Community engagement as “core business” for communicators working in Australian local government


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Abstract

Most Australian local government (LGOV) organisations employ at least one person who specialises in communication, although they go by different position titles. Beyond position descriptions and the plans of individual LGOV organisations, there are few professional principles to guide LGOV communication practice. Research has found that local government communication tends to be dominated by media relations in Australia and in the US. This paper examines ways that LGOV communication is conceptualised and reflects on the imperative to communicate well in a democracy. It reports governance, culture and communication technology trends that are driving a need for ever more sophisticated communication in the execution of government. The paper argues that listening and engaging are central to the mission of local governments, and that the participatory, inclusive, collaborative engagement increasingly required is beyond the present capacity of most councils. The paper argues that LGOV communication has mostly been conceptualised as one-way communication, and proposes that it would be more usefully conceptualised as two-way communication, and as more participatory than controlling. The paper challenges LGOV communicators, as individuals and as a professional group, to reorient in several ways that enhance LGOV capacity for engagement and participation.

Keywords: Political and Government Communication; Organisational Communication; Public Relations.
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Introduction

All governments need to communicate with their people and most Australian local governments employ at least one person to specialise in communication (Simmons and Small, 2012). Communicators in the sector are increasingly well networked through state and national bodies but to date there is little evidence to support the development or selection of effective and appropriate approaches to local government communication. Approach to communication is generally driven from the local level by the preferences, worldview and aspirations of senior managers and leaders. This in part reflects a healthy autonomy to address the needs of the local context, and in part that there are few sector-wide guidelines or principles to support effective practice.

The 2014 Government Communications Australia conference heard calls for integration of the communication function in local government core business (Whitlam, 2014) and for communicators to focus on listening and engaging with communities (Glenny, 2014). This paper aims to support planning and development of the communication function in LGOV by exploring issues, trends and strategic opportunities. It examines the growth of LGOV communication and ways that LGOV and public sector communication have been conceptualised to date. The future of Australian LGOV communicators is bound to the evolution of Australian local government, so it is important to understand and align with the directions of the sector. The paper reflects on the centrality of communication to LGOV democratic obligations, and examines governance, culture and communication technology trends that are driving a need for ever more sophisticated communication and community engagement in the execution of government.

Government demands skilled communication

All governments need to communicate with their people. The 560 local governments across Australia (ALGA, 2013) are established by State and Territory Acts. Neither “communication” nor the need for communication specialists are mentioned in the local government Acts, but the requirement to communicate well with communities is integral to the principles, preambles and charters intended to guide the execution of government. Each Act refers to one or more principles such as encouraging participation in civic life, representing and responding to the needs and aspirations of individuals and
different groups, social inclusion, and meaningful community engagement. Most also call for processes to be effective, efficient, transparent, and “accountable to the community” (LGOV Act Tasmania, 1993, Section 20).

Each LGOV aims to attain a safe and cooperative society for a diverse citizenry with different needs, expectations and preferences. So the simultaneous requirements for transparency, participation, inclusion and responsiveness present a considerable and obligatory challenge to even the most experienced communicators. They demand mechanisms and skills for listening to communities, interpreting viewpoints and needs, and justifying decisions and consequences. It has been argued recently that organisations generally should learn to listen actively and systematically (Macnamara, 2013), and that LGOV specifically has a “need for closer integration of engagement and communications strategies” (Coleman and Firmstone, 2014, p1).

… given the dependence of public engagement exercises upon the effectiveness of dialogical (technical, polylogical) communication, there has been a remarkable lack of attention in both theory and practice to … the communicative skills needed to make this new form of governance work well. (Coleman and Firmstone, 2014, p3)

An English study reported that occasions of community engagement “ending badly” were more likely to be the result of citizens participating but left feeling “insufficiently acknowledge[d] and efficacious” rather than the “rare occasions” where citizens could not be engaged (2014, p14). An Australian study of LGOV communicator activities and attitudes to the purpose of communication (Simmons and Small, 2012) reported a strong focus on Lee’s (2012) mandatory communication, making organisations more accountable and participatory, and optional communication, making communities more aware of facilities and services. When asked the purpose of their communication, the responses with the highest average scores were: “Increase community awareness of organisation facilities and services available for their use”, “Increase community support for the organisation”, “Report to the community on the spending of ratepayer funds” and “Gauge community opinion through listening” (p10). The authors concluded that Australian LGOV communicators make a range of important direct contributions to government (Simmons and Small, 2012).

Councils need to manage processes that facilitate voice and listening as well as promote service use, and ultimately lead to sound decisions that are acceptably balanced in the community’s interest. Often this requires communicating on behalf of a “greater good”, explaining links between various costs, inconveniences and benefits to the community in the long term.
LGOV communication – a growing specialisation

In democratic societies it is essential that governments provide citizens with useful information about services and programs and that they collect and respond to information about citizens’ needs and aspirations (Head, 2007). Cultural, political and technological factors have driven a rise in the use and importance of government communication. Governments have built capacity to adapt to feedback about services and delivery through various information and consultation mechanisms. To meet demand for responsiveness, governments have increasingly committed to marketing style communication and multiple information channels including the internet, paid advertising counter-service, call centres and multilingual services (Head, 2007). Communicators are now a feature of most public sector environments.

the growth of employment opportunities in communication and marketing functions in the public sector reflects the rise of the “information society”, the extensive mechanisms and forums for lobbying and consultation, and the desires of governments to publicise their activities. (Head, 2007, p45)

Around 90% of Australian local governments have at least one full time communication employee and media relations tends to dominate their work (Simmons and Small, 2012) as it does in the US (Liu et al., 2010). Fifty-two per cent of Australian local government communicators monitor traditional media coverage of their organisation daily, 40% respond to media inquiries daily, and 39% write for the media daily (Simmons and Small, 2012). LGOV communication leaders feel that communication should be broader than media relations, but in Australia there are few guides available – beyond individual LGOV communication plans – to frame the role and responsibilities of communicators. Glenny (2007) said that public sector communication generally lacks guidance on role and tasks, and that this 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). According to the national president of Government Communications Australia:

Local government communication goes by many names including community relations, media relations and community engagement. It is no longer enough to just be the voice of the council. A communicator who reports to a director can get good news out about the council, but to really influence decision-making and increase community participation communicators need to bring the voice of the community to the table … Some more advanced council organisations have recognized this and are benefitting, but there is a long way to go. (Deb Ganderton, 2013, personal communication)
In the UK as well, the Local Government Association (LGA UK) argues that “councils no longer look to communications to simply react to press coverage”, emphasising the need to be more proactive in a broader role as “s[trategic planner of council reputation” (p19), driving media coverage, and influencing change, culture, strategy and policy (LGA UK, 2013). According to Head (2007) the key tasks for communication specialists in the Australian public sector are increasingly concerned with managing the “reputation” of their agencies, rather than a public interest. “The problem is that reputation management usually relies more on assertion than substance” (2007, p46). “Reputation management” has also been advanced as a focus for local government communication management in Australia (Ryan, 2007).

Approaches to local government communication are mostly determined at local organisation level (Simmons and Small, 2012). This reflects a scarcity of guidance on principles for managing and executing LGOV communication, as well as a healthy autonomy for LGOV to address perceived local needs. Individual practitioners will lean towards their own preferences and capacities but the approach an organisation takes to managing communication is largely determined by the senior decision-makers or management (Grunig et al, 1995).

**Information and beyond – concepts of government communication**

Government “communication” spans a multitude of attitudes, activities and behaviours across policy, campaigns, media, publications, speeches, issues management, branding, events and countless intended and unintended displays. Howlett (2009) says we need a taxonomy to aid analysis of government communication activities and generalisation about their impact. To date there is very limited empirical evidence to aid comparison of the consequences of different approaches to managing and enacting LG communication.

There have been several conceptualisations of government communication proffered in recent years. Most (Liu and Horsley, 2007; Glenny, 2007; Lee, 2012; Simmons and Small, 2012) draw explicitly from public relations literature and conceptualisations of communication in their analyses. Glenny (2007) distinguishes the functions of “informing”, “persuading” and “engaging”, and says it is important to distinguish political and apolitical government communication. Sanders et al. (2011) and Lee (2012) also distinguish political from government communication. Lee (2012) describes political communication intended to help politicians get reelected, and labels it dangerous. He says some is communication necessary to inform, attend to and be accountable to community members as citizens – this he labels as mandatory; he refers to communication with community as consumers, concerning services, regulations and lifestyle, as optional (Lee, 2012), although many might regard information about services and
facilities as mandatory for public sector organisations. Simmons (2013) distinguishes an emphasis on listening, involving and representing from emphasis on managing message and promotion through media. Another model, the “Government Communication Wheel”, focuses on the contextual factors that lead to differences between public and private sector public relations. Public sector communicators report more dissatisfaction with the adequacy of communication budgets, higher pressure from publics and politics, more 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.

Conceptualisations of government and LGOV communication tend to focus on outward messaging or persuasion. Glenny (2007) reported that Australian federal government communication had largely been conceptualised in documents as one-way communication, from government outwards about tangible products (p158), and that there was considerable confusion about role and the purpose of communication. Among public service communicators she found a reluctance to use the term “persuasion” to describe their communication, 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 (p161). 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, p162)

The dual expectations of “controlling” communication and enabling community “participation” in organisation decisions create a dilemma for many communicators. In government organisations a perception of difference between public interest and organisational interest is likely to compel uncomfortable communication decisions and create additional tension. LGOV communication researchers have identified the tendencies towards control and participation as distinguishing characteristics of approach (Simmons, 2013; Scott, 2013). Simmons (2013) examined underlying differences in Australian LGOV communication approaches. Consistent with previous research in the US (Horsley et al., 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 away from media and towards listening and participation.

Scott (2013) compared use of social media by 100 urban local governments in the US in 2010 and 2013. He created two dimensions to plot use of social media, the extent to which social media were managed centrally by LGOV organisations, and the extent to which they encouraged comments or participation from constituents. 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 – *strategically managing the communication process* and *managing relationships* – reported by practitioners and academics.

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 and Brunton, 2011, p65)

There are very different values associated with one (“control, influence, management”) (p70) and two (promoting public interest, nurturing relationships and advising on corporate responsibility). The emphasis on managing communication implies a reliance on asymmetrical communication. The authors say 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. They urged further research across different sectors and domains (Jeffrey and 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 preferences 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, p163); both experiences are perceived to undermine communication management practitioners (Brunton and Jeffrey, 2013).

In summary, government communication models have often been focused on distinguishing political and apolitical communication. They have tended to conceptualise communication as one-way, and there is an enduring tension between organisations’ desire to control communication and the need to facilitate participation by those affected by decisions. Organisational culture and political factors tend to prevent more participation.

**Local government trends and communication for new governance**

The Tasmanian government is reviewing and exploring the role of local government. To guide the process it has conceptualised dimensions of the role of local government as *community engagement, strategic leadership, land-use planning, economic development, service delivery and asset management, legislation and by-laws, and representation and cooperation* and requested submissions from planners, policy analysts, researchers and council executive staff. Many of the submissions received for the review’s 2013 discussion paper call for or imply a need for increasingly sophisticated approaches to engagement and communication with a range of stakeholders. Some of the changes will require significant shifts in practice and mindset from leaders, management and staff. Local government is typically under resourced compared to other levels of government (Kamnuansilpa, 2013) and change must frequently be managed with diminishing resources.

Expectations of LGOV have grown along several dimensions, and changes continue apace. LGOV responsibilities have grown beyond roads, public buildings and infrastructure to include strategic development planning, environmental management, regional development and approximately 150 human and other services (ALGA, 2012). The shift to embrace a more social and economic focus has coincided with cultural expectations of greater transparency from organisations, diminishing trust in political and corporate leaders, and increased access to communication technologies. As councils take more responsibility for the human and the social, the challenges to engage with communities increase.
When councils were seen as primarily about roads, rates and rubbish there were few incentives to participate but increasingly as councils are more directly involved in community economic development, sustainability, resilience and social cohesion more people are engaging. (Adams, 2013, p17)

The General Manager of Central Coast Council says that councils must now expect the public to want to engage, and councils need to develop new, holistic ways of engaging with communities to improve economic, social and environmental outcomes (Ayton, 2013). She distinguishes traditional inform and consult engagement approaches on infrastructure and property matters from deliberative and collaborative forms of engagement increasingly required for “place making”, “where the sense of place and belonging comes in” (Ayton, 2013, p10).

Place making is an area that is more challenging to councils as … [it needs] more inclusive, collaborative and empowering forms of governance – ie involve the community in the co-design and co-delivery of ways of dealing with issues and opportunities. This may require additional or complementary forms of governance and capabilities – not so easy to bolt onto traditional forms of governance. (Ayton, 2013, p10)

Place shaping is an important responsibility for local government according to Adams (2013). He says that without it “local communities could be thrown to the wolves of big governments and big corporations”, and that “no other institutional entity seems capable of place shaping” (p13). Emerging approaches to governance in local government increasingly refer to notions of co-creation and dialogue. Effective democracy requires community voice in “decisions which shape their destiny”, and “intractable problems require co-produced solutions with citizens” (Evans and Reid, 2013, p9). “Soft governance” assumes that all communities have the capacity to adapt and make behavioural change, “the key is to find and nurture those capacities” (Evans and Reid, 2013, p9):

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. (Evans and Reid, 2013, p7)

Web 2.0 and social media have attracted the interest of communicators and governments in part because the dialogic affordances (Dalgarno and Lee, 2010) they offer are suggestive of enhanced capacity for co-creation and dialogue with important stakeholders. 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 re­uses, and dynamic emergence” (Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, and Azad, 2013, p38). We have the technology to support the normalisation of online interaction between communities and organisations including governments; important barriers are likely to be cultural, political willingness to cede control of communication (Glenny, 2007) and skills to facilitate and effect co-creation and collaboration appropriately.

Ideally councils will be able to manage transparent processes that facilitate voice and enable community ownership (Evans and Reid, 2013) but the requirements to effect a deeper, inclusive participation and engagement should not be underestimated. At the organisational level, community engagement needs to be reframed as “core business” and “promoted and supported from the top down through the entire organisation at both the elected and officer levels” (Ayton, 2013, p22). Engagement needs to be conducted on issues judged appropriately by officials and citizens to matter, and which are open to effective participation. Ideologies can drive people to act passionately and forcefully together (Pratt, 2013), and it can be difficult to avoid processes being captured by self-serving elites or other minorities (Evans and Reid, 2013; Massina, 2013). Appropriate engagement demands skills to know when and how, and Ayton (2013) says that organisations need to focus on training in engagement principles and practices for senior staff and elected members.

**Conclusions – strategic opportunities**

Presenters at the 2014 Government Communications Australia conference urged integration of the communication function with the core business of councils (Whitlam, 2014), and that communicators refocus their communication on listening and engaging (Glenny, 2014). This paper has argued that listening and engaging are central to the mission of LGOV, and that the participatory, inclusive, collaborative engagement increasingly required by councils is beyond the present capacity of most. The analysis presented here supports the closer integration of communication and engagement strategies in LGOV, as called for in the UK by Coleman and Firmstone (2014). Engagement for future LGOV is likely to involve resources and processes akin to an organisational “architecture of listening” (Macnamara, 2013, p1).

Communicators in many sectors often struggle to position communication as core to their organisation’s mission. LGOV communicators already contribute substantially to the mission of governments through information provision and listening that promote accountability, service awareness and responsiveness (Simmons and Small, 2012). The analysis in this paper challenges LGOV communicators, as individuals
and as a professional group, to reorient in several ways that enhance LGOV capacity for engagement and participation.

At the professional group level, state and national LGOV communicator bodies can identify cases studies, facilitate access to training in engagement strategies and principles for practice, and help to normalise LGOV engagement in their communications and presentations to the LGOV sector.

At the organisational level, individual LGOV communicators have different skills and capacities to build on. Some are already leading engagement initiatives. Others can become familiar with practices, principles and online and offline tools through training and other professional development. Inside organisations communicators can help to normalise and promote engagement as strategists, trainers or facilitators, according to their capacity and context.

Despite the ubiquity and importance of LGOV communication there is little scholarly research available to guide practice and strategy, in Australia or elsewhere. This paper finds that LGOV communication will be more usefully conceptualised as two-way than one-way communication, listening as much as talking, and more participatory than controlling. A first challenge for researchers is to model LGOV communication practice in ways that help practitioners and others to understand and communicate their roles. A second challenge is to link different approaches to outcomes determined important by a diverse range of stakeholders.

The close relationship between LGOV and communities demands that councils respond quickly, listen when communities want to be heard, and be accountable for taxes and charges paid to them. Increasingly LGOV will need to learn ways to co-create solutions to challenges, and help communities to envisage and become the communities they want to become.
References


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