



# Government Communication: An Emerging Field in Political Communication Research

María José Canel and Karen Sanders

In February 2009, the US Congress passed a US\$787 billion stimulus package designed to put the country on the road to economic recovery. Thereafter, managing ‘the stimulus story’ became, as *Time* magazine reported, ‘a full-time White House preoccupation’ (Scherer, 2009: 31). Obama and his team understood that without a concerted effort to communicate the plan, it would almost certainly fail in the court of public opinion.

The quality of government matters for human well-being. Governing necessarily involves constant exchanges of information and communication about policies, ideas and decisions between governors and the governed. Despite its key importance for 21st-century politics, the study of government communication is an under-researched area of political communication studies, finding itself in a kind of theoretical no-man’s land between political communication, public relations and organizational communication research.

This chapter examines three related issues. First, it examines what we mean by government communication. This task poses a number of challenges not least that of settling what kinds of institutions count as *governmental* in the diverse settings of democratic politics.<sup>1</sup> Second, the article draws together the distinctive contributions to the study of government communication found in the political communication literature. Third, the chapter argues that perspectives developed by public relations and organizational communication studies may have much to offer political communication scholars studying government communication. Finally, we suggest a number of issues that could form part of a research agenda for government communication (see Sanders, 2011).

## DEFINING GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION

In defining government communication we adopt two complementary epistemological strategies. The first might be termed an *a priori* approach: it relies on an analysis of characteristics of communication in diverse institutional settings that, though based on empirically known facts (a form of *a posteriori* knowledge), is true by virtue of the meanings we ascribe to social and political institutions. The second strategy can be termed a *posteriori*: it examines the empirical research carried out to date by scholars together with the broad thematic and theoretical approaches offered by political communication to map what the academy understands as constituting the subject matter and methods for the study of government communication. The *a priori* approach runs the risk of imposing historically and culturally conditioned meanings on our area of study and the second runs up against the limits of the research itself. However, we consider them necessary starting points to identify the strengths and the weaknesses of political communication’s contribution to understanding government communication.

The term ‘government communication’ is often used to refer solely to top-level executive communication. But it can also be used to refer to institutions established by government to do its work at national, regional and local levels. Our tentative, broadly framed definition of government communication attempts to capture this multilayered reality. Government communication ‘refers to the aims, role and practice of communication

implemented by *executive* politicians and officials of public institutions in the service of a political rationale, and that are themselves constituted on the basis of the people's indirect or direct consent and are charged to enact their will' (Canel and Sanders, 2011). This definition includes prime ministerial or presidential communication as well as mayoral or local and regional government communication; but it is contrasted with the deliberative communication legislatures use to decide public policy through determining the law, and with the judiciary whose function is to make judgments in relation to disputes about the application of the law. Other kinds of public sector institutions such as the UK's National Health Service or continental Europe's state universities would also be excluded. These institutions clearly have an executive function in that they seek to execute politically defined public policies but their primary end is the *provision* or *delivery* of public goods such as health and education. The definition also embraces a range of political regimes that evince varying degrees of recognition of political rights and civil liberties following the Freedom House set of indicators showing governments to be democratic (free), consolidating democracies (partly free) and non-democratic (not free) (Freedom House, 2009).

Government necessarily implies the principle of *publicness* in two senses: first, there is always a public institutional setting even in the most authoritarian regimes; second, again regardless of the political realities, it is almost always claimed that government is constituted on the basis of the people's direct or indirect consent and charged to enact their will (Puddington, 2009). Of course, government communication is not always public: heads of state or government make private phone calls to their peers; secret back channels are used for delicate issues; government leaders may have closed meetings with party members and ministers may privately brief journalists. However, government's institutional setting is public, directed to external audiences and played out partly in the space of appearance with important implications for the operational conditions for communication (Fisher and Horsley, 2007: 378).

Graber (2003: 6–18) distinguishes public from private organizations along three key dimensions (see also Fisher and Horsley, 2007: 378–79; Garnett, 1992; Rainey et al., 1976). First, the *environment* of public sector institutions is typically less open to market competition with less incentive to reduce costs, less concern with consumer preferences and more subject to legal and formal constraints affecting managers' choices of procedures and operational areas than in the private sector.

Second, *organization–environment transactions* in public organizations are more subject to sanctions and controls and to significant public

scrutiny in line with public interest expectations including fair and accountable action. The context of intense public and media scrutiny is linked to the organizational orientation to the public good and often finds regulatory expression in freedom of information legislation and/or commitments to transparency and openness. Ultimately, public organizations are usually required to have a high degree of accountability to political and public constituencies. On the one hand, as Graber (2003: 11) has noted, this can lead to cautious operating styles as managers seek to avoid bad publicity. On the other, it can ensure a flow of information that enhances the quality of civic life.

Finally, in relation to *internal structures and processes*, public sector organizations tend to be more complex than their private sector counterparts. There is more diversity and uncertainty about objectives and decision-making criteria and a greater possibility that goals will clash. They tend to have less decision-making autonomy and flexibility; less flexibility in establishing performance incentives; more application of formal regulations and more political roles for top managers. Public organizational communication and, in particular, government communication, operates in a political environment. This often leads to short-termism. Political considerations, events and culture structure resources, personnel and goals. Heads of communication in government ministries, agencies and institutions may be appointed on the basis of partisan rather than professional criteria.

In sum, public and more specifically government communication wrestles with considerable complexity in terms of goals, needs, audiences, definition and resources. The multilayered and organizationally diverse nature of government communication is a key factor in the complexity of understanding its needs, goals and resources. In relation to the issue of goals, for example, government communication often has to juggle what appear to be conflicting objectives set by political masters. Many scholars, especially, as we shall see, those working in the political communication tradition, consider communication goals related to persuasion to be particularly problematic. In relation to publics, government communication again must operate on a multilayered level, taking into account a very diverse group of stakeholders including other politicians, service users, minority groups, regulatory bodies, etc.

Graber's analysis is helpful but we must be careful about extrapolating it to settings outside the liberal democratic model that underpins it. A number of countries have developed complex government communication systems but without the concomitant implementation of civil liberties and political freedoms found in many electoral democracies (Freedom House, 2009). In other words, our approach to the study of government

communication has to take into account the regime variety that does in fact exist in the world including divergences in media ecologies and political systems.

## THE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE

Scholars working in the political communication tradition have mostly centered on the USA and taken executive, and more particularly, presidential communication as their point of departure.<sup>2</sup> However, in order to understand the broader sweep of political communication's thinking about government communication, it is worth examining the conceptual and methodological perspectives it has contributed to this area of research.

In his review of political communication research, Swanson noted the breadth of its portfolio but concluded that its central focus is on 'the role of communication in political processes and institutions associated with electoral campaigning and governing' (2000: 190). These core issues prompt a concern with understanding media effects and normative themes related to the quality and health of democratic discourse and institutions examined from multidisciplinary perspectives. An early 21st-century review of political communication research identified five key sites and methodological perspectives (Lin, 2004; also see Graber, 2005) namely:

- rhetorical analysis of political discourse;
- propaganda studies;
- voting studies;
- mass media effects;
- interplay of influence between government, press and public opinion.

These themes and methodological approaches in fact crisscross each other. The interplay of influence between government, press and public opinion can be approached from the perspective of rhetorical analysis or propaganda studies. Therefore, in using Lin's description to examine further political communication's contribution to the study of government communication, one must be careful to point out that thematic concerns often overlap and multiple methodological approaches apply. Broadly speaking, the following five main thematic concerns can be discerned: (1) chief executive communication; (2) the development of the permanent campaign; and, linked to this; (3) that of government advertising and publicity; (4) the structure and organization of government communication and (5) the development of news management strategies.

## Chief Executive Communication and Rhetorical Studies

This is perhaps the area that has received most significant attention from the US scholars, beginning with Neustadt's (1960) classic study *Presidential Power* and continuing with work by Denton and Hahn (1986), Tulis (1987), Smith and Smith (1994) and Denton and Holloway (1996). Studies of presidential rhetoric and its shaping of political reality (Zarefsky, 2004) and its influence (or not) on its audience (Edwards, 2003) have produced a rich vein of work from diverse disciplinary perspectives using methodological approaches from the humanities and social sciences. Cox (2001) also examines presidential rhetoric but within the framework of a consideration of communication strategy.

Chief executive communication has also been explored in a number of other national contexts including Argentina (de Masi, 2001), Australia (Young, 2007) and the UK (Franklin, 2004; Seymour Ure, 2003). Chief executive communication strategies in relation to political scandal and to terrorism have been examined in work examining Spain and the UK (Canel and Sanders, 2006, 2009). References to chief executive communication can also be found in more generalist literature (for example, McNair, 2007; Oates, 2008; Stanyer, 2007).

## The Permanent Campaign, Political Advertising, Public Diplomacy and Propaganda Studies

The development of strategic government communication was identified some time back by Blumenthal (1980). The techniques of election campaigns – gathering intelligence, targeting audiences, promoting messages, rapid rebuttal – become part of the machinery of government as the ubiquity, speed and quantity of contemporary media result in governments making substantial institutional and personal investments in communication, employing communication specialists to advise on strategy and carry out communication functions.

The development of the permanent campaign has been closely followed by political communication scholars who have frequently adopted a critical approach based on a tradition arising out of propaganda studies (for example, McChesney, 2008). In this analysis, the structural relationship between the media and state power is unmasked as one that 'manufactures consent' (Herman and Chomsky, 1988), producing a bystander public bereft of real power.

Scholars from a number of political communication traditions have noted what they consider to

be the troubling implications of a 'third age of political communication' (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999; Ornstein and Mann, 2000), where campaigning, that seeks to win not engage, becomes the settled style and substance of government. The health and quality of democracy and citizenship are at the heart of the concerns explored in a number of studies (for example, Patterson, 1994, 2003), particularly at times of crisis when events and issues such as war, terrorism and the environment become of vital public interest (Norris et al., 2003). The development of the permanent campaign brings the practice of public relations squarely into the frame together with its methods and tools (see Strömbäck and Kiouisis, 2011).

Political advertising has also been a major research focus of political communication scholars but principally in the field of election campaign advertising (Kaid and Holtz-Bacha, 2006). Government advertising in general and the area of government social marketing communication in particular (health campaigns; environmental change; driving behavior, etc.) has generated a considerable body of research but mainly by scholars working within distinct communication traditions from political communication (Rice and Atkin, 2001).

Finally, as governments increasingly see the attractions of 'soft power' (Nye, 2004) to achieve foreign policy objectives, the area of public diplomacy is one which has become a greater focus of interest. 'Public diplomacy' can be understood as the diffuse set of actions undertaken to influence favorably public attitudes in ways that will support foreign policy goals in political, military or economic affairs. As yet, there is no substantial body of research in the area, although analysts such as Leonard et al. (2005) are contributing to the development of an approach that focuses on 'mutuality', on long-term trust-building rather than short-term image-building.

### **Structure and Organization of Government Communication**

The logistical and operational issues of how governments organize their communication have been a significant area of research and debate examining too the relationship between government and its citizens, although thus far work has centered mainly on the organizational chart, roles, functions and decision-making processes of White House communication (Kumar, 2003a,b, 2007; Kumar and Sullivan, 2003).

The examination of government communication practices associated with the development of electronic technology has generated a significant

literature on issues associated with e-democracy and e-government examining, for example, the potential to unharness the democratic energies of the people (for example, Axford and Huggins, 2001; Chadwick, 2006; Izurieta et al., 2003; Saco, 2002). This growing area of research reflects a common theme in political communication studies namely, the development of media technologies and practices and their impact on political practices and institutions and, more especially, the quality of democratic life.

### **News Media Relations and Effects Research**

Government communication takes place in a mediated environment and it is perhaps unsurprising that one of the most significant areas of scholarship in political communication in relation to government communication is the news media/government nexus. The media are a key factor in the environment in which governments operate. Research has focused on such areas as source relationships to explain the ebb and flow of power between politicians and journalists. Generally speaking, politicians seek control, journalists seek novelty and revelation. Conflict is frequently the order of the day and, as scholars such as Patterson (1994) have shown, conflict itself is sought by journalists as the *leitmotif* of politics. In the view of some scholars 'the indexing hypothesis – selecting content patterns that are cued by the positions of decisive actors in a political conflict – still explains most routine political reporting' (Bennett, 2004: 292). Other scholars have looked to the model of 'primary definition' to explain the dynamics of source – reporter relationship (Gitlin, 1980; Hall, 1982; Herman and Chomsky, 1988). Here sources are identified as the forces who hold the balance of power, using their institutional muscle as well as logistical and ideological resources to ensure that certain stories are told and others not. Source power has also been explored in agenda setting and agenda building studies of the media, a major area of political communication research initiated by McCombs and Shaw's pioneering study that examined the relationship between public and media agendas (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; see also Weaver et al., 2004). This tradition of research has been particularly notable in the analysis of election campaigns (for example, Semetko et al., 1991). Election campaigns are, of course, one of the principal subjects of political communication studies and the role of news media in priming – the activation of certain associations in our memory that leads us to privilege some criteria

and terms in assessing candidates over others – and framing news stories, with their potential and real audience effects, has been a significant area of work (for example, Reese et al., 2003; Bennett and Iyengar, 2010).

Finally, a major area of study, and one that reflects an interest that runs through much of the work outlined above, examines the development of the news media as a political actor in contemporary politics and how even, in Cook's words, 'news media today are not merely part of politics: they are part of government' (2005: 3).

More recent work (see, for example, Dahlgren, 2009; Brants and Voltmer, 2011) examines the changing media environment and its implications for politicians' performance and presentation as well as citizens' interactions and civic culture.

### ***Theoretical Contributions from Political Communication***

This review of work carried out from the political communication perspective suggests that systematic research developing a critical analysis of baseline issues for the field or for modeling government communication to lay the foundations for comparative study going beyond the mainly descriptive has yet to be carried out. However, much useful work has been done and the political communication tradition provides at least two valuable theoretical standpoints from which to orient future government communication research.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given political communication's home disciplines among others of political science and rhetoric, the emphasis on the exploration of and sensitivity to institutional and social contexts, on the one hand, and the attention to normative concerns on the other, are key theoretical concerns of political communication and provide us with helpful indicators for government communication research designs of the future.

Drawing on Blumler and Kavanagh's (1999) analysis of the arrival of a third age for political communication, Swanson (2000: 192) points to the trend to examine communication's institutional and social contexts. He suggests that this is a useful corrective to social science research that either adopts a fragmented approach to the study of communication or applies overly ethnocentric models to explore complex communication phenomena. Hallin and Mancini (2004) have been particularly prominent in developing models to compare media and political systems that are sensitive to political, cultural and historical contexts. Their work is valuable in its potential to extend the boundaries and improve the rigor of comparative

research notwithstanding the challenges of this endeavor (Norris, 2009).

A second distinctive contribution from political communication scholars is a normative concern with how communication 'performs its civic functions at the center of social and political life, and also to point the way toward shaping communication to better serve democratic processes' (Swanson, 2000: 200). Of course, normative concerns are not unique to political communication. However, in this field there is, we would argue, a distinct feature: research conclusions have tended to emphasize 'the crisis of communication for citizenship' (Bucy and D'Angelo, 1999: 329), mitigated to some degree by more recent work on the democratic potential of digital technology (Chadwick, 2006; Davis, 2010). This has the positive consequence of pointing research to notions of purpose and performance but it may be too that it has contributed to a kind of intellectual pessimism about the possibility of creating the conditions for civic conversation in contemporary media democracies (Sanders, 2009: 229–33).

### **PERSPECTIVES FROM PUBLIC RELATIONS AND ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION RESEARCH**

We want to suggest now that political communication scholars might find some grounds for intellectual optimism by exploring work being carried out in the cognate fields of organizational communication and public relations. As far as specific work on government communication is concerned, a review of the relevant literature suggests that, as for political communication, the subject is under-researched. However, there are two areas in which research in the field can offer pointers for those working in the political communication tradition.

First, we can identify converging themes with those being explored by political communication scholars. These include the issues of media relations, issue management (Bowen, 2005; Jaques, 2006), the development of professional profiles and competences (Gregory, 2006); crisis communication (Coombs and Holladay, 2010) and public diplomacy (Signitzer and Wamser, 2006). To take issue management, for example, in the public relations literature this refers to the work undertaken by companies to identify emerging political, social and economic trends and plan communication in accordance with the potential threats and opportunities they pose. Political communication scholars are also keen to explore the requirement for and implication of communication strategies in relation to public policies (Cox, 2001) and may

be able to draw upon some of the insights of the work being carried out in cognate fields.

Second, public relations and organizational communication scholars can offer a fresh conceptual approach to issues common to researchers working in the field of government communication. We have identified three themes where they appear to offer new perspectives, namely, governments' relationship with the public; how governments and publics can evaluate performance through the concept of reputation and finally, how communication is core to organizational performance and thus intrinsic to any consideration of relationship and reputation quality. We will next examine briefly each of these issues.

### ***Symmetrical Relationships and Mutuality***

Broadly speaking, a revision of the public relations literature (Botan and Hazleton, 2006; Botan and Taylor, 2004; Heath, 2010; Vasquez and Taylor, 2001) shows that the underlying research perspective is centered on the construction of relationships between organizations and publics. The public is not seen as an impartial and passive spectator of organizations' communication, an approach that is not so clearly present in perspectives from the field of political communication. The field of public relations has evolved from a more business-oriented field to a more socially oriented one, keen to put the public back into research.

In their revision of the state of the art, Botan and Taylor (2004: 651) assert a similar view, charting the evolution of research from what they consider the functional perspective to what they call the 'co-creation' perspective. While the former sees publics and communication as tools or means to achieve organizational ends, the latter considers the public to be partners in the creation of meaning and communication. This perspective places an implicit value on relationships, going beyond the achievement of an organizational goal and instead placing the emphasis on advancing mutual understanding.

These authors locate here Grunig's symmetrical/excellence model of public relations, with its claim that it fosters ethical public relations practices (Grunig and Grunig, 1992; Grunig and Hunt, 1984). This model is the major framework that has guided public relations scholarship for the past 30 years (Botan and Hazleton, 2006: 6). Mutual benefit, mutual understanding, win-win mixed motivated communication, etc. are concepts used to denominate purposes of organizational public relations. They have inspired analysis of government communication (Fisher and Horsley, 2007; Gregory, 2006) as well as debate about

their providing the basis for a model of government communication, although Grunig in work with Jaatinen (1999) acknowledges that his model would have to be adapted to the peculiar conditions of government communication.

The interest of this approach is that, in centering the analysis on the establishment of relationships, the understanding of the 'public' is fundamentally altered. Government communication is conceived as the cultivation of long-term relationships oriented to mutual understanding rather than being modeled on short-term, vote-winning approaches to communication.

### ***The Concept of Government Reputation***

The idea that organizations' success depends on how they are viewed by key stakeholders has led both academic and communication practitioners to suggest frameworks and models that prescribe steps toward the 'strategic' use of communication. Consequently, concepts such as 'corporate identity' and 'corporate reputation' have gained purchase. The management of intangibles and, more particularly, of reputation has increasingly become the guiding philosophy of communication departments (Cornelissen et al., 2006).

One of the most important issues in the study of the notion of an organization's reputation is whether reputation is purely perceptual or purely experiential (through the company's activities and services or products provided). Two concepts are key to pinning down that of reputation: first, that of 'identity' defined essentially as consisting in what an organization presents of itself in terms of behavior, communication and symbolism as well as visual, non-material aspects of the institution; the second is that of 'image' understood as the mental structure of the organization that publics form as the result of the processing of information related to the organization. Whereas identity is what the organization *is* (including the organizational behavior, its products and services), corporate image is stakeholders' perceptions of it. For some authors, reputation is more closely related to the notion of 'image' and therefore, perceptual (stakeholders' net image of a company) (Fombrun, 1996) and for others, it is more closely related to the notion of identity as the result of corporation behavior (Villafañé, 2004: 31–2). In this latter sense, reputation is associated with the behavior of an organization. For this reason, reputation can not only be measured but also verified by hard facts and reality checks.

There is, as far as we are aware, no research examining government communication or communication in the public sector from the perspective

of corporate communication. Although many studies have centered on government leaders' popularity or public perceptions of public policies, no work has been done so far on what is the meaning of public leaders' reputation (and the correspondingly important question of the difference between public policies perceived and public policies performed); nor has work been carried out on how to build the reputation of government institutions and their leaders. Political communication research has also centered more on issues of image so that one can find discussions such as those of Waterman et al. (1999) that suggest that 'the image-is-everything presidency' is sufficient. In this sense, research perspectives that emphasize the significance of reputation helpfully shift the focus to the reality of political outcomes and the truth of who and what a leader is.

### **Communication as the Core Process of All Organizations**

The central idea that inspires the field of organizational communication is that communication is fundamental to the study of organizations. This approach is applied in the only handbook in the field examining public administration communication (Garnett and Kouzmin, 1997). In addition to this study, Graber's (2003) work offers one of the few systemic and comprehensive analyses of communication in the public sector. It too is theoretically grounded in the field of organizational communication. Although open to dynamic approaches, applying different methodologies and perspectives, she uses analyses of systems-wide communication flows and applies it to analyze the structure of the communications networks within public agencies. Although she considers that positivist theories will remain dominant in the study of organizational communication, she also argues that they can usefully be complemented by humanistic approaches. Since, as Graber suggests, quoting Viteritti, 'meaningful communication between government and the people is not merely a management practicality. It is a political, albeit moral, obligation that originates from the basic covenant that exists between the government and the people' (2003: 226).

### **FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS FOR GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION**

Examining the subject of government communication from a range of research traditions in the

field of communication studies suggests a number of issues that are ripe for development. Here we suggest five.

### **The Question of Professionalization**

Originally framed as an Americanization hypothesis within the political communication literature, the adoption and development of a set of practices and attitudes collectively known as 'professionalization' were considered by political communication scholars as driven by developments in the US political communication (for example, Negrine, 2008). Scholars are now more likely to ascribe these developments to 'modernization', the view that professionalization results from processes of social differentiation and changes in media systems and technology (Holtz-Bacha, 2004). Within political communication, the professionalization thesis could be summarized as follows: political actors have been forced to adopt and develop complex communication practices in order to deal with the huge demands of the contemporary news environment. This professionalization has, however, been detrimental to policymaking, to the substance of politics with consequences such as the de-politicization of politics and the loss of ideological identity; image and communication skills become key; political consultants become more important than politicians; politics becomes a strategic game or talk show, a type of politics that stimulates stereotypes and clichés undermining citizens' trust in political institutions (Canel, 2006 and Sanders, 2009 for an overview of all these trends).

From the political communication perspective, 'professionalization' has often been cast in a negative role (Hamelink, 2007). Of course, not all researchers in this tradition take this view (for example, McNair, 2007; Negrine, 2008). However, there may be something to learn from public relations' scholars and, in particular, the work of Grunig (2001), who suggests that attempting to achieve mutual understanding, even when engaged in asymmetrical communication in the 'win-win' zone of communication, is in fact the really professional way to communicate. In other words, it may be that Leonard's (2005) notion of mutuality, in which mutual understanding is the goal and where both persuasion and information are considered appropriate, can be considered to be the truly 'professional' way to communicate. But how would this apply in different political environments? Could standards and indicators of professional government communication be developed for countries as diverse as China, Norway and Mexico?

A number of researchers have sought to operationalize indicators of professionalism in

government communication in specific national contexts. Gregory (2006) provides a framework for British government communicators designed to drive up performance and improve the consistency of the communications function across government. The framework suggests that effective research, planning, implementation, evaluation and management processes provide the platform for effective communication activity that should be underpinned by the acquisition of the appropriate skills and competences. A Dutch research team (Vos, 2006; see also Vos and Westerhoudt, 2008), inspired by the quality management literature, have designed an instrument to assess government communication in relation to issues such as required competences, the priority given to communication, transparency and accessibility. Sanders et al. have examined the professionalization of central government communication in Germany, Spain and the UK applying a framework developed using indicators derived from the sociology of work and from the strategic planning and quality literature (Sanders et al., 2011). These studies provide pointers for ways in which researchers can explore in measurable terms what is meant by professionalization in government communication.

### **Information and Persuasion**

The issue of professionalization is linked to that of the debates surrounding the relationship between the informational and persuasive goals of government communication (for example, Negrine, 2008). In the case of the USA, this debate adopts the form of the distinction between two units, the House of Communications (whose role is strategy) and the Press Office (whose role is to be an information conduit) (Kumar, 2001a,b). While the first unit plans in advance, the second one is responsible for day-to-day operations: it implements the strategy. The separate offices have different functions but 'when they mix, the audiences for both can be confused about what is persuasion and what is information' (Kumar, 2001a: 614).

In the UK, debates about government use of 'spin' – presentation of policy – dominated the media during Alastair Campbell's years as Tony Blair's communication chief. The criticism can be summarized as follows: New Labour displaced attention from the *substance* of politics to its *presentation*, blurring fact and opinion (Ingham, 2003; Seymour Ure, 2003) and jeopardized the British Whitehall model of non-partisan government communication (Sanders, 2009: 78–80).

These examples raise questions for future research such as where does the line lie between

the role a government has in giving information and in persuading? Does persuasion necessarily clash with information? Is persuasion less professional? Could not it be the case that professional persuasion allows people to be better informed on public policies? Is an emphasis on explanation the most persuasive form of communication in an information-rich environment? Can these issues be conceptualized in a similar way in the distinct political and cultural environments of, for instance, Singapore, Brazil and Sweden? Answering these questions means thinking about how trust can be built in the relations between the governors and the governed and how concepts such as 'government reputation' and 'mutuality' may help in this enterprise.

### **Evaluating Government Communication**

Developing a framework for the evaluation of government communication is also a key task for researchers. A review of studies (Canel, 2007: 201–9) suggests key areas of study including the organizational chart, that acts as the formal representation of the place communication occupies in the decision-making processes; the role of the leader; the tasks carried out by those engaged in communication; public feedback mechanisms, arguing that these provide useful indicators of the degree to which communication is carried out as a strategic function.

Evaluating citizens' perceptions of government actions and, related to this, being clearer about the reasons governments have for monitoring public opinion are also key areas for future work. Some of the literature on presidential communication and public perceptions of political leaders considers constant presidential polling of public opinion as a negative result of the permanent campaign where a sophisticated and routinized 'public opinion apparatus' is developed to measure public approval, shifting the emphasis from polling the public's policy preferences to polling its non-policy evaluations related to leaders' personal image and appeal (Jacobs and Burns, 2004).

However, an alternative view is that evaluating public perceptions allows an 'important connection between the citizenry, presidential promises, accountability and presidential performance, measured according to public opinion polls as well as policy results' (Rimmerman, 1991: 234; see also Jacobs and Burns, 2004) to be established. Thus, examining public perceptions of government may be considered a helpful input into policy development. Once again concepts such as 'reputation' and 'mutuality' may help us to focus research toward examining not only



image but also verifiable facts about government performance that allow us to develop more robust indicators of the match between perception and experience of government.

### **Studying Government Communication Comparatively**

Comparative research in political communication has looked at issues such as media effects, media content, political advertising and, of course, election campaigns. However, there are, as far as we are aware, no general comparative studies of government communication. Such studies can provide helpful insights into the role of culture, structure and agency in political communication as well as providing baseline empirical data for theoretical development and hypothesis building. They can be useful for clarifying concepts and for discovering the scope of their application, making us more aware of the dangers of overgeneralization and ethnocentrism. Case studies are a useful starting point for generating basic data as seen, for example, in Semetko's (2009) four-country study (Kenya, Mexico, the Russian Federation and Turkey) of election campaigns and news media partisan balance. Her work highlights differences and similarities within the distinct components and characteristics of these countries' media and political systems that point to shared challenges and possible strategies for improving governance capacity in them. Case study research can be usefully complemented by the large-scale data sets (for example, those available from Freedom House, Transparency International, Eurostat, etc.) that help provide quantitative evidence for broader patterns and relationships. Norris' (2009) critical review of comparative political communication studies points to the need for such mixed methods research designs and the overall requirement for the use of more rigorously defined concepts in order to generate meaningfully comparative data. These are challenging tasks but, we suggest, necessary ones for the development of government communication research.

### **FINAL THOUGHTS**

The subject of government communication is at the intersection of diverse methodological and disciplinary approaches. Political communication scholars have examined specific features of government communication such as presidential rhetoric, communication strategies and media relations, attending to political and social contexts

and normative issues such as the relationship between communication and democracy. While there are relatively few studies in the field of public relations and organizational communication dealing specifically with government communication, we would argue that some of their conceptual analyses could be fruitfully applied to the exploration of government communication. Concepts such as 'symmetrical communication', 'mutuality' and 'reputation' would be useful tools in exploring some of the research issues already identified. Subjects such as issue management, corporate social responsibility or evaluation of relations with organizational stakeholders – examining transparency (Fairbanks et al., 2007), accountability and the generation of trust, for example – enriches political communication's discussion of common key concerns.

The challenge involves exploring the insights for the understanding of strategic communication offered by diverse theoretical approaches (Coger, 2006). In her review of the role of communication in public organizations, Graber (2003: 13–4) suggests that the study of organizational communication lacks an overarching theory, both in relation to the level of analysis (should it be a macro- or micro-level?) and to the theoretical and the ideological lenses through which organizational communication should be viewed. Graber suggests, however, that, like other areas of the social sciences, the study of organizational communication benefits more from multiple theoretical perspectives and a rich array of research strategies. We agree and believe that similar considerations apply to the study of government communication.

To conclude, we suggest that government communication presents an inviting field for future research and given its significance is too important a challenge to ignore.

### **NOTES**

1 The phrase 'democratic politics' can be put to a number of uses that in some examples are so far removed from what one might consider 'democratic' as to empty the term of any commonly recognized reference. We cannot hope to resolve these definitional and ideological challenges here but note their importance for the issues being considered. In their discussion of the characteristics of Habermas' normative theory of the public sphere, Norris and Odugbemie acknowledge that 'no single country or place serves as a perfect example of the democratic public sphere' (2009: 12). Nevertheless, those features that characterize the fully functioning democratic public sphere – civil liberties and political rights protected by an established constitutional and legal

order, pluralistic and accessible information sources and a flourishing civil society – provide, they suggest, the necessary conditions for healthy democratic governance. We agree.

2 Our review of the literature shows there is a limited amount of work outside the USA, something we hope to remedy in part with the future publication of a broadly drawn range of case studies of government communication (see Sanders, K. and Canel, M. J. (in press) (eds.) *Government Communication. Cases and Challenges*. London: Bloomsbury).

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