

Research Article

POTENTIAL COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES FACED BY A GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the communication challenges faced by government officials during a period of rapid change. The actions by the government official can range from doing nothing to active involvement in the change process, depending on the additional circumstances. These circumstances are particularly critical when evaluating the challenges that a government official must face. This essay consists of three sections. The first section addresses the challenges that arise during rapid change. The second section describes the communications that are impacted by disruptions to predictability. The third section discusses how a government must adapt to volatile circumstances. The paper concludes by observing that strategic communication is a government official's responsibility, and they must address communication disruptions, just as their private organizational counterparts do. Each section is dealt with in turn.

Keywords: Communication challenges, Disruption of predictability, Knowns and unknowns, Rapid change.

INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses the communication challenges faced by government officials during periods of rapid change. The actions by the government official can range from doing nothing to active involvement in the change process, depending on the additional circumstances. These circumstances are particularly critical when evaluating the challenges that a government official must face. This essay consists of three sections. The first section addresses the challenges that arise during rapid change. The second section describes the communications that are impacted by disruptions to predictability. The third section discusses how a government must adapt to volatile circumstances. The paper concludes by observing that strategic communication is a government official's responsibility, and they must address communication disruptions, just as their private organizational counterparts do. Each section is dealt with in turn.

CHALLENGES DURING RAPID CHANGE

The challenges experienced by a government official during rapid change depend on the nature of the circumstances. If a whole economy collapses, as occurred during the Great Depression of 1929-33 or the Great Recession of 2008, then decisive action would be necessary. In 1933, when Franklin D. Roosevelt was President, he created massive government programs, such as the Works Progress Administration (WPA), that provided jobs on public works projects, putting American citizens to work.¹ With congressional approval, President Roosevelt also established the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), which created temporary, military-style communities that employed young men and women in conservation projects, such as planting trees, fighting fires, and building roads and parks.² At the

height of the Great Recession of 2008, the Federal Reserve significantly increased lending funds to member banks via its discount window and established emergency lending facilities to prevent a broader financial collapse.³ The Money Market Investor Funding Facility (MMIFF) and the Commercial Paper Funding Facility (CPFF) aimed to mitigate the financial turmoil.⁴

In contrast to the activities of government officials when a calamity hits the economy, it is sometimes preferable to do nothing when a market is in its infancy and emerging. The challenge in this instance is that any government intervention can have a detrimental impact on a newborn market. For example, consider the personal computer market in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In an effort to help the fledgling personal computer market mature into a viable industry, government agencies adopted a hands-off approach, supplemented by government funding through the Department of Defense (DOD), specifically the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), to foster technological development.⁵ The idea at the time was to give the personal computer market time to grow and mature. Government interference could have stifled the market, preventing the United States from maintaining its economic dominance.

corps/#:~:text=CCC%20members%20were%20primarily%20unemployed,For%20further%20reading:.

³Board of Governors, Why Does the Federal Reserve Lend Money to Banks?, *Federal Reserve* (Jun. 17, 2011), available at https://www.federalreserve.gov/faqs/banking_12841.htm#:~:text=The%20Federal%20Reserve%20lends%20to,discount%20window%20loans%20to%20banks.

⁴Board of Governors, Credit and Liquidity Programs and the Balance Sheet, *Federal Reserve* (Mar. 24, 2020), available at https://www.federalreserve.gov/monetarypolicy/bst_lendingother.htm#:~:text=During%20the%20financial%20crisis%2C%20the,collateral%20on%20March%2031%2C%202010.

⁵See generally, NLM Staff, Rising to the Challenge: U.S. Innovation Policy for the Global Economy: 6 National Support for Emerging Industries, *National Library of Medicine* (2012), available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK100307/#:~:text=In%20reality%2C%20the%20U.S.%20federal,and%20nurtured%20with%20federal%20support>.

¹LOC Staff, Works Progress Administration, *The Library of Congress* (n.d.), available at <https://www.loc.gov/item/today-in-history/april-08/#:~:text=to%20this%20page,Works%20Progress%20Administration,schools%2C%20and%20other%20public%20structures>.

²Catherine A. Paul, Civilian Conservation Corps, *VCU Social Welfare History Project* (2017), available at <https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/eras/great-depression/civilian-conservation->

Thus, the underlying circumstances determine the appropriate government response. The actions of government officials depend on the circumstances. Sometimes it is prudent to engage in extensive market intervention, while at other times, government officials should maintain a safe distance from the market or provide seed money to encourage it. The idea is to promote the economic advantage of the United States. Therefore, a nuanced approach may be the most effective course of action.

COMMUNICATIONS IMPACTED BY DISRUPTIONS TO PREDICTABILITY

Communication disruptions are not necessarily negative. Communication disruptions may indicate that a new communication medium is bursting onto the scene. For example, for over 200 years, the primary means of communication in the United States has been the United States Postal Service (USPS).⁶ However, with the advent of the Internet, email, and social networks (e.g., Facebook), the USPS slid from its dominant position to second place.⁷ This is not to say that individuals completely abandoned the USPS. Instead, communications among individuals dramatically increased as email and social network communications offered a nearly instantaneous method of sending and receiving messages.⁸⁹ As the new communication methodology became mainstream, clients, key stakeholders, congressional decision-makers, state legislators, and, above all, private citizens have embraced email and social network communication.

In communications, the name of the game is speed. The reason is that email and social network communications are almost free compared to the cost of sending a letter via the USPS.¹⁰ There are the costs of the paper on which the message is printed, the cost of the envelope, the time it takes to address a letter, and the price of a stamp.¹¹ When considered collectively, all these postal costs have a negative impact on government budgets.¹² In contrast, the cost of sending an email or social network message consists of the time the

sender spends writing and editing the message. The cost of electronic communications is typically fixed, although some variable costs may also apply.¹³ As for schedules and workflow, this information age communication technology has dramatically reduced the time government officials take to send and receive messages, thereby increasing throughput and workflow, and consequently reducing costs.¹⁴

ADAPTING TO VOLATILE CIRCUMSTANCES

According to Donald Rumsfeld, in 2002, the former Secretary of Defense under President George W. Bush, there are known knowns, known unknowns, and unknown unknowns.¹⁵ Known knowns are things one knows one knows.¹⁶ Known unknowns are things one knows one does not know.¹⁷ Finally, unknown unknowns are things one does not know one does not know.¹⁸ In volatile circumstances, the things one knows one knows can be planned for because one knows the known thing that is changing. Plans can be made for known unknowns because one knows of the existence of the unknown thing. One can imagine what the unknown thing looks like and how it will behave,

However, it is the unknown unknowns that are at issue when planning for them and adapting to them. If one does not know an unknown thing, then no plans can be formulated because one does not know that the thing exists. In other words, no adaptation is possible. For example, individuals are aware of many features, events, and happenings on this planet. Plans can be made to deal with such things because, for the most part, humans know about them. Second, it is not generally known whether life as we know it exists on other planets in this galaxy and on planets in other galaxies. These are known unknowns. Scientists can plan for the time when the human race meets beings from other planets. The plans may not be perfect, but they can be formulated now and then revised in the future. Finally, there are the unknown unknowns. One cannot plan for something or adapt to something that is both unknown and currently unknowable. When such an unknown, unknown manifests itself, any plans or adaptations that are created will be strictly ad hoc. They may be accurate or inaccurate. They may be correct or incorrect. Simply stated, it is a matter of a throw of the dice. For unknown unknowns, government officials will likely not know what to do, how to plan for them, or adapt to them. Any plans generated or adaptations formulated will likely be a wild guess at best or a disaster at worst.

CONCLUSION

For a strategic communications professional in government, this essay examined the challenges that arise during periods of rapid change, how disruptions affect communications with clients, key

⁶Ryan Ellis, The Birth of the USPS and the Politics of Postal Reform, *The MIT Press Reader* (Aug. 17, 2020), available at [https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/birth-of-usps-politics-of-postal-reform/#:~:text=The%20U.S.%20postal%20system%20was,\\$1.1%20billion%20to%20\\$7.3%20billion.](https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/birth-of-usps-politics-of-postal-reform/#:~:text=The%20U.S.%20postal%20system%20was,$1.1%20billion%20to%20$7.3%20billion.)

⁷Monique Morrissey, The War Against the Postal Service, *Economic Policy Institute* (Dec. 16, 2020), available at <https://www.epi.org/publication/the-war-against-the-postal-service/#:~:text=The%20Postal%20Service's%20financial%20woes,retiree%20benefits%2C%20among%20other%20factors.>

⁸Britney Elyse, Social Media's Impact on Interpersonal Relationships, *CARRARA* (Jul. 27, 2024), available at <https://carraratreatment.com/social-medias-impact-on-interpersonal-relationships/#:~:text=How%20Does%20Social%20Media%20Influence,changes%20and%20foster%20healthier%20interactions.>

⁹Frank Newport, The New Era of Communication Among Americans, *Gallup News* (Nov. 10, 2014), available at <https://news.gallup.com/poll/179288/new-era-communication-americans.aspx#:~:text=Bottom%20Line,higher%20probability%20of%20being%20unmarried.>

¹⁰Sabrina McClune, Digital Convenience: Why Customers Prefer Email, *Beyond Encryption* (Jul. 16, 2025), available at <https://www.beyondencryption.com/blog/digital-convenience-customers-preference-email#:~:text=Reduced%20Costs,post%20by%20switching%20to%20email.>

¹¹See generally, PB Staff, USPS® Shipping and Mailing Price Changes, *Pitney Bowes* (n.d.), available at <https://www.pitneybowes.com/us/postal-information/usps-rate-change-overview.html>.

¹²Chris Matthews, American Taxpayers Give an \$18 Billion Gift to the Post Office Every Year, *Fortune* (Mar. 27, 2025), available at <https://fortune.com/2015/03/27/us-postal-service/>.

¹³Finally Staff, Fixed vs Variable Costs: Understanding Business Expenses for Strategic Decision-Making, *Finally* (n.d.), available at <https://finally.com/blog/accounting/fixed-vs-variable-costs/>.

¹⁴OGR Staff, Higher Technology Adoption Can Benefit the Public Sector Workforce and the Citizens They Serve, *Oxford Global Resources* (May 30, 2024), available at <https://www.oxfordcorp.com/insights/blog/higher-technology-adoption-can-benefit-the-public-sector-workforce-and-the-citizens-they-serve/#:~:text=Efficiency%20is%20paramount%20in%20the,complex%20tasks%20rather%20than%20paperwork.>

¹⁵Daniel Sarewitz, Unknown Knowns, *Issues in Science and Technology* (Fall 2020), available at <https://issues.org/known-unknowns-uncomfortable-knowledge-sarewitz/>.

¹⁶*Id.*

¹⁷*Id.*

¹⁸*Id.*

stakeholders, and government decision-makers, and whether government officials can effectively adapt to these rapid changes. The essay answers these questions by noting that their response depends on the circumstances surrounding these rapid changes. Suppose the rapid change under consideration is a massive depression or recession. In that case, the challenge is to act decisively by introducing programs that mitigate the effects of the depression or recession. Suppose the rapid change is the emergence of a technological marvel, such as personal computers or the Internet. In that case, the government may decide to take a hands-off approach and wait until it sufficiently matures, lest any government intervention stifle the industry's growth.

A disruption of predictability or practice can have positive or negative consequences, depending on the nature of the disruption. The essay discussed the shift from using USPS mail to email and social media communication networks. In this instance, the shift was positive because the latter increased the speed of communications. If the disruption were an electromagnetic pulse (EMP) attack, all electronic communication would cease to exist because electronic devices would cease to function. Here, government officials would be reduced to using handwritten letters to communicate with each other and the general public.

When adapting to communication disruptions, it is crucial to remember that the response depends on what is known and what is unknown. If a thing is known, whether or not it has occurred, a response is likely. In other words, known knowns and known unknowns can be dealt with by government officials who communicate with each other and the public. The unknown unknowns are the things where communication may be unreasonable or impossible because one cannot communicate about something unknown and currently unknowable.

Thus, the answers to these questions depend on the circumstances. There is no panacea or one-size-fits-all solution to address communications in periods of rapid change. Communication depends on the media employed and the underlying circumstances. That is the way it is.

DONALD L. BURESH BIOGRAPHY

Donald L. Buresh earned his Ph.D. in engineering and technology management from North central University. His dissertation assessed customer satisfaction for both agile-driven and plan-driven software development projects. Dr. Buresh earned a J.D. from The John Marshall Law School in Chicago, Illinois, focusing on cyber law and intellectual property. He also earned an LL.M. in intellectual property from the University of Illinois Chicago Law School (formerly, The John Marshall Law School) and an LL.M. in cybersecurity and privacy and an LL.L. in financial compliance, both from Albany Law School, graduating summa cum laude twice. Dr. Buresh received an M.P.S. in cybersecurity policy and an M.S. in cybersecurity, concentrating in cyber intelligence, both from Utica College. He has an M.B.A. from the University of Massachusetts Lowell, focusing on operations management, an M.A. in economics from Boston College, and a B.S. from the University of Illinois-Chicago, majoring in mathematics and philosophy. Dr. Buresh is a member of Delta Mu Delta, Sigma Iota Epsilon, Epsilon Pi Tau, Phi Delta Phi, Phi Alpha Delta, and Phi Theta Kappa. He has over 25 years of paid professional experience in information technology and has taught economics, project management, negotiation, managerial ethics, cybersecurity, business law, and quality management at several universities. Dr. Buresh is an avid Chicago White Sox fan and is active in fencing épée and foil at a local fencing club. Dr. Buresh is a member of the Florida Bar.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Description
CCC	Civilian Conservation Corps
CPFF	Commercial Paper Funding Facility
DOD	Department of Defense
MMIFF	Money Market Investor Funding Facility
USPS	United States Postal Service
WPA	Works Progress Administration

MISCELLANEOUS CONSIDERATIONS

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