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Challenges for Communicators in Future Australian Local Government

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Abstract

Local governments (LGOVs) are ubiquitous institutions for human cooperation and all need to communicate with their communities. Most Australian LGOVs employ at least one communicator but there are few principles to guide practice. This paper examines 'responsible flexibility', 'soft governance' and trends driving LGOV to enhance dialogue with communities and share ownership of problems and solutions. The paper argues that communicators are well placed to clarify and enhance their role in LGOV of the future by shifting communication focus from telling to listening, advocating the importance of transparency and communication in government, and developing expertise in facilitating community participation.

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1. Introduction

Most Australian local government (LGOV) organisations employ at least one person in a specialist communication capacity. Practice is diverse but tends to be dominated by activities related to media (Simmons & Small, 2012). LGOV communication leaders have acknowledged the desirability of using communication to enhance community participation in government (Simmons, 2013), and in 2014 the Government Communications Australia annual conference highlighted the important role of communicators in listening to and engaging their

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communities (Whitlam, 2014; Glenny, 2014). But to date there are few guidelines or principles for effective or proper practice of LGOV communication, beyond individual LGOV position descriptions and plans.

In common with communicators across many sectors, LGOV communicators individually and as a professional group ponder their relationship to the central business of their organisations, often in response to feeling insecure about that relationship. An enduring theme of concern to communicators is the pressure they perceive to advocate on behalf of both their organization and the organisation's stakeholders, and the conflict that arises when different interests are not reconciled. In several ways communicators can experience tension between pressures to facilitate participation by communities in processes, and pressures to control communication and outcomes. Glenny (2007) reported cynicism about the role of government communication in Australia, and said that a first step to overcoming negative perceptions would be to conduct research into the purpose of public sector communication.

This paper reflects on emerging needs of LGOV, including 'responsible flexibility' (Pratt, 2013), 'soft governance' (Evans & Reid, 2013), and the role of LGOV communication in Australia and other democracies. It examines the potential for LGOV communicators to clarify and align their role with emerging operational and democratic needs of LGOV. Finally, it makes recommendations for strategic LGOV communication priorities.

2. Background

Public relations and communication managers have long been concerned with improved clarification of their role and their contribution to organisations. According to Brunton and Jeffery (2013) there is a 'growing interest in the reputation and professionalism of' communication management, because of a demand for increasingly sophisticated understanding and approaches to strategic corporate communication. They focus on communication managers' professional identity, arguing that identity is concerned with perceptions and institutionalisation of status, the extent of congruence between personal and professional values, and the requirements of practice (2013). They reported that 'positive identification arose from an ability to influence, emulate the professional values of peers, and cohesion with the wider practitioner community' and that dis-identification arose from perceptions that communication managers are 'spinners' of information paid to exaggerate or deceive, their advice not being taken, and unethical or manipulative practice by professional colleagues (2012). This paper focuses on concepts related to the professional identity of LGOV communicators, at least insofar as it concerns practitioners' beliefs in the congruence between their personal values, their practice, their organisations' values and expectations of communicator practice, and organization and other stakeholder perceptions of alignments and gaps between their expectations and communicator practice. Within this complex dynamic this paper seeks to provide some evidence and analysis to aid theorizing and judgments relating to communication strategy and practice.

Several trends affecting government and LGOV present challenges but also opportunities for LGOV communicators to focus purpose and practice. Trends include pressure for 'responsible flexibility' (Pratt, 2013), 'soft governance' including coproduction with and adaptation to citizens and stakeholders (Evans & Reid, 2013), and decentralization (Kamnuansilpa, 2012). These trends are discussed below as they provide context for discussion about proper roles for LGOV communication, but first it is important to reflect that government, and perhaps especially any democratic form of government, requires communication with communities, and that best practice in government communication often involves as much listening as telling.

3. Democracy, communication challenges and 'soft governance'

The 560 local governments across Australia are established by State and Territory laws and differ in terms of structure, services (ALGA, 2013) and approach to managing communication (Simmons & Small, 2012). The requirement to communicate well is embedded in the principles, preambles and charters of the LGOV Acts intended to guide the execution of government. The acts refer to principles such as; encouraging participation in the 'decisions and affairs of local governments' (LGOV Act Western Australia, 1995, Section 1.3); being responsive to the needs, interests and aspirations of individuals and groups' (LGOV Act South Australia, 1999, Section 8); maintaining '... transparent and effective processes, and decision-making in the public interest' (LGOV Act Queensland, 2009, Section 4); and promoting 'social justice principles of equity, access, participation and rights' (LGOV Act NSW, 1993, Section 8).

All LGOVs serve diverse communities with a range of competing and vocal interests. For individual councilors and LGOV organisations alike, engaging, enabling participation, and making appropriate representation, are difficult and constant communication challenges. Ideally councils will manage transparent processes that facilitate voice, and enable ownership, but avoid being captured by self-serving elites or minorities (Evans & Reid, 2013). Negotiating paths to decisions that are acceptably balanced for the benefit of the community requires deliberate processes and a special balance of skills and qualities in those who manage the processes (Simmons, 2013).

Difficult issues and choices about scarce resources or developments demand that government representatives be sensitive to different perspectives and responses, to adapt for evidence and emotion, and to balance short term and long term consequences. Evans and Reid (2013) argue that effective democracy requires community voice in ‘decisions which shape their destiny’ and that ‘intractable problems require co-produced solutions with citizens’ (2013, p. 9). They describe ‘soft governance’ as the ‘power to persuade’, arguing that all communities have the capacity to adapt and make behavioural change, ‘the key is to find and nurture those capacities’ (2013, p. 9):

we live in an era of ‘soft governance’ that requires the collection of qualitative data because the achievement of co-production and adaptive behaviours with citizens and stakeholders requires us to understand what citizens think and how they will behave in response to various social interventions. In sum, the ability of public organisations to adapt and absorb new forms of knowledge is a condition of social progress (Evans & Reid, 2013, p. 7).

Many scholars, notably Daymon and Holloway (2011) have urged public relations and communication management practitioners to use qualitative approaches to understanding and interpreting stakeholders and issues. Although public sector communicators are often reluctant to describe their role as ‘persuasion’ (Glenny, 2007), the notion of ‘soft governance’, facilitating involvement of and learning from communities accords well with contemporary concepts of better public relations and communication management practice (Marsh, 2010).

3.1. Participation and responsible flexibility

In the UK, Coleman and Firmstone (2014) said that the need for local government to engage communities may never have been more important than it is today, and that engaging and communicating with the public ‘should be seen as one activity’. An increase in informed community participation in decision processes is widely believed to lead to better decisions and outcomes (Wang & Wan Wart, 2007), but Evans and Reid (2013) caution against unskilled or inappropriate participation processes, and emphasise the need for quality participation. Public participation needs to be appropriate and skillfully managed in good faith, with checks placed on involvement and representation of vested interests, or confusion and division may result (for more on participation process strategies and pitfalls in LGOV see Evans and Reid, 2013; and Wang and Wan Wart, 2007). Although Evans and Reid (2013) highlight European examples of effective participation strategies, they say that planned participation is often outsourced to private bodies by European LGOVs (Evans & Reid, 2013).

There has been a decline in trust of government institutions in recent decades (Wang & Wan Wart, 2007). Factors contributing to the decline include the exposure of scandalous behaviour by politicians, expansion of government, and disappointment with the performance of governments and their service provision. There are several schools of thought concerning the best strategies for enhancing trust in government, and one strategy suggested by all is increasing citizen participation (Wang & Wan Wart, 2007). Wang and Wan Wart, (2007) said ‘the public is geographically closer to local government than the national or state governments, so public participation and trust at the local level is more easily perceived and measured’.

Some challenges facing LGOV are paradoxical. LGOV face pressure to become less bureaucratic and rule orientated and be more responsive and business-like (Pratt, 2013; Huntley, 2014). Simultaneously LGOV are expected to become less secretive and more accountable (Whitlam, 2014; Pratt, 2013).

Greater responsiveness may make it possible for public organizations to perform with more agility, but this risks abandoning or weakening rules that emphasize equal treatment and guard against

various forms of corruption. An emphasis on accountability can help ensure services are provided equitably and reduce the misuse of public resources, but hobble the organization's performance and under-utilize its employees (Pratt, 2013, p. 90).

The term 'responsible flexibility' is used to describe the balance required to achieve these seemingly competing aims (Pratt, 2013). For public sector organisations aspiring to 24 hour responsiveness to a range of stakeholder needs, this creates a practical challenge of balancing 'responsible' administration of public resources through transparent lines of authority and decision processes, with 'flexibility', suggesting more discretion in decision-making and rules, more autonomy and loosely defined positions (Pratt, 2013). Politicians and governments are accustomed to dealing with stakeholders with different opinions and interests, but here we are dealing with requirements to meet conflicting but rational expectations held simultaneously by individuals and communities. Local governments and their communicators will need to engage with the complexity of situations and engage stakeholders in understanding and resolution. Because of its size and proximity to the people, LGOV may prove to be best placed to engage communities in complex questions concerning values, expectations and change.

Renewed interest in localism – including shifting decisions and resources away from central control – is creating opportunities for 'local government to become the key conduit for public participation in an era of governance' (Evans and Reid, 2013, 10). Decentralization is to some extent essential for effective democracy and participation in LGOV (Kamnuansilpa, 2012). Pratt (2013) argues that LGOVs are ripe for experimentation with flexibility in various ways. Because they are decentralized and frequently smaller and with fewer resources than central government, local 'organizations in turn have less role specialization and role rigidity because they undertake a broader range of responsibilities with fewer staffing resources'. Wang and Wan Wart (2007) found that public trust in LGOV increases when participation leads to high quality services the public wants and when officials demonstrate integrity and moral leadership, and that trust is most enhanced through performance, not promise (Wang & Wan Wart, 2007). With attention to real indicators of integrity and ethical behavior, and real differences in desired services, LGOV and their communicators could expect that participation would contribute to enhancing trust required for more successful experimentation in governance.

3.2. *Concepts of government communication: Tools, contexts and purposes*

Government communication is a disparate, growing industry that needs more classification and analysis if we are to understand it (Howlett, 2009). In the government sector a lack of guidance on role, tasks, positioning and titling for communicators is reflected in the large number of job titles that indicate differences in focus on media, publications, and relations, and different levels of seniority (Glenny, 2007). Approaches to LGOV communication are mostly determined at local organisation level (Simmons & Small, 2012). This reflects a scarcity of guidance on principles for managing and executing LGOV communication as well as autonomy for LGOV to address perceived local needs. The approach an organization takes to managing communication is largely determined by the senior decision-makers or management (Grunig, Grunig, Sriramesh, Huang & Lyra 1995). Research has also found that communicators with more experience of government communication or education in communication tend to reject a focus on media, and favour more two way information flow and a more strategic communication orientation (Glenny, 2007), and that higher qualified communicators in LGOV more frequently monitor the environment (Simmons & Small, 2012).

In recent years a number of researchers have proffered models and conceptualizations of different aspects government communication and public relations. Many (Liu & Horsley, 2007; Glenny, 2007; Lee, 2012; Simmons and Small, 2012) have drawn explicitly from public relations literature and conceptualizations of communication in their analyses and models (Canel & Sanders, 2013). Government communication and advertising resources can be used to help incumbent politicians with reelection (Young, 2013). Australian researcher Leanne Glenny (2007) distinguishes the functions of 'informing', 'persuading' and 'engaging', and says it is important to distinguish political and apolitical government communication. Similarly Sanders, Canel, and Holtz-Bacha (2011) also distinguish political from government communication, and in the US Lee (2012) also felt it was important to separate political public relations style government communication from communication intended to help politicians get reelected, which he labeled *dangerous*. He further identified *mandatory* communication necessary to inform, attend and be accountable to community members as citizens, and *optional* communication with community as consumers,

concerning services and regulations and lifestyle (Lee, 2012). Simmons (2013) distinguishes listening, involving and representing from emphasis on managing message and promotion through media. Another influential model, the ‘Government Communication Wheel’, focused on contextual factors that lead to differences between public and private sector public relations. Public sector communicators reported greater dissatisfaction with the adequacy of communication budgets, higher pressure from publics and politics, greater interaction with a range of external publics and partners, more media coverage and more legal constraints on communication (Liu and Horsley, 2007). Other studies including Gregory (2006) and Brunton and Jeffrey (2010) have focused on the need to articulate competencies required by communicators working in government, the latter emphasising the importance of competencies in stakeholder relationships and external interface management.

In view of the large number of communication activities government is involved with, Howlett (2009) says we need a taxonomy to aid analysis and generalization about their impact. He argues for conceptualising government communication as information-based tools used to effect policy goals through influence, focusing on outward one-way communication. He distinguishes a ‘front end’ stage (planning and agenda-setting communication), and a ‘back end’ (implementation and evaluation), and he distinguishes 4 main categories of government communicative tools; *‘product information; consumer information campaigns; general disclosure tools and data collection and release tools* (Howlett, 2009). These conceptualisations help scholars and practitioners to understand and possibly codify government communication, but each of the research studies reported above called for more research.

3.3. *Balancing control and participation*

Most of the conceptualisations of government and LGOV communication above focus on outward messaging or persuasion. Glenny (2007) reported that Australian Federal government communication had largely been conceptualised as one-way communication from government outwards about tangible products, and that there was considerable confusion about role and the purpose of communication. Among communicators she found reluctance to use the term ‘persuasion’ to describe their work, and a preference to associate their role with information dissemination. However there was some acceptance that their role was to help the government of the day to govern, and that the role involved advocacy. She said that government communication varies from task to task and context to context, and is sometimes a hybrid of informing, advocating and persuading. Importantly, she found that barriers to participatory communication were beyond the influence of most practitioners:

Much of the reluctance for engagement with the Australian public was attributed to the politicians rather than the public servants, with perceptions that the political leadership lacks interest in feedback when it does not suit its purposes and is intolerant of different views, denigrating those who express them (Glenny, 2007, p. 162).

The dual expectations of ‘controlling’ communication and enabling community ‘participation’ in organisation decisions create a dilemma in any organisation. LGOV communication researchers have identified emphasis on control or participation as distinguishing characteristics of approach. Simmons (2013) examined underlying differences in Australian LGOV communication approaches. Consistent with previous research in the US (Horsley, Liu & Levenshus, 2010) he found that media relations tended to dominate LGOV communicator focus and activities. Using factor analysis, he identified two main approaches in LGOV communication, one focused on managing media and promoting the organisation, the other was more oriented to listening to communities and facilitating participation. Significantly, he found that the approach favouring listening and participation predicted community approval, low staff turnover and favourable media coverage, while a focus on media and promotion had no significant relationship. He thus suggested that LGOV consider reorienting their communication focus towards listening and participation.

Web 2.0 and social media have attracted the interest of public relations because the dialogic affordances (Dalgarno & Lee, 2010) they offer parallel the dialogic interaction long held to epitomise best public relations communication. However organisations have much to learn with regard to engaging audiences and listening through social media (Macnamara, 2013). The interactional affordances of Web 2.0 enable us to move beyond thinking of community interaction as intermittent, protected and selective, and conceptualise LGOV interaction with communities as continuous conversations, ‘unexpected interpretations and re-uses, and dynamic emergence’ (Majchrzak, 2013, p. 38). Scott (2012) also identified control and participation as important dimensions of LGOV

communication. He recorded use of social media by 100 urban LGOVs in the US in 2010 and again in 2013. He created two dimensions to plot use of social media, the extent to which social media were managed centrally by LG organisations, and the extent to which they encouraged comments or participation from constituents. He found that cities were more likely to manage social media communication centrally in 2013, but that they were fractionally less likely to encourage constituent participation. On these two dimensions central management and public participation the trend 2010-2013 was towards more central control and less participation.

Control and participation approximate two ‘superordinate’ goals for communication reported by practitioners and academics; *strategically managing the communication process* and *managing relationships*.

The first superordinate goal .. involves evaluating, controlling and using the communication process to achieve pre-determined objectives.. the second superordinate goal, focuses on the participation perspective of the parties involved in the communication process. It is concerned with representing, understanding and advising members of both internal and external audiences (Jeffrey & Brunton, 2011, p. 65).

The study did not differentiate private and public sector communication management, and the authors urged further research across different sectors and domains, but the findings are of interest here. Jeffrey and Brunton (2011) highlight differences in the values associated with one (‘control, influence, management’) and two (promoting public interest, nurturing relationships and advising on corporate responsibility), and suggest that the emphasis on managing communication implies a reliance on asymmetrical communication. They say the organization management’s goals can be seen to be transcendent, and that a heightened concern for serving the public interest and need for even-handedness in interactions may be in conflict with this asymmetry (Jeffrey & Brunton, 2011). Communicators may experience discomfort where pressures for organisational goals conflict with public interest, and/or organisational pressures for asymmetry conflict with professional or personal instincts for symmetry. Glenny (2007) reported that we might expect communicators to be involved in effective engagement with the public, however government often finds it difficult to engage the public effectively and involve communicators appropriately. Sometimes communicators are excluded from policy development until it is time to sell a completed policy product, and sometimes communicators are engaged early but only to ensure that the policy developed looks good and is saleable (Glenny, 2007, p. 163), both experiences are perceived to undermine communication management practitioners (Brunton & Jeffrey, 2013).

4. Summary

In highlighting trends in LGOV and LGOV communication, two dominant emerging themes relate to changing expectations that seem paradoxical, and a future of participatory, co-creational governance. Local government is experiencing pressure to demonstrate ‘responsible flexibility’: to enhance accountability in decision processes and administration, and to be more responsive to a wider range of stakeholder expectations. Simultaneously there are trends to decentralise and localise government. Tensions between fund-holding central governments and service-delivering LGOVs will endure, but decentralisation may facilitate changes and flexibility required of LGOV. It is increasingly evident that effective community participation in, and ownership of, difficult community problems and decisions is necessary, and that good LGOV will require transparent processes for participation and specially skilled people to manage the processes. According to Evans and Reid (2013), decisions that enable necessary adaptation will be based in ‘soft governance’, expertly designed participatory processes enabling informed collective judgments and co-produced solutions. To date, most governments, of any size or capacity, struggle to find the expertise to design and manage such processes.

The role of LGOV communicators remains largely undefined beyond the local level. It may be healthy in one sense for LGOV to adapt communication to local needs, but individuals and professions need a range of structures, goals and principles to guide practice and credibility (Brunton & Jeffrey, 2013). It is known that media and outward, one-way communication are often the focus of efforts and resources, but recent evidence indicates that an emphasis on listening and participation in communication may achieve superior outcomes for LGOV (Simmons, 2013). Importantly, government communication is often poorly understood by many managers and politicians who are best placed to improve approaches (Glenny, 2007) and lack of understanding is a barrier to effective, strategic communication management. The development of a ‘clearer understanding and articulation of the role of the public

service communicator is just the first step in overcoming some of the negative perceptions surrounding the function' and would lead to 'a broader recognition that government communication is about the public, not the minister or the public servant' (Glenny, 2007, p. 165).

5. Conclusions and challenges

The paradoxical challenges of accountability and flexibility, control and participation, efficiency and availability, are not unique to LGOV and they need to be addressed. Local government is likely to become more difficult, insofar as resources will become more scarce, and stakeholder demands and expectations more intense. If our future is to be based on civic cooperation, new ways of communicating will evolve to be integral to governance, and communicators have an opportunity to play important and leading roles.

The 'soft governance' discussed here refers to a future we don't yet know, where responsibility for problems and decisions is assumed to be shared, affordances for dialogue are constant, and solutions are co-created. We already have the technologies required for this future, the systems are in experimental phases, and the psychologies are evolving. The preceding analyses indicate that there will be no single path ahead. One challenge for LGOV communicators is to shift the focus of their communication from telling to listening. Macnamara (2013) referred to organisations' need for developing new media literacies and an architecture of listening (p. 160). LGOV communication is presently more focused on the information, promotion and persuasion dimensions of communication than on listening and engaging. Previous research indicates that an orientation to listening and participation may best serve the needs of LGOV employers, communities and, through enhanced contribution, the LG communicators themselves. More than ever, governments need to listen to and understand their communities.

An important role for communicators may be to facilitate processes designed for, and support staff trained in, constructive community participation. Presently this occurs sporadically - for a range of reasons including opportunity and expertise - but trends to dispersed responsibility, responsible flexibility, and soft governance in LGOV provide an opportunity for communication managers to lead and specialise on behalf of LGOV organisations. It is important that engagement and participation strategies are managed well, that all involved understand the importance of careful process management and experience.

Governments often create their own barriers to citizen participation (Evans & Reid, 2013) and Glenny (2007) reported that resistance to engagement was often due to politicians more than public servants. It is important for public sector communicators to communicate the importance of transparency to their colleagues (Fairbanks, Plowman, & Rawlins, 2007). It may be in everyone's interests for the peak professional bodies to continually help communicators function as internal advocates for communication, linking participation with better decisions and outcomes, and counseling on the integrity of communication and transparency to effective democracy.

LGOVs are one of the fundamental and ubiquitous institutions for human cooperation, and they all need to communicate with their communities. But communication scholars have made relatively few inroads into the field and we have little evidence and few contextualised theories to work with. Communication is both the essence of and a tool for government. This paper has highlighted a number of trends in LGOV that suggest important gaps concerning decision-maker attitudes, communication management structures, and links to the requirements of democracy. Many studies focus on data obtained from the relatively conveniently accessed practitioners and administrators, studies exploring communication from different stakeholder perspectives should be prioritised.

One of the challenges for the future is to develop systems and ways of thinking that address complex expectations and problems that we can already identify. Communicators can help LGOV address multiple expectations to be more transparent, participatory, equitable, efficient, and even less bureaucratic. The centrality of communication to good government is too seldom asserted.

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