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Opportunities, challenges and trends in US federal government communication

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US federal communicators can facilitate the information needs of a democracy, helping citizens and public servants make informed decisions. This direct and mediated communication may provide an accountability mechanism for public sector policies, programmes and workers. However, despite the recognized importance of federal government communication, little research has focused specifically on government communication or government public relations (Lee, 2008a; Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011a). In the related political communication field, scholars have focused attention mostly on messages constructed, sent and received to directly or indirectly influence politics (Graber & Smith, 2005). Sanders (2011) found that political communication research has provided important, but limited, insights regarding government communication, mostly addressing themes of chief executive communication, the role of news media and normative expectations of communication within constitutional democracies. These limitations, and others, have led to significant gaps in the understanding of government communication in relation particularly to its definition and conceptualization (Sanders, 2011).

This chapter provides an overview of the context and development of US federal government communication, including definitions, structures and

processes of government communication, concluding with an examination of emerging trends and promising areas for future research.

Government communication defined

US government communication goes by many names, including public affairs, public information, public agency communication and public sector communication (Lee, 2008a). This chapter draws from Sanders (2011) and Lee (2008a) to more broadly conceptualize government communication beyond political communication and political public relations. Political public relations is defined as:

[T]he management process by which an organization or individual actor for political purposes, through purposeful communication and action, seeks to influence and to establish, build, and maintain beneficial relationships and reputations with its key publics to help support its mission and achieve its goals. (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011b, p. 8)

This definition could encompass government communication and government communication management but, in order to capture the peculiarity of *government* communication, Sanders (2011) suggested the term ‘political’ should be clarified so as to be understood to include civic purposes in addition to electoral or campaign ones. This understanding of government communication can be specified in Lee’s (2008a) account of the objectives of government public relations as working with the media, reporting and responding to the public, reaching out to the public to achieve objectives of increasing use of public services, gaining voluntary compliance with laws and regulations, conducting public education campaigns, using public outreach and input to monitor the external operating environment, and finally, increasing public support for government services and policies.

US government communicators

Before focusing on US federal government communicators, it is useful to provide the broader context for government communication within the United States. Government communicators are employees or professional consultants at the city, county, state or federal level whose primary responsibilities are communicating internally or externally to various publics regarding government policies, decisions or actions and/or guiding communication strategy. They

share a common set of obstacles and opportunities, though differences emerge according to government level.

The National Association of Government Communicators (NAGC) describes the functions of its members as editors, writers, graphic artists, video professionals, broadcasters, photographers, information specialists and agency spokespersons (NAGC, 2011). These communicators operate at all levels of government and hail from diverse educational and professional backgrounds. Public affairs officers can play critical roles in strategic issues management, crisis management and conflict management.

While comprehensive figures are not available for all government communication in the United States, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics includes a 'Local Government' occupational employment category and reported numbers for several categories of employment that would fall under public relations and communication. For example, in 2010 it recorded 3,160 public relations and fundraising managers, 10,020 public relations specialists, 1,110 media and communication workers, 790 marketing managers, 360 advertising and promotions managers and several other potentially relevant categories (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). The US Office of Personnel Management described the responsibilities of federal public information officers as advising 'agency management on policy formulation and the potential public reaction to proposed policy, and identify and carry out the public communication requirements inherent in disseminating policy decisions' (2008, p. 65). This work 'involves identifying communication needs and developing informational materials that inform appropriate publics of the agency's policies, programs, services and activities, and planning, executing, and evaluating the effectiveness of information and communication programs in furthering agency goals' (US Office of Personnel Management, 2008, p. 65).

Presidential and federal communication

US government communication and how it has developed are, of course, shaped by the political and electoral systems and structures in which it takes place. The US government is a complex federalist democracy, a union of 50 sovereign states, in which institutions at multiple levels share power. The strong central, national government and state and local sovereign governments mostly consist of legislative, executive and judiciary branches. There are also numerous executive agencies such as the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Transportation that, together with the state and federal level bodies, generate a complex, multilayered system and create a challenging communication context.

Presidential communication

The country's president is the nation's most powerful government communicator.

The White House has three primary offices tasked with presidential public relations: The office of communications (OOC), the press office and the office of public engagement (OPE) (White House, 2009b; Eshbaugh-Soha, 2011). Since its 1969 beginnings in the Nixon White House, the OOC has evolved into a critical component of presidential communication (Kumar, 2007). The OOC expanded White House communication functions beyond a singular focus on providing reporters with official information and added the function of advocating for the president (Kumar, 2007). The OOC contains the communication staff and operations tasked with crafting and communicating the president's overarching messages (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2011). The OOC includes the office of the press secretary as well as media affairs, research and speech-writing functions (White House, n.d.). The office of the press secretary, and the press secretary who manages the office, serves as the president's spokesperson and conduit of the president's agenda to the press corps. For example, the press office coordinates the daily gaggles and press briefings. Gaggles are less formal than the press briefings, are not televised, and can serve as an early warning sign for the press secretary in terms of what is on reporters' minds and what may be raised at the daily press briefing (Kumar, 2007). White House communication structures have become institutionalized but each president's management approach influences overall operations including communication (Kumar, 2003). For example, President Obama shifted the mission of the office of public liaison and renamed it the OPE.

The office of public liaison's goal had been to 'maintain relationships with key external groups while in office and use institutional resources to mobilize external supporters for both policy and electoral ends' (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2011, p. 101). This office's efforts correlated with the larger OOC and press office's efforts to influence the press, public and policy makers. In May 2009, the White House issued a press release announcing that the OPE would work along with the office of intergovernmental affairs to serve as the 'front door to the White House through which ordinary Americans can participate and inform the work of the President' (White House, 2009a, para. 1). The OPE has a strong online presence and seeks to broaden engagement between Americans and the federal government through town halls, forums and online discussions surrounding topics like health care and the economy (White House, 2009a).

Other federal communication related to government communication

The US Congress also influences federal government communication given that the executive power does not solely rest with the president. The federal legislature, Congress, is bicameral with two houses. The US Senate was designed to represent states' interests and is made up of 100 Senators, 2 from each state, who serve six-year terms without term limits. The House of Representatives, designed to represent the people and public opinion, has 435 members who serve two-year terms without term limits. The congressional press secretaries or communication directors who manage communication for federal legislators have received little research interest (Downes, 2008) despite that they contribute to the success or failure of policies and programmes through their direct and mediated communication.

At the federal congressional level, Downes (2008) found that press secretaries build relationships with the news media that are based on 'guarded honesty' (p. 132) and that while these relationships may not be friendly, communicators understand that they need the media in order to be successful. In qualitative interviews with congressional press secretaries, Downes (2008) further found that press secretaries described efforts to spin the media but did not like the negative implications of the term. Instead, they viewed truth as a 'spin toward the best and most positive angle of a story' (p. 129). The quantitative data reinforced this, suggesting that 'spin is a statement to the press that, although it is not based on half truths, is one that is based on selective angles to the truth' (Downes, 2008, p. 129).

Even though government communicators have sought to use less one-way messaging and more two-way communication, involving relationship building with publics that seeks to take their needs and interests more into account (Levenshus, 2010), government public relations have been generally viewed with hostility and suspicion by Congress. Significant efforts have been made to restrict the use of public relations as a professional activity in the public sector (e.g. Lee, 2003, 2006, 2008b, 2009). For example, an investigation by a Senate subcommittee of the US General Service Administration's use of public relations firms and one 2010 contract in particular prompted the Public Relations Society of America Chair and CEO, Rosanna Fiske to write to the committee urging it to consider the public interest served by government public relations and public affairs (2011). In her letter she suggested the following benefits of her members' work:

- Public relations advance the free flow of accurate and truthful information; open and transparent communication fosters credibility and trust in global institutions.

- Public relations serve the public interest by providing the context, clarity and information necessary to aid informed debate and decision-making in a democratic society.
- Public relations help to build mutual understanding among a wide array of global institutions and audiences.
- Public relations serve the public good by changing attitudes and behaviors toward some of the world's most pressing social issues, from breast cancer awareness to drinking and driving to smoking and obesity. The public relations industry also has prevented consumer injury and illness, raised awareness of products that have improved our quality of life, advanced worthwhile causes and provided pro-bono services for institutions that needed public relations assistance but could not afford it. (Fiske, 2011, p. 2)

Fiske also objected to what she considered to be the unfairly negative characterizations of government public relations: 'Pejorative statements, such as spending money to minimize bad publicity and hiring someone to help [the government] "spin", are speculative misnomers that debase the important work being performed by approved federal contractors working on GSA-authorized contracts, whose main goal is to help inform the public of relevant issues' (2011, p. 2). Such negative, unfair characterizations of government public relations are not limited to Congress. For example, a 2011 report on risk communication from the US Food and Drug Administration stated: '*Risk communication* is the term of art used for situations when people need good information to make sound choices. It is distinguished from public affairs (or public relations) communication by its commitment to accuracy and its avoidance of spin' (Fischhoff, Brewer & Downs, 2011, p. 1).

Legal framework for government communication

In addition to potential misconceptions and misnomers, government communicators are also subject to a number of legal restrictions that may affect their communication strategies and tactics. At the federal level, government communicators and officials are required to protect classified information in their possession (Kaiser, 2008). Laws such as the Hatch Act limit federal communicators' ability to engage in partisan or campaign-related activity during business hours (Maskell, 1996, 1998). For example, federal communicators cannot fundraise during business hours or use a government vehicle for political activities. While the Hatch Act exempts communicators

working for the Congress and the military, each of these groups has its own parallel standards of conduct (Maskell, 1998). For example, the Department of Defense Directive 1344.10 restricts political activities by members of the armed forces in the same manner as the Hatch Act.

Federal communicators must often follow access-to-information laws such as the federal Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and the Government Sunshine Act of 1976, designed to increase transparency and access to government deliberations and records (Relyea, 2008; Relyea & Ginsberg, 2008). While the president's office and Congress are exempt from FOIA, communicators at federal departments and agencies are not. However, the law does not cover interjurisdictional sharing between branches, meaning they mostly rely on professional courtesy or courts to get information from one another (Relyea & Ginsberg, 2008).

Government communicators working for Congress and federal agencies are also impacted by lobbying restrictions (Maskell, 2009). In addition to the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995 aimed at Congress, other government communicators are covered by federal criminal law that generally prohibits using congressionally appropriated funds to lobby Congress, state or local legislatures about pending legislation (Maskell, 2009). This includes publicity campaigns directed at those legislatures.

In a survey of 976 US government communicators at the federal, state and local levels, communicators working for US elected officials reported a higher impact of legal frameworks than did those working for non-elected officials (Horsley, Liu & Levenshus, 2010; Liu, Levenshus & Horsley, in press). These findings could mean that communicators working for elected officials have to tread more carefully in terms of regulations overseeing their campaign and official communication activities than do communicators who are not affected by such laws.

Communication in a permanent campaign mindset

Elections have been described as the 'single most important event in American democratic life' because elections allow Americans to 'both give their consent to be governed and to hold their representatives accountable for past performance' (Thurber, 2000, p. 1). Thus, election studies have received the most attention in government and political communication research (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). US government communication research has focused on relationships between elected officials (rather than non-elected officials or agencies) and the media (rather than publics or other entities) (Lee, 1999; Fairbanks, Plowman & Rawlins, 2007).

Politically or non-competitively appointed federal communicators working for elected officials may be more affected by campaigns and elections than career service communicators who were competitively selected as part of a merit staffing process (US Office of Personnel Management, n.d.). Federal political appointees, including appointed communicators, are often nominated by the president and confirmed by the US Senate (US Office of Personnel Management, n.d.). In 2011, the Senate passed legislation to reduce the number of politically appointed positions it would be required to approve, including many public affairs positions (Friedman, 2011). Politically appointed employees serve limited terms and are often affected by elections when the other party comes into power as they are likely to lose their positions (Vedantam, 2008). In times of increased political partisanship, it can be more important for presidents to 'stock departments with people who understand politics and the increased importance of interaction with Congress, lobbyists, and the media' (Vedantam, 2008, para. 12). This emphasis on the *political* importance of ongoing communication with key publics supports the argument that permanent campaigning has largely become the mindset of governments (e.g. Blumenthal, 1982; Klein, 2005). Kumar (2007) argued:

The president's need to communicate derives from the nature of our representative political system and from the reality that he must continually seek support for everything he does. . . . An emphasis on presidential communications can also be traced to the reality that chief executives are guaranteed no victories by dint of their election. Election provides them with the opportunity to persuade those whose support they need, but they must be able to exploit the resources and opportunities available to them. (p. xiii)

According to Klein (2005), the permanent campaign mindset took shape in the television age and has dramatically shifted the nature of the presidency and of presidential communication. From a communication perspective, permanent campaigning involves a combination of image making and strategic communication that turns governing into a perpetual campaign and government into a tool used to sustain public support for elected officials (Blumenthal, 1982). Besides the campaigning candidate or elected official, there are two important pieces in the permanent, professionalized campaign that affect how US government communicators operate on a daily basis: the paid professional consultant and the political party.

Paid professional political consultants have redefined the role of major political parties, decentering parties' strategic role and have transformed candidate communication with voters and voter assessment of candidates (Thurber & Nelson, 2000). The increasing professionalization of US

electioneering has shifted from a largely locally focused, amateur or part-time effort organized by political party loyalists to the more permanent campaign mindset and infrastructure in which paid campaign consultants are often responsible for the strategies and techniques utilized to market campaign images and issues (Farrell, Kolodny & Medvic, 2001).

The permanent campaign mindset may also be due to the fact that campaigns are increasingly expensive and can require significantly more fundraising than in past years. The 2008 election was the most expensive in US history with candidates raising over US\$1 billion and Obama raising US\$500 million in online donations alone (Hardy, Adasiewicz, Kenski & Jamieson, 2010).

The development of election campaigning as a long-term, hugely expensive activity, commencing precisely when the previous campaign has ended, can produce problems for the conduct of government communication. For example, in 2011, President Barack Obama faced logistical and other challenges in running a White House communication operation, political staff operating out of the Democratic National Committee, and a working 2012 election campaign staff headquartered in Chicago (Kornblut, 2011). Such logistical challenges can strain internal communication, yet US government communication has generally focused more on external audiences and external affairs (Lee, 2008a).

Internal communication systems have been identified as important foundations for strong external communication programmes (Lee, 2008a). External functions include building relations with different audiences including consumers, communities, interest groups and citizens (Lee, 2008a). Other audiences include senior government officials and other government agencies and entities (Lee, 2008a). Media relations are also a significant component of government public relations (Lee, 2008a). As Kumar (2007) stated, 'The public is where a president's political strength lies, but the president's chief vehicle to reach them is the major news organizations' (p. xiv). The First Amendment's protection of a free press laid the groundwork for the mass media to emerge as influential, central characters in government and political communication. The media represent a political institution that influences the government's daily activities (Cook, 2005). Understanding the mass media context is critical then to understanding government communication in the United States (Benoit, 2007).

Media relations and a shifting media landscape

Media relations tend to 'dominate the common view' of government public relations (Lee, 2008a, p. 85). The US media have historically played a

gatekeeper role that has decided what government or political news would be published and what would be ignored, but government communicators also influence media coverage (Entman, 2003; Liu, 2007), particularly during crises. For example, Entman (2003) found that after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, President Bush's war frame for the attacks overwhelmingly dominated the news.

The US media culture and landscape are undergoing tremendous change. While the American news media were once limited to three national television networks and a diet of daily newspapers, and radio news services, the massive expansion of cable news networks and online news options, including citizen journalism (Lee, 2008a), has transformed the American news landscape. At the same time, the mass media have become increasingly fragmented and Americans' confidence in the media has continued to decline (e.g. Cook, 2005; Cohen, 2008). The Pew Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism also reported further declines in daily newspaper circulation and commercial news sector revenues with the exception of cable news (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2010). While newspapers provide the most news reporting of all US media, newspapers have continued to lose both reporting and editing capacity (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2010). Significant staff cuts have also been made within news magazines and national and local television operations. These market-driven cuts and changes in news coverage have led researchers to express concern about the current changing landscape of government and political news (McQuail, Graber & Norris, 2008).

One specific concern has centred on whether the increasing commercialization of the media and the development of market-driven journalism has either increased or decreased the flow of political information and influenced political knowledge in the United States and in other countries (Aalberg, van Aelst & Curran, 2010). Nearly half of Americans report getting their news on a typical day from four to six media platforms (Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel & Olmstead, 2010). Sixty per cent get their news from a combination of online and offline news sources with the internet now the third most popular news platform (behind local and national television news) (Purcell et al., 2010). Cohen (2008) documented how the tone of presidential news has grown increasingly negative. While negative coverage was associated with lower presidential approval ratings from the late 1940s until the mid-1970s, negative news has since lost some of its power to shape public attitudes towards the presidency (Cohen, 2008). Some scholars (e.g. Cook, 2005; Cohen, 2008; Eshbaugh-Soha, 2011) attribute this development to the fragmented, changing media landscape of a new media age.

Paradoxically it seems that, while increasing numbers of cable television channels and digital news resources have made political and government news more widely available now than at any time in history, this increase

in availability and choice has not necessarily resulted in an increased flow of information (Aalberg et al., 2010). The American media system pays relatively little attention to public and foreign affairs, and rising soft news has increasingly displaced hard news (Aalberg et al., 2010). In a comparative study of six countries, the US media system was both the most commercialized and lowest provider of political news and current affairs (Aalberg et al., 2010) and Americans have generally demonstrated a lack of political knowledge including such issues as the causes of the second Iraq War (Castells, 2009).

Perhaps the most profound influence on government communication is the internet (West, 2004; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006). Two-way, interactive, social or digital-based communication may assist in decreasing public cynicism and increasing engagement in government-sponsored efforts such as community counterterrorism campaigns (Liu & Briones, in press). Public administration researchers have heralded the potential of the internet to improve government service, communication and citizen trust, yet little empirical research has provided guidance for how to realize this potential (Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006). The public sector has been generally slow to adopt web-based communication tools with citizens (West, 2004, 2008). However, political groups and representatives can use their websites or video-sharing platforms like YouTube to bypass television and traditional media and extend the reach and longevity of their issue advertisements regarding policies (Kaid & Postelnicu, 2007).

Despite these opportunities, many challenges face government leaders and their communicators who seek to employ digital or social media communication to reach key publics. These challenges include legal and regulatory restrictions, rigid organizational structures, limited budgets, group conflict, hierarchical organizational cultures and employee beliefs and behaviours (West, 2004). Nevertheless, US government agencies have begun to shift resources and emphases from more traditional offline communication activities to online ones, a trend that began with campaign communication. In the first month of his presidency, Obama's team reconstructed and launched a new whitehouse.gov website featuring a blog and replaced the traditional weekly radio address with video messages posted on the YouTube video-sharing platform and on the whitehouse.gov site (Williams, 2009). On 21 January 2009, Obama sent a memorandum to all federal agencies urging them to incorporate new technologies and expand their online communications (White House, 2009b). Many agencies have answered that call.

For example, in 2011 the US State Department abandoned a static website approach it had used since 2008 with America.gov in order to shift resources towards a proactive engagement strategy via social media communication platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube (Cohn, 2011). State Department official, Duncan MacInnes, was quoted as saying: 'The new

paradigm, particularly for reaching youth, is you have to go to where people already are on the Web. People don't visit you, you have to go to them. . . . The material we produced for the America.gov centralized site is now pushed out to the embassy sites' (Cohn, 2011, para. 5). Federal Reserve Chairman, Ben Bernanke, also acknowledged this shifting paradigm and need for transparency and engagement. In April 2011, the chairman held the Federal Reserve's first-ever press conference in which he took media questions and streamed the exchange live on the organization's website (Trumbull, 2011). President Obama has hosted jobs-focused town hall meetings via Facebook, Twitter and the LinkedIn professional social network (Associated Press, 2011). The first social media town hall that was broadcast live from the White House via Twitter on 6 July 2011 garnered 170,000 comments and questions (Associated Press, 2011).

Next steps in US government communication research

As the oldest, continuous constitutional democracy in the world it is surprising how many gaps there are in our knowledge of effective US government communication. We conclude this chapter with outlining three especially fruitful areas for future US government communication research.

Theory development

First, there is a need for more theoretical development in government communication (Sanders, 2011). To address this gap, Liu and Horsley (2007) proposed the government communication decision wheel (GCDW) as the first comprehensive framework for understanding how communication in the US public sector is distinct from communication in the corporate sector. Based on the limited extant research on government communication, the model explains how two categories of attributes affect government communication decision making: (1) influences on daily activities (federalism, media scrutiny, relationships with primary publics, legal frameworks and politics) and (2) influences on professional advancement (professional development opportunities, management support for communication and management team membership).

In addition, recognizing that the public sector is not a monolithic environment, the GCDW proposes that these opportunities and challenges play out differently in four public sector microenvironments: intragovernmental, intergovernmental, multilevel and external. Further, the GCDW illustrates

the decision making that communicators must consider in all four microenvironments, indicating that at any given moment communicators may be operating in multiple microenvironments. In the intragovernmental microenvironment, one single government unit communicates alone. In the intergovernmental microenvironment, two or more units from the same level of government communicate together. In the multilevel microenvironment, communicators from two or more levels collaborate. Finally, in the external microenvironment, at least one government unit collaborates with at least one private sector, non-profit, or international organization to communicate.

Figure 4.1 summarizes the findings from GCDW survey and interview research (Horsley et al., 2010; Liu, Horsley & Levenshus, 2010; Liu & Levenshus, 2010; Liu et al., in press). A primary contribution of the GCDW is a better understanding of how communicators from various levels of government and working for elected versus non-elected officials communicate. Given that the minimal existing US government communication research has focused on relationships between elected officials (rather than non-elected officials or agencies) and the media (rather than publics or other entities) (Lee, 1999; Fairbanks et al., 2007), the GCDW provides an important first step in broadening our understanding of US government communication. Future GCDW research should test and expand the model in additional contexts including examining whether political appointees and consultants who serve as government communicators face unique (or similar) challenges compared to the communicators currently examined in the GCDW. Further, research could test the extent to which the model applies outside of the United States and what revisions need to be made.

Rise of e-government

A second fruitful area for future research is to provide guidance on how US government communicators can most effectively harness the rise of electronic, or e-government, to counter the public's distrust of government. For example, Eshbaugh-Soha (2011) argued that the changing media landscape and introduction of social media technology may require presidents to cede substantial control over their messages or expand the role of the public liaison in the White House to help cultivate relationships with key publics. Yet, as the government becomes increasingly open to embracing new media, research is needed to evaluate to what extent these tools can improve government-citizen relationships (Sweetser, 2011).

FIGURE 4.1 *The expanded government communication decision wheel*

New communication challenges

The US government faces new communication challenges as new threats arise. Currently, one of the primary threats facing the United States is how to best communicate about terrorism. One of the most effective methods for countering terrorism is strengthening publics' resilience to terrorism (Weimann, 2009). As such, the government needs to develop effective communication tools to help publics prepare for, respond to and recover from terrorism. One of the first such communication tools developed by the US government in the wake of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks was a colour system that indicated the relative threat of a terrorist attack from low danger to severe threat. However, since the system indicated that the nation was never below a significant risk of a terrorist attack, experts ultimately concluded that the system taught the public to be scared rather than prepared (Homeland Security Newswire, 2011). Consequently, in 2011 the US government launched a simpler two-level threat advisory system featuring messages selectively disseminated via Facebook and Twitter (Sullivan, 2011). At the same time, however, the US government must balance the need to prepare the public for potential terrorist attacks without divulging information that could empower those who would do harm.

In addition, US government communicators would continue to benefit from additional professional development opportunities, especially in light of the emergence of new communication technologies previously discussed. Professional development is key to improving negative media coverage and public opinion of government communication as well as elevating communicators to management roles (Seib & Fitzpatrick, 1995; Liu & Horsley, 2007). The Public Relations Society of America (2007) defined professional development as acquired knowledge or experience that gives a practitioner more insight and ability to be more effective, improves the practitioner's capabilities, or grows his or her professionalism. Survey research in particular finds that US government communicators only moderately evaluate their professional development opportunities (Liu et al., 2010). According to the same survey, government communicators reported on average being members of two professional associations and attending two annual training seminars. Subsequent interviews with 49 US government communicators revealed that communicators working for elected officials at the federal level may have few to no professional development opportunities (Liu & Levenshus, 2010), and a survey of 781 US government communicators revealed that federal government communicators have fewer professional development opportunities than their city and county counterparts (Horsley et al., 2010). Findings from all of these studies draw attention to the need for additional

professional development for US government communicators, especially at the federal level.

Finally, government communicators continue to recognize a need for increased visibility of communication as a management and leadership function. For example, a survey of 976 revealed that only half of US government communicators reported being part of the management team (Liu et al., 2010). Also, interviews with 49 US government communicators found that communicators had limited opportunities for leadership roles. These communicators distinguished leadership from management, the former being a role they could play regardless of their job title and the latter being related to their job title and designated responsibilities (Liu & Levenshus, 2010). Finally, a survey of 781 communicators working for US elected officials versus non-elected officials found that those working for non-elected officials were significantly less likely to be part of the management team (52% compared to 71%) (Liu et al., in press). Therefore, research reveals that US government communicators continue to face challenges in elevating the communication function to a management function and leadership role.

Conclusion

Given declining citizen trust in the US government, scholars have suggested that more frequent, improved public communication can improve relationships with both the citizens they serve and the media they rely on to convey their information to the public (e.g. Berman 1997; Fairbanks et al., 2007). This chapter lays the foundation for understanding the current landscape of the US federal government and US government communication research, thereby facilitating an understanding of how to improve public communication efforts.

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