Perceptions of power in government communication

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Abstract

Government communication is often viewed as something that the government ‘does’ to the public. Descriptions of the ‘power’ of the government in this sense are based on information dissemination models in which the government’s resources to communicate far outweigh those of the public. The belief that government holds all the power in communication with the public is a simplistic perspective predicated on a sender-receiver model in which there are only two players: the government and the public.

Two cases are explored in this paper in an attempt to uncover some of the various ways in which notions of power could be interpreted in the communication between the Australian Government and its wider publics. The two cases represent two very different types of interactions with the community, with one attempting to engage the public on an issue and the other managing the aftermath of the dissemination of incorrect information. Interviews with 13 public servants, journalists and advocacy group representatives, along with an examination of government documents, reveal different perceptions of power depending on the place of the individual in the communication process. Respondents in the interviews generally reflected on the power of others and their own lack of power, with some criticising others for not using the power they possessed.

This paper argues that power in government communication is not necessarily an intrinsic element of a single entity, but a shifting, multifaceted network of relations in which power can take various forms. Assumptions that government controls all the information and that power is resource-based are limited and ignore the complexity of power relations.

Introduction

Public and scholarly discussions of government communication are often dominated by notions of ‘propaganda’ and ‘spin’ in which the government is typically seen as holding ‘power’ over the target of its communication effort – the general public. This view is problematic for two reasons. First is the categorisation of the people and

1 Acknowledgments: The author would like to thank the Donald Dyer Scholarship Board for their support for this project and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this paper.
organisations involved into two discrete, opposing parties: the government and the public. The other is the simplistic perception of power in terms of the resources used to ‘push’ a particular message onto a powerless and less resource-rich other. In this way, government communication could be seen as something that the government ‘does’ to the public, based on models of information dissemination in which the government’s resources to communicate far outweigh those of the public.

Critical Theory approaches to public relations also understand power in terms of the organisation’s control over information and their publics, presenting a hierarchical notion in which organisations and individuals can be ranked according to the amount of power they have over others. This has largely been a reaction to the lack of attention given to power in models of symmetry and dialogue which have dominated the field for the past few decades. However, in promoting notions of equality between participants in ethical communication, some of the barriers to achieving such a position are often neglected.

This paper argues that power is more nuanced than the symmetrical and hierarchical models presented in the traditional and critical approaches to public relations. More specifically, this research suggests that power is a shifting, fluid phenomenon and that individuals’ perceptions about what constitutes power depend on the place one has in the communication process.

Researching perceptions of power relations in practice provides public relations theories with an alternative to the organisation-centred perspective that has been the focus of the field for so long (Leitch & Neilson, 2001, p.127). This paper provides a closer examination of the “reality of practice” that Gower argues is needed to bridge the gap between theory and practice in public relations (Gower, 2006, p.185). It also attempts to address L’Etang’s challenge to “understand the perspective of practitioners as they too struggle to come to terms with the nature and social role of their practice” (L'Etang, 2006, p.40).

This paper begins by examining how notions of power in public relations literature often focus on either the idealistic expectation that all communicative participants can be equal, or that power is resource-based, benefiting the organisation more than its
publics. It challenges this dichotomy by positing a more diffusely situated conceptualisation of power relations. To illustrate this, the paper analyses one particular form of public relations; that is, communication between a government and its publics. Examining the perceptions of participants engaged in this process reveals feelings of powerlessness and the shifting nature of power relations.

In this paper it is assumed that government communication is ideally a non-partisan function, as distinct from party-political communication. Australian public servants have a legislated responsibility to perform their duties in an apolitical manner and therefore need to be able to make the distinction. While it is recognised that this can be difficult to achieve (see, for example Young, 2007), this paper supports McNair’s contention that a

…clear separation between government communication and party campaigning is deemed to be an important element of a properly functioning political culture’ (McNair, 2007, p.96)

Recognising that government communication could be considered ‘political’ in a number of senses, discussions of power relations in this paper are considered within a non-partisan context in order to provide a functional contribution to the work and ethics of public service communicators.

**Power within the public relations literature**

There has been a visible shift within the public relations literature from the early normative or functional approaches of describing ‘ideal’ public relations with little regard for the participants, to a co-creational perspective which views publics as an essential element in sharing interpretations and creating zones of meaning (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Heath, 2001; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Leitch & Neilson, 2001; Woodward, 2000). In other words, communication is no longer recognised as an act performed by one entity upon another. Participants are not considered as passive bystanders as their interpretations lead to the creation of meaning. The literature discusses a move “beyond persuasion and rhetoric” to “negotiation and mediation” (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001, p.194), setting some challenging goals for public relations practitioners and more specifically for government communicators. What emerges from the scholarly literature in public relations is a much repeated focus on
the topics of symmetry, dialogue and rhetoric. Van Es & Meijlink argue that there has been a turn away from the pragmatic approaches in public relations to a dialogical approach in which there is “the presence of a conceptual main line…[of] Grunig’s two-way symmetric communication, specified with the terms reciprocity and dialogue” (Van Es & Meijlink, 2000, p.71).

The notion that “dialogue elevates publics to the status of communication equal with the organisation” (Botan, 1997, p.196) is key to its claim of being the more ethical form of communication. Symmetry and rhetoric equally prescribe to this view with the principles of collaborative advocacy as espoused principally by Grunig (2001) and of rhetoric as argued by Heath (2001) predicated on the fact that each party in the two-way communication has an equal right to participate and an equal ability to influence each other.

The concept of two-way communication is also identified by Gower as “the dominant theoretical paradigm in the field” however she describes public relations research “as being at a crossroads” with challenges coming from “postmodernists, critical/cultural theorists, and others” (Gower, 2006, pp. 177-178). With trends in public relations theory moving away from traditional paradigms, the significance and interpretations of the notion of power are also being addressed, particularly by those with more of a postmodern2 or critical3 perspective. Numerous scholars have been critical of symmetry’s disregard of power imbalances, describing them as inadequate (see, for example, Coombs, 1993; Curtin & Gaither, 2005; Dozier & Lauzen, 2000, p.10) with some arguing that

…the complex issues of power and influence tend to be toned down under the pleasing notion of two-way symmetry. (Cheney & Christensen, 2001, p.181)

Alternate approaches to public relations such as communitariansim and social responsibility theory suffer from the same problem, according to Curtin & Gaither, in

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2 Holtzhausen and Voto view postmodernism as “a broad theoretical approach” with “no central postmodern theory… postmodernists revel in multiplicity and diversity” providing “a different lens through which society in general…can be viewed to provide an alternate understanding of practitioners' experiences…[but] can also be used to refute some of the modernist expectations of public relations practice” (Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002).

3 Similarly, L’Etang describes critical theory “not [as] a single theory but an interdisciplinary approach which seeks to define assumptions which are taken-for-granted with a view to challenging their source and legitimacy” (L’Etang, 2005).
that they also rely on this idealistic premise, or “utopian vision” (Curtin & Gaither, 2005, pp. 95-96).

Criticisms have suggested that the idealistic nature of this notion of equality brushes aside the more complex issue of power relations that exist within practice. In criticising Grunig’s mixed motive model, Dozier & Lauzen highlight the powerlessness of some publics and their inability to make it into the “win-win zone” that the idealistic models created (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000, p.12). While Grunig and Heath both support the idea of activist publics engaging in dialogue or rhetoric, there are arguments that the current theories and practice of public relations actually serve the dominant groups more effectively, and that in practice there may be times in which the parties are simply unable to reconcile (see, for example, Holtzhausen, 2000; Spicer, 2000, pp. 122-123).

From a critical theory perspective, power within public relations is viewed in terms of its use “to advance the hegemonic power of particular groups and to examine how these groups attempt to gain public consent to pursue their organizational mission” (Motion & Weaver, 2005, p.50). Critical scholars view models of two-way symmetry and dialogue as organisation-centred and therefore any attempt to “balance” the power relationships in a communicative act, will still be determined by the strategic importance of particular publics and issues to achieving organisational objectives (Cheney & Christensen, 2001, p.181). Roper & Toledano (2005) acknowledge a move towards inclusion of interested parties in discussions on policies in practice, but they argue that this is done for the benefit of the organisation. Roper argues that despite positive moves towards compromise and collaboration, and some evidence of the influence of stakeholders, corporations generally benefit in the long-term and the negotiating power of ‘critical stakeholders in civil society’ is weakened as a result, questioning the ethics of the corporate public relations (Roper, 2005).

Curtin and Gaither refer to the perception that corporate interests inevitably win out in power struggles as a “sweeping generalization [that] may not be accurate” and give examples of research that suggest that publics may sometimes hold more power than organisations (Curtin & Gaither, 2005, p.96). Rather than viewing it in terms of a class struggle, Holtzhausen considers the imbalance to be one between the values of
the dominant authority compared with those of the “small radical groups in society” (2000, p.102). However, in a significant addition to this line of argument, Holtzhausen also agrees that the power is not always in the hands of the organisation (Holtzhausen, 2000, p.103). While the resource inequality between organisations and publics could be seen as presenting a barrier to symmetry, a counter-argument is that any organisational advantage in terms of resources could be counterbalanced by the activist’s motivation and fervour (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000, pp. 9-10).

These complexities have led to a number of calls for further development of public relations theories in relation to power. Noting that the conflict between traditional and critical theories offer two perspectives of power, Falkheimer argues for a “third way public relations perspective” which

…questions instrumental agency-oriented theories that neglect power structures as well as critical theories that only views public relations as hidden strategic action used by elites to dominate the public sphere. (Falkheimer, 2007, p.288)

While Berger & Reber’s study of power relations focused on public relations practitioners within organisations (Berger & Reber, 2006), their reflections on different forms of power that dominate, engage or resist dominance are pertinent to a wider examination of power external to the organisation also. Berger argues that

…we need more sophisticated theories that incorporate power relations and their manifold influences on public relations practitioners, practices, and strategies. (Berger, 2005, p.23)

Weaver also calls for a greater consideration of power in public relations theory, arguing that public relations will become more relevant to what she sees as those “disempowered… in, and by, the new economy” (Weaver, 2001, p.286). Arguing that power is situational and “everchanging”, Curtin & Gaither suggest that there has been a move towards a perception of power as something that is “inherent in the relationship itself and not in the entities in the relationship” (Curtin & Gaither, 2005, p.96).

This reformulation of the role of power extends the possibilities for theoretical development well beyond the Grunigian fallacy of assuming that power as a construct can be discounted and beyond the simplistic, deterministic critical assumption that the
organization is always in possession of more relative power.
(Curtin & Gaither, 2005, p.96)

**Investigating ‘realities’ of practice**

Instead of researching the power of one entity over another, this paper seeks to uncover evidence of power ‘inherent’ in various relationships that exist within government communication. In doing so, it attempts to understand the perceptions of those involved in these relationships. Accepting that individual perceptions are culturally and socially situated, it recognises that there will not be a single interpretation to be discovered, but a range of experiences, opinions and attitudes. These ‘realities’ can inform both public servants’ understanding of their role in government communication and a more detailed understanding of how power is experienced and negotiated.

This research pursues what Crotty describes as “culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (Crotty, 1998, p.67). Underpinning the theoretical approach adopted here is the concept of *Verstehen* (understanding), initially used by Max Weber to distinguish it from *Erklären* (explaining) used in the natural sciences to determine general laws (Crotty, 1998, p.67; Schwandt, 2000, p.191). In this approach, the researcher seeks to understand the meaning that the research participants’ experiences hold. In this way, this study does not attempt to prescribe the nature of power relations in government communication, but seeks to understand how the participants view the environment within which they operate, “isola[ting] individual phenomena in order to trace their unique development” (Crotty, 1998, p.68).

In order to reveal these ‘realities of power’ in practice, this study examined two specific cases of Australian government communication activity, which occurred during the terms of the Howard Government (1996-2007). The case approach provides an opportunity to study these perceptions within their social context (Cutler, 2004, p.367; Yin, 2003, p.13) and has been described as “an extremely useful technique for researching relationships, behaviours, attitudes, motivations, and stressors in organizational settings” (Berg, 2001, p.233). The cases were selected as they employed different types of communication activity (one mainly proactive and the other reactive communication) and involved contested issues rather than being
standard information campaigns that are often treated as reflecting the entire remit of government communication practice. The aim was to gain insight into the complexities rather than to discover common factors that could have been revealed in a study of two cases similar in structure and function.

The first case involved interactions between the government and the community about the management of genetically modified (GM) foods. With government policy supporting continued investigation into the safety and feasibility of GM foods as well as a controlled introduction of the technology, attempts were made to engage the community on the topic. Communication primarily centred around the public awareness campaigns and research conducted by the government agency Biotechnology Australia, various government-led committees which included community representation, and a formal regulation process that included community feedback.

The second case involved the government’s communication efforts following the release of incorrect information by a Government minister, who claimed a child or children had been thrown overboard from a boat attempting to bring asylum seekers to Australia. While the initial information, passed to the minister through a chain of military officers and public servants, was subsequently shown to be false, the Government’s initial attempts to ‘prove’ the claim through the use of photographs and video material as well as later attempts to clarify the truth of the matter received much public attention and criticism and were the subject of a number of inquiries.

As this research delved into contested issues, data was drawn from two areas. In-depth, semi-structured interviews of at least 60 minutes duration were conducted with seven current and former public servants, three journalists, two interest group representatives and a political adviser. The breadth of participant interviews reflects the view that government communication should be considered as a participative function involving a range of stakeholders. Further data from the second case, was obtained from two reports from departmental investigations (Department of Defence, 2001; Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2002) and a Senate inquiry into the “Children Overboard” incident (Senate Select Committee on A Certain Maritime Incident, 2002), a speech by the former Head of the Department of Defence and some
opinion pieces from the Australian print media, which gave insights into the perceptions of those involved.

Documents were selected on the basis that the comments within them addressed the question of how individuals perceived the power relations involved in the communication between the Australian Government and its public. Potential interview respondents were selected using a purposive sampling technique, following a review of documents to determine key people involved in the cases. The focus of this study is not on the communicative actions within these cases, or on the detail of the arguments being presented, but on interpreting the meaning people attach to their actions, specifically their sense of ‘power’, and considering this within their social context (Sarantakos, 1998, p.38; Schwandt, 2000, p.191). A thematic analysis of the documents and interview transcripts was therefore undertaken, to compare and gain insight into the experiences of those involved.

**Perceptions of power within practice**
Instead of the simple dichotomy between the government and the public, the two cases revealed perceptions of power involving a range of participants both external and internal to government. External groupings included industry and advocacy bodies, the media and the general public. Internal distinctions were made between the political staff and public servants, as well as between the public service communicators and their administrative hierarchies. While there was some overlap in the two cases, discussion in the GM food case focused primarily on external industry and advocacy groups, whereas the children overboard case was focused substantially on internal power struggles. The discussion that follows is structured around how participants in government communication perceived the notion of power within each of these groupings. Common to all categories was the key finding that, regardless of their position, most respondents perceived themselves as relatively powerless, articulating opinions about the power held by others.

**Industry and Advocacy Groups**
Within the GM food case, the advocacy group representatives and one of the journalists expressed strong views about the power that the biotechnology industry had in influencing government, and about a government agenda that supported the
industry over the interests of the wider community. These respondents perceived that the government controlled information to ensure that data that could be used by advocacy groups to potentially harm the interests of industry was not released. In contrast, they perceived the government as being

…quite happy to release things that the industry will yell from the…tree-tops (advocacy group representative).

There was also a perception that the government did not just support, but facilitated industry in this issue. According to one advocacy group representative, the Office of the Gene Technology Regulator did not listen to dissenting views and failed to be a ‘real regulator’. Another believed government facilitated industry by dismissing anything that stood in the way of the economic benefits of the new technologies. Both believed that they lacked considerable power in having their views heard in this environment.

In contrast to these views, one of the public servants described his position as being in the middle of a power war between industry over-promising the technology and non-government organisations demonising it, with both “trying to spin the data” and his organisation trying to avoid doing so. Another believed that some non-government organisations, like Greenpeace, were difficult to manage because despite having what she saw as opportunity for dialogue, they rejected the technology outright, refusing to accept any negotiation.

For balance of power to be restored, the advocacy group representatives expressed the need for the government to ensure equal resources for “all the different voices”. This was supported by a journalist who suggested that the government needed to financially support “civil society groups” to raise the counter-arguments if there was to be a balanced dialogue in the public sphere. This reflected the notion of power as resource driven, yet none of the participants raised the potential difficulties and conflict that this could provoke regarding the independence of the voices and other forms of power that this model could generate.
The ‘general public’

The fact that ‘the public’ consisted of a number of different groups with varying level of influence was raised both directly and indirectly by journalists, advocacy group representatives and public servants. Considering the state governments’ banning of commercial planting of GM crops, a journalist reflected on the power of the green vote over that of the farmers in influencing the government. He claimed that the governments’ desire to court the preferences from the green vote during elections had influenced their policy making, suggesting that the NSW Farmers’ Association, in particular, had lacked power in representing their members.

Other views on the place of the public in the GM Food debate varied from a public service perspective that it was hard for them to engage due to a lack of knowledge, to a journalist’s view that it was to do with apathy rather than a lack of power. She suggested that “people are way too busy paying their mortgages to worry about whether or not they’re being duped” (journalist).

Two public servants in the GM food case saw roles for their organisations in the empowerment of the public. The more active role was in ensuring the exchange of information in both directions, particularly through community forums in which one public servant claimed his organisation provided “information from a trusted source, so that [the public could] therefore make informed decisions” while taking information from the community back into government. Another public servant described a more passive role in the form of accepting written submissions and providing transparent feedback through open reporting of the extent to which the suggestions had been incorporated. In this second instance, the respondent recognised that total agreement was not always achievable; however she believed that the importance lay in the public openness of the process and in giving the public an opportunity to influence decisions in a rational and open manner.

There was little discussion about role of the public in communication about the children overboard incident, as they were seen primarily as passive targets for information. One of the public servants, speaking more generally about government communication, referred to the constant lack of interaction between the public service and the public for two reasons: the public servants are too busy reacting to incidents
rather than thinking ahead, and the public are not interested in interaction most of the time. Another public servant was of the belief that the public was not concerned that the Prime Minister may have lied about the incident because they supported the government’s position on illegal immigrants.

**Media**

At least two incidents recorded by the Senate inquiry suggested a level of power of the media in placing pressure on the political staff to prove that a child had been thrown overboard and then to clarify the issue when there were increasing doubts about the accuracy of the story. According to a watchkeeper at Defence’s Strategic Command Division on the day the first reports of a child being thrown overboard had been raised, the Minister’s Media Adviser, Ross Hampton, had

> …seemed agitated and quite angry at times, saying that he was under pressure from media outlets to meet their publication deadline. (Senate Select Committee on A Certain Maritime Incident, 2002, para 6.10)

The second incident occurred during the process of releasing the photographs, in which Hampton claimed that he was having discussions with the Defence Media Room “in the context of finding a way to back up Mr Ruddock’s comment given questioning in the media” (Senate Select Committee on A Certain Maritime Incident, 2002, para 4.112).

A perception of the power of the media to control the agenda could also be seen in the comments of one of the advocacy group representatives in the GM Food case who suggested that media organisations were more responsive to advertisers and therefore not interested in issues that criticised the industry. Expressing feelings of powerlessness against this, he commented on how his organisation attempted to combat this by using “people power” to address the issues through the correspondence pages of the media.

In a speech made by the Secretary of the Department of Defence following the children overboard incident, he argued that “[j]ournalists scrutinise power, but they also exercise it” (Hawke, 2002). One of the public servants agreed that the media’s
power to scrutinise was a “democratic safeguard” and entirely “appropriate” and he claimed that the media had enormous power at various stages of the incident. But he also questioned the impact of the media power, claiming that in the end, it did little to change the outcome due to the skill of the political advisers in controlling the narrative. A similar criticism of the media’s responsibilities in the GM Food debate came from a journalist who believed that in many cases, the journalists were not fulfilling their role as independent watchdogs.

**Politicians and political staff**

Within the GM food case, there was only one reflection on internal power relationships. Two journalists held the view that the political power over bureaucrats was demonstrated in the tying of government funding to the control of the message, particularly for research scientists. One of the journalists claimed that public communication from a government organisation was hampered by the fear of losing funding for their research.

The perceived power that the Ministers and ministerial staff held over the public servants involved in the children overboard case, however, was a significant issue throughout both the interviews and the inquiry reports, revealing that ‘the Government’ should not be viewed as a single entity in terms of power. At least five pivotal groups could be identified in terms of power relations in this case: the Ministers, the ministerial staff, an Interdepartmental Task Force, the Department of Defence hierarchy (both civilian and military) and the departmental communications staff. Although the government members of the Committee held a dissenting view, the Senate inquiry into a Certain Maritime Incident summed up three key issues relating to the notion of power that also emerged during the interviews. The Senate inquiry report criticised the involvement of political staff describing

… haranguing interventions of [the Minister’s] personal staff into the Department of Defence, the insertion of their politically-driven demands into both the operational and administrative chains of command, and their complete failure to adequately assess, and give proper weight to, the advice coming to them from the Department (Senate Select Committee on A Certain Maritime Incident, 2002, para 7.181)
More specifically, the interventions of the Minister’s Media Adviser were criticised within the inquiry reports and the interviews. The Senate inquiry report describes the anger and agitation of a particular political adviser, in various conversations with junior and senior military personnel and public servants. The report remarked on the “considerable pressure” placed on the Department’s communications staff in particular (Senate Select Committee on A Certain Maritime Incident, 2002, para 4.92) and the Chief of the Defence Force also stated that he had a “testy” conversation with the Minister over the same issues.

The “chain of command” and standard information channels were bypassed on numerous occasions due to a desire to send messages to the Australian public that the government was in control of the nations’ border security. This had started prior to the children overboard incident when the Minister’s media adviser had taken control of all information to be released to the public about the activities associated with the numerous ‘Suspected Illegal Entry Vessels’ (SIEVs) attempting to bring asylum seekers to Australia. Public servants and military staff were banned from making any public statements, and orders had been given for them not to take any photographs that might ‘humanise’ the situation. The two key problems in this case, the release of the misinformation about the incident and the incorrect use of the photographs to ‘prove’ it had occurred, initially stemmed from the abandonment of standard procedures for releasing information to the public. The inability of the media to access the people directly involved caused frustration for both journalists and the Department’s communication staff and a sense of powerlessness.

We had a huge problem with their mandate… We thought it was unworkable… We felt that it was a naïve and silly idea. And essentially we foresaw, not necessarily the scale of the problem, but we foresaw a failure to adequately meet the needs of the media. A failure to keep the Australian public informed (public servant).

Politicians from the Federal Opposition were also criticised for failing to use their own power in these circumstances. One public servant suggested that the Opposition initially considered that there was “no mileage to be made in countering the government on this particular one” until they lost the election and it suited their political agenda to do so. This public servant claimed that the Opposition had been
given all the necessary information but either “didn’t join [the dots] or if they joined them, they didn’t use a lot of the material there for them to use”. Respondents also commented on the Opposition’s unwillingness to use their power to subpoena the key people in the political offices who had been prevented from giving evidence.

**Public servants**

The third issue raised in the Senate inquiry report, about the failure of the political staff to fully assess the advice given, was also raised in the interviews by public servants who discussed their feelings of powerlessness as events were unfolding. Some respondents expressed frustration about how their attempts to correct the misrepresentation of the photographs in particular, were ignored by both the political as well as elements of the public service hierarchies. Interviews and the Senate inquiry report both identified numerous occasions when the advice of public servants was dismissed, ignored or not accepted.

> We were not a player – apart from being belligerent and not giving people advice that they wanted to hear (public servant).

This feeling of powerlessness was exacerbated to a certain extent by an inability to speak publicly about the matter, both due to the restrictions that had been imposed but also by the public servants’ desire not to be seen as “anything but impartial”, believing that to “openly criticise the government of the day is to be seen as partisan” (public servant). A sense of duty to the government of the day, as distinct from politicisation, as well as self-protection, were given as reasons why they felt they were unable to defend their own reputations. The dilemma of leaking was considered by some of the respondents.

> You have to sit around and hope that things will work out in your favour. You know, we sat around hoping that the place would leak like it usually does, but it didn’t… (public servant).

An observation from another public servant was that the senior leadership of the Defence department lacked a level of political awareness of the situation as it was playing out, diminishing their level of power even further. Describing the department as a “shambles” at the time, he implied that the civilian head of the department should have understood the political implications of what was going on, and used his existing
power to do something about it, but chose not to become involved, leaving it in the hands of the military head with whom he shared authority. The public servant viewed this as a sign of weakness.

Power plays were also perceived within the public service itself, particularly during the inquiry processes within the public service. Claims made by three public servants in the interviews included:

- That evidence with political implications was given to the Department of Defence inquiry but not used in the report even though it was central to the case.
- The Head of the broader public service inquiry was appointed to “not find out what happened”.
- That crucial information had been withheld as the Head of the inquiry “wasn’t weighty enough or forceful enough to make people like me or other senior officers spill the beans”, and this public servant held no confidence that his evidence would have made the final report if it had been given.
- That attempts were made to use the Defence Public Affairs and Corporate Communication Division as a “scapegoat”, however political astuteness within the division at the time of the event had resulted in a thorough recording of details, affording them a level of protection in the distribution of blame.

One public servant suggested that the incorrect perception of bureaucratic deficiency gave the political office justification for imposing even tighter restrictions since the incident, although

...the reality is it never, ever, ever had the slightest bit to do with Defence bureaucracy. It was always, every bit, a Ministerial office problem (public servant).

In contrast, the GM food case provided a different perspective on the power of the public servant. While not disputing the politician’s hold on power, there also seemed to be a sense of both freedom and power held by one of the public servants interviewed. He believed freedom was gained from having a “hands-off minister who lets us do our thing”. Power on the other hand was implied through the description of his section of the organisation as a “bit of an ethical brake on some of the projects”
run by the wider organisation and its partner agencies. He claimed this position as the ethical conscience of the agency was fairly widely accepted by others but he admitted that their acceptance of his advice was often dependent on other departmental pressures. In this case, advice from communication specialists was also freely given to, and generally considered at, the ministerial level. For example, he claimed to refuse to “talk up the technology” if asked, adamant that he represented the community’s dislike to both government and industry. These relations between public servants and political staff appear to be significantly different to those displayed in the children overboard case.

Discussion
This research revealed differing perceptions about the dimensions and control of power in government communication. Power was discussed in terms of the possession of information and knowledge, the ability to be heard or to influence the political agenda, the relationships with and within government and the level of desire to act or engage. The findings also demonstrated how these various forms of power could be held by different individuals and organisations at the same time and how groups could be more powerful in one situation than another.

Berger’s descriptions of three types of power within an organisation’s dominant coalition can be seen in the perceptions of the power of external and internal publics expressed in this research. Berger describes the first two types of power within his framework:

*Power over* relations refer to a traditional dominance model where decision making is characterized by control, instrumentalism, and self-interest… *Power with* relations reflect an empowerment model where dialogue, inclusion, negotiation, and shared power guide decision making. (Berger, 2005, p.6) [Italics original]

However this research demonstrates that one of the challenges lies in different perceptions of which type of power is being used and that judgments from an organisational perspective can be significantly different from those of their publics. For example, the public servants in the GM food case would be likely to describe government’s actions as “power with”, whereas the advocacy groups would argue that it was “power over”.
The constraint this imposes on the work of public relations practitioners needs further consideration. However Berger also argues that at a deeper level, there is a need to consider a more fundamental level of complexity, that is, the essential dissonance of the practice itself. Whom do practitioners serve? Their own career interests? The organization? The profession? The interests of others in the margins? The larger society? (Berger, 2005, p.23)

This is particularly relevant for government communication and is being explored in further research into the ethical environment of the public servant communicator. Berger’s third category of “power to” relations which “represent forms of resistance that public relations practitioners may use to try and counter a dominance model” (Berger, 2005, p.6) also presents avenues for further exploration into the positions of those participating in government communication. In these types of relations, he lists various sanctioned methods such as “enhancing professional skills”, “performing at high levels”, building alliances, constructing “highly rational arguments” and “enhancing political astuteness” (Berger, 2005, pp.18-19). This research shows perceptions of weaknesses in some of these areas, as well as opportunities for those who felt they had limited power to improve their position. Unsanctioned forms of resistance, according to Berger, include “covert action [such as leaking information], alternative interpretations, whistle-blowing, and association-level activism” (Berger, 2005, p.20). Within the context of this research, these methods could potentially be attractive to those within the system, as seen by the comments on leaking. The question that remains, however, is to what extent are these unsanctioned methods appropriate or ethical in the service of government ministers and the public?

**Conclusion**

In acknowledging Leitch and Neilson’s view that power inequalities are “barely visible when viewed from the perspective of organisation-centred public relations theory” (Leitch & Neilson, 2001, p.138), this paper examined the perspective of individuals involved in the process of communicating between a government and its public. Three key findings in regard to power and how it is perceived were revealed. The first is that power is inherent in the relations between numerous participants in
the communication process and not simply within two general entities of ‘government’ and ‘public’. Second, that power is displayed in numerous contexts such as having the resources to be heard, an ability to influence government, a willingness to participate and freedom from a political agenda. Third, the research indicated that perceptions of who holds power in a particular situation are often influenced by an individual’s sense of their own powerlessness.

An understanding of the complexity of power relations could contribute to public relations practitioners’ ability to undertake their responsibilities in a more effective and ethical manner. Berger argues that there are considerable “constraints on public relations managers who seek to do the right thing” that “influence the role and power of public relations” depending on “the expertise, experience, and values of the public relations manager, organizational type, size, culture and historical practices; and the world views and values of others in the dominant coalition” (Berger, 2005, p.15). The findings of this research highlighted different perceptions which often related to the role and position of the participant in the communication activity and the different situations within which they operated. However the findings also supported Berger’s assessment, showing that the level of power could also potentially be linked to the issues such as the trust between various participants, respect for professional skills of the communicators, organisational culture and personal values.

Theories that bind us to organisational worldviews or restrict notions of power to the hegemonic dominance of corporations and governments potentially limit our understandings of public relations and its value in society. Motion (2005, p.505) encourages an approach to public relations that causes us to “think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known”. In this way, Berger argues that public relations cannot serve all interests equally until

...(a) Public relations theory provides a fuller, more illuminating account of power relations; and (b) public relations professionals and teachers become more astute political players and engaged activists. (Berger, 2005, p.6)

This research has highlighted the complexity of power relations in communication and the value in examining different types of practice to supplement the current
perspective of power in traditional and critical theories of public relations. The findings show that publics vary greatly in their perceptions of levels of power and influence within government communication, and support the notion that power is not necessarily held within the entity, but is “inherent in the relationship” (Curtin & Gaither, 2005, p.96).

Even within the limitations of these two cases, the complex nature of power relations is evident. Further research into different forms of government communication, and the continued analysis of the perceptions of those involved, will provide alternate ways of thinking about the issue of power within both public relations theory and practice.

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