CHAPTER 5.0

Public Sector Communication Measurement and Evaluation

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In the past two decades, governments in a number of countries and states have sought to expand public access to information and participation in policy making through 'open government' (OGP, 2015), 'Government 2.0' (Tanner, 2009), 'government to citizens' (G2C) projects (Garson & Khosrow-Pour, 2008), and other *e-democracy* initiatives (Carpentier, 2011; Dahlgren, 2009), along with traditional public communication through media and public consultation. This has resulted in substantial commitments to public communication, as noted in previous sections of this handbook.

Equally, governments are applying increased focus on governance, transparency, and accountability in relation to public sector expenditure. Continuing budget pressures in the wake of the global financial crisis that began in 2008, the effects of globalization on trade and investment, technological change, recent massive immigration influxes in a number of countries, and other economic, political, and social factors, mean that public sector communication must be shown to be necessary, cost-efficient, and effective.

Despite this pressure on public sector organizations, UK communication evaluation scholars Anne Gregory and Tom Watson (2008) have reported a "stasis" in measurement and evaluation. In the US, David Michaelson and Don Stacks have observed that "public relations practitioners have consistently failed to achieve consensus on what the basic evaluative measures are or how to conduct the underlying research for evaluating and measuring public relations performance" (2011, p. 1). In Europe, the 2012 *European Communication Monitor*, based on a survey of 2,200 communication practitioners in 42 European countries, reported that 75 per cent identified inability "to prove the impact of communication activities on organizational goals" as a "major barrier to further professionalization and growth" (Zerfass, Verčič, Verhoeven, Moreno, & Tench, 2012, p. 36).

The 2015 *European Communication Monitor* reported that communication practitioners in government organizations had the highest awareness of the need for transparency and governance, but lag public and private companies and non-profit organizations in reporting and explaining the value of public communication to management (Zerfass, Verčič, Verhoeven, Moreno, & Tench, 2015). The first-ever *Asia Pacific Communication Monitor*, which surveyed 1,200 communication practitioners in 23 countries, 12 per cent of whom work in the public sector, reported a slightly more positive picture. It found that practitioners believe that government organizations are better than public and private companies in evaluating the success of communication activities and explaining the value of communication to top executives – but only by a small margin. Furthermore, practitioners in both public and private sector organizations rated themselves as only slightly better than average in evaluation based on a five-point scale (Macnamara, Lwin, Adi, & Zerfass, 2015).

In his historical analysis of evaluation of public relations, Tom Watson (2012) noted that the first press clipping agencies were established more than 120 years ago in the late 1800s, and the use of a social science research-based approach to measurement and evaluation or PR was proposed by Edward Bernays in the early twentieth century. Fraser Likely and Tom Watson (2013) report that opinion research was also advocated by Arthur Page and that measurement and evaluation has been the subject of intensive debate since the 1970s. Similarly, evaluation of advertising and specialist fields such as health communication have long been a focus of attention.

Nevertheless, practice continues to lag theory. Leading scholars point out that, despite decades of public health campaigns, evaluation has been poorly undertaken in the health communication and health promotion field (e.g., Nutbeam, 1998; Noblet & Lamontagne, 2009). Despite more than US$500 billion a year being spent on advertising worldwide (PWC, 2014), independent marketing analyst Jerry Thomas says "the advertising industry, as a whole, has the poorest quality-assurance systems and turns out the most inconsistent product … of any industry in the world" (2008, para. 1).

So why does this stasis in evaluation continue? A number of barriers and obstacles to rigorous measurement and evaluation of communication have been proffered as explanations including:

- Lack of *budget* (Wright, Gaunt, Leggetter, Daniels, & Zerfass, 2009):

- A lack of *demand* (Baskin, Hahn, Seaman, & Reines, 2010);
- A lack of *standards* (Wright et al., 2009; Michaelson & Stacks, 2011, p. 4);
- A search by practitioners for a *silver bullet* – a single simple solution (Gregory & White, 2008; Likely & Watson, 2013, p. 156); and
- Lack of *knowledge* (Cutler, 2004; Watson & Noble, 2014, Baskin et al., 2010).

However, all but one of these so-called barriers have been refuted by researchers or substantially addressed. For instance, at the beginning of the millennium Walter Lindenmann (2001) presented a list of low-cost tools for evaluation to supplement advanced social science research methods – an argument supported in the Pyramid Model of Evaluation Research (Macnamara, 2002, 2012). Demand by employer organizations is evident in that many governments have legislated or made it policy to require evaluation of communication activities including the EU (O'Neil, 2013), the UK (Government Communication Service, 2015), and some states of Australia (e.g., NSW DPC, 2015). Standards, which have been lacking in the past (Macnamara, 2014), have been substantially developed, as discussed in Chapter 5.1, and the myth of a 'silver bullet' has been debunked by researchers (e.g., Watson & Noble, 2014). The one barrier that continues to limit measurement and evaluation is knowledge, and this section is devoted to addressing this issue.

In this section, a number of leading authors including several of those who have studied this field of practice for many decades summarize the theoretical foundations of measurement and evaluation and provide models, methods, and case studies that inform the evaluation of communication in the public sector. As noted in the introduction, public sector communication incorporates practices referred to as government communication, public affairs, strategic communication, public relations, and administrative communication within public administration. The authors in this section draw from all of these fields is discussing evaluation for the public sector communication.

First, in Chapter 5.1, Anne Gregory, Professor of Corporate Communications at the University of Huddersfield in the UK, recaps and summarizes the fundamentals of measurement and evaluation including key concepts, theoretical frameworks, and the most widely used models for quantitative and qualitative evaluation. Gregory draws on several decades of experience as an academic and as a communication practitioner and adviser to government on evaluation of communication.

In Chapter 5.2, Stefania Romenti, Associate Professor in Strategic Communication and PR at IULM University, Milan and Grazia Murtarelli from IULM discuss measurement and evaluation of communication through traditional and social media. This is an important chapter, as media in ever-expanding forms remain central to public communication. Romenti examines both quantitative and qualitative aspects of media content analysis looking beyond clippings to the latest measures of target audience reach, tone, and messages, as well as new metrics such as likes, follows, shares, and other indicators of reception and engagement.

Chapter 5.3 explores a vitally important aspect of measurement and evaluation – the effect on audience awareness, attitudes, and audience response following communication. This chapter comes to the heart of evaluation in terms *outcomes* and *impact*. Glenn O'Neil, Assistant Professor of Communications at the International University in Geneva and a consultant on evaluation to a number of public sector organizations in Europe, discusses methods for identifying changes in awareness, attitude, perceptions, and behaviour including surveys, focus groups, in-depth interviews, and ethnography (close observation), as well as data analytics based on databases and public records. He usefully incorporates insights from public sector case studies to demonstrate the application of evaluation.

This focus on outcomes and impact leads to the important question that has plagued communication practitioners for decades – how to show the contribution of communication outcomes to organizational outcomes – and, in some cases, societal outcomes. Who better to discuss this important issue than Ansgar Zerfass, Professor and Chair in Strategic Communication at the University of Leipzig, who leads the *European Communication Monitor* research project that identified this as a major challenge confronting practitioners. Zerfass and Sophia-Charlotte Volk, also from the University of Leipzig and a member of the Task Force on standards for measurement and evaluation of PR and corporate communication, discuss management aspects of public communication drawing on international multi-country studies and a case study of public sector communication.

This section concludes with a review and discussion of the latest developments in best practice measurement and evaluation including emerging standards and new approaches and models that have been developed recently. Chapter 5.5 by this author provides readers with the latest thinking about evaluation of public sector communication including recommendations from organizations such as AMEC, examples of public sector best practice such as the Evaluation Framework of the Government Communication Service (GCS) in the UK Cabinet Office, and models and methods adopted by governments such as that implemented by the Department of Premier and Cabinet in Australia's largest state.

Together, the chapters in this section set out essential knowledge about measurement and evaluation of communication for the public sector from fundamentals to latest models and approaches used by public sector leaders around the world.

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