

departments that was observed in the excellence study (Dozier, L. Grunig, & J. Grunig, 1995, p. 181).

The practitioners' description of segregated communication efforts seems to, at least in part, reflect the existence of two fundamentally different views on the role of communication. Normative public relations theory, particularly excellence theory, has emphasized the importance of mutually effective dialogue in the determination of organizational strategy (Dozier, L. Grunig, & J. Grunig, 1995). In this perspective, two way communication is used to manage interdependencies between an organization and its environment (L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002, p. 95). L. Grunig, J. Grunig, and Dozier (2002) describe the role of communication, "Of course , communication alone does not create and maintain these relationships; but communication plays a vital role" (p. 95-95).

Comparatively, the practitioners frequently describe this role as limited to one-way information dissemination and publicity. This perception is supported in public participation literature, which distinguishes between public communication and public participation. The comments of Rowe and Gammack (2004) are particularly appropriate to this discussion. They describe that, "Public communication involves the one-way communication of information from the exercise sponsor to the public (a passive recipient)" (p. 41). Alternatively, they suggest, "public participation involves two-way information exchange and debate between members of the public and the sponsor" (p. 41). This is also exemplified in Rowe and Frewer's (2005) diagram which illustrates communication responsibility as isolated to the outward flow of information (p. 255). These authors' descriptions of public participation bear an obvious resemblance to

excellence theory's description of symmetrical communication, yet the practitioners describe a situation where the two are treated as exclusive terms.

The fact that public affairs officers, as the communication specialists, do not take ownership of public participation programs may seem ironic to communication scholars, who have struggled to establish the value of the public relations and public affairs functions within organizations. However, the delegation of public participation to subject matter experts is not solely an effect of the disassociation of public involvement and public affairs. The interview data reviewed in the findings suggested that the decentralization of communication functions was an effect of efforts to improve access and better distribute the workload. For example, director of public affairs in a non-regulatory federal agency stated that the diffusion of communication responsibilities is a means to improve public access. He says, "we make all of our experts available to people." The director points out that by having the subject matter specialists conduct their own public meetings and information collection, the process is more directly plugged into the concerns and interests of the agency's publics and constituents. There are also theoretical benefits to an agency encouraging wider involvement in public outreach and public involvement programs such as public meetings. The excellence study suggests that this contributes to a more participatory culture, which is correlated to institutions with higher levels of communication excellence (Dozier, L. Grunig, & J. Grunig, 1995).

Effects of Segregated Communication Efforts on Relationship Building: Essentially, the segregation of communication functions relegates relationships to the role of a process measure rather than a communication goal. Hon and J. Grunig (1999) describe

three stages of strategic relations as it relates to relationship cultivation. These three stages can be summarized as identifying strategic publics, "planning, implementing, and evaluating communication programs," and "measuring and evaluating the long-term relationships" (p. 9). The interview data suggests that these stages only partially fit within the government communication context, specifically in relation to public affairs. The following discussion addresses how the three stages appear to apply and suggests how this might relate to previously reviewed public sector characteristics.

The interviewees' determination of strategic constituencies, or key publics, seems to be a critical theme in understanding why there is ambiguity surrounding the purpose of relationship building in public affairs. The data suggests two ways of looking at agencies' interpretations of strategic publics. One hypothesis is that the intra-governmental audiences are the most significant publics because these audiences have the greatest effect on the agency. For instance, congressional affairs is frequently a separate communication function. It is possible that a focus on long term relationships is not seen in public affairs because the communication intensive relationship building efforts are being "strategically" targeted towards the audiences with the greatest effect. This leaves public affairs to satisfy public information requirements and asymmetrically gather environmental information needed for decisional processes. This is a seductively elegant interpretation because it would seem to fit a significant amount of the interview observations, and fits a number of the criticisms of government communication. This interpretation may be accurate in some instances, particularly in non-regulatory agencies; however, a more likely interpretation considers some of the contextual factors of the public sector.

Another way to interpret the practitioners' perspectives of strategic publics is inferred in the interview data. As concluded from the data related to the first research question, the interviewees seem to make an effect-oriented determination of their key publics. In other words, the strategic stakeholders are not determined by their direct effect on agencies' actions, but more by how they are affected by the agency. This seems to primarily reflect a difference in how publics are perceived as effecting the organization. Ultimately, it seems "effect" on an agency, is different than "effect" on a private organization because of the differences in determinations of their respective bottom lines. The bottom line of organizations in the public sector are determined by their service of the "social good" (Euske, 2003, p. 5) or "public good" (Liu, Horsley, & Levenshus, In press, p. 2). Recognizing the differences in perceptions of agencies' bottom line may account for the practitioners' descriptions of key publics being segments of the general public, and not only the legislative and interagency publics which have a seemingly greater direct effect on agency operations.

The fundamental differences in the organizations' determinations of their bottom line contribute to significant differences between the sectors. While other barriers and environmental factors can have systematic effects on communication, they seem to be procedural constraints rather than fundamental differences in motivations to communicate. The non-economic public sector bottom line creates difficulty in the "measurability of objectives" (Euske, 2003, p. 5), which contributes to "goal ambiguity" (Rainey, Pandey & Bozeman, 1995, p. 568) within agencies. This goal ambiguity may inhibit a clear delineation of communication responsibilities by not placing emphasis on developing long term relationships with effected publics. Overall, the ambiguity of long

term goals, specifically communication goals, seems to contribute to a focus on short term goals. An effort to reconcile the perceptual differences between agency practitioners and normative public relations theory must recognize the most basic differences in communication goal determination.

Wilson (1989) describes how the public sector context contributes to the focus on short term goals. He says, "Faced with political superiors that find it conceptually easier and politically necessary to focus on inputs, agency managers also tend to focus on inputs" (p. 126). This suggests that the process measures may be perceived as more important than long term relationship measures. Wilson (1989) also relates this "goal of fairness" (p. 127) to Rainey, Pandey and Bozeman's description of "goal ambiguity" (1995, p. 568) by explaining that "equity is more important than efficiency in the management of many government agencies" (Wilson, 1989, p. 132). Wilson (1989) gives this example to illustrates how "equity" becomes emphasized as a process goal without illustrating its value as a long term goal:

> We cannot easily say whether the pupils were educated, the streets made safer, or some deseases prevented; but we can say whether every pupil got the same textbook, every citizen got the same police response, and every patient got the same vaccine. (p. 132)

This is not to suggest that these individualized, short term communication processes do not have a positive effect. Hon and J. Grunig (1999, p. 9) indicate that the achievement of short term goals, or "outcome objectives," may contribute to long term relationship building, but the interview data does not indicate that this integration of the individual effort usually happens at the function level.

The focus on "process measures" versus "outcomes" (Hon and J. Grunig, 1999, p. 18) can be related to a number of public sector characteristics. Part of this is because practitioners perceive the primary value of public interaction as being a decisional input, as described in the discussion of the second research question. Another part may be that the agency maintains a focus on exchange relationships, which apply better to situations where there is mutual, direct effect between relational partners. The agency communicators' effect-based determination of publics suggests that "communal relationships," rather than "exchange relationships," are more applicable to public affairs efforts (Hon & J. Grunig, 1999, p. 21).

This point is significant because it suggests that the relationship goals may be unique in the public sector. In terms of the agencies' publics, a distinction between communal and exchange relationships becomes blurred because of the public sectors' bottom line. The exchange relationships, which Hon and J. Grunig (1999) describe as the "essence of marketing relationships between organizations and customers," effectively merge with the more selfless concepts of communal relationships. In other words, the bottom-line centrism of exchange relationships is applicable, only the bottom line is "the welfare of others," which is the focus of communal relationships. This point is meant to suggest that part of the reason public affairs practitioners do not make a sustained relationships development effort is because there is insufficient clarity on what the outcome of the relationship should be.

Communication Value of Public Comment: The review of literature recounts that one of the frequent criticisms of public participation in government agencies is the perception that the participation is without effect. As mentioned, this perception also has its roots in

the original Administrative Procedures Act. Essentially, bureaucracy was intended to be an administration of government functions by those most qualified to do so. These administrators were legally empowered to largely self-determine whether their action served the public interest; a logical effect of their being the most qualified. This philosophy, which underlies why agencies were granted the discretion to selectively respond to public comment, appears to put efficiency over democratic process and representation of the public interest. The resulting process is one where public input is considered in relation to other informational products either generated by or sought by the agency.

The themes of the interview data indicate that public comment has a value as a decisional input, but it also indicates that practitioners do not assign it any further communication value. Even though some interviewees describe responding to every public comment and even posting them on the website, there is little or no effort to holistically consider the comments outside of their issue specific, context. Still, there is potentially value to public comment outside of its worth as a decisional input. This is perhaps best indicated by Dozier, L. Grunig and J. Grunig's (1995) description of informal, versus formal, environmental scanning (p. 202). The authors state that, "Although [informal scanning activities] may not provide the level of quantification that senior management needs for many strategic decisions, informal techniques provide communicators with sensitive antennae they need to get their first tingle of turbulence or problems on the horizon" (p. 203).

This suggests that public comment information may have further value in preempting issues. Dozier, L. Grunig and J. Grunig (1995) find that such scanning

efforts correlate strongly with communication excellence (p. 203). Instead of considering the scanning value of public comment and public meetings, practitioners seem to feel that their responsibility is largely met by merely responding to public comment. As one practitioner in a non-regulatory federal agency describes, "My rule of thumb is if you don't hear back from the people again, then they're satisfied." This may effectively satisfy public information requirements, but it neglects an opportunity to inform the agency's perception of its key publics. It is essentially two-way asymmetrical communication, in which the value of incoming information is only considered from the organizational perspective.

This is not to suggest that environmental scanning inputs are not received by strategic decision makers. Although, the information received seems to come primarily from media scanning activities and regard a general public analysis, rather than an analysis of key publics. For instance, one interviewee in a non-regulatory state agency describes that "scanning the media" is a primary source for environmental information. While this may provide some information on the agencies operating environment, it is not likely to be as developed as the information received from the agencies' direct interactions with specific publics.

An important point in the discussion of public comment's potential value to communication is that it is not an argument for increasing the effect of agency-public interaction within decisional processes. Where that argument can be and has been made, it invites a different set of procedural considerations to avoid an imbalance of informational inputs. Specifically, this invites the criticism that certain publics will have a disproportional influence on agency action, and receive undue consideration from the

agency. This is a particular challenge for agencies given they must consider the effects of their efforts in the broadest context, not just in their own operating environments. However, these concerns do not apply to the more thorough consideration of public comment by communicators. This information does not function solely as a decisional input in regulatory decisions, but also serves to better direct communication activities to those publics most likely to be affected by the regulation. Such efforts can potentially avoid further petition, adverse legislation, and judicial review.

The issue specificity of public involvement is further described by Creighton (1999). Creighton (1999) describes how agencies suffer from "meeting-itis" in which,

> The symptoms are a tendency to think of public participation as a set of meetings - particularly meetings at the end of a decisional process - interspersed with many months of studies and agency coordination during which the public is uninvolved. (p. 254)

This does not allow public involvement in the broader context of agency management, and it does not provide for a sustained dialogue with the agencies' key publics. The interviewees obviously recognize meetings as an external requirement, and they frequently describe efforts to publicize the meeting and its outcomes which far exceed the minimum requirements for such communication. However, the interviewees continue to individualize meeting efforts rather than incorporate them into larger communication goals.

Earlier in the discussion, I concluded that public advocacy may not be a practical model for information gathering in agencies decisional processes, given the ethical concerns. Creighton also recognizes that applying the concept of strategic constituencies

to rule-making may introduce bias, and similarly concludes that there is still a place for improved dialogue and participation, particularly in a consensus building effort. As he says, "Although the process can be become skewed if agency staff interact only with some stakeholders, it is also true that personal trust is a major building block for development agreements" (p. 254). This suggests that continuing the dialogue, outside of the decision making process may improve agency-public relationships.

Creighton (1999) says that "more frequent interaction" and "less formal forums" provide for more productive public interaction (p. 254). The interview data suggests that communicators are beginning to address the shortcomings of formal meetings by adapting meetings styles or having additional meetings. In the case of public affairs officers, who are primarily tasked with public information (media relations achieving this through associations with professional journalists), this translates to an improved ability to anticipate the information demands of publics. For public affairs officers who have broader communication responsibilities, this also includes improved agency-public dialogue and a better conceptualization of the agency's operating environment. One important point is that in order for this effort to be consistent, avoid redundancy, and limit extraneous effort, the regulatory meetings most also be taken advantage of as a communication forum.

Retrofitting Bureaucracy for Greater Participation: Regardless of the perceived benefits, the segregation of public affairs and public meetings represents a broader separation of the communication function and public involvement. The separation of these efforts does not allow for the broader incorporation of the public input generated by public involvement into strategic decision making. In order to fully recognize the value of

public input, the information needs to be considered outside of its specific decisional application and processed as an informational product for general agency management. Merging, rather than segregating, public affairs and public involvement would allow for a more holistic management of public input and an opportunity to address public demands for greater participation in their government.

The demand for public involvement has been slowly increasing since the 1960s (Creighton, 1999 & 2005), but there has not been a change in the basic bureaucratic purpose outlined in the Administrative Procedures Act of 1946. The original Administrative Procedure Act of 1946 required that public comment be received prior to an agency's rulemaking; however, it did not make any specific provisions for the agency actually considering these comments. This makes sense considering bureaucracy was supposed to be the administration of specific government responsibilities by professionals with the necessary expertise, rather than elected officials. The broad administrative powers and rule-making authority which these professionals were subsequently granted were theoretically warranted by their expertise. Bureaucracies were therefore imbued with significant decisional autonomy, with only a minimum requirement for public comment, in order to ensure no potential inputs were excluded. In other words, public comment was meant to improve informational inputs into agency decisions, not to share decisional responsibility. The failure to recognize the original purpose for public comment is reflected in the contemporary criticism that public involvement is pageantry. Rowe and Gammack (2004) explain this perceptions by noting,

It has been argued, for example, that many supposedly participative procedures are nothing of the sort, but essentially public relations exercises giving the appearance of

participation but without truly empowering the public... The public meeting is a case in point: the public in attendance might feel that they are having an influence on policy, but the reality is that influence is often minimal. (Rowe & Gammack, 2004, p. 41)

The interview data suggests that structures, such as the addition of informal meeting efforts or public involvement offices, are being created in order to address the apparent disconnect between participatory vehicles and their decisional effect. However, this effort to retrofit bureaucracy to be more participative is only described in the data as being on the function level. The result is issue-specific public involvement efforts which are structurally segregated from traditional and required efforts to inform decisional processes. This redundancy is exemplified in the interviewees' descriptions of multiple meeting formats for individual efforts and physical separation of public information and public dialogue.

By recognizing that public affairs is not limited to one-way public information, there can be a more complete and thorough consideration of incoming information. The public sectors' communication efforts are independent and inefficient. Instead of addressing a mass audience or committing resources selectively to strategic audiences, they do both. Instead of having either communication personnel or subject matter experts control public forums, they have two different meetings; the required meeting and then an informal meeting to encourage greater dialogue and relationship building. Instead of integrating public input into the broader context of agency management, agencies have a new communication effort, with different subject matter experts each time, with few obvious vehicles for information sharing. While this is a selective representation of the interview data, it highlights the redundancy and inefficiency introduced in segregating

communication efforts and suggests the potential synergy of public affairs and public meetings.

To the individual government practitioner, this may appear to be too big of an issue to fix. However, the interview data suggests that greater synergy is achievable. There are interviewees who describe robust communication programs that tailor communication to dialogue with key publics while ensuring that information and access is available to the broadest possible audience. These few interviewees describe communication programs where public involvement and public information are integrated concepts rather than separate offices with separate purposes speaking to separate publics. The features which appear to play a role in the development of these programs are not specific enough to suggest that their results are not transferable to another agency. Specifically, regulatory capacity, mission, and level of governance do not appear to prohibit the integration of public communication and public involvement. A manager's personality is frequently cited by the interviewees' as an enabling factor, and in one instance, so is the agency's small size. Overall, the challenge is the same as the challenge of improving communication excellence in a private organization. The practitioner must seek windows of opportunity to impress upon strategic decision makers the potential value of effective communication. Greater integration of public communication and public involvement will reduce redundant communication efforts, derive greater value from informational products and potentially improve publics' decisional efficacy, while maintaining equality of access.

Limitations

A limitation of this study relates to the potential limitations in transferability. The sampling was purposive, in that it intentionally included representation from different departments, levels of government (state and federal), and rule making authorities (non-regulatory and regulatory). This distribution of the interviews helps to increase the transferability in comparison to data focusing on only a single permutation of these variables. However, assuming broader transferability based on these exogenous factors may not be reasonable given the potential commonalities in factors like interviewee personality. In other words, the respondents may only represent the most active and outgoing practitioners, as that is likely to be why they responded. This could mean that the programs they participate in are systematically affected by this characteristic, and cannot be transferred to a context is apparently comparable. In essence, this study sought to strike a balance between transferability and depth and this balance was considered in the choice of methods. The resulting data helps to move the discussion of public sector practice forward, but does not suggest a state-of-the-field, and may only have limited transferability to similar contexts.

The potential positivity bias of the interviewees is also a limiting factor of this study. I am confident that I reached a point of saturation judging by the ultimate repetition of themes in the data; however, all of the practitioners were asked to do at least some self-evaluation in that they gave their impression of the effects of their communication efforts. Any positivity in the self evaluation potentially affects the overall quality of the data. The effort to reach saturation and the candor of the

interviewees mitigates this concern somewhat, but the potential effect is still worth considering as a limitation.

<div align="center">Future Research</div>

Media and Government 2.0:   The prominent role of media in government communication is one which is well reported in literature (e.g., Liu, Horsley, & Levenshus, In press; Allison, 1982; Euske, 2003; L. Grunig, J. Grunig & Dozier, 2002). This prominence is substantiated in the interview data, but the changing role of professional media and the concurrent increase in social media may present areas of change in this relationship.

> We are now seeing traditional media crumpling under the weight of the ubiquitous Internet. For example, the *Chicago Tribune*, The *Philadelphia Inquirere/Daily News* and the *San Francisco Chronicle* all either are in or close to bankruptcy. And it is not only the newspapers... it's all advertising-driven content. (Tabb, 2009, p. 1)

There is some interview data which suggests that new media may offer a "window of opportunity" for expanding the communication function in agencies (Dozier, L. Grunig, & J. Grunig, 1995, p. 146). One practitioner in a regulatory federal agency describes this change in his agency, "We went with first one person doing it as a collateral duty to that person doing it full-time to now that person plus a staff of three individuals doing social media networking because we get so many inquiries from the public." However, this window of opportunity will not stay open forever. Whether or not government communication expands as a result of new media would seem tied to how professional journalism adapts its role. Clark and Aufderheide (2009) also observe

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that professional media may adapt and resume its previous role as the primary vehicle of agencies information exchange. They explain, "Legacy public media, both some commercial journalism institutions and public media institutions, are wrestling hard with the challenge of serving their public missions in new and radically different ways." (Clark & Aufderheide, 2009, p. 12). It may be that the informational "conduit" described by an interviewee earlier is streamlined into more direct communication modes offering greater immediacy.

Strategic Decentralization and New Media: The application of strategic decentralization is also compatible with the advent of Web 2.0 features in which agencies may be forced to reach their publics on a wider variety of media and face a greater demand for immediacy. The flat structure better recognizes that any agency member can potentially broadcast video in real-time to a global audience, regardless of their function within the agency. Including the unit level in public communication allows the agency "to make better use of the contributions of all employees" (Dozier, L. Grunig, & J. Grunig, 1995, p. 145). Also, the greater inclusiveness of this structure allows the public more access to the agency. An effort to limit the agency's communication to a single office may seem contrary to current initiatives of transparency and access.

Despite this potential application of new media, there are still perceptual barriers to enhancing two way agency-public communication. There is a hesitation to invite participation in vehicles with limited scope that is similar to the opposition towards segmenting publics on the grounds of egalitarian democracy. A practitioner in a regulatory state agency addresses these questions of access by saying, "There's people in Southwest Virginia that don't even have running water so you can't expect to put

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something on the website and they'll see it." Another practitioner in a regulatory federal agency explains how these differences in access affect the input's value: "It's hard to judge the content and weigh that when you can have certain groups who have advantage because they are more internet savvy, that they can have a better network where they can generate a lot more comments than a smaller group who aren't that savvy."

Essentially, this is the same argument for not segmenting publics and seeking symmetrical communication, and it similarly ignores the context in which the information is being used. This seems to be predicated on a fear that someone will be excluded; however, the fundamental design of agencies offers the same elegant solution. There is little threat that the informational value of one vehicle's input is privileged over another's, because public input is an informational product and not a direct decisional determinant. In other words, agencies were designed to be a body of administrators who would make the best decisions based on the best evidence. The role of public communication is thus to improve the "best evidence" and not make the decision. The effect-oriented determination of publics by government communicators offsets any remaining risk of access inequity. To use the interviewee's example of "people in Southwest Virginia that don't even have running water," it would be the responsibility of agency communicators to segment this public as one affected by the agency, and to ensure this public has equal access to the agency through other vehicles.

Future research is needed to explore the potential for government agencies to use new media as a growth opportunity for the communication functions. Specifically, there is a value in examining how the diffusion of professional media and the increasing role of non-professional media is changing the traditional agency-media relationship. This

examination would also yield evidence as to whether this results in structural changes to

the media relations functions of government agencies.

Interview Protocol: How public meetings affect agency-public relationships (APR)

Name of Participant (for correspondence only; confidential): _____

Title: _____

Date of Interview: _____

Time Started: _____

Time Stopped: _____

Pre brief

_____Ensure member has read/signed consent form

_____Introduce interviewer and study topic

_____Reconfirm audiotape permission

1. How would you describe your role in the organization? (Rapport)

2. How would you describe a typical day performing these responsibilities? (Rapport)

3. While conducting your public affairs responsibilities, how do you determine who you need to communicate with? (RQ1)

4. How, if at all, do you prioritize these audiences? (RQ1)

5. What affect do these audiences have on your organization? (RQ1)

6. Do you feel that your organization has a relationship with these audiences? Why or Why not? (RQ1)

7. How frequently does your agency conduct public meetings? (RQ2)

8. What role, if any, does the public affairs function play in organizing and conducting a public meeting? (RQ2)

9. Why does your organization conduct public meetings? [Probes: What value, if any, do you feel public meetings have to the organization? How does this achieve the goals of your department? Can you give me some examples?] (RQ2)

10. What effect do you feel public meetings have on your publics' perception of your organization? Can you explain? (RQ3)

11. Do you feel that your experience at the meeting strengthened or weakened your relationship with your publics? How so? (RQ3

12. How, if at all, do you feel that the public meetings help achieve organizational goals with your publics? (RQ3: Control Mutuality)

13. Do you feel that you can rely upon the audiences represented at public meetings? Why or Why not? Can you give me some examples? (RQ3: Trust)

14. How, if at all, do you feel that the public meeting audiences demonstrate their willingness to work with your organization? Can you give me an example? (RQ3: Commitment)

15. How do public meetings affect your level of satisfaction with the participating publics? Please Explain. (RQ3: Satisfaction)

Follow up

16. Thank you for your participation. If I have any further questions while transcribing, would it be acceptable to follow up with you? If so, what is the best way to get in contact with you?

_____ phone #/email

17. Are there any other questions that you feel I should have asked to better explore how public meetings affect relationships between government agencies and their constituents?

18. Do you have any questions for me regarding this research?

Thank you again for your participation.

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

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July 14, 2009

MEMORANDUM

Application Approval Notification

To: Dr. Elizabeth Toth
Michael Patterson
Communication

From: Joseph M. Smith, MA, CIM

IRB Manager

University of Maryland, College Park

Re: **IRB Application Number:** 09-0447

Project Title: "Communication Study of Public Meetings in Government Agencies"

Approval Date: July 13, 2009

Expiration Date: July 13, 2010

Type of Application: Initial

Type of Research: Non-Exempt

Type of Review for Application: Expedited

The University of Maryland, College Park Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved your IRB application. The research was approved in accordance with the University IRB policies and procedures and 45 CFR 46, the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects. Please include the above-cited IRB application number in any future communications with our office regarding this research.

Page 1 of 2
Initials _____ Date _____

CONSENT FORM

Project Title	Communication Study of Public Meetings in Government Agencies
Why is this research being done?	This is a research project being conducted by Dr. Elizabeth Toth, Principal Investigator, and Michael Patterson, master's student, at the University of Maryland, College Park. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because your familiarity with the public affairs practices of government agencies. The purpose of this research project is to understand the use of public meetings by government agencies and examine how these meetings relate to the agencies' public affairs efforts.
What will I be asked to do?	The procedures involve a one-on-one interview which will be recorded with your consent (audio only). The interview will either be face to face, at a location mutually convenient to both you and the interviewer, or via telephone. The interview is expected to last no longer than 1 hour. The questions asked during the interview will focus on your experience with the public meetings. You will be asked to discuss your professional experience as it relates to your agency's use of public meetings and public participation. For example, you may be asked questions like the following: How, if at all, do you prioritize these audiences? What affect do these audiences have on your organization? You may decline to answer any question, and you will not be penalized. You may withdraw from the study at any time, and you will not be penalized. Your participation is completely voluntary.
What about confidentiality?	This research project involves making audiotapes of you. To help protect your confidentiality, standard methods to protect privacy will be maintained. Your identity and your organization or affiliations will remain confidential. Only the Principal and master student will have access to your name and your organization. Data will be securely stored in the master student's locked office on a computer. Hard copies of data will remain in the master student's office. All data will be destroyed (i.e., shredded or erased) when their use is no longer needed but not before a minimum of five years after data collection. If we write a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law. (Please check the blanks for all those statements that apply) ___ **I agree** to disclose information which may identify myself ___ **I do not agree** to disclose information identifying myself and wish such information to remain confidential ___ **I agree** to disclose information which may identify my organization ___ **I do not agree** to disclose information identifying my organization and wish such information to remain confidential ___ **I agree** to be audio-taped during my participation in this study. ___ **I do not** agree to be audio-taped during my participation in this study.

Page 2 of 2

Initials _____ Date _____

Project Title	*Communication Study of Public Meetings in Government Agencies*
What are the risks of this research?	There may be some risks from participating in this research. Because you may be audiotaped and may be identified by name, this project presents minimal risk to you. Your participation is voluntary and that you can decline to answer specific questions or to end your participation at any time without penalty.
What are the benefits of this research?	This research is not designed to help you personally, but the results may help the investigator learn more about how public meetings relate to public affairs efforts in government agencies.
Do I have to be in this research? May I stop participating at any time?	Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify. Also, if you choose to withdraw or request it, the researchers will destroy all records including the audiotape.
What if I have questions?	This research is being conducted by **Dr. Elizabeth Toth in the Communications Department** at the University of Maryland, College Park. If you have any questions about the research study itself, please contact Dr. ElizabethToth at 2130 Skinner Building, College Park 20742; 301-405-8077; eltoth@umd.edu If you have questions about your rights as a research subject or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact: **Institutional Review Board Office, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, 20742; (e-mail)** irb@deans.umd.edu; **(telephone) 301-405-0678** This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.
Statement of Age of Subject and Consent	Your signature indicates that: you are at least 18 years of age;, the research has been explained to you; your questions have been fully answered; and you freely and voluntarily choose to participate in this research project.
Signature and Date	**NAME OF SUBJECT**	
	SIGNATURE OF SUBJECT	
	DATE	

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