Influencing Healthcare Policy:
Implications of State Legislator Information Source Preferences for
Public Relations Practitioners and Public Information Officers

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Abstract

An internet survey and follow-up mail survey were conducted in order to (a) determine New Mexico state legislators' preferred sources for information when making decisions about healthcare policies and to (b) assess the state legislators' attitudes toward e-mail more generally. Legislators were found to privilege expert colleagues and constituents over mass media as healthcare policy information sources; additionally, face-to-face encounters with constituents were preferred over e-mail, although respondents largely felt positive about using e-mail with both constituents and colleagues. These preferences regarding information sourcing and delivery indicate that public relations practitioners' (PRPs) continuing tendency to communicate with state legislators using traditional media-centric methods are problematic. Results suggest legislators could be reached with greater effect if PRPs were to supplement their use of mass media channels with more personal, symmetrical relationship management strategies.

Keywords: excellence theory, healthcare policy, legislators, media richness theory, public information officers, public relations practitioners

Introduction

Healthcare in America emerged as one of President Barack Obama's pre-eminent issues early in 2009 (Rowland, 2011). To facilitate reform, President Obama initiated discussions involving citizens and legislators alike (Rowland, 2011). In March 2010, the U.S. Congress passed a healthcare reform act that relegated a great deal of implementation discretion to state legislatures, resulting in disparate policy initiatives across the 50 states. Subsequently, public information officers (PIOs) representing government and non-profit institutions and public relations practitioners (PRPs) representing corporations and other private organizations have focused their communication efforts on state legislators.

State legislators are important stakeholders in healthcare policy construction. Successfully reaching legislators involves understanding their source and media preferences for policymaking information. However, developing positive relationships with legislators is problematic for PIOs/PRPs, because legislators share complex relationships with these practitioners and with the media (Dyer & Nayman, 1977; Fico, 1984; White, Willis & Stohr, 2013). Research conducted over the past three decades suggests that to build relationships with legislators, PIOs/PRPs need to focus on strategic communication models grounded in situational and excellence theories rather than on traditional media relations tactics (Gandy, 1982; Grunig, 2006; Park & Rhee, 2010). Such strategies involve more personal contact, including interacting face-to-face and through social media, and fewer media-centric communications tactics (White & Wingenbach, 2013; Yanovitsky, 2002). The present study sought information about the source preferences and e-mail use of the state legislators of New Mexico in order to facilitate information dissemination crucial to healthcare policy decision-making.

Background

Effective public relations (PR) strategies and tactics are conceptually grounded in situational and excellence theories (Grunig, 2008), agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1976), framing (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989), and priming (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Legislators' healthcare information source and delivery preferences, on the other hand, are explained by constructs including adaptive structuration (Giddens, 1984), uses and gratifications (Dimmick, Ramirez, Wang, and Lin, 2007), and media richness theories (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Although legislators' source preferences may vary based on policy type, they tend to

privilege unmediated communication from constituents and colleagues over mass mediated communication (Kral, 2003; Riffe, 1990). In addition, lawmakers have indicated their wish to receive constituent input and research reports face-to-face rather than through the media (White, Willis & Stohr, 2013). Legislators' political party affiliation, gender and ethnicity/race also may intersect to influence information source/delivery preferences (Simien, 2007).

Theories Relevant to PR Influence on Legislators

Situational theory posits that publics actively or passively progress through stages of problem recognition, constraint identification, and involvement (Werder, 2006). Empirical studies have validated these stages' ability—combined with audience demographics—to predict the degree of communication success (Hamilton, 1992). Since issues encompass different stakeholders, successful relationship management also dictates that PIOs/PRPs understand and use audiences' preferred sources and delivery media (Kim, Shen & Morgan, 2011). Therefore, situational theory provides a useful lens through which to examine communication between PIOs/PRPs and legislators.

Excellence theory argues that an effective organization solves stakeholders' problems and satisfies their goals, as well as those of the organization itself. Excellence theorists, therefore, suggest that PIOs/PRPs communicate symmetrically with audiences to build high-quality long-lasting relationships, using dynamic, inclusive, culturally relevant, and technologically innovative strategic management (Grunig, 2006, 2008; Grunig & Grunig, 2010; Kim & Grunig, 2011; Sha, 2006). Further, excellence theory recommends ways that diverse stakeholder groups can protect and enhance their own interests through symmetrical practice (Grunig & White, 1992). Specialized PRPs, including PIOs, may combine the application of excellence theory's relationship approaches with increased professionalism (Hirasuna & Hansen, 2009; McDonald & Hebbani, 2011; Taliferro & Ruggiano, 2010), building increased social capital for organizations, stakeholders, and society (Strauss, 2010). Thus, excellence theory also proves helpful in analyzing PIO/PRP practice.

Opinion leaders help define issues about which the public should think (McCombs & Shaw, 1976); they serve as gatekeepers who "screen information and only pass on items that help others share their views" (Baran & Davis, 2012, p. 145; see also Lazarsfeld & Franzen,

1945). Media help communicate agenda salience through a theoretical process called *agenda-setting*. *Framing* helps guide the public as to how to think about an issue, providing contexts for opinion formation and discussion, while *priming* uses those contexts to prepare audiences to reach particular conclusions (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989). Agenda-setting, framing, and priming activate similar cognitive processes, conveying issue importance while making concepts accessible and applicable (Althaus & Kim, 2006; Tan & Weaver, 2007) and dictating standards suggesting appropriate information *sourcing* (White, 2006). Legislators represent a unique subcategory of "publics" as they are opinion leaders themselves yet also susceptible to the influence of other opinion leaders, whether that influence is conveyed through mass media or other channels (White, Willis & Stohr, 2013). However, PIOs/PRPs often fail to use such other channels; rather, they continue to target media publics in their attempts to reach legislators, meaning they rely on the agenda-setting, framing and priming functions of media rather than communicating directly with their ultimate desired audiences (Gandy, 1982; White, Willis & Stohr, 2013).

Theories Explaining Legislators' Information Source/Delivery Preferences

Legislators' information sourcing and delivery preferences are influenced by the organizational process of *adaptive structuration*: humans in groups creating definitions and roles to guide and restrict subsequent behaviors (Giddens, 1984). Acting on beliefs engendered by adaptive structuration within legislatures, legislators rely on information provided by delivery media approved by legislative colleagues. Adaptive structuration thus produces particular legislative environments, effecting perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors among legislators that are different from those of PIOs/PRPs. Thus, in making policy decisions, adaptive structuration leads legislators to value information sources and delivery methods valued by their fellows, while PIOs/PRPs construct target audiences and manage relationships that mirror those of PR colleagues.

Uses and gratifications theory posits that individuals prefer particular media based on their communication needs and underlying social/psychological motivations (Cho, de Zunigas, Rojas, & Shah, 2003). Users select media based on their ability to satisfy cognitive, affective, personal, social integrative, and/or escapist needs. Although it has been suggested that Internet users seek to meet the same needs with the Web as with other media, scholars identify "new media" as particularly effective in satisfying communication, interaction, and

information needs and new media's tendency to displace older media through more satisfactorily gratifying the same needs (Cho, de Zunigas, Rojas, & Shah, 2003; Dimmick, Kline, & Stafford, 2000). Thus, uses and gratifications theory provides an additional lens through which to examine legislators' information delivery preferences.

Media richness theory claims that some media are more "rich" than others, meaning they are more effective at conveying information and knowledge (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Kock (2005, p. 118) elaborates on this claim, noting that "communication media can be classified along a continuum of richness . . . based on the ability of media to carry nonverbal cues, provide rapid feedback, convey personality traits, and support the use of natural language." Based on these criteria, face-to-face communication is considered "richer" than computer-mediated communication. Some scholars, however, argue that empirical evidence does not substantiate such media richness differences; Ledbetter (2010), for example, found that quantitative measures scored face-to-face and computer-mediated communication as equally effective at relationship maintenance. Others maintain that media richness theory is logically contradicted by the idea that "social influences can strongly shape individual behavior toward technology in ways that may be independent of technology features" (Kock, 2005, p. 119; see also Fulk, Schmidtz, & Steinfeld, 1990; Van Den Hooff, 2005). Kock (2005) further hypothesizes that humans are biologically engineered to prefer co-located and synchronous communication; thus, face-to-face communication is simply more *natural*, rather than being more information-rich. The debate concerning media richness as explaining audience delivery preferences constitutes another lens through which to examine legislators' preferred information delivery methods.

Current Research into PIO/PRP-Legislator Relations

Numerous researchers have investigated legislators' opinion formation, preferred information sources, and preferred delivery methods, concluding that legislators' decision-making is informed more by constituents, expert colleagues, and fellow committee members than by media influences (Kral, 2003; Riffe, 1990; White, Willis & Stohr, 2013). Media attempt to set public agendas, craft issue frames, and prime target publics, but legislators also set agendas for each other and attempt to frame issues for themselves, their colleagues, the public—as well as for the media (Bell, 2004; Fico, 1984; Kral, 2003). Thus, researchers agree that legislators receive decision-making information from many sources (Bybee &

Comadena, 1984; Sabatier & Whiteman, 1985); that media may not be the most important of these (Riffe, 1988, 1990; Yanovitzky, 2002); and that PIOs/PRPs, media personnel, and legislators share a complex relationship (Dyer & Nayman, 1977; Fico, 1984; White & Wingenbach, 2013). These findings have implications for PIOs'/PRPs' traditional media relations activities, suggesting they would benefit from spending less time providing information subsidies to journalists and more time interacting personally with legislators (Hirasuna & Hansen, 2009; Sorian & Baugh, 2002).

Researchers have also studied legislators' use of "new media" such as e-mail. Richardson and Cooper (2006) concluded that "legislators have a nuanced approach to e-mail usage in the policy process with their assessment of its impact differing significantly for constituents, intermediary groups, and policy insiders" (p. 113). Ferber, Foltz, and Pugliese (2005) apply media richness theory to legislators' e-mail use, stating that legislators' "face-to-face communication is richer than e-mail or letters because it has more capacity for immediate feedback, direct and personal experience, and assimilation of emotional understandings of a message" (p. 143). Several studies (Mayo & Perlmutter, 1998; Richardson, Daugherty, & Freeman, 2001; Sheffer, 2003) replicate these findings, concluding that legislators are dissatisfied with electronic communication with constituents and each other. Other scholars, however, find that legislators are turning to the Internet to connect with constituents in an era of voter apathy (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009; Jaeger, 2005) and that advocacy groups embrace e-mail to influence policy (Kobayashi, Ikeda, & Miyata, 2006; Micon, 2008).

Legislators' gender also influences policy priorities and voting behaviors, with female legislators often focusing on so-called "women's issues" such as family concerns, education, and access to healthcare (Poggione, 2004; Taylor-Robinson & Heath, 2003). Ethnic/racial identification exerts a similar influence on legislative priorities and voting (Pruehs, 2006). It is perhaps most correct to view individual legislators' policy positions and voting behavior as the complex result of the intersectionality of party affiliation, gender, and race/ethnicity (Cammisal & Reingold, 2004; Fraga, Lopez, Martinez-Ebers, & Ramirez, 2006; Simien, 2007).

Policy subject matter also conceivably influences legislators' information source preferences. With healthcare policy surging to the top of national and state legislators' agendas, the study

of sources and delivery methods legislators use to inform their decision-making should correspondingly rise to the top of researchers' agendas. However, a survey of the literature uncovered no studies linking healthcare policy information and legislator information-source preferences or media usage. Previous studies focused on policy decision-making information in general, but none touched specifically on acquisition of healthcare policy information. Moreover, what little research exists on legislator source preferences is over 20 years old and none focuses on New Mexico specifically. Given the passage of time and the concurrent explosion in information/communication technologies, an up-to-date study of state legislators' source preferences and their attitudes toward e-mail use is needed; hence, the present study.

Research Questions

This study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. What sources of information do New Mexico state legislators prefer as input for making decisions about healthcare policies?

RQ2. What are the state's legislators' attitudes toward using e-mail?

RQ3. What relationships exist among the demographic and employment characteristics of the state legislators, their preferred sources of healthcare policy information, and their attitudes toward e-mail?

Methods

Study Design

The present study combined an Internet survey adapted from Kral (2003), Richardson and Cooper (2006), and Riffe (1988, 1990) with a follow-up mail survey, using Dillman's tailored design method (2000). Participants not responding to the mailed survey were telephoned. Respondents were asked to (1) rank in descending order of importance the sources they consulted for healthcare policy information and (2) rate the effectiveness of e-mail communication with each source. Respondents were also asked to rank in descending order the importance of methods used to secure constituent input. Finally, respondents were asked their level of agreement with seven questions about e-mail (Richardson and Cooper, 2006). Demographic data also were collected from respondents.

Sample

Names, addresses, e-mail addresses, and telephone numbers for the representatives and senators were obtained from a public domain list provided on the state legislature's web site. Because the New Mexico state legislature has just 112 members (70 in the State House of Representatives; 42 in the State Senate), all legislators participating in the state's 49th legislative session (2009-2010) were surveyed. While such a technique reduces the generalizability of results to other New Mexico legislative sessions and to the legislatures of other states, surveying all members of this one legislative population yields a more comprehensive picture of their members' characteristics, information sourcing behaviors, and patterns of e-mail use.

Data Collection/Analysis and Response Rate

Because of limited response to the Internet survey after five contacts, legislators not completing online surveys were mailed a copy. Legislators still not responding were telephoned and asked to complete the survey online. The final response rate was 41 percent (46/112) of the legislators surveyed (46 of 112 overall; 27 of 70 House members, or 38.6 percent; 19 of 42 Senate members, or 45.2 percent), exceeding the mean response rates expected for recent online surveys (Grava-Gubins & Scott, 2008; Sheehan, 2001). All survey data were combined for statistical analysis in SPSS. Identifiers were removed before analysis.

Results

Preferred Information Sources

Respondents numbered in order of importance 13 possible sources for healthcare policy information (Kral, 2003; Richardson & Cooper, 2006; Riffe, 1988, 1990). As can be seen in Table 1, which lists percentages choosing each source as first or second preference, the three most preferred sources were all interpersonal (expert colleagues: 54.4%; constituents: 45.7%; legislative staff: 34.8%). Media sources were among the least preferred.

Table 1: Preferred Information Source for Information on Health Care Policy Issues

Source Choice	Percentage of Respondents - First Choice	Percentage of Respondents- Second Choice	First & Second Choice Totals
1. Expert colleagues	34.8%	19.6%	54.4%

2.	Constituents	26.1%	19.6%	45.7%
3.	Legislative staff	10.9%	23.9%	34.8%
4.	Research by universities, etc.	10.9%	13.0%	23.9%
5.	Members of relevant House/ Senate committees	8.7%	4.3%	13.0%
6.	Interest groups	6.5%	4.3%	10.8%
7.	Grassroots organizations	4.3%	0%	4.3%
8.	Internet/Web-based news and commentary	4.3%	6.5%	10.8%
9.	Newspapers	2.2%	0%	2.2%
10.	Television news and commentary	2.2%	0%	2.2%
11.	Radio news and commentary	2.2%	0%	2.2%
12.	Lobbyists	2.3%	2.2%	4.5%
13.	Ethnic associations	2.2%	4.3%	6.5%

Percentages may not total 100 percent due to missing data.

Relative Importance of Constituent Input Methods

Face-to-face encounters, whether in meetings or visits to legislators' offices, were identified by almost two-thirds of the respondents as their preferred way to receive constituent input, with telephone calls and e-mail messages tied for a distant third place. Table 2 lists percentages of legislators choosing each input method as first preference.

Table 2: Preferred Method for Receiving Constituent Input On Health Care Policy Issues

Method of input	Percentage of Respondents - First Choice
1. Meetings	35.7%
2. Face-to-face visits	28.6%
3. Telephone	11.9%
4. E-mail	11.9%
5. Letters	4.8%

Percentages may not total 100 percent due to missing data.

Importance of Source to Successfully Making Healthcare Policy Decisions

A clear majority of respondents viewed constituents and legislature insiders as essential or extremely important to them in successfully making healthcare policy decisions: constituents (78.8 percent: top two categories of importance combined), expert colleagues (70.7 percent), and staff (60.8 percent). Table 3 lists respondent rankings of the importance of each source to making healthcare policy decisions.

Table 3: Legislator Rankings of Source Importance For Making Healthcare Policy Decisions

Source	Could not do my job without it	Extremely important	Moderately important	Somewhat important	Not at all important
Constituents	31.0%	47.8%	8.7%	0%	0%
Legislative staff	13.0%	47.8%	24.4%	0%	0%
Lobbyists	0%	19.0%	45.2%	28.6%	0%
Expert colleagues	12.2%	58.5%	14.6%	7.3%	0%
Committee members	4.9%	43.9%	26.8%	17.1%	0%
University & think tank researchers	7.1%	14.3%	35.7%	26.2%	4.8%
Interest group representatives	0%	23.8%	21.4%	45.2%	2.4%
Ethnic associations	0%	11.9%	14.3%	40.5%	19.0%
Grassroots organizations	7.1%	26.2%	21.4%	28.6%	7.1%
Media	0%	19.0%	21.4%	26.1%	19.6%
Other	0%	9.5%	2.4%	9.5%	9.5%

Percentages may not total 100 percent due to missing data.

Effectiveness of E-mail as a Tool to Communicate with Information Sources

Respondents were asked to rate the effectiveness of their e-mail communication with each of ten source groups (Richardson & Cooper, 2006). The legislators clearly viewed e-mail as extremely or moderately positive in keeping in touch with constituents (69.1 percent, total of top two categories), staff (68.5 percent), and expert colleagues (71.5 percent), finding few or no negative consequences to using this technology to communicate with these groups. However, large percentages of the respondents felt that using e-mail might be problematic when communicating with ethnic associations (47.6 percent, "not positive" and "negative" categories combined) and with the media (29.5 percent). Table 4 lists respondent rankings of e-mail as a tool to communicate with different sources.

Table 4: Legislator Rankings of Effectiveness of E-Mail In Communicating With Sources

Source	Extremely positive	Moderately positive	Somewhat positive	Not positive at all	Negative
Constituents	42.9%	26.2%	21.4%	2.4%	0%
Legislative staff	41.3%	26.2%	14.3%	2.4%	0%
Lobbyists	9.5%	26.2%	14.3%	2.4%	0%
Expert colleagues	31.0%	40.5%	11.9%	4.8%	2.4%
Committee members	21.7%	21.7%	31.0%	11.9%	2.4%
University & think tank researchers	16.7%	21.4%	35.7%	14.3%	2.4%
Interest group representatives	19.0%	21.4%	28.6%	11.9%	9.5%
Ethnic associations	11.9%	7.1%	23.8%	38.1%	9.5%
Grassroots organizations	14.3%	21.4%	33.3%	16.7%	4.8%
Media	16.7%	14.3%	31.0%	21.4%	7.1%
Other	7.1%	9.5%	11.9%	38.1%	14.3%

Percentages may not total 100 percent due to missing data.

Legislators' Attitudes toward E-mail Use

Respondents were asked their level of agreement with seven statements about e-mail (Richardson and Cooper, 2006). Table 5 lists respondent attitudes toward e-mail use. The majority of the legislators either agreed or strongly agreed with negative-attitude statements such as "the volume of e-mail places an undue burden on my staff," "I cannot be certain that e-mail communication is confidential," and "e-mail creates unrealistic expectations for an immediate response."

Table 5: Legislator Attitudes toward E-Mail Use

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. The volume of e-mail places an undue burden on my staff.	31.0%	19.0%	2.4%	38.1%	2.4%
2. E-mail creates unrealistic expectations for an immediate response.	38.1%	26.2%	4.8%	23.8%	0%
3. E-mail provides a biased	26.2%	23.8%	19.0%	23.8%	0%

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
representation of my district.					
4. I cannot be certain of the true identify of the e-mail sender.	7.3%	39.0%	7.3%	12.2%	0%
5. I cannot be certain that e-mail communication is confidential.	38.1%	35.7%	9.5%	7.1%	2.4%
6. E-mail makes it easier for special interests to orchestrate single issue campaigns.	53.7%	29.3%	4.9%	2.4%	2.4%
7. I am not personally comfortable with using e-mail.	16.7%	14.3%	9.5%	33.3%	16.7%

Percentages may not total 100 percent due to missing data.

Demographic Data

Forty-five percent of the respondents identified themselves as Democrats, 35 percent identified themselves as Republicans, and 19 percent did not provide their party affiliation. Years of legislative service ranged between 2 and 25 years, with a mean service tenure of 11 years. The majority of respondents (57 percent) clustered between 51 and 70 years old, with all respondents older than 31 years. Three respondents (7 percent) were above the age of 70. Table 6 presents selected demographic characteristics.

Table 6: Responding Legislators' Selected Demographic Characteristics

DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLE	RESPONSE LEVELS	PERCENTAGES OF RESPONDENTS
Political orientation	Liberal	25%
	Conservative	30%
	Depends on issue	22%
	Libertarian	2%
	Moderate	2%
	Progressive	2%
	Declined to specify	17%
Legislative tenure	First legislative session	13%
	Second or subsequent session	87%
Gender	Male	61%
	Female	20%

DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLE	RESPONSE LEVELS	PERCENTAGES OF RESPONDENTS
	Declined to specify	19%
Ethnicity	White/not Hispanic	48%
	Hispanic/Latino	20%
	Native American	4%
	Multiracial	2%
	Declined to specify	26%
Highest education level	High school diploma	15%
	Bachelor's degree	33%
	Masters' degree	24%
	JD degree	7%
	Declined to specify	31%

Percentages may not total 100 percent due to missing data.

Relationships between Selected Respondent Demographics and Information Source and Delivery Preferences

No statistically significant relationships emerged among the variables preferred information source for healthcare policy information; rankings of source importance; rankings of e-mail effectiveness; attitudes toward e-mail use; and selected demographics (age, gender, ethnicity, political party affiliation, political orientation, highest level of education) (MANOVA, SPSS).

Discussion

Findings

With regard to RQ1 (what sources of information do state legislators prefer as input for making decisions about healthcare policies?), the majority of respondents listed expert colleagues as first or second choice source for information influencing healthcare policy decisions, with constituents next in line. More than 70 percent of respondents rated colleagues as essential or extremely important to making healthcare policy choices, while almost 80 percent similarly valued constituents.

Further, most respondents preferred to receive policy input from constituents through face-to-face delivery, whether in formal meetings or one-on-one visits; e-mail, telephone calls and letters did not come close. However, the legislators did not dismiss the value of e-mail in

communicating with constituents and expert colleagues. More than 90 percent rated e-mail communication with voters as positive to some degree, while 83 percent rated e-mail with colleagues as positive to some degree.

Surprisingly, although the present study was undertaken more than 20 years after Riffe's seminal 1990 work on legislators' communication preferences, its results are quite similar: We found that legislators turn first to personal/insider sources (such as expert colleagues) for specialized policy information. Results also bolster previous findings that media do not constitute legislators' most important source of policymaking information (Kral, 2003; Riffe; Yanovitzky, 2002) and that legislators' estimation of e-mail effectiveness differs among stakeholder groups (Richardson & Cooper, 2006).

With regard to RQ2 (what are legislators' attitudes toward using e-mail?), a majority of respondents agreed that e-mail was burdensome, creates unrealistic expectations for immediate response, presents a biased representation of constituents, and facilitates orchestration of single issue campaigns by special interest groups. In addition, although a majority felt comfortable using e-mail technology, respondents felt they could not be certain either of the identity of e-mail authors or of e-mail confidentiality. Study responses closely paralleled legislator opinions toward e-mail documented by Richardson and Cooper (2006).

With regard to RQ3 (what relationships exist among demographic and employment characteristics of legislators, their preferred sources of healthcare information, and their attitudes toward e-mail?), no statistically significant relationships emerged among study variables and selected respondent demographics. Thus, this study *contradicts* the findings by Richardson and Cooper (2006) that (a) longer tenure creates less positive attitudes toward e-mail, (b) that minority legislators are less likely to use e-mail, and (c) that female legislators are more positive about e-mail. Our results also contradict studies indicating that legislators' political party affiliation, gender, and race/ethnicity influence information source and delivery preferences (Cammisal & Reingold, 2004; Fraga, Lopez, Martinez-Ebers, and Ramirez, 2006; Preuhs, 2006; Simien, 2007).

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretical explanations for state legislators' reliance on expert colleagues and constituents as sources for healthcare policymaking information may lie in adaptive structuration, while preferences for receiving information from constituents face-to-face may point to uses and gratifications and media richness theories. Through adaptive structuration occurring within a legislative body, legislators are acculturated to value those information sources and delivery methods that are trusted by fellow legislators. Indeed, the fact that rankings of expert colleagues and constituents have remained constant throughout 20 years and across different state legislatures points to the persistence of such legislative values (Giddens, 1984; Kral, 2003; Richardson & Cooper, 2006; Riffe, 1988, 1990; White, Willis & Stohr, 2013).

Face-to-face exchanges between legislators and their constituents help them gratify cognitive and integrative needs for healthcare policy information (Cho, de Zunigas, Rojas, & Sha, 2003). Legislators' positive attitudes toward using new media such as e-mail with colleagues and constituents show that such media have the potential to satisfactorily meet those same needs, but do not take the place of face-to-face interactions traditionally found effective (Dimmick, Kline, & Stafford, 2000). Thus, e-mail communication may supplement, but not replace, face-to-face communication.

Research suggests that face-to-face interactions are richer in information (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Ferber, Foltz, & Publiese, 2005) and more natural (Kock, 2005) than mediated interactions; this explains why these communication forms are preferred by legislators seeking healthcare policymaking information. The social influences that reinforce media-specific richness and predispose legislators to prefer face-to-face interactions include adaptive structuration within legislatures that shapes professional information source and delivery preferences (Giddens, 1984; Kock; Van Den Hooff, 2005).

The present study also offers practical implications for PIOs/PRPs. PR practitioners would benefit by adopting tenets of situational theory that would guide them in developing more effective message targeting and delivery tactics for influencing legislative audiences. Additionally, applying excellence theory's relationship approach, which stresses symmetrical communication models, would mutually benefit legislators and PR practitioners; specifically, PIOs/PRPs should decrease their reliance on media-centric strategies that use news subsidies

and place greater emphasis on more personal, interactive contacts with legislators, including face-to-face meetings and increased use of e-mail (Werder, 2006).

Understanding legislators' information source and delivery preferences and the role of organizational adaptive structure in forming those preferences can aid PIOs/PRPs in their efforts to apply agenda-setting, framing, priming, and sourcing knowledge to the processes of communicating with policymakers. Survey responses show that legislators prefer those they consider expert colleagues, along with constituents, as sources of healthcare policymaking information. More personalized approaches could help move PIOs/PRPs into the prized ranks of "expert colleagues." Consequently, PR practitioners are urged to more frequently apply basic audience-segmentation and message-targeting expertise to crafting appeals and selecting channels for information delivery to legislators.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Findings from this study are limited to the specific legislative body from which our respondents were drawn. Additionally, the small number of legislators responding to this survey (41 percent) and the slight over-representation of older members of the legislature limit our ability to generalize results to other sessions of the New Mexico legislature, to somewhat younger legislators, and to legislators in other states. Additionally, the study focused exclusively on legislators' information sourcing and delivery preferences regarding healthcare policy issues specifically; thus, findings cannot be extrapolated to other policy issues.

Additional research is needed to discover the roots of legislators' information source and delivery method choices. In-depth interviews should be conducted with respondents more representative of the legislature's demographic make-up, as respondents to this survey included an over-representation of older white, male legislators. Data should be collected from PIOs/PRPs to discover attitudes toward practice that are driven by situational, excellence, agenda-setting, framing, priming, and sourcing theories. Researchers should also explore practitioners' openness to strategies and tactics suggested by these theories, along with their willingness to embrace interactive and interpersonal message-delivery channels. Adaptive structuration within PR organizations should be researched in more depth to elucidate the roots of PIO/PRP attitudes and behaviors that diverge from those of legislators.

Finally, research should be undertaken to expand inquiry into legislator source/delivery preferences for healthcare policy information to other state legislatures and to the U.S. Congress, as well as to discover what differences, if any, exist between preferred sources and attitudes toward media information about healthcare policy as compared with other policy issues.

Conclusion

The persistence of legislators' preferences and opinions about information sourcing and delivery across 20 years of studies suggests that problems continue to exist with PR efforts to reach state legislators using traditional media-centric methods. Through application of PR situational and excellence theory relative to legislators' information needs, findings about the effects of adaptive structuration, and perceptions of relative media richness, practitioners could alter impacts on legislators' policymaking decisions. The information subsidy has proven effective in influencing journalists' stories, and through these intervening audiences, in reaching target publics with strategic PR messages. However, evolving technology and corresponding changes in audience member preferences suggest that legislators could be reached more effectively if PIOs and PRPs were to supplement mass media sourcing and delivery with more personal, symmetrical relationship management strategies comprising interactive media and interpersonal contacts.

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